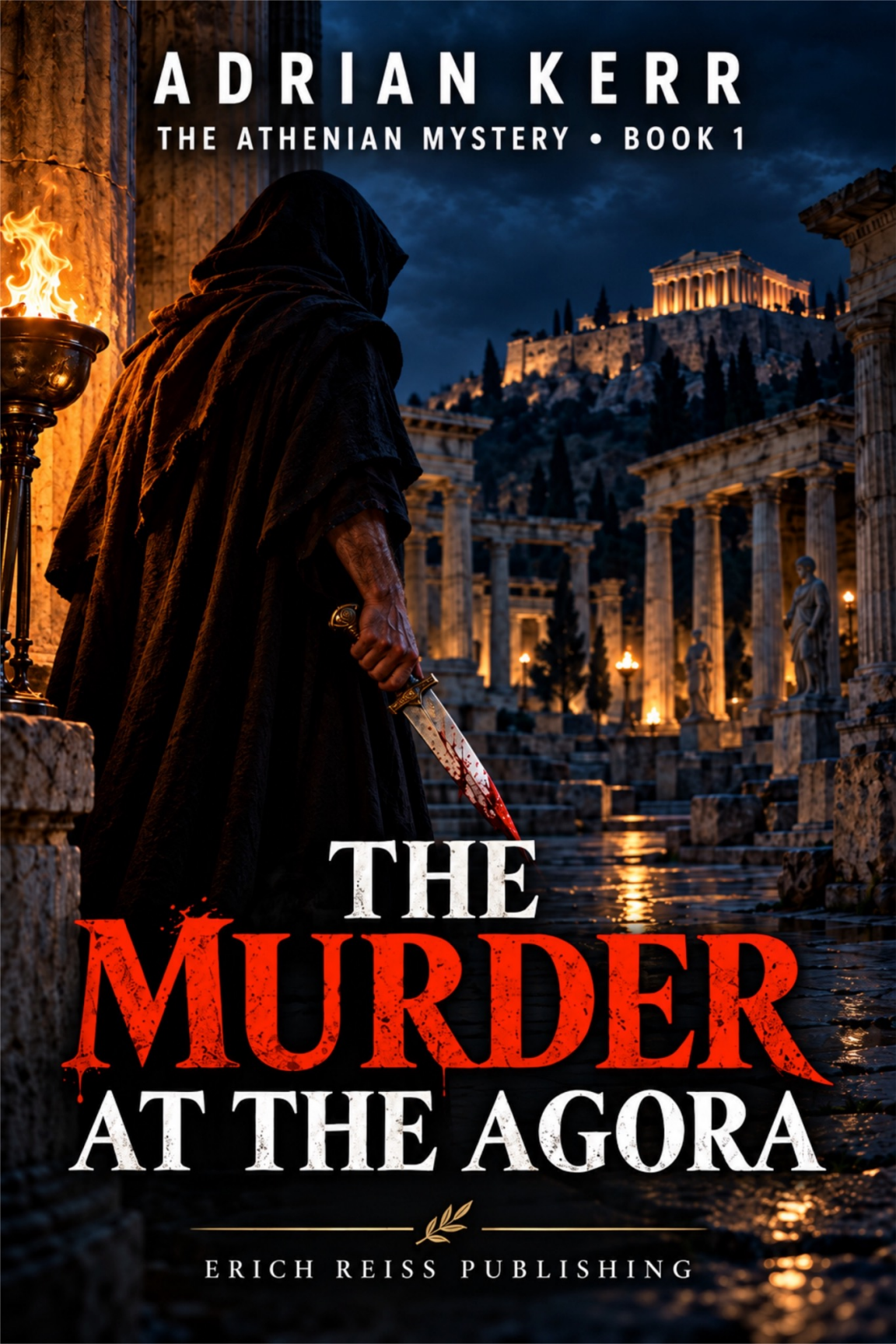
ADRIAN KERR
THE ATHENIAN MYSTERY • BOOK 1
THE
MURDER
AT THE AGORA
ERICH REISS PUBLISHING

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THE ATHENIAN MYSTERY
BOOK 1

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THE MURDER AT THE AGORA
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Adrian Kerr
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For those whose names were left out of the record—and those who went looking for them.

"I neither know nor think that I know."

— SOCRATES, IN PLATO'S *APOLOGY*, 21D

1

Demetrios set a stone weight on the scale, frowned, and set it aside. "That one stays home."

Nikandros had weighed the stone himself the night before. He picked it up and found a chip near its base, small enough for his father to have missed in poor light. Across the courtyard a slave turned the hand mill. Barley rasped between the stones; from the wash area came the sour smell of yesterday's wine jars.

"Take the good set to the Agora," Demetrios said. "And stay out of the speeches until our deliveries are done."

It was the second dawn of Hekatombaion in the archon year of Antidotos. A potter's son named Theoros was expected to speak in the marketplace that morning, and Nikandros had promised to hear him. Theoros meant to challenge the new rule limiting citizenship to children of two Athenian parents. He had also been asking where the allies' tribute went after it reached the city's treasury. Nikandros knew his father would object to the questions more than to a late delivery.

His mother came from the kitchen with a fig and a piece of bread for the household shrine. She caught Nikandros reaching for breakfast and tapped his wrist. "Hestia first." He touched the warm

clay of the hearth altar and waited while she poured a few drops of oil. At the doorway the jar for Zeus Ktesios stood bound with wool, its smell of grain and old oil familiar from childhood. The slave at the mill kept turning the handle. Nikandros took his food and the approved weights and went out into the lane.

Athens was already awake. A fig seller called to the first carts, donkeys pulled against their bits, and dust lifted at every passing sandal. Above the roofs he could see the Acropolis with its old shrines and stones still scorched by the Persian sack. Down in the Agora, men would soon be arguing about what to build there and who should pay for it. Nikandros had a stylus and a fresh wax tablet in his belt. He would record Theoros' words if he could get close enough.

At the family grain stall, Nikandros gave the sound weights to a porter and took the receipts his father expected him to copy. A buyer objected to the price of barley. While the porter explained it, Nikandros glanced toward the bēma. People were already gathering around the low stone platform.

He finished the figures and went over. The Agora smelled of fish, fresh bread, and hot dust. Farmers pushed past with sacks from Acharnai; an olive seller shouted down a rival; a girl with laundry balanced on her head waited for two citizens to stop blocking the lane. Under the Painted Stoa men argued about tribute. Near the Royal Stoa a clerk carried a stack of tablets inside. Nikandros knew Theoros had spoken to men in both places.

Three men in heavy cloaks stood apart from the crowd. One watched the platform. The other two looked over the people nearest it, then drew closer when a path opened. Their sandals were clean despite the dust. Nikandros wrote a brief description on his fresh wax tablet. A herald lifted his staff, and the talk around the bēma began to subside.

Theoros stood beside the platform, plain in his clothing but sharp of face and eye. No fine cloak marked him, no retinue surrounded him. His tunic was belted tight, his hair bound with a simple fillet. He caught Nikandros' eye and gave a brief nod. Nikandros lifted his tablet in answer: he had kept his promise. Then

Theoros rubbed his damp palms against his tunic and turned to face the crowd. Nikandros had never seen him nervous before.

The herald struck the stone with his staff. Men nearest the platform stopped talking; farther back, someone called for quiet. Theoros stepped onto the bēma and waited. His hand tightened on his tunic, then released it. When he began, his voice carried beyond the men standing nearest him.

"Men of Athens," he began, "when we vote silver for our ships, how many of us know who receives it? I have asked. I am still waiting for an answer."

A man beside Nikandros nodded. Another called that Theoros should ask at the treasury. Nikandros lowered his stylus, recording the question before the replies drowned it.

Then Theoros turned to the new citizenship law, passed under Perikles' guidance. "Both parents must be Athenian," he said. "What does it gain us to make a stranger of a boy whose mother is not Athenian? If we examine his family so closely, let us be as careful about the men we trust with the city's silver."

A few men grumbled; one old veteran leaned heavily on his staff and spat. Yet others nodded, their eyes sharp with approval.

Then he returned to the tribute coming from the islands, pledged for the common defense. "Our allies give us silver to keep the fleet at sea. They should be able to learn what it pays for. So should we. A demand for the account is no insult to the ships or the men who sail them."

More men answered him now. Nikandros missed a phrase while trying to distinguish the replies. He had questioned figures at his father's table; he had never considered standing here and asking who kept them. He looked up to see whether Theoros would retreat from the question.

At the edge of the crowd, one of the cloaked men leaned toward his companion. Nikandros could not hear him. The companion glanced toward the lane behind the platform, then shifted aside to let a porter pass. Neither joined the applause. Nikandros kept a finger against the description he had written.

The kērux raised his staff again. "Who will answer?" A man

came forward through the crowd: Philostratos, a breeder of fine horses, his cloak clasped with a silver pin shaped like a mare's head. Men greeted him as they stepped aside. He answered without hurrying, leaving Theoros to wait until there was room for them both.

He mounted the bēma slowly, steadying himself with one hand. An iron ring set with a dark stone caught the light. His voice was lower than Theoros', and he paused until the men still greeting him had finished. Nikandros had heard Demetrios use that silence when a buyer was protesting the price.

"You have had much applause," he began, smiling faintly. "Now let us consider the business you distrust. A fleet must be supplied while men are still disputing who should pay. Someone has to find the money before every question is answered."

A rumble of approval went up from the older men, those whose property made them wary of quick change. Philostratos gestured toward the grain stalls. "Who equips the ships that keep these markets supplied? Who feeds the oarsmen? Men whose fortunes are bound to this city. Demand an account, certainly. But accuse every man who handles silver of theft, and who will risk his money when the fleet next needs it?"

A grain buyer beside Nikandros nodded. Demetrios had complained of ships delayed and barley spoiled at sea; the argument was not easily dismissed. Philostratos pressed on. "Our allies trust a fleet that sails when it is needed. Our enemies fear it. Let either doubt our strength, and speeches will not bring the grain ships home."

Theoros lifted his chin. His hands trembled, but his voice grew steadier. "Then let us see that the silver reaches the ships," he said. "A man who asks to see the accounts has not accused every merchant of theft. Why answer him as though he has? If tribute is stolen by private men, the fleet loses what was promised it. You ask us to trust our strength. Let us know what it costs."

A water-seller stepped forward, offering each speaker a cup. Theoros drank quickly, his lips wet, returning the cup with a nod. Philostratos waved it away, keeping his eyes on Theoros. The seller

withdrew between the men nearest the platform; Nikandros stepped aside to let him through.

"Then show us what was received and what was paid," Theoros said. "Let a man read it and ask where the figures differ. If the account is sound, you can answer him. Why must he prove his loyalty before you will let him read?"

The crowd answered in a mixture of cheers and jeers. Philostratos came down from the platform, making room for Theoros to turn toward the men who had begun calling out.

Theoros raised his arm. "If we are to be called free, let our decrees stand in the sun, not rot in shadow!" The cheers interrupted him. He waited with his hand still lifted, his face flushed, sweat shining at his temples. Nikandros joined the applause, then stopped to catch the next words.

One cloaked man edged closer to the bēma. He moved while the men around him were applauding and stopped scarcely an arm's length from the platform. When he turned, a pale scar showed at the edge of his hood, high on his cheek. Another lingered near a row of hermai, their carved phalluses exposed above the offerings at their bases. The third went toward the council house, keeping close to the men sheltering in its shade.

The herald glanced from the crowd to the platform. Sweat beaded on his bald head. He lifted his staff, looked toward the men still calling out, and lowered it. Nikandros shifted the tablet against his forearm so no passing elbow would smear what he had written.

Theoros spread his hands. "The men who row deserve an answer too. So do the households that wait for them. You ask those men to trust the city with their lives. Let them ask what was done with the silver voted to support them." A man at the back repeated that to his neighbor.

Theoros drew a breath and raised his arm again. "If Athens will call herself free, then let every man's voice weigh as heavy as silver!" A man shouted that he had said enough. Theoros turned toward him. "I have asked to see an account. I intend to keep asking."

A shove caught Nikandros between the shoulders. His tablet struck the man ahead, who turned angrily, blocking his view of the

platform's step. Nikandros lifted it clear. Beyond the man's shoulder a dark fold of cloth moved beside Theoros. Later he would hear men speak of iron beneath a cloak, of poison in the water seller's cup, of punishment sent by the gods. He had seen no weapon.

Theoros' eyes widened. His voice stopped in the middle of a word. His body jerked, and his hand went to his side. When he pulled it back, his fingers were red. The man in front turned toward the platform. Blood spread through Theoros' tunic; he pressed his palm against it again.

Theoros staggered, his lips shaping a word—phōs, light, or perhaps only a gasp. His knees struck the stone. He tried to catch himself, missed, and fell with one arm beneath him, his cheek hitting the bēma. Men shoved to see. Someone screamed; farther back, people were still cheering. A woman pulled her child away as Nikandros forced past the man blocking him.

He reached the platform and dropped beside Theoros. Blood came from one narrow opening below his ribs. Nikandros pulled his cloak against it and pressed with both hands. The linen beneath was already soaked. "Stay," he said. "Theoros, look at me." His friend's eyes moved toward him without settling. Blood worked around Nikandros' fingers. He pressed harder, waiting for Theoros to answer. The eyes stopped moving.

The herald scrambled up the bēma, shouting for order, for priests, for the archon basileus. A man near the step said miasma—the pollution of blood unjustly shed. Others repeated it. People who had been pushing closer began to draw back. Nikandros heard prayers, then someone telling him to take his hands away. He kept them where they were.

Messengers ran toward the Royal Stoa for the archon basileus and toward the Eleven. The crowd surged against the edge of the platform before the herald could clear a way.

A man pushed forward. "Who touched him? Who was near him?" Another cried, "Where are the cloaked men?" Nikandros looked up. He could find none of the three among the faces turning toward the platform. One man insisted he had seen a dagger. Another pointed at the place where he said a cup had fallen.

The priests marked a boundary around the bēma with chalk, forbidding any to cross until purification rites could be made. Nikandros was still beside the platform, his hands wet with Theoros' blood. Beyond the line the crowd drew back. A priest motioned him toward a gap, taking care not to touch him.

Nikandros stood when the priest motioned again. He drew his soaked cloak away and gathered it over one arm. As he stepped back, he noticed a dull edge in the crack at the base of the bēma. He crouched. Whatever it was had caught between the stone and the packed dust. He eased it out with the tip of his wax stylus, taking care not to break it.

A thin curl of lead lay across his fingers, greasy to the touch. He recognized the folded metal: a katádesmos, a binding tablet. Men scratched curses on such strips and hid them in wells, tombs, or the earth, asking that an enemy's tongue or fortune be bound. He glanced toward the priest. The priest was still looking at the body. He could put it back now, or open it before someone asked what he held.

He unrolled it carefully. The letters crowded one another, some cut deep enough to show on the back. Four names emerged, three common enough to offer little guidance. Beside the fourth he made out a place: Hagnous. He had seen those letters on one of his father's account tablets, beside a corrected tally. He followed the strokes without touching them. The last letter disappeared into a crease. A more practiced reader would have to confirm it.

A gust of wind stirred dust across the square. The priests sprinkled water and held the citizens back from the bloodstain. Nikandros slipped the lead tablet into the fold of his tunic, close against his chest. His fingers lingered there. The priest was watching him now; Nikandros rose and went through the gap.

His father would ask why he had taken it. Nikandros tried the answer he might give: it lay where Theoros had fallen; it bore names; one place looked familiar. None explained why he had hidden it from the priest. He should have held out his hand while the metal was still there.

Beyond the boundary, men were arguing about the cup. Nikan-

dros looked down at the blood on his hands. He could still feel Theoros beneath them, the small movement of his chest before it stopped. He wiped his fingers on the edge of his tunic, then covered the place where he had put the lead.

Above the roofs, the old stones of the Acropolis caught the morning sun. His father would still be waiting for the receipts. Nikandros took out his tablet, found the unfinished record of Theoros' speech, and made room beneath it for the letters he had just read. He whispered into the hot air, though no one heard:

"I will know the names beneath the names."

2

By noon the paving around the bēma was white with glare. Trading continued beyond the chalk boundary. Porters shifted their loads to pass the priests of Zeus Agoraios moving along it with laurel and water. Men who had watched Theoros fall were telling latecomers where they had stood. Nikandros watched a priest rinse a dark patch without quite removing it.

The herald's voice had gone hoarse. It broke when he named the archon basileus, and a man asked him to repeat the instruction. Witnesses were to give their names. Messengers went toward the Royal Stoa and the Eleven at the prison.

A scribe took the names while a prayer was repeated behind him. Nikandros moved away with his bloodied cloak over his arm. When he folded it, a stiff edge scraped his wrist. At the fountain he rinsed his hands until the water ran pale, then worked at the blood beneath his nails. A woman pulled her child away. "Míasma," she said. He lowered his hands into the water again. He had nowhere clean to dry them.

He was still rubbing his fingertips when someone spoke beside him.

"Theoros has been taken home."

A leatherworker Nikandros had seen beside the platform stood there, eyes red-rimmed, lips pressed tight. "Cholargos," the man added. "His father lays him out now."

Nikandros took his tablet from the fountain's edge. The lead beneath his tunic had slipped sideways. He straightened it through the cloth, then stopped when the leatherworker looked at his hands.

"His father has been asking who was beside him," the leatherworker said. "I told him someone tried to stop the blood. Go if you can. He will want to hear it from you."

Nikandros had been looking toward the Royal Stoa. He turned the other way. There would be time to give his account when he returned. He gathered the cloak clear of the dust and took the road toward Cholargos.

Dust worked into Nikandros' sandals on the road to Cholargos. A boy trotted past, dragging an olive branch. At a crossroads a herm wore a fresh garland. Beneath it lay a shard scratched with a curse: May the tongue that lies be bound. Nikandros read it twice, then moved on with his hand against the lead beneath his tunic.

Theoros' house stood among houses much like it, its doorway open to a courtyard where a fig tree leaned toward the light. Women's voices reached the lane. One called Theoros' name; another took up the lament when the first could not continue. Nikandros stopped outside. He knew the doorway, yet he had to make himself approach it.

A neighbor woman came to the doorway. Her gaze went to the cloak, and she stepped aside before he could give his name.

The household was preparing for the prothesis. Theoros lay on a low board, washed and anointed, his eyes closed and hair combed smooth. A clean cloth covered his feet. His mother sat at his head, veil thrown back, cheeks raw. She beat her breast while the women answered her lament, then stopped to touch her son's hair.

At her side, Theoros' father stood too straight to be steady, shoulders broad from years of clay-work, cuticles still ghosted with the pale dust of his wheel. The bloodstained tunic lay folded beside the bier. He had kept it after the women washed his son. When his

eyes found Nikandros, his mouth worked once before words emerged.

"You were there?"

"I was near," Nikandros said, looking at the folded tunic. He wished he could say more.

"Then tell the basileus." The man looked at the cloak. "Was he still alive when you reached him?" Nikandros nodded. Theoros' father waited until he could speak again. "Tell him that too. I want to know what happened before they brought him home."

Nikandros looked at Theoros. The women had cleaned the blood from his cheek and closed his mouth. He wanted to explain that the face on the board was not how his friend had looked when he fell. It seemed a cruel thing to say to the people who had washed him. He kept silent.

Theoros had nodded to him before the speech. Nikandros had lifted his tablet in answer. He remembered making notes, but could not bring back a complete sentence now. He looked at the tablet under his arm and did not open it.

Two men in plain cloaks waited beneath the fig tree. One had ink-stained fingers and a wax tablet. He cleared a place on the bench to write; his companion asked Nikandros to come nearer.

"Name?" Ink-Fingers asked.

"Nikandros, son of Demetrios, of Alopeke."

"You saw the killing?"

"I saw its ending. I saw Theoros fall."

"You saw a blade?"

"No." Nikandros gripped the edge of his own tablet. "Three cloaked men stood near the platform. One had a pale scar on his cheek. Someone shoved me, and a man blocked my view of the step. I saw cloth move beside Theoros, but no hand."

Ink-Fingers scratched once across the wax. "You will repeat this at the Royal Stoa before the basileus. Go there when you leave this house."

The other man looked at the cloak, then at his tunic. Nikandros kept his hand away from the lead. "Have that cloth washed," the man said. "And wash yourself before entering another household."

They left as another lament began. By the doorway, Nikandros waited to say goodbye. Theoros' father had returned to the bier and laid a hand on his son's feet. Nikandros went out without disturbing him.

People waited beneath the Royal Stoa's plain Doric columns at the Agora's northwest edge. The archon basileus heard accusations of homicide here. Nikandros asked a clerk which men were witnesses and where he should stand.

A clerk with a shaved head took his name. Men were comparing their accounts in the shade: one interrupted whenever another mentioned the cup, while a third insisted they should wait to be called. Nikandros moved away from them so he could still remember his own view of the platform.

Inside, the basileus sat on a plain chair, iron-gray head bent above his hand. He watched each speaker, then waited for the clerk to finish. Once he made a man repeat an answer because he had spoken before the last was recorded.

One man described a flash beside the bēma. Another said Theoros had cried out before he fell. They disagreed about the cup: water, one insisted; wine, said the next. Neither had tasted it. The basileus asked where each had stood. A witness who had spoken confidently about the cup admitted that two men were between him and the speaker.

When his name was called, Nikandros put his tablet against his side and went forward. He bowed, aware of the men behind him waiting to hear what he would say.

"Speak," said the basileus.

Nikandros began with the three cloaked men. He described the scar, the shove, and the man who turned in front of him. Twice the basileus asked him to go back to the moment his view was blocked. Then he told the basileus what he had felt while pressing his cloak against Theoros: a small opening below the left ribs, with blood coming fast through it. "I saw no blade," he said. "I cannot tell you whose hand made the wound. I saw a water seller offer the cup. I do not know what it held." The clerk recorded the location of the injury.

"And after?" asked the basileus. "You knelt to staunch the blood. What did you pick up when you rose?"

Nikandros could feel the lead against his chest. He had rehearsed the answer about the wound, not this. The clerk lifted his stylus and waited.

"My cloak," Nikandros said. "I had pressed it against the wound."

The basileus looked at him before nodding to the clerk. "Remain within reach of this office. You may be called again. If you remember something else, bring it here. When someone asks you who killed him, tell them what you have told me: you did not see the hand."

The clerk marked his wax. Nikandros stepped back, hands trembling until he forced them still.

Across the stoa, a man in a smooth cloak watched him. He smiled when their eyes met. Before Nikandros could decide whether he recognized the face, someone crossed between them. When the way cleared, he had left.

Nikandros moved toward the entrance. A tall man stopped beside him, and the clerk behind them rose. Nikandros recognized Perikles before he spoke.

The men at the entrance made room. Perikles waited for the clerk to sit again, his gaze on Nikandros' cloak.

"The basileus has your statement," Perikles said, glancing at Nikandros' bloodied cloak. "If you remember more, bring it to him."

The basileus looked up, then returned to the clerk. Others had heard Perikles' advice. There was nothing in the words Nikandros could call a threat.

Nikandros nodded, wondering why Perikles had singled him out.

Perikles went farther into the stoa. A man who had been waiting against a column followed him.

Thucydides son of Melesias stood with companions at the square's edge. One leaned close to speak, then looked toward Perikles. Nikandros could not hear them. He wondered how much of his

statement had reached men who had not been waiting among the witnesses.

He left before anyone called him over. The basileus had his name and his account of the wound. The lead remained beneath his tunic. He had been asked directly, and he had answered with the cloak.

He did not carry the strip to the Eleven. It might be míasma, he told himself, something he should understand before asking officials to touch it. But Hagnous was the name that kept him from turning back. It might lead to his father's accounts. He wanted to know how before putting the lead into another man's hands.

So instead he sought a copyist near the council house. Men paid him to read agreements and copy accounts; Nikandros had once brought him a damaged receipt for Demetrios. Inside, the air smelled of papyrus, beeswax, and the damp cloth covering the ink pot.

The older copyist looked up, gray hair combed in a neat fringe. He moved his sheet away before Nikandros could set down the cloak.

"I need you to read some cramped letters," Nikandros said. "There is a place I cannot quite make out."

"On what?" the copyist asked. Nikandros touched the fold of his tunic. The man's gaze changed. "If it is a binding tablet, you should take it to a priest."

"Look first." Nikandros put the fee for reading a receipt on the table, then another coin beside it. He kept his fingers on the second coin until the copyist drew the sheet farther from them.

"Show me." The copyist counted the coins and half-closed a shutter. In the passage beyond, Nikandros could hear a man dictating an agreement.

Nikandros laid the lead on the bare wood. The copyist examined its folded edge, then fetched a reed pen. In the reduced light, Nikandros could hardly distinguish the letters he had followed at the bēma.

"Where did you find it?"

"Under stone." Nikandros watched the copyist's face. The man waited, but he added nothing about the platform.

The copyist eased the fold open with the reed and turned the strip toward the light. Nikandros leaned forward, then drew back at a warning finger. The man read the whole inscription before pointing to the names.

"Four men. Three without a father's name or a place to distinguish them. You will find others called the same." He pointed with the reed. "The fourth has a deme. I have seen it in accounts, though not often. Who asked you to have this read?"

"Hagnous?" Nikandros asked. "That was how I read it."

The copyist laid down the reed. "If you repeat this, say only that I read the letters. I do not know the men."

"You read a damaged receipt for my father. You told him what you could make out. That is all I want." Nikandros took his hands from the table.

A pause. Then softly: "Hagnous. Yes. An inland deme. I have seen it in freight accounts brought up from Piraeus. Men need not live beside the sea to own a share in a ship."

Nikandros had hoped he had misread it. Hagnous stood in his father's account and on a curse found where Theoros had died. That did not make his father guilty. He wished the thought had not come so readily.

"Make a copy," Nikandros said. "Keep it in your drawer. Give me an hour before you tell anyone I came."

"Men come here asking about other men's accounts," the copyist said. "I do not always know who sent them." He copied the strokes, folded the scrap, and slid the lead back. "I can keep the copy. I cannot promise you an hour."

Nikandros folded the lead and watched the scrap go into the drawer. Someone else could repeat the letters now.

A shadow crossed the shutter. The copyist lowered his voice. "Take the back passage. Put the metal away before you open the door." He waited until Nikandros had covered it, then pointed him toward the rear room.

Nikandros took the back passage. A man dictating in the next

room stopped when he passed; Nikandros kept walking. Outside, the alley was narrow and bright. A boy leaned against the opposite wall with a basket held loosely at his hip. It seemed empty. A red thread was tied around his wrist.

The boy smiled. Nikandros turned sideways to pass a jar. When he looked back, the boy still watched him. He had made no move toward any of the rooms.

Nikandros made himself walk past the next two doorways. At the wider street he joined a group following a cart. He looked back from among them. The boy had not come into view.

At Alopeke a woman sorting figs greeted him, then stopped when she saw his cloak. Demetrios was weighing grain in the storeroom, the stone weights arranged along his bench. He finished the measure before looking up.

"You were at the stoa," Demetrios said. It was not a question.

"I spoke what I saw."

"And what did you see?" Demetrios kept a hand on the measure. He asked that about disputed deliveries too, waiting to hear what Nikandros had counted himself.

"Theoros fell. I reached him before he died. I could not stop the blood." Nikandros set his tablet down, but kept the cloak against his side. "They asked whether I had seen the knife. I had not."

Demetrios turned a polished stone in his hand. "Then do not let anyone persuade you that you did." He put it down and looked at his son's hands. "You smell of blood."

"I have washed twice."

"Your mother will have water brought." Demetrios moved the tablet away from the grain. "You'll sleep in the small room tonight. She will burn sulfur at the threshold."

Nikandros nodded. The ritual would sting the eyes; better that than neighbors whispering míasma tomorrow. He stopped beside the hearth-altar, keeping his stained hands away from the clay. Even here he could not forget the blood beneath his nails.

"Father." Nikandros waited until Demetrios faced him. "Do we trade with Hagnous?"

"We buy from men of Hagnous sometimes. Why?"

"One of the tallies was corrected. Did the missing grain turn up?"

Demetrios wiped a few grains from the bench into his palm. "A corrected tally need not mean a shortage. You have counted a load twice yourself and found a different number. Look at the account before you ask who has stolen from it." He emptied his hand into the measure.

"Then show me the account," Nikandros replied. Demetrios turned back to the scales. Nikandros waited, but his father said nothing more.

That night, after his mother burned the sulfur, Nikandros lay awake in the small room. Smoke still stung his eyes. He held the lead near the lamp and tried to read the fourth name again. The copyist had confirmed the deme. The name before it remained a man he could not identify.

He put the strip into a crack in the roof-beam and moved the lamp away. No metal showed from below. After lying down, he reached up once to make certain he could find it.

At dawn the kērux came through Alopeke. Witnesses were wanted at the Royal Stoa, especially those who had stood near the bēma or seen a weapon. Nikandros sat up as a neighbor asked whose names had been taken.

Nikandros told his mother he was going to the fountain. Once outside, he took the road toward Piraeus. The copyist had seen Hagnous in freight accounts; someone at the harbor might know whose. He left the lead in the beam. He had his wax tablet and stylus, and a name he could ask about without showing the metal.

At the Piraeus, Nikandros had to wait while a cartload of timber crossed his path. The air smelled of salt, pitch, fish guts, and incense burnt to Poseidon. Rigging sang above the shouts of stevedores. Men carried amphorae toward the storehouses; others passed sacks down from a ship, calling each count to a man with a tablet. Nikandros watched until he could follow the order of the work, then walked along the quay.

He read the names on the ships as he passed. On a freshly moored vessel, red letters on the stern gave him the one he wanted:

Nereid of Hagnous. He stopped beside a bollard and read it again before approaching the men unloading her.

A broad-armed guard moved into his path. Nikandros stopped short of the gangplank, leaving room for a sailor with an empty basket to pass.

"What business?"

"I copy accounts," Nikandros said quickly. "Merchants need their tallies kept."

The man grunted, unimpressed. Behind him sailors unloaded amphorae marked with an owl. Nikandros watched a tally keeper count them onto a tablet. He could not tell whether they belonged to the city or to a merchant. He would need more than a painted mark to know.

A lean merchant came down the gangplank, holding his cloak clear of the wet planks. He corrected the tally keeper, then looked from Nikandros' tablet to the jars. He spoke without coming nearer.

"Who is he?" the merchant asked.

"Some scribe's son," the guard replied with a shrug.

"We have a clerk." The merchant pointed toward the quay. "Tell him to find work elsewhere." He waited while the guard moved between Nikandros and the tally keeper, then went back to the ship.

Nikandros stepped back. He had offered a service the merchant did not need. There was nothing in that refusal he could complain of. Yet he disliked the way the guard kept watching after he had turned away.

As he turned into the maze of stalls, a boy darted between barrels, a red thread around his wrist. The same thread he had seen in the Agora. The boy paused just long enough to glance at him, then vanished among the sailors.

Nikandros' stomach tightened. Theoros lay in his father's house, waiting for burial. Had the boy followed him from the copyist's passage, or had someone sent him ahead? The harbor suddenly offered too many places to hide.

From behind a stall Nikandros looked back at the Nereid of Hagnous. The guard still watched him. He turned away, meaning to lose himself in the bustle, but felt the man's eyes follow him.

He quickened his pace between the stacks of amphorae. A carrier shouted, and Nikandros stepped aside before the man's grain sack caught his shoulder. Oil had slicked a patch of planking. He crossed it carefully, looking for a way back toward the open quay.

"Nikandros."

The voice came from behind stacked timber. A man stood in the gap, his cloak drawn close despite the heat. Nikandros could see his mouth and one hand against a plank. He had not called to anyone else.

"You have been asking about the Nereid," the man said. His voice scraped, and he paused to clear his throat.

"I was looking for work," Nikandros said. "I copy accounts."

"Then copy your father's." The man stepped nearer. Nikandros smelled pitch on his cloak. "Go home. Count barley. There is no work for you on that ship. If you come back asking the same questions, we will take you to the men who can answer them."

A cart passed the gap. The man went behind it, keeping to the far side. When Nikandros moved to look, two carriers were following the cart. He could not see which way the cloaked man had turned.

Nikandros reached toward his chest before remembering the lead in the roof-beam. He lowered his hand. The man had known his name and his father's trade. He went into a narrow lane between warehouses, intending to come out beyond the ship and take a different way home.

Footsteps echoed behind him. Quick. Sure. Closing.

He broke into a run. Sandals slapped stone, crates rattled as he shoved past, a dog barked wildly at the chase. He darted into an alley that stank of fish, squeezed past a broken cart, and burst into open sunlight.

The footsteps faltered, then stopped.

He stopped beyond the alley, breathing hard, and turned. No one came out after him. He could hear gulls and a man calling for a rope. He waited, looking for another exit through which someone might have gone.

Something clicked against stone inside the alley. A shard of

pottery slid into the light and stopped near his feet. He stooped and read a single word, freshly scratched:

Silence.

He closed his hand without thinking. The edge caught his palm; he opened his fingers and saw blood collecting along the cut.

Beside the Long Walls, he looked at the shard again. He could take it to the basileus, but he would have to explain why he had gone to the harbor. At last he let it fall into the dust and pressed his cut against his tunic. When he looked back, he could not distinguish it from the other broken pieces.

The sun was low when he reached Alopeke. At his father's gate he waited until a slave carrying grain had passed out, then entered. Work had continued while he was away. Jars stood ready for delivery, and the hand mill was turning. He had been listening for pursuit so long that he noticed these ordinary sounds only after the gate closed.

On its shelf beside the household shrine, the jar of Zeus Ktesios sat with its wool tie neat. But someone had touched the clay. A single dark fingerprint stained the rim, still wet with oil.

Nikandros stopped. His mother had wiped the jar clean that morning. He looked toward the lane. Someone might simply have touched it while entering the house. After the harbor, even that possibility troubled him.

Inside, Demetrios was weighing grain. He looked up, saw Nikandros' hand pressed against his tunic, and put down the weight. His eyes went to the doorway before returning to his son.

"You came back late," his father said.

"I went to the harbor." Nikandros kept his cut hand low. He could have told him about the ship or the man who knew his name. "I was asking about a shipment."

His mother came with a bowl of figs. She looked toward the jar and put the bowl down too sharply. Figs rolled across the floor. Leaving them, she fetched water and rubbed the oily mark from the rim. Nikandros watched her rinse the cloth and use it again after the stain had gone.

That night the cut caught against the blanket whenever he

moved. He laid his hand outside it and listened to the house settling. Once he reached up to the beam, touched the hidden metal, and lay down again.

He had not asked his mother who had entered the courtyard. He wished he had done it while she was still beside the jar.

Before dawn the next morning, Nikandros returned to Cholargos for the procession. Lamps burned inside Theoros' house. The men waited to lift the bier; his father had not yet let them.

People gathered in the dark lane, speaking quietly as they took their places. Theoros lay on the board, wrapped in a cloak, his head crowned with olive. A bearer asked whether they were ready. Theoros' father bent to straighten the cloth at his son's shoulder. Nikandros saw his fingers catch in the weave and remain there. The bearer waited until he had loosened them one by one.

His mother followed the bier with her veil thrown back and one hand caught in her hair. His sisters kept close to her, taking up the lament when her voice failed. At the junction, men waiting with lamps moved toward them. Some joined the procession; others held their lights higher to let the bearers see the turn.

Ahead walked the men. Potters from Cholargos, fellows of Theoros' father, carried lamps and a small jug for the graveside offering. One stumbled where the lane narrowed. His lamp struck the stones and broke with a crack that made heads turn. He stooped for it, then left the pieces and hurried after the others.

The procession crossed the Agora and passed the bēma. The chalk boundary was still visible. Nikandros looked at the place where he had knelt, then at the men carrying Theoros. A stain remained in a crack despite the washing. Some citizens murmured prayers. A stallholder held his shutter halfway open until the bier had passed, then lowered it again.

At the Kerameikos they halted beside the grave. The bearers lowered Theoros and moved back for his father. He poured wine and scattered barley. A few grains caught in the cloth; he brushed them free before stepping away.

Nikandros stood at the edge, shoulders pressed on all sides. A

voice murmured near him: “He will not be the last.” He turned but could not tell whose lips had spoken.

As the earth covered the cloth, the women’s voices fell. A man behind Nikandros began speaking about the next Assembly, then stopped when someone touched his arm. People shifted to give the family room. Nikandros stayed where he was until a bearer asked him to move so the last earth could be brought forward.

He thought of the lead in the roof-beam. The copyist had kept another record of its letters. Nikandros wondered whether his requested hour had lasted even until he reached home, and who might have read the scrap since.

That afternoon, citizens gathered at the fountain near the Prytaneion for katharmos. Nikandros waited his turn behind two men rinsing their hands. Laurel smoke drifted across the basin. A woman turned aside, holding a place for her child.

The water stung the cut in his palm. He kept his hand beneath it, remembering how he had pressed the cloak and waited for the bleeding to stop. A neighbor saw him shiver and muttered míasma. Nikandros stepped aside before the man could say more. He dried his sound hand first.

At the altar of Zeus Agoraios, a ram struggled against its handlers while the basileus stood beside the priest. Its bleating broke short under the knife. Blood darkened the stone. The prayer asked that the killing be answered with justice and that the city be spared further bloodshed. Nikandros watched the basileus bow his head.

But beneath the chants came whispers:

“Perikles was seen near the Stoa that day.”

“Thucydides smiled when the news spread.”

“Perhaps no hand at all, but the boy’s own arrogance.”

Nikandros looked for the men speaking. One was repeating a rumor to someone who asked what had happened. Neither had mentioned the wound. He wanted to interrupt, but the prayer had not ended. The priest’s voice rose, and those nearest the altar bowed again.

Nikandros pressed his injured palm against the fold of his tunic. Every rumor gave him another reason to keep the lead hidden, and

another reason to bring it forward. That night, after sulfur smoke faded from the threshold and the house grew quiet, he lay awake staring into darkness. The tablet remained in the roof-beam above him. His palm still burned where the shard had cut him.

He tried to recall Theoros before the fall: his damp palms against his tunic, the nod when he saw the tablet. Then the mark on the jar returned, and his mother scrubbing it after the stain had gone. He would ask her who had entered the courtyard while he was away.

He reached for his writing tablet and set it beside his sandals. He would take his notes when he was called again; he had heard enough men borrowing from one another's stories. The lead would stay in the beam until he could examine his father's accounts. He lay down with his sound hand beside the tablet.

Outside, footsteps sounded in the lane, then stopped. Nikandros lifted his head and listened.

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End of reading sample

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