

CHAPTER 1 – THE TRIAL OF SOCRATES

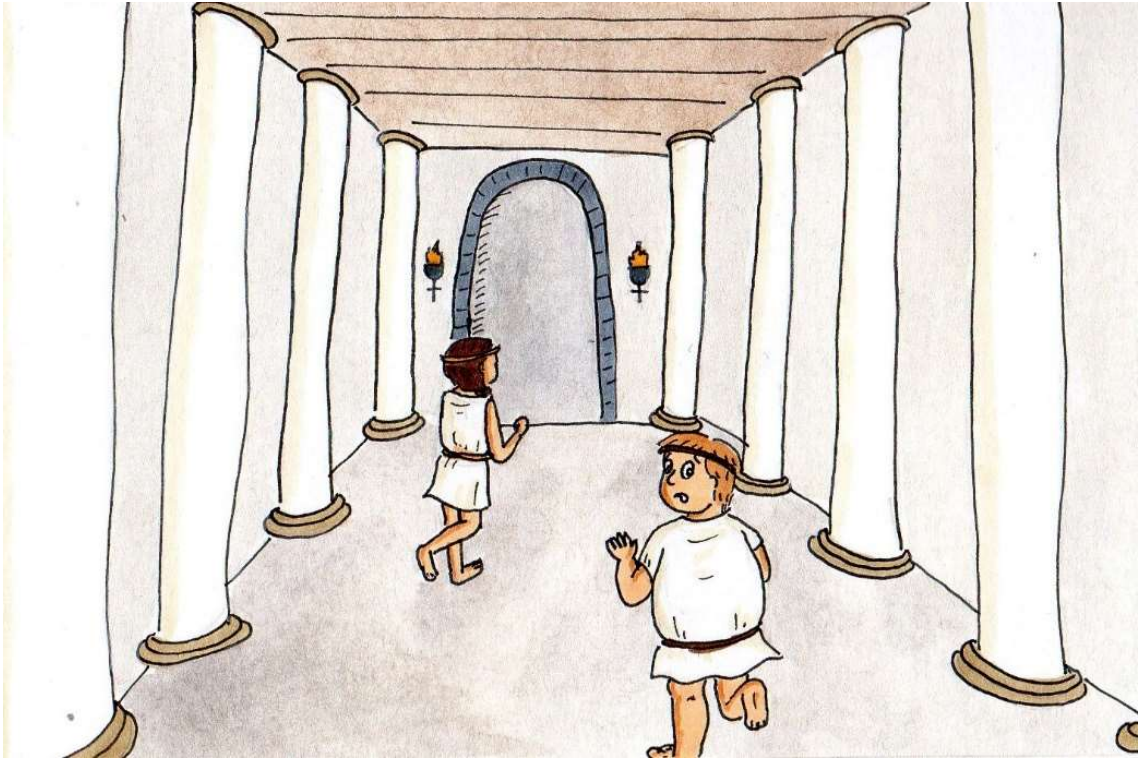


Delphi and Plato ran through the crowds. They dodged between legs, ducking under white cloaks and treading on people's sandals, until they got around the back of the court buildings, three dramatically painted marble structures amidst the bustling chaos of the Agora.

Say it like this!
A-guh-ra

Delphi was not usually allowed in the Agora. It was an important part of the city – it was the city's main market, where many of the temples were and it was where the men of Athens would gather to buy, sell, talk and spend their time. Of course, as soon as Delphi heard she wasn't allowed there, she had done her best to explore it at every opportunity.

She led Plato between two shops and to a back alley, where she found what she was looking for – an entrance. It looked half closed off and was probably only used for slaves to deliver things. There was no one there now – all the guards would be distracted by all the excitement at the main entrance. Delphi went towards it first, looked around cautiously and then waved for Plato to follow.



They passed under a stone archway and into a covered walkway stretching to both their left and right. Delphi could hear the crowd on the other side of the wall in front of them. It sounded like the trial had been going for some time. She glanced both ways, trying to work out which way they should go and that there weren't any guards around. They would be in big trouble if they were caught here.

She could feel her heart pounding like a drum in a festival. Delphi was sure there must be a way into the main courtyard but which door? They hesitantly tried a doorway at random and they found themselves in a small kitchen.



There seemed to be no one around but there was certainly a lot of mess. There were big, dirty copper pans sitting on a big table and some gently smoking logs amongst all the ash in the fireplace. She looked around, but it looked like a dead end.

Suddenly, she heard footsteps from behind them, coming up the corridor they had just left. Someone was coming and there was no way out! What should they do?



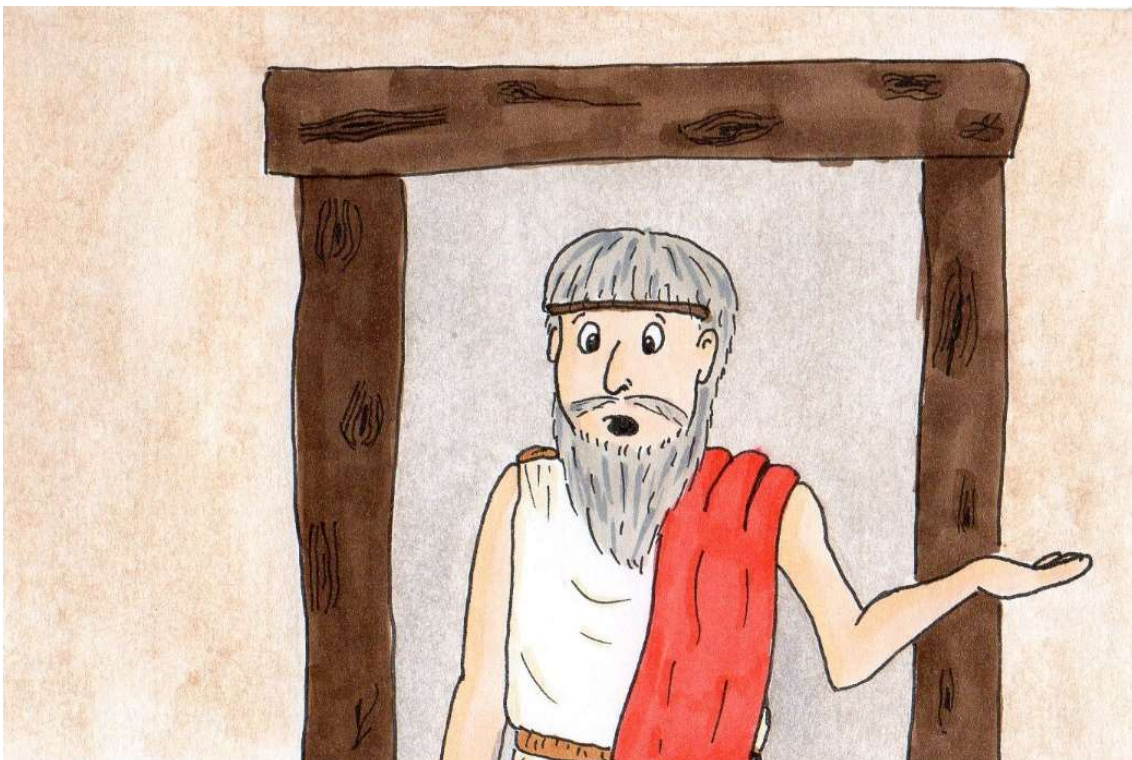
Different options ran through Delphi's brain like athletes in the Olympic games. She could bash them over the head with a copper pan. Risky – she'd only get one chance and she wasn't sure she could reach if the guard was tall. How about throwing a burning log from the fire at him? That would probably just make him angry and get them into more trouble. Hiding under the table? That would probably work for all of two and a half seconds...

The man turned the corner and froze as he saw the two children staring at him. He may have stopped because one of them was fiercely clutching a copper pan. To Delphi's surprise he wasn't a guard – he was a rather pudgy middle-aged man with a grey beard, who seemed more worried about seeing them than angry.

Before Delphi could speak, or even hit him over the head with the copper pan, Plato sniffled from behind her.

"Phaedo?" Plato stepped forward, looking relieved. Delphi relaxed a little.

Say it like this!
Not like Play-Doh!
Fee-doh



"Plato, my boy," the man muttered, quietly. "What are you doing here? I thought you were told to stay at home." The man was looking at him with concern and kept shooting curious glances at Delphi.

"I... I know..." whispered Plato. "But... I saw Delphi and..." he gestured vaguely towards Delphi, who was slowly putting down the frying pan. "And... we thought we could sneak in and see if we could... watch... or something..." he tailed off, and Delphi realised at the same moment that perhaps this had not been a good idea. Since when were children allowed to watch criminals being sentenced to death? They weren't even supposed to be in the Agora!

Phaedo was shaking his head, but wasn't immediately telling them off, so Delphi realised that this was a chance to find out what was actually going on.

*What could Delphi ask
to find out more about
Socrates and his trial?*



One of Delphi's thirty-seven questions pushed its way to the front of her mind.

"Are they really going to sentence him to death?" she asked, slightly terrified of the answer.

Phaedo nodded slowly. "But he doesn't seem worried about it all! If it was me, I'd be wetting myself! But he seems quite happy about it!" He appeared to think for the first time. "Why are you..."

"But what's going on?" Delphi cut him off. He sighed.

"He has to defend himself. He's making a speech now to try and persuade everyone to let him go. He had to suggest what his own punishment should be." Phaedo laughed suddenly. "But he's not taking it seriously! He's just said that his punishment should be getting free dinners for the rest of his life. He thinks he deserves a reward - not a punishment!"

"Are they going to... kill him today?" Plato asked, his voice wobbling. Phaedo shook his head.

"If he's found guilty, they won't kill him until the ship from Delos returns." Delphi had heard about this. The holy ship sent to the island of Delos was part of the festival to the god Apollo that had just finished in the city. It was traditional that the city was kept pure during the time that the ship was away, so there were no executions carried out until it returned. It meant that Socrates wouldn't be killed until the morning after the boat returned. That might give him a month to live.

Delphi's next question bubbled up immediately. "What did he do wrong?"

"I don't think he's done anything wrong," Phaedo answered, quietly. "But it's probably not going to matter. They want to find him guilty. He's asked one question too many, to people who don't like to be questioned. There's no getting round it – he's annoying. Or rather he's annoyed a lot of important people."

"But people love his questions and his ideas, don't they? I heard people come from all over to talk to Socrates. Everyone thinks he's really clever!"

"They do, but..." Phaedo paused and rubbed his eyes. He looked tired. "Some people don't like it when you ask them questions. People look stupid when they can't answer them. A lot of people would prefer it if he just did as he was told and didn't think about things quite so much!"

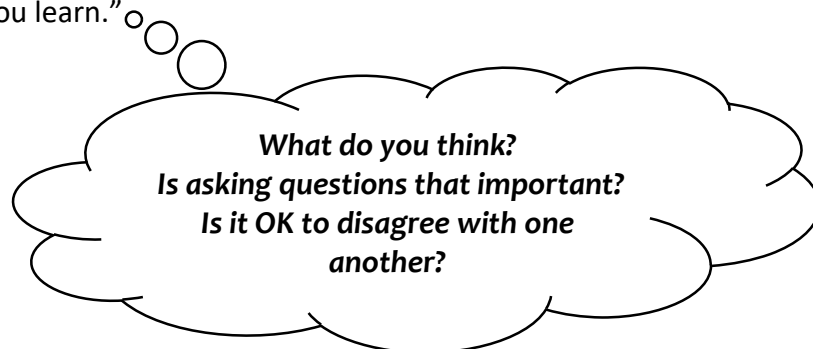
"But that's just... stupid," Delphi said. "Did he really get arrested just because of that?"

She could hardly believe someone could get into such trouble just for disagreeing with people and asking questions. Was that really such a bad thing to do?

Phaedo looked like he couldn't quite believe it himself. "They've said it would be OK if he just agreed to stop doing it, but Socrates would never agree to that." Delphi's mouth fell open.

"So, he could just go? Does Socrates think that asking questions and disagreeing with people is so important that he'd rather die than stop doing it?" Phaedo seemed to think for a minute, shrug and then nod.

"That's what he does. He tries to find the truth in things. I agree with him because how else will you know what's true? He thinks that asking questions and disagreeing with people is the best thing you can do because that's how you learn."



The more Delphi thought about it, the more she realised what it was she had liked about Socrates. He didn't let anyone do his thinking for him. However much trouble he got into, however much people might punish him for it, he would say what he thought was best. He would do what he wanted to do. Delphi really liked that idea. It felt important.

Delphi threw up her arms in confusion, making Phaedo step back a little.

"But it's all just so stupid!" Delphi yelled, slightly louder than she'd meant to. The man put a gentle hand on her shoulder and she managed to stop herself from asking anything more.

"It's complicated and this is hardly the time or place. You shouldn't even be here! Now I only came in here to get him a drink of water, and I better get back or else the guards will start to wonder where I am. I won't tell you to go home," he said, looking over at Plato. "But don't let anyone see you."

"Can we come with you?" Plato asked.

"No!" Phaedo replied, quickly. "Stay here, out the way, or else we'll all be in trouble!" With that, he gestured them to be silent and filled the cup of water from a jar on the table. He left the kitchen, his shadow from the window's light following him out.

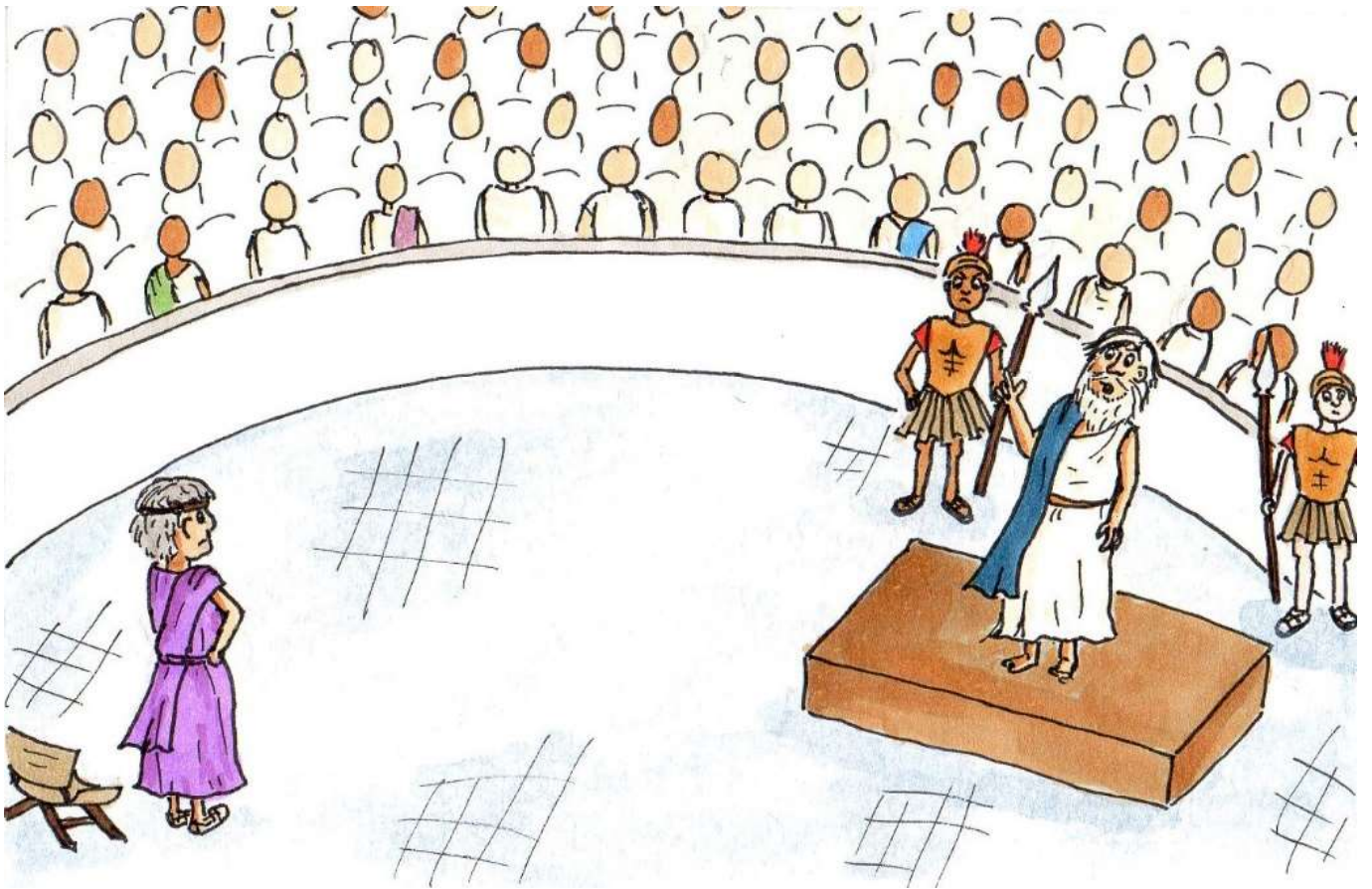
Delphi and Plato looked at each other.

"What shall we do now?" Plato asked her. Delphi bit her lip. There was no way she was going to wait here while all the interesting stuff was happening somewhere else. They had to try and get to the trial itself.

"Come on, let's follow him. He probably meant to tell us to do that anyway." She started to creep after him and Plato looked confused for a moment, but then followed her. They crept back down the walkway following Phaedo, wincing at every noise their footsteps made on the hard stone. If Phaedo heard them he didn't show it. He opened a door at the far end and shut it behind him. They followed as quickly as they dared, the voices from the trial growing louder as they approached the door.



Delphi didn't dare to open it with the crowd so close. The voices from the other side sounded angry. There was shouting. There was booing. And through it all was one voice which they both recognised, trying to make himself heard. They listened, but couldn't make out what he was saying over the hubbub. There was however a small gap in the hinges of the door and Delphi pushed her face up against it, hoping she would be able to see if anyone tried to open it. Her eyes widened. There he was.



“What can you see?” Plato hissed, trying to shove her aside.

Socrates was standing on a wooden stage, his finger in the air, speaking in a loud, commanding voice. But he looked small. The crowd, which she knew were five hundred Athenian citizens chosen to judge the man, surrounded him and overwhelmed him. It looked like some of them were listening but plenty more were talking amongst themselves or shouting back at him. She could also make out a man in purple robes with a beak like nose, standing across from him.

“What are they doing?” Delphi whispered.

“He’s giving reasons why they shouldn’t kill him,” Plato replied. “What do you think he’s saying?”

**What reasons are
there for why Socrates
should be free?**

Delphi and Plato watched for a while, trying to work out if Socrates was winning. It didn’t look like it was going very well.



“Who’s that?” she asked Plato, who was squinting under the door.

“That’s Miletus! It’s him who got Socrates arrested!”

Say it like this!
Mel-eat-us

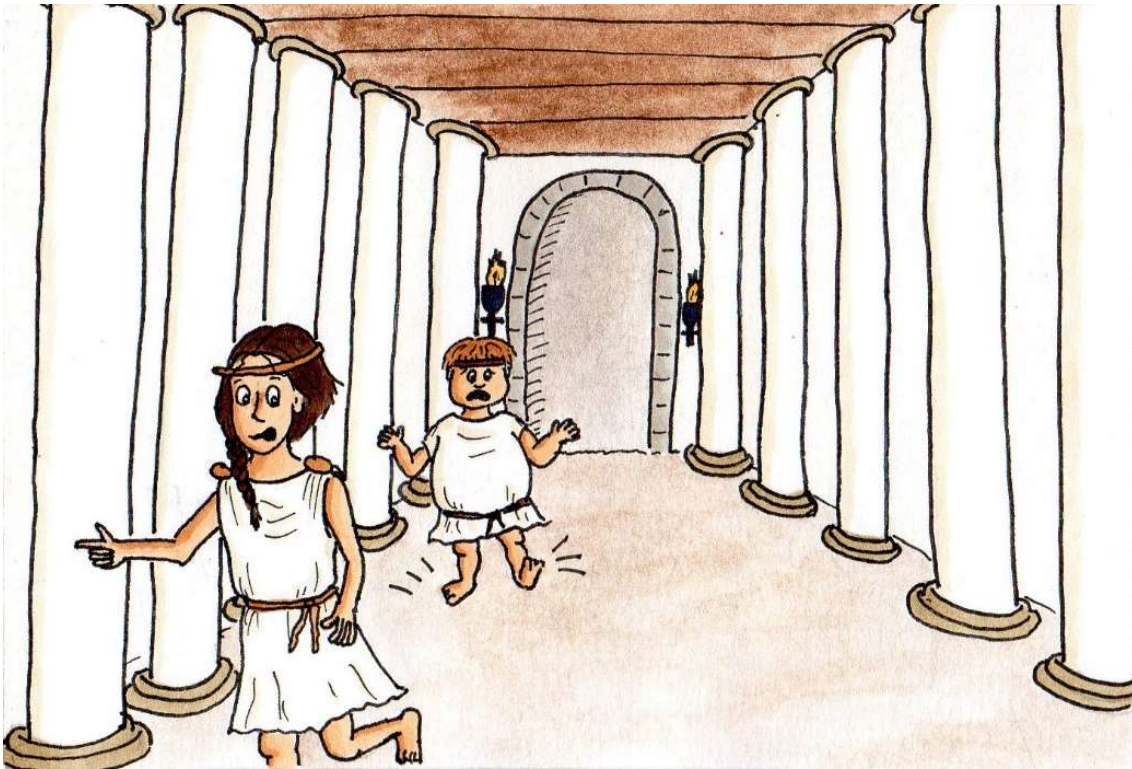
Delphi narrowed her eyes at the beak nosed man. She wouldn’t forget that face.

Suddenly, the crowd seemed to erupt and Socrates got down from the stage, looking disappointed, but not angry. The shouting intensified and they could make out the occasional cry of ‘kill him!’

“Gods, Plato...” Delphi looked down at her friend. “He’s lost!” Suddenly, they heard loud footsteps coming towards them. A look of terror spread across Plato’s face.

“They’ll be taking him out the front!” Delphi said, hurriedly. “That’s the way to the prison. Quick!”

Without bothering to be quiet, she started to sprint back down the corridor, Plato rushing to keep up. They turned a corner and headed for the exit.



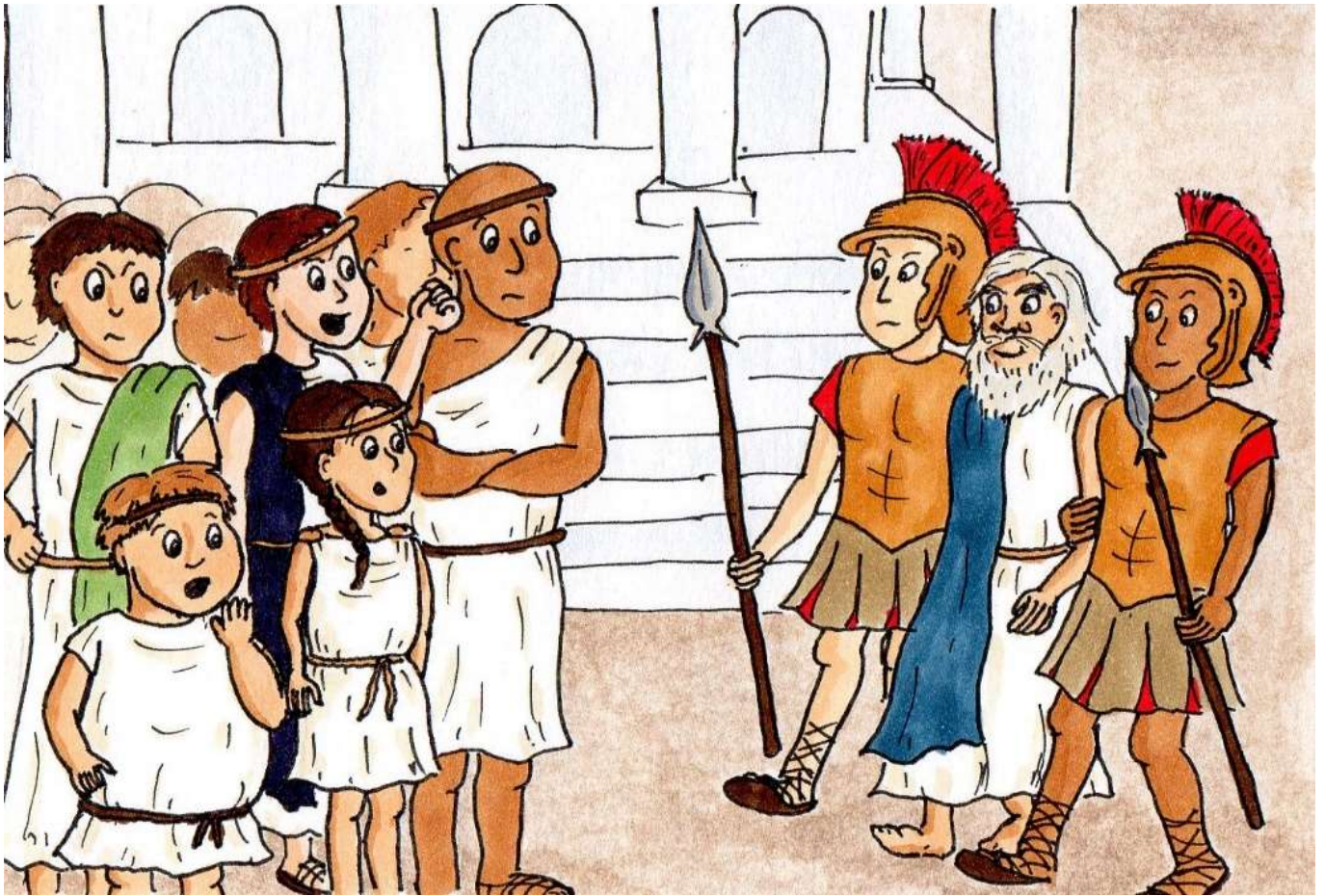
“Hey!” There was a shout from behind them, as a guard emerged from the far end. Delphi smiled. As if they could catch her. She turned the corner and sprinted through the archway and back into the bright sunlight of the Agora, Plato just about keeping up. She staggered for a moment, blinded by the sun.

“This way! Quickly!” Blinking furiously, she barged through the market and back round the side of the court buildings. There was some shouting behind her, but behind her didn’t matter.

They ran until they hit the crowd. Delphi had never seen so many people in one place, and they were all heading the same way they were. There was one name on everyone’s lips. Socrates. They had sentenced him to death.

Delphi and Plato pushed through the crowd, ignoring the shouts of protest. At one point, someone grabbed her tunic but she hit the arm that grabbed her and there was a howl and it let go. She pushed on. After a great deal of shoving, they suddenly emerged into a space and she stopped, sending up a little cloud of dust.

In front of her were two soldiers marching in their direction, and they were leading the ugliest man Delphi had ever seen.



Later, when Delphi thought about what happened next, it all seemed to happen like something in a dream. She remembered seeing the expressions of the men around her. The soldiers looked angry to see two children in the Agora, particularly at this very moment. Socrates looked almost cheerful and was nodding at people in the crowd who were gathered round. There was a lot of shouting and not a small amount of anger. Then, to Delphi's horror, the prisoner looked in their direction. Socrates laughed and gave them a warm smile.

Delphi felt like she needed to say something. But she had no idea what to say. The thoughts in her head shouted at each other and wrestled around, and she opened and closed her mouth a few times. This was the man who had asked questions so important that he was being put to death for it – and he seemed weirdly pleased with himself.

Then, she knew what she wanted to say.

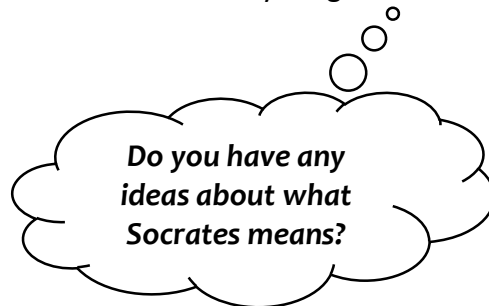
She stepped forwards and stood directly in front of the oncoming soldiers. They almost tripped in surprise. The world seemed to go quiet.



"I think..." she began, nervously, but her voice was loud and clear. "You're the cleverest man in all of Athens."

Socrates looked at her curiously.

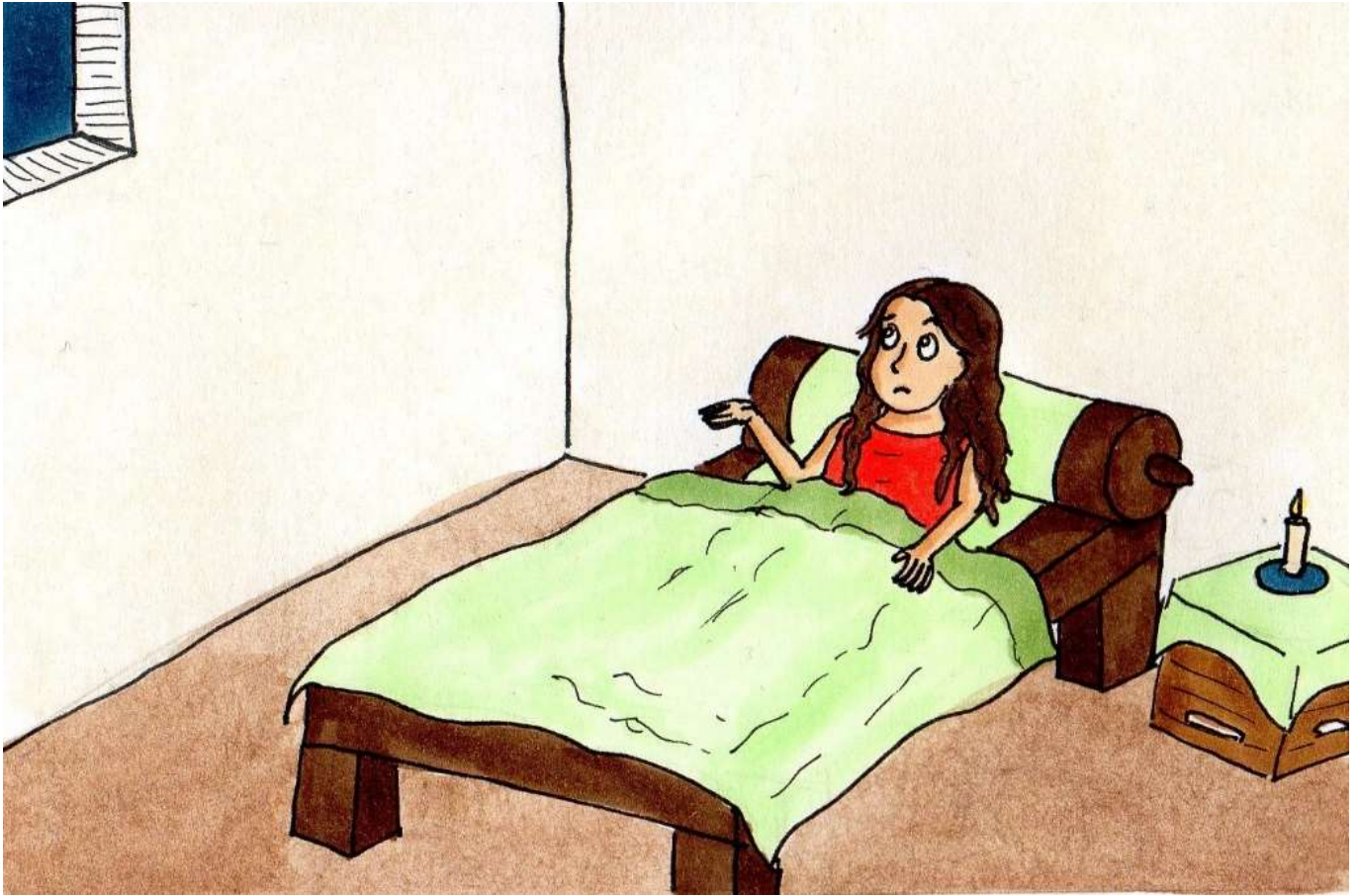
"My girl, the only thing I know is that I don't know anything at all."



It was those words that stayed with Delphi, after the soldiers had pushed her to one side and the roar of the crowd took over Delphi's senses again. Plato had picked her up and the crowd had swallowed them, blocking any view they might have had after that. Delphi didn't even notice where she was. The only thing that she was thinking about was this new feeling inside her stomach, the hard rock of pure idea that had suddenly grown inside her.

The world needed a Socrates. It needed people to think and argue and question. It needed someone to find the truth in things, even if people didn't like it. He couldn't die. So - she'd do what he did - question, argue and find a way to get him back. It was so simple an idea that it settled into Delphi's mind like an old dog flopping into bed.

Her mind was buzzing, even as the guards finally grabbed them and escorted them back to their homes, and her Dad had told her off for a very long time for sneaking into the Agora and bothering people. Luckily, he didn't know about the half of it.



Delphi couldn't sleep that night. She cried a little bit, and didn't really understand why. She wished she knew what Socrates had meant, but they'd never be allowed to see him again. If only she'd spent more time with him! Why did Socrates think that he didn't know anything? Why was he going to be killed? Why didn't he know what a good person was? There were so many questions she couldn't begin to answer. She simply didn't know yet.

She knew one thing at least, and the knowledge of it kept her awake that night, her mind ablaze and her heart racing. She would figure it all out. She would find out... why.

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The details of Socrates' life and trial are drawn from Plato's dialogues Apology, Crito and Phaedo (found in: The Last Days of Socrates, Penguin Classics, 2003).

Details of life in ancient Athens are drawn from several sources, most notably The World of Athens (Cambridge University Press, 2008). Also invaluable was The Hemlock Cup by Bettany Hughes (Vintage, 2011). Delphi the Philosopher is fictional but has been written to at least be consistent with historical events and practices. Any errors in that regard are my own.