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FIRST HOOFPRINT
PELLA, MACEDONIA, 344 BC

Dominating dung

When we reach the river landing, I can't get off the ship fast enough. A storm hit us during our voyage up the coast, which is no fun if you're tethered in a dung-spattered hold with a hundred terrified horses slipping and neighing around you.

I gallop down the ramp, dragging with me the two strongest man-colts employed by our trader Philonicus. The little curved spikes of the rough bit I'm wearing dig into the corners of my mouth as I fight against it, and they've attached a rein to each side of my bridle so I can't bite them. They haven't a hope of controlling me, of course. The only reason I'm going in the direction they want me to go is because I NEVER abandon my herd.

The sand steams under our hooves as we are led on to the riding ground. It smells of strange horses, and I need to stop

several times to dominate dung, lifting my tail over the stranger's pile and dropping my own dung on top to show I'm boss. My grooms jerk my bit, so I rear up and fight them. By the time we catch up with the others at the far side of the ground, I am covered in white foam and the corners of my mouth are bleeding.

Philonicus squeals at my grooms, who mumble that I'm mad-fresh after being on the ship and that the state I'm in ain't their fault. Nothing ever is with man-colts, I've found. The Macedonians who have come to try us out give me wary looks.

'He's a bit excitable after the voyage,' Philonicus tells them. 'He's high-spirited, like all the best warhorses. He'll calm down in a moment.'

Ha! Not unless he finds me a groom who knows what he's doing, I won't.

Philonicus gives the man-colts a glower that is the human form of flat ears, then hisses, 'Take him over there and walk him round until he's cooled off. And for Zeus' sake, wipe that blood off his mouth before King Philip gets here! If you let this horse get worked up like that again, I'll take my whip to the pair of you when we get back to the ship.'

The two grooms drag me away, complaining in low voices. All that kicking and neighing on the ship has taken more out of me than I thought, and I take a breather to listen. They assume, just because we horses don't speak in words, that we can't understand human language. But we're not as stupid as you think, and while they lead me around, I learn a few things about this Macedonian king.

The battle that killed my rider and gave me my bad reputation wasn't the only one the Macedonian king has made.

Soon, he's going to make a big battle in another world across the sea to the east, where the sun rises, because the king of that world stole some cities from our world. Many squealing threats have been issued by both kings, which is what stallions do before a battle. But humans make these threats by sending one another rolls of flattened grass with marks on them. Dominating dung would be easier, but you don't understand smells like we do.

That's why the Macedonian king wants to buy so many of us, because he needs horses to train as cavalry mounts for his battle in the other world. He's also looking for a horse to carry his son Alexander into his first battle. The king wants a quiet, well-trained mare. But the prince has his own ideas, because he is a man-colt and wants to be a hero. Ha! Sounds to me as if the king will soon have more than one battle to fight.

It is quiet at this end of the ground, and I've dominated all the dung within smelling distance. As my grooms talk, I relax a bit and my stride lengthens.

'I think he's cooling off at last,' says one of them. 'Get your mitten on and give him a bit of a polish. I'll hold him so he don't bite you.'

The other groom eyes me warily. 'Why bother? No one's goin' to buy him once they've tried to mount him.'

'The Macedonian royal horsemaster is supposed to be a good rider.'

'Ha! That's what they said about the horsemaster back in the last place, and look what happened to him!'

What happened was a ghost moved in the corner of my bad eye, and I panicked. The man fell off and rolled under my feet where I couldn't see him. I accidentally stamped on his arm and broke it.

'C'mon! If he looks the part, the Macedonians might buy him untried. Then at least we'll be rid of the brute.'

'*You* polish him, then!' says the other groom, still eyeing me nervously. 'I'll hold his head.'

They take turns to run their grooming mittens down my neck and over my back, while the other one stands in front of me and hangs on to my reins tightly as if I am acting wild, which I'm not because it's quite nice being groomed in those places. But they can't decide who is going to do my belly, which is where I sweat most. I give them flat ears to warn them not to try, and they jump clear. I have my second wind now, so I take advantage of my slack reins to drag them back across the ground. I want to see what the Macedonians are doing to my herd.

Alexander

By the time we reach the other horses, the king's family and friends have arrived from the palace along with a pack of dogs that run around our heels, barking loudly. They have enough brains to keep away from *me*, though. My herd are being trotted up and down, while the king's horsemaster checks their legs and teeth. Bridles are brought, and riding-cloths fastened on burnished backs. The men vault on, and try out battle manoeuvres. I keep a close eye on the horsemaster, because I don't like his smell.

The young Prince Alexander watches the others eagerly. I can't see him very well, because most of his friends are taller than him. But I can see his energy, bathing everyone around him in its light. This fascinates me so much, I prick my ears and stand still. My grooms breathe a sigh of relief, and even pluck up enough courage to wipe the blood off my mouth.

One of the king's eyes is a mess of scar tissue, but his good eye watches the horses with interest. Finally, he calls a dappled grey mare across and orders her rider to dismount so the prince can try her. She has big brown eyes, and is gentle and kind. Her name's Aura, and I'd like to have her in my pasture. I give her a nicker, and she nickers back.

But Alexander tilts up his chin and says he wants to ride a stallion, not some soft mare. His friends laugh. The one-eyed king smiles and shakes his head. The king's horsemaster scowls. He says that since none of the other horses are suitable for the prince, he will have to wait for the next shipload.

Bags of gold change hands. Horses are led away towards unseen stables.

My companions from the voyage, all going!

I neigh to them. Heads shoot up, and there are some whinnies in reply. I try to follow Aura. My grooms stop me with a jerk on my spiked bit, and get another telling-off from Philonicus. He brushes aside their boasts of how they polished me, grabs my rein and leads me towards the one-eyed king.

'Here's the perfect horse for Prince Alexander, Your Majesty!' he says. 'He's called Bucephalas – after his brand. See? It's an ox-head – very valuable type. He's as strong as an ox too, extremely fast, and sound as a trumpet. Look at those high hooves! He's experienced, too. Twelve years old, the same age as your son. He'd make a fine warhorse to keep Prince Alexander out of trouble in his first few battles. Not *cheap*, of course . . . but I'm sure a man of Your Majesty's experience understands that quality comes at a price.'

The king's gaze runs over me. He looks interested. So does his horsemaster, who runs his hands down my legs and looks at my teeth – though he doesn't get a very good look because

he prods my sore mouth and I nearly bite off his finger.

The horsemaster's eyes narrow. 'Put a riding-cloth on him,' he orders. 'I'll try him out.'

My grooms glance at each other, and Philonicus goes a bit quiet. But the cloth is brought, and the girth and breast strap are tightened, making me shiver and sweat. For my last rider, I used to settle down, bending my knees to lower my withers, so my rider could get on more easily when he was tired, wounded or wearing armour. But I don't want this man on my back, so he is forced to vault on to me.

Like most humans who spend a lot of time around horses, he mounts from the left. It's my blind side, but he doesn't realize. When he reaches for a cavalry spear, it's all shadows, and my head whirls in panic.

I act WILD.

His weight is soon gone. I gallop off, scattering the crowd and leaving the ghosts behind me.

There is an outcry as everyone gives chase. The king's grooms vault on to the horses they were leading away and gallop round the far side of the ground to head me off. Philonicus' grooms race after me on foot, shouting for them to watch out and not to get too close in case I attack their horses.

As I wheel back towards the royal party, I hear the queen laughing.

'A fine warhorse, eh? He'll certainly be able to run away from a battle! Horsemaster, aren't you always telling the boys to hold on to their reins if they fall off?'

Philonicus tries to explain that the storm has upset me, that I'm highly strung and I've been trained to leap like that in battle. But the royal horsemaster does not appreciate being

laughed at by the queen. He's like a stallion who wants to be boss of the herd but isn't, so is quick to take out his frustration on those who are weaker than him. He picks himself up, clouts a groom who is giggling at the queen's comment, and makes himself huge. He says I'm obviously unrideable, Philonicus is asking a crazy price for a rogue like me, and that I'm too old to retrain.

The king nods.

But the prince ducks under his arm and stares at me, his eyes shining with admiration. 'He's the best of the lot, Father!' he says fiercely. 'I bet *I* can ride him.'

'That's a man's horse, Alexander,' says the king. 'We're looking for an experienced mount for you so you can concentrate on your weapons training, not one you'll have to fight every step of the way. He's evil, you can see it in his eye.'

'I want that horse.'

The king sighs. 'The last thing you want is a half-broken stallion you can't trust in battle! Besides, the price is a joke, ox-head brand or not. I wouldn't be surprised if old Philonicus didn't brand the horse himself – I see the brute has a fresh whip scar on his nose. What happened, Horse-trader? He try to bite you?'

Philonicus flushes, because that is exactly what happened when he tried to stop me kicking a hole in the ship during the storm.

But the prince hasn't given up. 'If I prove I can ride him, Father, can I have him?'

The king looks angry. 'I'm not shelling out good Macedonian gold for a rogue.'

'If he throws me, I'll pay for him myself out of my allowance. Let the price of the horse be the bet.' He gives the

one-eyed king a calculating look. 'That means if I stay on, you'll have to buy him for me, Father.'

There is an uncomfortable pause. Everyone watches as the king and his young son glare at each other like challengers for the herd. The queen says Alexander is a better rider than most trained cavalrymen and should be allowed to try. The horsemaster whispers something in the king's ear, while giving me a dark look.

The king grimaces and gives a reluctant nod. '*If* you stay on,' he mutters, 'I'll buy him. My horsemaster tells me there's a thing the Scythian tribes do to their colts to make them more manageable. We could always try it with this horse, though he's a bit old so it won't be easy on him.'

The prince's friends whisper excitedly, betting on the outcome. The horsemaster, smirking at this mention of the unpleasant thing, seizes a rope from one of them and gives me another dark look. He starts to organize the grooms to drive me into a corner. But the prince ignores his warning shout and sprints across the riding ground towards me.

I flatten my ears and gallop straight at him. This usually frightens man-colts into jumping out of the way. But Prince Alexander does not move. He stands in front of me, his stocky legs planted firmly in the sand and his arms spread wide as if to catch me. An untidy pale mane flops into his eyes, which are fixed on mine. His chin tilts up to one side.

'Steady, Bucephalas!' he calls in a shrill voice. 'Time to stop running now.'

'Get out of the way, you fool!' yells one of Philonicus' grooms, not realizing it is the king's son he's shouting at. 'That horse is a maniac! He'll kill you!'

But Alexander does not move a muscle. He keeps his odd

eyes on mine. One is brown, the other flecked with blue. I've never seen a human with eyes like that. Nor have I seen a man-colt so determined and with such bright energy inside him.

Something shifts in my head. I forget the grooms chasing me, dig in my hooves, and come to a snorting stop, a whisker's length away from the prince.

One of Philonicus' grooms puffs up behind me. 'Slowly,' he says. 'Grab his lead rein. Then we'll come and get him. He knows we won't stand for no nonsense.'

Alexander grins. 'Don't worry, I know how to handle horses. I could ride before I could walk.' In one smooth movement, he steps forward and lifts the reins over my ears.

I can feel the blood pounding through his body, so I know I scared him. But he does not tremble like most man-colts do when they hold my rein. While I am deciding whether to let him lead me back to the others without a fight, he squints up at the sun and turns me so that the light shines into my eyes and makes the ghosts disappear. Before I know what is happening, he has moved to my shoulder, gripped my withers and vaulted softly on to my back.

Philonicus' groom takes an anxious step towards us, but stops, not wanting to startle me. The king's horsemaster stops, too. He stands well back with his rope coiled and an expectant smile, giving me space to act wild, as I did with him.

I just stand there, I am so surprised. Alexander's legs reach only halfway down my flanks. I have no idea how he got up there on his own. His hand is still gripping my withers, and his other hand holds my reins loosely. He doesn't dig his knees in like the horsemaster did, nor pull on the bit to hurt my sore mouth. He simply sits on my cloth, his heart still

pounding, talking to me in his high voice as the whole Macedonian crowd comes running towards us.

The one-eyed king watches me closely, while the prince's friends call out advice.

'Be careful, Alex!' 'Keep his head up!' 'Mind he doesn't bolt!'

Philonicus puffs after them, quick to take advantage of my apparent calmness. 'See, Your Majesty? What did I tell you? He just needs the right handling, that's all.'

The king's horsemaster scowls. He clears his throat and gives orders as to how I am to be tried out properly as a warhorse, including having blunt javelins thrown at me to test my reflexes.

Alexander gives the horsemaster a mischievous look. I feel his hands tighten on my reins as if he is going to ride me through the crowd to the gate. Then he changes his mind, clamps his heels into my sides and heads me for the fence. 'Come on, Bucephalas!' he says. 'Let's get away from these idiots, shall we?'

I need no urging. I take three strides, clear the fence with a huge bound, and gallop across the plain towards the river. I throw a couple of bucks to let the man-colt on my back know I am boss. But he makes no attempt to stop me. He has the most amazing balance, and somehow he stays seated on my cloth.

Behind us, the king yells for someone to accompany the prince. I suppose I must look out of control. The horsemaster vaults on to a bay stallion and gives chase, but we soon leave him far behind.

It is a wild freedom to gallop so fast. I've done it before, sometimes with my rider's permission, sometimes not, but

never with so young a man-colt perched on my back. Yet Alexander's hand is strong on my withers, and now his fear has gone he holds my bit firmly enough with the reins so that I know he'll never let me fall if I stumble. It feels good.

On my back, Alexander must be feeling good, too. He shakes his mane out of his eyes and laughs. 'Oh, my crazy, beautiful Bucephalas!' he shouts as he turns me along the riverbank, the wind whipping his words to pieces. 'That showed them, didn't it? My fine, strong warhorse! You wouldn't throw me, would you? I was right. You're like Father. You can't see much out of your left eye, can you? Don't worry, it'll be our secret. I bet you're not afraid of anything. I'll ride you in my first battle, then together we'll conquer the world!'

I toss my head and gallop even faster, because his excitement infects me and he looks so happy.

You may think I was acting like some crazed youngster given the run of my first pasture, but it had been a long time since I'd galloped so fast with such a brave man-colt on my back. With some riders, you just know you will give your life for them, if they ask you to.

A plot against the prince

Instead of bucking Alexander off when we returned to the riding ground, I arched my neck to accept the bit. Then I made myself huge so everyone stared at us.

The king's horsemaster scowled at me as if I were doing this deliberately to show him up, which I was. He tried to snatch my reins as we passed. I gave him flat ears and carried Alexander to safety. The queen clapped her hands in delight, smiling at her son as she called him clever and brave and all sorts of other things guaranteed to make his head swell.

The one-eyed king's fearful expression melted into one of pride. He gave me a wary look, then helped the prince down from my back and embraced him with tears in his eyes. 'Alexander, you scared us!' he exclaimed. 'If you're going to carry on like this, you'd better find yourself a larger kingdom because Macedonia won't be big enough for you.'

Alexander, his cheeks still flushed from our gallop, gave him that upward tilt of his chin and grinned cheekily. 'How about leaving Persia for me, Father? You've conquered just about everywhere else, and as you've just seen, my new horse Bucephalas likes to run east.'

This set them all off laughing again. As they returned to the palace, the prince's friends crowded round to hear his account of how he'd 'tamed' me. Some of them wanted to know if he was serious about Persia. The queen followed, still praising her son's bravery and skill.

But the one-eyed king remained on the riding ground, frowning after Alexander.

When the others were out of earshot, he took the horse-master's arm and said, 'I don't want to see my son riding that horse again. Put him in a back stable away from the others, and if he doesn't calm down in a few weeks find a Scythian who can do the deed. Before I leave on my next campaign, I'm going to make arrangements for Prince Alexander to go away to finish his schooling. He'll soon forget the horse, don't worry. In the meantime, find him another stallion more suited to his size and experience, and train it well so I don't have to be looking out for him when the time comes for him to join me on the battlefield.'

The king's horsemaster smiled his dark smile and ordered his grooms to take me to the stables. I didn't make trouble,

because I'd had a good gallop and was looking forward to my barley. But as we passed the crowd of onlookers at the edge of the ground, I caught a smell that reminded me of the time before the ghosts came, and saw a girl-filly clutching what looked like a mule's hoof. She was glaring at the one-eyed king with as much hatred as a colt that had just been driven out of the herd.

This was rather strange. But the horsemaster's grooms did not see her, because human eyes can't see all round like horses' eyes can, so I lowered my head and walked on.

Whatever the Scythian thing is, it can't be as bad as a spiked bit.