CHAPTER 4 – THE GOLDEN MEAN

Delphi would be the first to admit, if you dared to ask her, that she was not actually very *nice*.

Not that she thought she was a *bad* person exactly. It's just she didn't much care what people thought of her. We probably shouldn't judge her. She lived in a tough part of town in a tough part of history – Golden Age Athens was not the enlightened paradise that sometimes it is made out to be. The city had been ravaged by war and by plague. Her life had been hard. It generally was for little girls in Athens.

So perhaps this explains why she was feeling rather angry at her failure to so far come up with a decent plan to free Socrates – or even become a good person, whatever that meant.

It perhaps doesn't explain why she was breaking into a shop – though maybe we'll forgive her if we take a closer look.

Do you think Delphi is a good person?
What is a good person like?

"Quick, while no-one's around!"

Delphi smacked the rotten boards at the base of the wall with a stone, and they splintered satisfyingly. It only took a few more hits before she had created a hole and then she lay down to wriggle through.

"Are you coming in then or not?"

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Plato asked, hopping from one foot to another in his nervousness.

"Gods! I wish you weren't such a wimp, already!"

Plato gulped and looked up. Painted above the boards, on a cheap plank of wood, were the words: 'The Golden Mean'.

Plato took a deep breath and started to follow her. With a bit of a wriggle and a bit of pulling, she finally got Plato's wide shoulders through the gap and they stood up to find one of the strangest places they had ever seen.

Every wall was covered in shelves reaching up to the ceiling, and through the gloom she could make out hundreds and hundreds of glass bottles. Glass was a rare and foreign material to Delphi, but that wasn't the strangest thing. Each bottle seemed to contain different liquids, of all colours, and the bottles themselves were of every possible shape and shade.

In the centre of the stone floor was a large clay pot with some mysterious stain at the bottom of it, and they both walked round it, staring in wonder at the sheer number and range of bottles on the shelves. Curiously they all seemed to be arranged in pairs.

"Are they potions?" Delphi asked. "What are all these?" she asked him, and tapped on the scrap of papyrus that was stuck on the front of a large green bottle in front of her. Every single one of the bottles seemed to have one – though of course Delphi couldn't read them.

"They're… virtues," Plato replied, hesitantly.

"They're what?"

"Like, ways to describe a person. Like, the personality or good things that some people have. Look, there's patience," he tapped a wide purple bottle near the floor. "and next to it, impatience," a clear bottle with some foul looking brown liquid inside. "And… manners, and… rudeness." He inspected another pair. "This one's pride, and this one's… humil…ity. I guess that means not pride."

Delphi stood back and took a deep breath.

"So each one is the opposite of the other one?" she asked. Plato nodded.

"So if you drink one…" she started, and Plato turned to her in horror. "Does it make you like that? I mean, if I drank the patience one then I'd be really patient?"

"Don't even think about it, Delphi!" Plato said, shaking his head furiously. "You don't know what might happen!" But Delphi's mind was off, and racing towards the finish line.

"But this is it!" she declared. "This must be what Socrates was looking for all this time! He was looking for how to be a good person. And here it all is!" She waved around the room, her eyes gleaming almost as much as the bottles. "Anything you wanted to be, you could just drink the potion and then boom! You'd be a good person!"

"Delphi, you're not going to…"

 "Quick, help me look, I can't read them. Which ones would make someone a good person, do you think?"

Delphi started scanning the shelves excitedly.

"But you don't need to! You already are!" he insisted.

"Just help!" and she said it with such command that Plato was helpless. He read out dozens of different labels.

There was one for courage, which was a big fat bottle with a bold red liquid inside, and next to it, cowardice, which was tiny and yellow. There was a slim pink one labelled 'generosity' and the black one

next to it, 'selfishness'. Some of them even Plato didn't understand. There was confidence and shyness, honesty and tact, loyalty and independence, gratitude and resentment and so many more that Delphi and Plato could barely begin to understand them all.

"Which one should we try?" Delphi asked.

Which potions would be needed to make a good person? Are there any others you think she should find?

"Are you really going to?"

She shrugged. "Of course. We can't go this far and not see if it works."

Plato looked at her with horrified fascination – but there was a flicker of curiosity on his broad face and Delphi noticed it.

"How about you choose one for me, and I'll choose one for you?" She raised an eyebrow at him. Plato took a few deep breaths.

"This is a really bad idea, Delphi…" he muttered, but started to look around.

"I already know what you should have. I remembered it specially." Delphi picked up a big, heavy bottle containing a potion so bright and sparkling that it was almost impossible to look at directly. When she moved her hand from the label, it revealed the word: 'Confidence.'

Plato bit his lip in annoyance.

"You always say that! You always say I should be more confident!" he said, he started to hunt around the potions with more energy, trying to choose one that Delphi would find insulting. Eventually he picked up a cloudy, pink one in a thin glass.

"What is it?" Delphi asked, nudging him aside. He showed it to her. 'Kindness'.

"I don't need to be more kind, you filthy little poo bug!"

But Plato just smiled. Delphi passed him the large bottle of Confidence and he looked down at it. Delphi plucked the Kindness out of his other hand. With only a little hesitation, they both pulled out the cork at the top.

"Just a sip?" Plato suggested, and Delphi nodded.

"No wussing out," she whispered. They clinked bottles, counted to three and drank.

They both managed a cautious sip, and then lowered the bottles slowly. Plato's had tasted of victory and applause. Delphi's had tasted of hugs and presents.

"Are you OK?" Delphi whispered, looking straight at Plato. He grinned.

"I feel amazing!" he said.

"Really?" Delphi asked, carefully putting down her bottle. Plato was stretching his arms upwards, and all of sudden it looked like he had grown by several inches.

"Yeah! That stuff was amazing! I bet we can do anything now!" He stood up straight, his hands on his sides like he was posing for a particularly heroic looking statue. "I say we go and get Socrates out of jail! It'll be easy!" Delphi smiled at him.

Plato immediately crawled back out through the hole to the street. Delphi followed behind him, rushing to pick out bits of splintered wood from his hair.

"Are you sure you're OK? I wouldn't want you to…" She suddenly grabbed Plato by the arm, and with considerable reluctance, he stopped. "Look!"

Plato looked to see where she was pointing. By the side of the road was a small dog, barely bigger than a puppy. Its big brown eyes were looking up at them hungrily, and by the looks of his ragged fur, it looked very much like no one had ever loved him in his entire little life. This was not an unusual sight in Athens.

To Plato's surprise, Delphi was crying.

"The poor thing! Just look at him! Oh, Plato, we've just got to help the poor little doggy woggy…"

Plato stuck out his chest. "Of course! We can easily help him! You go and patch him up and I'll go and rescue Socrates!"
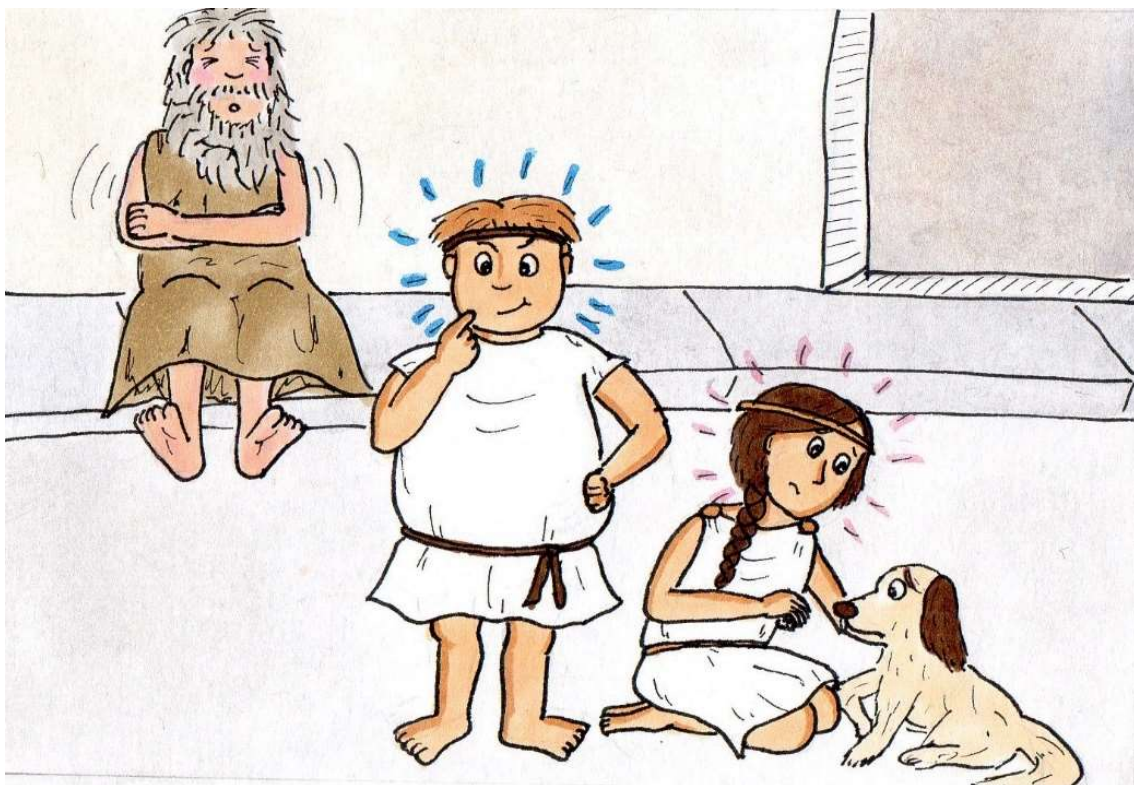
Delphi, wiping away her tears, gently walked towards the dog, offering her fingers for it to smell. It took a few unsteady steps towards her, watching her carefully. Then it bit her.

"There, there…" Delphi said, slowly stroking its head and ears. "Everything's OK now!" The dog didn't let go. "Have a good chew if it makes you feel better."

She picked up the dog and started to follow Plato.

"Now, I'm sure the prison is back this way…" Plato declared, but he suddenly felt Delphi's hand on his arm again.

"Oh, Plato, look!" He followed her gaze, and saw she was looking at a man sitting on the side of the street. By the looks of him, he had been there for some time. His face was grizzled and aged, and he was wearing little more than stinking rags. He was scratching at some sort of rash on his arms and was staring at them warily.

To Plato's complete lack of surprise, Delphi was crying again.

"Oh, the poor thing! Just look at him!" The man coughed and spat in their general direction. Delphi immediately went over to him, still carrying the dog who was now happily chewing on her hair. "Please, can I help you? You must be starved you poor man…" She gently knelt down and moved to give him a hug.

The man panicked. "Errr… no, no! I'm… fine!"

"No please, I must be able to help! Let me pick out the insects from your hair at least!" And Delphi gently started to pick out the lice on his head with her fingers. The man froze to the spot, terrified.
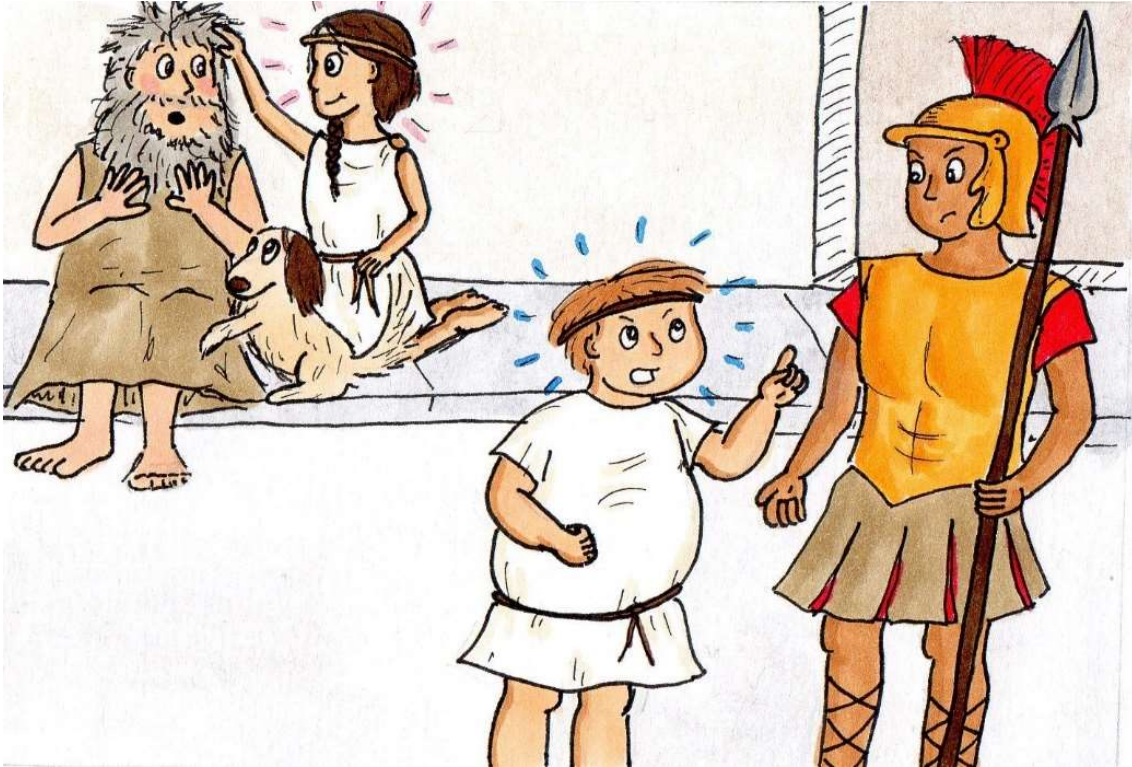
Plato, meanwhile, had found a soldier who was passing through.

"I demand that you release Socrates straight away! What's more, I warn you that if he is held in prison even a minute longer, I shall personally demand the entire army to arrest you and any other soldier that gets in our way!"

The soldier was looking a little dazed.

"You what, kid?" he said. Plato took another deep breath.

"I said, I demand that Socrates be released at once! Otherwise I will…" but the air was suddenly pushed out of his lungs because an elbow had just connected hard with his stomach. He bent over wheezing.

"Get lost kid. Play your games with someone else!" The soldier started walking away, shooting suspicious glances back at him.

"I… demand…" Plato gasped, trying to get his breath back. "Do not… walk… away… from me…" He staggered back towards Delphi, who was deep in a one-way conversation with the homeless man.

"So I think you should move into our house this afternoon. Me and my Dad can get ourselves out by then. That way you can get a good night's sleep and don't worry, we'll leave all the food for you so you can catch up on your meals and oh yes! Perhaps you could do with a job! I'm sure my Dad won't mind giving you his, if it will make you happy…" She smiled at him, and the man blushed a deep red.

"Well, it's all very kind of you, Miss…" he muttered, his voice deep and sore. "But I'm not sure I can…"

"Delphi!" Plato interrupted. "Come with me!" He grabbed her by the arm and pulled her up.

"Oh, yes of course, but I'm just talking to my dear friend here but…" Plato started dragging her away.
"Um! I'll come back and find you!" Delphi called to the man.

The homeless man watched the two children gallop away from him and looked down at the little dog Delphi had left behind. Nervously, he gave it a little stroke and it bit his finger.

*Can you be too kind?
Can you have too
much confidence?*

Plato dragged Delphi all the way back to The Golden Mean, and back inside the room with the potions.

"Now, then," Plato declared, looking at Delphi straight in the eye. Possibly for the first time in his life. "You're not yourself after drinking that potion and you can't go around giving away your house and everything, so you need to drink something else."

"Oh, really?" Delphi asked, looking confused. "Was I being different to normal? But you're probably right, you usually are after all."

"There you go! You never usually say that I'm right!" Plato paused for a second. "Even though I am right, obviously. Here!" Plato passed her a little black potion in a cracked bottle. "Drink that. It'll get you back to normal, no problem!"

"Oh, thank you!" Delphi replied, taking the bottle. "Which one is this?"

"The opposite of the one you had last time. You drank Kindness so this one's Selfishness. Bound to work isn't it? And I'll drink the opposite one of mine then we'll all be back to normal!"

Plato did look very certain of himself so Delphi pulled out the cork, and sniffed it at it. It smelt so bad she was almost sick. Plato was holding up a tiny bottle, containing a liquid that had a strange yellow streak running through it. It was labelled 'Cowardice'.

He pulled the cork and downed the entire bottle in one. It tasted of running away and missed chances.

His face went through several expressions, before finally settling on a look of sheer terror. His hands shaking, he gently lowered himself to the floor and sat with his head in his hands.

"Well… if you're sure…" Delphi said, and took a gulp, just about fighting off the instinct to spit it out as soon as it hit her taste buds. It tasted of greed and loneliness.

"That was horrible! Why did I listen to a stupid idiot like you?"

Delphi's voice had changed. Suddenly the sweet flowers in her voice had turned to thorns. Plato looked up, surprised.

"And don't even think of touching any more of these bottles, I found them all first so they're mine, aren't they?" Her face was screwed up in a way that Plato found terrifying. "They're all MINE! Not yours! Not anyone else's! MINE!" She suddenly punched him on the arm and pushed him over. Plato tried to stop himself from crying.

"Delphi?" Plato's voice was quivering and shaking, like he was freezing to death. "What have we done? How are we going to… fix this?"

Delphi turned on him again. "You can't have any of them! I need them all to get back to normal!"

She grabbed the nearest one to her and drank all of it, even licking the inside of the dusty bottle so no-one else could get a drop. It had been a deep red potion with a strong perfume. It tasted of dreams and sighing.

As soon as she lowered the bottle, her face relaxed, losing its fierce glare and softening as colour flooded back to her cheeks.

"Oh gods, Plato," she said, and rushed over to him. "I'm so sorry! What have I done? I couldn't bare it if I've hurt you!" She threw an arm round his shaking shoulders and sat next to him. She stroked his arm awkwardly. "Please answer me…"

Plato took a rather wobbly breath and hesitantly looked up. She was sat very close.

"Delphi…" he whispered. "You've… got to think of a way of getting us back to normal… I can't do it."

"You can! You're amazing," she whispered back, trying to look deep into his eyes.

"No, I can't. I can't do anything, I'd only get it wrong. You've got to. Please." He lifted his hand up to her and Delphi grabbed it and held it tight.

"Of course I will, Plato," she whispered. "For you, I'd do anything, you know I would…" She just about managed to tear her eyes away from him and looked round the room. How *was* she going to fix this?

How do you think they could get back to normal? What is the best way to use the potions?
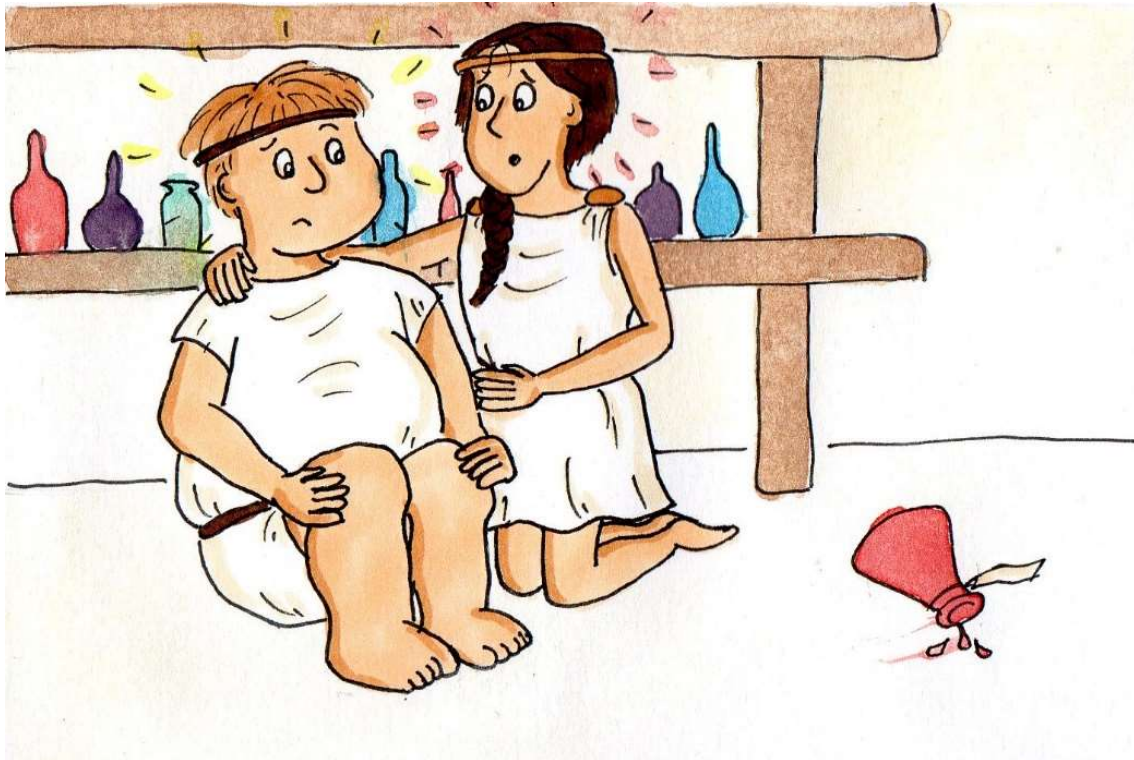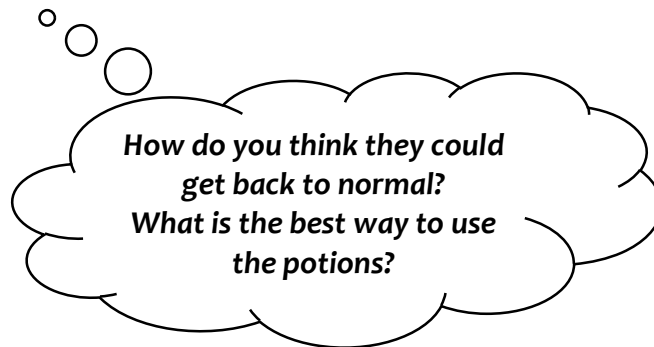
"Wait here, Platey…" she whispered. "I'll be right back!"

Delphi leaped back up on to her feet and picked up the nearest bottles from the floor. She pulled out the corks and stepped over to the large clay bowl in the middle of the room. She started to pour them in.

She started grabbing every potion in sight; the big ones, the small ones, the old ones, the coloured ones, the ones that could ruin a person and the ones that could turn you mad. She almost danced round the clay

bowl and the empty bottles piled up around her. In the bowl, the reds and greens, yellows and pinks, the dreams and nightmares, the emotions and desires all swirled together.

"What are you doing?" Plato wailed, his eyes streaming with tears. "It'll kill us!"

"It will work," Delphi replied, still pouring. "I've thought about it. For you."

"How do you know? You can't know!" Plato sobbed.

"Well…" Delphi stopped and came and knelt in front of him, taking his hands again. "I just thought about what had happened. I drank the Kindness and it was too much. Then I drank the Selfishness and that was too much. So the perfect place must be in the middle!"

Plato looked up at her.

"Like with you and Confidence and Cowardice. So I guess it must be true of all of them. I thought if we mix everything together then what we'll get is the middle of everything – not too much of one thing. And that'll be just right." She gave his hands a squeeze and went back to pouring in the last of the bottles.

Is Delphi right?
Is the best way to find the 'middle' between the two extremes?

It took a little while, and by the time the shelves were empty, the floor was almost overflowing with bottles and the clay bowl was almost full. All the colours had blended into a dull, light brown. In fact, it looked a lot less magical and considerably less exciting than almost any of the other potions by themselves. A little wisp of steam was coming off it.

"OK, it's ready." Delphi dipped in an empty bottle and brought it over to Plato, sitting down next to him on the floor again. He tried to shuffle away, but Delphi kept moving over until she had practically pinned him against the wall.

She put the potion in his hands.

"For you," she whispered, and Plato felt her hand on the back of his head, stroking his hair.

"I… I can't…"

"Here…" Delphi whispered, and bought the bottle up to his lips. She leaned close to him. "Even if we die together, it'll be just like all those stories…" She held the bottle closer.

"No! Please!" He tried to squirm, but Delphi held him firm and forced the bottle to his mouth. Sometimes you have to be cruel to be kind after all. He took a little of the liquid, and after a great deal of panic, swallowed. It tasted familiar, like a cup of tea.
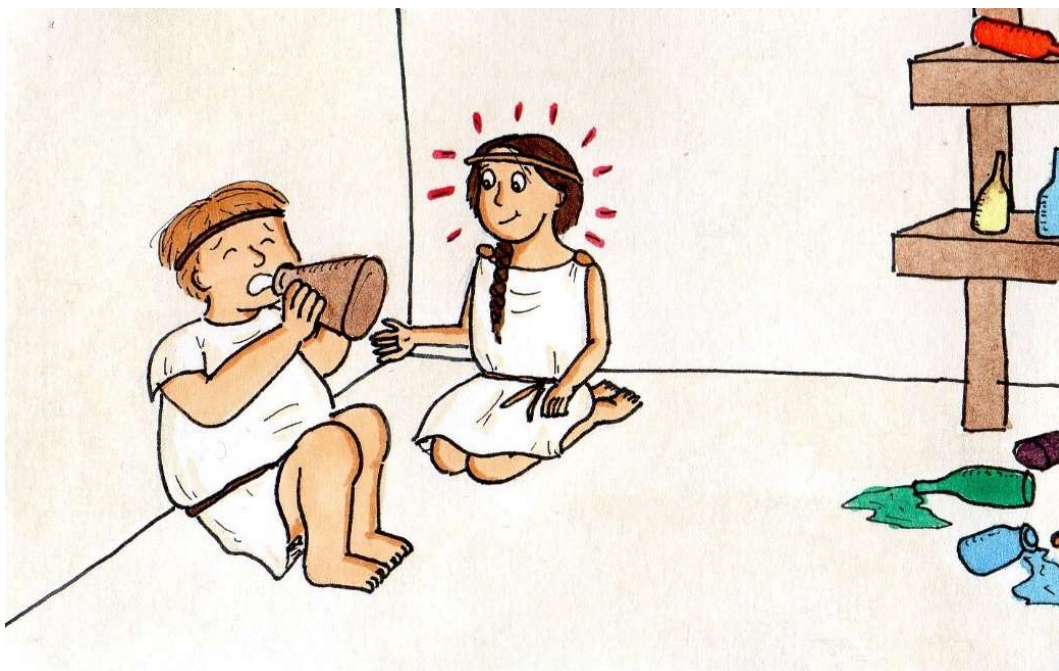

Plato slowly looked up into Delphi's shining green eyes.

He had never seen her look at him like that in his entire life. Later on, he would sometimes wake up at night remembering what she had looked like then, and he would have to go for a run or a long bath to get the thought out of his head again.

She was leaning forward and her eyes kept darting down towards his lips…

Plato fumbled for the bottle of brown liquid and forced it onto Delphi's mouth. She gulped the contents in surprise, and not a little disappointment. When she had swallowed, he lowered the bottle again. Delphi's eyes were crossed for a second, then snapped back to focus.
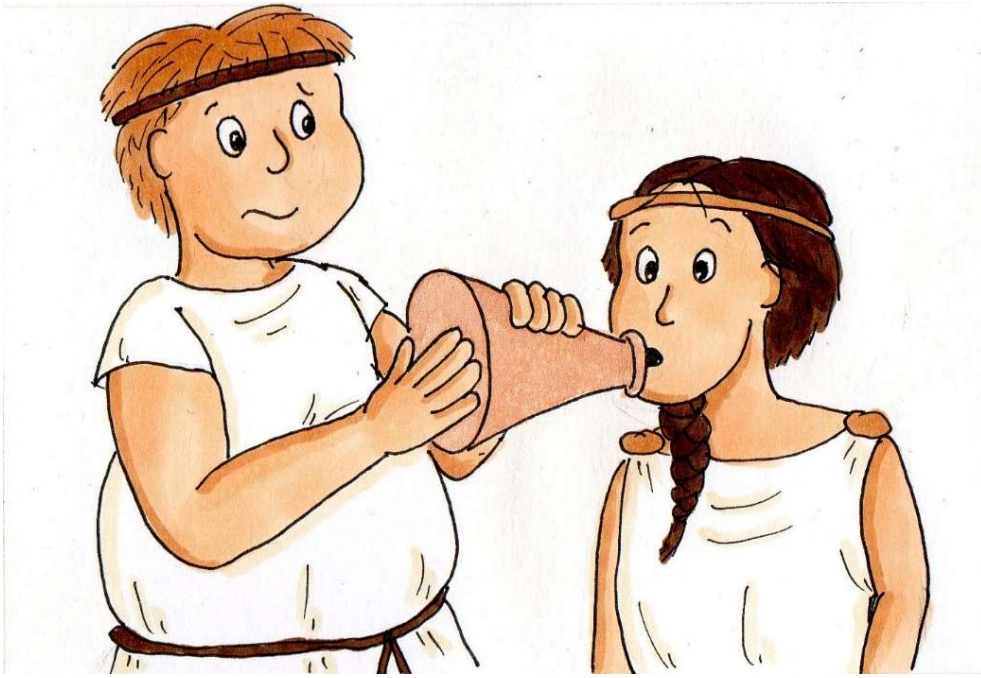
"Euurrrrghhhh!" she cried and leaped backwards, pushing him over. Plato laughed, from the floor.

"I didn't think it tasted that bad," he said.

"Not the potion! It was… we nearly… euurrrrgghhhh!" Delphi was carefully treading over the glass bottles trying to put some distance between herself and her friend. They were both bright red and had no idea what to say to each other.

"Are you… back to normal then?" asked Plato, sitting up. He was looking slightly tense, but not actually cowering in fear, which for Plato, seemed about right.

"I think so…" Delphi admitted, wiping her mouth. "Are you?" She didn't want to actually look at him at the moment.

"Yeah, I think. Hard to be sure, I guess. Maybe we'll never really know if it's exactly the same as before…" He stood up and took in the chaos they had made of the room. "Perhaps we better get out of here."

Delphi nodded, and started to make her way back through the bottles to the hole in the wall, back to the street.

"What shall we do with that?" Plato asked, nodding towards the clay bowl, which still contained a great quantity of safe looking brown liquid.

Delphi shrugged. "Nothing. If we're right, then it's worthless. Just a mix of everything. Just, normal."

"It's not just normal though is it? It's perfectly in the middle of every virtue. Maybe it's the perfect potion?" He stopped and looked at the brown pool thoughtfully. "This could be the potion that makes someone a good person – like Socrates was looking for."

Delphi stopped and thought about it. "But we're just back to normal. Unless… we already were good people?"
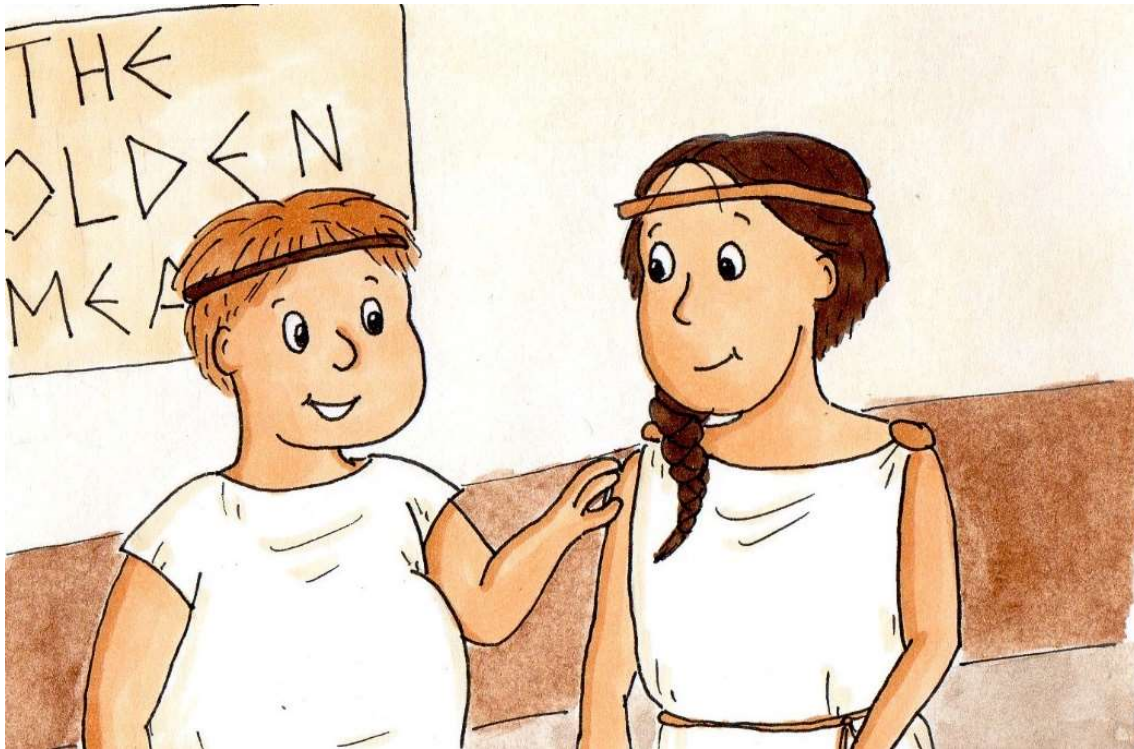
Plato laughed.

"Yeah! That must be it! That's what I told you, wasn't it! You were always a good person, Delphi." They both reached the hole back to the street, and hopefully, normal life again. "It's knowing about this stuff that makes you a great person."

He smiled at her and put his hand on her arm. He felt another blush rising.

"Plato?" Delphi asked, leaning down and looking him in the eye.

"Yeah?"

"If you ever try and get me to kiss you again, I will cut your lips off."

Plato nodded. "Fair enough."

*Maybe knowing about your virtues makes you a better person.
Do you think Plato is right?*

Delphi the Philosopher

The Golden Mean is drawn from ideas found principally in Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics (Penguin Classics, 2004).

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.