

MADMAN

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In the tombs of Kursi sits a man with his back to the sea. For a long time he will sit, his back bowed tight against the sea.

Some tombs of Kursi are caves in the hillside, some are rock piles, old mounds staggering like steps to a sacred altar. The altar is nothing more than a barren hilltop. In this desolate place the man dwells, and sits with his back against the sea. He cannot say why the tombs afford safety, but they do for him, the unliving among the dead.

Someone watches him. Someone he once knew. And though he hates to be watched, hates the relish of the morbidly curious, hates their freedom most of all, humans no longer hold significance for him. If they come to stare, he rages at them for a time, then forgets them. He only knows to keep his back to the sea. He learned it as a child learns about red glowing embers, learns not to touch such fiery wonders.

Across the Sea is important to him because it is important to Them. Across the Sea has dreadful consequence. He looks at the last time he gazed Across the Sea—purple bite marks up and down his arm. He takes what he has closest and smears it over the marks.

The watcher with the old familiar face sat a distance apart from the man with his back bared to the lake. Watching, idling with a weed.

“Who would have believed that one day you’d sit among the dead covered in your own filth?”

The madman never responded. Never showed a sign of who he used to be. Sometimes he sat silent with his eyes half closed, locked in impenetrable trance. More often he was not silent at all, locked, then, in careening frenzies no man could still.

This didn’t stop the once-familiar man. If there was a way into madness, logic said there was a way out. Logic said.

“I don’t know what to do that I have not already done,” he said softly.

If he could have understood the shout of the madman, upon whom not a single word was lost, this is what he would have heard:

Do not leave me to Them!

Do not leave me!

You! I once knew you. . . .

The watcher lifted his head. Did he hear words? Or was that his wishful fancy? The madman grunted sometimes, made long garbled nonsense sounds as if he were clearing a throat full of sludge.

Once he spoke with perfect clarity—in a voice the once-familiar man had never heard before. The madman looked right at him, black eyes peering from behind filthy matted hair, and told him a thing no one could have known, a thing he had long pretended never happened, spoken in the ancient windswept tombs in a voice just as ancient and windswept: *I know what happened behind the stable when you were fourteen.*

The madman’s eyes glowed then, and his face changed for a moment into a leering hideousness that made his eyes water and his skin leap; it was a wavering of flesh into a form not his own; for an instant the madman’s features became the face of the voice, and then came a flickering of faces, a cacophony of images, people he had never seen, some he thought he knew from old dark memories. In that moment an odor came from the madman, an incarnate foulness, a stench with no match upon the earth; he vomited at once and crawled away, vomiting.

The watcher listened carefully, then sank into himself once more. It was no response; just another grunt.

The madman’s head was tilted, his mouth hung open. Saliva ran from his gray tongue into his beard, stiff with spit and filth, with

blood from the animals he ate. Sometimes when the madman was sleeping, the once-familiar man would come and cut off as much of the beard as he could. The madman used to be clean shaven and proud of his appearance.

The watcher rose. He had nothing much to record today, not about the madman anyway. He had a new thing to record about himself, something vaguely disturbing. He wondered how to word it, and tried it out in the air. "I am attracted to evil. It fascinates me. I do not know if this makes me a bad man."

He almost wanted the Other to speak again, and it troubled him. Rather, it *should* trouble him. "Yes, it should," he mused aloud. The encounter had disturbed him deeply, frightened him to his core; it also evoked a tumult of sensation. It evoked questions so enormous he could not yet frame them.

He strolled away from the man with his back to the lake, hands clasped behind him, as he used to walk in the colonnades. "I am not a bad man, but evil fascinates me. Evil intrigues me—this does not make me a bad man. . . ."

You! Do not leave me to Them, you!

Do not leave me.

I once knew you. . . .

The watcher stopped. He waited, motionless, hands clasped behind his back.

He heard only the cry of seabirds and the gentle rush of wind come down from the heights, rounding on the hillside tombs, coursing down the slope to the lake. He waited a moment more and then strolled away, trying out the new thing to record before he put it to parchment.

To Callimachus
 At the Academy of Socrates, West Stoa
 The Acropolis
 Athens

From your servant Tallis
 At a backwater barn of an inn
 In the dreadful Roman province called
 Palestine, on the Galilee

Greetings.

I would tell you the details of my journey, but you would only skip them. If this dispatch is late, it is your fault—the ship did not put out from Alexandria on the kalends of the month, as you assured me it would. I am sure you did not mean for me to stay an extra intolerable week with Aristarchus. Yes, that is what happened. Go ahead and laugh, Cal. I was not amused.

Palestine. I will describe it, though I know you will skip it. It is dry, dusty, foreign, dirty, hot; dusty doesn't do it justice, and when I say foreign, I mean barbarian. (Bathhouses? Two miles south! And never mind finding a decent launderer or fish sauce.) I am staying at a place the locals call the Inn-by-the-Lake, and that lake is called the Galilee. I've wedged a tiny writing desk under a tiny window, and I can see the lake from here. It's the only thing to soothe my longing for the Mediterranean, for Athens and all that is familiar. I am miserable for intelligent conversation.

The innkeeper has a fake smile, the locals skirt me like dung, and I miss cheese, for gods' sake, cheese. Though the innkeeper's daughter is an interesting conundrum, the inn itself is dreary, the common room dark, and—no. You are skipping this. I know you too well, dear Callimachus.

The Decaphiloi. Have I now your attention?

Tallis nibbled on the end of his pen. The moving water invited his glance, and he looked long before putting pen to parchment again.

Decaphiloi, League of Ten Friends. An amusing designation in this land called the Decapolis, League of Ten Cities. We thought so long ago, didn't we, when they chose to name themselves so?

He rubbed his brow. This wasn't the letter he was supposed to send. It should have been filled with assurances of the academy's welfare, with anecdotes of the teachers and students. This letter was never meant to be.

Cal, I don't know how to say it, so I'll say it. The League of Ten Friends is no more: the Decaphiloi have vanished, and the Academy of Socrates in Palestine is dissolved. Our little school has ceased to exist. Callimachus—it's as if it never was.

Worst of all, I am not joking. You know I wouldn't joke about this.

How well do I know you? You shook this letter and set it down in your lap. You looked long about the colonnades with those great gray brows plunged in consternation. You read over the last three or four lines, but it hasn't changed anything—Athens has lost one of its most promising satellite schools, it has simply vanished, and attend this: No one will speak with me about it.

Sometimes I laugh, Cal, the whole thing is so preposterous.

My attempts to learn more are constantly frustrated—most deny it even existed! The only place I get information is from the riffraff, at a price I can scarce afford, and now attend this: You received regular reports from the school up until a few months ago. What if I told you the portico they had rented has been empty for three years? (Go ahead and shake the letter. And get some strong drink; it doesn't get any better.)

The fellow in charge of public rental properties told me to my face he'd never heard of the Decaphiloi, or the Academy of Socrates either, and why don't I try Jerusalem. I laughed in his face, Cal, I couldn't help myself, and was summarily escorted to the door.

You did not send me to the outermost edge of the earth (that's what Palestine feels like) to be greeted with this kind of time-wasting riddle. I am not smart enough for this—you couldn't send a teacher? Or a student, for that matter? Do you know how often your name has been ill-used since I've arrived on this scorched puck of a province?

This I know, that the more I investigate, the more I—

Tallis chewed the end of his pen, made himself stop. Most of the styli in his vase back home were chewed up.

—am angry. I am unaccountably uneasy staying at this inn; there is an oddness in the air (I hope you skipped that). I am vexed at the delay in returning to

Athens, furious at the lies and the lack of information, and am now determined beyond pale to learn the truth. (Somewhere Socrates is smiling.) I know the Decaphiloi existed, you know they did, ten teachers know, and great gods and goddesses, the students know—to insist on this to a pie-faced magistrate who well knows the truth is absurd.

Did the Romans disband the school for fear of insurgence? You've spoken of the revival of Greek pride to Aristarchus, but the notion that your little school should have a hidden democratic agenda is as ridiculous as it is hilarious. Where is a parchment, I feel a play coming on. . . . (I hope you didn't skip that, it was funny.)

Well, I will write again when I have a firmer grasp on what has happened—if I'm still alive; they don't feed you much at this inn, and my purse is getting lamentably light. Of the Decaphiloi, I give this present accounting—accurate or inaccurate as it may be, it is all I have, and that from the riffraff. Six members—whereabouts unknown. One member was murdered in a most horrifying manner; I shall not put it on parchment. One is allegedly a priestess in a temple of Dionysus—you read right, Dionysus. Don't be alarmed: I've forsworn all things Dionysiac, you know that, Cal. Anyway, one member committed suicide.

And one . . . one is a madman.

Tallis sat in his chair with his lunch in his lap, eating steadily and watching the fishermen on the lake. He had been at the inn for a week now, and the innkeeper's daughter finally gave him a little variety in his meal. Showing him his whitened toga accounted for nothing in these parts. Tallis ate scorched bread for one week straight, and cheese only because he'd stolen it from the worktable in the kitchen. Today he ate boiled eggs with salt, unscorched and tasty bread, and cheese, for gods' sake, unpilfered and cumin-scented cheese.

He could have easily purchased fresh bread in the city, and did indeed on the first day, after a charred and hungry breakfast. Once he discovered the lack of a certain school of Socrates, he tightened his purse strings. His meager cache of coins would have to go for bribes, not bread; room rental, not a hammock on the next ship out of Caesarea.

One week in this backwater province, and he had no answers to the disappearance of an entire school. Eight years it should have been in operation! According to Lysias, the slave Tallis had questioned a few days

ago, the school had operated for five years—three years ago, it vanished.

Tallis watched the fishermen put out their boats and row north, toward the mouth of the Wadi Samakh on the northeast side of the Galilee. The seasonal riverbed emptied into the Galilee during the rainy season, and there at the mouth of the Wadi was the best fishing on the lake. The fishermen caught thousands of the little sardines so popular around here. Not that Tallis had *tasted* any. Boiled eggs and cheese today gave him hope of smoked sardines in the future.

A rustle drew his attention from the waters. The innkeeper's daughter came up the path from the inn with what was surely an amphora of wine on her hip. She offered it to Tallis.

He brushed the crumbs from his front and accepted the amphora with a nod. He drank long and wiped his mouth and handed back the amphora as naturally as if this occurred daily—as if he did not have to water himself with a ladle from the well, no wine about it. Any wine he had, he purchased in the common room of the inn.

The girl rested the jug on her hip and looked under her hand at the fishermen. "Are you going to Hippos again?" she asked, eyes on a boat.

"I am."

"Can you deliver a package for me?"

Ah—the reason for the tasty meal. "Of course."

She hesitated. "He may not be there anymore. Leave the package on his doorstep if he's not."

She turned to go back to the inn, and Tallis caught a glimpse of her face. It was clear and hopeful, a freshened look Tallis had not yet seen from her. It was the look a young woman should have, and her returning step to the inn was light and quick. She'd also just spoken more words to him in a minute than she had in an entire week.

Are you going to Hippos again?

"Yes, I am going to Hippos again," Tallis muttered, and ended his meal by tossing the remnants to a waiting dog.

He stood and shook out his toga, which was growing more dingy by the day. He would have to find a decent launderer, and Kursi did not have a launderer who cleaned togas. Surely he would find one in Hippos; he'd have to ask one of the occasional Roman soldiers he saw. If he had known this journey was to last so long, he'd have taken his entire wardrobe—which meant his other toga.

Tallis scowled at the lake. *Yes, I'm going to Hippos again.* To find a school that has been defunct for three years, a school no one will talk about; to find out who stole the money Callimachus has been sending for the past three years, money to pay salaries and rent—money from his own pocket, and from Tallis's pocket when funds were low. Cal, of course, didn't know that.

Callimachus of Athens was the sole patron of the school in Palestine, and Tallis was his servant, the one who saw him worry and fret if he didn't send the money on time. *The teachers have families, Tallis, they risked everything; they left their jobs for our school, and they trust us. What can we do this month? Can we take on another boarder?*

Callimachus was never good at managing his money. If he had it, he gave it, and forgot monthly commitments in favor of serving immediate needs. If it weren't for the money, Tallis would be on his way back to Athens—desperately strange, the disappearance of the school, yes—but all he cared about was making someone pay for stealing from Cal.

He smiled grimly. With interest, they would pay, and interest on the outskirts of the Roman Empire was high indeed. He had already made the calculations—to debtors' prison they would go, roaringly cheered by Tallis, a thought nearly as satisfying as his Tiberius fancy: Callimachus was a great and revered Greek philosopher, in favor with the Roman emperor Tiberius. The thieves could be remanded to the emperor himself, where they would meet justice in its most unpleasant possibilities.

When Tallis thought of Cal's sacrifice, and his worry, and his depleted state of affairs, only to find someone had *stolen* from him—the fury made his eyes glow.

"Never mind—if he's not there, you can have it yourself." The girl stood before him, holding a bundle. Her freshened look faltered when she saw his face; instantly he smiled, smoothing away thoughts of dripping murder. He took the bundle, and by its fragrance knew it was one of the loaves he'd seen on the table that morning.

He held it to his nose. "I hope he's not there."

The girl smiled, the first real smile he'd seen in a week, and she skipped down the path to the inn.



Tallis set out on the two-mile walk to Hippos. He was to deliver the bundle to a fellow named Demas, who lived on the other side of the city in the amphitheater housing, a building with a double tar smear on the side. The errand would take him away from his task, but no matter; despite certain misgivings at losing the loaf, he hoped to find the fellow. He was curious about whoever rated a fragrant loaf from the enigmatic young mistress of the inn. That smile was the first real conversation he'd had since Egypt.

The time he spent visiting the academy in Egypt with Cal's colleague, the insufferable Aristarchus, didn't count in the way of conversation. Aristarchus never once forgot that Tallis was a servant. It was Callimachus, Tallis's master, who had trouble remembering, and Tallis himself who had to remind him. Nothing aggravated Cal more than to hear that reminder. The great gray brows would plunge, and he would snap, "If I didn't want your opinion, I wouldn't ask for it."

It worried Tallis to think of Cal receiving the dispatch without Tallis himself at his side; Cal was getting old, and the letter would be a tremendous shock. He hoped, by then, that Aristarchus had returned to Athens. Aristarchus would take care of him. And what would *he* think of the situation in Palestine? Tallis snorted—Aristarchus certainly wouldn't trust its investigation to Tallis. A servant was better suited to run the backwater inn.

The innkeeper's establishment was tucked into a fold of landscape on the east side of the Galilee, on the Roman road running north and south. The inn was south of the little fishing village of Kursi, north of the much more cosmopolitan Hippos. It was situated on a rise that afforded a splendid view of the lake; and in a certain secluded place behind the inn, not far from the shore, Tallis had taken to eating his meals in blessed solitude. He couldn't stand the darkened common room. He spent the first day or two there, looking for affable conversation, but soon learned he was a whitened stranger, that perhaps to folks around here a toga meant only higher taxes. He was asked his business in accents that pinched his fourth or fifth vertebra, and when he saw that only suspicion prompted the questions, he learned to make his answer this: that he was a traveling scholar from Athens. Scholars were generally left alone.

He'd made the mistake, once, in an easy moment brought on by

wine, of telling a local that in his spare time he was a playwright and an aspiring historian of Alexander of Macedon—called now “The Great,” an appellation courtesy of Augustus Caesar. Tallis also mentioned to his drinking companion, as a casual grand finale, that he was the head servant of the great philosopher Callimachus, and was here in Palestine on business for his master.

And his companion had replied dully, “Who’s he?”

“Who’s he,” Tallis now muttered as he approached the west side of Hippos. He sighed up at the city on the hill and began the long traversing walk to the top.

“Callimachus is one of the finest scholars of Socrates short of Socrates himself, but you wouldn’t have heard of Socrates, you wine-soaked slothead. Callimachus is a greathearted old soulringer, his sum is wisdom and earnestness and passion for truth—more in his toenail than you possess in your entire being.” Tallis paused to blot sweat with his sleeve, and grimaced at the sleeve. Sweat became instant grime with all the dust around here.

If everything in his life were going well, Tallis would have enjoyed discourse at the inn, even sullen and suspicious discourse. The people of Kursi who came to the inn were not exactly a cheerful lot; they had the look of people who expected to be cheated, and expected the cheater to be Tallis. Their look said a person had to work mighty hard to earn trust, and at one time Tallis would have enjoyed the challenge. He suspected beneath it all they were as good-natured as the fake-smiling innkeeper himself.

He envied the way Jarek, the innkeeper, exchanged greetings with long-known friends. It made Tallis long for Athens. Keeping to the cliff made him feel like the outsider he was, but once he realized someone had stolen from Callimachus, it put him out of countenance with the world.

He gained the top of the hill and paused, perhaps breathing harder than a thirty-seven-year-old man should. The weight of the loaf in his shoulder pack made him think of the innkeeper’s daughter, and he turned into the busy city of Hippos.

So a fellow from the big city had captured the heart of the close-mouthed mistress of the inn. . . . Tallis didn’t think her capable of anything but dark and sizing glances. Had he only stayed a day or two, he would not have guessed it was the girl who ran things, not her father.

Tallis watched her manage things in ways so subtle perhaps the innkeeper himself was fooled.

Every other day she fixed a basket full of food and left it at the back door. Tallis never saw who came to pick it up. (He had first, foolishly, hoped the basket was for himself.) He once caught the father giving the basket a grim, inscrutable regard. The laden glance went from the basket to the daughter, who received it with an equally inscrutable evenness. Her father had dropped his eyes and shuffled away.

One week under her roof and he still didn't know her name. Tallis only called her "Excuse me."

Jarek seemed affable enough, as innkeepers should be, but his courteous ways seemed deliberate, and his smile was quick to disappear, replaced by a somberness that seemed more usual to him. Even so, it did not appear the girl had inherited her taciturn ways from Jarek. If she had gotten them from her mother, Tallis didn't see such a woman around to compare.

The daughter was about ten years younger than Tallis, maybe more. The fact that she wasn't married did not surprise him, since this was Palestine, Palestine near the Parthian borders, and the ways here were often strange. Back home, even an ugly girl would have been married off at sixteen. If the innkeeper's daughter was not beautiful, she was not plain.

Maybe that explained why the people of Kursi seemed so morose—they lived at the eastern boundary of the Roman Empire. Tensions ran higher at the demarcation where countries met, and the Parthians were supposed to be barbarians, Persian blood crossed with wild nomad blood. Kursians would be the first to know if the Parthians had taken a fancy to win back lands lost by their ancestors to the Seleucids.

Well, the Seleucids were no more; their weakened dynasty had fizzled nearly a hundred years ago with Pompey's campaigns. The Roman general had united local cities into a federation called the Decapolis, a league of ten cities banded together to keep Greco-Roman bloodlines Greco-Roman. Hippos was one of the chief cities of the Decapolis, an impressive metropolis situated on the top of a flat diamond-shaped mountain, and entirely walled. Parthians would think twice about taking Hippos.

The innkeeper's daughter told him to stay on the main street through the forum, go past the marketplace and the public baths and the

temple of Athena, until he came to the amphitheater in the southeast corner of the city. Demas lived in the neighborhood behind the theater.

“Look for the double tar smear,” Tallis murmured.

He walked the main street to the forum, wove around shopkeepers who had laid their wares on blankets right in the flow of foot traffic, and stopped when he came to the portico of the temple of Athena on his right. He gazed at the columns and at the wide steps in front of them.

There should have been clusters of students on those steps, each cluster with its own teacher. Instead, the entire north side of the portico was rented out to a multiware merchant who didn’t know the previous renter before him. Days earlier, the merchant had told Tallis to ask at the municipal building, and pointed to it on the north side of the forum.

What do you mean, you’ve never heard of the Academy of Socrates? Tallis had said to the pie-faced magistrate. You collected their rent for years.

Never heard of it.

I am in Hippos, right?

No answer.

How long have you worked here?

No answer.

What about the Decaphiloi?

(Interesting, the blink of the magistrate.)

Never heard of it.

Really. Mind if I look through your rental archives? They are public records and I, after all, am the public.

You won’t find anything.

(Interesting, the smirk.)

Why don’t you try Scythopolis. Better yet, Jerusalem.

The next day he had wandered the forum and its busy marketplace, questioning merchants in the vicinity of the temple, employing an instinctive caution, and his instinct was well-placed: A few were genuinely ignorant of the school that had rented the portico, but others did not appear happy at the questioning. Interestingly, the unhappy ones denied that the school and the Decaphiloi ever existed. The others simply said they didn’t know.

The third day in Hippos he had merely walked the streets. There were nice wineshops and tawdry ones. There were bathhouses of the af-

fluent and bathhouses of the not. Pleasant Greek statuary adorned certain places in the forum, and cheap miniature imitations were displayed on merchants' cloths for souvenirs. Hippos was like any other Greco-Roman city in the Decapolis . . . except this one had swallowed whole an enclave of philosophers, teachers, and artisans calling themselves the Decaphiloi.

On the fourth day in Hippos, he'd met Lysias.

Tallis had been watching a gang of public slaves repair a portion of the eastern wall by the barracks, when he had an idea. Surely the forum and the temple of Athena were kept clean and in repair by such slaves, perhaps these very ones he watched. If he couldn't get answers in high places, he would try low.

Tallis spoke to the overseer, and here his decent toga and Greek manner stood him in good stead. He told the man he needed to conscript one of the slaves for a quick service to the *agoranomos*, the market controller of Hippos. He slipped the overseer a few coins and promised to have the slave back in an hour.

By the smoldering look on the slave's face, he had a different suspicion for his conscription. It occurred to Tallis such practices must have been commonplace, for the overseer to acquiesce so easily to losing one of his workforce for an hour. Either that or he had paid the man entirely too much.

"I prefer women," Tallis had cheerfully informed the young man as they walked the main street back to the forum.

The man's stiffness eased then, and he ventured, "Then where are we going? You're not from around here."

"I need information. How long have you been in Hippos?"

"Eleven years. I came with my master from Scythopolis." His look soured. "I'd served him well and hoped for my manumission upon his death, but it turned out he owed a lot of money. The city confiscated all of his property."

They walked the streets of Hippos as Tallis questioned the man, whose name was Lysias.

"Yes, I've heard of the school. They used to meet on the corner steps of the temple."

For the first time since he walked beneath the western archway of Hippos, Tallis gave a great sigh. "Can you tell me when they met last?"

Lysias frowned, dodging a man carrying an armload of planks. “I don’t know. Three, maybe four years ago.”

“*Years ago?* Three or four years ago, are you certain?”

The slave shrugged. “Something like that. One of the teachers used to give me a tip if I cleaned the portico well.” He thought and nodded. “Yes, it was at least three years ago.”

“What was his name? The one who gave you the tip?”

“Polonus.”

Polonus! At last, a name, a familiar name. Polonus ran the school. “What do you know of the other teachers?”

Here the man must have sensed profit in the questions. He hesitated, with a glance at the purse strapped to Tallis’s waist. Tallis seized his arm and pulled him to the side of the street. “I paid one man today; I’m not about to pay you. I need information, and you can either spend a pleasant hour talking with me, or I’ll bring you back to the gates. What’s it going to be?”

Lysias chose a toil-free hour, and Tallis learned more in that one hour than he had in days.

The slave did not know the names of the teachers, only that there were nine or ten—two were women, he noted, one pretty and one plain. They met every day for hours in the northeast portico; they were a fixed part of the forum—had been for several years. Then one day the teachers didn’t show up. For days the students had congregated on the steps, their bewildered state apparent as they asked questions in the forum. But the teachers never returned, and the students eventually dispersed.

When he cleaned the portico Lysias would sometimes speak with Polonus, a man he called kind and smart. He knew the name of one other teacher, Antenor. In fact, Lysias was certain he had seen Antenor since those days, only he couldn’t remember where. He never saw anyone else.

Tallis and Lysias had returned to the eastern gates at the end of the promised hour, and Tallis thanked the slave.

Lysias turned to his work, then called Tallis back. “You know that wineshop we passed, the one where I said you’d find good imports?”

Tallis nodded.

“If you come again tomorrow and take me to that shop and buy me a meal and some wine, I’ll have more information for you.”

"I thought you told me that was the most expensive wineshop in Hippos," Tallis countered dryly.

The man grinned. "My master had excellent taste."

The fifth day Tallis was in Hippos, the slave Lysias was again conscripted for service to the *agoranomos*. While they sat over expensive wine, and a meal bought only for Lysias, the slave offered more information. This time, despite the wine, the man was not as sociable as he was the previous day.

"You've put your toe into some muddy water, my friend," Lysias commented quietly, after sizing up the occupants of the wineshop. A few servants were making purchases for their masters; a few masters were enjoying cups of wine and platters of olives and cheeses in the sitting area near a small back garden.

"How muddy?" Tallis asked. He sipped his wine, very nice indeed, glancing over the cup's rim at the people around him.

"We will not meet again," Lysias said.

Tallis studied the slave. What had changed? How far could he press him? By the stoic look on the sun-darkened face, not far. Tallis lowered his cup.

"Fair enough. Earn your meal, and we'll call it good."

Lysias told Tallis the names of a few more teachers, names Tallis already knew. He also told the fates of some of those names.

"Polonus ran the school, and Antenor was his . . ." He gestured for the word.

"Assistant." This Tallis already knew.

"Yes. One of the women ran things too, in a way my friend said was hard to define. Her name was Portia. She's supposed to be a priestess in the temple of Dionysus in Scythopolis."

Tallis kept his face smooth, while the name cleared his senses like a slap. Dionysus, god of wine . . . god of madness.

Tallis blinked. He pushed it down, he pushed it away. He took a slow sip of wine.

"There was a teacher named Bion," Lysias was saying, "who committed suicide. And one, a fellow named Theseus, was found—in large chunks—outside a disreputable bathhouse on the bad side of town."

Tallis was not aware he had slammed down his drink until he saw the surprise on Lysias's face and noticed the purple slop of wine on the

table. He took his napkin and blotted the mess, cheeks growing warm. It came too quickly on the heels of Dionysus. For the first time in a very long time, memory threatened to push back, and sweat broke on his scalp. He refused to remember. Callimachus forbade him to remember.

“If they were your friends, I am sorry,” Lysias murmured.

Tallis inclined his head to acknowledge the gracious comment. “They were friends of my master. He will be grieved at these tidings. Please continue.” Then he said suddenly, “This—thing that happened. To Theseus. Was it before or after the Decaphiloi disbanded?”

“Before,” Lysias had responded, after thinking it over. “Shortly before.”

“What do you know of Portia, the one who is the priestess?”

“Nothing, except what I said. She serves in the temple of Dionysus in Scythopolis. She was the plain one.”

They all came to Athens the summer before the school started in Hippos. Tallis had been much occupied with lodging details, food details, endless errands. It was eight years ago. He rubbed his temple. Portia . . .

Lysias continued over his thoughts.

“The other woman, the pretty one whose name I do not know, she simply disappeared like the rest of them. Except, of course, for the one named Kardus.” Here the slave had snorted. “Everyone around here knows him. Most don’t know what he used to be, only what he is now: a raving lunatic. The local legend. Crazier than a rabid dog on hard ale. Possessed, they say. And that is all I have to tell you.”

Weakness entered Tallis’s limbs. What he had tried for years to forget pursued him like Achilles on a rampage.

Lysias stood and wiped his mouth with the fine linen napkin, then folded it carefully and laid it on the table. He lingered for a moment, gazing first at their small table and its leftover evidence of an elegant meal; he watched a haughty servant sweep past with a silver platter on his splayed palms. He looked at the neatly trimmed ivy in the latticed arbor, beneath which genteel customers engaged in languid conversation, and he smiled a little. Then he bent to inhale the fragrance of the sprig of lavender in the bud vase on their table. He wished Tallis well, told him not to come for him again, and was gone.

Tallis sat motionless. Callimachus would tell him it was his fancy, tell him it was only old grief rolling over, it would go to sleep again.

Tallis knew it was more. Knew it by the strange uneasiness he'd felt at unexpected times at the inn, knew it by too many blows in one single conversation, too many suggestions of one certain conclusion, though Callimachus would tell him he was wrong. Callimachus would forbid him to remember.

Dionysus, god of wine, god of madness. Dionysus was here.

Tallis stood in front of a building with two tar smears on its side. He'd last spoken with Lysias two days ago. Yesterday he had sent his dispatch to Callimachus.

He thought of earnest young Kardus. He was one of the few Tallis had had occasion to speak with on that weeklong gathering in Athens. There were two servants for fifty guests, and a few of the newly recruited teachers had volunteered to help with the endless details incumbent upon a collection of fifty scholars at the estate of Callimachus. Kardus was one.

Tallis remembered him because of their mutual interest in Alexander the Great. Kardus had made a proud comment that he was descended from Macedonian colonists in Hippos, colonists who had been with Alexander himself on his great march east. He owned a small clay replica of Bucephalus, Alexander's beloved horse, which he claimed had been given to his ancestor by Alexander's own hand. Kardus had produced the trinket, and though Tallis doubted such a treasure to be genuine, he afforded the object due respect, and Kardus had been satisfied. The one named Theseus—the one now dead—rolled his eyes behind Kardus's back.

Tallis vaguely remembered Polonus, the leader of the Academy of Socrates in Hippos—a kind man, as Lysias had said; that had been Tallis's own impression. Kind and enthusiastic. A purposeful man, as suited a leader of one of the academies.

He didn't remember much of Antenor, Polonus's assistant, or of the women, or anyone else. What he did remember was excitement. He remembered a simmering enthusiasm in the crowd, a near giddiness . . . he had watched for their reaction upon meeting the great Callimachus, and he remembered it. And as Tallis watched Callimachus speak to them of the new academies, he felt privileged himself to be a part of this great undertaking. Even as a servant.

He looked at the two tar smears on the side of the whitewashed building. He barely remembered Portia. *Egyptian*, he thought. Had he known then what he knew now, of her association with the cult of Dionysus, he would have afforded her the respect due a snake pit.

He had one more idea to play out in this quest to discover the truth of the Decaphiloi, conceived just today when he passed Athena's temple with his fragrant loaf. In front of the temple, in the center of the forum, was the public message board of Hippos. For a few coppers he could post a notice.

It could prove to be a dangerous idea, but seeking the truth always meant risk. And it might take patience, a commodity Tallis had never learned to hoard. What he did have was a nice supply of calm fury. For three years someone had stolen rent and salary monies from Callimachus, the only person on earth he loved. For three years someone had sent progress reports to the academy in Athens, reports that were carefully crafted lies, all for the bilking of an honest old man out of his life savings.

Did Tallis care what had happened to the Decaphiloi? Not as much as he cared about revenge. He could hold out at that backwater inn as long as it took.

He hefted the loaf in his hand and took an envious sniff. He was already formulating the words for the message on the public boards. First, he had a loaf of bread to deliver.

In the silent tombs of Kursi sits a man with no silence within. He used to have a name. If he could remember the name, it would change things.

Remember. Poor stupid man, remember.

They won't let him remember.

Ancient babble, endless babble, a cacophonous din within keeps an endless frenzied pace where no remembrance is possible. He often screams above the din to create his own silence. If he screams, he does not hear the voices. When he stops, he hears.

Blasphemies. Abuses. Accusations. Worst of all, plain babbling nonsense.

WOULDIFICOULDIFICOULDIFIWOULDBARLEYANDPEAS
BARLEYANDPEASBARLEYANDPEASBARLEYANDPEASSOMASEMA
SOMASEMASOMASEMASOMASEMACHEESEWITHYOURBREAD
CHEESEWITHYOURBREADCHEESEWITHYOURBREADCHEESE
WITHYOURBREAD...

If he could remember his name, it would stop the voices. He thinks it is in the endless stream of information passing through him every second. He could dip into the stream and pluck his name from it.

He dipped into the stream long ago, and it unleashed hell.

He can't remember his name because he can't get Them to *shut UP!* Ancient babble, endless babble, and an abandoned name tumbling within.

Remember. Remember.

Poor stupid man. Remember.

STUPIDMANSTUPIDMANSTUPIDMANSTUPID MAN...