

Chapter One

The candle burned low and the sun was bloated, and the town of Kouloundros did not stop. After their long shifts at the local mines and fisheries, everyone had different ways of resting. Parents watched their children play in the streets from their balconies. The young men, their tempers frayed, brawled over card games on street corners. The elderly knitted or whittled in their rocking chairs. It all came to a standstill, though, when the government carriage creaked past.

Government carriages were rarely the harbingers of good news. Sometimes they carried grains from richer places, but those almost never had armed guards. Other times, they were to show off prisoners and criminals as warnings. But when there were two Peligians, that was the worst of all. A cloud of pestilence and malevolence hung over their heads. They were more feared than bandits and more hated than vermin. They were tax collectors.

They steadily moved down the tightly packed line of homes, sparing none of them. The older of the two always knocked first. Most took a few minutes to answer, but this home, the door opened immediately, though only an inch. The stench of boiled oysters wafted out. A haggard, pinched man peeked through, sticking his clenched fist through the slot. "Here it is, it's all there," he said, and he tried to shut the door, but the tax collector stopped him.

"Calm down, sir. Can we at least introduce ourselves first? We know your name, Mr. Plutus, I think you should know ours."

He flashed a bright smile, and the man opened the door some more. "O-okay," he said.

The older man pointed at his younger associate. "This here is Zoe Chronis, and I am Castor Aleksiphus. There're a few files we need to review. Do you mind stepping outside?"

Mr. Plutus shook his head, and Castor shrugged one shoulder. "That is fine, sir, perfectly fine. Whatever puts you most at ease. Now, Mr. Plutus, our records show that you are 32 years old, and you've been married for 18 years. Is that true?"

He nodded, and Castor marked a check on a form. "Okay...you are the owner of Plutus' Fisheries, and you reported 547 obols in income last year."

"Yes, that's all. Uh, excuse my asking, what's the point of all this?" Plutus asked. He scratched at the Adam's apple protruding from his neck. "Listen, if you think I lied or anything, I promise--"

Castor laughed and waved his hand dismissively. "This is all routine, I assure you. We just have to verify a few things. Ms. Chronis, can you get me the Kin File?"

It was a thick scroll, bound by cord. "So it says here," Castor said, unfurling the scroll. "You've had...three children, yes? As I'm sure you're aware, there has been a rash of people underreporting how large their families to reduce how much in taxes they pay. Therefore, we need to confirm this."

Deep in the interior of his home someone spoke too rapidly for Castor to catch. Plutus shouted, "Not now, dear!" and stepped outside, shutting the door behind him. A swollen stomach poked out from beneath his salt-stained shirt. He asked, "Alright, what've you got?"

Castor smiled, not letting his suspicion through. "I only need you to confirm the information you've provided us. Now, your first child's name was..."

"Thaddeus."

"How did he die? And at what age?"

"He was thirteen, and he was kicked in the head by a horse."

"Right, and your second son--"

"Jason died of the fever when he was eight."

"Yes, and--"

"Callia died three months ago. She was two and drowned."

"Terribly sorry for your loss there, Mr. Plutus." Castor glanced back at his companion. Zoe kept latching and unlatching a bundle of scrolls. It was probably to hide her discomfort. Given enough time,

she'd get use to the way some islanders talked about dead children in the same tone as the weather. "Now, Mr. Plutus, it says here that the body of little Callia was never found. Is that true?"

He licked his cracked lips. "Yes, that's right. That is right. They say the sharks might've eaten her."

Inside the home something shattered. Plutus started to speak, but Castor stopped him with an upheld hand. A woman cursed loudly. She started to bang together what sounded like pots and pans, but that couldn't drown out muffled crying.

Neither of them spoke. Plutus used the back of his sleeve to wipe the sweat from his upper lip and said, "That, uh, that's our cat."

"A cat?" Castor asked.

"Yes, a cat."

"Hm." Castor handed his papers to Zoe. "Well, you have the 10% income tax per person, the 5% self-employed tax, the twenty-five obols business tax, and the thirty obols property tax. So, that is a grand total of 190 obols."

Plutus' hand shook, hard, but he handed the coins over without dropping any of them. Castor counted out ten golds and nine silvers and deposited them into a pouch marked with the League's crest. "Excellent. Thank you for your time and patience, Mr. Plutus. Have a good day."

He tried to shake hands, but the door slammed shut in his face instead. Castor sighed and returned to the carriage, Zoe following close behind. "Sir, you realize that wasn't a cat, right?" she whispered.

Castor stopped, not wanting to get too close to the guards, and pretended to write something down on his wax tablet. "Yes, Zoe, I'm well aware. You want to go back and demand another 54 obols from those people?"

"That's our job to do so, yes," he said. Zoe was a young lass, with short black hair in a small bun, and only three ink markings on her arms. He hadn't read her dossier yet, but Castor figured he'd find a

wealthy father who paid her commission. Although, bought officers tended to not be so irritatingly dedicated to proper procedures.

“It’s not our job to investigate tax fraud. We’re called *collectors*. Besides, Ms. Chronis, do you know what 54 obols can do for a person?” When Zoe didn’t answer, Castor said, “54 obols can buy a two year food for six months. Not good food, but food. And did you see that man’s stomach?”

“I didn’t want to say anything, but I thought these people were starving,” Zoe said. She glanced back to make sure Plutus was still gone, and whispered, “That man had a beer belly bigger than some brewmasters.”

“Oh Ms. Chronis, I was like you once. I asked Dr. Kriost about that. He told me, that the human body produces juice in the stomach to digest food. When the body doesn’t eat anything, that juice accumulates, eventually causing the bloated belly.”

A guard yelled for them to stop talking and hurry up. Castor ignored them and kept pretending to scribble. “But by all means, Ms. Chronis, try and collect the proper amount of taxes.”

Zoe still didn’t answer. Castor put an imaginary period on the end of his imaginary sentence and approached the carriage, ignoring the guards’ griping.

Inside the carriage were 26 barrels, each labeled with a different letter. Castor hoisted himself onto the back-gate, tossed the pouch inside the “P” barrel, and hopped off. Zoe still stood halfway, glancing back and forth. “Don’t stand in place for too long, you’ll sink into the muck,” he said, moving already to the next home, and Zoe half-sprinted to keep up.