

Party at Alex's
Jason Shannon

"I told you I couldn't pinpoint the exact landing under those conditions," said Charlie.

"Sorry, but those Chinese soldiers were rapidly powdering that cannon," retorted Ryan. "You're the one who just had to tell Hong Sho-something he was a twat."

"Hong Xiuquan, and he was a twat."

Even though the World Languages App didn't translate that word perfectly, it had still been satisfying to declare that to Jesus' younger brother, posing as emissaries from Heaven. He would learn the meaning, in time, when he was being starved out of Nanjing.

And so the machine couldn't be calibrated right, and they'd fallen out of the vortex fifteen feet from a Greek patrol. Just fell five feet out of thin air, dressed in one-piece jumpsuits, goggles and scuba masks, right in front of these guardsmen from antiquity.

These ferocious spearmen had rapidly rounded up the pair, and now the time travellers were being marched in chains through the foothills of what would one day be Pakistan.

"We pop our masks in right now," said Ryan, "and we can just zap out of here."

"And land where?" retorted Charlie. "I haven't programmed anything into it. We could end up in Hiroshima with the Enola Gay flying overhead, or under the foot of a tyrannosaur as it's charging after its prey."

"We don't have enough fuel to go back *that* far," said Ryan sarcastically.

They were not at risk of their captors overhearing them. The spearmen did not speak English – English was not even a meaningful concept at this point – and the Greeks didn't seem too concerned about their jabbering captives anyway.

"Besides," said Charlie, shaking his wrists, indicating the chain hitched to the camel ten feet ahead of him, "who knows how this anchor would affect the wormhole?"

"It would probably just sever the chain," said Ryan.

"Or it would suck the camel and Mr. Popodolopis in with it, or it might refuse to close and grow increasingly unstable. Let's just go with these ruffians. Look at what they're wearing; they're not bandits. You know where they're taking us."

"Straight to the firing squad," muttered Ryan.

But the two were not taken to a barracks of soldiers with ready bows and itchy trigger fingers. No, when you fall out of a vortex in the sky wearing a neoprene jumpsuit, you're taken straight to the top.

Over the course of the afternoon, they were marched, hitched to camels, up into a mountain base camp. They climbed up a ridge, which looked down upon a vast camp. Horses were stabled on the far side, chariots were being repaired by craftsmen. Soldiers practised their swordfighting skills; two shirtless men circled each other while an audience shouted chants and exchanged coins.

The time travellers were pulled along, farther up into the rocks. On a broad plateau atop the slope, they arrived at a camp. Various lavish tents were hammered down. A garish chariot was parked off to the side. Perhaps the most famous horse in history was munching on some hay from a cart.

Ryan and Charlie were unhitched, and led by their chains around to a fire pit, which already had a fire going in the late afternoon sun. Ten or twelve men were gathered around. Chalice of wine were in their hands, a large table of food was off to the side. These men were generals, advisers, emissaries...

And there, stuffing a greasy drumstick into his mouth, was the big man – Alexander III of Macedon.

He was young, younger than either Charlie or Ryan. His lush black hair fell to his shoulders around a thin face, commanding eyes.

"Follow my lead," whispered Charlie.

The lead spearman approached Alexander, bowed reverently, said something in Macedonian. Alexander said something back. With urgency, the spearman jabbered again, before Alexander cut him off, looked to the newcomers.

Covertly, Charlie reached into his pocket and scooped up his phone. He'd fished it out earlier and preset the translation to early Macedonian. He just prayed this worked.

Charlie bowed lavishly before the king. He said, "My glorious king of Massedon—"

"Mackadon," corrected Ryan.

"Shut up, asshole," Charlie seethed. Continuing, he said, "My glorious king of Mackedon, pharaoh of Egypt, shahanshah of Persia, and lord of Asia, we come from a distant time and place to pay our respects and wish you continued success in your pursuit of glory."

The World Languages App was rapidly translating.

Alexander seemed surprised. So did his generals and the spearmen. "A speaking piece of obsidian?" gasped one general, translated through the phone.

Ryan quickly jumped in. "It's a... mechanism for speech, my lord. We are not fortunate enough to speak a Hellenic tongue."

"As I say, your eminence," said the spearman, "they are satyrs sent by the gods. Why, Zeus shot them down straight from Mount Olympus before my eyes."

There was no point in denying this. If they claimed to be from some Indian kingdom, it would only prompt Alexander's immediate invasion. But, emissaries of the gods... That might work.

Carefully, Charlie said, "We come from a place with a different vantage point on the cosmos, the earthly realm, and the flow of history."

Alexander rubbed his chin. He was clearly eyeing the neoprene suits, the giant backpack, the goggles and masks, and the talking obsidian.

"Prove it," he said.

A cautious man. Charlie supposed he should expect nothing less from one of the greatest kings in history.

If he got this wrong, they'd both be readily denounced as foreign spies and run through with the *xiphos* swords of his generals and bodyguards.

Then he suddenly had an idea. Unzipping his suit, he reached in to the breast pocket of his shirt, pulled out a pen. He took a step towards Alexander. Two guardsmen stepped up to barricade the king.

Charlie clicked the pen, handed it over to the guardsman, standing upright. Into the phone, he said, "Your eminence, I present to you a gift from our esteemed sovereign."

The guardsman turned and handed Alexander the pen, holding it out like a baggy of dog poo.

Alexander took it, eyed it curiously. On the shaft was a blonde woman in a corset, her hair perfectly coiffed, unlike almost any woman on Earth at the current moment. She was wearing makeup, her armpits were waxed, she was in high heels.

Alexander squinted. Charlie said, "Turn it upside down."

The king did so. Slowly, the corset disappeared. It was a nudie pen, a gimmick from years ago.

The king's eyes narrowed. "Phenomenal!" he exclaimed, as translated by the talking obsidian.

"It gets better," said Ryan. "Take the tip and write your name on some papyrus."

A general or someone handed over a roll of papyrus. Alexander wrote his name.

"A quill which needs no ink! And a beautiful siren besides! You lads truly are from a

greatly enlightened kingdom. Guard, unchain these men! My friends, please partake in the feast. Servant-boy, get them some wine! No, not that swill! Get the good stuff, from Greece!”

Covering the mic on the phone, Ryan whispered, “Only you would have a nudie pen. You could have just given him a pen. The wheel was only invented last week. Titties have been around forever.”

Charlie rolled his eyes.

“My lord,” called back someone, who was evidently a servant boy, “we have only a handful of those bottles left.”

“This is a special occasion! We have guests of the finest sort. Pour them the good wine!”

The wine was shit. Even the ‘good’ wine tasted like vinegar. It was also not very strong, and they had to drink a lot of it to get buzzed. Still, drink they did, and consume much of the grilled pheasant and stone-baked bread.

An Egyptian belly dancer was brought out for entertainment. She wore sandals, a long, flowing skirt which exposed her legs, and a purple brassiere, her belly naked, a blue stone twinkling in her navel. A musician played an *aulos*, a sort of ancient flute, and the dancer began shaking her belly seductively.

“Hey,” said Ryan, “now this man knows how to party.”

As dinner went on, they declined the ‘good’ wine to save some for the glorious king’s future victories, and opted for the Persian swill instead. It was even worse, though perhaps a little more potent.

“I wish I could offer you something from the vineyards on Lesbos,” said Alexander. “Alas, Greece is twenty-seven thousand *stadia* away, and it would take weeks to send a rider so far.”

“Nonsense,” said Ryan, clambering to his feet a little uneasily. He was starting to feel the effects of the wine. “We should have brought you some... wine, as a gift. Have you ever heard of whiskey? You’d love it.”

“Whis...key?” said Alexander, enunciating the word.

“Ah, we’ll get you some!” said Ryan. “Hell, you’ve been so hospitable, it’s the least we could do.” Then he blew a kiss to the belly dancer.

“Are you mad?” scoffed Charlie, taking his friend by the elbow. “Whiskey isn’t invented for another eighteen hundred years.”

“Exactly.”

“We can’t fuck up history like this.”

“Ah, what’s going to happen? The king has an exotic wine and passes out before he can plough Hephaestion? Come on, this is like being given the opportunity to do blow with Kiss – only on steroids. We’re literally partying with Alexander the Great!”

“Alexander... *the Great*,” mused Alexander. “I like that!”

Ryan zipped up his neoprene suit, pulled the pack over his shoulder.

“Oh, all right,” said Charlie, feeling the warmth of the Persian swill. He turned to the king. “Your eminence, we’ll be back in a jiffy – before you can finish that chalice.”

“We’ll see about that,” said Alexander, and began chugging.

Charlie popped in his air mask and pulled down his goggles. Rapidly imputing 2021 as a year, he stepped up next to his friend, and Ryan pushed the button on his watch.

The wormhole spewed into existence and engulfed them.

They landed in a warehouse, 3 AM, in Los Angeles, on the seventeenth of October, 2021. Crates and boxes of alcohol were stacked on pallets and in warehousing racks all around them.

It was dark. No security alarms were going off because they’d beamed themselves clear inside. Using the lights on their phones, they began combing through the warehouse, looking for whiskey. They found the vodka, they found tequila shipped up from Mexico, they found crate after crate of Australian wine.

“Aha!” barked Ryan. He’d found the whiskey aisle.

They began cutting into boxes.

“This is the good stuff,” said Charlie. He’d pulled a bottle of Writer’s Tears Irish whiskey out of a box.

“Hello, hello,” cooed Ryan. “This – *this* is the stuff right here.”

Charlie looked over. His friend had cracked open a wooden crate, and was holding a bottle of Johnnie Walker Blue Label.

“Kim Jong-un’s favourite,” said Ryan.

“Shit, that stuff’s like two hundred dollars a bottle,” said Charlie. “That case is probably worth three grand.”

“Who better to share it with than Alexander the motherfuckin’ Great?”

“Good point.”

Ryan grabbed a nearby upright dolly, hooked it under the crate, while Charlie clumsily punched in the coordinates. The black sphere erupted, engulfing them.

Alexander the Great was amazed, having seen the vortex swallow the two travellers, then spit them back out again seconds later.

Ryan popped the lid on the crate. Opening a bottle, he offered it to the Macedonian king. “This, your eminence, is ambrosia from our lands.”

Alexander took the bottle, swigged deeply, swallowed. He nearly gagged, the scotch much more potent than any wine he was used to. But despite the sting, he swallowed it, licked his lips. “Fantabulous!” he ejaculated. “You two truly are emissaries of Zeus himself!”

More bottles were passed out – to Ptolemy, Cassander, Seleucus. Charlie and Ryan each took one for themselves.

Alexander plied them with food and comfort, and the finest of Persian whores. They were olive-skinned and voluptuous, wearing only silk g-strings, and sat on the knees of the two travellers. Ryan became quite enamoured of a wench named Damaspia, while Charlie enjoyed the company of two such women – Artystone and Xerxephone.

Alexander sat heavily on his cushions, drinking more of the Johnnie Walker, smirking gleefully.

“Careful with that stuff,” said Charlie. “It’s much stronger than wine.”

“I can tell!” boomed Alexander. “This is what wine *should* taste like!”

The night went on. The musician played. Two strongmen were brought up from the encampment to wrestle and fight each other with swords. Guests placed bets. Alexander told stories of the sacking of Babylon, of how much of a pansy Darius was. He gleefully told them of his solving of the riddle of the Gordian knot, guffawing riotously as he reached the punchline.

Ryan more than once laid Damaspia down and sucked shots of Johnny Walker out of her navel while she giggled.

Charlie, with Artystone resting her head against his chest, said to Xerxephone, “Tell me, have you ever made love the Greek way?”

In the morning, everyone awoke with extreme hangovers. Charlie had awoken in the middle of the night to the sound of Alexander vomiting profusely outside his royal tent, only to roll back over and pass out once more, Artystone’s black hair engulfing his face.

When at last Charlie emerged from the tent, he was ragged. The king was already up, sitting on a rock at the edge of the encampment. Hephaestion was rubbing his back, while Ryan was there, speaking into the phone, saying, “Trust me, your eminence, drinking copious amounts of water helps to reduce your illness. This we know from medicinal practitioners in our own lands.”

Charlie took that advice, found a flagon, and sucked greedily, his head splitting.

Ryan shuffled up to him. “What a fucking night, am I right?”

“*Guhrh*,” grumbled Charlie.

“Hey, how many times are we gonna be able to party with Alexander the Great and a bunch of Persian whores?”

Charlie was rubbing his eyes. “Did we... I don’t remember, did we gamble away two thousand *drachmas* playing dice against that Persian courtier?”

“That’s as far as you remember? I remember gambling away *five* thousand against that Egyptian army captain. And then you got up there and started doing karaoke, the flutist coming up with his own melody to mimic your singing. Alexander was laughing uproariously.”

“Oh, God...” grumbled Charlie, chugging more water.

“I suggest we head back to the present for some hashbrowns and bacon,” said Ryan. “No need to overstay our welcome here. We don’t want to mess with history. Plus, you know what’s on the Macedonian menu for breakfast? Porridge. I need something a little stronger than that.”

“Not a bad idea,” said Charlie, grabbing hold of the backpack’s shoulder strap and dragging it closer. He briefly considered staying one more day. There were about seven or eight bottles of Blue left, and he wouldn’t mind one more romp with Artystone and Xerxesphone, but Ryan was right; best to not mess with history. Alexander would be gearing up to probe into India in the next week or two, and too much ‘blue ambrosia’ might distract him from launching new and ambitious campaigns.

He opened up the back of the pack to check the settings, began recalibrating it. They could leave the remaining Johnnie Walker with Alexander, thank the king for his gracious hospitality, and wish him luck in all his future campaigns, then jet off to—

“Fuck,” Charlie blurted out.

“Hmm? What?” asked Ryan.

“*Fuck! Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuuuuuck!*”

“You’re causing a scene,” seethed Ryan. Alexander and Hephaestion were looking over with curious gazes. “What is the goddamned problem?”

Charlie stared at the backpack blankly, the lights seeming to have gone out behind his eyes.

“Charlie! What the fuck is it?”

“The plutonium,” Charlie whispered, his face a blank mask. “We used up all the plutonium.”

Last night, when they’d jumped ahead to 2021 and back again, it had depleted their reserves. They hadn’t had enough to come back to 327 B.C. twice.

Ryan immediately grabbed the pack from him, spun it around. “There’s still some left,” he said with a faltering voice.

“That’s an eighth of a fucking tank!” erupted Charlie. “Do you know how much it takes to go twenty-three hundred years?” He was shouting at his friend now, seething, furious. “That’s like trying to drive from L.A. to New York on an eighth of a tank of gas. We’re talking about nearly two and a half millennia. We’ve maybe got enough for two and a half centuries!”

Charlie collapsed almost into a ball where he sat.

Alexander the Great strode up. He said, “Gentlemen, how may I help?”

The king evidently understood there was some sort of issue with their godly device.

“Well,” said Ryan, “maybe we can stretch it. Like mixing a little naphtha in with your gas to keep the engine going. Won’t be pretty, but—”

“What are we gonna mix it with?” Charlie exploded, coming to his feet. “Fucking Persian wine? We’re talking about highly refined plutonium. Unless you were to mine the goddamned hills for uranium ore...”

He cut himself off. A lightbulb had gone off in his head. So too had it in Ryan’s. Both of

them turned to Alexander, and the domineering Hindu Kush in the distance behind him.

Mining began immediately. Without rest, the Macedonian army laboured, digging, hauling rocks, smashing pick-axes into the ground. Ox carts dragged rocks out of deep mine shafts bored into the rock. The Pakistanis had gone looking here – or they would, twenty-three hundred years hence. Charlie and Ryan told them what they were looking for, and had the best Greek stone quarry experts draw up blueprints for the army.

Three weeks in, and Alexander was sucking back the last of the Johnnie Walker. It was another banquet. They had stuck gold that day, the king's surveyors having found the first traces of uranium ore. It was a small party, with Ptolemy and Cassander, Hephaestion, and the Persian courtesans who'd cozied up to the mysterious strangers who brought ambrosia.

"Tell me again why we need this stuff?" asked Hephaestion, holding a chunk of the uranium ore in his hand.

"Set it down, set it down," urged Charlie. "I assure you, this stuff will one day be worth more than gold. And this area of the Hindu Kush is rife with it."

"Anything for you fine lads," Alexander beamed. He slurped more Johnnie Walker.

"We'll see what he says when that bottle is gone," Ryan mumbled.

"I'm more concerned with the flow of history," Charlie whispered back, covering the mic on the phone, currently at three percent battery. "We could tell Lenin to his face his revolution will fail and take tens of millions with it down the drain, and it won't matter all that much because 1917 is so close to 2021. The spacetime continuum has a certain elasticity to it. But this far back, one poke into the fabric of reality and it could tear all Western Civilization asunder."

"What's the matter, boys?" Alexander asked expansively. "We should be celebrating. We found your rock deposits today."

You should be invading India! Charlie wanted to scream it.

"Nothing, your majesty. Just a little tired, is all."

Many months later, the travellers visited the quarry with Alexander and Ptolemy. It was high up in the mountains, the wind wicked and already a foot of snow crunching under foot. Huge heaps of discarded stone were strewn everywhere. A very small amount of uranium ore was laid out on a blanket, an alchemist examining it with a mining foreman.

A hairy Himalayan yak dragged a cart out of a mine shaft bored deep into the earth and supported with a handful of huge wooden beams. Even the yak looked overworked and on the verge of collapse.

"This is the stuff, gents!" bellowed Alexander, picking up a huge chunk of uranium ore from the back of the cart.

"Your majesty, thirteen more men died in a cave-in this morning," said Ptolemy. "The men are exhausted, and quite unhappy."

Charlie had seen the devastation first hand. A startling number of men came down with what they were calling broken back syndrome – herniated disks, extreme sciatica, knee and elbow and neck problems.

Alexander suddenly coughed viciously, doubling over and wheezing as he gasped for air.

Ryan whispered to Charlie, "Handling all that uranium ore is not good for his health."

"Fuck it, he'll be dead in a few years anyway."

Charlie was ever more concerned with history. The Macedonians should have engaged in multiple campaigns striking into the Indian subcontinent by now. Instead, one of the greatest armies in history had occupied the last eighteen months busting rocks. The plans for India were never discussed. In fact, Charlie was certain they'd been abandoned entirely. They may have never existed in the first place. The Hindu Kush was punishing. Alexander wanted to make it to the ends of the Earth, and, judging by the attitude around camp, the Hindu Kush might just be the world's end.

Charlie had mentioned this to Ptolemy once, careful not to plant seeds and thus interfere with the course of history. Ptolemy responded that he'd never heard of India, but that may have been a problem with the World Languages App's translation.

Throughout all this time, Ptolemy had been the primary overseer. He had charts and maps, lists of workers who'd fallen ill or suffered workplace accidents, all on crisp papyrus.

What remained of the Johnnie Walker Blue had been rationed carefully, until at last it dwindled to nothing over the course of a few months. Charlie and Ryan – as well as Ptolemy, Cassander and the others – abstained from consuming it, reserving it solely for the king's lips until more of the elixir could be procured. More would be procured, the travellers promised profusely, as soon as they had the raw uranium ore; as soon as their Heavenly lightning bolt was working, they'd deliver him an ox cart full of it. Ten ox carts. Enough for all his officers and stablehands.

Charlie and Ryan's phones had died months ago. Luckily, Alexander had them hooked up with a Persian linguist, and they were gradually learning the basics of the Macedonian language. In turn, the linguist was learning much more about English, and this might prove problematic for history as well. Then again, perhaps it would all get buried somewhere. Most of what history knows of Alexander comes from the Romans, written hundreds of years from now. One random Persian courtier who speaks a smattering of English... if anything, the temple in Damascus with Persian writing that translates phonetically to 'crates of whiskey' will add to the *Ancient Aliens* hour on The History Channel.

Ptolemy also had the best alchemists in the Achaemenid world working on refining the ore, separating out the imperfections. You wouldn't be able to run Chernobyl off of it, but it might provide enough raw oomph to the plutonium still held in reserve.

At last the day came. The uranium had been refined into rods, loaded into the unit, and Ryan had rewired it to accept the new energy loads. It had taken many months, and many Macedonians had suffered grievously in the campaign to mine it. The soldiers were tired and freezing. A mutiny had been put down the day before, a dozen men seeking to rush the royal camp and demand that this end.

Charlie and Ryan suited up, and climbed up atop a slight rise just outside Alexander's camp. The king stepped up behind them. In very broken English, he said, "Charlie, Ryan, may journey well." Then he saluted in the Roman fashion.

In equally broken Macedonian, Charlie said, "Thank you, eminence. You big friend, never forget."

In English, Ryan said, "No one parties like you, my lord. Now stand back, we'll be right back with more whiskey and a little something called tequila."

They stepped up onto the peak of the rock. Charlie whispered to Ryan, "We're not bringing him fucking whiskey. He should have smashed the Punjabi kings by now."

"Just keep smiling," said Ryan, "and hope we're not returning to a future of mud huts or a global Chinese empire."

Charlie powered up his watch and began entering the coordinates. Arlington, Virginia. 17 October, 2021.

Then, in the distance, a cacophony. Men were riding up from the barracks in chariots. Alexander's royal guards tried to stop them, but they were speared to death. Men fell to the ground with blood gushing. The chariots kept coming. Ptolemy and the others tried to shield their king.

"Shit, shit, get us the fuck out of here," said Ryan.

The lead mutineer disembarked from the chariot and saluted Alexander. Charlie couldn't make out what he was saying, but he picked up on "tired" and "our wives and children in Greece" and "go home."

"Okay, I got it," said Charlie, popping his scuba mask in.

Ryan yanked down his goggles. "Do it!"

The wormhole opened. The two of them were swallowed by the vortex, and vanished behind the back of Alexander the Great.

Popping into the underground bunker beneath the Pentagon, Charlie ripped off his goggles and scuba mask. "Fuck, that was a close one."

"We never should have given him goddamned whiskey!" said Charlie.

They ceased their bickering when they saw Sarah, bloodshot eyes and pale face, looking back at them. They were unshaven, dirty, and had lost weight. They were nearly two years older.

Hesitantly, Charlie stepped up to Sarah. "*Privet*, Saritska."

She quirked an eyebrow.

Ryan said, "*Ni hao*."

Another blank face from Sarah.

Charlie said, "*Konichiwa*?"

"What the hell are you two blathering on about?" Sarah burst out.

Charlie turned to Ryan. "Okay, so Columbus still sailed the ocean blue."

"Ah, it's probably fine," said Ryan. To Sarah, he said, "Tell me about Alexander."

"Hamilton?" she asked, perplexed. "They made a musical about him."

Ryan turned to Charlie. "I think we're fine."

Charlie slipped off the heavy backpack and handed it off to Sarah. He said, "You're probably going to have to take a hose and rinse some corium out of the bottom of this thing."

"*Corium*?" she gasped.

"Don't tell the colonel about this."

Ryan stretched his back. "*Urgh*," he grunted. "I need a soft, pillowtop mattress."

"I need a shower," said Charlie.

"You had Xerxephone giving you sponge baths every evening."

"Even still, we're never doing that again. It was a close one. We should stay in the present from now on."

"Ah, where's your sense of adventure?" grinned Ryan. "We'll just be a little more cautious on the next one. We'll just be sure to keep the Johnnie Walker in the present." He beamed.

Charlie just sighed and shook his head.