

MARTIN HOWARD



Alexander the Great

The story of the invincible Macedonian king

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Prologue

Child of the Gods

Queen Olympias stood on the palace wall, staring up at the sky where the priests said the stars made pictures of the gods. It was 356 BC, almost two and a half thousand years ago. The cool summer evening air gently stirred the golden hair of the baby in her arms. The beautiful queen glanced down into the face of her sleeping son and remembered the dream she'd had before he was born.

She had been struck by a thunderbolt, then a fire had flared in her belly; a fire that had burned with a glorious light. Soon afterwards, her husband, King Philip II of Macedonia, had had another strange dream. In the king's dream, the child she now held had been a lion.

Many people thought Queen Olympias had magical powers. Perhaps they were right, she thought, looking down at her son. She had known immediately that the dreams were messages from Zeus, the king of the gods, but to make sure, she visited the high priest at the Temple of Zeus in her homeland of Epirus.

‘The son you shall have will not only be the child of you and King Philip, but the child of Zeus himself,’ the old man had said as they sat together beneath an old oak tree. ‘He will be no ordinary child, but a hero, as brave as a lion and as dazzling as fire. But you must keep this secret from him until he is ready to seek his destiny, for his path will be dangerous. His life will be like a fire that burns fierce and bright. But the fire that burns the brightest, never burns for long.’

That had been months ago, before her son was born. Now Queen Olympias held the tiny boy tight and looked into the night sky. It was said that the Macedonian royal family was descended from the champion Herakles, whose father was Zeus himself. Her son truly *was* the child of the gods. Carefully, Queen Olympias held the baby up to the stars,

and spoke his name. The breeze would carry it away for Zeus to hear.

‘Alexander,’ she whispered.

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The Boy Who Would Be King

Alexander ran through the palace corridors. He was dirty and scratched from rolling in the dusty courtyard with his toy soldiers, fighting great battles with the little wooden army.

‘Mother!’ he yelled as he ran into the cool rooms she occupied. ‘I heard the sound of horses. Has the king returned? Is Father home?’

Queen Olympias clutched Alexander’s younger sister Cleopatra tightly and frowned at her son. ‘Where have you been?’ she asked sternly. ‘Lanike has been looking everywhere for you. You worry us to death, running off all the time.’

Lanike was Alexander’s nurse. She was always looking for him and as far as he was concerned

she could carry on doing so. She wasn't happy unless he was sitting quietly and still, so he didn't mess up his clothes.

'Forget Lanike,' he cried. 'Is it true? Is the king back at Pella? May I see him?'

Alexander rarely saw his father. On the day he'd been born, King Philip had won a famous victory over the city of Potidaea, and he'd been fighting battles ever since. It seemed to Alexander that his father was always at war, but during the brief times when the king returned to Macedonia's capital city of Pella, the boy loved to sit on his knee and listen to tales about the crash and roar of battle; the clash of sword on shield, the shouts of the men, and the deadly rain of arrows. To Alexander, King Philip II of Macedonia was the greatest warrior who'd ever lived. His father had invented a completely new way of fighting, by organising his troops into large rectangles of soldiers armed with long spears. He called them *phalanxes* and on the battlefield they were all but invincible.

Queen Olympias looked down into her son's dark-blue eyes and smiled. 'Yes, your father has returned, but you cannot be presented to the king

looking like that. Go find Lanike and tell her to take you to the baths.'

Two hours later, Alexander was sitting on the steps of the throne dressed in a simple white tunic and sandals with a red cloak over his shoulders. Eyes wide in awe, he looked up at King Philip. His father, however, ignored him, listening instead to reports from his generals and staff, and receiving noble visitors who had come to congratulate him on his latest victories against the hill tribes of Thrace to the north.

At last, Philip finished talking and beckoned to his son. Nervously, Alexander got to his feet and stepped towards his grim-faced father.

The king was not tall, but he was built like a warrior with a strong, powerful-looking body. Beneath his thick beard were the scars of old wounds taken in battle, and there were more scars on the king's thickly muscled arms and legs. He looked his son up and down.

'You've grown,' he said, then took the boy in his arms.

Respectfully, the other men in the throne room withdrew. When he had finished hugging the boy,

amazed as always at how sweet he smelled, King Philip pushed him back.

Alexander stood as straight and tall as he could, like a guard at attention. He wanted his father to be proud of him.

‘Aye, you’ve grown,’ the grizzled old warrior said softly. ‘Tell me, boy, do you know what this is?’ He tapped what looked like a golden sun on the breastplate of his armour.

‘It is the Argead Star, the symbol of the Macedonian king,’ Alexander said. ‘It has twelve points, one for each of the gods on Mount Olympus, and –’

‘Yes, yes, that’s enough,’ Philip laughed. ‘You’ve been learning, too, then?’

‘Mother told me about it.’

For a second, a cloud appeared on the king’s face, then he laughed and tousled Alexander’s hair. ‘Did she indeed? Well, that’s good. Yes, it is the royal star of Macedonia. And one day, Alexander, when I am dead, you will wear it as King.’

Alexander stared at his father. It had never occurred to him that the king might die. ‘But, sire,’ he said. ‘You cannot die. You’re a hero, like the

ones in the old stories Lanike tells me.'

Philip hunched over in his throne and looked his son in the eye, his face serious. 'Even heroes die, Alexander,' he said softly. 'And one day Macedonia will need a new king; a king who is strong and wise. You are my heir and I have been thinking about you while I was away.'

'What's an heir?' Alexander asked.

'An heir is next in line to the throne. When I am gone, you will become king. And you must be ready for that day. You are six years old now, and it's time your training began.'

Alexander grinned. 'I will learn quickly, Father,' he replied loudly. 'And next year I will fight alongside you on the battlefield.'

Philip proudly clapped a hand on his son's shoulder, then continued, 'A good king must not only learn to fight, Alexander. My goal is to make Macedonia the greatest kingdom in the world. To rule such a kingdom takes wisdom and knowledge. And *that* you will never learn on the battlefield.'

Seeing Alexander's mouth sag with disappointment, Philip waved a finger in front of the boy's face. 'Do not worry, my son, you will