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Fire from Heaven

Written by Mary Renault

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arrow books

Published by Arrow Books in 2003

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When Perdikkas asked him at what times he wished divine honours paid to him, he answered that he wished it done when they themselves were happy. These were the last words of the King.

Quintus Curtius.

I

The child was wakened by the knotting of the snake's coils about his waist. For a moment he was frightened; it had squeezed his breathing, and given him a bad dream. But as soon as he was awake, he knew what it was, and pushed his two hands inside the coil. It shifted; the strong band under his back bunched tightly, then grew thin. The head slid up his shoulder along his neck, and he felt close to his ear the flickering tongue.

The old-fashioned nursery lamp, painted with boys bowling hoops and watching cock-fights, burned low on its stand. The dusk had died in which he had fallen asleep; only a cold, sharp moonlight struck down through the tall window, patching the yellow marble floor with blue. He pushed down his blanket to see the snake, and make sure it was the right one. His mother had told him that the patterned ones, with backs like woven border-work, must always be let alone. But all was well; it was the pale brown one with the grey belly, smooth as polished enamel.

When he turned four, nearly a year ago, he had been given a boy's bed five feet long; but the legs were short in case he fell, and the snake had not had far to climb. Everyone else in the room was fast asleep; his sister Kleopatra in her cradle beside the Spartan nurse; nearer, in a better bed of carved pearwood, his own nurse Hellanike. It must be the middle of the night; but he could still hear the men in Hall, singing together. The sound was loud and discordant, slurring the ends of the lines. He had learned already to understand the cause.

The snake was a secret, his alone in the night. Even Lanike, so near by, had not discerned their silent greetings. She was safely snoring. He had been slapped for likening the sound to a mason's saw. Lanike was not a common nurse, but a lady of the royal

kindred, who reminded him twice a day that she would not be doing this for anyone less than his father's son.

The snores, the distant singing, were sounds of solitude. The only waking presences were himself and the snake, and the sentry pacing the passage, the click of his armour-buckles just heard as he passed the door.

The child turned on his side, stroking the snake, feeling its polished strength slide through his fingers over his naked skin. It had laid its flat head upon his heart, as if to listen. It had been cold at first, which had helped to wake him. Now it was taking warmth from him, and growing lazy. It was going to sleep, and might stay till morning. What would Lanike say when she found it? He stifled his laughter, lest it should be shaken and go away. He had never known it stray so far from his mother's room.

He listened to hear if she had sent her women out in search of it. Its name was Glaukos. But he could only hear two men shouting at each other in Hall; then the voice of his father, the loudest, shouting them both down.

He pictured her, in the white wool robe with yellow borders she wore after the bath, her hair loose on it, the lamp glowing red through her shielding hand, softly calling 'Glaukos-s!' or perhaps playing snake-music on her tiny bone flute. The women would be looking everywhere, among the stands for the combs and paint-pots, inside the bronze-bound clothes-chests smelling of cassia; he had seen such a search for a lost ear-ring. They would get scared and clumsy, and she would be angry. Hearing the noise from Hall again, he remembered his father did not like Glaukos, and would be glad that he was lost.

It was then he resolved to bring him back to her now, himself.

This must be done, then. The child stood in the blue moonlight on the yellow floor, the snake wound round him, supported in his arms. It must not be disturbed by dressing; but he took his shoulder-cloak from the stool, and wrapped it around both of them, to keep it warm.

He paused for thought. He had two soldiers to pass. Even if both turned out to be friends, at this hour they would stop him.

He listened to the one outside. The passage had a bend in it, and a strongroom was round the corner. The sentry looked after both doors.

The footfalls were receding. He got the door unlatched, and looked out to plan his way. A bronze Apollo stood in the angle of the wall, on a plinth of green marble. He was still small enough to squeeze behind it. When the sentry had passed the other way, he ran. The rest was easy, till he got to the small court from which rose the stair to the royal bedchamber.

The steps went up between walls painted with trees and birds. There was a little landing at the top, and the polished door with its great ring handle in its lion's mouth. The marble treads were still scarcely worn. There had been nothing but a small harbour town on the lagoon at Pella, before King Archelaos' day. Now it was a city, with temples and big houses; on a gentle rise, Archelaos had built his famous palace, a wonder to all Greece. It was too famous ever to have been changed; everything was splendid, in a fashion fifty years old. Zeuxis had spent years painting the walls.

At the stair foot stood the second sentry, the royal bodyguard. Tonight it was Agis. He was standing easy, leaning on his spear. The child, peeping from the dark side-passage, drew back, watching and waiting.

Agis was about twenty, a lord's son of the royal demesne. He had on his parade armour, to wait upon the King. His helmet had a crest of red and white horsehair, and its hinged cheek-flaps were embossed with lions. His shield was elegantly painted with a striding boar; it hung upon his shoulder, not to be put down till the King was safe in bed, and then not out of arm-reach. In his right hand was a seven-foot spear.

The child gazed with delight, feeling within his cloak the snake softly stir and twine. He knew the young man well; he would have liked to jump out with a whoop, making him throw up his shield and point his spear; to be tossed up on his shoulder, in reach of the tall crest. But Agis was on duty. It would be he who would scratch upon the door, and hand Glaukos to a waiting-woman; for himself there would be Lanike and bed. He had tried before to get in at night, though never so

late as this; they always told him nobody could enter except the King.

The floor of the passage was made of pebble mosaic, checkered black and white. His feet grew sore from standing, and the night chill came on. Agis had been posted to watch the stairs, and only that. It was a different matter from the other guard.

For a moment he considered coming out, having a talk with Agis, and going back. But the slither of the snake against his breast reminded him that he had set out to see his mother. That, therefore, was what he was going to do.

If one kept one's mind upon what one wanted, the chance appeared. Glaukos, too, was magical. He stroked the snake's thinned neck, saying voicelessly, 'Agathodaimon, Sabazeus-Zagreus, send him away, come, come.' He added a spell he had heard his mother use. Though he did not know what it was for, it was worth a trial.

Agis turned from the stairs into the passage opposite. There was a statue a little way along, of a lion sitting up. Agis leaned his shield and spear on it, and went round behind. Though stone sober by local reckoning, he had drunk before going on duty too much to hold till the next watch. All the guards went behind the lion. Before morning, the slaves would wipe it up.

The moment he started walking, before he put down his weapons, the child knew what it meant and started to run. He flew up the cold smooth stairs on silent feet. It always amazed him, when with children of his own age, how easily they could be outrun or caught. It seemed impossible they could really be trying.

Agis behind the lion had not forgotten his duty. When a watch-dog barked, his head went up at once. But the sound came from the other way. It ceased, he straightened his clothes and picked up his arms. The stairs were empty.

The child, having pushed-to behind him, silently, the heavy door, reached up to fasten the latch. It was well-polished and oiled; he coaxed it home without a sound. This done, he turned into the room.

A single lamp was burning, on a tall standard of bright bronze,

twined with a gilded vine and resting on gilded deer's-feet. The room was warm, and breathing all over with secret life. The deep curtains of blue wool with embroidered edges, the people painted on the walls, all stirred with it; the flame of the lamp breathed too. The men's voices, shut off by the heavy door, were no more than murmurs here.

There were close scents of bath-oil, incense and musk, of resined pine-ash from the bronze hearth-basket; of his mother's paints and oils and the phial from Athens; of something acrid she burned for magic; of her body and her hair. In the bed whose legs were inlaid with ivory and tortoiseshell and ended in lion's paws, she lay sleeping, her hair falling across the worked linen pillow. He had never seen her in such a deep sleep before.

It seemed she had never missed Glaukos, to sleep so soundly. He paused, to enjoy his stealthy undisturbed possession. On her tiring-table of olive wood, the pots and bottles were clean and closed. A gilded nymph upheld the moon of her silver mirror. The saffron night-robe was folded on a stool. From the room beyond where her women slept came a faint distant snore. His eyes strayed to the loose stone by the hearth, under which lived forbidden things; he had often wished to try working his own magic. But Glaukos might slip away. She must have him now.

He stepped softly up, the unseen guard and lord of her sleep. Gently the cover of marten-skins, edged with scarlet and fringed with bullion, rose and fell above her. Her brows were drawn clearly above the thin smooth lids which seemed to show through them the smoke-grey eyes beneath. Her lashes were darkened; her mouth was firmly closed, the colour of watered wine. Her nose was white and straight, and whispered faintly as she breathed. She was twenty-one years old.

The cover had fallen back a little from her breast, where, till lately, Kleopatra's head had too often lain. She had gone to the Spartan nurse now, and his kingdom was his own again.

A strand of hair spilled down towards him, dark-red, strong, and shining in the moving lamplight with streaks of fire. He pulled forward some of his own, and set them together; his was like rough-wrought gold, gleaming and heavy; Lanike grumbled

on feast-days that it never held a curl. Hers had a springy wave. The Spartan woman said Kleopatra's would be the same, though now it was like feathers. He would hate her, if she grew more like his mother than he was. But perhaps she would die; babies often did.

In the shadows, the hair looked dark and different. He looked round at the great mural on the inner wall: the Sack of Troy, done by Zeuxis for Archelaos. The figures were life sized. The Wooden Horse towered in the background; in front, Greeks plunged swords into Trojans, rushed at them with spears, or carried on their shoulders women with screaming mouths. In the foreground, old Priam and the child Astyanax weltered in their blood. That was the colour. Satisfied of this he turned away. He had been born in this room; the picture held nothing new for him.

Round his waist, under his cloak, Glaukos was wriggling, no doubt glad to be home. The child looked again into his mother's face; then let fall his single garment, lifted delicately the blanket's edge, and still twined with the snake slid in beside her.

Her arms came round him. She purred softly, and sank her nose and mouth into his hair; her breathing deepened. He pushed down his head under her chin; her yielding breasts enclosed him, he could feel his bare skin cling to hers, all the length of his body. The snake, too tightly pressed between them, squirmed strongly and slid aside.

He felt her wake; her grey eyes with their inner smoke-rings were open when he looked up. She kissed and stroked him, and said, 'Who let you in?'

While she still half-slept and he lay wrapped in bliss, he had been ready for this question. Agis had not kept proper lookout. Soldiers were punished for it. Half a year had gone by since he had seen from the window a guard put to death on the drill-field by the other guards. After so long an age, he had forgotten the offence, if he had ever known it; but he remembered the small distant body bound to the post, the men standing round with javelins poised at the shoulder; the shrill taut command followed by a single cry; then, when they had all crowded in

to jerk out the bristling shafts, the head lolling, and the great spill of red.

'I told the man you wanted me.' No need for names. For a child fond of talking, he had learned early how to hold his tongue.

Her cheek moved in a smile against his head. He had hardly ever heard her speak to his father, without being aware she was lying about one or another thing. He thought of it as a skill she had, like the snake-music on the bone flute.

'Mother, when will you marry me? When I'm older, when I'm six?'

She kissed the nape of his neck, and ran her finger along his backbone. 'When you are six, ask me again. Four is too young to get handfast.'

'I'm five in Lion Month. I love you.' She kissed him saying nothing. 'Do you love me best?'

'I love you altogether. Perhaps I shall eat you up.'

'But best? Do you love me best?'

'When you are good.'

'No!' He rode her waist with his knees, pummelling her shoulders. 'Really best. Better than anyone. Than Kleopatra.' She made a soft sound, less reproof than caress. 'You do! You do! You love me more than the King.'

He seldom said 'Father' if he could help it, and knew it did not displease her. Through her flesh he felt her silent laughter. She said, 'Perhaps.'

Victorious and exulting, he slipped down beside her. 'If you promise you love me best, I'll give you something.'

'Oh, tyrant. What can it be?'

'Look, I've found Glaukos. He came into my bed.'

Folding the blanket back he displayed the snake. It had coiled round his waist again, having found this pleasant.

She looked at the burnished head, which lifted from its resting-place on the child's white breast, and softly hissed at her.

'Why,' she said, 'where did you find this? This is not Glaukos. The same kind, yes. But this one is much bigger.'

They gazed together at the coiled snake; the child's mind filled

with pride and mystery. He stroked the reared neck, as he had been taught, and the head sank down again.

The lips of Olympias parted, and the blacks of her eyes grew wide, invading the grey irises; he saw them like soft silk, pleating together. Her arms slackened about him; he was held in the grasp of her eyes.

'He knows you,' she whispered. 'Tonight, when he came, be sure it was not for the first time. He must have come often, while you slept. See how he clings to you. He knows you well. He comes from the god. He is your daimon, Alexander.'

The lamp flickered. The end of a pine-brand slipped into the embers, and threw up blue flame. The snake squeezed him swiftly, as if to share a secret; its scales trickled like water.

'I shall call him Tyche,' he said presently. 'He shall have his milk in my gold cup. Will he talk to me?'

'Who knows? He is your daimon. Listen, I will tell you –'

The muted noises from the Hall broke out loud as its doors were opened. Men shouted to each other good nights, jokes or drunken taunts. The noise flowed in on them through their closed defences. Olympias broke off, gathered him close into her side, and said softly, 'Never mind, he won't come here.' But he felt her taut with listening. There was a sound of heavy feet, a stumble and a curse; then the rap of Agis' spear-butt on the floor, and the slap of his soles as he presented arms.

The feet came scuffing and tramping up the stairs. The door flew open. King Philip crashed it behind him, and without a glance at the bed started taking off his clothes.

Olympias had pulled up the blanket. The child, eyes round with alarm, had for a moment been glad to lie hidden. Then, cowered in the womb of soft wool and scented flesh, he began to feel horror of the danger he could not confront or see. He worked down a fold to make a peephole; it was better to know than to guess.

The King stood naked, one foot up on the cushioned stool of the toilet-table, loosing his sandal strap. His black-bearded face was cocked sideways to see what he was doing; his blind eye was towards the bed.

For a year or more, the child had run in and out of the

wrestling-ground, when anyone dependable would take him off the women's hands. Bare bodies or clothed, it was all one, except for being able to see men's war-scars. Yet his father's nakedness, seldom seen, always disgusted him. Now, since one eye had been blinded at the siege of Methone, he had become frightful. At first he had kept it covered with a bandage, from which blood-tinged tears had stained a track down into his beard. Then these had dried, and the bandage had come off. The lid, which the arrow had pierced on its way in, was puckered and streaked with red; the lashes were gummed with yellow matter. They were black, like his good eye and his beard, and the mats of hair on his shins and forearms and chest; a track of black hair led down his belly to the bush, like a second beard, between his loins. His arms and neck and legs were seamed with thick scars, white, red or purple. He belched, filling the air with the smell of stale wine, and showing the gap in his teeth. The child, glued to his peephole, knew suddenly what his father looked like. It was the ogre, one-eyed Polyphemos, who had picked up Odysseus' sailors and crunched them raw.

His mother had risen on one elbow, with the clothes pulled up to her chin. 'No, Philip. Not tonight. It is not the time.'

The King took a stride towards the bed. 'Not the time?' he said loudly. He was still panting from the stairs on a full stomach. 'You said that half a month ago. Do you think I can't count, you Molossian bitch?'

The child felt his mother's hand, which had been curved around his body, clench into a fist. When she spoke again it was in her fighting voice. 'Count, you wineskin? You're not fit to know summer from winter. Go to your minion. Any day of the month is the same to *him*.'

The child's knowledge of such things was still imperfect; yet he had a feeling of what was meant. He disliked his father's new young man, who put on airs; he loathed the secrets he sensed between them. His mother's body had tightened and hardened all over. He held his breath.

'You cat-a-mountain!' said the King. The child saw him rush upon them, like Polyphemos on his prey. He seemed to bristle

all over; even the rod that hung in his black bushy crotch had risen by itself and was thrusting forward, a sight of mysterious horror. He pulled back the bedclothes.

The child lay in his mother's arm, his fingers dug into her side. His father started back, cursing and pointing. But it was not at them; the blind eye was still turned that way. The child perceived why his mother had not been surprised to feel his new snake beside her. Glaukos had been there already. He must have been asleep.

'How dare you?' panted Philip hoarsely. He had had a sickening shock. 'How dare you, when I forbade it, bring your filthy vermin in my bed? Sorceress, barbarian witch . . .'

His voice stopped. Drawn by the hatred in his wife's two eyes, his one eye had moved that way, and he had seen the child. The two faces confronted one another: the man's empurpled, with the wine, and with anger heightened now by shame; the child's as brilliant as a jewel set in gold, the blue-grey eyes fixed and wide, the skin transparent, the delicate flesh, taut with uncomprehended agony, moulded close to the fine bones.

Muttering something, Philip reached by instinct for his robe to cover his nakedness; but there was no more need. He had been wronged, insulted, exposed, betrayed. If his sword had been at hand, he might well have killed her.

Disturbed by all this, the child's living girdle writhed, and lifted its head. Till now, Philip had not seen it.

'What's that?' His pointing finger shook. 'What's that upon the boy? That thing of yours? Are you teaching *him* now? Are you making *him* into a back-country, snake-dancing, howling mystagogue? I tell you, I'll not endure it, take heed of what I say, before you suffer; for by Zeus I mean it, as you will feel. My son is a Greek, not one of your barbarous cattle-lifting hillmen . . .'

'Barbarous!' Her voice rose ringing, then sank to a deadly undertone, like Glaukos' when angered. 'My father, you peasant, sprang from Achilles, and my mother from the royal house of Troy. My forbears were ruling men, when yours were hired farm-hands in Argos. Have you looked in a mirror? One can see the Thracian in you. If my son is Greek, it is from me. In Epiros, our blood runs true.'

Philip gritted his teeth. It squared his chin and broadened his cheekbones, which were wide already. Even under these mortal insults, he remembered the child was there. 'I scorn to answer you. If you are Greek, then show a Greek woman's manners. Let us see some modesty.' He felt the lack of clothes. Two pairs of grey eyes, smokily rimmed, stared from the bed. 'Greek schooling, reason, civility, I mean the boy to have them as I have had. Make up your mind to that.'

'Oh, *Thebes!*' She threw out the word like a ritual curse. 'Is it Thebes again, now? I know enough of Thebes. In Thebes they made you a Greek, in Thebes you learned civility! In Thebes! Have you heard an Athenian speak of Thebes? The byword of Greece for boorishness. Don't make such a fool of yourself.'

'Athens, that talking-shop. Their great days are done there. They should keep quiet about Thebes for shame.'

'It is you should do that. What were *you* in Thebes?'

'A hostage, a pledge of policy. Did I make my brother's treaty? Do you throw that in my face? I was sixteen. I found more courtesy there than you ever showed me. And they taught me war. What was Macedon, when Perdikkas died? He had fallen to the Illyrians with four thousand men. The valleys lay fallow; our people were afraid to come down out of the hill-forts. All they had were the sheep whose skins they wore, and those they could hardly keep. Soon the Illyrians would have taken everything; Bardelys was making ready. Now you know what we are and where our frontiers stand. Through Thebes, and the men who made me a soldier there, I came to you a king. Your kindred were glad enough of it.'

The child, pressed to her side, felt her breath drawn in and in. Blindly he waited for the unknown storm to break from the lowering sky. His fingers clenched on the blanket. He knew himself forgotten now, and alone.

The storm broke. 'A soldier, was it, they made you there? And what else? What else?' He could feel her ribs convulsed with rage. 'You went south at sixteen, and by then already the country all around was full of your by-blows, don't you think I know who they are? That whore Arsinoe, Lagos' wife, old enough to be your

mother . . . Then the great Pelopidas taught you all the learning Thebes is famous for. Battle and boys!'

'Be silent!' roared Philip, loud enough for a battlefield. 'Have you no decency before the child? What does he see in this room? What does he hear? I tell you, my son shall be brought up civilized, if I have to . . .'

His voice was drowned by her laughter. She drew back her hand from the child, to thrust her body forward. With her arms and open palms propping her weight, her red hair falling forward over her naked breasts and the child's open mouth and eyes, she laughed till the high room echoed. '*Your* son?' she cried. '*Your* son!'

King Philip breathed as if he had just run the long-race. He strode forward and raised his hand.

Starting out of a perfect stillness, in one flash of movement the child threw off the curtain of his mother's hair, and stood upright on the bed. His grey eyes, dilated, looked almost black; his mouth had whitened. He struck at the lifted arm of his father, who from mere astonishment withdrew it. 'Go away!' screamed the child, glittering and fierce as a forest wildcat. 'Go away! She hates you! Go away! She will marry me!'

For three long breaths, Philip stood rooted, mouth and eyes gaping, like a man clubbed on the head. Then diving forward, he seized the child by both shoulders, swung him through the air, let go with one hand while he wrenched the great door open, and tossed him outside. Taken unawares, rigid with shock and fury, he did nothing to help himself. His sliding body reached the head of the stairs and began to tumble down them.

With a great clattering din, young Agis let fall his spear, dragged his arm out of his shield-straps, and taking the stairs in threes and fours leaped forward to catch the child. At the third stair down he reached him, and picked him up. His head seemed not to have been struck, and his eyes were open. Up above, King Philip had paused with the door in his hand. He did not slam it till he had seen that all was well; but of this the child knew nothing.

Caught up along with him, startled and bruised, the snake whipped free of him as he began to fall, poured itself down the stairs, and was gone into the dark.

Agis, after his first start, had seen what it was. The child was enough to think about. He carried him downstairs, and sitting at their foot took him on his knees, looking him over by the light of the torch in its wall-sconce. He felt stiff as a board, and his eyes were turned up to show the whites.

In the name of all gods below, thought the young man, what shall I do? If I leave my post, the Captain will have my blood. If his son dies on my hands, the King will. One night last year, before the new favourite's reign began, Philip had looked his way, and he had pretended to be dense. Now he had seen too much; his fortunes, he thought, would sell dear at a sack of beans. The child was looking blue about the lips. In the far corner was Agis' thick wool night cloak, ready for the cold small hours. He picked it up, wadded a fold between the child and his own hard corselet, and wrapped him round. 'Come,' he said anxiously. 'Come, look, all's well.'

He seemed not to be breathing. What to do? Slap him, like a woman in a laughing-fit? It might kill him instead. His eyes were moving, and focusing. He drew in a crowing breath, and gave a violent scream.

Deeply relieved, Agis loosed the cloak round the struggling limbs. He clucked and muttered as if to a frightened horse, not holding him in too hard but letting him feel firm hands. In the room above, his parents were calling down curses on one another. After a time Agis did not reckon – he had most of the night before him – these sounds died down, and the child began to weep, but not for long. Having come thus far to himself, soon he fell quiet. He lay biting his lower lip, swallowing, and gazing up at Agis, who tried suddenly to remember how old he was.

'That's my young captain,' he said gently, moved by the almost manlike struggle on the childish face. He dried it with the cloak, and kissed it, trying as he did so to picture what this golden boy would look like when he was old enough for love. 'Come, sweetheart, you and I will stand guard together. We'll look after one another, eh?'

He enfolded the child and stroked him. After a time, the quiet, the warmth, the unconscious sensuality of the young man's caresses,

a vague awareness of being more admired than pitied, began to heal the enormous wound which had seemed his whole and only self. It began to close, sealing-in all within it.

Presently he put out his head from the cloak and looked about. 'Where is my Tyche?'

What did the strange child mean, calling upon his fortune? Seeing Agis' face look blank, he added, 'My snake, my daimon. Where did he go?'

'Ah, your lucky snake.' Agis thought the Queen's pets entirely loathsome. 'He's hiding awhile, he'll soon be back.' He wrapped more cloak round the child; he had begun to shiver. 'Don't take it to heart, your father didn't mean it. It was only the wine in him. Many a clip on the head I've had from mine.'

'When I'm big . . .' He paused to count on his fingers, up to ten. 'When I'm big, I'll kill him.'

Agis sucked in his breath through his lower teeth. 'Ss-ss! Don't say such a thing. It's god-cursed to kill a father, it sets the Furies after a man.' He began to describe them, but broke off as the child's eyes widened; he had had more than enough. 'All these knocks we get when we're young, that's how we learn to bear our wounds, when we go to war. Look. Move over. Look what I got, the first time I fought the Illyrians.'

He pulled back the kilt of scarlet wool from his thigh, and showed the long ridged scar, with a pit where the spear-head had ploughed through almost to the bone. The boy gazed with respect, and felt it with his finger.

'Well,' said Agis, covering it again, 'that hurt, you can guess. And what kept me from yelling out, and being shamed before the Companions? My father's clips on the ear. The fellow who gave me that never lived to boast of it. My first man, he was. When I showed my father his head, he gave me my sword-belt, offered up my boy's girdle-cord, and feasted all our kindred.' He looked along the passage. Would no one ever come by, and take the child to his bed?

'Can you see my Tyche?' he was asking.

'He'll not be far. He's a house-snake. They don't wander. He'll come for his milk, you'll see. It's not every boy can

tame a house-snake. That's the blood of Herakles in you, I daresay.'

'What was *his* snake called?'

'When he was a new-born babe, two snakes crept into his cradle –'

'Two?' His fine brows drew together, frowning.

'Ah, but these were bad ones. Zeus' wife Hera sent them, to choke him dead. But he grabbed them by their necks, one in each hand . . .' Agis paused, silently cursing himself. Either it would give the child nightmares, or, maybe likelier, he would go off and try to throttle a viper. 'No, this only happened, you see, to Herakles because he was the son of a god. He passed as King Amphitryon's son, but Zeus had begot him on Amphitryon's Queen. So Hera was jealous.'

The child listened alertly. 'And he had to work. Why did he work so hard?'

'Eurystheus, the next King, was envious of him, because he was the better man, a hero, and half divine. Eurystheus was only a mortal, you understand, and Herakles had been meant to have the kingdom. But Hera caused Eurystheus to be born first. That's why Herakles had to do his Labours.'

The child nodded, like one to whom all has been made clear. 'He had to do them, to show he was the best.'

Agis missed these words. He had heard at last, along the passage, the captain of the night guard, going his rounds.

'No one's been by, sir,' he explained. 'I can't think what the nurse can have been about. The child was blue with cold, running about the Palace mother naked. He says he's looking for his snake.'

'Lazy bitch of a woman. I'll shake up some slave-girl to go in and rouse her. It's too late to disturb the Queen.'

He strode rattling off. Agis hoisted the child across his shoulder, patting his buttocks. 'Bed for you, Herakles, and not before time.'

The child wriggled down, to clasp both arms round his neck. Agis had sheltered his wounds and not betrayed them. Nothing was too good for such a friend. He shared his secret, since it was all he had to give.