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Marathon

Written by Christian Cameron

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Marathon

CHRISTIAN CAMERON



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I

Shield up.

Thrust overhand.

Turn – catch the spear on the rim of my shield, pivot on my toes and thrust at my opponent.

He catches my spear on his shield and grins. I can see the flash of his grin in the *tau* of his Corinthian helmet's faceplate. Then his plumes nod as he turns his head – checks the man behind him.

I thrust overhand, hard.

He catches my blow, pivots on the balls of his feet and steps back with his shield facing me.

His file-mate pushes past him, a heavy overhand blow driving me back half a step.

The music rises, the aulos pipe sounding faster, the drums beating the rhythm like the sound of marching feet.

I sidestep, faster, and my shield rim flashes like a live thing. My black spear is an iron-tipped tongue of death in my strong right hand and I am one with the men to the right and left, the men behind. I am not Arimnestos the killer of men. I am only one Plataean, and together, we are *this*.

'Plataeans!' I roar.

I plant my right foot. Every man in the front rank does the same, and the pipes howl, and every man crouches, screams and pushes forward, and three hundred voices call: *The Ravens of Apollo!* The roar shakes the walls and echoes from the Temple of Hera.

The music falls silent, and after a pause the whole assembly – all the free men and women, the slaves, the freedmen – erupt in applause.

Under my armour, I am covered in sweat.

Hermogenes – my opponent – puts his arms around me. 'That was . . .'

There are no words to describe how good that was. We danced the *Pyrrhiche*, the war dance, with the picked three hundred men of Plataea, and Ares himself must have watched us.

Older men – the archon, the lawmakers – clasp my hand. My back is slapped so often that I worry they are pulling the laces on my scale armour.

Good to have you back, they all say.

I am happy.

Ting-ting.

Ting-ting.

The day after the feast of Ares, and I was back at work – planishing. Planishing is when you use a hammer to smooth out finished work – *tap-tap*, *tap-tap*. The hammers need to be polished, and the anvil needs to be crisp and well surfaced, and you need a stake of just the right shape with a polished surface, and your strokes need to be perfectly placed, crisp and all the same strength. It was not my strong point.

I remember it well, because I was making myself a new helmet, and thinking of Miltiades. All my other orders were completed, winter was coming and there was no reason that I shouldn't play with my equipment. My barns were full, my people fed and I had a sack of silver buried under the shop floor – without having to send to Miltiades for my gold. I had decided I would not go back to Miltiades.

Miltiades of Athens – the tyrant of the Chersonese – was my father's patron, and sometimes mine. I'd fought and killed for him, but I'd left him when the killing became a habit I had to break. And when Briseis said she would not have me. Hah! One of those is the true reason.

But Athens, mighty Athens – the bulwark of the Hellenes against the Persians – was deeply divided. Miltiades was no hero back then. Most Athenians saw him as a fool and a tyrant who was

bringing the wrath of the Great King of Persia down on Greece. Rumour came over the mountains from Attica and Athens that he was to be declared *atimos* and lose his citizen rights – that he would be exiled – that he would be murdered. We heard that the faction of the tyrant-slayers – the Alcmaeonids – was ascendant.

I have to tell you, as an aside, that calling the Alcmaeonids tyrant-slayers is both incorrect and laughable, but a fine example of how easily fooled mortal men are by good orators. The mighty Alcmaeonids, the richest family in Attica and perhaps all of Greece – one of their many scions killed one of Pisistratus's sons in Athens. It was a private quarrel, but we still call the overhand sword cut the 'Harmodius blow', and most men think that the dead man was the tyrant of Athens.

In fact, the only reason that the Alcmaeonids would have arranged the death of the Pisistratids was so that they could seize the city and rule themselves. They were all in the game – all the great men of Athens. They prated about democracy, but what they wanted was power.

In the early days of the Long War, I was bitter – disillusioned, even – to find that the heroic Miltiades was a pirate and a thief, not a freedom fighter. Oh, he was brave as Achilles and wily as Odysseus, but beneath his aristocratic manners lurked a man who would kill a beggar for an obol if it would finance his schemes. After a while, I took to hating him for his failure to be the man I wanted him to be. But I'll tell you this, my children – he was a better man than any of the Pisistratids or the Alcmaeonids. When he wanted something, he reached for it.

At any rate, it was late summer and the rumours of open conflict in Athens, our ally, had begun to disturb even sleepy Plataea. As the saying went, when Athens caught a cold, Plataea sneezed.

I recall all this, because I was thinking of Miltiades while I was working on my helmet. I thought about him a lot. Because, to tell the truth, I was already bored.

I'd shaped the helmet twice – first, I'd made the bowl far too deep, and the result looked so odd that I'd melted the bronze,

added a little more tin and poured a new plate on the slate where Pater had done the same. I made a wine bucket from that bronze. I didn't trust twice-forged stuff for armour.

The second time I was more careful with my prayers and I made a real invocation to Hephaestus, and I took time to draw the curve in charcoal on a board as part of the invocation. I raised the bowl of the helmet carefully, for an hour or two each day after propping the vines and gathering olives with my slaves and my household, and this helmet grew like a child in a mother's belly. Like a miracle. So on that day, I remember I was growing afraid – I, who feared no man in the meeting of the spears, was afraid. Because the object I was making was beautiful, and better than I ever expected of my own work, and I was scared that I might ruin it.

So I planished slowly.

Ting-ting.

Ting-ting.

The anvil rang like a temple bell with every blow. My apprentice, Tiraeus, held the work and rotated it as I requested. He was older than me, and in some ways better trained, but he'd never settled with one master, and before he met me, he'd never even learned the signs that any man can learn who dedicates to the smith god. I'd had him a month, and he'd changed. Just like that – like molten metal settling into the mould. He'd been ready to take a new shape, and he was no work of mine, but it still felt odd to have an older man – and in many ways a better smith – as my apprentice.

He raised his head, as if listening.

Ting-ting.

Ting-ting.

Like a temple bell, my anvil called aloud to the gods.

I was deep into it – the focus that the gods send to a man intent on a task – when I heard what Tiraeus heard. The same focus, to be honest, that comes in combat. How Aristides would writhe to hear me suggest a link between the two.

I ramble. I heard a horse in the yard.

'Don't stop,' my apprentice ordered. That'll give you an idea of his actual status. He gave me orders.

Behind me, Bion, my father's former slave apprentice and now almost a master smith in his own right, was rewelding a pot. His hammer rang on his own anvil – heavier blows than mine.

'What the man says,' Bion grunted. 'Never stop once you're in a task.'

That was a long speech, for Bion. But I was young, and a horse in the yard promised adventure. As I said, months of farming and smithing had left me – bored.

I took water from the bucket by the door and saw a young man in a fine wool *chlamys* slip off his horse's neck, showing a lot of leg and muscle, as pretty young men are wont to do.

'I have a message for Lord Arimnestos,' he said portentously. His disappointment showed in every line of his body. He'd expected better.

Pen – my sister, Penelope – came down the steps from her eyrie with the women, and Hermogenes, Bion's son and my best friend, came in from the fields, both drawn by the horseman. I let Pen have the boy. He was handsome, and Pen needed some suitors or my life was going to become very difficult indeed.

My mother stayed in the women's porch and didn't emerge – probably because she was drunk. Hades – for a certainty she was drunk. She was the only child of the *basileus* of Hispae – a small place west of Plataea. She ran off with my pater – a smith, but a powerful man in his own right. She thought he'd become a great man. He did – but not in the way she wanted. He became a great smith. She became a drunk. Did I say this was a pretty story?

Back to it, then. The handsome boy with all the muscles paid me no attention at all. I had a rag wrapped around my groin and was otherwise naked. I was covered in soot and looked like a slave, and he'd have had to be a careful observer – not something usually found in handsome boys – to note that I had the muscles of an athlete, not a farrier.

'I am Lord Arimnestos's sister, Penelope,' she told the young sprig. 'My brother is busy. May I take your message, sir?'

That flustered young Paris, I can tell you. 'My message – is for the lord himself.' He looked around for a social equal – someone to punish all these slaves and women.

I laughed and left Pen to the enjoyment of his discomfiture. My helmet was calling me. I drank another dipper of water and got my hammer back in my hand.

Ting-ting.

Ting—

I realized that there was a boy in my workshop. Where in Hades had he come from? He was Styges – the dark boy from the hero's tomb. No one was clear whether he'd been a prisoner or a bandit – he'd become part of Idomeneus's retinue. I think he'd been a thief – he was silent as the grave.

So much to explain! Idomeneus was Cretan – a soldier and archer who had been my hypaspist – my squire – in the fighting for years. When I cleared out my father's house, Idomeneus made himself priest of the hero's tomb. I had trained at that tomb as a boy, and it was my place – my sacred place. And Idomeneus, for all his madness and his delight in killing and his debauchery, was my friend. And a member of my *oikia*, my household, my own retinue of trusted men and women.

Styges was in Idomeneus's oikia. He was the Cretan's lover, his *eromenos* and his hypaspist too, as they do things in Crete.

'My master needs you, lord,' the young man whispered, his eyes downcast.

My hand hesitated, the head of the iron hammer high in the air. I let it fall – *tang* – and cursed. A clear mis-stroke, and I'd left a small flaw in the surface of the helmet.

Tiraeus put his hand to my mouth. 'Curses won't change the metal,' he said.

See? He had ten more years than I had. In many ways, I was an overgrown boy with a talent for ripping men's souls from their bodies. He was a mature man – a man who'd seen enough hardship to learn to make better choices.

'Fuck,' I said. But I didn't throw the helmet across the shop. I'd learned that much. Nor did I gut Styges with the heavy

knife I always wore – even in the shop, or lying with a slave girl – although the red rage flashed over my eyes.

Instead, I placed it on a leather bag, washed my hands in the basin and nodded to Styges.

'I need a cup of wine, and I'll be happy to give you one as well.' I did my best to imitate Achilles and be a man of warm hospitality. Even to a catamite-thief who had just caused me to miss a hammer stroke. I was growing up.

Styges bowed. 'I am honoured, lord.' Of course, in Crete, men who were called 'lord' were seldom covered in soot and bronze scale, with hands so black that the skin couldn't be seen. But in Boeotia, things were different. Besides, I had a great deal more respect for Styges than for the perfumed boy in my courtyard.

My sister, Penelope, came out of the house with wine. She poured a libation to Artemis, as was right for her, and then to Hephaestus, for me, before serving the rest of the pitcher of wine to Tiraeus, Bion, Hermogenes, Styges and my guest. Of the crowd, only the guest and Pen could be said to be wearing clothes. I just want you to see this in your heads.

Only when Styges had a cup of wine in his fist did I question him.

'Why does Idomeneus need me?' I asked.

'He killed a man,' Styges replied.

'What man?' I asked. 'A Plataean?' By which I meant: *A citizen? Or a man of no account?*

'No, lord,' Styges said. 'In fact, we killed two men. One, a soldier at the shrine, the other,' and Styges smiled, 'I killed myself, one of the bandits, lord. They knew each other – were planning to escape or perhaps take the shrine. Lord Idomeneus thinks they meant to kill all of us.'

He had a fresh cut, I realized, running from his shoulder to the middle of his side. He saw me looking at it and nodded, beaming with pride. 'He had a knife and I did not.'

This sort of heroic understatement was the rule of the Greeks, and Idomeneus, for all his blood-madness, ran a tight ship up there on the mountain.

'The soldier we killed was Athenian,' Styges said, his smile fading. 'My master is afraid that he was a man of consequence.'

That got my attention.

'My lord, is it nothing to you that I have travelled here from Sardis?' the beautiful young man asked. In truth, they were both quite handsome – the aristocrat like a statue of an athlete, and Styges a more practical, down-to-earth set of muscles, scars and smooth skin.

I could tell that Pen was pleased by both.

I smiled at the aristocrat. 'Young man, I apologize for my rude dress and quick welcome, and I ask that you stay a day or two. This matter concerns my honour, and must be dealt with immediately.'

He blushed – I hid a smile – and his eyes flickered to Pen's. 'I would be honoured to be a guest here. But I have an important message—'

'Which I'll hear when I return.' I nodded to him. The gods were blinding me. If I had paused a moment to listen to him … But I thought my duty was calling me, and I didn't like him or his airs.

'Mind that they don't put you to work in the forge,' Pen muttered.

'I'll be back by midday,' I said, and ordered the slaves to bridle my horse.

The gods were laughing. And Moira spun her thread so fine …

It was the edge of darkness by the time I rode up the hill to the shrine. It may seem comic to you lot, to hear that I rode a horse. Now I'm lord of a thousand shaggy Thracian ponies and half a hundred Persian beauties, but in Boeotia in those days, the ownership of a horse was a matter for some remark, and I had four. Laugh if you like – four horses made me one of the richest men in Plataea.

Styges ran by my side. He'd fought a mortal combat, run thirty stades to fetch me, drunk a horn of wine and now he'd run thirty stades back to the shrine. Later, when I tell you of the deeds of

arms my people performed, think on this – we made hard men then. We bred them to it, like dogs to the hunt. In Sparta, they trained aristocrats to be superb. In Attica and Boeotia, we trained every free man to be excellent. Calculate the difference if you like.

I could smell the blood at the tomb, even over the night air. I took the leather bottle off my shoulder and poured a libation to old Leitos, who'd gone to windy Troy from green Plataea – and come back alive, to die in old age. Now that, my friends, is a hero.

At the tomb, we have a tradition – that it was Leitos who stopped bold Hector's rush at the ships, not by clever fighting or mad courage, but by getting lesser men to lock their shields and stop his god-sent killing rage. Not a mighty killer, but a man who led other men as a shepherd tends sheep. Who kept his men alive and brought them home.

So men come to the tomb from all over Greece – men who have seen too much war. Sometimes they are broken past repair, but if they are not, the priest feeds them wine, listens to them and gives them work, or perhaps a small mission. And the completion of that work makes them clean, so that they can go back to the world of men who are not killers.

Sometimes, though, a man comes to the tomb with the mark on him. How can I tell this? It is the mark of evil, or of a soul past saving. And then the priest, who is always a retired killer himself, must face the man and kill him on the precinct wall, so that his shade screams as it goes down to nothing, lost for ever, and his blood waters the souls of the dead and feeds the hero.

Heh, heh. Boeotia is a tough place, and no mistake. And we've little tolerance for those men who've lost their way. Can I tell you a hard truth, friends? If a killer goes bad, the best the rest can do is put him down. Wolves know it, dogs know it and lions know it. Men need to know it too.

Even when the man is your friend. But that's another story.

More wine here.

*

Idomeneus came out and held my horse as I slid down.

'Sorry to call you all the way here, lord.'

The dent in my perfect helmet still rankled, and I couldn't get the thought of a messenger from Sardis out of my head – Sardis, the capital of Lydia, the satrapy of the Persian empire closest to Greece. Who would send a messenger from Sardis? And why in the name of all the gods hadn't I stopped to ask?

But Idomeneus was a man who'd saved my life fifty times. Hard to stay angry with him. 'I needed to come out, anyway. If I stay at the forge too long, I might forget who I used to be.'

'Used to be?' Idomeneus laughed his mad laugh. 'Achilles reborn, now hammering bronze?'

'So, you killed a man?' I asked. One of the women pressed a horn cup into my hand. Watered, spiced wine, just warmed. I drank thankfully.

'We just killed us an Alcmaeonid,' Idomeneus said. His eyes glinted in the last light. 'He stood there on the precinct wall and proclaimed his parentage and dared us even to think of killing him. He thought that big name would protect him.'

I shook my head. The Alcmaeonids were rich, powerful and nasty. Their wealth was boundless, and I couldn't imagine what one of them was doing at the tomb of the hero. 'Perhaps he was lying?' I asked.

Idomeneus produced something from under his chlamys. It flashed red-gold in the last beams of the sun. It was a clasp belt, the sort of thing a very rich man wore with his *chiton*, and every link was beaten gold. It was worth more than my farm, and I have a good farm.

'Fuck,' I said.

'He had the mark of evil,' Idomeneus said. 'What could I do?'

I went and looked at the corpse, stretched over the precinct wall in the traditional way. He had been a big man – a head taller than me, with a bell cuirass of bronze as thick as a new-flayed hide.

He probably weighed twice as much as wiry Idomeneus. He had a single wound, a spear-thrust in his left eye. Idomeneus was a very, very dangerous man. The Athenian nobleman must have

been too stupid to see that – or the mark truly was on him and the hero needed blood.

The armour was of the best, as was his helmet.

'Fuck,' I said again. 'What was he doing here?'

Idomeneus shook his head. Behind him, men and women were lighting the lamps. There were six huts now, instead of just one, as there had been in my youth. My Thracians had one, and former bandits were four to a hut in the others, except the last, which was for the women. They were clean and orderly. Dead deer hung in rows from the trees, and there was a whole boar, and piles of salted skins, rolled tight. Idomeneus ran the tomb like a military camp.

'He was recruiting,' I said aloud, answering my own question. Perhaps the grey-eyed goddess stood at my shoulder and said the words into my head, but I saw it. He was in his best armour because he wanted to impress. But he'd challenged Idomeneus – somehow – and the mad fuck had killed him.

These things happen.

My problem, I thought, was how to clean it up. They were all in my oikia, so I bore the responsibility and it was my place to put it right. Besides, I knew most of the big men in Athens. I knew Aristides, and he was related to the Alcmaeonids by marriage and by blood. I was sure he could make it right, if anyone could.

I considered the alternative – I could do nothing. It was possible that no one knew where this man was, or what he had intended. It was possible that even if his people found out, they would take no revenge.

'In the morning, I'll cast an augury,' I said. 'Perhaps the *logos* will offer me an answer.'

Idomeneus nodded. 'You'll stay the night?' he asked.

'Just as you wanted, you mad Cretan,' I said.

'You need to get away from the farm before you turn into a farmer,' he said.

I had the glimmer of a suspicion that my mad hypaspist had killed a powerful man merely to get me to come up the hill and drink with him. I sighed.

Styges put a warm cup in my hand and led me to the fire circle, where all the former bandits sat. We sang hymns to the gods while the bowl of the heavens turned over our heads. The firelight dappled the ancient oaks around the hero's tomb. Styges took out a *kithara* and sang alone, and then we sang with him – Spartan songs and aristocratic songs – and I sang Briseis's favourite, one of Sappho's.

My eyes kept meeting those of a slave girl. They weren't precisely slaves – their status was not simple. They'd belonged to a farmer – a widow – and the bandits had killed her and taken her chattels. Then I'd killed the bandits. Whose were they? Were they free? They slept with all the men and did too many chores.

She was short, almost pretty, and one of her legs was twisted. Our eyes kept meeting, and later she laughed aloud while I was inside her. Her breath was sweet, and she deserved better than a hero who thought only of another woman. But despite her limp and her odd face, she stuck in my head. In those days I must have mounted fifty slave girls a year. Yet I remember her. You'll see why.

In the morning, I hunted on the mountain with Idomeneus, but if he'd left any deer alive within half a day's walk, I didn't see them. But we did cross the trail where we'd ambushed the bandits a year before. The road goes as high as it ever does on Cithaeron's flank, then drops down into a mud-hole, after which it climbs a little before starting the long descent, first to the tomb and then to Plataea herself.

There was a cart abandoned by the mud-hole, and tracks.

The cart was loaded with weapons and leather armour – good, strong stuff. And there were a few coins scattered on the ground.

'He had servants,' I said.

'And they ran,' Idomeneus said. 'No need to cast an augury, is there?'

The abandoned wagon meant that the rich man had had attendants – men who even now were running back to the family estates in Attica with a tale of murder.

'We could chase them down and kill them,' Idomeneus said, helpfully.

'Sometimes, you really piss me off,' I said. And I meant it.

'I feel bad,' he admitted. 'What are you going to do?'

'I'll ride into Attica and make it right,' I said. 'Send to the farm, get Epictetus to fill a wagon with my work, and have it head for Athens. I'll meet the wagon in the Agora in Athens in ten days. Before the Herakleion. Then my whole trip won't be wasted fixing your fuck-up.'

Idomeneus nodded sullenly. 'He had the mark on him,' he said, like a child who feels a parent's law is unfair. 'The hero wanted his blood.'

'I believe you,' I said. And I looked at him. He met my eye – but only just. 'You can't come,' I said. 'Not unless you want to die,' I added. He shrugged.

My entertainment of the night before was standing a little apart. I palmed a coin to give her, but she shook her head and looked modestly at the ground.

'I want to go,' she said. 'I can be a free woman in Attica. I'll warm your bed on the trail.'

I considered it for a while. 'Yes,' I said.

The other two women cried to see her go.

I'd have done better if I'd stopped to cast the auguries. But who knows? The gods like a surprise.

We made good time up Cithaeron's flank. Up where the oak trees falter, I killed a young boar with my bow. From there, and with that as an omen, I took the old road and we climbed all the way to the top of the ancient mountain, and made camp in the wood of the Daidala, the special place of all the Corvaxae, where the crows feast on meat we provide for the god.

I made a good camp, with a wool sheet as a tent and a big fire. Then I left the slave girl to cook meat from the hero's tomb and I climbed up to the altar. In our family, we say that the altar is to Cithaeron himself, and not to Zeus, who is, after all, an interloper here.

There was a sign on the altar, the remnants of a burnt offering and a hank of black wool. So – Simon's sons lived. And they had come here in the dark of the moon to curse someone. Not hard to guess who. I smiled. I remember that smile – a wolf's snarl. Hate comes easily when you are young.

It was a clear night, and I could see out to the rim of the world, and everywhere I looked, I could see fire. And I thought: *War is coming*. The thought came from the god, and his eyes helped mine to see the girdle of fire all around the world, standing there on the summit of the mountain.

I heaped brush on top of the pile of ash on the old altar, and I rolled the boar's hide, hooves and bones around the fat, then lit the fire. That fire must have been visible to every man and woman from Thebes to Athens. I set the boar to burning and made my prayers. I fed the fire until it was so great that I couldn't stand near it naked, and then I went back down to where the slave girl waited.

She served me food. 'Will you free me,' she asked, 'or sell me?'

I laughed. 'I'll free you,' I said. 'With that twisted foot, you're not worth selling, honey. Besides, I keep my word. Do I not?'

She didn't laugh. 'I wouldn't know.' She stuck out her bad foot and stared at it.

'Your barley broth is delicious,' I said, and it was. That's all the flirtation a slave gets. 'I was a slave, honey. I know what it's like. And I know that all my talk isn't worth shit until you have your freedom tablet in your hand. But I give you my word, by the high altar of my ancestors, that I will free you in the Agora of Athens and leave you twenty drachmas as dowry.'

Every god in Olympus must have been listening. A man needs to be careful when he swears, and careful what he promises.

'The sons of men lie,' she said, her voice hollow, so that just for a moment I wondered what goddess was sharing my campfire. 'Will you be different?'

'Try me,' I said with a young man's arrogance. I moved towards her, and as I put a hand behind her head, the ravens came, a great flock, and they alighted in the trees around my fire – the

same trees where the Corvaxae feed them, of course – and they knew me. I had never seen so many. The fire reflected their eyes – a thousand points of fire – and when I put my mouth over hers, her eyes glowed red in the fire, too.

We made love anyway. Ah, youth.

We were five days crossing Cithaeron, at least in part because I became infatuated with her. Sometimes one body just fits another – hard to describe to you virgins. Suffice it to say that despite her twisted foot and odd face, my body adored hers in a way I have seldom experienced. I wanted her every minute, and the wanting was not slaked by the having, as it is so often with men, especially young men.

After we had made love on a rock by the trail, where you can first see the rich blue of the sea over Attica, she rose from my best efforts, smiled and threw her chiton over her shoulder and strolled on, naked, by my horse.

'Don't you want to get dressed?' I asked her.

She smiled and shrugged. 'Why? It will only come off again before the sun goes down a finger's breadth.'

And she was right. I could not have enough of her.

She wouldn't tell me her name, and sometimes I called her Briseis. That got a bitter laugh and a hard bite. I begged her and tickled her and offered her money, but she said that telling her true name would break the spell. So I called her Slave Girl, and she resented it.

After the slowest trip over the mountain in the history of the Greeks, we came down by the fort at Oinoe, where my brother had died. I poured wine to his shade and we rode on, the horse useful now. We didn't camp in Attica – I was a man of property, and we stayed in inns or I claimed guest status from men who I knew a little, like Eumenios of Eleusis, who was happy to see me, toasted me in good wine and warned me that he'd heard that the Alcmaeonids were out for my blood.

I sneered. 'They don't even know who I am,' I said. 'I'm just some hick from Boeotia.'

Eumenios shook his head. 'No. You're a warrior and a friend of Miltiades – and Aristides. It's said in the city that you can lead three hundred picked men of Plataea over the mountain whenever Miltiades snaps his fingers.'

I shook my head and drank my wine. 'Who the fuck would say that? Myron is the archon – Hades' brother. In Plataea we care very little for who lords it in Athens, as long as the grain prices are good!'

But then I thought of the black wool on Cithaeron's altar. Simon's sons would spread that story, if it would help them to revenge.

In the morning, Eumenios pretended he'd missed a night's sleep because of my antics with my slave girl. He saw me mounted, poured a libation and sent me on my way. But before I'd turned my mare's head out of his gate, he caught my ankle.

'Go carefully,' he said. 'They'll kill you if they can. Or bring you to law.'

Nine days on the road, and we came to Athens.

My daughter, and young Herodotus, have both been to Athens – but I'll tell you about the queen of Greek cities anyway. Athens is not like any other city in the world, and I've been everywhere from the Gates of Heracles to the Mountains of the Moon.

Most men come to Athens from the sea. We came down from the mountains to the west, but the effect is the same. The first thing you see is the Acropolis. It was different then – now they have new temples a-building, fantastic stuff in white marble to rival anything in the east, but it was impressive enough in my day, with the big stone buildings that the Pisistratids, the tyrants, had put up. New temples, and new government buildings, and power in every stone. Athens was rich. Other cities in Greece were stronger – or thought they were stronger – Thebes, and Sparta, and Corinth – but any man with his wits about him knew that Athens was the queen of cities. Her Acropolis had held the Palace of Theseus, and men from that palace went to the war in Troy. She was old, and wise, and strong. And rich.

More people lived within the precincts of Athens than in the

whole of Boeotia, or so men said. The city was bigger than Sardis, and had almost twelve thousand citizens of military age.

Athens had bronze-smiths and potters – the best in the world – and farmers and fishermen and sailors and oarsmen and perfumers and tanneries and weavers and sword-smiths and lamp-makers and men who dyed fabric and men who whitened leather and men who did nothing but plait hair or teach young men to fight. Moreover, they had women who did most of these things. The world was turned on its head in Athens, and in my time I've met women who played instruments, women who coached athletes, women who wove and women who painted pots – even a woman philosopher. It was the city.

The City.

They're a greedy, rapacious, foxy lot, the Athenians. They lie, steal and covet other men's possessions, and they argue about everything.

I've always liked them.

I'd never been to Aristides' house, but he was a famous man, even then, so it was easy enough to ask directions. But I had to turn down a dozen offers on my slave girl – the truth is, she shone with some power, and no man who saw her cared an obol about her limp – and for some reason men fancied me, too, and even offered for my horse and my blanket and my sword and anything else visible.

We should have passed around the shoulder of the Areopagus and walked on, down the hills to the cool countryside on the east side of the city. Instead, I paused for a cup of cheap wine. What I really wanted was to walk down the street of the bronze-smiths, so I left my horse with Slave Girl and headed to the Agora. Now, there's a fancy new temple for Hephaestus. Back then, it was a much smaller affair, with tiny cramped streets all over the low hill and a small shrine to Athena and Hephaestus at the top – just one priest and no priestess. But I went, made a small sacrifice and left the meat for the poor, as befitted a foreigner, and then I walked down into the smiths' quarter. I'd have done better to take the Boeotian dog-cap off my head – but I didn't.

I gave the sign to the priest, of course, and he passed me the sign for Attica, so that other smiths would treat me as a guest. Then I worked my way down the hill, looking at their shops, admiring their bellows or their tools – or their hordes of apprentices. I finally stopped where an iron-smith was roughing out spear-points – beautiful things, long as my forearm with light sockets and heavy ribs for punching straight through armour.

'You look like a lad who can use one of these,' the smith said. 'For a dirt-eating Theban, I mean,' he added.

I spat. 'I'm a dirt-eating Plataean,' I said. 'Fuck Thebes.'

'Fuck your mother!' he said with pleasure. 'No offence meant, stranger. Any Plataean is welcome here. Were you in the three battles?'

'Every one,' I answered.

'*Pais!*' the master called, and when one of his boys came, he said, 'Get this hero a cup of Chian.'

'You?' I asked politely.

'Oh, I stood my ground once or twice that week,' he said. He extended his hand and we shook, and I passed the sign.

'You're a smith!' he said. 'Need a place to stay?'

That's how it was, back then. Sad, to see those old ways go. Hospitality was like a god to us – to all Greeks.

I had started to explain that I was on my way to see Aristides when a well-dressed man leading a horse leaned into the stall.

'Did I just hear you say you were a Plataean?' he asked.

I didn't know him from Oedipus, but I was courteous. 'I have that honour. I am Arimnestos of the Corvaxae of Plataea.'

The man bowed. 'You've just saved me quite a journey, then,' he said. 'I'm Cleitus of the Alcmaeonids of Attica. And you are under arrest, for murder.'