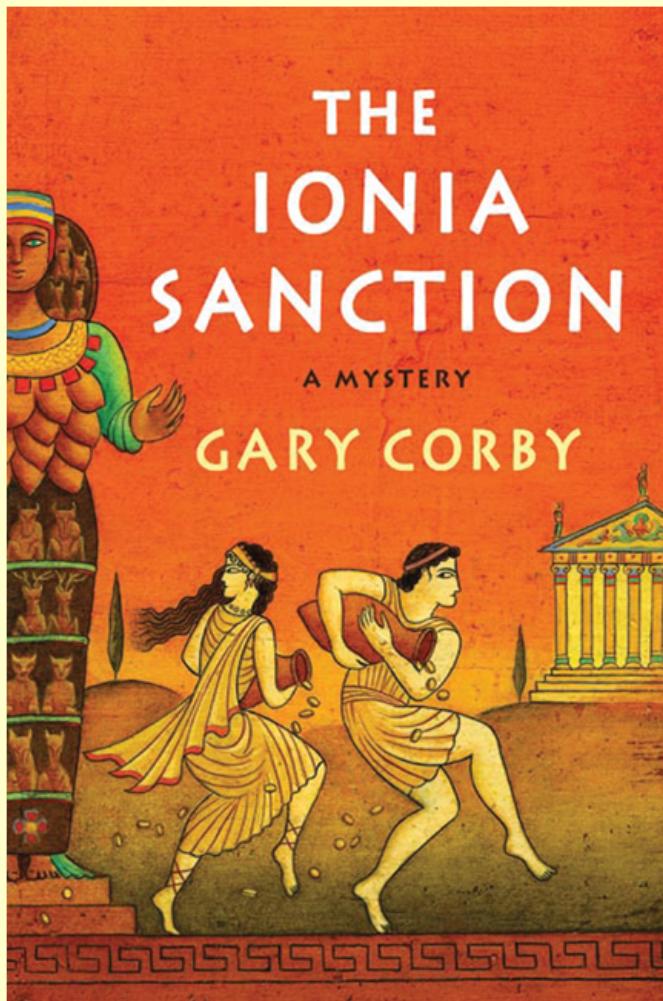


**READ IT FIRST**



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# 1

*Evil deeds do not prosper;  
the slow man catches up with the swift.*

I ran my finger along one foot of the corpse, then the other, making the body swing with a lazy, uncaring rhythm. I stared at his feet, my nose so close I went cross-eyed as the toes swung my way.

“He was like this when you found him?” I asked.

“I touched nothing,” Pericles said, “except to confirm Thorion was dead.”

“Are there any sons?” I asked.

“One, of twenty-four years. He’s at the family estate, according to the head slave.”

Thorion had died hard. He hung from a rope tied to a cross-beam in the low ceiling. A stool lay toppled below. The fall was nowhere near enough to snap his neck; instead he’d strangled. He must have changed his mind after the air was cut off, because there were deep red scratch marks in his throat where he’d tried and failed to relieve the pressure. Yet his arms were long enough to have reached the beam to pull himself up and call for help. Why hadn’t he?

There was no answer to my question, except the high-pitched

wails and long, low moans that had assaulted my ears ever since I arrived. They came from the women's quarters across the inner courtyard. The wife and girl-children had begun screaming the moment they'd learned their husband and father was dead. They would screech, tear their clothes, and pull their shorn hair every waking moment until he was cremated. The caterwauling meant that by now the whole street knew Thorion was dead.

I stepped across to the narrow window facing onto the street. A small group stood below; citizens, and their slaves holding torches, the black smoke floating up to me with the distinctive bittersweet aroma of burning rag soaked in olive oil. The crowd would have entered the house by now but for the two city guards who stood at the door. The moment they were allowed, these neighbors would cut down Thorion and carry him to the courtyard, laying him out with his feet pointing toward the door to prevent the dead man's psyche from straying. Then the women would come downstairs to wash the body and dress it for eternity, with no more than three changes of clothes, as the law demands. They would place an obol in his mouth, the coin as payment for the ferryman of the dead, Charon, to carry Thorion across the Acheron, the river of woe.

The pressure would be building on the guards to let through the crowd and allow the rituals to begin. I might have only moments left to learn what I could.

"Did you know him?"

"No, not really." Pericles handed me a torn scrap of parchment. "This is the message which brought me."

THORION SAYS THIS TO PERICLES. I HAVE BETRAYED MY  
OFFICE AND MY CITY. NEWS OF A THREAT TO ATHENS.  
COME AT ONCE.

"It's not the sort of message anyone could ignore," Pericles said. "The head slave led me up here to Thorion's private office,

where we found him dead. Is it reasonable for a man who intends suicide to summon someone he barely knows, purely to make him discover the body?"

"It might be if the man summoned is you." Pericles at the young age of thirty-three was recently elevated to leadership of the new democracy. Though he held no official position, already men came to him, to seek his approval before any important decision was made. I knew Pericles fairly well, might even claim to be a minor confidant, which was no easy position. The last time Pericles and I had been together in the presence of death, it had very nearly resulted in my own execution.

"The slave boy who carried the message says Thorion had a scroll with handles carved as lion heads open before him. Thorion appeared upset, shocked even. It seems obvious whatever this news is, it's written in the scroll, but there's no such scroll here. I've looked. How could it have disappeared? Something is wrong."

"You're correct, something is indeed wrong. His feet are dry." I pointed at the dry floor beneath the corpse. "Where's the urine? Everyone knows a dying man releases whatever he holds."

Pericles shrugged. "Not everyone does; not if they relieved themselves shortly before they died."

I lifted the hem of Thorion's chiton, which fell all the way to his ankles. I kept lifting until I found what I sought, at thigh level. I took a big sniff.

"He let go all right. It's on his thighs, but it didn't run down his leg."

Pericles stepped forward for a closer look, careful not to touch the body. He grunted. "You're right." He cast about the room, and so did I. Ceramics and pots and amphorae and jars stood on every possible surface, on benches and tables and even on the floor, giving the room more the look of a small warehouse than a man's private office. They must all have been

imported; none had the look of the famous Athenian red figure pottery. Many appeared delicate and had small bases, yet not a single one was out of place or knocked over.

"Whatever happened, there wasn't a fight."

I lifted each pot and shook to see if the missing scroll had been dropped inside. Only one amphora rattled, and it proved to hold three old coins, not even Athenian.

I got down on all fours and crawled about, paying particular attention to the areas where a man might ordinarily stand or sit. Pericles watched from the entrance as I nosed about like a hunting dog searching for scent.

"Here, under the desk. The floor is damp, the smell is obvious."

"Let me see." Pericles, not one to fret about form when an important matter was at stake, shoved me aside and checked beneath the desk for himself. He surfaced to say, "It seems you are correct. Thorion died at his desk."

"And likely was murdered to prevent him passing on this intelligence. How could a comfortable citizen in the middle of Athens come to learn of a threat to the city?"

Pericles said, "Do you know what a proxenos is?"

"A citizen who acts for another city."

"A citizen who represents the interests of another city in its dealings with Athens. Thorion is . . . was . . . the proxenos for Ephesus."

Ephesus is a major city, across the sea on the east coast of the Aegean. The Ephesians speak Greek—they're as Hellene as we Athenians—but their city lies just within the Persian Empire.

"You think the summons had something to do with Ephesus."

"Don't you? Every proxenos receives regular news from his client city."

I nodded. "If your theory is good, then Thorion received letters today."

Pericles summoned the head slave of the household.

The man was thin, balding, and middle-aged. He shook with dread as his dead master hung before his eyes, and the most powerful man in Athens stared at him grim-faced. At twenty-one I was unimportant, and certainly less threatening to a slave, so I said, "Did your master receive any letters or packages today?"

The slave turned to me and said, "Oh, yes sir. The regular courier from Ephesus arrived at dusk, straight from the boat. He still smelled of the sea."

"You've seen this man before?"

"The same man always brings the mailbag, sir."

I glanced at Pericles. He glanced at me. This was progress.

"Was that when you last saw your master alive?"

"No sir, he was alive when I announced the second courier."

"The *second* courier?"

"The first left, taking the mailbag with him back to Ephesus. The master stayed in his office. I was summoned again later to bring a boy, and the master gave him a note for Pericles."

Pericles nodded.

"Then a second courier walked in as the boy went out the door, I hadn't even time to shut it. The second courier said he had an urgent message, sir, from Ephesus."

"What did Thorion say to that?"

"It's never happened before, sir. The master was startled when I told him."

"This second man must have given a name."

"Araxes, sir. He said his name was Araxes."

"Did he too smell of the sea?"

The slave thought for a moment. "Yes sir, now that you mention it, he did. He stayed longer than the first—I suppose he had more to say—and when he walked down the stairs he told me the master didn't wish to be disturbed until supper. I opened the door for him and he left."

"You didn't think to speak to your master after that, to check with him?"

"No sir, I always obey orders."

I sighed.

"Describe the second courier," I ordered.

"He had white hair," the slave said without hesitation.

"You mean he was old?" Pericles asked.

"No sir, I'd guess his age to be thirty, maybe thirty-five. The hair wasn't gray, it was white."

"Was he Hellene?" I asked.

"He spoke like us."

"What did he wear?"

"A chitoniskos. Twasn't worn either. It looked new."

The chitoniskos is cut short at the shoulders and thighs for easy movement. I wore one myself. Since the material is never cut to fit the body, there are always extra folds of material in which you could hide anything, such as a scroll for example.

"So the murderer tricked his way into Thorion's office. He slipped a loop around Thorion's neck, strangled him, and strung him up to make it look like suicide. Then he tucked the missing scroll inside his clothing and walked out."

"Oh, sir!" said the slave. "Did you say murderer? You're not suggesting the courier had something to do with the master's death are you? No, it's impossible."

His tone intrigued me. "What makes you so sure?"

"Because he spoke so nicely. I've never known a man who minded his pleases and thank-yous so well."

"You liked him?"

"Yes sir, who wouldn't?"

Pericles said, "Nicolaos, the murder of Thorion is important, but not as important as recovering the contents of the scroll. The safety of Athens depends upon it."

I nodded and rubbed my hands. "Any chance of sending a slave to Piraeus for a jar of seawater?" I had touched a dead man,

and so would be considered ritually unclean and not permitted to eat until I'd washed my hands in seawater. The call from Pericles had made me miss dinner, and I was hungry.

Pericles shook his head. "The city gates closed long ago."

Why couldn't Thorion have died at a more convenient time? That was the way my luck went these days. But—"Say that again?"

Pericles wrinkled his brow. "What? The city gates closed long ago? It's true. So?"

"So Thorion was killed at night, *after the city gates closed*. The murderer is trapped inside Athens."

There was silence while Pericles absorbed that.

"The gates open at dawn," he said, his manner snappier than before, his back straighter. He glanced out the window into the dark night. "Can we catch him before then?"

"In a city as large as Athens? Not a hope in Hades, unless the murderer makes a mistake, and this man's no idiot."

Pericles' shoulders slumped.

"We could keep the gates closed in the morning," I suggested.

"Lock in Athens during the day?" Pericles shook his head. "The people wouldn't stand for it."

I nodded unhappy agreement. "Besides, that would tell the killer we're looking for him. He'd only go to ground until we were forced to reopen the gates. No, we have to let him come out into the open."

"You have a plan," Pericles deduced from my tone. "What is it?"

"The slave said the killer smelled of the sea, as did the real courier. Their boats docked at the port town of Piraeus, and they walked uphill to Athens. I'd be willing to bet our man will be lined up with the normal crowd to walk downhill back to Piraeus at first light. All we have to do is watch the traffic pass by."

"There are two roads to Piraeus," Pericles pointed out.

"So there are. I suggest that tomorrow morning, there will be a problem with the gate to the northern road."

Pericles nodded. "That can be arranged. You want everyone down the south road?"

"The south road is enclosed every step of the way within the Long Walls. If he goes that route then he can't escape; he'll be trapped in a tunnel where we control both ends."

"Brilliant," Pericles said.

"I'll be at the south gate to watch every man who passes," I said, pleased with myself. There were those who said I was too young and inexperienced for my position. This operation would prove them wrong.

I could imagine Pericles' reaction if I lost the scroll because I'd overslept. Yet dawn was far enough away that the wait would be tedious, particularly since I couldn't eat.

I solved the problem by shaking awake a slave when I returned to my father's home, and ordered the bleary-eyed man to stand over me—so he wouldn't fall asleep himself—and wake me in the predawn. I was so tired I went to sleep immediately, despite being on edge about my mission.

The slave got his revenge by kicking me in the stomach when the time came, but I didn't mind. I'd completed my two years of compulsory service in the army as an ephebe; broken sleep and rough awakenings had been the norm then.

One glance upward showed me the rosy-fingered dawn, as Homer would have called it, lighting the otherwise dark sky. I rose naked and wrapped the short material of a gray exomis about myself from the right side and tied it over my left shoulder. Such clothing is favored by artisans; I would be merely another workman, waiting at the gates to make my way to Piraeus for the day's employment.

I hurried through the dark streets, stepping in more than one pool of sewage, soaking my sandals in the stale wash water, the urine, the feces, and the rotting, rancid leftovers that neighbors had tossed out their doorways. I cursed as my feet plunged into yet another sticky, squelchy mess up past my ankles.

At the south gate, men were already lined up, shivering, yawning, and scratching themselves. Two guards stood at the head, waiting for Apollo's rays to appear in the east, when they would pull back the gates so the men could shamble through. I had visited these guards after leaving Thorion's house. They knew of my investigation and what to expect.

I walked from the end of the line in the direction of the guards, reminding myself every few steps to amble, to not appear as if I had any purpose, nodding or wishing good morning to the men I passed.

*"Kalimera."*

*"Kalimera. Good morning."*

Most nodded back; some gave me queer or hostile looks. They probably thought I was a line jumper, something that could end with a fistfight. To them I explained I was looking for my workmate: had they seen a man with white hair? They would shake their heads and I would pass on.

Among one group were some women, haggard-looking, with unwashed hair and wearing patched linen. I couldn't imagine why they were waiting, until it occurred to me these were probably drudges whose men were too ill to work, or couldn't be bothered. One of them looked me up and down and smiled, then she blew me a kiss and said, "Gorgeous." The few teeth she retained were black. I felt myself blushing; had I been staring?

It was all too easy to pass by my suspects without even breaking step. Some wore hats, and these I had to stare at a little longer. Others held the leads of donkeys harnessed to carts, or sat atop protesting mules. A very few had horses, a luxury item.

The artisans among them had a slave or two to carry their tools and wore an exomis like mine. The common laborers wore nothing but short leather cloaks and surly expressions. The slaves stood together and told jokes. What man would rather be a slave than free? Yet the slaves did not seem hungry, and the free men whose only skill was to sell their labor looked thin and their faces were taut—I could see the ribs beneath the flesh, so perhaps slavery was to be preferred over being useless.

These men, as I say, were easily dismissed, and if a man owned slaves it was all the more easy to ignore him, because no one arriving in an afternoon can both murder someone and acquire slaves before the next dawn. The front of the line came ever closer, and still no Araxes. Had I made a mistake?

There were only two in the line before me now, a man leading a donkey, and a flattop cart pulled by a horse. Apollo peaked over the hills, and on cue in the weak light the guards lifted the heavy bar and carried it to the side.

Where had I gone wrong? The only thing I could think was that Araxes had arrived late, or perhaps wanted to hide himself in the crowd. I would stand by the gates and watch as the men passed through. Despite the chill I felt the irritating trickle of sweat in my armpits and down my back.

The man with the donkey had dark hair and beard. He grinned as I passed.

The distinct aroma of dead fish surrounded the horse cart. It was probably on its way to collect the morning's catch. Two men sat at the front, the one on the left held the reins. He was slumped forward and wore a full-length cloak to keep out the chill. The man on the right was fast asleep, leaning back in the seat with his hat over his face.



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