

MOTH AND FLAME

“That’s me, and that’s you.”

Satiated, Hephaistion lolled against Alexandros’s chest on the low sleeping couch, or *klinē*, in the room they shared. He pointed to the lamp on a bedside table where a hapless moth darted in and out of the flame. It was the only light remaining; they’d extinguished the rest. Night noise drifted in through windows shuttered against autumn chill, but they were fevered enough yet to have thrown off the blanket. Gold lamplight licked the curve of Hephaistion’s shoulder and the planes of his chest, the dip of his belly and sigma-curve of his hip, and what lay flaccid now amid black curls between his thighs. Alexandros ran a hand down his torso; the sculptors were right to praise the human form in marble, but stone could never catch the soft leather suppleness of skin. “You burn me, that’s true,” he replied.

Hephaistion pulled away to prop himself on an elbow and glance around at Alexandros, where he was settled against the bolster. “You’re the flame. I’m the poor moth.”

Alexandros felt his brows rise. “Oh, so? You’re the magnetic one.”

Hephaistion snorted.

“You are. Did you know, when you first arrived in Pella, some of the boys called you Walking Sex?”

Hephaistion’s expression was a delightful study in shock and bemused horror. “That’s ridiculous!”

“I’m just the messenger. And I told you myself, you’ve got a freight of unconscious power. People pay attention to you.”

Abruptly, Hephaistion shifted to sit up cross-legged on the *klinē*. Or really, two *klinai*. Shortly after their return from Dion, he’d pulled together his and Alexandros’s to lash the legs and make a double. If two could fit on one *klinē* for dining, it was a bit too narrow for sleeping comfortably. Once, this room had belonged to Kassandros because nobody had wanted to share with him. Then Hephaistion had claimed it during his falling-out with the prince. When the two had made up, Alexandros had moved out of the big room next door into this one. Nobody had commented, and after events at Dion, both prized the privacy. Sharing a bed might not be typical,

might astonish their classmates, but with winter coming on, body heat under blankets was appreciated. That wasn't why they did it; they needed to *touch*. It might be as simple as Alexandros's elbow against Hephaistion's back where he lay on his side, or Hephaistion's feet pushed against Alexandros's calf where he was sprawled on his stomach, but it said, "I'm here."

Now, Alexandros sat up as well, sensing that Hephaistion had something more to say than soppy pillow-talk. He had that look he got sometimes. "You've no idea, do you?" he began. "Beside you, I'm eclipsed." Alexandros started to object, but Hephaistion held up one long hand. "Let me finish. You called me magnetic? *You* paint a fire in the sky, like that aurora we saw. Remember it? Glorious."

"I'm not—"

"Yes, you are. When you're happy, or enthused, you practically glow. And you're more magnetic than I'll ever be. You pull us all in. You want something, and the rest of us want it, too. I don't know how you do it; it's like a bewitchment."

Silence fell. Outside somewhere, a robin whistled, confused perhaps by courtyard torches, and Alexandros puzzled over what to say. He couldn't be the way Hephaistion described or he'd have had more friends before Mieza, wouldn't he? Yet lately, he felt larger, and not just for having grown several inches. Untrammelled. Aristoteles had freed something in him, as had Hephaistion.

An aurora, though? That was a bit rich. "That's love talking."

"It's not. I wish you could see you the way I see you. You don't second-guess yourself like most people. Remember Thrakē? That night battle? Yes, running off was rash, but as I said then, you were like a lion. You, at fourteen, had grown, seasoned soldiers following you. Think about that."

"My father didn't like it."

"Your father was angry. So was I. But when he first saw you, he was proud too. I know you won't believe me, but it's true. Anger doesn't preclude pride. When you fight, it's...it's like watching Herakles."

Overwhelmed and more than a little disbelieving, Alexandros muttered, "Now you are flattering me."

The corners of Hephaistion's wide mouth quirked up. "Perhaps a bit. Or perhaps that *is* love talking. But you have true charisma. The first night I met you, I had no idea who you were,

but you smiled at me and that fast”—he snapped his fingers—“I’d have followed wherever you led. I started to, just to ask your name, but Koinos found me and I had to talk to him about being a Page.”

“You have charisma too,” Alexandros blurted. “You made a fool of Kassandros.”

Hephaistion shook his head. “Not the same at all. I asserted dominance. But you just smiled at me and I felt singled out. You have this amazing warmth.” He pointed to the lamp flame. The moth still danced around it. “You *like* people, and it shows. When you ask somebody something, you listen to the reply. It’s not mouthing pleasantries. And you remember names, faces, details about people. I can, too, but not for the same reasons. I like knowing things. You like knowing people. You’re completely charming, and it’s sincere. Others sense that and respond.”

Hephaistion had been looking at him, holding his eyes with that force he could bring. Now, he dropped his gaze. “I like to pretend I’m immune to the appeal, but I’m not. I’m that blasted moth circling you.”

The confession was offered in a tone between defiant and pained, and Alexandros understood he’d just been handed something enormously precious. Scooting closer, he rose up on his knees to kiss Hephaistion’s forehead. “I do like people,” he said, sinking back onto the cushion. “But I like you best of all people.” That won a quick grin from Hephaistion. He tilted his head at the lamp. “We should snuff that and get some sleep. Let the poor moth get away.”

“That moth,” Hephaistion agreed. “This moth is permanently mesmerized.”

Despite such occasional sentimentalism, Hephaistion showed fondness in the pragmatic. Not only did he bring an apple to Alexandros, but cored it for him. He’d mend Alexandros’s torn clothes, or curry Boukephalas along with Brephas when the prince was busy with some task. Such gestures weren’t new, but their mundanity might explain why it had taken Alexandros so long to realize what his friend felt. Hephaistion expressed love by taking care of people.

Effusive avowals belonged to Alexandros, who’d write “I love you” on a scrap of papyrus, then slip it into Hephaistion’s palm at lessons, making him blush when he read it. He’d taken to calling him *khara mou*, my joy, and *philtatos*, treasured friend. And sometimes he’d

throw an arm around his waist or shoulders for no reason beyond an overwhelming urgency to show affection. Hephaistion might roll his eyes but never refused such gestures. Alexandros thought he nursed a covert enjoyment of them. By nature, Alexandros wanted to pursue, and thought Hephaistion liked being pursued. It just wasn't the way this was supposed to go.

Yet as weeks passed, no longer awash in the bright newness of it all, Alexandros came to recognize a certain darkness in himself. When he stroked Hephaistion's chest or arms, or pushed his hip into Hephaistion's groin, he was fascinated by the turmoil he could wake in his lover's body. And when Hephaistion spilt between Alexandros's thighs, or against his belly, or the small of his back, Alexandros relished having given him joy, but also having driven him to sexual surrender. It was a triumph of sorts, one that let him pretend he wasn't slain by a longing just as profound. The scent of Hephaistion's sweat, the turn of his head, the red flush in his cheeks from the cold, his long fingers when he gestured, or his big grin that showed all his teeth—any of these things could pierce Alexandros with raw desire, running a flame all under his skin.

What was wrong with him? A beloved wasn't supposed to feel such sweet ache, only care and pity for his lover's desires. Yet *eros* had kidnapped Alexandros's *philia* and he hated his tyrant of a body, afraid of becoming his father. So as with hunger and tiredness, he sought to conquer it. Aristoteles, and Leonidas before him, had taught that a true king mastered himself.

He began to put off Hephaistion. Caresses once welcomed were increasingly rebuffed with the excuse of, "I'm tired," or, "I don't need that right now," and Hephaistion's bright bliss twisted into bitter brooding. Instead of irritation at Alexandros, he seemed to blame himself, and Alexandros feared that, deep down, his friend didn't think he deserved good things. Yet to Alexandros, Hephaistion deserved all manner of good things, and guilty, he'd relent to win a smile. That was the proper role for a beloved, wasn't it? To show compassion to his lover?

Then, in the wrestle of limbs and tongues, lust would bite once more and Alexandros just wanted to make Hephaistion pant and groan and hiss. This drive to dominate would shame him anew and he'd withdraw, restarting the whole perverse cycle. He had to be in control, not only of himself, but also of Hephaistion.

He came to recognize this fundamental defect in himself one morning when he found Hephaistion and Erigyios fishing on the Arapitsa, just the two of them and their dogs.

He was out for his usual dawn run, and always hit the river shore for the drag of muddy resistance strengthening his endurance. He'd initially thought nothing of waking to find

Hephaistion already gone, but when he spotted him on the short pier, sitting beside Erigyios, casting out into the river center, his first thought was to wonder why he hadn't been invited. His next thought was to *worry* why hadn't he been invited. The two sat awfully close and had been laughing over some shared joke when Alexandros spotted them. Had Alexandros's fickleness driven Hephaistion to Erigyios? That Erigyios was one of Alexandros's oldest friends only made the betrayal more pernicious.

Stalking out onto the wooden dock, he all but shouted, "Why didn't you invite me?"

Both boys jerked around to look at him, then at each other, clearly flummoxed. "You don't like to fish?" Erigyios answered.

"But why didn't you at least ask?" Alexandros thundered, red-hot temper driven by white-hot fear.

"We didn't think you'd want to come." Erigyios pulled in his line to stand, handing the cane pole to Hephaistion and moving carefully as if to calm a spooking stallion. Hephaistion reeled in his own lure and set both poles aside but didn't get up. "You love hunting, but hate fishing," Erigyios went on. "You call it boring and never want to go. Why would we think this time different?"

"You still could have *asked*," Alexandros replied.

Abruptly Hephaistion pushed himself to his feet with a word to Erigyios to take back his tackle and hound. Then he grabbed Alexandros's elbow, steering him off the pier and away. He didn't say anything, but Alexandros could feel his irritation pulsing even as Alexandros's own jealousy fueled an instinctive attempt to jerk out of Hephaistion's grip. Hephaistion held on.

They walked some way down the riverside dirt track, then winded their way up from the bank past leafless bushes whose branches scratched Alexandros's legs. Winter had killed much of the underbrush even if that day was tolerably warm—probably why Erigyios and Hephaistion had gone fishing.

Finally alone, Hephaistion yanked Alexandros's elbow hard enough to turn them face to face. "*Oa!* What was that about?"

"Why didn't you invite me?"

"Because you hate fishing. What was that about?"

"Why Erigyios?"

Hephaistion's expression appeared genuinely bewildered. "We both like to fish?"

“Why just him? Why not ask others?”

“We used to go with Ptolemaios, but he’s back in Pella. Nobody else here likes to fish, except Aristoteles himself.”

And the utter absurdity of his own jealousy suddenly struck Alexandros hard. He dropped his gaze to study his dirty, bare feet amid dead leaves, wafting up a subtle smell of rot. The river rustled by below, singing of longing.

“Aleko, *what* is going on?” Hephaistion demanded. “You’ve been acting so...odd lately.”

“I saw you both together and thought maybe you were getting tired of me.”

He dared to look up. Hephaistion’s mouth hung open in shock. Then, face hard, Hephaistion took two steps back, releasing Alexandros’s elbow. “*Oimoi!* Whatever made you think such a stupid, stupid thing?”

“I... You were together alone.”

“We were fishing!” Hephaistion retreated two more steps, face transforming from hard to furious. “I won’t discuss this.” And he took off at a jog back the way they’d come.

Alexandros dropped to a crouch, holding his midriff. What folly had he just committed?

He returned to the villa, run unfinished, too heart-sick to complete it. The other boys were breaking their fast in the warm kitchen and preparing for the day’s lesson, all circled around one of the tables stacked with bread as kitchen girls wove among them. Erigyios was there, but not Hephaistion. Alexandros approached him, pulling him out into the courtyard. “Sorry about earlier. I don’t know what bit me.”

Bless him, Erigyios appeared mostly amused. “I do. It’s called jealousy.”

Alexandros could feel blood burn his neck and ears. “You’re one of my oldest friends. I shouldn’t have doubted at you.”

“No, but love makes us a bit mad. Hephaistion and I both like to fish. That’s all it was. You’ve never said anything about it before.”

“I didn’t realize it was a regular thing.”

“We usually go when you’re busy.”

“Did you catch anything?”

“No. That’s not the point.”

Mystified, Alexandros cocked his head. “It’s not?”

“And *that’s* why we never ask you to come. Everything’s a goal for you. Sometimes we

catch a fish, but we usually throw it back.”

“Why?”

“We’re fishing for fun. It’s nice out by the river in the morning, or evening.”

The prince was confounded. “But why would you do something that has no purpose?”

“The purpose isn’t catching fish.”

“Then what is it?”

“Just...talking. Enjoying being outside. This was the first warm day in a while.”

It struck Alexandros with the shock of a cavalry charge that Hephaistion had friends, and interests, that extended beyond him. He’d known it, but hadn’t acknowledged it because he viewed Hephaistion as *his*.

Except he wasn’t. Hephaistion belonged to himself, always had, and that very independence had sucked in Alexandros from the beginning. He chose to spend time with Alexandros because he wanted to, whatever he said about being a moth to Alexandros’s flame.

When Alexandros didn’t reply, Erigyios spoke again. “Sometimes Hephaistion wants to talk to somebody other than you, about you.”

This only deepened Alexandros’s anxiety and confusion. “Have I upset him? About more than this morning, I mean?” No doubt he had, with all his capriciousness of late.

“Maybe you should ask him. Anyway, friends are good for perspective. You might need some too.”

Was that a covert rebuke? Once, Alexandros had counted Erigyios as his closest friend. “This is all new. Confusing.” Abruptly, he blurted, “I don’t know what’s normal to feel.”

His confession made Erigyios laugh. “I’m not sure there is a ‘normal.’ But you might want to go and apologize to him.”

“I don’t know where he is. He wasn’t at breakfast. And we have lessons soon.”

“Try your *room*. Take him some bread. He’s probably hungry.”

Ashamed, Alexandros returned to the kitchen to filch a small loaf. Wrapping it in his cloak to keep it warm, he hurried to the room he shared with Hephaistion.

The schhhlap, schhhlap of a sword being sharpened on a strop told Alexandros he’d found his friend even before he entered. As he shut the door, Hephaistion looked up. Holding out the loaf, Alexandros said, “Eat something.”

Breathing out, Hephaistion took the bread, recognizing it as a peace offering. Alexandros

poured him some water from a jug on a side table, handing it over. Service as apology. It was growing late, and Alexandros knew Aristoteles would head for the *nymphaion* soon, but this was too important to put off. Pulling up another chair, he watched his friend eat.

“What was that about at the river?” Hephaistion asked finally, offering Alexandros some of the loaf. Calmed enough to remember hunger, Alexandros accepted it.

“Me being an arse.”

“Well, yes. But that doesn’t answer the real question. Why? It was just Erigyios.”

For several breaths, Alexandros couldn’t reply. He chewed his bread. Finally, swallowing, he confessed, “I was jealous.”

“What on earth of? Why did you say that to me about being tired of you?”

“I don’t know,” Alexandros replied, sullen.

“Jealousy means you doubt me.”

And in five words, Hephaistion had cut to the heart of it.

“I don’t doubt you. I doubt I’m enough to keep you.” The honesty spurted out like blood from an infection lanced.

Hephaistion tossed the last of the loaf on the table and stood, yanking Alexandros to his feet too, gripping him tightly and kissing him with uncharacteristic fierceness. Pulling back just enough to speak, he whispered, “You’re all I want. How can that not be enough?”

“But you have other friends.”

“Of course I do. As do you. I don’t want to fuck them, though.”

Anger made Hephaistion crude, yet Alexandros wondered if it might also have made him honest. Startled and unready to think about it, he returned to the other matter. “I forget you have other friends, which is dumb.”

Hephaistion still held Alexandros, and this close, the prince had to tilt his head up to meet Hephaistion’s black eyes. “I have friends, yes, although my friends were all your friends first.”

“I’ll share.” Well, he’d share them with Hephaistion. He didn’t like sharing Hephaistion with them, and without thinking, pulled down Hephaistion’s head to kiss him again. Then he unpinned Hephaistion’s heavy winter *khiton* and undid his belt, pulling him towards the dual bedcouch. Hephaistion undressed Alexandros, too, and they climbed under heavy, scratchy, wool blankets. Alexandros was hard even before he lay down, anticipating. So was Hephaistion. Their embrace was more like war than love, and Alexandros was honest enough to realize he’d done

this to avoid further conversation that might go down paths he didn't want to explore.

"I like it when you get like this," Hephaistion muttered.

"Get like what?"

"When you kiss me instead of waiting for me to kiss you. I feel less guilty."

"Guilty?"

"Of imposing my longing on you. You said you were afraid I was tired of you, but lately, I've been afraid it was you tiring of me."

Horrible guilt crashed over Alexandros. Pulling away, he spoke fervently. "I'll never tire of you. I'm just being silly."

"About what?"

Alexandros didn't reply immediately. This was the conversation he hadn't wanted to have, but he also wasn't inclined to lie. Hephaistion waited him out; he had that annoying ability. "Shame," he admitted finally. "I want you, the same as you want me. But I shouldn't."

"Why not?"

"I'm your boy."

"You're my *eromenos*, yes"—beloved—"but not a *pais*." Child. "You'll be sixteen next summer. There might be something wrong with you if you didn't want sex."

Put so bluntly, the observation untwisted Alexandros from his assumptions. Hephaistion pressed his face to Alexandros's neck. "I want—I need—you to want me back, Aleko."

The rawness of the plea drew equal honesty from Alexandros. "I do."

"Show me."

"I don't know how."

"Yes, you do. Stop thinking. Just love me."

His plea freed something, and Alexandros's desire didn't feel so much like dominance now. It was just him, his most basic nature. He caressed his friend's body with an abandon he'd not heretofore allowed himself, but still avoided Hephaistion's groin. Aggravated perhaps, Hephaistion gripped his wrist, guiding the hand to his erection and closing fingers around it. "No one's watching; no one will know. *Touch me*. I want you to touch me back."

Time stuttered, then moved forward.

Rising on an elbow, Alexandros stroked Hephaistion up and down with a firm grip as his friend tipped back his head and sighed. He looked as if he'd just been given the world, which

was how Alexandros felt. *This* was what he'd wanted, this uncomplicated intimacy. He'd just been unable to admit it to himself. It wasn't dominance, it was trust. Hephaistion lay splayed out, completely open, cuing Alexandros as to what felt best with hisses and moans while his hips undulated like ocean swells.

After a bit, he shifted sideways so he could grip Alexandros too, giving what he was getting. Sometimes they kissed. Sometimes they just gazed at each other, mouths slightly open as they scaled up, hands asking questions, exploring like urgent visitors to a new country. Alexandros forgot to be quiet. So did Hephaistion. When Alexandros finally did spill, his cry was like a phalanx marching into battle, and Hephaistion followed him over with an answering bellow. Then they collapsed against each other.

Alexandros was glad the other boys were long gone to the *nymphaion*, and for what seemed like a long time but probably wasn't, they just breathed.

"That was amazing," Hephaistion whispered.

"Yes," Alexandros agreed.

"It's a lot more fun when you help."

Alexandros hadn't thought about it that way, but liked how Hephaistion phrased it. They didn't say anything else for a long while. Finally, Alexandros whispered, "I love you. I'm sorry I was a possessive pillock earlier."

"I'm no better sometimes. You know it."

"You are rather the king of moodiness. But I belong to you completely." Given his need to own, he felt compelled to admit as much to Hephaistion.

"And I belong to you. Remember that the next time I go fishing."

"I will. But next time, bring us some fish, would you? Stop throwing them back."

"Who told you we throw them back?"

"Erigyios. I apologized to him, too."

"Good. I think he was quite miffed."

"Not really; he knows me. He told me to find you and bring you some breakfast."

They lapsed into silence again, hands sliding along bare skin, but gently. Desire vanquished, love could triumph. They spent a silly length of time just kissing, all soft lips and occasional tongue like a tease, which sent shivers down Alexandros's spine. "You're a good kisser," Hephaistion whispered.

“Nice to know,” Alexandros whispered back. “Hate to be defeated in anything.”

“Arrogant arse.”

Alexandros laughed against Hephaistion’s mouth. Briefly, he considered asking about what Hephaistion had said earlier: that he didn’t want to fuck his other friends. Did that mean he wanted to fuck Alexandros? But Alexandros wasn’t ready for a possible affirmative answer, and then what would he say? Some things a prince couldn’t permit.

Eventually they dressed and, holding hands, wandered down to the *nymphaion* for lessons. Alexandros could tell Aristoteles was irritated with them. Fairly. Under normal circumstances, he’d never be so rude as to disrespect his teacher by being unforgivably late, but personal matters had demanded immediate attention. He’d apologize to Aristoteles later. For the moment, his insecurities were resolved.

The next day, which was unseasonably mild as well, Hephaistion and Erigyios went fishing again. This time, they brought back brown river trout for dinner.

Author after-notes

At some point, Alexander supposedly said, “Sleep and sex remind me I’m mortal.” The pithy nature of the quip suggests it might even be genuine. If it is, and not meant in jest, it implies an uneasy relationship with his own bodily needs, which is hinted at in other anecdotes. Self-mastery was Alexander’s god, at least when sober. Anger, arrogance, and a love of wine seem to have been his vices. A line from this particular scene is referenced later in Rise.

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