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# **Killer of Men**

Written by Christian Cameron

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# Killer of Men

CHRISTIAN CAMERON



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It may seem odd to you, *thugater*, who has only known me as an old man, and an aristocrat, that I was once young and poor. And indeed, when the singers rise to sing of our ancestors, and men say that we are descended from Heracles and Zeus, I always laugh in my gut, because when I was young the smell of sheep dung was more common in our house than the smell of incense, and my mother's hands were red and hard, despite her high birth and constant complaints.

But you, who have soft hands and whose only work is the loom, should know that those days were happy days too. And that it is worth knowing that a man can live as happily on a farm in Boeotia as in a city in Asia. Life is not all rose water and porphyry.

Listen then. And may the Muses aid me – I am old, and my memory may lose the furrow where the plough should go. I pour this libation to Heracles, my ancestor, who endured the twelve labours, and to all the jealous gods, who gave me this good life, despite famine and peril, and a long war.

## Part I

### *The Lovely Bloom of Youth*

As long as some mortal has the lovely bloom of youth, he plans  
with a light heart many things that are never to be fulfilled.

Simonides, fr. 20

# I

The thing that I remember best – and maybe it’s my first memory, too – is the forge. My father, the smith – aye, he farmed too, because every free man in Boeotia counted his wealth in farmland – but Pater was the bronze-smith, the best in our village, the best in Plataea, and women said that he had the touch of the god upon him, because he had a battle wound that made him lame in his left foot, and because his pots never leaked. We were simple folk in Boeotia, not fancy boys like Athenians or joyless killers like the men of Sparta – we valued a man who made a pot that didn’t leak. When Pater pounded out a seam, that seam held. And he liked to add more – he was always a man to give more than he got, so that a housewife who paid him ten hard-won drachmas and a bowl of potted rabbit might find that Pater had put a carefully tooled likeness of Demeter or Hecate beneath the rim of the pot, or worked her name into the handle of the cauldron or tripod.

Pater did good work and he was fair. What’s more, he had stood his ground twice in the storm of bronze, so that every man knew his measure. And for all that, he was always ready to share a cup of wine, so the front of the smithy had become a gathering place for all the men of our little village on a fair day when the ploughing was done – and sometimes even a singer or a minstrel, a *rhapsode*. The smithy itself was like a lord’s hall, as men brought Pater their quarrels – all except his own bloody family, and more of that later – or came to tell him their little triumphs.

He was not much as a father. Not that he hit me more than a dozen times, and every one deserved, as I still remember. I once used my father’s name to buy a knife in the *polis* – a foolish thing, but I wanted that knife. It broke in my hand later – yet another tale, lass – but I meant no harm. When Pater learned that I had pledged his

name for a simple blade he'd have made me himself, he struck me with the whole weight of his fist. I cried for a day from the shame.

He had the raising of us all to himself, you see. My mother was drunk from the time I first remember her – drinking away the forge, Pater would say when the darkness was on him. She's your grandmother, lass – I shouldn't speak ill of her, and I'll try to tell her true, but it's not pretty.

She was the daughter of a lord, a real lord, a *basileus* from down the valley in Thespieae. They met at the Great Daidala in the year of the Olympics, and the rumour of my youth had it that she was the wildest and the most beautiful of all the daughters of Apollo, and that Pater swept her up in his great arms and carried her off in the old way, and that the basileus swore a curse on their marriage.

I respect the gods – I've seen them. But I'm not one to believe that Hera comes to curse a woman's womb, nor Ares to push a spear aside. The gods love them that love themselves – Mater said that, so she wasn't a total failure as a mother, I reckon. But she never did aught to love herself, and her curse was her looks and her birth.

She had three children for Pater. I was the middle one – my older brother came first by a year, and he should have had the smithy and maybe the farm besides, but I never faulted him for it. He had red hair and we called him 'Chalkidis', the copper boy. He was big and brave and all a boy could want in an older brother.

I had a sister, too – still do, unless Artemis put an arrow into her. My mother gave her the name of Penelope, and the gods must have been listening.

I know nothing of those first years, when Pater was as handsome as a god, and Mater loved him, and she sang in the forge. Men say they were like gods, but men say a great many things when an event is safely in the past – they tell a lot of lies. I'll no doubt tell you a few myself. Old man's prerogative. I gathered that they were happy, though.

But nothing ended as my mother expected. I think she wanted something greater from my father, or from herself, or perhaps from the gods. She began to go up in the hills with the maenads and ran wild with other women, and there were words in the forge. And then came the first of the Theban years – when the men of Thebes came against us.

What do you know of Thebes? It is a name in legend to you. To us, it was the curse of our lives – poor Plataea, so far from the

gods, so close to Thebes. Thebes was a city that could muster fifteen thousand hoplites, while we could, in an emergency and freeing and arming our most trustworthy slaves, muster fifteen hundred good men. And this is before we made the Great Alliance with Athens. So we were a lonely little polis with no friends, like a man whose plough is broken and none of his neighbours have a plough to loan.

They came at us just after the grain harvest, and the men went off to war. Whenever I hear the *Iliad*, thugater, I weep when I hear of mighty Hector's son being afraid of his father's shining helmet. How well I remember it, and Pater standing there in his panoply, the image of Ares. He had a bronze-faced shield and a splendid helmet he had forged himself from one piece of bronze. His horsehair plume was black and red for the smith god. He wore a breastplate of solid bronze, again of his own making, and thigh guards and arm guards of a kind you scarcely see any more – aye, they were better men. He carried two spears in the old way, and long greaves on his legs, and when he stood in the courtyard with the whole panoply he gleamed like gold.

Mater was drunk when she poured the libation. I can see it in my head – she came out in a white *chiton*, like a *kore* going to sacrifice, but the *chiton* had purple stains. When she went to bless his shield she stumbled and poured wine down his leg, and the slaves murmured. And she wept, and ran inside.

So Pater went off to fight Thebes, and he came back carried by two men on his *chlamys* and his spears, and his shield was gone. We lost. And Pater lost most of the use of his left leg, where Mater spilled the wine, and after that there was nothing between them but silence.

I suppose I was five. Chalkidis was six, and we lay in the loft of the barn and he whispered to me about Pater's part in the battle and about our cousins – the grandsons of Pater's father's brother. Aye, thugater, we count such relations close in Boeotia. Pater had no brothers – his father must have read Hesiod one too many times – and this batch of surly cousins were the nearest relations I had on Pater's side. On Mater's side they scarcely allowed that we were kin – until later, and that's another tale, but a happier one.

My brother said that Pater was a hero, that he'd stood his ground when other men ran, and he saved many lives – and that when the Thebans took him, they hadn't stripped him, but ransomed him like a lord. I was young and I knew nothing of ransom, only that Pater,



who towered over me like a god, was unable to walk and his mood was dark.

‘The other Corvaxae were the first to run,’ Chalkidis whispered. ‘They ran and left Pater’s side open to the spears, and now they slink through the town and fear what Pater will say.’

We were the Corvaxae – the men of the Raven. Apollo’s raven. Look up, lass – there’s the black bird on my *aspis*, and may the gods send I never feel it on my arm again! You know what the sage says – count no man happy until he is dead. I pour a libation in his memory – may his shade taste the wine.

The black bird is also on our sails and on our house. I was five – I knew little of this, except that I knew that Pater told me it was a good omen when a raven landed on the roof of the smithy. And our women were Corvaxae, too – black-haired and pale-skinned, and clannish. No man in our valley wanted to cross my mother, or my sister, in their day. They were Ravens of Apollo.

And the truth is that my story starts in that fight. It is from that day that the other Corvaxae turned against Pater, and then against me. And from that day that the men of Plataea decided to find a new way of keeping their little town free of Thebes.

It took Pater almost a year to get to his feet. Before that year, I reckon we were rich, as peasants in Boeotia measured riches. We had a yoke of oxen and two ploughs, a house built of stone with a tower, a barn that stood all weather and the smithy. Pater wore the full panoply when the muster was called, like a lord. We ate meat on feast days and we had wine all year.

But I was old enough to understand that at the end of that year we were not rich. Mater’s gold pin went, and all our metal cups. And my first bad memory – my first memory of fear – is from that year.

Simonalkes – the eldest of the other branch of the Corvaxae, a big, strong man with a dark face – came to our house. Pater had to walk with a crutch, but he rose as fast as he could, cursing the slaves who helped him. My brother was in the *andron* – the men’s room – pouring wine for Simon like a proper boy. Simon put his feet up on a bench.

‘You’ll be needing money,’ Simon said to Pater. Not even a greeting.

Pater’s face grew red, but he bowed his head. ‘Are you offering me aid, cousin?’

Simon shook his head. ‘You need no charity. I’ll offer you a loan against the farm.’

Pater shook his head. ‘No,’ he said. If Pater thought that he was hiding his anger, he was wrong.

‘Still too proud, smith?’ Simon said, and his lip curled.

‘Proud enough to stand my ground,’ Pater said, and Simon’s face changed colour. He got up.

‘Is this the famous hospitality of the Corvaxae?’ Simon said. ‘Or has your whore of a wife debased you, too?’ He looked at me. ‘Neither of these boys has your look, cousin.’

‘Leave my house,’ Pater said.

‘I came to tender help,’ Simon said, ‘but I’m met by accusations and insults.’

‘Leave my house,’ Pater said.

Simon hooked his fingers in his belt and planted his feet. He looked around. ‘Is it *your* house, cousin?’ He smiled grimly. ‘Our grandfather built this house. Why is it *yours*?’ Simon sneered – he was always good at sneering – and snapped his fingers. ‘Perhaps you’ll marry again and get an heir.’

‘My sons are my heirs,’ Pater said carefully, as if speaking a foreign language.

‘Your sons are the children of some strangers on the hillside,’ our cousin said.

Pater looked as angry as I’d ever known him, and I’d never seen two grown men take this tone – the tone of hate. I’d heard it from Mater in the women’s quarters, but I’d never heard it rise to conflict. I was afraid. And what was I hearing? It was as if cousin Simon was saying that I was not my father’s son.

‘Bion!’ Pater shouted, and his biggest slave came running. Bion was a strong man, a trustworthy man with a wife and children who knew he’d be freed as soon as the money came back, and he was loyal. That’s right, thugater. Melissa is Bion’s granddaughter, and now she’s your handmaiden. She’s never been a slave, but Bion was once. As was I, lass, so don’t you wrinkle your nose.

‘You’ll be even poorer if I have to kill your slave,’ Simon said.

Pater thumped one crutch-step closer and his heavy staff shot out and caught Simon in the shin. Simon went down and then Pater hit him in the groin, so that he screamed like a woman in childbirth – I knew that sound well enough, because Bion’s wife provided him with a child every year.

Pater wasn't done. He stood over Simon with his staff raised. 'You think I'm afraid of you, you coward!' he said. 'You think I don't know why I'm lame? You ran. You left me in the bronze storm. And now you come here and your mouth pours out filth.' He was panting and I was more afraid, because Simon was wheezing, down on the floor, and Pater had hurt him. It was not like two boys behind the barn. It was *real*.

Simon got himself up and he pushed against Bion. 'Let go, slave!' he croaked. 'Or I'll come back for you.' He leaned against the doorway, but Bion ignored him, linked an arm under his chin despite his size and dragged him from the room.

All the *oikia* – the household, slaves and free – followed the action into the courtyard. Simon wouldn't stop – he cursed us, and he cursed the whole *oikia*, and he promised that when he came into his own he'd sell all the slaves and burn their houses. Now I know it for what it was – the blusterings of an impotent but angry man. But at the time it sounded like the death curse of some fallen hero, and I feared him. I feared that everything he said would come to pass.

He said that he'd lain with our mother in the hills, and he said that Pater was a fool who had risked all their lives in the battle and who sought death rather than face his wife's infidelity. He shouted that we were all bastards, and he shouted that the *basileus*, the local aristocrat, would come for the farm because he was jealous of Pater.

And all the time Bion dragged him from the yard.

It was ugly.

And when he was gone, Pater wept. And that made me even more afraid.

It seemed as if the roof had fallen in on our lives, but it was not many weeks later when Pater brought the priest to the forge, all the way from Thebes. He rebuilt the fire and the priest of Hephaestus took his silver drachma and made a thorough job of it; he used good incense from the east and he poured a libation from a proper cup, although made of clay and not metal as we expected. Because Chalkidis and I were old enough to help in the forge, he made us initiates. Bion was already an initiate – Hephaestus cares nothing for slave and free, but only that a craftsman gives unstintingly to his craft – and he advanced a degree. It was very holy and it helped to make me feel that my world was going to be restored. We swept the forge from top to bottom and Pater made a joke – the only one I can remember.

‘I must have the only clean forge in all Hellas,’ he said to the priest.

The priest laughed. ‘You took that wound fighting us last year,’ he said. He pointed at Pater’s leg.

‘Aye,’ Pater allowed. He was not a man given to long speeches.

‘Front rank?’ the priest asked.

Pater pulled his beard. ‘You were there?’

The priest nodded. ‘I close the first file for my tribe,’ he said. It was a position of real honour – the priest was a man who knew his battles.

‘I’m the centre man in the front rank,’ Pater said. He shrugged. ‘Or I was.’

‘You held us a good long time,’ the Theban said. ‘And to be honest, I knew your device – the raven. Apollo’s raven for a smith?’

My father grinned. He liked the priest – a small miracle in itself – and that smile made my life better. ‘We’re sons of Heracles here. I serve Hephaestus and we’ve had the raven on our house since my grandfather’s grandfather came here.’ He kept grinning, and just for a moment he was a much younger man. ‘My father always said that the gods were sufficiently capricious that we needed to serve a couple at a time.’

That was Pater’s longest sentence in a year.

The priest laughed. ‘I should be getting back,’ he said. ‘It’ll be dark by the time I see the gates of Thebes.’

Pater shook his head. ‘Let me relight the fire,’ he said. ‘I’ll make you a gift and that will please the god. Then you can eat in my house and sleep on a good couch, and go back to Thebes rested.’

The priest bowed. ‘Who can refuse a gift?’ he said.

But Pater’s face darkened. ‘Wait,’ he said, ‘and see what it is. The lame god may not return my skill to me. It has been too long.’

The fire was laid. The priest went out into the sunshine and took from his girdle a piece of crystal – a beautiful thing, as clear as a maiden’s eye, and he held it in the sun. He called my brother and I followed him, as younger brothers follow older brothers, and he laughed. ‘Two for the price of one, eh?’ he said.

‘Is it magic, lord?’ my brother asked.

The priest shook his head. ‘There are charlatans who would tell you so,’ he said. ‘But I love the new philosophy as much as I love my crafty god. This is a thing of making. Men made this. It is called a lens, and a craftsman made it from rock crystal in a town in Syria.’

It takes the rays of the sun and it burnishes them the way your father burnishes bronze, and makes them into fire. Watch.'

He placed a little pile of shavings of dry willow on the ground, then he held the lens just so. And before we were fidgeting, the little pile began to smoke.

'Run and get me some tow from your mother and her maidens,' the priest said to me, and I ran – I didn't want to miss a moment of this *philosophy*.

I hurried up the steps to the *exhedra* and my sister opened the door. She was five, blonde and chubby and forthright. 'What?' she asked me.

'I need a handful of tow,' I said.

'What for?' she asked.

We were never adversaries, Penelope and I. So I told her, and she got the tow and carried it to the priest herself, and he was tolerant, flicking her a smile and accepting the tow with a bow as if she were some lord's kore serving at his altar. And all the time his left hand, holding the lens, never moved.

The light fell in a tiny pinpoint too bright to watch, and the willow shavings smoked and smoked.

'I could blow on it,' I said.

The priest looked at me strangely. Then he nodded. 'Go ahead,' he said.

So I lay down in the dust and blew on the shavings very gently. At first nothing happened, and then I almost blew them all over the yard. My brother punched me in the arm. The priest laughed.

Quickly, I ran into the shop, where Pater stood by his cold forge with a distant look on his face, and I took the tube we used for controlling the heat of the forge – a bronze tube. I ran back into the yard, put the end of the tube near the pinpoint of light and gave a puff, and before my heart beat ten times, I had fire.

The priest wasn't laughing any more. He lifted the tow, put the flames in the midst and caught the tow, so that he seemed to have a handful of fire, and then he walked into the forge at a dignified pace, and we followed him. He laid the fire in the forge under the scraps and the bark and the good dry oak, and the night-black charcoal from mighty Cithaeron's flanks. The fire of the sun, brought down from the sky by his lens, lit the forge.

Pater was not a man easily moved, but he watched the fire with a look on his face like hunger in a slave. Then he busied himself

managing the fire – the hearth had been cold for a long time, and he needed coals to accomplish even the slightest work. So my brother and I carried wood and charcoal, and the priest sang a long hymn to the smith god, and the fire leaped and burned through the afternoon, and before long there was a good bed of coals.

Pater took down a leather bag full of sand from his bench, and he had Bion cut him a circle of bronze as big as a man's hand. Then, with that hungry look, he took the bronze in his great hand and set the edge to the leather bag, and after a brief pause his rounded hammer fell on the bronze in a series of strokes almost too fast to see.

That's another sight I'll never forget – Pater, almost blind with his lust to do his work, and the hammer falling, the strokes precise as his left hand turned the bronze – strike, turn, strike, turn.

It was the bowl of a cup before I needed ten breaths. Not a priest's holy cup, but the kind of cup a man likes to have on a trip, to show he's no slave – the cup you use to drink wine in a strange place, that reminds you of home.

Outside, the shadows were growing long.

In the forge, the hammer made its muffled sound against the leather. Pater was weeping. The priest took the three of us and led us outside. I wanted to stay and see the cup. I could already see the shape – I could *see* that Pater had not lost his touch. And I was six or seven and all I wanted was to be a smith like Pater. To make a thing from nothing – that is the true magic, whether in a woman's womb or in a forge. But we went outside, and the priest was holding the tube of bronze. He blew through it a couple of times, and then nodded as if a puzzle had been solved. He looked at me.

'You thought to go and fetch this,' he said.

It wasn't a question, so I said nothing.

'I would have thought of it too,' my brother said.

Penelope laughed. 'Not in a year of feast days,' she said. One of Mater's expressions.

He sent a slave for fire from the main hearth in the kitchen, and he put it in the fireplace in the yard. That's where Pater kindled the forge in high summer when it was blinding hot. And he blessed it – he was a thorough man, and worth his silver drachma, unlike most priests I've known. Blessing the outdoor hearth was something Pater hadn't even considered.

Then he built up his little fire and the three of us bustled to help him, picking up scraps of wood and bark all over the yard. My brother

fetches an armload of kitchen wood. And then the priest began to play with the tube, blowing through it and watching the coals grow brighter and redder and the flames leap.

‘Hmm,’ he said. Several times.

I have spent much of my life with the wise. I have been lucky that way – that everywhere I’ve gone, the gods have favoured me with men who love study and yet have time to speak to a man like me. But I think I owe all of that to the priest of Hephaestus. He treated all of us children as equals, and he cared for nothing but that tube and the effect it had on fire.

He did the oddest things. He walked all over the yard until he found a whole straw from the last haying, and he cut it neatly with a sharp iron knife and then used it to blow on the flames. It gave the same effect.

‘Hmm,’ he said.

He poured water on the fire and it made steam and scalded his hand, and he cursed and hopped on one foot. Penelope fetched one of the slave girls and she made him a poultice, and while she nursed his hand, he blew through the tube on the dead fire – and nothing happened except that a trail of ash was blown on my chiton.

‘Hmm,’ he said. He relit the fire.

Inside the forge, the sound had changed. I could hear my father’s lightest hammer – when you are a smith’s child, you know all the music of the forge – going *tap-tap, tap-tap*. He was doing fine work – chasing with a small chisel, perhaps. I wanted to go and watch, but I knew I was not welcome. He was with the god.

So I watched the priest, instead. He sent Bion for a hide of leather, and he rolled it in a great tube, and breathed through it on the fire, and nothing much happened. He and Bion made a really long tube, as long as a grown man’s arm, from calf’s hide, and the priest set Bion to blow on the fire. Bion did this in the forge and he was expert at it, and the priest watched the long tube work on the fire.

‘Hmm,’ he said.

My brother was bored. He made a spear from the firewood and began to chase me around the yard, but I wanted to watch the priest. I had learned how to be a younger brother. I let him thump me in the ribs and I neither complained nor fought back – I just stood watching the priest until my brother was bored. It didn’t take long.

My brother didn’t like being deprived of his mastery. ‘Who cares?’ he asked. ‘So the tube makes the fire burn? I mean, who cares?’ He

looked to me for support. He had a point. Every child of a smith learned to use the tube – as did every slave.

The priest turned on him like a boar on a hunter. ‘As you say, boy. Who would care? So answer this riddle and the Sphinx won’t eat you. *Why does the tube air make the fire brighter? Eh? Hmm?*’

Pater’s hammer was now going *taptaptaptaptaptap*.

‘Who cares?’ Chalkidis asked. He shrugged. ‘Can I go and play?’ he asked.

‘Be off with you, Achilles,’ the priest said.

My brother ran off. My sister might have stayed – she had some thoughts in her head, even as a little thing – but Mater called her to fetch wine, and she hurried off.

‘May I touch the lens?’ I asked.

The priest reached up and put it in my hand. He was down by the fire again.

It was a beautiful thing, and even if he said it had no magic, I was thrilled to touch it. It brought fire down from the sun. And it was clear, and deep. I looked at things through it, and it was curious. An ant was misshapen – some parts larger and some smaller. Dust developed texture.

‘Does it warm up in your hand when you bring down the sun?’ I asked.

The priest sat back on his heels. He looked at me the way a farmer looks at a slave he is thinking of purchasing. ‘No,’ he said. ‘But that is an excellent question.’ He held up the bronze tube. ‘Neither does this. But both make the fire brighter.’

‘What does it mean?’ I asked.

The priest grinned. ‘No idea,’ he said. ‘Do you know how to write?’

I shook my head.

The priest pulled his beard and began to ask questions. He asked me hundreds of questions – hard things about farm animals. He was searching my head, of course – looking to see if I had any intelligence. I tried to answer, but I felt as if I was failing. His questions were hard, and he went on and on.

The shadows grew longer and longer, and then my father started singing. I hadn’t heard his song in the forge in a year – indeed, at the age I was at, I’d forgotten that my father *ever* sang when he worked.

His song came out of the forge like the smell of a good dinner, soft



first and then stronger. It was the part of the *Iliad* where Hephaestus makes the armour of Achilles.

My mother's voice came down from the exhedra and met Pater's voice in the yard. These days, no one teaches women to sing the *Iliad*, but back then, every farm girl in Boeotia knew it. And they sang together. I don't think I'd ever heard them sing together. Perhaps he was happy. Perhaps she was sober.

Pater came out into the yard with a cup in his hand. He must have burnished it himself, instead of having the slave boys do it, because it glowed like gold in the last light of the sun.

He limped across the yard, and he was smiling. 'My gift to you and the god,' he said. He handed the cup to the priest.

It had a flat base – a hard thing to keep when you round a cup, let me tell you – with sloping sides and a neatly rolled rim. He'd riveted a handle on, simple work, but done cleanly and precisely. He'd made the rivets out of silver and the handle itself of copper. And he'd raised a scene into the cup itself, so that you could see Hephaestus being led to Olympus by Dionysus and Heracles, when his father Zeus takes him back. Dionysus was tall and strong in a linen chiton, and every fold was hammered in the bronze. Heracles had a lion skin that Pater had engraved so that it looked like fur, and the smith god was a little drunk on the happiness of his father's taking him back.

The priest turned it this way and that, and then he shook his head. 'This is king's work,' he said. 'Thieves would kill me in the road for a cup like this.'

'Yours,' Pater said.

The priest nodded. 'Your gifts are unimpaired, it seems,' he said. The cup was its own testimony. I remember the awe I felt, looking at it.

'Untouched by the rage of Ares,' Pater said, 'I owe more than that cup, priest. But that's what I can tithe now.'

The priest was visibly awed. I was a boy, and I could see his awe, just as surely as I had seen Simon's fear and rage. It made me wonder, in a whole new way, who my father was.

Pater summoned Bion, and Bion poured wine – cheap wine, for that's all we had – into the new cup. First the priest prayed to the smith god and poured a libation, and then he drank, and then Pater drank, and then Bion drank. Then they gave me the cup, and I drank.

'Your boy here has a gift too,' the priest said, while the wine warmed our bellies.

‘He’s quick,’ Pater said, and ruffled my hair.

First I’d heard of it.

‘More than quick,’ the priest said. He drank, looked at the cup and held it out to Bion, who filled it. He started to pass it back and Pater waved at him.

‘All servants of the smith here, Bion,’ he said.

So Bion drank again. And let me tell you, when the hard times came and Bion stayed loyal, it was for that reason – Pater was fair. Fair and straight, and slaves know. Something for you to remember when you’re tempted to a little temper tantrum, eh, little lady? Hair in your food and piss in your wine when you mistreat them. Right?

Anyway, we drank a while longer. It went to my head. The priest asked Pater to think about moving to Thebes – said Pater would make a fortune doing work like this in a real city. Pater just shrugged. The joy of making was washing away in the wine.

‘If I wanted to be a Theban,’ he said, ‘I’d have gone there when I was young.’ He made the word *Theban* sound dirty, but the priest took no offence.

And then the priest turned back to me.

‘That boy needs to learn his letters,’ he said.

Pater nodded. ‘Good thing for a smith to know,’ he agreed.

My heart soared. I wanted nothing – *nothing* – more than to be a smith.

‘I could take him to school,’ the priest said.

Pater shook his head. ‘You’re a good priest,’ Pater said, ‘but my boy won’t be a *pais* in Thebes.’

Again the priest took no offence. ‘You won’t teach the boy yourself,’ he said. No question to it.

Pater looked at me, nodded, agreeing. ‘No,’ he said. ‘It’s my curse – I’ve no time for them. Teaching takes too long and I grow angry.’ He shrugged.

The priest nodded. ‘There’s a hero’s tomb with a priest up the mountain,’ he said.

‘Leitos,’ Pater said. ‘He went to Troy. Calchas is the priest. A drunk, but a good man.’

‘He can write?’ the priest asked.

Pater nodded.

The next morning, I rose with the sun to see the priest go. I held his hand in the courtyard while he thanked the god and Pater for his

cup, and Pater was happy. He reminded Pater that I was to learn to write, and Pater swore an oath unasked, and the thing was done. I wasn't sure what I thought about it, but that was Pater's way – a thing worth doing was done.

The priest went to the gate and blessed Bion. Pater took his hand and was blessed in turn. 'May I have your name, priest?' he asked. Back then, men didn't always share their names.

The priest smiled. 'I'm Empedocles,' he said.

He and Pater shook hands the initiates' way. And then the priest came to me. 'You will be a philosopher,' he said.

He was dead wrong, but it was a nice thing to hear at the age of six or seven, or whatever I was.

'What's your name?' he asked.

'Arimnestos,' I answered.