



Sousa. Spring of 324 b.C.

The Greeks, dominating the whole of the known world at the time. In the big chamber of the palace. Sisygambis has the first word on the wedding of Greek war lords with Asian princesses.

The weddings take place according to the Persian customs. She marries her grand-daughters Stateira and Drypetis to Alexander and Hephæstion. General Karteros to her niece Amastrine.

Ptolemeus, the bodyguard, and Eumenes, the Royal Secretary, to the two daughters of the satrap of Phrygia, Artakama and Artonis.

General Perdicas to the daughter of Atropates, satrap of Media. Admiral Nearchus to the daughter of Barsine and Mentor. General Seleucus to Apame, daughter of Spitamenes from Afghanistan.

And 80 more princesses to Greek officers. All of them with splendid trousseau from Alexander.

Moreover, priests will wish the best, with gifts from Alexander, to 10,000 couples, Asian brides and Greeks, who have joined their lives.

Sisygambis orders the eunuchs:

- I won't say it again. The thrones decorated with flowers must be as many as my brides that will be seated on them. Next to them will be the thrones of my bridegrooms. They must be all placed in a circle around the statue of Hera.

After the toasts, the brides will come. The bridegrooms will stand up and lead them by the hand to their thrones in a chivalrous way. As soon as they sit down, every pair of bridegrooms will lean towards their brides and kiss them on the cheek. The wedding, which is common for all the couples, will start straight after.

And be careful with the presents for the 10,000 Asian women who share their lives with Greek warriors. I don't want to learn that a woman was left without an equivalent present.

- Vagoa, if anything goes wrong, God help you! Now, get your eunuchs and leave.
Apame addresses Sisygambis.

- Seleucus sent me this letter. He swears eternal fidelity to me. And that he'll build a lot of cities named after me.

- You have my blessing, my daughter.

The brides are getting ready teasing one another. Suddenly Hephaestion comes in. He addresses Sisygambis.

- As a wedding present mother Olympias is sending me this letter full of poison.

Sisygambis: Give it to me.

She takes it and immediately throws it into the fire burning on the altar of Hera.

Sisygambis: I'll tell you what to answer, get a papyrus and a pen.

"Stop slandering us and don't swear nor threaten. If you insist, learn that we hardly care. You know, of course, that Alexander is above all of us." This is more than enough for her.

How did the inspection of the 30,000 young Persian soldiers go?

Hephaestion: Armed with shiny Macedonian armours! Beautiful sight!

Sisygambis: Let me tell you my dear Hephaestion that we received wishes from all over the world. From the Libyans, the Bruttians, the Leucanians, the Carthaginians, the Illyrians, the Ethiopians, the Scythians, the Iberians, the Romans.

Suddenly, a royal messenger comes in. He bows gasping for breath. Sisygambis stops reciting nations.

Sisygambis: Catch your breath first, my boy.

Royal messenger: This heavy parcel is for Hephaestion from Abdalonymus, king of Sidon.

Sisygambis: Open it, child.

The royal messenger opens it.

- Nine golden plates. The one side bears letters, the other a picture. Each plate depicts a muse.

Sisygambis: Fine. Leave them here next to me. Stay close to me at the weddings. For the good message you brought us, child. Hephaestion, you get ready now for the bridegroom's bath, as is customary in Persia. In the meantime, I will read to you the letter of our good friend.

Three bondmaids bring a wheel-driven bath tub, another two are carrying two water-cans. They undress Hephaestion and make him sit in the tub. One of them pours water slowly on Hephaestion's head, while the other washes his hair. On the two sides of the tub, two of them rub his body with sponges, while another one with the second water-can pours water on their sponges. The girls are whispering and laughing secretly.

Sisygambis: Girls, behave yourselves in front of my bridegroom. I don't want to hear a whisper.

She starts reading.

Muse, lock keeper of inspiration, give me the strength to express the beauty spread so generously by Almighty Zeus, who is a titan and an infant, that came to govern jointly the world we establish. Because this was decided by Zeus of Thunderbolt and others in the Pantheon of gods following the Olympians' big decision to wander for higher responsibilities.

P.S. Having the most beautiful gods is great happiness.

He was just five years old, the virtuous one, when Ochus, by betraying the King and his friends, entered Sidon.

And those who remember will quiver again and those who ignore will be horrified, I say that 40,000 of my fighting fellow citizens, men and women, were forced, then, to withdraw with their children to the city center. And with no hope left, they set fire to the blocks determined to fall into the flames at the end of this unequal battle.

I, an offspring of the royal family and a very close successor to the throne, didn't have anywhere to go. On the one side was the betrayal of my people, and on the other side the betrayed who were ready to tear me into pieces if they saw me. On one side, my family, who were allies and friends with Ochus, preparing to govern over the bodies of my fellow citizens and on the other side, my fellow citizens who began a struggle to the end which, de facto, excluded every member of the royal family.

So, what could I decide in the middle of this horrible absurdity? The way out, so courageous for an army but absurd for just one citizen whose family opened the doors to the enemy, while all of his fellow citizens chose a heroic death instead of dishonor.

Therefore, all alone I rode my battle horse and like a tornado with only one sword in my sash and without armor, I threw myself into the streets like a madman taking the fastest route out of the city. I didn't care about my life. I almost didn't want it and surely felt it had become a burden to me.

Besides, my loved one was already with her brothers who continued to fight while retreating. And for me, what a sorrow, the fate deprived me of the happiness to die defending her.

Like a madman, therefore, I rode directly towards the closest gate. The soldiers and officers of Ochus didn't even pay attention to me. I think that as I was dressed in my royal attire, they thought I was a messenger from the palace sent on a special mission. Even outside the city limits, nobody stopped me. Only when I turned my head back, 20 stadia from the city walls, and saw the flames did I understand. A bitter taste filled my mouth and I couldn't even breathe a sigh.

I don't even know how long I stood there, bitter, staring at death until I heard a voice behind me asking me who I was. I turned and saw three cavalrymen. I don't remember what happened, nor do I remember if they said another word. I suddenly saw with my dim eyes that they had fallen from their horses. With a similar sword stroke, they all writhed like wounded deer. Each one with a sword stroke in the eyes.

I turned round and continued my run. I had just galloped to a hill, when I noticed 5 to 6 soldiers preparing their meal with all of their guns thrown to the ground as if they belonged to strangers. The sun had set and it was getting dark.

They heard my gallop but did not pay any attention. They continued with their preparations as if they were under a spell without looking at me. I galloped towards them, not very fast, as if drifted by the current of fate and feeling I had no choice. I approached them calmly and only when I was almost standing over their fire did they turn and look at me. I had enough time to see the horror in their eyes before I attacked them. It was as if they were looking at death in the eyes.

I attacked and when I finished, my eyes saw everything blurred. Everything was blurred and red. I tried to clean them with the back of my hands and the red curtain disappeared. And what did I see then?

Five bodies resembling slaughtered sheep and me fallen off my horse full of blood. I heard my horse's breath next to me. Then I felt my beard wet and shivered as I realized that it was drenched in blood.

No, I could never accept this. This hideous habit of Scythians made me sick ever since I was a child when thinking about it. The first time that one of the palace guards described to me how the Scythians drank blood from their hostages throat, I fainted. And here I am now, tumbling myself into the thing I held so much in abomination.

I threw my sword away. I started getting dizzy. My horse came next to me and blew on my face with his muzzle. I jumped on it and without leading it, it started galloping frantically, as if it wanted to escape death. It kept galloping, I don't know for how long. I began to get myself together. There was a full moon. I could discern that this place was far away from the city. The position of the moon showed that dawn was close.

My horse continued galloping. I stroked its neck and it neighed. It had grown up with me. That's why it became extremely jealous when I selected another horse from the stables for training. If I didn't pet it and talk to it, it was capable of continuously kicking the walls in its stall until I returned. I felt that it was overwhelmed, but with a slower pace, it continued towards the unknown.

We were in a ravine, which I had seen sometimes from a long distance in my wanderings away from the city. But I never had the opportunity to explore it. My family gave orders to my attendants not to travel beyond certain limits.

Already the daybreak had come to bid farewell to the night and to welcome the day. And then, following the turn of the ravine, I suddenly found myself in a clearing. Three stadia away, I saw a hut surrounded by a garden. Next to the hut was a small waterfall the waters of which formed the stream that accompanied me in the ravine.

I didn't know anymore what I wanted from life. With slow steps, my horse took me under the small waterfall. It stayed there until the last traces of blood disappeared from our bodies. The sun was out by now. I dismounted and sat on a bench to dry off when an old man approached me.

"The best therapy for an unexpected disaster is land work." he told me. And as I didn't respond for a long time -my sorrow still burned my mouth and throat- he shouted:

"Besides, everyone should cultivate their garden, poor and rich, young and old. And there is always a garden waiting even for the most miserable man. Take a part of the field next to mine and make a garden of yours. Let me see your hands. These are hands of a warrior and not of a

labourer. Be that as it may, I won't ask anything. You don't need your own house if you can make yourself comfortable with me in my humble home. Stay as long as you want to rest, eat from my food as long as you don't have yours. You can repay me whenever you can. And if, in the future, I ever need something from you, you can lend it to me, if you want, on the understanding that if I can't repay you, you'll risk collecting it someday from someone else as a gift. And now pay attention. If you don't agree with this understanding, leave after the last words you hear."

I didn't say anything. I just got up and entered his house. On the two sides of the fireplace were two beds. The one that was made and untouched seemed to me even prettier than the palace I was born in.

I spent seven years with the old man. I learned from his silence. And what was made clear in me was an aversion to any form of power. The old man could only accept as a king a virtuous warrior.

At the end of the seven years, he suddenly tells me:

"Did you forget? Where were you going when I found you? If you are sure that this is the place you were looking for, stay, or else, leave immediately."

And he turned his back to me and entered his house. I decided to return. I had some unfinished business in my land. I owed something important to myself but I wasn't able to define it.

When I reached Sidon, I realized how quickly life banishes death. Nothing reminded of the disaster. Still, I didn't want to enter the city. I had the feeling that as soon as I would try to pass through the gate, the wall would collapse on me.

At the walls, I met a childhood friend, one of the few who survived. My friend gave me a small farm which I accepted only under an agreement. I wasn't asking for anyone's charity. It was the last thing I needed. The agreement I insisted on provided that my payments were higher than necessary. This was an old habit of mine, since I was a prince, to always pay a little more than I owed. This, however was an extra strain on me and required that I took on additional work in the nearby farms to settle the payments. As for my royal family, I was sure that they fortunately ignored me with malicious arrogance.

I was in a farm near mine drawing water when Hephaestion found me. I had been working in the same farm for 12 years.

"The royal family with all of their treasures and friends left the city and joined Darius," he told me. "That's a problem of the Kings," I responded.

He smiled as if this had been the answer he expected. I had seen him approaching with about ten cavalrymen and Strato, his nephew, on his side. I had learned by now not to be surprised by

anything. But at that moment, I was shaken. I sensed that they were going to ask me something very important, something that would change the course of my life. But what else than my royal blood had I retained? Is it possible that they propose me for...?

“There is no longer a King in our city, Abdalonymus, nor anyone else to take his place,” said Strato.

“I proposed Strato but he told me that your laws require that he must be a member of the royal family, the one who ...” Hephaestion looked at me in the eyes as if judging an officer for a difficult mission.

“And I proposed you, Abdalonymus. Hephaestion agreed on condition that you would forget my good idea and treat me exactly as the rest of the citizens.
And I told him that this is exactly your character, fair to everyone.

Of course, I told him, that I would only agree on this condition.

Hephaestion signaled to an officer to approach. He approached with a purple robe and gave it to him with such a respect as if it was a Royal Crown. Hephaestion weighed it in his arms as if he wanted to weigh me.

We were all silent for a while.

“What are the responsibilities accompanying the robe?” I asked, as it was my turn now to weigh myself.

“A just government based on your laws.”

“Why should I leave the gardens and return to the palace?”

“We decided to change the world Abdalonymus and we will change it by the grace of God.” His eyes flashed. My question annoyed him. It was clear that he didn’t like long talk or those who dither about details. He looked at me as if I was a soldier whom he obliged to play his life or desert.

I was already convinced. I looked at the land I stepped on and was about to leave.

“And how will the minds of the noble men change?” I whispered without daring to look up.

“We want that all people live in one Kingdom as brothers and that they are governed by the best governors and not the successors. The development of democracy... This is what we establish...” His voice softened.

“It sounds like the myth of Atlantis,” I responded.

And yet I had already accepted him as a leader. In his face I recognized the virtuous warrior whom the old man wanted as a King. For sure, Alexander and his young generals brought something dramatically new to the world. And of course, I had heard about the fierce opposition and the attempted murders. Strato visited me often and we discussed the news that his commanders brought him.

He started laughing. He was about 23 or 24 years old, tall and good-looking. Proud, real. Like Phidias's statue at Delphi, which I had visited as a boy with my father. A statue that depicted an unbowed Warrior.

"Without visions and dreams life would be grey," he tells me.

"To your dreams I devote the only thing I own, my life." I answered. Tears came to my eyes, it was as if I had rediscovered my nation.

"Let's go and may the Gods bless us," said Hephaestion giving me the robe.

A warrior approached me bringing a snow-white horse. I mounted the horse and galloped towards the central gate. A cavalry man blew his trumpet towards the city and immediately others responded from inside the walls.

We passed the walls galloping and moved towards the agora. Hephaestion, Strato and I were heading.

The men of Sidon were waiting for us there. The news in this city travel with the speed of the hawk.

In front of the crowd stood Strato's brother with three or four citizens who stood out from the rest. When we approached, he smiled at me like warriors do to each other after a victory. Hephaestion dismounted and everybody followed him. Addressing the mass he shouted:

"May the Gods bless your new King and give you health and happiness."

"We donate to the royal coffer 30 silver talents," Strato shouted.

"Every day, at this time, the palace will be open to every citizen" I shouted. "With the help of God may I not be unfair to anyone."

All the citizens cheered my name. Embarrassed, I turned to Hephaestion and said.

"It is time to go to the palace."

Hephaestion turned abruptly and nodded. I understood that there were many unanswered thoughts in his young mind.

We walked towards the palace. There, at the front, the obviously new palace guard was lined up. The commander of the guard approached us and informed us that the palace was ready to receive the new king. I said to the commander of the guard that I would guide Hephaestion around the palace. I discovered that not many things had changed in the last 20 years of my absence.

While we crossed the large chamber of the city council, Hephaestion tells me:

“We must go to the camp before it gets dark. You are coming too. Alexander wants to meet you.”

Without delay we left the palace. I saw about one hundred Greek cavalrymen being ready and next to them about fifty cavalrymen from my palace guard. I turned and looked at the commander of the guard who had not left my side since the moment we met. He smiled nodding his head. I was happy that he had already given orders for my personal escort without my realizing it. I remembered the old man saying, “Be afraid of the stupid, my son, you can work things out with the smart ones.”

Hephaestion says to me: “Tomorrow morning you’ll be back. Arrange for a replacement.” I called Strato and the commander of the guard. The people had filled the area in front of the palace. Immediately I addressed the citizens:

“I leave Strato in my place for political decisions, and the commander of the guard for the military responsibilities.”

I knew the commander of the guard. He was an experienced military officer, devoted to the interests of the city. Strato had seen that he assumed his duties, as the previous commander with his men had followed his King. I called Strato’s brother and told him:

“You are now responsible for the royal coffer.”

Hephaestion was like a horse that was eager to gallop. I looked at him wanting to tell him that since all the necessary were arranged, we could leave. He smiled to me, before I had the time to talk, he hit me on the shoulder and we both mounted our horses.

We crossed the city at a gallop. Passing through the big gate, the sound of trumpets saluted us. I felt reborn. We stopped galloping only when we reached the Greek camp. Four or five officers came forward to meet us. We dismounted. Hephaestion, walked quickly and gave orders.

“Your men will dine with my horsemen. They will also find accomodation there.” he tells me.

Immediately I communicated this to the chief of my cavalry. He shook his head, as if he had already been informed. Warriors, sometimes, by discussing with each other, want to predict the actions of their superiors. Without delay, by signalling to me to follow him, he passed the entrance and moved towards the centre of the camp. A little further, a guard in the entrance had picked up my horse and that of Hephaestion.

I had to run in order to catch up with Hephaestion. By the way the warriors saluted us I realized that Hephaestion was very popular with the troop.

Their camp was their mobile capital. An ordinary Greek city. With the “company” of courtesans embellishing its streets.

“Let’ go now, I have to give my last directions for the symposium I organize tonight,” Hephaestion tells me.

After a while, we arrived at his tent, where the courtesans prepared the wreaths. The cooks and bakers prepared the dining table.

Let me skip the ceremonials and etiquette to come to the culmination of the symposium.

Hephaestion raises his glass to propose a toast and then recites Greek verses.

“A man must care for the happiness of his mistress, when she sails for new directions. Free women means peace. And happy lovers.”

And immediately, he asks Kypris, as he called his goddess-like Mistress,

“What do you expect from your beloved?”

“Serenity”, she replied. And immediately she added,

“And from me, your beloved, what do you expect?”

Silence from everybody followed.

“Joy without worries, my boy”, she answered her question. And she made Alexander stand from his seat to kiss her and put his wreath on her.

Afterwards, Iollas, the cup bearer, implied something about Ganymedes. Alexander’s courtesan, Pagisti, started up as if she had been stung by a scorpion. And she lashed out at him, shouting:

“This is hubris towards my dear-loved Hera. Eat your words at once, you blasphemer. Right now.”

He froze and stammered in a female manner:

“I eat my words.”

Pagisti tossed back her hair proudly and added:

“How could avenging Hera ever accept such an insult? How could she accept that someone claiming her conjugal bed is treating her husband to nectar in her presence...”

“You, homosexual, you don’t know a thing about women. The sluts that cash your obsequious adulations have nothing to do with women, idiot.”

“As a punishment, I suggest that you stay here silent and thirsty until the end of the symposium.”

We all gave her a standing ovation...

Thais, the Athenian, Ptolemy’s courtesan, following his request, sat next to me as a token of honour. At some point, towards the end of the symposium, she confided to me with drunken words:

“Hefaisteion is our most handsome General.

And she continued, without fearing that Ptolemy or Kypris might hear her.

“One night that I had him in my arms”, I asked him,

“Hephaestion, why aren’t you scared of death?”

“Because we, heroes, win the most ferocious battles dead, my sweet fire bug.”

Then she looked at him full of pride and as she wasn’t able to touch him from her seat, she kissed me on the cheek.

After a while, with the Hymn to Hera, we ended the symposium. Already, it had begun to dawn. I took the way of return together with my horsemen. And I thanked Gods for the honour they gave me to visit for one night the Elysian Fields.

Chiliarch Hephaestion, as you can see, I am sending you this story written on these 9 golden plates. It is dedicated to the 9 Muses that you sacrificed at the beginning of your route to the East. Accept this as a wedding gift offered with my deepest sentiments. Live your happiness with Drypetis as long as the Fates allow it.

Kypris and Thais will be happy to receive the gifts I am sending them. Whenever they need it, there is a mansion waiting for them in Sidon.

We shall be fighting up to our last breath for a free and beautiful world

P.S. The love for arts is a gift from Apelles.
Pagisti chose the gifts for her girlfriends.
I just received a message from Thalestris.
“As a wedding gift Alexander receives from Thalestris
a daughter that leans her head the same way with her father”.

Sisygambis finishes the reading of the letter.
The preparation of Hephaestion is also finished. All dressed-up and bejeweled, he smiles at her.

Sisygambis: You have my blessing, son. I will reply to Abdalonymus. She takes a pen and a papyrus. She writes by reading loudly.

“As a gift in return, our dear friend, accept from me the promise that, if anything happens to Alexander, Sisygambis will rush to meet him at the Elysian Fields.

Be happy and wise
THE QUEEN MOTHER”

Sisygambis: Hephaestion, it’s time for you, bridegrooms, to go to your thrones.
Hephaestion kisses Sisygambis on the cheek and leaves.

Sisygambis: Brides, in a while, we’ll go to your thrones. (Addressing her bondmaids)
You, girls, can start throwing flowers for the brides to step on. The girls throw flowers on the chamber’s floor. They open the Big Gate. As they come out, they scatter flowers on the red Persian carpets leading to the room of the Weddings.

Author’s Note: Irini Papa is the ideal Sisygambis

