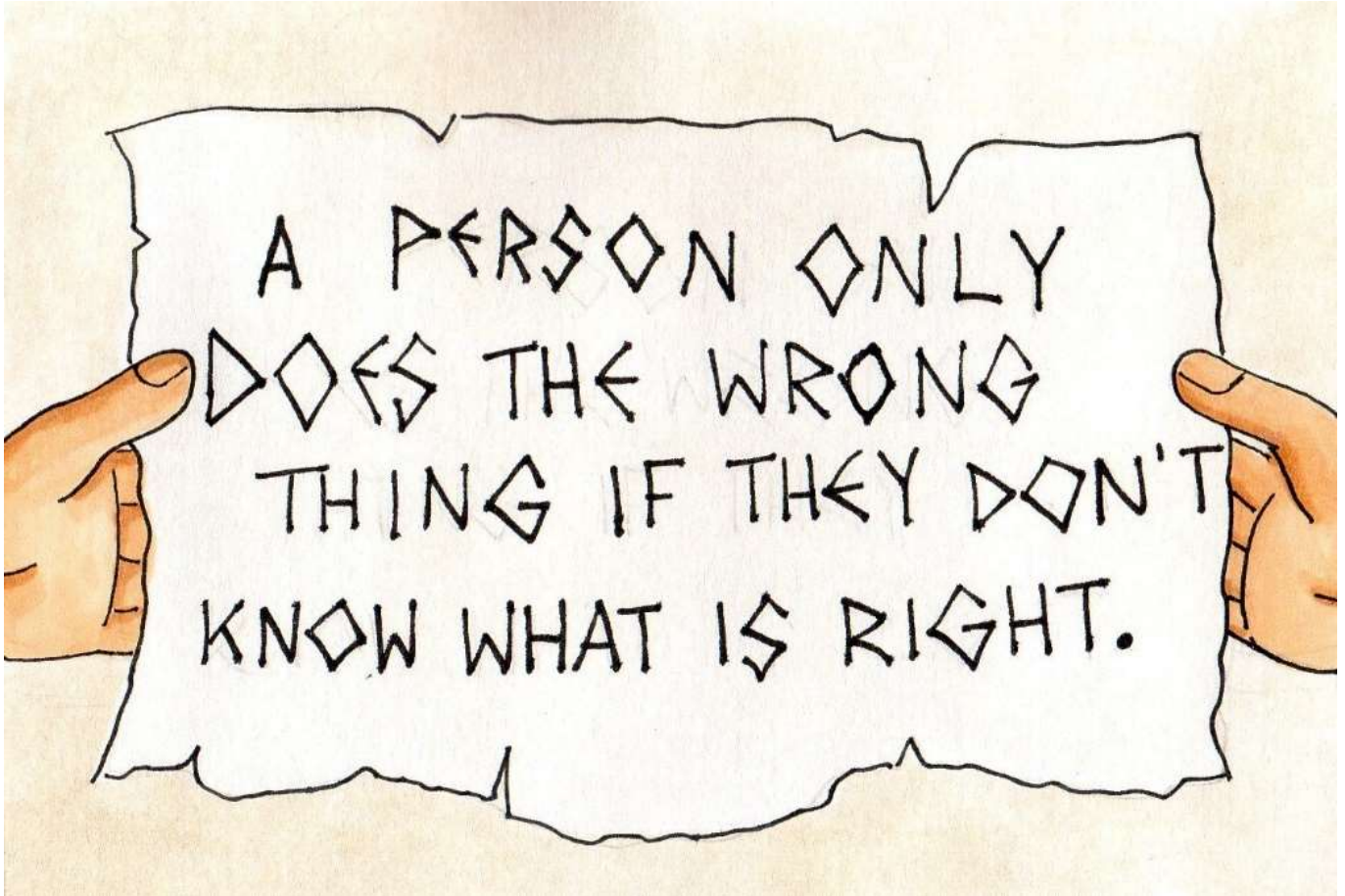# CHAPTER 3 — THE RING

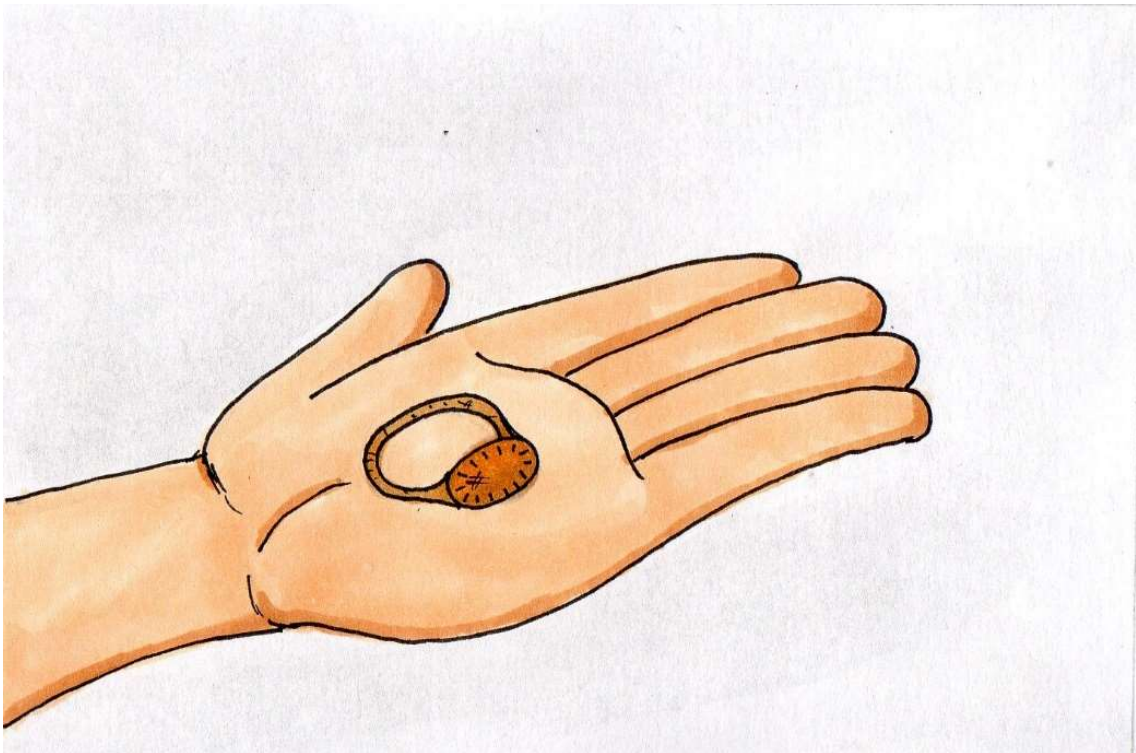Delphi looked at the note in her hands.

Does that sound true? What's your first thought?

She lowered the piece of paper and looked at Plato, who had just read it to her.

Plato shrugged. "That's all it says. Who would send you a note just saying that?" They were sitting on the edge of a wall, opposite the bath house, watching the men walking in and out.

"I think it's Socrates," Delphi said confidently. "It sounds like something he would say. But what's it got to do with this?" She held up the object that had been wrapped in the note and the rusty gold caught the sunlight. It was a ring.

"I don't know. It looks pretty old," Plato said, scratching his ear.

"It's not exactly very nice though, is it?" Delphi said. "Do you think it's worth anything?"

"Don't think so. All rusty like that." He watched Delphi turn it over with her fingers for a while. She seemed to be thinking. Plato wasn't surprised. Delphi wasn't usually one for being quiet, but ever since she had discovered philosophy, she seemed to spend more and more time thinking to herself. Look at her now. She was just turning the ring over and over again. Plato sighed. Who ever thought a ring could make someone go weird?

"Um… I better go, before…" Plato nodded towards the bath house. Delphi shrugged.

"Yeah, yeah…" she said, but her eyes were only on the ring in her hands.

Delphi took a few seconds to realise he was gone. Her mind was elsewhere. It was with Socrates in his prison cell and remembering the laughter of the philosophers on the Acropolis when she'd said she'd get him out. She was so desperate to help – but she didn't even know where to begin.

She couldn't stop staring at the ring. It really was an ugly thing. Little flakes of metal were coming off on her fingers, but it still seemed to glow a little in the sunlight.

She decided to try it on. After a bit of a struggle, she just about squeezed it on her middle finger, though the rough metal scratched at her skin. It didn't look any better being worn. Oh well.

She jumped off the wall and walked in the direction of home. Really, she wanted to go to the Agora and get something to eat but they weren't letting children in as much as they used to. She suspected that was probably because of her.

There were a lot of people around at this time of day and she had only gone about five steps before a large man stood right in front of her. Instinct made her stand still, and to her surprise the man carried on walking and barged straight into her, knocking her over.

"Hey! Watch where you're going!" she cried, picking herself up, but the man was behaving rather strangely. He had a look of complete bafflement on his face and was looking around desperately, trying to work out what had happened. Delphi paused for a moment, waiting for the man to look at her – but he didn't. After a few seconds, he shrugged, turned and left. Then it happened again. A small boy, a little

younger than Plato, skipped past and tripped over Delphi's foot. After his father picked him up, they both looked around at the floor, trying to work out how he had fallen over. And completely failed to see Delphi.

"What's going on?" Delphi whispered to herself. She cleared her throat. "Hello!" she shouted. "You tripped over my foot!" Both the father and son turned around and looked towards Delphi, but not at her – more like, through her.

 "Can't you see me?" Delphi felt a sudden lurch in her chest. She looked down at the ring, which sat on her finger, shining and odd. It couldn't be, could it? She quickly moved to the edge of the street where there was a trough of water for animals outside the bath house and looked into it.

Where she should have seen her reflection, there was just… sky. She was! She was invisible! Delphi stood up slowly, her thoughts pushing around to get into line. Don't Get Carried Away, got to the front. Make Sure.

So she did. She danced in front of a group of boys going into the bath house and they didn't even look up. She leaped in front of an old man who didn't react whatsoever. She stuck two fingers up at a soldier who was patrolling nearby. Nothing!

She really was invisible! A wicked grin spread across Delphi's face. Think of all the things she could do now!

What would you do?
Be honest!

There was so much!

She thought about catching up with Plato but changed her mind at once. What's the point of having an invisibility ring if you're going tell people you've got it?

So what about… the Agora? She could spend as long as she liked there now – and have anything she wanted, couldn't she? Nobody would know she was even there! She skipped happily along the street back towards the market, occasionally barging into people on purpose just to see the brief moment of panic flash across their face. One old woman's expression, as she toppled over, was hilarious! Nobody saw her, nobody knew it was her. She left a trail of confusion behind her and Delphi loved every second of it.

When she got to the Agora, she had one thought on her mind: honey cakes! They were her absolute favourite! She made her way to the market stall, where a little balding man lurked over his table full of cakes and sweets. Every so often he would sell her one, when she could afford it. But that wasn't often. And now, it was so easy! She waited until he was serving a customer, and then grabbed a whole cake with both hands and shoved it down the front of her tunic.

A moment of doubt hit her then – would it just look like the cake was flying by itself? But no – a young man was looking in her direction and there wasn't the slightest reaction on his face. Delphi breathed out. Of course. The ring must make whatever she was holding, or wearing, invisible too – otherwise people would be able to see a tunic flapping around by itself and she'd have to take all her clothes off if she wanted to be invisible. Thank the gods for that! Although… nobody could see her anyway could they? So what did it matter?

Feeling more confident every second, she giggled madly as she ran away from the stall and pulled off her tunic and pulled out her cake. She spent the next two minutes dancing in her pants, leaping between the completely unseeing shoppers, stuffing honeycake into her mouth, and Delphi thought it was the most glorious moment of her life.

She went back for more. Why shouldn't she? She ate the next one sitting in the fountain, just behind a soldier whose job it was to stop people going into the fountain. The cake got wet, but she didn't care. She went and got another one and threw it at the soldier's head.

That caused a bit of a commotion. The soldier shouted and looked around angrily, and ended up spotting a pair of young slaves in the crowd who were running past. He ran off, giving chase, while Delphi almost laughed herself sick.

There was no way she could be caught. Even if they saw something strange, they'd never know it was her. Part of her felt a little bit bad for getting other people into trouble – but what did it matter? She could do whatever she wanted and she would never, ever be punished for anything, ever again. Couldn't she?

If she definitely isn't going to get caught, does it matter if she does something bad?

By the time the sun was setting, and the air was feeling a bit colder, Delphi had started to calm down a little. She hadn't taken the ring off since she had first put it on, but now she sat on the edge of the fountain doing nothing more than looking around and watching the market traders starting to pack away.

She was contemplating whether she should take one last honey cake before the shopkeeper packed them all away, but she didn't really have the energy anymore. She felt sick.

Besides, she was distracted by the shopkeeper, the balding man who she remembered had once given her a cake for nothing and was now looking increasingly upset. He was looking in his little wooden chest where he kept his money, and kept counting and recounting it. Eventually, he picked it up and wandered over to another stallholder who was packing away his pottery. Delphi was sitting perhaps only a few metres away, but of course, they had no idea she was there.

"Have you had anything go missing today? I think I've been robbed!" the man said. Delphi swallowed, hard.

"No, I don't think so," the other merchant replied, carefully stacking his little pots. "How much are you missing?"

The stallholder stroked his beard. "I don't know, exactly. I seem to have sold a lot of cake, but don't have the money for 'em. The honey costs quite a bit you know, and my wife took days to make 'em all. I haven't even got the coins to bring home a decent meal tonight!"

Delphi got up suddenly and walked away. She didn't want to hear any more about the stallholder. However, her path was blocked by a group of angry soldiers who seemed to be arresting a young man.

"That'll teach you to chuck cake around!"

Delphi gulped hard and walked past quickly. She was starting to feel even more sick.

She was about to pass two people sitting on the side of the road when she noticed one of them, an older woman with a stick, was slumped on the ground, looking in considerable pain. A younger man with fair hair was sitting next to her.

"I don't know what happened. You just seemed to trip over on nothing. Are you sure you can't stand, mother?" But the woman just shook her head, and Delphi ran past and she realised there were tears in her eyes.
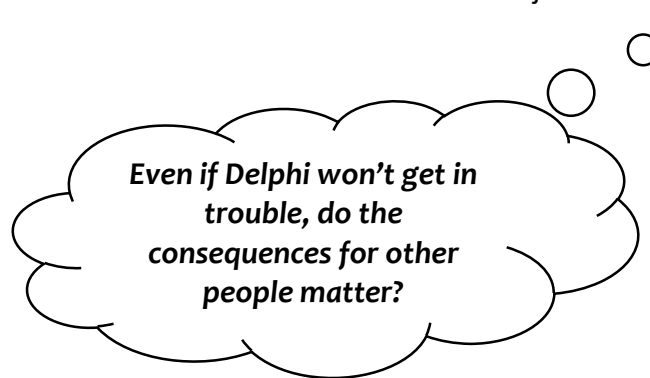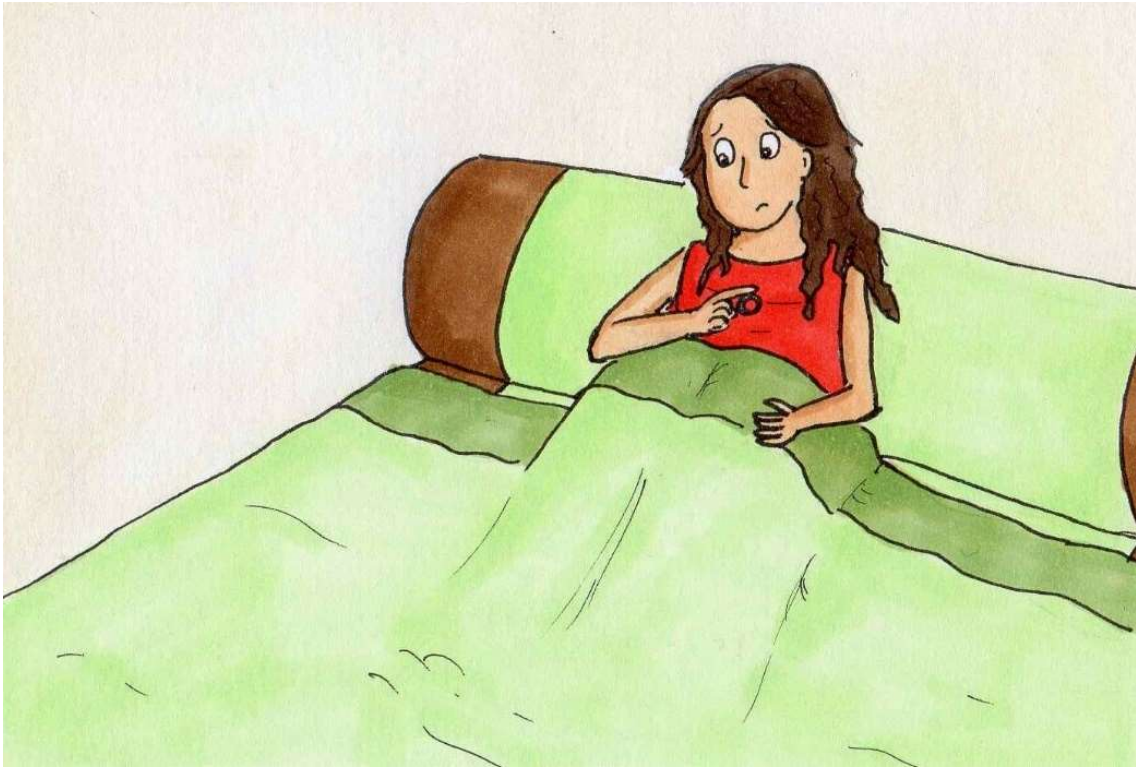
She didn't stop running until she was good and lost. She didn't want to go home. The sick feeling was rising up and needed to come out, so she hid behind a bush and waited until she threw up.

She wiped away the tears that burned in her eyes, spat on the floor and pulled off the ring moodily. It lay, threateningly, in the palm of her hand.

Delphi had never felt so bad. The anger inside her raged like a caged monster. Delphi often felt angry. But she had never felt angry at herself before. What had she done? She just… hadn't *thought*.

Even if Delphi won't get in trouble, do the consequences for other people matter?

She gritted her teeth and closed her hand around the ring. Tomorrow. She could do this differently. She could do so much. What *should* she do?

Delphi didn't sleep well that night.

When she got home, she went straight to bed and didn't eat any of the leftovers that her father had left for her. She dreamed of soldiers, of ghosts crashing into her over and over again, and the man at the cake stall looking at her with such loathing that she woke up suddenly, sweating.

But as she sat through that long night, with the ring in her fingers and the moon's light making it shine white, she had chance to think.

At first, she thought of Socrates. If she could get into the prison, then she might be able to give the ring to him, so he could escape.

But the more she thought about, she realised this wasn't going to work. She knew the prison building and it only had one door - and it was a huge wooden thing with bolts and bars all over it. She couldn't walk through a locked door, and even if she got in, Socrates would probably be in chains. And how were both of them going to get out with one invisibility ring? Her hopes sank.

Then she found herself thinking about the note. What did it say? "A person only does the wrong thing if they don't know what is right."

Well, she knew what was right and what was wrong. She had stopped stealing honey cakes, now anyway. She knew deep down that it wasn't right. So, she would have to do what was right. That's what Socrates would want, isn't it? She should use it to help people instead.
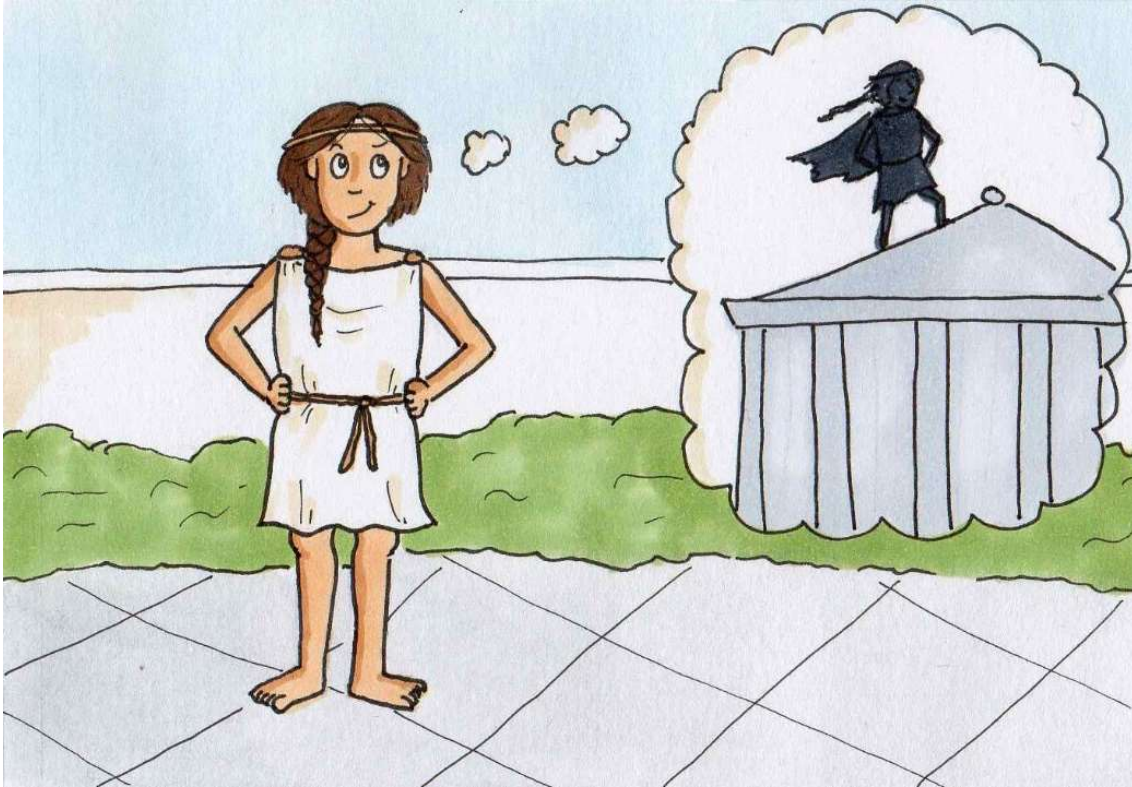
A little grin crept over her face, like a dog's when they eat your pudding. She could do it, couldn't she? She could stop other people from committing crimes. Instead of stealing money, she could give it to the people who really needed it. She could help people without them even knowing!

In fact, she could basically be a superhero! Invisibility girl!

Delphi leaped out of bed, arms at her sides dramatically, all her energy flooding back to her. She'd show them the right thing to do!

In her mind, a montage of heroic moments was playing, accompanied by some dramatic music. She saw herself rescuing children from runaway carts and fighting evil soldiers who were invading the city. She pictured herself scattering coins at the feet of the poor, and freeing slaves from their cruel masters. She saw herself as Athens unseen, ultimate hero! With a nice superhero outfit, obviously.

The next morning, she proudly put on the ring and marched back to the Agora. She looked around, desperately trying to find someone who looked like they needed help.

There! There was the old woman from yesterday! She was limping painfully down the street, trying to carry a basket of bread and her walking stick at the same time. Delphi's heart leaped. She could carry her shopping home for her!

Delphi strode towards her and grabbed the basket from her hands. The old woman, who had just felt the basket being tugged away from her and was now watching it float in mid-air, screamed.

"Oh gods! Have I been cursed?" And she turned and ran, much faster than Delphi thought she would be able to, leaving Delphi holding her basket. Slowly she put it down. A few people were looking in her direction, so she quickly stepped away. OK, that hadn't worked. She needed to *think*.

She looked around and felt vaguely relieved when she saw the stallholder from yesterday, selling his cakes from his table. His table looked a lot emptier today, but Delphi didn't want to think about that. She should pay him back for yesterday, she thought. That's what she should do. Now where was she going to get the money from?

She scanned the street, peering at each of the stalls, until she saw a couple of rich silver merchants with thin moustaches, who were wearing very fine clothes and were laden down with more jewellery than a single person really needed. They wouldn't miss any money, would they? They were probably rolling in it.

So again, she waited just behind them until they were distracted by a customer and then she reached up and grabbed a handful of silver coins. There was a very tricky moment when one of the men suddenly stood back and almost pushed her over, but she managed to dodge out the way just in time. Then she ran, grinning madly. She waited until the cake merchant's money box was opened and then dumped the coins in. She stood back and waited for him to notice.

It was when he took payment from his next customer that the gleam of silver caught his eye.

"Gods be praised!" the man muttered. He stood blinking at the coins for a few seconds while Delphi grinned at him from the other side of the stall. "Where's all this come from?"

The man was still staring at the money in astonishment as there was a cry from the direction of the silver merchants.
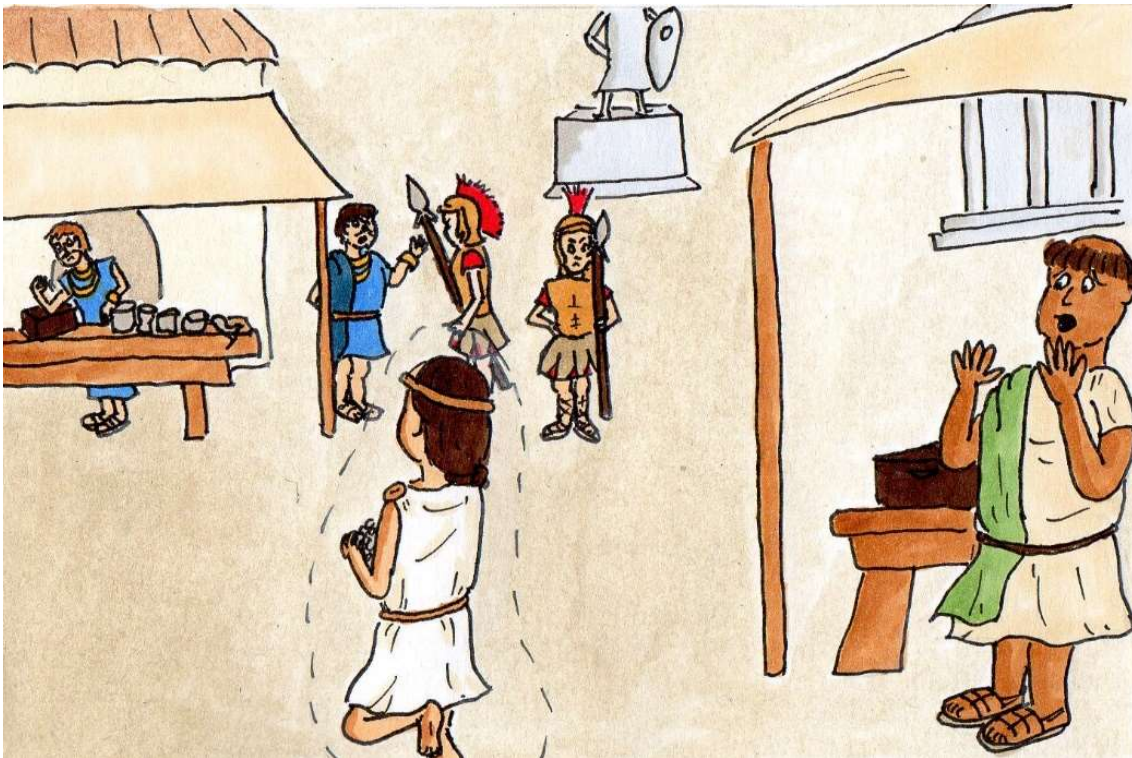
"Thief! There's been a thief!"

Delphi could see the two moustached men turning red with fury and shouting at a couple of soldiers. It turns out they would miss some silver after all.

"Nobody move!" a soldier called out. "We'll have to search everyone here!"

The cake merchant looked at the pile of silver in his moneybox and went as white as a ghost.

"Gods… what am I going to do?" he muttered.

Delphi felt herself start to panic too. She hadn't meant this to happen! She was only trying to help! She quickly took off the ring. The stallholder almost screamed when Delphi suddenly appeared in front of him.

"It's my fault! But don't worry, I'll fix it!" she declared. She swiftly put the ring back on and grabbed the pile of silver again. Then she started to run. For the poor market seller, having just seen both a pile of silver and a young girl blink in and out of existence, this was all too much and he fainted.

Delphi ran between the market stalls, accidentally dropping the occasional coin. Where would be the best place for it?

What should she do with the money?

If she gave it to someone else, then they'd just be caught and arrested for stealing, wouldn't they? Even if she kept it herself, then she could hardly come back to the Agora and spend it, could she? They'd be looking out for possible thieves like her with a suspicious amount of silver to spend!

In the end, after a good deal of running about and changing her mind, she snuck back to the silver merchants' stall and dumped the silver coins back where she'd found them. In all the chaos she'd created, no-one noticed. But they would. The silver merchants might get a telling off for wasting soldiers' time but at least no-one would actually get arrested because of her.

Some superhero she'd turned out to be.

Delphi stomped away, biting her lip. She kicked at a stone, sending it flying, as she paced out of the Agora. Why was this so difficult? She was only trying to help people.

Someone cried out as she passed them. "That stone! Just flew by itself!" but Delphi just ran away before there was another big fuss.

She walked until she got to the small river that flowed through the northern part of the city. It was quieter here and she needed to think.

She slumped down onto the grass by the riverside and stared at the sludgy, oozing flow of the water. Well, it was mostly water. The river that flowed through the city entered it one colour and left it considerably different. The trick was to swim in the less brown bits. But she really wasn't in the mood now, anyway.

Without looking down, she pulled off the ring and held it in the palm of her hand and squeezed it until it started to hurt.
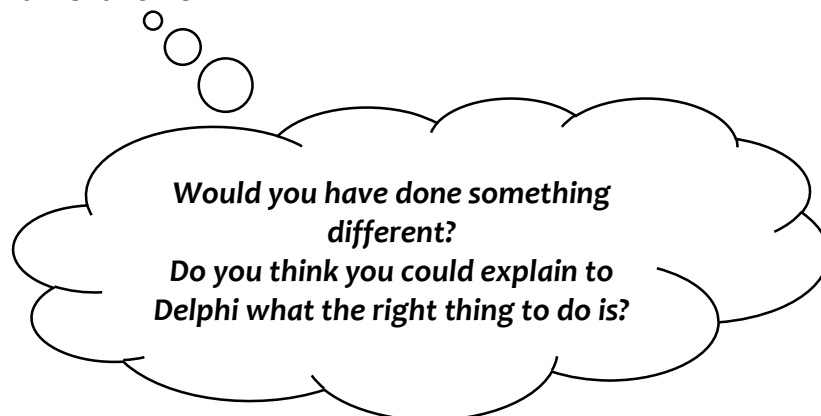
That had been a disaster. She had caused more trouble trying to do the right thing than when she hadn't been thinking at all! All she wanted to do was what was right! How difficult could that be?

But then, Socrates' words occurred to her again: "A person only does the wrong thing if they don't know what is right."

Delphi thought and thought that afternoon, as the light started to die and the cool evening air started to push away the heat of the day. And she had no idea what the right thing to do with the ring was. It was just too much responsibility.

She sighed, and with one movement, threw the ring as far as she could into the river. It went gloop.

Delphi turned away and went home.

Would you have done something different?
Do you think you could explain to Delphi what the right thing to do is?

Delphi the Philosopher

The example of the invisibility ring is that of the Ring of Gyges, which Socrates raises in Plato's Republic (translated by G.M.A. Grube, Hackett Publishing Company, 1992).

This enquiry began life as a lesson delivered from The If Machine by Peter Worley (Bloomsbury, 2011).

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.