

CHAPTER ONE



The day the debt collectors came, I had started my morning early, pruning the mint leaves and lemon balm in the courtyard with Melitta, the oldest of our servants. We were waiting for rain. For days, the air had smelled thick with the promise of thunder, yet it continued to evade us. Instead, a dense humidity slowed every person in Prousa. I kept to the shadows of the house or to the portico and the courtyard, where breezes could billow through from outside regardless of the weather. Here, vines climbed up the pillars while light shone through the open roof and across the frescoes painted on the white stone walls.

Of all the paintings that adorned that house, my favorite was one of Apollo. The god lay in the long grass, a lyre in his hands, while nymphs and mortals gazed up at him in adoration. Some days, if I studied the image closely enough, I could almost hear the melody as it rose from his strings. I could allow myself to believe I was in the presence of an almighty god, the beauty of his music flowing over me. In such moments, I was as close to peace as I ever came in that house.

“I will go to the agora myself, mistress,” Melitta said as she added sprigs of rosemary to our collection. “That kitchen girl is useless. She still lets them charge her far too much.”

“Thank you.”

Melitta was older than my mother, and her confidence when addressing me likely came from her long years serving the family. She had served Morsimus’s mother, Eriopis, who had since passed, but Melitta continued her service to me. She had taken me under her wing when I had first arrived as a new bride, showing me the ways of the house.

“Perhaps I will come with you,” I replied. “Morsimus has not yet returned from last night’s festivities.”

“Gambling” was what I really meant, but there was no need to say it. Having lived here since before Morsimus’s birth, Melitta knew my husband better than I did. Her opinion of him was not a favorable one.

As the words left my lips, however, I cursed myself for saying his name aloud, for it was as if the gods had heard and laughed. For that was when the hammering began.

“He cannot open the door.” Melitta’s muttering echoed my own thoughts. It was not the first time this had happened. There were bolts on both the top and bottom of the door, and how easily Morsimus could handle them in any given moment was a solid indication of how much he had drunk.

“You cannot do this. This is my home! This is my home!” His voice rose to a shriek that sent a ripple of fear through me. “This is an outrage!”

No matter how many beatings I had received, I had not grown numb to their effects. The anger in his voice sent my pulse soaring. At times, merely the creak of that wooden door was enough to have

me seeking a safe place. I would often flee to the kitchen where our servants gathered, as Morsimus liked to keep his beatings private. I had already learned my husband could not be appeased when in such a state. An offering of wine only made the beating come faster, while offering him my body made him call me a useless, barren whore. This time, however, was different. Morsimus was not shouting at me but at someone else.

“Mistress, come. We should head to the gynaeceum.”

I heard Melitta’s words, but I did not move. The women’s room was no sanctuary for me. If Morsimus wanted to hunt me down, little things like tradition and etiquette would not stop him. He would drag me from that room by my hair or beat me where I stood. So I remained rooted to the spot, dreading hearing my name on his lips and wondering how close he would come to breaking my bones this time.

It was not my husband’s voice that sounded next.

“We will return at sunset,” said a deep and resonant male voice.

“Please, no,” came my husband’s response.

“You will be gone by then.”

The door slammed shut, and I waited, breath held, muscles tensed.

“Mistress, please.” Melitta begged me to seek safety.

“You go,” I said, handing her the bunch of herbs. “Go. I will seek you out afterward.” *After the beating.* Those were the words I didn’t say. I would seek her out to apply salt water to my wounds. To rub mallow into my broken skin and crushed flowers of sideritis to the areas that would bruise most deeply. “Please, Melitta. Go.”

The old woman’s eyes glazed with tears as she nodded once, then darted out between the pillars of the courtyard, only a second before Morsimus appeared.

My husband was a bulbous man. His skin was pitted and blotched red from years of drink, his belly rounded, and dark chest hair protruded from the top of his robe. Had a stranger passed us in a street, they would have assumed him to be my father, yet he was less than a decade older than me. Usually, my gaze went to his hands; would they be already balled to fists or flexing repeatedly as though to discharge the energy his fingers contained? But this time, my eyes lingered on his face. A bright purple bruise was blooming across his cheek and jawbone, while blood trickled from a thin split above his eyebrow.

This was not the first time Morsimus had come home battered, but on prior occasions, he had retreated to his room, declaring that he was not to be disturbed other than for meals and reappearing only once the swelling had subsided and his bruises yellowed. I would thank the gods and goddesses for the reprieve during such days, even though tension filled my every move and I prayed that his recovery would be slow.

Never before had he come directly to me in such a state. For once, his fingers did not flex nor his hands ball into fists, yet still the chill of the impending beating held me rigid.

Rather than hitting me, however, Morsimus spoke.

“We are to leave today,” he said.

I studied my husband’s face, absorbed by that single trickle of blood that meandered downward and into his eye. I wondered how he could not wipe it away. Were his wounds so bad that he could not feel it? Or did he simply not care?

“Did you not hear me, Otrera? I said we are to leave. Now.”

That was when his hand clenched, and I shook myself back into the moment. I did not ask why we had to leave. I knew. He had gambled away all our money. He was in trouble.

“Where are we to go? Should I tell the servants? They can begin to pack for us,” I said.

“The servants are gone too. They are taking it all.”

I stepped back, unable to steady the flow of air into my lungs. He had lost the servants. I could barely hold the thought in my head for what it meant next. As his wife, I was also his property, no different from the men and women he had just discarded without a second thought. What was to be my fate?

“Stop standing, and get moving,” he spat. “We need to be gone before sunset.”

CHAPTER TWO



Ninniya. That was the village we were headed to. The name rang with a faint chime of familiarity, though it took me a moment to recall why. My mother-in-law had been brought there when she was newly wed and complained about the place. The family had maintained a small house there, for reasons I could not fathom. Perhaps Morsimus knew this day would come—a day when he would have angered so many in Prousa that he would have no choice but to flee to a place where even the debt collectors dared not go.

“We cannot leave Melitta,” I insisted as Morsimus swept past me, opening up drawers, hunting for any last coin or gem he had not yet pawned. “She will not cost much to keep. Nothing, even. She barely eats.” *She does not even have teeth to eat with*, I considered adding, for it was true. The old woman had more fingernails on one hand than teeth in her mouth, and yet her smile was a thousand times more appealing than my husband’s. “She has been with you since you were a child. Please, Morsimus. She tended your mother in her last hours. You cannot send her to those wolves. Besides, a servant is a useful tool.”

“She will share your portion of food,” he said eventually. “And I will not pay for any funeral rites for her.”

“I will fetch her now,” I said and raced off, sighing with relief. I could not live alone with him and expect to survive.

Calling in his very last favor, Morsimus acquired two mules to carry our belongings to the new village, though we took very little. The furniture was too heavy, the pottery too delicate. Most of the jewelry and silver he had already lost in games of *petteia* or worse still, *knucklebone*—a child’s game, based only on chance and the favor of the gods.

When the satchels were filled with as many clothes and blankets as they could hold, I gave the house one last look before we headed west.

Slowly, we trudged down rocky paths lined with olive trees, and while my fear was tangible, a strange flicker of excitement accompanied it. This was my first trip out of Prousa since my marriage.

My mother had told me stories of the gods and the lands they favored. She had told me about the temple to Apollo in Delphi and the great citadel of Athens, named after the goddess Athena in return for her gift of an olive tree. Mother told me of islands where the sand was so white and gleamed so brightly, it could be confused for the sun and of places where the forest was so dense, it would seem like night had fallen the moment you stepped inside. As a child, I had longed to visit those places. But Ninniya, I would soon learn, was no such wonder.

Melitta dragged her heels on the path behind me, but it was Morsimus who struggled the most to keep pace. His cheeks glowed with the exertion, his breathing a constant, grating wheeze. Before that day, the most he’d ever carried was the weight of his own ego.

“Let me help you,” I said as the climb took an upward turn and

he winced with every step. I did not care that my husband was in agony, but I did not wish to spend unnecessary nights out in the open, exposed to wild dogs and wilder men.

“I do not need your help,” he spat as he paused and rested his hands on his knees. “It is you who have brought this upon us. Bitch.”

Normally, I took this insult silently, bowing my head and keeping my gaze lowered. This time, however, I stepped away, out of his reach. I could not let the comment pass without question. Not when he was the one who had done this to us.

“How is that?”

Morsimus glanced up, the darkness in his eyes. Had he possessed the strength, he would have gone for me, but sweat soaked his skin and streamed down his face, and he could barely move.

“Your purpose was to give me a son. If you had only done your duty, we would not be here today. I would not have sought comfort in the dens. I would not have had to drown my worries in the taverns or seek pleasure at the tables. This is because of you. You barren, wretched whore.”

His words hit their mark. A deep ache spread through my chest. Knowing that any further response would earn me a beating once Morsimus was recovered, I turned away and left him to struggle alone with the climb.

It was late when we first stopped to eat. Melitta had filled a satchel with as many loaves of bread as she could carry, all of which she carried herself, along with a small satchel containing her personal belongings. Morsimus dropped to the edge of the path, like a pebble to the bottom of a riverbed, while Melitta and I moved a little deeper into the grove. There, the trees shaded our bodies from the sun, and the distance shaded our words from my husband’s ears.

“What do you know of Ninniya?” I broke a piece of bread from a loaf and handed it to Melitta. “Have you visited?”

She shook her head. “No, though the old woman spoke of it frequently, always with disdain.”

I did not ignore the irony that came with Melitta referring to my late mother-in-law, Eriopis, as old, for there could not have been more than five years between the pair.

“What did she tell you about it?” I asked instead of commenting.

“Bits and pieces. It was not for a woman of her kind. I remember her saying that. No decent woman lived in such a place.”

I attempted to understand what she meant. I was married and had been pure until the day I had been taken by Morsimus. I had prayed daily to Apollo, my father’s god, and gave offerings at every festival. I had also offered occasional prayers to Cybele. My mother’s grandparents had been believers in the Phrygian gods, and though she offered public devotion to Zeus and Hera and all the Olympians, in private, she and I would dance together and offer our footsteps to the great mother Cybele. But it was a practice I barely continued now, for I was not often inspired to dance. Still, the question stayed with me. Was I a decent woman? Probably not by Eriopis’s standards. Melitta continued speaking.

“It is a village. Tiny. It does not have its own polis or council. From the way she spoke of it, it is a forgotten cluster of houses barely remembered by the city-state.”

That part did not surprise me. My grandparents came from a similar-sounding village, one ruled by the inhabitants with as much or as little governance as they pleased.

“And the stench. That was something else, I believe,” Melitta continued. “Yes, I remember now. In days when the sewage filled the streets of Prousa, Eriopis would hold a scented cloth to her nose and

say it was nothing compared to Ninniya. That, according to her, was the most putrid place on earth.”

For all Melitta’s skills, understanding when a situation should be handled with delicacy was not one of them. I could feel the blood draining from my cheeks, and yet she persisted.

“There is no agora for people to engage in trade, for they have so little, and there are no public baths either. The local women would go to the stream to wash, she said, though Eriopis insisted she only bathed at home.”

When Melitta finally fell quiet, I swallowed, trying to dislodge the churning fear growing within me. Of course, Eriopis would not have seen fit to bathe in such a manner, no matter how clear the water was. But I had loved to swim in rivers as a child, to duck and dive into the rippling currents, screaming with laughter, not knowing the gift that freedom was. Or how soon it would be taken from me.

“Mistress, about your husband’s words.” Melitta’s voice brought me back from my thoughts. “They were cruel and said in anger, and you must not believe them. You are still so young. You have countless childbearing years ahead of you.”

Of all the insults Morsimus threw at me, that one was the only one that could cut me the same way as his rings sliced the skin on my cheek.

In all the years of our marriage, my bleeding had not stopped once. I had not once felt the flutter of another heartbeat within me or watched my belly bloom with new life. Perhaps that was why I took his beatings without a fight. Because deep down, I knew his words contained a grain of truth.

“You will see.” Melitta squeezed my arms, her hands rough with breadcrumbs. “You are barely eighteen. The gods may well have wonderful plans for you.”

I forced a smile the best I could, but I could not bring myself to speak. I believed the gods had forsaken me the day I married Morsimus. How wrong I was.