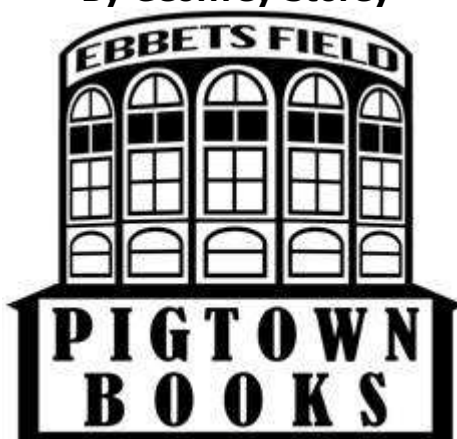


Anabasis

Demetrius Soter, the Saviour King of Bactria and the Indo-Greeks

A Novel of Hellenistic Afghanistan and India

By Geoffrey Storey



To my Penny



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Printing History

ANABASIS: Demetrius Soter, The Saviour King of Bactria and the Indo-Greeks

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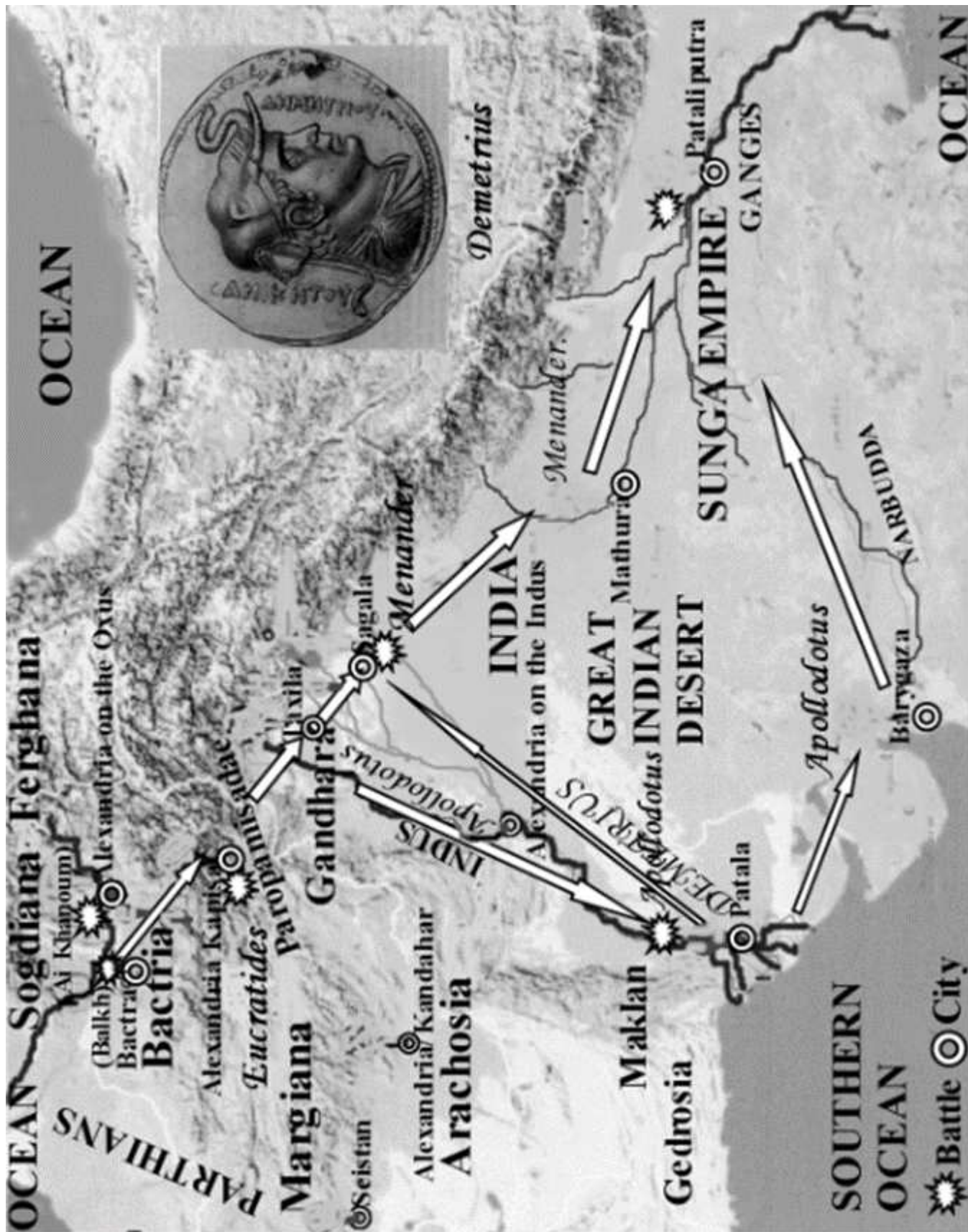
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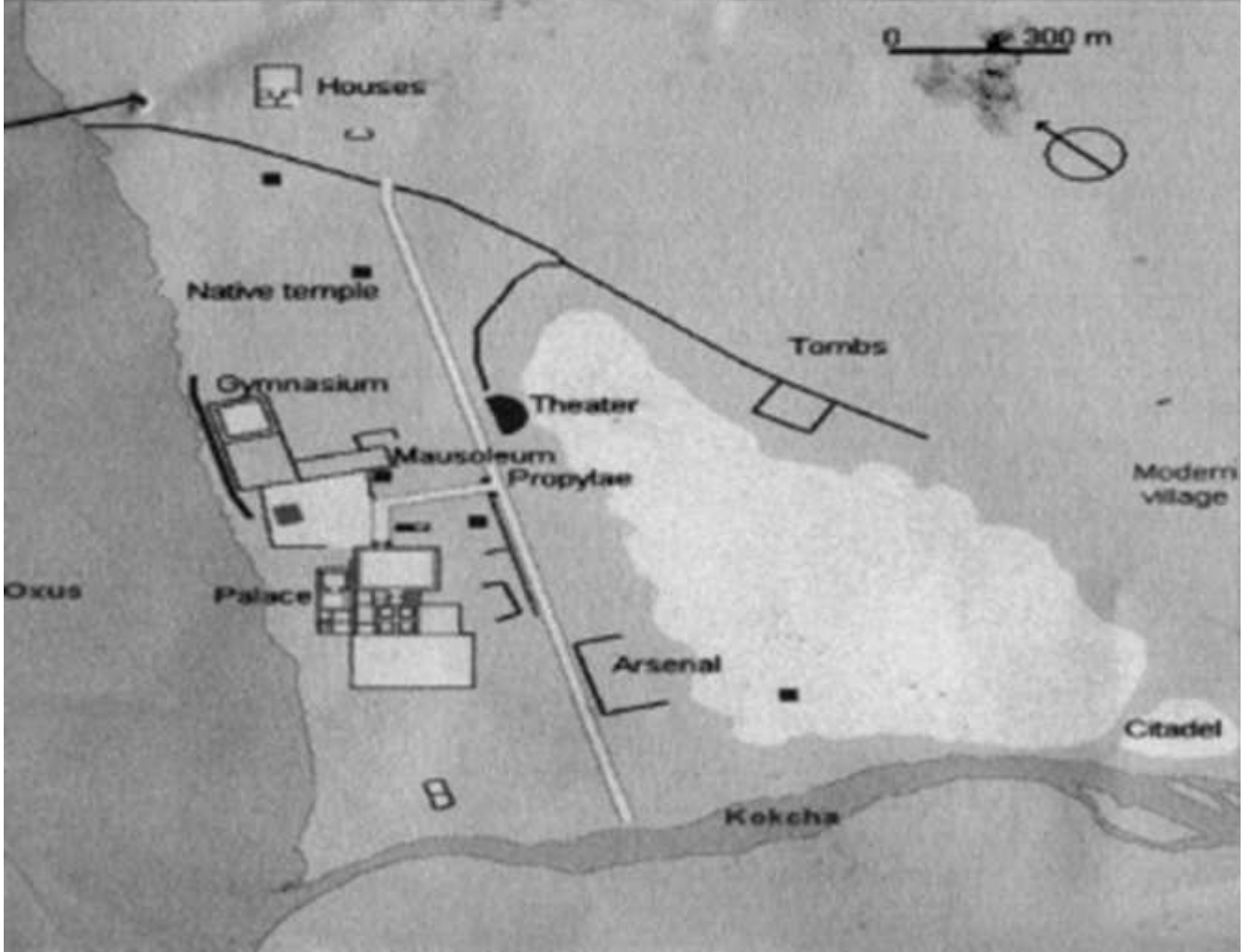


Bactria and Neighboring Lands circa 200 BC



Alexandria on the Oxus Today

Or Ai-Khanoum, Afghanistan.



Introduction: Hellenism Triumphant



This is a story about a largely forgotten people living out their lives geographically isolated from their parent culture, separated by thousands of miles from the lands whence their ancestors had come. These people were the successors of Alexander the Great and his followers, at the furthest tip of his Empire, in the north of modern Afghanistan, then called Bactria, and the vast lands surrounding it. Their early centuries are well documented, their exploits known.

The tides of time were to later overwhelm and isolate them from the rest of the Hellenistic world of which they felt a part, allowing us only glimpses of them. They were nominally Greek or Macedonian by descent. The settlers were not completely cut off from the Hellenistic world bordering the Mediterranean, but they had perforce begun to adapt to the world around them, a world largely ruled before Alexander by a warlike Iranian aristocracy. They were at the hub of transcontinental trade routes, men and caravans crossed the seas, mountains, and deserts. They read the latest plays from Greece, had their own authors, playwrights, and poets.

Yet as with Hellenistic dynasts everywhere, their rulers had vast ambitions, and had divided them politically from the successor Seleucid Empire and from the other Hellenistic Empires and states that Alexander had once ruled or dominated. Once separated from the greater Hellenistic polity, with steppe nomads poised to further divide them from Mesopotamia, our sources begin to fall silent. They were on their own now.

The Seleucids still controlled most of Asia, centred on Syria and Mesopotamia, which was once conquered by Alexander, while to the South was the mighty Egypt of the Ptolemies. Small successor states were gradually carving out new kingdoms around the Aegean, and the now dwarfed Greek city states continued their squabbling in the shadow of the still powerful Macedonian Kingdom.

The Hellenistic world saw a flood of creativity that the new patrons of Hellenistic culture, in the arts and sciences, could now finance. The great new centres of learning included Alexandria in Egypt, Antioch, Pergamum, and Syracuse, itself still free from the Roman yoke. The New Men of the Hellenistic world did not forget older centres such as Athens. Now the scholars and their teachers travelled widely, criss-crossing the entire Hellenistic World. Their disciples and their teachings were to reach Bactria, and their works are still to be found in the ruins of Bactrian libraries, along with much older classical works, including plays.

Books were to be written about these Hellenes in furthest Asia, books now lost, with only a passing reference to be found today in another man's note. Strangely enough we often know what these otherwise forgotten people looked like as individuals. Tens of thousands of coins both large and small, ranging from gold staters to the smallest nickel or bronze. These show portraits of strong men, ambitious men, of learned and wise men, all snapshots taken at a certain period in their lives. Their headdress, the symbolism on these coins, the legends on them, a dedication to a god or a reference to a triumph, to a school of teaching, or even to a philosophy, all give us some glimpses of the world they lived in and ruled against all the odds. The legends give us not only words, but tell us much from the language they are inscribed in. A bilingual coin will reveal who that coin was meant to be read by. For most of those ruled that coin, and what it said, along with the portrait of the individual on it, would be the closest he would get to his king. The coins were not merely units of currency, but living propaganda. Statements of belief and intent, and reminders of past successes.

Those coins are in fact the most revealing history we have of these people. After a few centuries even the passing references to them cease. The coins continued to be minted however, striking pictures taken out of time, out of the exact history we are all so used to

reading. These glimpses of what they wanted the world to know of themselves are almost all we have. There are a few garbled travellers tales, a few mentions in Buddhist literature, but beyond that, nothing. We know something of their eventual fate in Bactria, nothing of what happened to a king named Plato ruling in India, long after the line of the Ptolemies in Egypt ended with Cleopatra, and centuries after the phalanx of Philip the Fifth of Macedon went down in bloody defeat to the Romans.

There are peoples even today who claim descent from Alexander and his men. Anthropologists and others have climbed high into the mountains and driven deep into the deserts to search for any hint of Greek or Macedonian evidence in their speech, appearance, daily life or beliefs. Ultimately identity is about our desires. These people, from princely families to whole ethnic units, want to identify with these bold adventurers from the distant waters of the Aegean who had once dreamt a dream and had set out to make it a reality.

Bactria was a land of many contrasts, high snowy peaks, rushing mountain streams and broad rivers running through fertile valleys, lush forests, with broad stretches of grasslands and steppe to the north, while to the south lay barren hills, deserts of sand and rock. These deserts were not simply waste lands however. Strong wide rivers often cut through them, with green fertile land on either side. As to the North, with its dry steppe lands, its inhabitants had long been masters of irrigation.

This was a rich country, with good lands for farming and stock raising, teeming with wildlife and filled with precious minerals easily mined. It was also a harsh land, one of contrasts between high cold mountain valley pastures and the river oases in the southern deserts, between cultured city life and the herdsmen of the steppe.

It was in this beautiful alien land that a relatively few Greeks and Macedonians settled, not always by choice. Here they built their cities in imitation of the cities back home, here they built their lives.

They had been ruling and living in this land for six generations when this story opens. They had lost none of the adventurous spirit that had led their ancestors to Bactria, for they knew, had always known, that beyond the Hindu Kush lay an even richer world, a world that seemed ripe to fall into their lap. Lands perhaps greater than even Alexander had conquered. They were Hellenes, and they would carry the standard of Hellenism and its all embracing culture to the ends of the earth, if they could. Demetrius son of Euthedemus was the greatest of these men. Demetrius, surnamed both Soter or Saviour, and Aniketos, the Invincible, undertook an incredible Anabasis, an advance to the ends of the earth, backed only by the resources of what had been an insignificant outer province of Empire, a military expedition that beggars the imagination.

The grete Emetrius, the kyng of Inde,..

Cam ridyng lyk the god of armes, Mars..

His criske heer lyk rynges was yronne,

And that was yellow, and glytered as the sonne.

His nose was heigh, his eyen bright citryn,

His lippes rounde, his colour was sangwyn;

A fewe farakenes in his face ysprynd,..

His voys was as a trompe thonderyng.





Chapter One: The Mission

The still air stirred. Alexis felt the first gust of wind on his face. They were still some way from their goal, the village set amidst the shady fertile lands along the Helmand River. The sky was beginning to cloud over, yet the whitewashed mud walls ahead gleamed in the bright sunshine. He urged his tired horse, pricking it lightly with his spurs. Skyron followed. The stifling dust rose around and about them.

Alexis felt the first droplet of rain on his head, and took off his kausia, his felt beret. It would be no protection against what was to come, that he knew. It was time to look like a soldier again. He pulled on his Boetian helmet, itself a farmer's hat set in bronze, its shady brow both a protection from the Bactrian sun and its downpours. His score of mounted Royal Companions followed suit.

The column of Royal Companions and their accompanying Tarentine light horse were travelling alongside a dry wadi from the desert lands of the South, a dry watercourse which cut through the thirsty plain like a sword-slash. Although all was now parched earth, immediately ahead was the brilliant green of the lands beside the Helmand River. On the other side of the river, far away in the distance, rose brown-grey hills, beyond which in his imagination were snow-capped mountains. They were his promise of home.

Alexis was on a mission for Demetrius son of Euthydemus, King of Bactria. He was tall and lithe, his long brown wavy hair blowing in the wind where it es

caped his helmet. He could be taken for a dreamer, until one saw the jagged scars on his limbs. His eyes confirmed what his scars suggested. He had experienced much, this young man. His bearded companion Skyron was physically his opposite, a short stocky no nonsense man, muscular and sun bronzed. The wind bellowed a warning in their cloaks.

Both Skyron and Alexis wore handsome officers' bronze muscle cuirasses, shaped to their bodies. Double layered strips of leather pturiges protected their loins. In his heavy armour Skyron looked grim and business-like, but Alexis resembled a second Achilles in his flamboyant cuirass, picked out with gold and enamelled decoration. Alexis turned and waved to the troopers.

"I think that we'll make it!" he called. He fingered the Euthedemus drachma in his belt pouch for luck and eased his heavy recurved sabre in its scabbard. It had both a wicked slashing edge and a needle point. His lance was secured to his horse. It was a thrusting weapon, nine foot long, tipped with iron and with a bronze butt-spike at its foot. His personal pennon blew boisterously at its tip.

Alexis was a leader of men despite his youth, and his enthusiasm was infectious. He made even the prospect of a race to beat a storm into an adventure. His weary troopers responded. For the past hour they had been wearing their hot and heavy composite cuirasses over their dusty reddish tunics. They would look spectacular on parade, with horsehair and feather crests atop their helmets tossing. But not now, not here. Both their saddle clothes and cloaks were faded red, bordered with dulled yellow. Their cloaks were a partial protection from the fierce sun, but scant protection from the downpour to come. They straightened up in their saddles and formed into ranks, gripping their lances, the ensigns unfurling the banners of Bactria and Demetrius to gust in the gale.

These men were superb horsemen, controlling their agile unshod mounts largely by means of their legs, helped by their reins, bridles, and flexible bits. Their spurred calf high cavalry boots enabled them to manoeuvre their horses whilst still affording some protection

to their legs. The remainder of their horse-gear consisted of a simple saddle cloth held by a broad breast strap and girth, with a second padded saddlecloth giving a firmer seat. Like Alexis, most of the Companions were clean-shaven in the fashion set by Alexander. Their hair was long in the cavalry style, and sideburns framed their faces. They were all noblemen, horse-lords, and of Demetrius' own guard. Eager, quick-witted, self-confident, trained to peak fitness throughout their lives. Competition was in their blood, and Alexis was one of their kind.

The score of light cavalry outriders were ever vigilant out on the flanks, to front and rear. They were armed as Tarentines, but only a couple of veterans besides their scarred leader, Kleon, had ever seen Taras in Magna Graecia, Southern Italy. At first sight of the green shade ahead they had pulled on their light cone-shaped pilos helmets, stuffing their felt hats and berets in their horse rolls. Kleon and his men also wore red linen tunics, calf-length boots, and carried two or three javelins for thrusting and for throwing with the leather loops they carried. For most close combat they relied on the same heavy sabres carried by the Companions. With their left arms they both gripped the horses' reins and bore a shield emblazoned with their arms.

Kleon was a small wiry man. As tough as old boots, he led his men well and effectively. He and the other two Tarantines from Taras, Kroton and Herakles, had first been attracted by offers of high wages. They had decided that they would be fools to ever leave this land and they had never returned to Italy. The three Tarantines formed a close-knit group. Their long almost pointed beards easily distinguished them from their mostly cropped and clean-shaven men and comrades. Although hard pressed to take up their own commands, the other two Italian Greeks had stubbornly refused to be parted from their leader and comrade.

As experienced soldiers these men travelled light, with only a few servants and muleteers, with the mules and ponies carrying the heavy baggage such as the stone barley grinders, barley for the horses, hide tents, and suchlike. Each man carried his own rations and equipment, usually in light panniers on his horse. The servants led a second horse for each warrior.

They reached the farmed fields and shade trees just before the heavy rain. The large walled village with its whitewashed walls lay just ahead, crouched on a low bank overlooking small green fields. The watchmen above the main gate recognised the soldiers' banner as Demetrius', and the horsemen as Hellenes, and hailed the gatekeeper. He knew the urgency, was already prepared to duck into shelter. They reached the gate and Phineus the leader of the escort spoke briefly to the guard. The gatekeeper opened the stout doors and the troopers clattered through.

Alexis knew that the chief magistrate, the headman of this village was loyal to Demetrius. Minutes later Alexis, his squire Kinon, and Skyron were being shown into the courtyard of the headman. They were fortunate in their timing. The heavens opened, and rain fell like a curtain, huge droplets driven by a gale, striking like hailstones. Soon the ravine alongside which they had travelled would be filled with a raging torrent.

Phineas and Kleon were shown with hurried gestures the government stables where they could tend the horses, and only then did the men look to themselves. They at least knew that when the rain stopped they would be able to supplement their monotonous diet of barley eaten as a bread or a porridge, together with salt-fish, salt, thyme, and the cheese which they carried in their panniers. The locals would be able to provide luxuries such as olives, garlic, olive oil, onions and fresh fruit, perhaps also some meat or wheaten bread. For now all the men wanted was rest, rest and some wine. They could think of entertainment later.

The village was similar to many Alexis had passed on his long journey from Alexandria Arachosia, Kandahar. This village had the usual agora, in reality simply the market place, in addition to being an assembly point. The small shrines were to local gods, not to the Olympic pantheon. The streets were narrow but straight, in grid like fashion. The well maintained walls could be easily reached and defended. To one side of the market place

was the council hall and the chieftain's – or chief magistrate's – chambers.

They were shown in, given water and towels to wash. Alexis spoke a few words to Kinon who, naturally, expected to serve Alexis.

"See to our horses first. The Magistrate would want to pour the wine himself. Such is the local custom with guests. Anyway, you have earned a good time with the lads. Its been a long journey. Come back in an hour or two"

The magistrate had a couple of reclining benches in the main reception room, and, the formalities over, hurried Alexis and Skyron through. He found that he could speak easily in rough Greek with both the chief magistrate and his militia leader. The room was a curious hybrid, plastered walls with rush mats, a low centre table with couches set either side. In niches on the walls stood small statues of outlandish gods and domestic guardian spirits, some of which he thought he recognised. In place of a Greek brazier was a central hearth. It seemed certain that this room was normally reserved for native worship, and then the couches would be piled in the corner.

The village was one of Euthydemus' resettlement experiments, which went far beyond that done anywhere else in the Empire, the old Seleucid Empire. Usually such an organised settlement would be of military settlers, some of which grew into real towns, and even into fully independent Cities with their own constitutions.

These villages in Bactria were completely different. Their populations were made up predominantly of serfs, men who before the resettlement had been the absolute property of their Iranian feudal lords. They and a few mounted retainers lived off the land and the serfs who worked it. The serfs still worked the land for their lords, but Euthydemus had begun settling those serfs into walled villages, and begun organising their society. Many already had rudimentary ad hoc "constitutions," with an assembly of elders and magistrates, such as here. Through ruling themselves the people were beginning to grow in confidence.

These new larger communities of serfs attracted trade and trade meant communication with the outside world. Some of the richest armed and mounted traders with valuable goods had always travelled the roads between princely dwellings, towns, and the cities. Now however there were far more, along with itinerant peddlers with their trinkets and gossip, and they would stay for a while in these villages and they would put up shop. Their number would include jobbing metal-workers, carvers, painters, entertainers such as actors and musicians, all adding to the sum of the villagers' life. Many villages also held government post houses and stabling, and some even a hostel for both official and paying travellers.

They and their fellows from the grassy Sogdiana in the north to these deserts of the south had already led to Bactria being called the Land of a Thousand Cities. The new prosperity had of course made the feudal Iranian lords far richer than ever before, and as their wealth grew so did their armed retinues, which were largely at Euthydemus' disposal. The army was stronger, the country was richer, and there were now countless strongholds to delay or even halt the swift-moving nomad raids until a force from the nearest military colony, or from the satrap, could reach and destroy them.

A military colony was of course made up of veteran soldiers, men whose land was held by military service. Unlike these villagers they had all the amenities Greeks expected in their towns, especially a gymnasium, the focus of Greek cultural, intellectual, and physical life.

Alexis' men, who were settling down in the village below his chamber, were a mixed bunch. Most were of Greek and Macedonian blood, but with a shortage of women from the homelands and much intermarriage, especially with the Iranians in the East, few could swear that they were either fully Greek or completely Macedonian. Of course many cities in the Old Country had sent out both male and female settlers, especially under the energetic settlement plans of the Seleucids.

Not that resentment between the two peoples had altogether faded away. It was being a minority in their new world that united them. Being "Hellenic" was no longer simply a question of blood. It was a matter of culture, of identity. The great historian of the

Peloponnesian war, Themistocles, had a Carian mother, but no one would regard him as a half breed. They were Hellenes.

Alexis was definitely a Greek. And given his ancestry, a very proud one. His parents were Olynthian, and like many whose origins lay in that city devastated by Philip of Macedon, his father still called himself an Olynthian. Alexis was a curious mixture. He had inherited the Greek hostility to Macedonian absolutism, but he served a Successor Prince, albeit that his Prince, Demetrius, was mostly Thessalian Greek. He had seen enough to make hard choices, had this young man, yet he was in no way embittered. There was still something boyish, curious, in those eyes. At times when the campfire was dying and the men were either stretched on their backs on their bedding under the starlight, or gambling quietly and chatting under the stars, Skyron would see the young man he already admired gazing up at the mountain tops highlighted by the moonlight, or gazing into the impenetrable depths of the desert darkness. Dreaming might be a word for it. Or Searching. He had a need to know. Not to understand in the pure pragmatic sense of the world, but to understand what made his world, the why as well as the how. Questing, perhaps. For adventure, knowledge, new horizons.

He already understood the cruelty of life. Battles are fought, and poor men starve, honest men lose all, and unpleasant men grow rich. More importantly he had loved and lost. He had seen things in his short life which most men experience over many more years. Yet that experience of life had not soured him, made him cynical. It had made him long to find the better, even the best, in life.

His hosts served their guests the very best wine and food available in the village.

Skyron caught the grimace Alexis made as he took his first sip from the cup. Skyron had to stifle a laugh. For some reason it reminded him of the time that a mischievous and much younger Alexis had surreptitiously introduced a tippler's cup into one of his father's dinner parties. The lad had many theatrical friends and was of course in charge of serving the wine and of keeping the guests' cups full. There was one guest there that night whom Alexis found especially objectionable. He had a nasty habit of trying to grope the prettier of the servant boys. Alexis had found one boy in tears after the last gathering this man had attended. He had even tried it on Alexis when his father's attention was elsewhere. Alexis had adroitly twisted away, but now he would have his revenge. This boor was rather a heavy drinker, always ensuring that his cup was kept full to overflowing.

Alexis' actor friends had come up with just the thing. A cup which was a perfectly good drinking vessel when filled to the usual levels, but if overfilled the wine came pouring out of the base, swamping the guzzler. Skyron was not like Alexis in that way, he did not try to understand matters of valves and atmospheric pressure, but he had been at that party that night, and long would he remember the occasion. Alexis had filled the man's cup and had already moved on towards the next guest when it happened. Wine suddenly poured out of the base of the boor's wine cup, swamping him. He had simply sat there, wine cascading all over him, stupefied, his mouth open, empty for once.

It had simply been too funny. No servant could be blamed, and none were blamed. He was unpopular with most of the party, and it had been hilarious. Even Alexis' father was loath to punish his son.

What Skyron really admired was Alexis' judgement even at that age. He had risked an elaborate practical joke on an important personage, but had foreseen how the other guests, and especially his father, would react. His sense of humour and love of japes had resulted in a something truly out of the ordinary. After the boor had left the other guests gathered around to examine the wine cup, and to ask just how it worked. The story, and replica wine cups, had circulated in the city for a long time afterwards, resulting in many a tippler carefully examining his cup before accepting a refill.

Now however Alexis and Skyron were the King's Men, and these rural law-givers would not take kindly to a slight. Alexis and Skyron were on their best behaviour. The villagers were small, delicate people, unlike the tall lean Iranians Alexis knew in the North. The village was humming with their arrival, almost but not completely stilled by the downpour

outside. They were Royal emissaries, their standard bearing the emblem of Demetrius, with Alexis and Skyron the embodiments of the King himself in their little world. Alexis was youth enough to be gratified. After the past few days he could at last take his ease after days of hard riding in the fierce heat of the south, sleeping in the rocky hollows. He considered what he had accomplished. Demetrius was planning a major campaign. Alexis believed that he understood the goal that Demetrius had set himself, and had set for the people of Bactria. The King's father Euthedemus had laid the groundwork, and Demetrius' entire career had been building up to this great adventure. He had begun stockpiling weapons and stores for years, carefully husbanding the vast financial resources of his kingdom. Now he needed men to carry it through. Not simply the precise number of retainers owed by the Iranian or Hellenic horse-lords, not simply the stipulated drafts owed by towns, military colonies, and cities, but in addition eager volunteers, trained by their cities, men who sought adventure and riches for themselves as well as doing their civic duty. He wanted to galvanise his people.

The cities were independent, governed by their citizens. The cities of Bactria, as throughout the Hellenistic world, had a rather uneasy relationship with their kings. The system was made workable by the kings' avoidance of direct interference in domestic affairs, although they could work subtly. The kings did limit a city's foreign affairs, and the imposition of tribute did infringe the cities' liberties. Treaties bound king and cities. This is why Alexis' mission was so important to King Demetrius. He had sent Alexis to ask for men and money over and above that owed. Alexis had to work with the Councillors, in the interests of the King.

Alexis' long journey had been his contribution, from Alexandria Arachosia, once a settlement of military colonists and now a thriving city, and from the remote Alexandria on lake Hamun in Seistan. Both cities had been reclaimed for Bactria relatively recently. Both were among the many cities so named by Alexander the Great on his march Eastwards. Alexis' own home city was another Alexandria. At least it had not been named Bucephalos after Alexander's horse, he thought wryly. Another Eastern city had been. The two cities he had visited were still unsure of their allegiance. Both were the centres of their provinces, owing military service of cleruchs, descendants of military Greeks and Macedonians settled on the land in return for military service in their own lifetimes and then from their heirs. Demetrius wanted more. Through a free vote in the Assembly he wanted extra volunteers, trained Hellenic warriors, for his forthcoming Anabasis.

It had been Alexis' duty to lobby the councillors and the influential citizens of both cities, ably assisted by Skyron. Skyron was a landed gentleman and veteran commander, now recalled to the colours by Demetrius. He was Alexis' father's oldest friend and right-hand man, and perhaps Alexis' mentor on this mission. Whatever their precise relationship, it was easy, and the two men were friends. Alexis knew that Skyron could talk and cajole and influence those men he could not. It was not simply that Skyron was more a man of the people, but rather a man whose stock of sound common sense shone through whenever he spoke. Demetrius had known the men he sent on this mission. Skyron was the perfect foil to Alexis. He did not exactly stand in the background, but he and his presence were always there at Alexis' shoulder. He was not the formal emissary of the King as Alexis was. Men could approach him less formally, ask blunt questions, and feel that the answers they received were equally blunt. Alexis, trained as he was in rhetoric, and sometimes carried away by his own fervour, was free to address and sway the Councils in an attempt to impart something of the magic of Demetrius' Dream.

India.

For six generations the Hellenes of Bactria and Sogdiana to the north had dreamt of the fabled wealth of India. Alexander had led their ancestors across the Hindu Kush and down into the great plains, defeated the mighty King Porus, had crossed the Hydaspes River, built now vanished cities, journeyed down the mighty Indus to the Southern Ocean, subjugating countless cities and peoples as he progressed. Then after his death the great Chandragupta, founder of the Mauryan Empire, had swallowed up most of his conquests.

The Seleucids had withdrawn gracefully, leaving only ambassadors in the place of generals. Alexis had read the journals of some of these men, including the writings of Megasthenes, the first of those ambassadors, a man who had known the Mauryan state at its greatest heights, a man of insight and curiosity, a man who had tried to understand the workings of Indian society. Alexis had learnt much from the work of these men, had learnt more of India from them. They had written to their Emperor in the days when Bactria was still a part of the Empire, before the creation of Bactria as an independent kingdom. They had painted a picture not only of wealth, but of a people ripe for Hellenism, a people who like the Hellenes thrived in cities and saw the world as one entity. Their philosophers were men of wisdom, their farmers and artisans both skilful and industrious. The Greeks had retained only a tenuous hold on the Paropamisadae and Gandhara, just beyond the Hindu Kush, where Hellenes still lived in both town and country, subject to the light hand of the heirs of Chandragupta. Those successors, including the great Asoka, had been heavily influenced by Hellenism, as could be seen by his bilingual coinage. Hellenes thrived in his administration and rose high in both his army and his civil service. But now Asoka was dead. His state crumbling. Demetrius sensed that his moment had come.

Demetrius, as had his father before him, dreamt a dream. Not merely to hold their Kingdom secure against Western threats, but to expand Eastwards. Not simply to retrace Alexander's steps, but to take and Hellenise the entire East, building a new polity that would be greater than any other seen before. They would bring Hellenistic rule and the very essence of Hellenism itself to the entire known world, build an Empire vaster and more enduring than Alexander's. From this power base a second Alexander could unite the rival Hellenistic kingdoms and cities of the world. This Alexis knew.

The message he brought to the citizens of the south was not however one of dreams. That was only for a few. No, he had to remind them of what they had always been brought up to believe in. Of India, a world not of villages and fertile fields alone, but of rich cities, decadent princes, and weak armies. Of course he did not address the Assemblies directly, but Demetrius had chosen his messenger well. His enthusiasm, his knowledge, and his experience as both a fighting soldier and as a staff officer close to Demetrius had carried the day. It was known that he was close to the King, and had known him since boyhood. Many men, trained and well-equipped men, would march from both provinces when the call came.

•

That night, whilst his men caroused with the locals, he was able to rest, content. Skyron looked in after having a few drinks with the lads. The storm had gone as suddenly as it had sprung up. He nodded to himself, and lay down on the cot in the corner, drawing his cloak around himself. Tomorrow would be a late start, but soon they would be back at base. This village and its magistrates would receive wholehearted praise in Skyrons' report.

They did start late, but maintained a steady pace along the river valley, their travel more pleasant now as the days grew cooler. They stopped at other villages, were rested, fed, and watered, and both men and horses were set an easy pace, the miles passing steadily underfoot. The scene was peaceful. Little fields cut by irrigation channels, the lush flowers and trees, the unceasing irrigation wheels, buckets turning, at the riverside. Fishermen in reed boats out on the river, half hidden by the living reeds thick along the banks. The folk they passed waved at them confidently, seemingly content, relatively prosperous. They passed many fellow-travellers, not only the caravans of wealthy merchants but single peddlers, citizens and farmers going about their business, easy in their minds at the King's Peace which held over the highways.

They had a schedule to keep to however, and finally left the highway for a shorter route over the barren hills, riding northwards along hill tracks which climbed up over small passes and down into arid valleys. Alexis and Skyron spaced their men more widely down those valleys, the Tarentines riding wider, covering far more ground than did the Companion mounts. The ground was deceptive, hiding sudden ravines, with spurs of the encroaching hills quite capable of concealing scores of men. Boulders lay scattered over the hillside. The

dust again rose to almost choke them. These were Badlands, haunts of outcasts and bandits.

By night they would set up camp, tending first to their horses and mules tethered in lines, then arrange most of the baggage in the centre of the camp, the men themselves sleeping somewhat more haphazardly, some opting to set up their hide tents, others to sleep under the stars. Yet here the sentries were very alert. The Companions mounted the inner guard, under Phineas' watchful gaze, the Tarentines the outer, supervised by Kleon. After seeing to the horses the men looked to themselves, grinding their barley in the stone mills carried on the mules, mixing the flour with water, olive oil, or wine, and roasting the little flat loaves on the fire. If lucky or provident, some might still have olives, garlic, or onions to go with their bread or cheese, perhaps some wine. The men on duty would feed first. The routine was strict, but if not on the guard roster, they had time to ease their stiff muscles by sprinting, wrestling, or simply stretching and gossiping around the fire. Gambling would have to wait until they were at Bactra, or Balkh as it was known to the Iranians.

The journey would not be long now. Over these hills to rejoin the King's Highway through and over the Hindu Kush, descending to the great green plains of Bactra. They would reach the passes well before the snows began. Lying on his back, gazing up at the twinkling stars, Alexis' found himself thinking of the end of his mission. He looked forward to his meeting with Demetrius, whom he had first seen at the gymnasium at home in Alexandria. Of course he had been a mere boy, and Demetrius a grown man, but later, when Demetrius visited his father to talk politics, Aristobulos had used his son as cup-bearer rather than a serving boy who might gossip. When with his friends Demetrius did not put on airs, he thought of himself simply as a house-guest. Demetrius had noticed Alexis then, and spoken to him. He was surprised by the boy's wit and intelligence, his grasp of the larger political picture. For his part Alexis thought himself almost in the presence of a God. His hero-worship knew no bounds.

Alexis was often in the coming months to serve his father and his hero in the privacy of his father's den. A bond grew up between the growing boy and Demetrius, which his father encouraged. It seemed natural that one day he would serve this man.

He would report to Demetrius, then he and Skyron would travel on to Alexandria on the Oxus and to their own homes and families. He chuckled, suddenly, thinking of Skyron's wife, Agatheia. She of the hard exterior, jealous of her own and her husband's place in the world, but with a soft generous nature shown only to those she allowed into her inner circle. The two families were as one. Still, the first thing she would say to her adoring husband would be a put-down, that Alexis knew. Just as he knew that, the formalities of wife meeting husband in public over, tough old Skyron would practically be smothered in love and affection.

The shout of a Tarentine sentry catching a glimpse of a moving shadow and hearing a sudden clink of metal, cut short by a hissing arrow, brought him and all his men out of dalliance and, professionals as they were, reaching for their weapons. Knowing that silence would no longer serve, the bandits erupted out of the dark, howling like wolves. With no time for battle shock or nerves the men rallied where they were, the Tarentines closing in on the horses and linking up with the Companion's main body in a loose circle around the baggage. There were no more arrows. Most of the enemy were already in among the horses, trying to cut the ropes and drive the horses away before the soldiers could react, others feinting attacks on the Companions. A mounted reserve of the bandits was probably waiting to drive the horses off. They knew that the Hellenes would be easy prey afoot, if the bandits thought it worth their while to risk losing men.

Discipline and training saved the Hellenes. This was their job, their life. Most of the Companions rushed to the aid of the Tarentines around the horses and mules, whilst in among the horse lines a further shock awaited the enemy. The servants and muleteers struck up from the very ground, their razor sharp long knives tearing into the bandits bellies. Alexis was in and through the horses in an instant, his sabre laying over his right

shoulder, and there looming out of the night were two swarthy grinning devils, their blades flickering in and out, seemingly taunting him. They moved apart and came in fast. Stepping back he swept his heavy sabre up and back and cut down on the first man, literally taking his arm off at the shoulder. Continuing the same sweep his blade cut into the other bandit, almost cutting him in two, his blood spurting like a fountain over Alexis. Around him was an open circle. No others intruded into that deadly space. Swinging his bloody weapon back onto his shoulder he looked around. The firelight played on an eerie flickering scene. Men were everywhere fighting in close combat. He dismissed the clash of metal, the enemy cursing and yelling, the horses neighing. He saw that the Hellenes fought silently in pairs, well-drilled even now, shields up, their sabres cutting the outcasts down almost as if they were sacks on the drill ground, no space for spears. Young Kinon was at his back, shield up. A good lad. Closer to the firelight Alexis saw one of Phineus' men, isolated from both his weapons and his comrades. Two of the enemy circled their easy prey. With the single-mindedness and sheer naked aggression of a skilled pankratiast the Companion did the unexpected and attacked them. With a combination of swift blows and kicks he killed one man and grappled with the second.

Soon the din grew less, the first rush of the outcasts driven back, their voices stilled by the shock of their reception. They began to fall back, faster and faster, slipping back into the darkness whence they had come. It was practically over. The enemy were running for the cover of the dark boulders from which they had launched their attack. Alexis called his men off. It had been a brief but bloody fight, and he wanted to lose no more men. The unarmed Companion still stood, with both his opponents at his feet. The Tarentines moved forward and searched the night for a target. When one saw a moving body he loosed a javelin, using a leather strap wound around the shaft which spun the weapon in flight, making it much more far flying and deadly accurate. Three more of the bandits fell that night to the murderously accurate javelins. They would collect the weapons in the morning.

Alexis, his chest heaving, called muster. One Tarentine was mortally wounded, two slightly wounded, one muleteer dead. No horses had been lost. A dozen robbers lay dead in and around the camp, at least three more sprawled out amongst the boulders strewn over their approach. Skyron and Phineas took over the re-ordering of the camp. Alexis poured water from his water-bag and doused his face and arms of the blood and dirt, pouring a libation to the God. He turned to his men, raising his voice, and gave brief thanks to the Gods. No more need be said. The men knew that they had done their jobs. The enemy had been bandits, not soldiers.

Alexis congratulated the Companion who had killed two armed men with his bare hands. His prowess would become legendary. Alexis remembered his own Greek trainer in the pankration, the no-holds barred unarmed combat he had learnt in the gymnasium. The tough old Greek would approve. Then he went over to the Tarentine. Kleon was there and looked at Alexis. He shook his head. The man was in agony, but trying desperately to hold on to his strength, his dignity. He whispered to Kleon, who took opium out of his pouch, that gift by Alexander to Bactria six generations ago. Already the poppies flowered throughout the land, and the villagers used it for more than just a pain-killer. The man quieted. Herakles bent over the man and holding his hand prayed to all-knowing Zeus. He waited until he lost consciousness, drifting off to that land from which no man might return. Kroton placed an obol in his hand, that he might pay the ferryman when he reached the river Styx. He closed the soldier's fingers over the coin.

Alexis turned to the lightly injured, already bandaged by their comrades and voluble in sharing their experiences with them. He spoke soothingly to them, and moved somewhat aside. The Hellenes had no time to build a funeral pyre for their dead and were already digging a grave for their comrade. Alexis prayed aloud at the head of his grave, appealing to Almighty Zeus, the Skyfather, his audience those of his men who were either close to the man, or could be spared from the work of ordering the camp. Alexis saluted, and Kleon gave the order to disperse. That then was that, thought Alexis. The story of a human life ended. He felt no grief. He had not known the man. They had only been together a few

weeks, on this mission. He felt no more grief than for the muleteer, or for his dead foes. He felt empty. Perhaps it was only a reaction to the shock, the fighting, he told himself. He saw Kinon talking excitedly to Dion, Skyron's squire, a youth of his own age. Both were reliving their first skirmish, their excitement born out of both fear and relief. Together with the selfishness of youth a potent mixture. He turned away, wondering what spirit, what God, was truly to be appeased in this seemingly god-forsaken place.

Unwilling to be seen as superstitious he quietly took a copper from his pouch and pressed it into the soil.

The soldier's comrades would find his family in Bactra, and beyond the passing grief his life was then over, beyond perhaps a small pension. Gone. Forgotten to men. There might be an image in someone's mind, which would soon fade. He moved restlessly to the edge of the firelight. Skyron left him, and motioned others away who would disturb him.

A couple of the Iranian muleteers were praying over their dead comrade, prior to exposing his body on a high rock above the dry stream bed. There the vultures would pick his bones clean, and finally the rain and wind would carry his bones down into the waters of the now dry stream bed. They were fire worshippers, Alexis knew. The irony took him. More in that here a few men on an isolated hillside prayed to so many gods. Different gods. Or were they? He fingered the lucky coin in his pouch.

There on the barren sleepless hillside he thought back to his lively boyhood debate in the gymnasium and agora. To his teachers and the quick cut and thrust of debate. He would not have been a good student of Plato's, he had thought ruefully. Though quick on his feet and a faster thinking wrestler and competitor than he appeared, his was more a mind for contemplation. He thought alone, and then having thought, found himself able to debate fearlessly, whilst always able to take on another man's argument, and, by questioning, to understand it. Then off he would go, said his friends, into his own world, taking only the ideas and arguments with him.

His father, Aristobulos, the one man he most respected in the world, believed that all gods were one, representing different aspects of the godhead. That Godhead was, for want of a better name, Zeus. Alexis prayed to Apollo, son of Almighty Zeus, as he saw the sun rise every morning. Alexis, there in the night, listened to the fire-worshipper's prayers. He knew that although the Hellenes called these men fire-worshippers, to them the light, the fire, was merely a symbol of the Good, of Ahura Mazda, the Creator. Their prophet Zoroaster, like his father, believed that there was only one true god, all the others which survived from the early days before the teaching of the prophet being only aspects of the One God. His father knew a magus, a priest, a man who stayed often at the home of an Iranian neighbour, a baron with vast horse herds. They had spoken much. The Magus was a man of middle years, a handsome man.

Both Aristobulos and his son had been attracted by the strongly monotheistic teaching of the magus, although they were told that as with Hellenes the followers of Zoroaster had many gods. Many identified Zeus Stratios with the Ahura Mazda. It was their world view, of a struggle between Good and Evil, that Alexis found difficult to accept. Everything was divided into Good and Evil, Truth and the Lie, light and dark, as is the day into light and the darkness of night. On the one hand there was Ahura Mazda, who represented all that was good and truthful, and on the other Angra Mainyu, who was evil. There were good and evil rulers, good and evil warriors, farmers, traders. All Men had to choose one or the other, good or evil. In thought, word, and deed. At the end of their lives their soul would be judged, and either enter Paradise or be doomed to the pit. They made their own choices. Their freedom of choice was the ultimate purpose of human existence.

For Alexis this was an attractive set of ideas. However he had been schooled in dialectic by the sophists in gymnasium and agora. Would Ahura Mazda and Angra Mainyu always oppose each other? It was too simplistic to divide the confusion in men's hearts and minds into good or evil. He knew that from his own searchings. And how could a beast be either? Whereas a wolf is the enemy of man, his cousin the dog could be his best friend. As for natural forces, and the Gods that represented them, wind and fire and water, all could be

both good and evil. As for the truth, he knew from experience that one man's truth was another man's lie. He could not reconcile the contradictions in what he heard. Perhaps that was his fault, he thought. He and the magus had talked long. He saw him now. A man widely respected in the area, literally a magician, but a priest, a diviner, an astrologist, a healer. Despite the difference in their ages and outlook they had become friends, although not understanding each other. One man certain, the other still unconvinced.

Unbidden came thoughts of Miriam. Her belief in the One God, Yahweh Her beliefs had influenced his thoughts almost as much as she had done. Her God was a jealous God, and as interfering and petty at times in men's lives as was any Zeus or Hera. Was belief in a Supreme God consistent with human understanding, with Man's capability?

Love of Man and love of God, they both require passion. Alexis knew himself for a passionate man who must believe, must love. Alexis had loved, once. Loss had hurt him, but not soured him. Love, he had discovered, enriched life. Love was as much a part of his life as was death.

Alexis shook his head. Thoughts of love and lovers left him. A sudden thirst overcame him, and he drank deep from his wineskin. A few hours sleep was what he, and the men, needed. The horses needed rest, quiet, soothing. They stood to that night, and in the morning took stock.

Little time was wasted the following morning. Weapons were retrieved, the packs once more neatly bundled. They mounted and rode, through those hills, and by the next day had descended to the Royal Highway, snaking its way towards the mountains and the high passes, beyond which lay Bactra.

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The journey was again easy, with government hostelries, food, and drink. It was easy going for both horses and men despite the steadily steepening path. They were back in civilisation, heading home towards one of the richest lands in the world, Bactria. Alexis and Skyron could devote time of an evening to writing their reports.

On the last night before reaching Bactra the party readied both themselves and their horses. Alexis' man- servant brought his armour to a brilliant shine, and did what he could with his travel-stained garments. Kinon took especial care shaving Alexis. He felt cleansed and refreshed. The horses were combed, their gear polished and helmet crests again flowed clean. When finally they saw the great city before them the group halted and dressed their ranks. They were soldiers of the King. Around them now on the highway were throngs of other travellers on horse and foot. Some were far-travellers like they, others were locals merely on their daily errands. Intent on their own business, few looked twice at the horsemen.

When the mighty walls of Bactra-Balkh reared up above him, Alexis felt the same awe that he had as a boy on his first visit with his father. These were the walls that had withstood the mighty Emperor Antiochus for two long years, finally forcing him to the peace-table. Here Kalisthenes the Historian, nephew of Aristotle, Alexander's old tutor, had died when he refuted Alexander's claim to be a God.

These walls encircled one of the mightiest and richest cities in all of the Hellenistic world. The great trade routes from India and even the Silk Road from the fabled land of the Seres were but tributaries which converged here into a mighty river which flowed both East and West, carrying the goods of the East to Mesopotamia and westwards, to Antioch in Syria and the Egypt of the Ptolemies, and to Old Greece and Europe. In the West it swirled around, and then flowed back again to the East. It was not a river on which any one boat sailed, but a stream on which many boats travelled short journeys, transferring their goods to others, who in turn carried those goods further, adding and subtracting their own unique and valuable goods.

At the great gates he identified himself, and a guard was sent hurrying to the guard-commander. He knew Alexis by sight, and they exchanged a few words in greeting. Demetrius, Alexis was told, was not actually in the palace but a few miles outside the city, spending a few days "relaxing" with his chief advisors at his lodge in the hills. The

commander would give them a guide. Alexis told him that would not be necessary as both he and Skyron knew the place well. Wheeling their men, they trotted off.

Demetrius' lodge was a relatively modest abode for a king. Riding up the approach drive the men were surrounded by beautifully laid out gardens on either side, with fountains in a lake and quiet groves in which to stroll. The view was magnificent. The building itself was rather rustic, without colonnades or adornment. They were received by the Deputy Commander of Demetrius' Companions and by a further dozen or so who hurried from the barrack block and stables. Here Phineas came into his own, surrounded by his own immediately on dismounting, his men similarly treated, laughing and joking with their comrades. Alexis told them that they could disperse, and they and their horses were led off, Kinon and Dion following them. Alexis knew however that Phineas would be giving a brief report to Demetrius before ever he and Skyron saw the King.

He turned to Kleon and told him to return to the city and to dismiss his men for a couple of days, but to hold himself in readiness to be summoned by the king. Alexis bade the Tarentines farewell for now, wishing them all the best.

Kleon's last words were accompanied by a wry smile which contorted his wizened face. "See you at the Muster, M'Lud"

It was with a smile on his face that Alexis and Skyron strode into the lodge. The Chamberlain greeted them and clapped his hands for servants to bring them water, and food and wine.

"The King is talking to his military advisors, but he knows you are here, My Lords. He will not keep you waiting for long. In the meantime please give me any details of your losses in men and equipment. I believe that you lost a man? Unfortunate. We must find his widow and arrange her pension."

Within a short space of time they were ushered into Demetrius' war-room. Alexis had known him since boyhood, but was still taken aback by his aura, the way in which his personal magnetism drew him. Why, Alexis knew not. He was no lithe young Alexander. Demetrius was in his prime, a tall and heavily built man, bull-necked and broad shouldered, with yellow hair curling from beneath his kausia to frame a strong face. His features were handsome but rugged, his nose jutting imperiously forward, his chin square and determined. His blue eyes seemed to see into a man's soul. He was clean-shaven, like Alexander. A leader. A man in a hurry.

Yet not impetuous. He had laid his preparations carefully, had chosen his moment. Alexis knew this all too well. He was an officer on Demetrius' staff, had spent the summer planning Demetrius' grandiose adventure. Along with his colleagues he had pored over the maps drawn by agents and traders, had calculated the numbers of troops to be involved, the needed supplies, their logistic support. It was men like himself, inspired by Demetrius' dream, who would make that dream a reality.

The East, India and all its fabled wealth, lay open before him. The Seleucid King, the Great Antiochus, was dead. His successor had not yet found his feet. He was safe from that quarter. In India Asoka was dead, his Mauryan Empire tearing itself apart, and his successors were minor oligarchs and petty kings squabbling over the pickings. The inevitable Vedic or Hindu revival had added another dimension to the tangled strands of the web. Persecution of the Buddhists of the North West had begun. Religious hatred flared like a forest fire. Demetrius, like all Hellenistic leaders of his time, with perhaps one or two exceptions, aimed to stand above the religious bickering of his subjects. Therein lay weakness and division. Yet for all that his intelligence was good, and such rivalry was all grist to his mill. He knew the power of propaganda. Already his agents were spreading the word. The Liberator, Demetrius Soter, the Saviour, was coming.

To the Greeks who had remained under Mauryan rule when Seleucis had pulled back from Alexander's furthestmost Indian conquests his coming was looked for with longing. During all those generations they had lived quietly, retaining both their culture and their identity. Under Mauryan leaders such as Chandragupta and the great Asoka they had prospered, rising high in the army and bureaucracy, thriving as artists, sculptors, and

poets. Yet it was to the Buddhists that his coming was to be Salvation.

Demetrius the warrior, Demetrius, whom the Great Antiochus his enemy had praised before the walls of Bactra during the two-year siege and war, was in a hurry. Because this was his moment. To strike now, at this one time in history, when the irons were hot in the fire. This was the man they were to face.

For all that he was still an old family friend, a fellow Greek, and it was as a friend that he advanced to meet Alexis and Skyron half-way, rising and putting aside formality to stride across the room. However informal, still the energy radiated out from the man as he clasped their arms and asked if they would join him in a cup of his favourite vintage. Ushering them up he seemed more a courteous host than a man planning a grandiose anabasis involving more than sixty thousand fighting men.

Their de-briefing was typically Demetrius. He swapped a few soldier's jokes with Skyron. He listened, asked a few pertinent questions, compared estimated troop numbers with those he had hoped for, congratulated the two, jotted a few more figures down on the scroll he had open by his side, learnt a few more details about the men both had talked to, and of the feelings in the two cities. He commiserated over the lost soldier, his name raised briefly and as soon gone. He began asking Alexis about his father and mother, adding that Alexis had to dine with the Royal family as soon as they returned to their duties. Then, with old friends, he unexpectedly began to speak, almost to himself. He reminded them of what they were working towards. His voice was low, throaty, impelling. The vision grew before them again. A Hellenistic world from Marseilles in the West to the limits of the Eastern Ocean. A world in which all races, languages, and creeds were tolerated, but also one in which every man had access to the knowledge, reason, and ideals of Hellas wherever they might be, in Athens, Alexandria-in-Egypt, Pergamum, or on the banks of the Indus. A world united by the common language and bonds of Hellenism. He stopped. Looked at them, and grinned, looking years younger.

"Enough. This you know, Alexis. Aristobulos and I have kept you awake into many a dawning with dreams such as this. Go now. I know that you, Alexis, want to spend a few days at home before returning to duty on the staff. You deserve it. Please give Agatheia my regards when you return to being a Gentleman Farmer, Skyron. I thank you for your time spent on my behalf."

"Please hand your written report to my Chamberlain. I am sure that the staff are impatient to read it. Farewell, and God speed."

Almost bemused by it all, they were ushered out, and to their quarters. Alexis did not sleep that night. A fever of anticipation gripped him. He burnt to begin. They had so much to do. He shook himself.

"Am I a child?," he wondered. Although the time was coming, it had not yet come. Patience.

The very next day he and Skyron, together with their squires, were on their way home, riding the easy Royal Highway all the way to their home city of Alexandria on the Oxus.



Chapter Two: Home – Alexandria on the Oxus

They saw the city at the height of the day. It rose colonnaded out of the grey Asian

soil, its long city walls and its red tiled roofs climbing up to the marble acropolis, highlighted by the sheer cliffs on the opposite bank of the Oxus.

To Alexis the sight acted as a spur and he made as if to cross the leagues that remained at a gallop. Skyron held back. The road was much busier now. Their party was but one of many. After the solitude of their journey they felt the noise of men, of beasts, of wheels and whips. Skyron's restraint held more than a regard for dignity however. To him it was an impressive sight, but as a man brought up in a free simpler Greece it could still make him pause. He was not a demonstrative man yet he seemed almost to shake his head as if waking from a dream. He glanced at Alexis, wondering what his younger companion actually made of the scene.

To Skyron this was still an exotic world, as it no doubt was in the mind of Alexis' father. They had grown up in Old Greece. Their city had evolved organically over the centuries, and which time had changed and adapted. Change that was the work of patient householders as much as dramatic history, siege and sack. A city which might have achieved a little grandeur over the centuries, in walls and temples, but which had grown up in its own landscape. This Alexandria, despite having stood for many generations, was to Skyron something new and outlandish, sprung from a foreign mind and planted dramatically in a foreign soil.

The road they travelled was wide, metalled, and well maintained. It passed through lush fertile countryside irrigated by the rivers. Irrigation levers rose and fell rhythmically. The ditches and canals had originally been dug long before the Hellenistic rulers had arrived. To Skyron the landscape under the Eastern sky was different in more than just scenery and scale. The fields had been centrally planned. The swarthy peasants working the fields around their mud walled villages in their knotted loincloths were not sturdy free Greek farmers. These men and women looked well-fed and prosperous, perhaps even more so than those back in Greece, but Skyron knew that although free men and not slaves they served a lord, possibly of their own kind, but yet a lord. The free farmer of Old Greece worked his modest ten acres virtually alone, with his family and perhaps a servant or a slave. He could not afford a horse, but he equipped himself with helmet, shield, sword and spear. Thus outfitted, and prepared to fight, he voted as a free man in the Assembly, and sat on its councils. Together such men made decisions that, whether they be right or wrong, decided their destiny. To Skyron the Governance of this Alexandria was a nonsense. Their decisions merely on local government, their militia, and city law. Their most important decisions were how to rubberstamp the king's decrees, and how to placate the provincial satrap. This would not be quite the way the city magistrates and assembly saw things, but for Skyron it was true nevertheless. King Demetrius had not been chosen by more than a handful of oligarchs in Bactria. Once King he ruled through his army, his bureaucracy, and his treasury.

The Treasury. Its insatiable arms grasped the rich mines of rubies, turquoise, lapis lazuli, iron and copper that lay around and which made both king and city prosperous. Its embrace included even the proud Iranian horse-barons of the valleys and plains. They clasped more tightly on the peasants toiling in the fields and who were gradually extending their canals out into the desert to finance the growing infrastructure piled above them.

Skyron looked again at the mixture of people thronging the king's highway. Was Alexis truly aware of the strangeness of what he saw, he wondered. Of the dramatic backdrop. The cosmopolitan travellers. Yes. He must be, but on a different level of awareness from Skyron. Skyron the Greek saw the incongruity, Alexis the variety. This was his world.

They saluted mounted Hellenes with their light cloaks thrown over linen tunics. They wore straw hats, felt hats, even woollen bonnets in the noonday sun. Some were men they knew, and the necessities of courtesy delayed them. Alexis in his haste was hardly more than polite, and of course in his youthful pride he was still the King's emissary.

Skyron looked differently at the wonders of Asia passing them by. The hawk nosed Iranian noble riding West from the City, on a high-stepping horse. His retinue gaudy in their richly embroidered but loose clothes; their long shirts and colourful woollen cloaks and

leather caps. Leather belts or cummerbunds over baggy trousers held long scimitars and arrow quivers. Their bow and lance strapped ready to hand or firmly gripped.

Arrogantly giving way to no man, the pastoral nomads rode with their entire families and with all their worldly goods. They carried the weapons they had learnt to use from childhood. In amongst all was the riot of traders' caravans. Men and women from all Asia and beyond. Alexis and Skyron had passed their camps and caravans all along the highway from Bactra. They carried every conceivable merchandise, and were prepared to make much more besides. Alongside them all were the locals, striding forth on their business, or steering carts laden with farm goods. They acknowledged a few short-haired Hellenes in work-stained tunics and stout leather sandals tramping about their business, but far more were darker men in winding head-dresses flung over the chest or back, blackened by the sun. As many men pulling hand-carts as those hauled by draught animals.

They passed the outwork marking the original foundation, a fort built by Alexander and commanding the best crossing point on the Oxus for miles around. It had housed the garrison which controlled the nomads, and checked the customs dues, and patrolled along the banks of the Oxus. The first Seleucids had restored the great military exclusion zone which swept away from Alexandria and the Oxus all the way to the river Jaxartes, and secured Alexander's conquests in Sogdiana. Towns and forts now lay within easy riding and signalling of each other, all the way to that other Alexandria on the Jaxartes, called Alexandria the Furthest. There Alexander had stopped. The Seleucid general Patroclus had travelled all the way to the Caspian and reported that he had reached an arm of the great encircling sea. Others had voyaged down the Oxus to the Aral, another bay of Ocean. Alexis and his fellows thus knew what lay to the North. They knew that in the South was the Indian Ocean by which Alexander's fleet had returned, and that the West was blocked by the great competing empires of the Successors to Alexander. It was the East that beckoned.

Many graves lined the road as they began to near the City. Graves with Greek inscriptions. Memorials to those Hellenes who had lived here for generations. This was Alexis' world, a Greater Greece. The Hellenistic World that stretched from Marseilles in the west to Bactria in the East. The earliest funerary inscriptions told of men and women who had carried Hellenistic culture to this place on this river thousands of miles from their original homes. Alexander had almost reached the Eastern ends of the Earth. He had turned back. It was for those that came after him to continue his conquests, and to make the world one. In Demetrius and in those who followed him the dream still lived. They had the energy and the determination to attempt it.

Gone were the hills and loops in the road. It now ran straight across the plain to the bridge over the Kochba River. The City stood in the plain, at the junction of the

Kochba which guarded the south, and the Oxus which guarded the west. The site had been ordained by Hephaestion, Alexander's lover, in a place not only strategic but breathtakingly beautiful. On the opposite bank of the Oxus were high sheer cliffs. The gleaming white marble shone in the clear Bactrian sunlight, the reflections glinting in the broad Oxus and the light thrown back at Skyron from the cliffs on the opposite bank of the river. Upstream it was as broad as an inland sea. On the Oxus itself he could see the white sails of the patrolling galleys of the Oxus squadron. Skyron saw them not as distant objects of beauty, but as a commander. Fast craft with a very shallow draught, they guarded the river and supplied the outposts scattered along the banks, as did another squadron far north on the Jaxartes. Their crews were drawn from the free poor of the city, and the marines were regular soldiers.

Away off to his right in the far distance the High Mountains curved around to the rising sun. They guarded the gateway to India. In India there were many broad rivers running through the plains. Greek knowledge of shipbuilding would stand them in good stead, thought Skyron the soldier.

Long stone walls built to a height of some thirty feet encircled the city, reinforced by even higher projecting towers. The earth beneath the walls was embanked to thwart siege

engines. With the rivers' added protection on two sides, the strongest stretch of wall was that cutting off the river angle to the north and the east. Above the walls rose the Acropolis and Citadel, all clad in marble.

This was a city built by the Seleucid Emperors for a people who longed for a Greek upbringing and way of life, and the Seleucids gave it to them. They held to their identity. Just as they adapted the world around them to suit that way of life, so they adapted the materials to suit. They used mud brick and soft limestone and adapted local building methods even on their greatest public buildings, finishing them off convincingly with Greek Corinthian colonnades and statuary carved from local stone.

Alexis and Skyron crossed the Kochba on a wide bridge, an introduction to the marvels of Hellenistic engineering to come. They rode in a vast semi-circle along the eastern walls. Now mansions dotted the plain, private with their walled courtyards. Shrines and small temples stood in isolated groves. These were visited by the superstitious country folk whose very survival rested on their appeasement of the gods, as well as by the city dwellers. Then as the road turned to join the northern road into the city it cut through the suburbs just outside the walls. Mean dwellings and workshops, small shops and canvas stalls were held back an arrowshot from the gate by a bare glacis embankment and then by a wide ditch. The road broadened as it reached the North Gate which spanned the ditch and cut through the stone walls.

The North Gate had its entrance set back from the circuit walls, forming a wide three sided enclosure. The flanking towers had gabled roofs and were fenestrated not only for archers but for powerful torsion sprung catapults. Here were the guards and the customs posts. The King's garrison included Greek mercenaries from all over the Hellenistic World. From here Demetrius' Iranian horse-archers patrolled the roads and controlled the nomads. The Gate was where all the travellers met. It was a babble of East and West.

They were recognised by sentry and guard commander alike. Ahead of them ran the main street of their City. The King's Emissaries were home.

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They dismounted and gave their reins to their squires. An eager Kinon and Dion would look after the horses before going home to friends and family. Alexis bade them report to him at his home in a couple of days.

From now on both he and Skyron were once again private citizens, free to relax in their home city.

"Well, Agathea will already have heard from one of the boys at the gate that you have arrived, so we'll have to have that cup of wine tomorrow, assuming that you are a free man," joked Alexis

"She probably knew while we were still a league or two from the city." Skyron agreed. He looked a little shamefaced already. "No more of your funny stories about what I got up to whilst away, you young whippersnapper" He made as if to playfully box his younger colleague's ears.

There was about fifteen years between them and Skyron was about five years younger than Alexis' father. They were very old friends. They had lived through much together, in Greece and in crossing the world to Bactria together with Rhea, Aristobulos' young wife, and with her baby child. Seeing them together Alexis often suspected that they had once been lovers. The signs were there, in the way they held the cup, their eyes twinkling across a room, and in the way that they could almost finish each other's sentences. Rhea seemed to know, but still she and Skyron were close. They had shared too much together, for too long, and had never been rivals. They each owned a different part of Aristobulos. Skyron had made many sacrifices in helping his friend and his young wife and son across Asia. He had grown fond of that determined little boy. Alexis had never cried however hungry, sore, or tired he might be. He never revealed their hiding place when robbers were near, never complained when an old wagon jolted over rutted tracks, coped with rain, and snow, and dust. Over snowy mountains and across dry deserts. The baby boy suffered the burns and cuts of his daily life without flinching.

The friendship had never weakened. In their new land Skyron had taken a wife, a lady whose family swore they were of pure Macedonian stock.

"They little knew how close that boast brought me to breaking off the arrangement!," as Skyron once joked to Aristobulos, his fellow Greek

Agatheia had never had children, and although Skyron spent much time looking after his farm, he did keep a small house in the city. Aristobulos had concentrated much of his own efforts on politics, supported by Rhea, an astute politician in her own right. A supporter of Euthedemus, and latterly a friend of Demetrius, his writ ran far. He was a skilled soldier, and had been one of Euthedemus' greatest generals. He had trained Alexis early to be a horseman, a hunter, and a warrior. He and Rhea had taught all three of their children, Alexis and his sisters, to be practical philosophers, not simply to practice those cheap questions asked by sophists in the agora.

It was in pursuit of a Scythian raiding party that Aristobulos had been wounded by a Scythian arrow in the leg. Alexis was twelve. Skyron had begun spending more time with Alexis. He was a renowned huntsman, and it was an honour to be able to tell his friends that he, Alexis, had hunted with the great Skyron. Aristobulos knew the grounding that he had given his son, and felt no envy of Skyron.

Skyron had at first seen this as a conscious duty to his friend, but the relationship had grown to become something more than that. The two were close enough in age for Skyron to have helped Alexis through the crisis of boyhood and his teenage years, and his own first love. Quietly and unobtrusively. Alexis had always seen the older man more as an ally in his boyish escapades, and later had willingly followed his lead. He had seen Skyron's courage in the hunt, knew his wily way with sophists, and knew too that he was hard to outdo at a drinking party.

Skyron had often been away for long periods however, often with Aristobulos. By the time Alexis was a teenager, a young man, Skyron seemed to disappear whenever Alexis was joined by boys of his own age. Yet when he was at home he was there for him, and Alexis knew it. His relationship with Skyron seemed to be continually changing. Now, as a young staff officer with considerable responsibilities, Demetrius had selected Skyron as his companion on this mission. They had worked well together. The world

of the Greek aristocracy was small, and Alexis had taken it rather for granted.

Skyron and Alexis parted, to join their respective families, Skyron turning left up a side alley towards the citadel, pushing his way up the steep cobbled way which broke into steps every few yards. Alexis the bachelor smiled to himself at his haste, and strolled down the main street of his city. Fewer people were around in these hours after noon. To his right was the gleaming Oxus, to his left the houses climbing up towards the acropolis and citadel, the temples gleaming white in the noon day sun, with houses tumbling down to the main street where the elite lived in tiled mansions. On either side were colonnades and courtyards, imposing porticos, red tiles, painted walls.

He walked past the theatre cut into the steep slopes rising up to the citadel, a theatre he had been to often, capable of taking five thousand people with ease, and which could hold another thousand at a pinch. He remembered going there as a boy, eager to marvel at the strange tragic and comic masks, at the stage sets and backgrounds, at the magical effects, and at gods and heroes flying through the air. Now he had been backstage, had seen the engines, had entertained the artists at his home, and the wonder still remained. Alexis had a mechanical bent. He understood the workings of the system of levers and pulleys that worked the brightly painted backdrops and other assorted stage props. He understood how the stage gods flew effortlessly above the stage. His artist friends had shown him how the priests managed to open temple doors automatically, and to dispense measured amounts of Holy Water and pumice to enable worshippers to clean their hands and faces before worship. He understood the principles behind water power, and that air could be compressed and controlled to make sounds, and that he could also learn these techniques. No, it was the abilities, the skills, of the actors and stage managers that he knew he could never emulate. These men could captivate thousands by their art in a

theatre

where if one dropped a single drachma in the centre of the stage the sound could be heard on the topmost tier of seats. The Seleucids had done them proud, he thought.

Just beyond the theatre, on the river side, was the Propylae. The monumental gateway was modelled on that of the Acropolis in Athens. The central arch had six Doric columns, with wings on either side. It was stunning. It had fascinated him ever since he was a tiny boy. It led to the beating heart of the city. To the colonnaded agora which was the market place and assembly ground, to the gymnasium, the soul of a Hellenistic city, to the mausoleum of The Founder of the city; and finally to the Council Chambers and to the Royal Palace, the treasury, the administrative offices, and to the royal mint.

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Past the Propylae the area changed yet again. On the river side stood large mansions built around a courtyard, with ornamental trees and shrubs showing beyond the walls. The houses were inward looking, and balconies opened onto these internal courtyards. The walls and tiles were brightly coloured. Houses were painted in the most vivid colours, red, yellow, black, with blue and some green. As one walked down the average street one was faced by these blinding slabs of colour, the walls usually contrasting with the roof tiles. The houses were brilliant, freshly painted, each contrasting with its neighbour.

His home was quietly tucked away off a main road leading down to the Oxus, near to that of Miriam. No. Not now. Now was the time for his family. It was a large house, and its bland exterior belied what he knew awaited him inside. There would be water, playing fountains, shade trees, and cool colonnades. He greeted the watchman at the gate, and asked him not to announce his return. With a nod and a wink, he slipped through the small gate within a gate that opened out onto the colonnaded courtyard. All seemed quiet at this time of day, but he was sure one inhabitant would greet him first.

And it did. Immediately his old hound was upon him. A veteran of many hunts, the heavy Laconian deer hound was still smooth and sleek. Its leap almost floored Alexis, however well prepared he was. It stood almost as tall on its hind legs as did he. It never made a sound, but was all over him, acting almost like a puppy, licking, biting ears and nose, its curling tail wagging as if possessed. Alexis had to drop his pack, and kneel on the ground. He loved this hound. It had been with him since his late boyhood, and had shared his life, had been at times his most intimate companion. Much of his boyhood had been spent alone, with the girls very young, his father and Skyron away at the wars or at court, and his mother hard at work smoothing the paths of diplomacy. Finally the old hound was soothed and comforted. Alexis stood up. The commotion had roused others in the house. First to come running was little Chloe, all her maidenly dignity simply vanishing as she rushed helter skelter into his arms, calling loudly for her sister Cleo, older by a year and much more dignified because of it. The old hound bounced back into the welcome again. Alexis swung her around until she remembered herself enough to demand to be put down, just as Cleo emerged into the courtyard with flushed face and breathless haste. The three – no, four – hugged each other as if Alexis had been away a year or more, rather than for just a few months.

When he did stand back, and the girls remembered themselves in front of the servants, Alexis could see that even in those few months these two had grown, changed in a way that no boy could have done. Chloe, the spirited brunette, and blonde strong-willed Cleo who was already asking to be called by her full name of Cleopatra. He felt both love and affection for these two. Being so much older than them he had always felt protective. He had pleased his mother by romping with the two as toddlers. Later they had grown more apart as their lives had diverged. He had never really been able to share much of his teenage and military life with them, entering into young manhood

just as they became girls. That mattered little. The real affection engendered between them years ago was still there. Both girls were still tom-boys at heart. Chloe took to smoothing the hounds' ruffled feathers. Only they and his father were able to touch the

hound. The hound had no name. Alexis as a boy had simply called him "My Hound," and the name had stuck. Unlike the other hounds and mastiffs in the kennels, Hound had the run of the house, a course he had embarked on very quietly, unobtrusively, and determinedly, ensuring that he never left Alexis' side as a boy. He was even tolerated by Aristobulos' huge Molossian mastiff, stockier and rougher haired, a huge guard and war dog named Pyrrhus.

With his arms about the two girls he walked across the courtyard to his mother, who had appeared wiping her floury hands on a cloth.

"Alexis, you have returned days before we expected you," she gasped. "Oh, it is good to see you."

Then she added "How long have you got? And then "the larder is almost empty!"

Rhea, the politician, the force behind Aristobulos in the dangerous world of power-politics, was still a homebody and mother before all else. Blue eyed and blonde, and a little over medium height she was rather matronly and rounded. She was an unusually demonstrative mother to the boy whom she had carried across the known world as a child, and to the two girls who represented for her a new and contented life here in the new world. She certainly did not confine herself to the home as would be expected of a wife in Old Greece. But then very few wives in Old Greece could imagine accomplishing what she had in her life.

"And good to see you, Mother. Demetrius made sure I returned as soon as possible. I have a few days before I must return to Bactra. Oh, and Skyron is well. He is already with Agatheia. Young Kinon sends his greetings. I sent him off to Doratheia. He can pay you court later." Doratheia had been Alexis' nurse in those fabled months travelling to Bactria. She was important in Alexis' life, and not the sort of woman he wanted to upset.

"Of course. I must send an invitation to Agatheia immediately to dine. And what about others you'd like to ask? And does your father know that you are home?"

"Wait, Mother. I don't think Agatheia or Skyron would want to dine out today, and no, I don't want to have anyone else around just yet, and as for Father, I'm sure that he knows by now, but I will go to him immediately." He smiled indulgently at his mother, then burst into a chuckle and kissed her full on the face.

While she regained her composure, he slipped off. She took both girls in hand and marched them off to the kitchens.

With Hound still at his heels Alexis climbed the stairs to his father's apartment, knocked, and was let in by his father's man-servant. The great Molossian mastiff within growled, but allowed Alexis to ruffle his head. Hound stalked warily past and lay down quietly in a corner. The manservant nodded to the sunlit balcony, and retired. Alexis crossed the room which was both bedchamber and study, and also an intimate reception room. The walls were hung with his father's armour, weapons, and old hunting gear, the table strewn with scrolls. Open doors led to a balcony as wide as the room. Seated there his father could see all that went on in the courtyard and, raising his gaze, could follow the Oxus upstream on his left, with the acropolis and citadel on his right. Far in the distance were the snow-capped grey bleak mountains.

Aristobulos sat upright, and rose as his son entered the room. He was a tall man with short iron-grey hair and a clipped beard, spare and lean. His old wound had partially crippled his right leg and he limped when he walked, using a staff as a support. He was in constant pain, but he concealed it well. Father's clothes, a simple cloak flung back jauntily over one shoulder, showed his contempt for Asiatic fashions and the gaudy baubles worn by the locals.

Alexis knew that he quite often took small doses of the concoction derived from poppy seeds. Alexander had introduced it to Bactria to dull the pain of battle-wounds in his armies, and it had become commonplace now to see the flowers blooming in the valleys.

Perhaps Aristobulos was shorter now with others, apt to be less tolerant of fools, and this was often where Rhea came in. She was an effective diplomat, working behind the scenes to smooth ruffled feathers. Greeks from back Home were often surprised by the freedom of women in Bactria, but it was natural in a smaller, more isolated and tightly knit

group of aristocrats. His father had never allowed his pain to harm his family's harmony. He had been a strict but fair man to his young son, and was still so to his daughters, but it spoke for itself that the atmosphere in the whole house was light and easy. Servant or slave, horse or dog, all knew where they stood with his father. His father spent less time out on his farm nowadays, which neighbored Skyron's. Their herds mingled and ran as one. Skyron had largely taken over teaching Alexis the management of the herds and horses.

Once Royal Companion and fighting general, Aristobulos had retained his close personal friendship with Demetrius. As such he was more than a counsellor. He knew and understood the feelings of his fellow-citizens and they trusted him to put his point of view across to Demetrius.

Long before father had been wounded, before even the girls had come along, Alexis remembered the long lazy summers when he had been a boy. He and father had hunted and fished together, and mother had often joined them. They had been happy, then. For his parents the New World held so much promise. Aristobulos, the veteran of Cynocephalae, the famed warrior who had travelled the length of the Empire, had already been elected as strategos, or general, for his tribe. Mother was grooming him for the role she had mapped out for him. Their son was intelligent, brave, and an excellent horseman. But not always lucky as a huntsman.

"Our son is growing into quite a centaur, Aristobulos," said his proud mother.

"Not quite, Rhea. Centaurs are reputed to be wise and resourceful hunters," retorted her husband, ruefully examining another almost empty quiver and the empty larder.

The relationship between father and son that had grown up in those early days was to be proven later. Alexis could not remember any of that wild and dangerous journey from Thessaly to Bactria, but he had a vivid imagination. Aristobulos greeted Alexis gruffly and with a firm handclasp.

"Greetings, son. As your mother said down below, you are early. I also heard that Skyron is well?"

"Yes, Father. But his company was also as dull as you remember," Alexis joked.

The general nodded "Nothing ever seems to disturb his equanimity, that I'll grant. But tell me, were there any problems? How many men did the South have to offer?"

"Well, everything went well. We had one small skirmish with a few bandits on the way back, but I really must tell you about what Demetrius had to say when I reported back to him...."

For an hour they closed out the world. Two allies, father and son. They talked about the mission, about future plans, about Demetrius, and the political situation. Father was wary of the way that things were developing at home. The Seleucid Kingdom or Empire was again sending agents into Bactria, gathering intelligence about not only Demetrius' plans, but about the feelings of the people, the Hellenes.

Demetrius was popular, that was well known, but at all costs Demetrius had to avoid conflict with the Empire. The Hellenes in the East had an almost religious loyalty to the Emperors. This had been of concern when the Great Antiochus had invaded Bactria in the time of Euthedemus, Demetrius' father. Antiochus was a Successor to Alexander. The Empire was weaker now, assailed on many sides, but it had a long memory. It was still immensely powerful, with a long reach. They must remember that.

"And I have been forgetting. You have journeyed far. You must be hungry. We have disrupted the household schedule enough. You go and refresh yourself while I tell your eager mother and sisters we will be down in a moment." Father turned and called for his man, adding "Thank you, my son. More tomorrow. Let us go now and join the family." He stroked Hounds' ears as he got up to follow Alexis out. The Molossian at his heels, as silently as the Hound.

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Early in the morning Alexis walked abroad in the city. Already the main street was bustling, farmers having brought in their fresh vegetables by then, butchers and

fishmongers by now had their stalls up, and merchant and peddler alike were hawking their wares. Housewives and their slaves were up early to buy the best and freshest food for the day. People of all races thronged. Bustling, haggling, dogs slipping in and out, children shouting, playing, running, crying. These were the little folk. The more established traders in the agora would supply the big houses, the palace, the civil service and the army, having received their orders the previous day.

Both here and in the agora the soldiers and civil servants themselves would join with the citizens to buy their take-away breakfasts, hot or cold, and to buy their bread and wine for the day.

The noise and bustle was a complete contrast to the days spent on the road, but he knew that when he returned to Bactra, the capital, it would be far worse. This was his city, and he felt at home in it. All races crowded the streets and byways, yet people still tended to live in more segregated ethnic and religious groups.

Other Hellenes, including their famous guest Klearchos had expressed their amazement at the freedom of the Hellene women in Asia. Not just of the poor but also of women of the middling sort, and even of the rich. They accompanied their slaves out to do the shopping for their families, chatted on street corners and in alcoves. Girls even watched the games at which the best athletes of the city, naturally competing naked, were selected for the Holy Games, and not just on the girls' day. Alexis had heard the practice called a number of ribald things, and as Bactrian girls also had more say than most as to whom they married, he believed them.

He approached the Propylae again, the Athenian Arch, and turned in. He avoided the colonnaded Agora, the main market and assembly place. Here water was piped to points in the city. Each householder was expected to connect to this central water supply, although water was piped out to the poorer districts from which the people could draw and carry their water. There were public drinking fountains throughout the city.

Here in the Agora were the bigger stalls, packed with goods imported not only from the West but from the distant East. There were jewellers and cloth merchants selling silk and rare cottons. Amphorae filled with Mediterranean olive oil, fine wines from Greece and even Italy, and with the more mundane but treasured Greek fish pastes. Even the poorest men used strong tangy fish sauces to make their rather bland diet more tasty. In the agora it was money that passed hands, bronze and copper coins, although even the richest could still resort to barter for the more fabulous items on offer. The Market supervisor was Oxybazos, a stout Iranian who was proud of his position in society and regularly strolled around the market with his secretaries. He controlled most of Bactria's trade in lapis lazuli and on the Silk Road. Alexis rather disliked him. Perhaps it stemmed from his boyhood experiences, when such as he were always finding ways of controlling young lads.

The Agora held the temples to Zeus the Skyfather, and to Hermes and Herakles, the twin protectors of their city. Their temples were bold and awesome, filled as were the theatre with magic self-opening doors and fountains, their coin operated outpourings of Holy Water, quite unlike the small Persian temples scattered about both inside and outside the walls. Alexis thought wryly how the discovery of the priests' trickery in fooling the gullible into parting with their offerings had not shaken his own faith. His friends in the theatre had explained much of the workings of the mechanisms used by the priests, similar to those their own stage-managers used. Their sheer ingenuity had made him chuckle, and he was soon bent on trying to see how the devices worked for himself. He had taught himself the theory, but in wanting to peer beneath and behind each device he had made himself very unpopular. Even the son of Aristobulos was unwelcome. What self-respecting priest wanted a boy fiddling with the inner workings of his water dispenser at the height of the day? He and his irreverent friends would too often find themselves scampering out of a Holy place, chased by an otherwise decorous old priest waving the heaviest staff he could lift for some very old-fashioned corporal punishment.

On the way he had passed temples that were a reminder of the varied peoples and faiths within the city walls. Some had obviously undergone a makeover recently, others

seemed a little bit more run-down, a reflection of how well their respective congregations were doing, he thought irreverently. Those erected by the city and the citizen body had fresh paint and were well served, such as were those of Apollo and Anaitas, the fertility goddess of Bactria, with her golden crown complete with the eight rays. Apollo the Sun God was especially worshipped by the Iranian Zoroastrians. Alexis had an especial reverence for Apollo, God of wisdom, healing, and righteousness. He could even see the temple of Phrygian Cybele from the Main Street. Hellenic monarchs, with the exception of some remote conflicts he had heard of in remote Judea, allowed full religious freedom. Demetrius certainly did.

To one side of the agora, in which the full Assembly of the people met, were the Council buildings. Here sat the elected councillors of the city and its surrounding lands. The Council Building literally turned its back on the Macedonian palace which represented the Royal government of the satrapy within which the city lay.

He skirted the agora and its Council chambers and turned left towards the palace and administrative buildings. This was quieter, the civil servants not yet having begun their day. The architecture was elaborate, monumental, having lost, as his Greek father sniffed, all sense of proportion out here on the edge of the world. The statues too did not measure up to Aristobulos' aesthetic taste. Alexis believed that the realistic sculpture of his day was far superior to the elusive work of old. He compared the old statues of Alexander and of the founder here to that of the young Alexander at the entrance to the gymnasium. The new schools, their techniques and use of local materials, had also made possible an increase in realistic busts that many could now afford in their own homes.

He stood outside the Royal Palace, Demetrius' home when in Alexandria, and otherwise occupied by the satrap or provincial governor. His province was further divided into Eparchies and then into Stathmoi, the latter little more than a few villages and their surrounding territory. They too would have their assembly, their standing police force, and their militia, and of course the tax-man. Alexis well knew the old saying that there were two things that a man could not escape; death or the tax-man. And of the two, death at least could hold out some promise of a better after-life, thought Alexis.

Behind the Government buildings was the naval dockyard that served as a base for the Oxus squadron. He had been warned to stay away from the rough sailors and marines as a boy. Subconsciously he rather enjoyed their deference now to a young staff officer.

The barracks-block was off to one side of the main building. The treasury, the bureaucracy, and the army

were the foundations of his kingdom, and here he faced them all. Here too was the Royal mint. Demetrius knew that the message shown on his coins of a striking individualist, wearing for the first time a military cloak and on his head an elephant scalp and fighting tusks symbolised for his people his ambitions in India. Alexis' again fingered the lucky coin in his pouch, a silver drachma. He had handled few of Demetrius' gold staters.

He had no duties here, as his mission had been directly at the behest of Demetrius, but he hoped to be able to call on an old acquaintance of his, the Eparch. He walked in through the portico into the cool marble reception hall, and found a young secretary he knew by sight.

"I'm afraid that you have missed him by a day, My Lord," responded the clerk, a young Indian by his accent. More and more Indians, educated men, were moving to Bactria of late. City-dwellers, they were good immigrants. A little teaching and they would make good citizens. They were city-dwellers in the main, who understood life in the Polis. "He is expected back from inspecting the irrigation canals by tonight."

"Well, tell him that I'm back, and that I hope that he will call on me," said Alexis. He turned to go. The civil servants were beginning to trickle in through the doors. Dignified men in cloaks, beards neatly trimmed. Men clean-shaven in the Alexander fashion, beardless boys beginning a career, freemen and slaves. Theirs was a life Alexis found grateful to have avoided, at least in the prime of his life. He checked himself. When needed these dignified men and beardless boys, along with most of the traders in the agora, the

sculptors, artists, painters, decorators, sophists or rhetoricians, citizen or foreign metic, all would take up shield and pike, anonymous in helmet and armour. Unless imported for a term as specialists by Demetrius, these men were free citizens of the Polis, they voted in the Assembly in the Agora, and served as councillors and soldiers just as he did.

The City was governed by its citizens, men who were expected to fight in its citizen forces, armed according to their means. The Royal Palace just happened to be located in Alexandria, the most important city in the Satrapy. The magistrates of the City were elected by the Assembly, as was the Council. All citizens belonged to the ten tribes whose tribesmen elected their own generals, of whom Aristobulos had been one for almost a decade now. Only the generals could be elected for more than one year at a time.

The tribes came from both city and country, and were not divided by race or class. The Seleucids especially had attracted Greek settlers, and others from Anatolia and the Middle East. As well as Greeks and Macedonians, the tribes included the Bactrian nobles and their free retainers. Many non Greek citizens lived within the city walls. Although they could not vote, they still lived under the law, and these metics had duties as well as privileges. If wealthy they were expected to enrol as cavalry, if of the middling sort as heavy infantry, and if poor as peltast light infantry, missile men, or to toil as engineers. Other racial groupings had corporations to represent them to the city government. These included the Phoenicians who ever followed the expansion of Greek rule, and the Jews, who were held back from being full tribesmen only by their religion which prevented them from worshipping the gods of Alexandria. As it was the Jewish corporation had its own leaders, counsellors, and law-courts. They were exempted from worshipping gods other than their own or from paying divine honours to rulers and from working on the Sabbath.

Miriam was a Jewess. Her brother Simon was his old friend. Simon was the son of Hycanor, one of the leading members of Jewish society, and one of Aristobulos' oldest friends. Many Jews were among the bureaucrats. Their young men were good soldiers, if rarely to be found in the gymnasium. Their habit of defiling their bodies with circumcision made that inevitable. He believed that some families had stopped that vile custom of late.

Playing with Simon as a boy, and later, meeting his sister, had made Alexis more receptive to other peoples and to their ways. More open-minded. For a Greek it was too easy to see all the other races in Bactria as merely there, to be bypassed. Aristobulos' open-mindedness had allowed his son to appreciate not only other cultures, but more of his own.

He understood his city's government. He was brought up by his father to be a good citizen. Many cities took the names of the founding cities on the Aegean. They adopted their home cities' constitutions. Many new foundations had constitutions taken from the cities which had provided a large proportion of their citizens, such as Thera in Sogdiana. Others had borrowed celebrated constitutions, or simply written their own. Of course most Asian cities were royal foundations, and after the royal foundation charter had been granted, the constitution had to be approved by the king. Still, the genius of the Greeks who had written the first constitutions still held good here in furthest Asia. In Old Greece they had had to contend with conflict between town and country, and between classes. Politics in Asia were complicated by race in a way unknown to the original Greek Fathers, but the practice of splitting up ethnic and tribal groups equally between the tribes held good here just as it had back in Thessaly or Athens. More so, given Iranian family and clan ties.

The Greek allies and mercenaries who had settled here under the leadership of a Thessalian had tried to build their Old world here in the New. Greeks from Home often mocked their backward ways and old-fashioned manners. Alexis knew that from dinner-parties. A society of Western men and women cut off geographically from their ancestor's homelands must always live a few decades behind culturally. The Hellenes of Alexandria on the Oxus were proud of their Greekness, and had tried to keep their culture pure. Alexis believed that he would be equally at home in Antioch or Pergamon.

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He walked back down to the gymnasium on the riverbank. On his way he passed the Mausoleum to his city's founder, Kineas the Thessalian. Aristobulos, who regarded himself as an Olynthian still, felt an especial kinship to the Thessalian horseman. On the stone stele in front of Kineas' tomb he read the words he had learnt as a boy. The first five read:

As a child, be orderly.

As a youth, be self-controlled.

As an adult, be just.

As an old man, be of good council.

When dying, be without sorrow.

These rather Stoical injunctions had formed the basis of his early education. They came from a copy of one hundred and fifty of the Delphic Oracle's maxims, brought to Alexandria four generations before by an Aristotelian philosopher named Klearchos. Alexis believed that he had travelled right across the Seleucid Kingdom to bring these wise sayings to the Greeks of Alexandria. By so doing he had, to Alexis, shrunk the world. These were the same maxims as were to be found in any Greek city.

He tried to picture Klearchos. He felt a real affinity for this man who had wandered so widely and learnt so much from his travels. He had accomplished so much for his fellow Greeks here in furthest Asia, and was remembered by so many. Alexis could not see him as his schoolfellows had done, as simply a dignified old gentleman in a long robe. He saw him as rather a rogue, an ingenious and attractive chap, easy to get on with, and extraordinarily tough.

Kineas on the other hand brought a more simplistic picture to mind. A dashing young Thessalian lordling who had followed Alexander across Asia to be rewarded with this final posting. A man Alexis could see in any of the Companions surrounding Demetrius. It might have been any of Alexander's officers who received this posting. Klearchos on the other hand had made a conscious decision to be a benefactor to his fellow-Greeks, a choice that had sprung out of his own adventurous nature.

As a boy Alexis had usually been accompanied by Areus his tutor. He was a pleasant enough man, who had guided Alexis through his early lessons fairly and well. His talents were wide-ranging. Alexis had come to realise that for Aristobulos to have employed a free man who had been born in Thessaly and educated in Antioch was something very special among his friends. Or at least for their parents. Aristobulos had chosen well. Areus was tolerant and had a sense of humour. He soon caught his pupil's imagination. He enjoyed his job and was very conscious of his luck. His teachings went far beyond the basics of reading, writing, and numbers. He was a learned man whose enthusiasm captivated his young scholar. Whenever this post as companion and tutor ended, Aristobulos would be certain to give him a modest pension for life, certainly enough for him to potter about doing his experiments. Hieron of Alexandria in Egypt, and a man named Philon were Areus' heroes. He it was who first kindled Alexis' enthusiasm for what Skyron called pumps and valves. Areus was in with the theatrical set who taught Alexis the practical applications of steam and water power, and of levers. Alexis was an easy pupil. He was mischievous, certainly, but intensely curious and eager to learn. He had a wide circle of acquaintances, but no friends of his own age. He was not a loner, but he did not share his thoughts easily, if at all.

Areus had found his charge different from other boys. He had been a quiet lad, often solitary, not standing aloof from other boys, but standing aside, never making it obvious. His technical competence, his love of gadgets and how they worked could make him a holy terror, as the priests often discovered. However he would always return to the fold, and his love of romance and history kept him a diligent student.

No better ammunition was needed for his fertile imagination than the Homeric heroes. Areus was quite the Homeric scholar. From Homer Alexis learnt the eternal truths about mankind. About the passions and their inherent weaknesses. His great heroes were the wily Odysseus and the stoic Ajax, not the bully-boy Achilles. Alexis also learnt about the Gods, and his questioning was if anything encouraged by Areus, who made him see that Homer

could only portray what he himself could understand of the Gods, their motives, and their actions.

He admired the histories of Herodotus and Thucydides, and began to understand something of politics. From Herodotus he learnt of the world beyond his own. To a Bactrian Greek the Scythians were a constant threat, almost unknown nomads from the North who struck and as rapidly disappeared. Herodotus made him question their society, their culture, the better to try to understand them. He learnt, like other educated Greeks, to respect other people's customs, traditions and religion. There was a warning implicit and explicit in the great man's work, that Hellenism must be defended, and that in the clash of civilisations between East and West, the West must triumph, or be absorbed. Treat all men as rational beings, not as inferiors. Be open to them, exclude no man on the grounds of race. Hellenism is an all-embracing culture.

From Thucydides he learnt of the great political divides in Alexis' world, of kingdoms, Oligarchies, Democracies. Practical history and politics laid the foundation of his later studies in political philosophy. To the approval of Areus and his father he favoured Athenian democracy but immediately saw the weaknesses of an Assembly being swayed by emotion. It was far from a perfect solution. The hysteria and jobbery that led to the execution of the six victorious generals for not rescuing drowning sailors in pursuit of total victory after the battle of Arginusae really affected the youth. His sense of moral justice was outraged, it went against the laws of Pericles. Naturally Socrates had stood alone in insisting on acting in accordance with the laws. Athenian democracy without restraint had made mistakes, had probably led to Athens's final defeat, but for all that Alexis saw Democracy as representing a better way than the military machine of the Spartan Oligarchy.

"Despite all the limitations of a war that you think might have killed a half of all Athenians, we have this tremendous outpouring of literature and art, Areus?" asked Alexis. "All possible because of liberty, no sycophantic posturing before tyrants."

"A little simplistic, My Boy, but you sum that up rather succinctly," said Areus, stroking his beard.

Alexis' great hero was the Athenian aristocrat, Xenophon. Himself a descendant of one of the generals who had fought alongside Xenophon, he avidly studied the march of the Ten Thousand Greeks right through the heart of the Persian Empire to safety in the Greek Black Sea Colonies.

Men outnumbered, having to live by their wits and their courage, making do, improvising as they saw fit. Xenophon was a horse soldier like his father, as he would be. Areus introduced him to Xenophon's works on cavalry tactics, much to the delight of Aristobulos. His early lessons with Areus would stand him in good stead later.

He was taught to see history in terms of the chronology developed in Alexandria in Egypt, he believed the Trojan War was fought almost a thousand years before his time, that the Spartan Lycurgus had given his law code over eight hundred years previously, and that the first Olympiad was held over half a millennium prior to Euthedemus' reign. Using that timeline he could understand the world history that he read. He could understand how recently his own civilisation had sprung up in the aftermath of Alexander's conquests.

He learnt more of Alexander, the man who conquered the world, including Bactria. He studied the history of Bactria Here he learnt as much from Rhea and Aristobulos as from Areus.

From Areus he learnt of Alexander's campaigns, from Aristobulos he learnt of the man.

"Alexander was not a Greek, Alexis," said Aristobulos. "He was educated as one, studied under Aristotle, but never felt as one. He never truly understood the feeling of liberty that gave rise to the great men of Athens, that attracted men from all over the world to work, create, and learn in that rich atmosphere. He was brilliant, Alexis, but a murderous enemy to Greece. He killed more Greeks when he slaughtered Darius' Greek mercenaries at the battle of Granicus than the Persians had killed in a hundred and fifty years. And yet Alexander led allied Greek and mercenary hoplites as well as Macedonians, not to mention his Greek and Thessalian Horse. Alexander did not simply lead a Greek force against a

Barbarian one. "

Rhea reminded him of men like Memnon who fought for Darius against Alexander. They believed that they fought for Greek freedom. "Alexander created our world, but it was only saved by his early death," she tartly told him.

She described Memnon's faithless wife who had succumbed to Alexander's charms after her husband's death. He learnt that there were no black and white choices in the world.

"Memnon had made a choice, I believe that he made the wrong one," said Rhea, "but it was consistent with his ideals of freedom"

Rhea believed that Alexander, who had killed so many in his quest for world domination, had really shown what a monster he was over a city not all that far away from where his own Alexandria on the Oxus was to be founded. She told him of the Massacre of the Branchidae.

"They were a people who had been resettled here by the Persians. A hundred and fifty years ago their ancestors had surrendered the temple of Apollo in Miletus to the Persians. The Persians resettled them near here for their own safety. They had kept their distinctive identity and their language, had made for themselves a new city, and a prosperous one. Of course they welcomed Alexander. Alexander took their joyous submission, and gave no clue as to his thoughts," she paused, and then continued "Back in his tent he ordered his generals to surround the town silently and on his signal to storm the walls and gates, to kill every living creature in the city, within and without. His Macedonian beasts carried out his orders gleefully. They let all their blood-lust out on the Branchidae. This despite the fact that the people, the pregnant women, the little children, had given them flowers only a few hours before. They waved olive wreaths and branches. Afterwards he had the walls undermined so that no stones were left standing. He sent his men out throughout the territory beyond the walls and destroyed everything and everyone. They cut down the sacred groves, uprooted the orchards...killed the dogs...he was a drunken brute." Here Rhea stopped, overwhelmed by the picture she was painting. Memories were long in Bactria. Many families remembered the defeat and massacre of Greek settlers on the death of Alexander. Among her friends were old women who had known their family history. They had not let their men forget.

His father took up the tale, "And the Barbarians called him a God," said Aristobulos.

"Even his Macedonians, used to a king who was chief among equals, refused to prostrate themselves before him. They could not stomach that. Power does corrupt. If a king is no longer restrained he can become a tyrant. Macedon's kings were limited monarchs, constrained by ancient bonds, bonds which Alexander burst. Alexander thought that he was above that. If a man believes that he is all-powerful, and forgets that he is a man who can only accomplish his aims through the cooperation of other men, then he loses his grip on reality. Alexander was hardly more than a boy when he was given the world's most fearsome weapon, his father Philip's Army. He wielded that weapon superbly, He was brilliant, he was insane."

"When men declare another man as a God, however brilliant, they make us all Atheists. Declaring men capable of the monstrous behaviour a Macedonian king was capable of is certainly enough to make atheists of us all. Remember your mother's words. Remember the massacre of the Branchidae. "

In Areus' schoolroom Areus urged him to think dispassionately of Alexander the general, and of Alexander the ruler. He took over the Persian administrative system and ensured his own placemen ran it efficiently. He pursued Bessus the murderer of Darius beyond the Oxus to the Jaxartes, where the Sogdian nobles including a certain Spitalmenes had surrendered Bessus.

Within the year both his policy of city-building, and incidents in which his Macedonians rode roughshod over the Sogdian nobles, led to a revolt led by the very same Spitalmenes. It was to be one of the greatest fights Alexander faced. As a foretaste of the future Spitalmenes allied himself to the Scythian nomad hordes north of the Jaxartes. They could not prevail against the genius of Alexander, and lost. Spitalmenes was in his turn betrayed

to Alexander.

His family were given clemency. His daughter was married to Alexander's general Seleucus, ancestor of all the future Seleucid kings. Her family ties bound much of the Iranian nobility to the Seleucids. It appeared to have been a love-match. When Alexander's other officers divorced their Barbarian wives Seleucus did not. He was to set an example followed by many of his leading commanders. One reason for Bactrian loyalty was the close ties of blood between Hellene and Iranian in Bactria. Over time the leading Hellenes and Iranians were to come to share common goals. Alexander himself had taken Roxanne off the Sogdian Rock and married her.

Alexander established many cities in Bactria and Sogdiana. They provided the infrastructure through which Seleucus' satraps worked. He built fortresses with Greek troops at strategic points. He also built cities beyond the Hindu Kush, in the Paropamisadae and Gandhara, and in the South and West in Arachosia and Gedrosia. They were to be ceded by Seleucus to Chandragupta, but many of the Greeks and some Macedonians stayed. Bactria was to flourish over the next century under its Hellenistic rulers. Little was to happen politically for almost a century.

Then, during a period of upheaval, including the Ptolemaic invasion of Syria, and the Civil Wars between the two Seleucid kings, the satrap of Bactria, Diodotus gradually eased away from royal control. He was a powerful man, controlling Bactria, and Sogdiana to the North, plus Margiana to the North West and Aria to the West. Gradually Diodotus assumed the royal prerogatives. A Parthian revolt isolated him even further from the Seleucid Antioch. He governed well and prosperity grew. His strength lay both in the Hellenistic cities, and on the support of the Iranian nobility who favoured a local rather than distant ruler. As an independent king he had much scope for patronage. He divided Bactria into Satrapies, and was a popular ruler. By his death he was truly a King, with a cult as Soter, or Saviour.

He seemed secure in the East and South. The Scythians were relatively quiet, but to his West he faced multiple threats. Parthia had separated from the Empire under its Seleucid Satrap, and then in its vulnerable state been conquered by Arsaces the Scythian. Arsaces and Parthia was now a direct threat to Bactria. Two political camps evolved in Bactria, one pro-Seleucid and westward looking, one eastward looking. The first saw their links to the West as being all-important. Ideally Bactria would return to the Seleucid fold. Even the Parthians, under whom the Greek cities were to flourish, were civilised neighbours who would protect them from other Aryan hordes. The other school of thought was that the Bactrians were an outpost of the Hellenistic World. They should defend themselves in the west, although they must not be cut off from that world, but should look to the East, outside the Seleucid sphere of influence, for expansion and opportunity.

Diodotus I was hostile to Arsaces. When after a long reign he died and his son Diodotus II assumed the crown he reversed his father's policy and allied to Parthia. This was an immensely unpopular move. Diodotus was not a very good politician, nor a very successful general.

Diodotus II rather forgot himself," Areus told Alexis. "He got a little too big for his boots, and forgot that he was not a King by Divine Right, merely a son who had been in the right place at the right time."

"Now, however, at this time, there was a young man who was proving a very good general and leader of men. He was Satrap of Sogdiana in the north. His was an adventurous spirit. He was born in Magnesia in Thessaly. He was Euthedemus. His father was a renowned General of Thessalian horse. He rose rapidly in Bactria to become a squadron leader of the Royal Agema or Bodyguard, consisting of Royal Companion lancers. Soon he led the Agema, and proved himself a superb cavalry general against Parthian and Scythian alike. He had been noticed by the older Diodotus, and had married his daughter. As Satrap of Sogdiana he led the most powerful cavalry army in all Bactria. His voice had to be listened to."

"He was appalled by the younger Diodotus' treaty with Arsaces. He believed that the

Parthians could never be trusted. He believed in the unity of Hellenism, and knew from history that the greatest Greek weakness was their tendency to fight among themselves. He became the leader of the Eastward looking party, and carried out an almost bloodless coup against Diodotus. "

"Almost bloodless?," asked Alexis.

"Yes. Diodotus was handed a sword by his own bodyguard, a man whom he had insulted once too often, He could not hold it, So he was helped," said Areus. "And Euthedemus was on the throne when your father, Aristobulos, arrived from Olynthus via Thessaly. Euthedemus thought of Thessaly as his home until the day he died. I have been told that Magnesia has erected a magnificent statue to Euthedemus, its most famous son."

"I would like to see that, one day," said Alexis. I would love to go to Greece. I really would. It is my home too."

"Yes," said Areus. " It is Home for us all."

Alexis, as he paused at the memorial to Kineas, thought of Areus, thought of his youth. He thought especially of Thessaly, the home of so many people that were important to him.

When he saluted Kineas he was also saluting Areus, Euthedemus, and the thousands of Thessalian cavalry that had made Alexander's conquest possible.

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Past the mausoleum to Kineas was a broad square through which he walked to the Gymnasium. At the entrance was a pillar to Hermes and Herakles, the Cities' Protectors. This was the heart of the City, where his education had truly begun, training both his mind and his body.

There were many statues of gods and heroes in alcoves and within the colonnades. The first one his eye fell upon was that of Ariston. Ariston had been so handsome, so beautifully proportioned. Sculptors had flocked around him, begging him to pose for them. Ariston had refused, saying that he was not yet a penniless student unable to pay his teachers. One day, at Alexis' urging, he had succumbed. He had consented to model for the finest sculptor in the city, as the discus thrower.

Alexis had prepared himself as he did every time he entered the portal. The statue was so very true to life, the muscles straining, the coloured flesh-tints so real, with its auburn hair and Ariston's blue eyes. But there was the rub. The eyes were not those of Ariston. Those eyes were dead. Those eyes made it possible for Alexis to walk past that statue. It reminded him of Ariston, but it did not evoke Ariston.

Those eyes could not show the range of expression Ariston's had. The ironic glint whenever Alexis grew frustrated at another sophist, the blazing fury he had seen in battle, the tenderness of a lover. Aristobulos had wanted to buy the statue, whatever the cost, and put it into storage, but Alexis had refused. He wanted the city to remember Ariston. Ariston was his youth. Had been his life. Best it stay here so that he could see it each and every time he entered the gymnasium, talking with friends or training his body.

Yes. He had had a lover, once. Now he was dead. He had been impaled by a Scythian lance and died writhing in his arms, his blood and guts spilling out of him, his eyes tormented, screaming. No dignity there. Sheer animal agony. Now Alexis looked older than his years. Wiser, more experienced. Skyron knew it. As did Demetrius, who had observed Alexis' and Ariston's youth together. It was also one of the reasons the Councillors of Seistan and Kandahar had listened to him.