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6000 words

Command Performance

Callisthenes crossed the darkness that separated the main camp from the fires of the pickets. They were only a hundred yards out, but they seemed further, and elevated—as if they were at the top of an amphitheater and he were down near its stage.

He went in a straight line, which he knew to be safe. Alexander’s men made their latrines out there. The breeze would shift—it was warm for late fall—and he would smell them. The odor reminded Callisthenes of the soldiers’ jokes.

One of the pickets saw him and alerted his companions. When they stood to attention, grounding their spears, they looked like three surprised comedians. Callisthenes gave them a salute that was intentionally clumsy. Being a civilian, he did not want to appear to mock them.

Coming into the firelight was like entering a building.

“Where are they?” Callisthenes asked.

“This way,” said the officer.

The two men walked toward the woods, stopping on the fringes of the firelight. The officer pointed.

“There. Near the trees.”

Under the moonlight, the row of birches looked like an old man’s teeth. Callisthenes stared. The horsemen gradually appeared, like faces in a sorcerer’s glass.

They were just out of bowshot. There were three mounted men, and there was a riderless horse. Callisthenes sensed that they had been there for some time. They were immobile.

“Not Scythians,” he said, turning to the soldier. “In my uncle’s library . . .”

The officer bowed his head at the mention of the great man.

Irritated, Callisthenes asked, “Do they ever come closer?”

“Never!”

“They appeared as soon as we entered the mountains?”

“No, sir. After four days. Nine days ago.”

“Did you see where the fourth man went?”

“Fourth man?”

“The empty horse.”

The guard shook his head. “Every night, we see three men and four horses.”

“Then it is a superstition,” said Callisthenes. “A device to trick the gods. Our curses will fall on the man who ‘isn’t there.’”

“‘Man,’ sir?” The soldier’s voice expressed honest perplexity.

It was impossible to explain certain things to certain people. Callisthenes said, “Dra would know.”

A thin cloud passed before the moon. The horsemen became indistinguishable from shadows.

Callisthenes said, “You would need a true seer to see them now.”

They returned to the fire. Callisthenes questioned the pickets. The horsemen would appear shortly after sundown. They had never attempted a parley or a theft. A few days earlier, a patrol had gone out to catch them from behind. To ensure surprise, it had left from a distant part of the perimeter. Unfortunately, and perhaps inevitably, the men had got lost in the dark, and had not returned until the next morning.

“They show no signs of wanting anything from us,” said Callisthenes. He let the sentence hang there: half a question, half a theory. “They are—curious?”

“Sir?”

“Or something else,” Callisthenes said. He stood up. He thought of the latrines; he wondered if he should ask for an escort back to the camp. He turned to go. A thought stopped him.

“The horse could be an offering,” he said. “When they get what they want, they will kill it. But this looks like Dra’s business. You should have sent for him.”

“All men by nature desire to know.”

“I know.”

Callisthenes had frequently imagined, but never actually had, that exchange with his uncle. He had been living in the country with his mother and her two brothers, running the estate, when the summons came. It was a summons. Aristotle, his father’s brother, was officially a commoner, but the courier would not have come without Philip of Macedon’s knowledge and approval.

The ride from Stagira to Pella should have taken thirteen days, but the guides had refused to enter the city on an unlucky afternoon, and they had spent the thirteenth night in hills overlooking the town. The next day, they had found their path blocked by a landslide, and the caravan had entered the royal city on the fifteenth day.

To Callisthenes, who had spent three years in Athens, Pella had seemed to be the true philosopher’s city. Its sights, like words in a foreign language, had to be apprehended with the mind, not the eyes: this building was a palace, not a brothel; the barn beside it was a temple to Zeus. Stagira, never a wealthy city, had not been rebuilt after the Persian Wars, but it did not look more bleak than Pella. On market days, Stagira’s streets were almost impassable with hawkers, top-heavy ox carts, beggars, and herds of startlingly aggressive sheep; the air was full of bargaining and cursing, serenades, and drums. But Pella seemed to exist in a perpetual mourning, like a field of execution, except on festival days, when gangs of drunken soldiers made the poorer sections as dangerous as a city being sacked.

King Philip had met them outside the palace. The king's accent matched that of Callisthenes' mother's cook.

"The household of Aristotle is the household of the king." Philip had half turned, stretching his right arm toward a young man who stood one pace behind him. "Cousins!"

That man was Alexander. He was bandy-legged, and half a head shorter than his father. He had raised his face toward Philip and the new arrival. His eyes had met Callisthenes' precisely on the utterance of the king's final word. It was as if he had caught the word as it fell, knowing it would be there.

Aristotle's villa lay on the right bank of a calm river, under hills on the western side of town. The villa had reminded Callisthenes of an old friend, whom he had not seen since he was nine: Callisthenes had been in love with his friend's sister, and as a child he had dreamed of living with her in a house like this, near a river.

He had not seen his uncle for five years, since when the king had made Aristotle his son's tutor. Callisthenes' first impression was that his uncle had become somewhat like Pella, needing translation: *Not an old man who has acquired cunning to compensate for the loss of his teeth, but Aristotle, the first student of Plato, and a great philosopher.* He had vaguely noticed that neither description fit the title, "uncle."

Moved by his memory of the sister, Callisthenes had praised the beauty of his uncle's house. Aristotle had responded by calling it "an object unworthy of a philosopher's consideration," accepted reluctantly, and only out of deference to the king. He had said the same of the other gifts: the land, herds, slaves, and gold.

A long, shaded terrace overlooked the water. Callisthenes had arrived in summer, and for three months they had taken their meals there. He had been able to hear the river. Lying out of sight, over the terrace wall, it had made him think of a creature that was continually drawing breath.

The summons had said that he would become his uncle's apprentice, but it had not named the trade. Through summer and fall, Aristotle had sent Callisthenes into the mountains with attendants, and told him to bring back stones, small trees, antlers, beehives, soils, herbs, and bottles full of brackish waters. Knowing his nephew to be a skillful artist, Aristotle had urged Callisthenes to make sketches of anything noteworthy that was too large to bring home; he had given "an amber mountain" as a helpful example.

In winter, he had sent Callisthenes to search through his twenty thousand books for: descriptions of rare diseases; verses of eccentric but exemplary style; true prophecies of earthquakes, plagues, and eclipses; epitaphs erotic and polemical; hymns to vanquished gods; biased accounts of inconclusive military campaigns; lives of merciful judges.

In the spring, Callisthenes had attended the births of cattle, horses, pigs, sheep, and goats. He had analyzed each birthing process, and classified its stages according to cause, effect, essence, accident, and function.

It was during the birth of a calf that he learned of Philip's assassination. A messenger had run from the city to the house, and then from there to the stable, breathless in his uncertainty, not

knowing whether to appear overjoyed or terrified. Callisthenes had stood up suddenly, with the newborn animal still cradled in his arms. He had seen neither the king nor his son since the feast of the winter solstice, and very few times before then. He had almost come to think of the royal family as Greeks. Learning of the murder had been like coming into Pella for the first time—a second time.

The too-prompt executions of the conspirators had seemed to confirm that Alexander, if he had not initiated it, had at least known of the plot and not stopped it. But his complicity, universally suspected, was never spoken of. It had puzzled Callisthenes how anything could be known like that, through silence. He had read of the night panics that appeared and spread through defeated armies; it was like that.

Six months later, Alexander had marched east, and Callisthenes had accompanied him. In a personal audience, the young king had told Callisthenes how Aristotle had recommended him very highly. On behalf of the king's ex-tutor, Callisthenes would have every opportunity to collect, record, and investigate; he would have beasts and bearers, scribes and sheepskin, and leisure. Callisthenes had understood, with fearful immediacy, that this boon was too gracious to refuse.

On the last night in the villa, Callisthenes had dreamed of his friend's sister. In the dream, the two of them were grown and married, and they lived by a river. Sea-pirates sailed upstream and captured them—having a dream-reason to keep them alive. Callisthenes and his wife planned how they would kill the pirates and gain their freedom. When he had woken, Callisthenes had been filled with a blank horror at the thought that their plot might be discovered, and that he might be killed (in the dream, to cause another's death was nothing). He did not even think of her.

The escort from the army had arrived at noon. Callisthenes had anticipated without pleasure the sort of advice that Aristotle would give him at their parting. But there had been no parting. Callisthenes had mounted the horse, and the party had waited in the dusty courtyard while a slave searched the house. The slave had returned only moments later, with the report that Aristotle could not be found. The officer had shouted the order to go almost before the slave had finished speaking.

The camp, on the other side of town, was two miles wide. It stretched from the riverside to the base of the foothills. There were tents, fires, pack animals, prostitutes, musicians, wagons, and merchants. Callisthenes had felt his heart lift, for the sight had eased his homesickness. He had pushed himself up on his horse, to try to see the king's tent, not knowing what to look for, except that the tent would be large and close to the center.

The escort had taken him to his own tent and presented him to his servants. Callisthenes had already learned their names, along with their many skills, just as he had known the number and varieties of the horses, ropes, baskets, and rolls of parchment and papyrus detailed to him. Nevertheless, he had spent the rest of that day taking inventory, wanting to appear busy when the king called.

The king never called. During the first two months of the expedition, Callisthenes came into Alexander's presence on four occasions, and not once did Alexander address him. All of

their dealings went through intermediaries. Callisthenes wrote letters to the king—requisitions and administrative inquiries—and received written replies that referred to Alexander in the third person. A soldier explained that that was how the king treated all the civilians, except for the augur.

The augur was a man named Dra. He was neither Greek nor Macedonian. Alexander had captured him in Illyria, during his maiden expedition. Callisthenes had never seen him in Pella. He believed, but was not sure, that he might have heard his name once, and mistaken it for a concubine's. He had heard Dra described soon after he came into camp, making it easy to recognize the man when he finally did see him. This was at a court-martial, after they had been marching for two weeks.

Dra was much taller than Alexander, and he was so dark that even the sunburned Macedonians remarked on his color. He had high cheekbones and black, crows'-feet eyes. He was as thin as a beggar and, although the king's gifts had made him rich, he dressed in rags that looked like torn sheets of bark.

Dra had stood next to the king's chair, resting his hand on the bronze eagle's crest. The charge was petty sacrilege: a soldier had desecrated a shrine while drunk. Alexander had listened attentively to the statements and the evidence, but without giving any signs of emotion. Then he had turned, almost looking over his shoulder, toward the seer. Like an anxious gambler watching his dice, Dra had bent forward and furiously whispered. The king had shaken his head. The soldier had got off with a fine.

Before every battle, the augur read the intestines of sheep and fowl. He gave his pronouncements in a rough mixture of his own language and Macedonian that was like a piece of badly woven, uncombed wool: its unintelligible strands were connected to nothing and pointed in incomprehensible directions. Yet Alexander listened. Victory followed invariably.

Callisthenes sent the king copies from his journals and reports on his collections. He had spent the first two months fearing and hoping for Alexander's judgments on them. When these had failed to come, he had searched for evidence of some change in the king's attitude. He could divine nothing. His people's food, their place in the ranks, and the quality of their animals had remained constant.

For a month he had played with the idea of submitting blank scrolls, or scrolls that were covered (on the inside) with obscene pictures of Alexander and Dra (or, sometimes, Bucephalus). On more than one morning he had woken with the dreadful thought that he had done it, and spent the day in painful anxiety. When, by nightfall, no soldiers had come for him, he could not be sure whether he had not, after all, insulted the king, or that no one—not even the bored Athenians attached to Alexander's staff—ever bothered to open the scrolls. Sometimes, going to sleep, he imagined himself, defiant and contemptuous, being dragged before the king, and owning his treason at the moment of his execution.

Whenever the army halted for more than two consecutive nights, it was to prepare for a fight or to recover from wounds, not all of which were inflicted in battle. Diseases followed them like

thoughts of home. Animals went lame; and men broke limbs in mishaps they could not later recall.

Callisthenes had seen one battle, from a hilltop, standing amidst the wounded, the baggage train, and the whores. It had made as little sense as Dra's divination that morning. He had written down what he saw, but when he read his account later, it had seemed like a description that a man who has never lived among people might give of a human face changing from apathy to rage. The masses of men moved, but the secret that tied the motions together lay out of sight. Callisthenes imagined it hiding under the battlefield.

He found his best opportunities for collection and observation on foraging expeditions. These always had the same commander, an aging captain who was said to be the oldest man in the army. The young officers said that he should have been retired after the Illyrian campaigns. He had no need for more loot, and they felt that he had not come for glory, notwithstanding that, in their first big battle, he had rolled up the enemy's left flank with a daring cavalry charge.

Following that battle, Alexander had restricted him to foraging. The captain had accepted his reassignment without complaint. However, some said that it had made him quick-tempered and reckless. At least once on each excursion he would take his horse into a too-high jump that could have killed him. Men who had tried to keep up with him had been crippled or killed.

Callisthenes had heard rumors that the captain's recklessness had another cause. This old soldier had wanted to stay in Macedon. Unfortunately, he had been a popular commander in Philip's army, and Alexander had believed that he was too dangerous to leave behind. His case resembled that of other officers, but he had been unlucky in not having a son, especially a firstborn son, whom he could send in his place.

The foragers looked for ripe fields behind the mountains, since the farms in the army's path were quickly exhausted. The animals and plants that Callisthenes found up there were less Greek-looking than in the valleys, but the specimens were nevertheless disappointing. The trees grew somewhat stouter than in Attica; the animals—hawks, jays, snakes—had longer or shorter tails, or all of the expected colors, but in unexpected places (bearers came back with fungi as large as oxheads); but it was not so different. It was hardly worth a philosopher's consideration; or, Callisthenes thought, a philosopher's presence. He gave his orders and noted the "discoveries" automatically. He barely thought of them. He thought of the captain, pitied him, and compared him to his uncle. The captain was ten years older than Aristotle. The army life that Callisthenes experienced was softened by his privileges, but it would have killed his uncle within months. Everybody rose at dawn; everybody caught the fevers. Callisthenes remembered the gentle river and the cool terrace.

The foragers always found the mountain villages empty. (In contrast, those in the army's path sent emissaries to meet it.) The huts were lopsided cones of converging straight poles that had been covered with hides, bark, and mud. From the heights of the entrances, Callisthenes guessed these people to be short. They left few traces of themselves: no tools, no clothing, no gods. The villages stank of human and animal feces, but the interiors of the huts smelled of cold smoke, because the fires would have been put out only a day or two before. So, the people could not have been far away. Perhaps they watched while the soldiers stripped their fields. If so, they made no outcry;

they stayed invisible.

Callisthenes would walk through the uneven rows of huts and try to imagine them being like Stagira, full of dogs and gossip and children's cries. Even in his mind, they remained silent. On warm days, when the stink was especially sickening, he would take refuge in a hut. For a moment, as the door flap closed, he would feel the silence seem to enfold him like the hut's walls. The walls' jagged texture would become like far-off trees or standing spears, and the people's language, just then, became like a song he had heard once, while falling asleep: Let the universe stand still, and it would return to him.

Only once had they come across an un-Greek thing while on the march. The army had advanced northeast through an undefended pass, and the main body had reached the next valley at mid-morning. They had halted for an hour while scouts had gone ahead, and Alexander decided whether to continue or to make camp.

The order came to proceed. The news spread through the ranks in minutes. The army hissed like a cauldron as thousands of men stood up with their armor and weapons, and prepared to march.

Callisthenes had re-mounted, when he saw the black stone.

It looked like a cowed figure buried up to its chest: an idol to a forgotten god. But the light was good, and he saw the markings. He leaped from his horse and nearly twisted his ankle.

"Get the ropes!" The pain made him frantic. "Pull it out! Pull it out!"

Twelve of his beasts were unburdened of their loads. Orders were given and countermanded as the animals were pulled and shoved into a crooked double line. The servants tied ropes around the figure, close to the ground. The train of animals lay across the line of march, and the files had to part to get around them. Callisthenes tried to stay too busy to look at the soldiers, fearing their anger.

However, he did not hear them complain. They treated the little group as they would any other obstacle: a copse of trees or a smoldering house. The only sound they made came from the rhythmic shaking of their gear.

And the stone did not move.

"Spades!" The dust choked him and the word ended on a squeak.

A narrow, deep trench was dug around the figure. The cords were re-attached. The animals' hooves dug into the dry earth.

The stone did not move.

A workman shouted, "Scholar!" The man straightened up, and he pointed with his spade toward the front of the army. A group was approaching.

It was Alexander. His staff followed a few yards behind. Dra was almost running to stay between them.

"*Kyrie.*" Callisthenes addressed the king in Greek. "I have found a most remarkable stone. For the delay, *kyrie*, I apologize. It has been more difficult than I expected."

Callisthenes noticed that Alexander, who knew Greek, did not look at him; and that Dra, who understood no Greek, did.

Alexander said, "Where is it." The words came quickly and the voice was flat.

Callisthenes turned toward the stone. The king chopped the air with his right hand, and he and the augur advanced together. Callisthenes hurried after them. He shouted for his men to take off the ropes and move the animals out of the way.

The three men reached the stone simultaneously.

"Look at these." Callisthenes drew up his tunic and knelt on the ground. He wiped away dust with his hand. "Skeletons—in the stone. My uncle has seen them on mountaintops. They prove, they prove that the sea once covered the land."

A laugh exploded from Alexander's lips. It lasted precisely one second. The king slapped Dra on the chest with the back of his hand.

The augur squatted on his flat feet and peered at the glyph-like figures.

Aristotle claimed that he had seen an ape once. He had told Callisthenes how the animal had opened a nut—held it, tilted his head, bit it, turned it over, bit again. Callisthenes had never seen an ape. Until this moment he had forgotten the description. His uncle had told him—it was unlike Aristotle to remember such a detail—about the striking innocence of the ape's eyes. It was the eyes that spoiled the augur's face. Callisthenes searched for a comparison—wolf, snake, cat: none fit. It did not seem right to call them human eyes.

The seer stood up. He pulled his torn cloak around him with a sudden, jealous motion.

"This rock," he said. "The king's good fortune. Large, like a man—leads many men. A part—the land that he will take. These—scarabs." He pointed to the glyphs. "Eternal life! The king!"

Alexander beckoned to his staff. He spoke to the first man to reach him, too softly and quickly for Callisthenes to hear. The man vanished into the hosts.

Callisthenes remained kneeling by the stone. The army had stopped. Hundreds of armed men were staring at them—at him. He realized, but without any feeling of comfort, that they did not look angry.

There was a commotion from where the man had gone. The ranks parted. The runner and two other men came through, leading a sheep by a rope halter. Callisthenes immediately stood up and stepped away. He knew what was going to happen.

Dra's hand, which had been empty, held a curved knife. He slashed the sheep's throat. The expert stroke cut the vein and the windpipe at the same time: Dra had not had to look. One man held an earthen bowl underneath the gushing wound, and in seconds the bowl overflowed with blood. Two men held the kicking, gasping animal.

The blood spilled onto the priest's feet.

Dra placed his upturned hands under the bowl, raised it over the black figure, and emptied the blood onto the crown. He dropped the bowl. It broke on the ground. He placed his hands on the bloody head and, when they were filthy, drew them onto his face. Then he shouted three words

in his native tongue.

A moment later, when Alexander nodded to his staff, everybody knew that the business was over.

The king, as he turned to go, glanced toward Callisthenes. But he did not really look at him. It was the way that a pretty girl looks at an ugly, unathletic man without a fortune. Callisthenes remembered suddenly that he was Alexander's senior by six years. He did not know why that fact seemed important. He watched the staff close around its general, like a cloud sent by a protecting god.

Callisthenes, from the highlands that separate the regions of Thrace and Scythia, to Aristotle and his household: Greetings!

I send you my journals, with objects I have gathered since we entered these mountains five weeks ago. The manifests and catalogues must prove to you that they are worthy of a philosopher's consideration, and therefore I will not describe here even the most interesting of the finds.

I will, however, express a regret, that I could not send you an example of a most remarkable species.

It is, perhaps, a kind of man.

It approaches our army in groups of three, every evening at sunset. They come mounted and—this is peculiar—there is always a fourth, riderless horse.

They do not attack our outposts. They do not approach us. By nature, you said, all men desire to know. What do these wish to know? Are they men? We have never heard them make any sound. They appear in a moment and, during the hours that they are visible, they hardly move. (The horses move.)

The soldiers believed them to be Scythians. However, they do not wear that people's peaked hat. Neither are they Thracians. Their horses are smaller than any others I have ever seen, not much bigger than ponies. Full-sized horses, I believe, would not be of much use in these woods. The men (not the horses!) wear leather helmets, trimmed with fur, which cover the tops of their skulls. They carry short spears; sometimes one of them will have a sword, but, since we never see it drawn, we do not know whether it is bronze or wood. They wear leather armor made of strips that have been woven like mats; or so they appear. Their beards and hair are short and black. They stay at such a distance that it is hard to say much about their faces. They seem somewhat rounder than ours—meaning yours and mine—but they are not so unlike the soldiers'.

I fear that they will try to send spies into our camp. I have attempted to discuss this danger with the sentries, but they do not take it seriously. The horsemen may know our language (we do not know theirs: they have been silent). Alexander's army is such a mongrel lot that the most barbarous accent can go unnoticed here.

I believe that a system of passwords, such as I am devising, will prevent this. I am confident of its merits, but I do not wish to present my project to the king until it is perfect.

Let me know that you have received this letter. It is months since I have heard from you.

I go with the foragers tomorrow.

The party assembled at the northwest corner of the camp just before sunrise: drivers, bearers, a hundred mounted soldiers, a hundred foot soldiers, three hundred pack animals. The old commander watched them from the top of a fallen log. He stood with his legs apart and his arms folded over his chest. His facial features were hidden in the bad light, and his silver hair and beard surrounded the blank spaces like parts of a helmet.

Faces were becoming visible. Callisthenes and his assistants took their place near the center of the forward cohort. The hundreds of bodies moved into the woods.

At this hour the forest was not much darker than the land outside. The air was humid. It felt warmer. Callisthenes welcomed the wholesome odor of decay: it reminded him of farms.

At first, they could barely see the forms that moved—men and horses—and the forms that did not. A torch, far ahead, danced in and out of sight. The daylight strengthened, nearly three hours passed, and the sunbeams fell through the high branches like swords. The torch went out. The forest was as full of light as an ornamental pond.

By the time the captain ordered a halt, Callisthenes had long concluded that he would find nothing worthwhile on this trip. Callisthenes looked at his assistants, all of whom were dozing. Would they have obeyed him if, back at the camp, he had ordered them to go without him? Would Alexander have allowed it? He wished that he, like Aristotle, had had a nephew to send in his place.

He realized then that he was a hostage: the guarantee of Aristotle's loyalty. He saw it at once. "Mother," he whispered.

He felt no surprise when, seconds later, the men around him started dying.

The arrows that flew through the clearing sounded like cautious breaths blown against a struggling fire. They became visible only when they hit their targets. Men screamed; horses reared. Macedonian curses and the ring of falling armor filled the narrow clearing. The air became thick with dust.

Callisthenes was thrown from his horse. His elbow cracked against the ground. Through the legs of the maddened horses he saw faces appear between the trees.

He shut his eyes and did not think of what he waited for.

There was a growling on all sides of them, coming closer. The voices were human, and terrifying, but guttural, and without exultation. It was like a dirge.

Callisthenes felt the shock as a spear struck the earth close to his face. His eyes sprang open.

The barbarian wore a leather cap that made his skull look almost spherical. He had a black beard. A short bronze sword swung from his leather cuirass.

He pulled the spear out of the ground. Callisthenes' body jerked away, then stopped.

The man had spoken in Greek.

"Stand!" he repeated.

Callisthenes got to his feet. On his left he heard another horrendous scream. His head jerked: he dared not look.

With his spear, the man motioned toward what had been the rear of the party.

They stepped over horses' limbs and men's bodies. Callisthenes recognized faces. This one, with the open, bloody mouth, had smiled like he knew something when Callisthenes had showed the stone-glyphs to the king. That man, whose neck was bent back almost double, had stood beside him at a latrine trench three days ago. Further over, an arrow-pierced back stirred a memory. The incident? He could not remember. He had never known the names.

They stopped. The barbarian said something. It did not sound Greek. They were out of the corpses. Callisthenes raised his eyes.

A barbarian was on a horse, leaning forward and slightly away from them. He was listening. Callisthenes understood that this man was the leader.

Something imperceptible happened beyond the dust. The man turned to them.

"Are you a wise man?" he asked in Greek. Callisthenes did not answer. "Are you a wise man?"

"I am Callisthenes!"

The man on the horse said something to the first man—the guard. The noise of fighting was becoming more distant and sporadic. It was like being in the center of a stage, Callisthenes thought, but the story was at the edge or the top of the amphitheater. The savages, riding their ponies skillfully through the forest paths, were executing the remnants of the party.

Callisthenes felt his wrists being pressed together. He looked down. The guard tied the thong in three quick strokes, as if he were striking a flint, and then stepped back, holding the free end. The leader said something to the guard and the man shouted. He shouted three times.

The horsemen returned to the clearing. The men barely spoke—candleflames of conversation—and the sound of the horses' hooves was like flowing water or a sleeper's breathing, as they moved through the leaves and fallen twigs. The sound became continuous and then stopped.

Callisthenes guessed that there were between three and four hundred of them. They stared at him with what looked like a mixture of wonder and skepticism. It was as if he were a gem which they had dug out of the earth after much danger and hard work, and they were trying to believe that he was worth it.

The leader addressed the men. In the middle of his harangue he abruptly stopped, pointed at Callisthenes, and pronounced, "Wise man!" Then he seemed to wait. Callisthenes looked up. Did they expect him to speak? Many seconds passed. Suddenly, Callisthenes understood.

"I am not the wise man! I am the *wrong* wise man! You want *another* wise man!"

The savages cheered.

The crowd stirred. In the back could be seen three men leading a horse. The ranks parted as they approached. Callisthenes did not recognize their faces. Perhaps it had not always been the same men. But he understood that this was the horse.

It was small, like the others, and somewhat darker, but Callisthenes knew somehow that the darkness was not important. It could have had a white foot or a dappled rump, and those would not have mattered. What distinguished this horse was nothing about itself, but that it had been chosen.

The guard thrust a club into his bound hands. Men stood behind the horse's head on either side and gripped its bridle tightly. Callisthenes saw somebody out of the corner of his eye, nodding, as if to encourage him. He raised the club. The men's mouths opened in anticipation.

When they get what they want, they will kill it.

The club struck the skull and the horse dropped. Callisthenes looked up: eager nods. He hammered until all the kicking stopped.

He was blindfolded; the club was taken from his hands. The second action surprised him by its gentleness. He felt himself lifted up and set on a living horse. He gripped the mane, thinking: They have a dream reason to keep me alive. The darkness rang with barbarous cheers.

The leader's words came again, now without a trace of Greek. He was beside Callisthenes; his mouth was close to his ear. Perhaps the leader spoke only to him. The leader spoke rapidly. He seemed to stumble over his words like an impatient, fretful suitor. His breath smelled like the air in the empty, dark huts.

The band moved out of the sunlit battlefield. The cool forest obliterated the odors of panic and death. The leader, a warrior who bore many scars, rode beside the wise man, the treasure he had captured from another world. He told the treasure of his people's love for him and their reverence for his alien wisdom. He described the village where he would spend the rest of his life. He described the children, their games, the gossiping women, and the thieving dogs. He promised the wise man that he would see all of these things soon—in a few days—when they removed the blindfold.