

At the far end of the plain of Issus, the sea sparkled under the wintry sun. It was not cold. Winters are mild in southern Anatolia.

Inside Darius's great tent, Alexander's eyes searched for a seat. Hephaestion was leaning heavily upon him, his leg pierced by an arrow. He had pulled it out himself on the battlefield but it was still bleeding, soaking the expensive carpet. Craterus lifted up an overturned stool. Someone brought water and clean cloths. Alexander kneeled in front of his friend and began to clean up the wound. Only when he had finished did he lift up his eyes to take a look around him.

The luxurious hangings were drawn and the sun of the East flooded every corner of the tent. Amongst the overturned gilded tables and stools, a bird with multi-coloured wings was screeching inside its shiny cage. Tableware of gold and silver was scattered on the floor. The royal mantle was draped over the king's golden throne.

'Alexander! This way!' Philotas called out.

Eager like a child handed a new toy, Alexander followed Philotas through the tent. Philotas was always the first to discover the choicest things.

Behind a scarlet curtain, the bathtub Darius had abandoned, inlaid with gems, was still filled with scented water.

'No one can accuse the man of being a bad host,' Alexander said. Everyone burst out laughing.

Chests of perfumes and fragrant herbs were arrayed on a divan covered with a soft linen cloth.

Alexander made a sweeping gesture.

'Philotas, take whatever you wish. Just don't take the bathtub, please, at least not until I've used it once myself.'

They all laughed again. They knew he was only joking. Alexander kept much fewer war spoils for himself than his friends. And Philotas was the one who always had first pick and kept the best pieces for himself.

They were still laughing when a man's figure cast a shadow on the tent entrance.

‘Where is Alexander?’

‘Here he is, Parmenion.’

The old general sighed with relief. Although he wasn’t as old as Antipater, who had stayed back in Macedon as regent, he suddenly felt drained. War was definitely much more taxing on him than on all these lads who surrounded the young king. Yet again he observed how handsome and strong they all were. *This is the new generation of Macedon that defeated Darius at Issus*, he thought proudly. He couldn’t take his eyes off their leader. Alexander had inherited the slender bone structure of his mother Olympias and he wasn’t as tall as the rest of them. But his lithe young body had all the power and grace of an Olympic athlete.

‘Alexander, it’s all settled,’ Parmenion said, looking for somewhere to sit.

Alexander whisked the royal mantle off the throne and made a sign for him to sit there. Nobody was surprised, they were used to their young king’s disregard of formalities.

‘Everything’s done properly then?’ Alexander asked the old general.

Parmenion shook his head thoughtfully.

‘How can anyone know what these barbarians consider proper?’ he sighed. ‘But there are guards outside the women’s tents now. I saw to it myself. Nobody will dare molest Darius’s mother or his wife. I’ve just now left them in their tents, and all the children, too. You’d expect them to be weeping, but no. His ‘majesty’ drags them along all the way to the battleground and then he abandons them, just like that! As if they were a chariot, or a tent! And them, they are just sitting there, silent as statues, neither weeping nor wailing. Not even the children. Who can understand the barbarians?’

It was now Alexander’s turn to shake his head.

Yes, it was certainly hard to understand these people. Everything about them was strange, from their looks to their clothes to their behaviour. But then, there are not two people alike in this world...

‘Inform them I intend to visit them,’ he said, turning his look towards the filled bathtub.

There was no way on earth he would appear anywhere dirty when he could be clean instead.

The tent of the royal family was situated at the very edge of the camp. In truth it was a whole compound of tents surrounding the great one in the middle bearing the golden emblems of the Persian dynasty. According to the Achaemenid court etiquette, a great number of courtiers and servants followed the Queen when she travelled.

The Persian camp on the plain of Issus had now been reduced to broken spears and wrecked chariots and levelled earth. One would have expected to see the bodies of dead soldiers, remnants of Darius' vast army, abandoned to the vultures, but they had been lifted from the battlefield. Alexander always respected the dead.

In the middle of the great tent, sitting on a golden throne, Queen Sisygambis, Darius' mother, raised her hand in an ambiguous gesture. The Persian in the embroidered robe and black silky beard bowed down to the earth in front of her and, walking backwards, left the room.

Yes, the Greek king may now enter.

Darius's wife - she was said to surpass all women in Persia in beauty - instinctively reached out and touched her son, as if the mere touch of her hand could protect him.

One of the fragrant logs burning in the big brazier flared out in a shower of sparks. The young queen jumped up. Her mother-in-law's reproachful look made her sit still again.

The next moment Alexander and Hephaestion entered the room. They were both dressed in similar Greek short tunics - too plain, inappropriate for Persian tastes. Except for the golden clasps on their cloaks, the two young men bore no other ornament.

Queen Sisygambis stood up. She was as tall as Darius himself, and her former beauty was still obvious on her face that looked like carved old ivory. In spite of her seventy-five years, she made a deep bow in front of Hephaestion.

There were confused whispers and panicked stares. One look on the face of a terrified courtier sufficed for Darius' wife to realise what great faux-pas her mother-in-law had just committed.

As shame spread over Sisygambis's immobile face like a shiver, Alexander's heart melted with compassion. This old woman, abandoned by her son to his enemy's mercy, had now one more reason to feel humiliated.

He reached out to her and stopped her as she was about to prostrate herself again, this time in front of him.

'It's all right, Mother,' he said softly, gesturing towards Hephaestion. 'He too is Alexander.'

Her old wrinkled hands were shaky inside his own, as he led her back to her throne. Before she sat, Alexander felt her hands holding him tight, leaning on him.

Now Darius' wife bowed down in front of Alexander in her turn.

He returned the bow and took his eyes quickly off the young queen, as a mark of respect. Then he turned to the old queen.

'Never fear, Mother,' he said. 'You are safe with me. Is there anything you and yours might have need of? Let me know and it shall be granted.'

Sisygambis's dark, penetrating eyes, the only feature that seemed alive on that carved ivory face, were looking at him with a strange intensity. She looked baffled and expectant at the same time.

It was then that Alexander thought of her hands leaning upon him just now. It was then he realised that he had called her Mother. This was the first time he had used this word for anyone except Olympias. He realised that the only thing he had wanted since the moment he laid eyes on Sisygambis was to liberate her from shame. She, the woman, the mother, the queen, the Persian, was bearing defeat and desertion with such dignity! He wanted to assure her that it was all right, that she could trust him. *He* would never abandon her to the mercy of her enemies.

If she were his own mother, he would know what to do: he would just smile at her. But he did not know what the correct behaviour towards an aged Persian lady of such high standing was. Therefore he did what he would have done with Olympias: he smiled at her.

Sisygambis' immobile face came alive. She trusted him!

She did not call him her son as she thanked him. But he knew she meant it.

Later, Alexander would wonder why he had felt such a connection with that woman who was so different from his own mother. His answer to himself was: 'Exactly for that reason. Because she *is* so different.'

Olympias, with her sudden outbursts of adoration, her endless demands, her unjust resentments, had exhausted him. He would have liked a mother with the dignified serenity of Darius' mother. Well, he had found such a mother at the most unlikely place, at the battlefield of Issus. That foreign queen, disappointed by her own son, had seen Persia's future in Alexander's smile and placed that future in his hands, with trust, as if he were her real son; the way it befitted a real queen, who put her people and their future above all else.