

CHAPTER 8

THE WATCHMAKER



“You’ve got to help me! I accidentally made a deal with a demon, and now he’s taken my father and my friends, and I’ve got to find something that’s really real, but it’s much harder than it sounds and I’ve already tried all the obvious things and now I don’t know what to suggest and everyone’s acting weird and I don’t know what to do!”

The man stopped and looked down at Delphi, who was trying to get her breath back. He was the most important looking man Delphi could find, which in Athens meant the oldest looking. He blinked a couple of times uncertainly.

“Erm... could you repeat that, my dear?”

Delphi was not getting anywhere. This was the fourth person she had tried to tell, and she had gotten nothing out of any of them. In fact, everyone was behaving very strangely.

Delphi the Dreamer



The first person she had come to when she had left the cave had been a beggar on the street, who had then declared that he was in fact the 'King of Athens' and had tried to enlist Delphi into his army.



Delphi had run away to speak to a local guardsman but he didn't respond at all, except at one point to mutter: "I'm not a guard, I'm a glass teapot!" and then tried to make himself a handle out of his arms and pour himself into a cup. He looked rather irritated when it didn't work.

Then there had been...



...the naked man. He had walked towards Delphi smiling cheerfully, declared himself an Emperor, and then asked what she thought of his new robes. Delphi had screamed and ran away again.

At least the older man seemed more normal.

“Just follow me, please, I’ll show you!” Delphi grabbed hold of his arm and pulled.



It came off with a click.

She looked at the object in her hand with horror. At the end of the arm, where it used to meet the shoulder, was a metal ball and some strange looking silver strings.

“Oh, I do beg your pardon,” said the man, who looked rather unconcerned. “It’s always doing that. I’ll soon have it back in place,” and he took the arm and slotted it back into his shoulder again. “Now, where were we?”

Delphi screamed and started to run away again. But then she stopped.



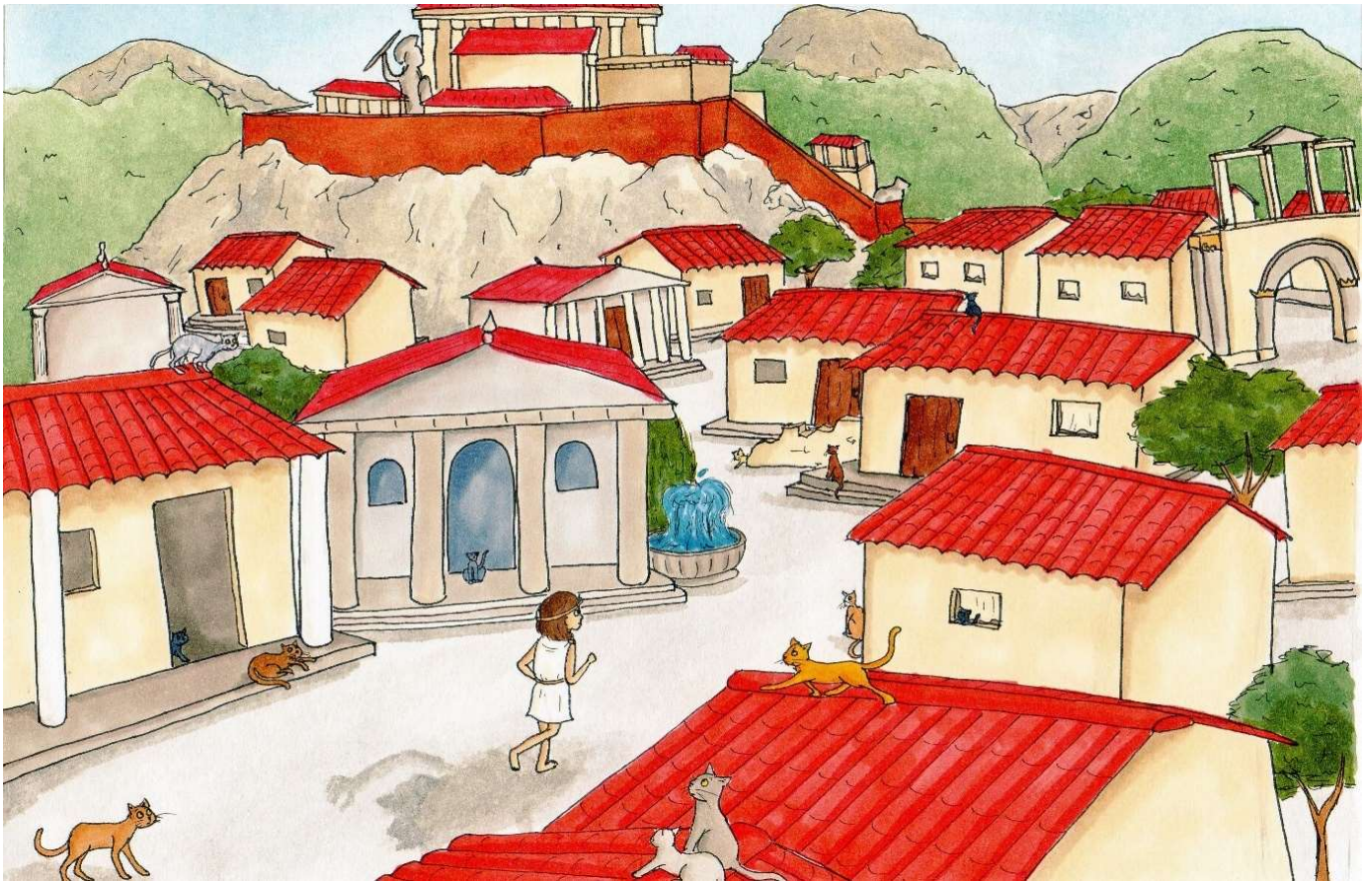
Delphi had the thought that you are probably having. This can’t be real.

Was she dreaming again? When had she started? She knew it was impossible to tell and pointless to even try and check. But what did it matter? Whether this was real or not, she knew it was the Demon’s doing.

She had to beat him. She knew it from the bottom of her dirty toes to top of her scraggly hair. She had to find something here that was without doubt, real. Whatever that meant.

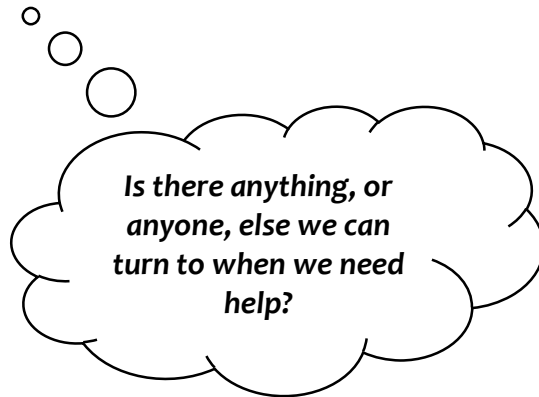
She looked up and saw the sun glint off the roof of the Parthenon temple, high up on the Acropolis hill. Maybe there was someone else who could help her.

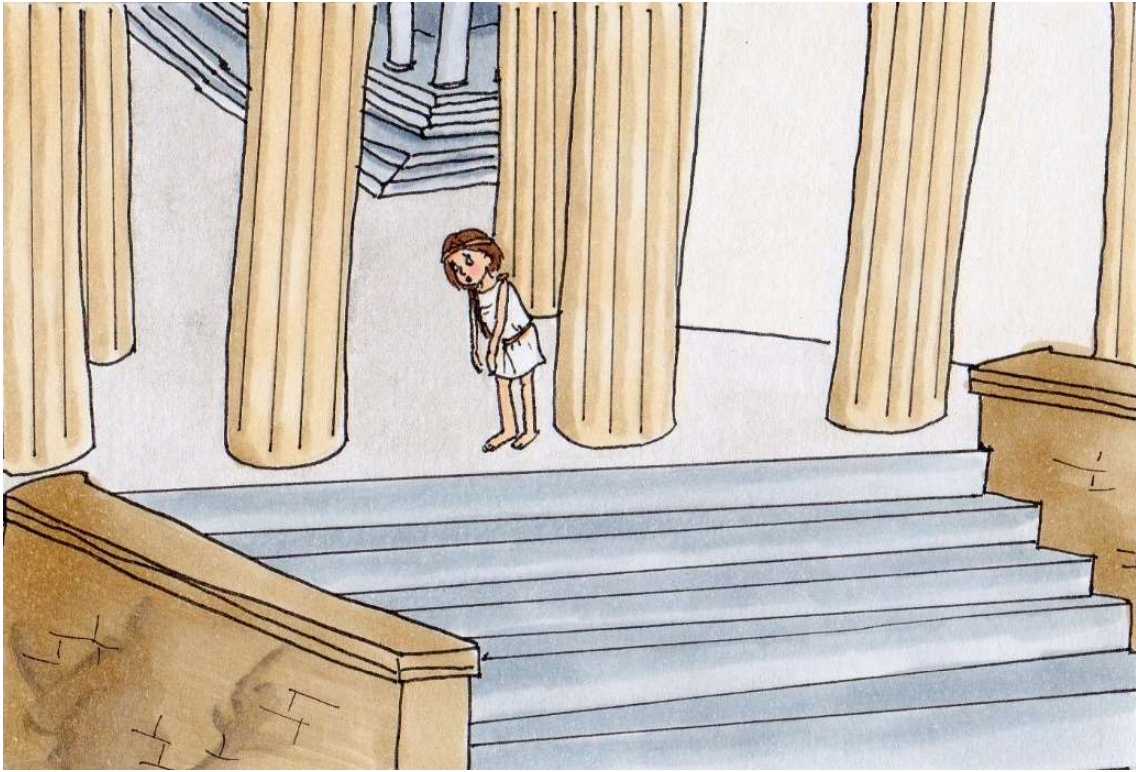
Say it like this!
Parth-e-non



She started to sprint up the road, heading for the temples at the top of the hill.

On every verge, lying in every doorway and sitting on top of every wall, the cats watched her go.





Say it like this!
Prop-er-lee-er

Delphi was out of breath again long before she reached the Propylaea, the gateway to the Acropolis. Like many other places in Athens, she was not usually allowed here.

Say it like this!
Mur-tis

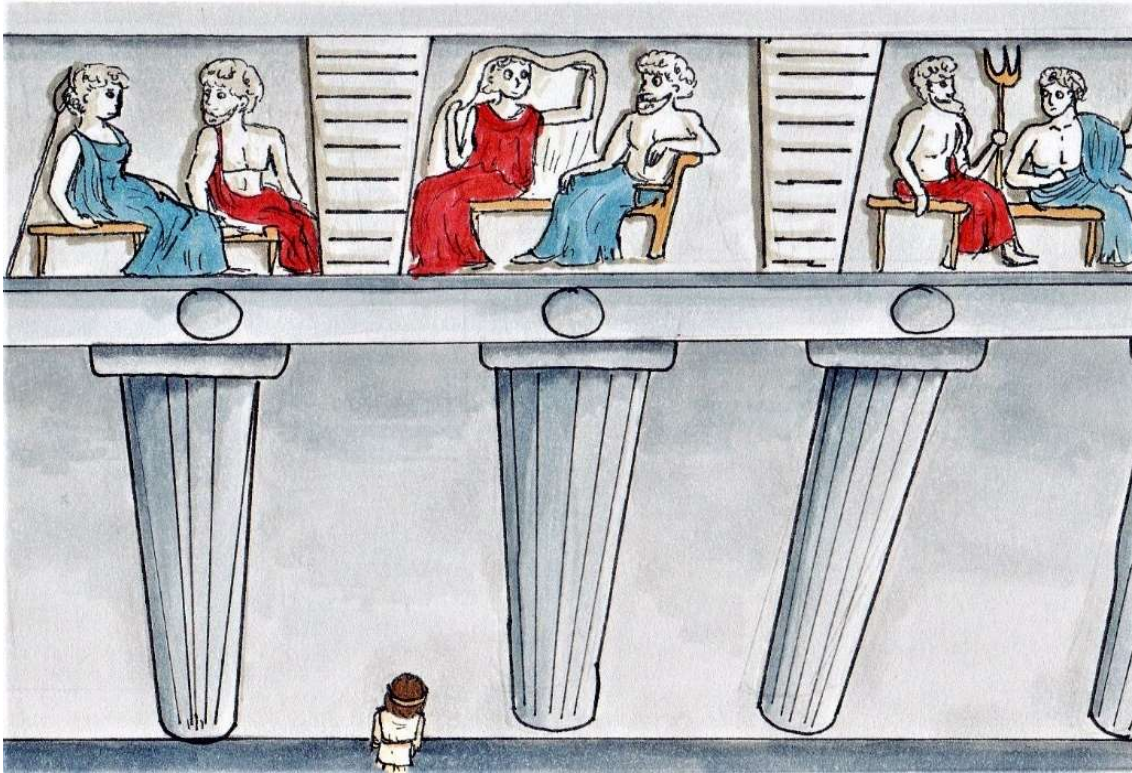
Delphi had a friend called Myrtis, who normally worked as a priestess in the temples, but Delphi knew that there was nothing normal about today. The gateway, usually thronged with visitors and overseen by priests, was deserted.

Panting slightly, Delphi walked up the long staircase and under the archway onto the Acropolis itself.

Say it like this!
Ah-thee-na

The mighty statue to Athena which dominated the plaza stood tall and proud, and the impossibly huge temple of the Parthenon lay before her, filling the sky. She walked towards it feeling like she was going to be caught and thrown out at any second. But there came no shout, no voice of command, and that felt disturbing enough.

There was no-one here. There should never be no-one here.



She reached the bottom of the towering pillars and looked up. On the frieze above her head, the gods, sculpted and painted in blue, red and white, were gathered in an epic battle scene which stretched around the entire perimeter of the temple. Zeus, the king of the gods, was seated at the heart of it all, and was surrounded by the other Olympians: his brother, the warrior Ares, his wife Hera, and his children, Athena, Apollo and Artemis, amongst the many others.

*Check the glossary
for pronunciations of
the gods!*

Delphi had always believed in the gods of course. It went without saying in such a religion-obsessed city as Athens. She had even met them once or twice.

She felt herself relax. Of course the gods could help defeat the Demon. Why didn't she think of this earlier?

She took a deep breath and walked into the temple.

*Say it like this!
nay-os*

She had never been into the central room of the temple before. It was not a place where little girls generally got to go. Myrtis had once told her that inside was the naos, the sacred room which had the most important statue. The Parthenon was Athena's temple, the goddess who had given her name to the city, and so it would be her statue inside, a golden and marble masterpiece, said to hold the soul of the goddess herself. Her dad had often mentioned it when he worked on his, considerably less sacred, statues.

Delphi was prepared for this.

What she hadn't expected was the forest.



Trees filled the temple from floor to ceiling, and her bare feet squished into the soil as she walked in. She could hear the leaves rustling in the gentle breeze and the smell of damp earth. Sunlight was filtering through the canopy and painting the ground in gold, orange and yellow, while tiny creatures danced and sparkled in the light. She took a few steps in, looking up, torn between wonder and doubt.



When she turned around, she could still see the white columns of the temple, and the world beyond them. When she looked up, she could see only leaves and branches.

“This isn’t real,” she whispered to herself, reminding herself. “None of this is real.” A word that Zeno had mentioned came back to her. “Therefore, I don’t need to worry about it.”

It was an oddly relaxing thought.

“Hello?” she shouted. “Is there any... god there?” The forest swallowed the words and there was no response.

Delphi started walking, picking a path at random through the trunks and the flowers. It was a beautiful forest – all colour and light, and full of activity. Birds sang mysterious songs in the trees and enormous bumble bees buzzed around huge pink and purple flowers. Delphi walked through it all in a daze, her eyes wide to take it all in. It was the kind of forest that you hear about in the old stories but never actually see in real life.



The sheer energy of the place seemed to fill Delphi up as she moved through it, faster and faster, until she broke out into a run, dodging under the low branches and leaping over roots, before entering a small clearing filled with bracken and long grass.

She slowed down almost in time to avoid tripping over the rock.

“Ow! Gods, that hurts!”



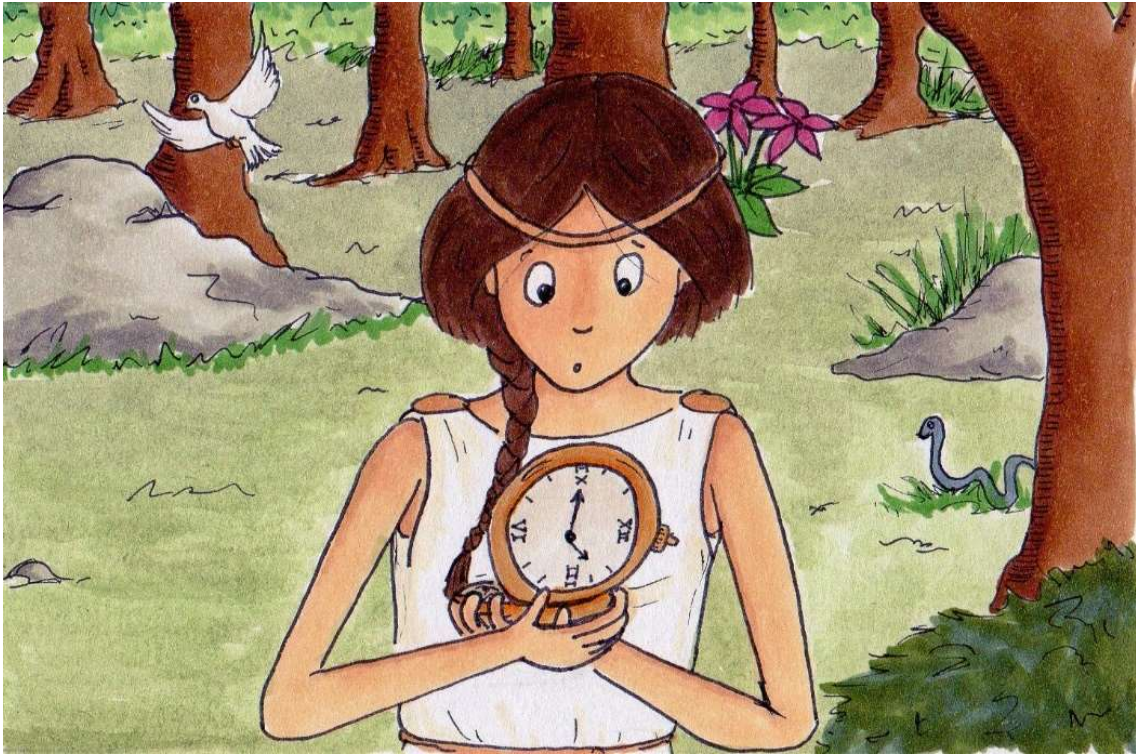
Delphi sat herself up and grabbed her foot where she'd banged it. Luckily, she could still move it OK so she doubted she'd really damaged it, though if her dad was here she certainly would've made him carry her back home.

And then she thought about her dad for a few seconds and forgot about the pain in her foot.

"You gods better be here somewhere!" Delphi shouted into the sky. "Please! I need your help!" The wind responded, which made the leaves dance, but that was it.



She stood up and was about to start shouting for the gods again, when she glanced down and saw the rock she had fallen over wasn't a rock at all. It was a dull golden colour and metal. She picked it up.

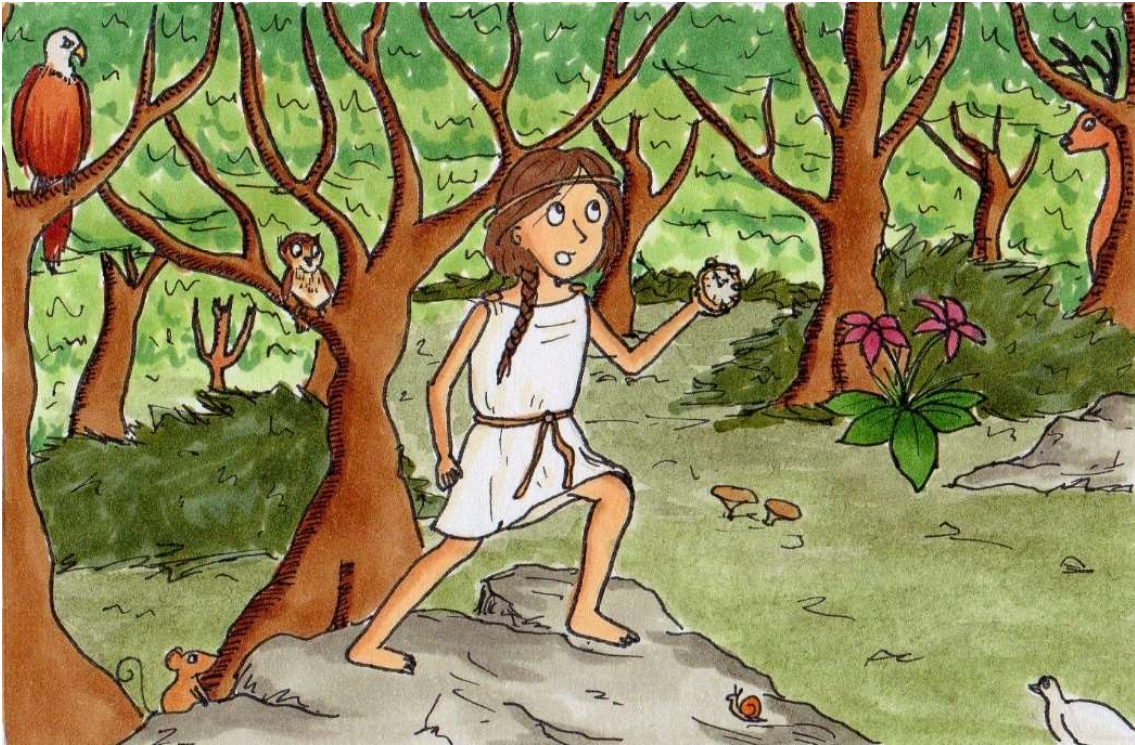


Delphi had never seen a watch before. Clockwork wasn't invented until the seventeenth century, so she would have to wait two thousand years before seeing one. But we know that's what it is. To Delphi it was just a very strange lump of metal, making a quiet, regular ticking sound. She stared at the strange contraption in her hands, watching it as one of the pointy bits inside rhythmically ticked round. She had no idea what it was for.

"What's this then?"

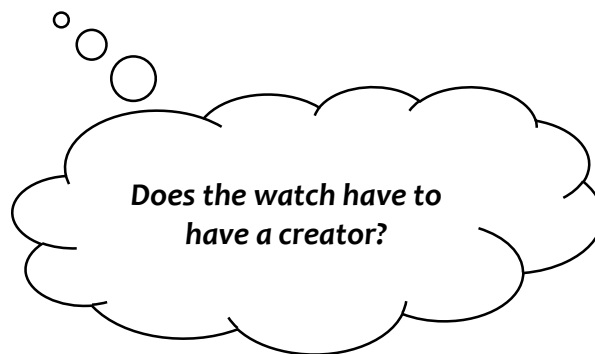
She ran her fingers around the edge of it until she felt a tiny gap and so she gently eased it apart with a fingernail. Inside the strange object were lots of tiny wheels, all spinning and connecting in perfect time. She carefully clicked it back together again. It was one of the most wonderful things she had ever seen.

She found herself looking round. Surely, someone must have made this? It seemed far too complicated, far too made, to have grown there by itself. Even if it wasn't real, someone must have invented at least the idea of it to put into her head.



“Can I keep this?” she asked, into the air. Then she realised this probably wasn’t the most important question. She tried again.

“This must have been made,” she said. “Therefore... there must be a maker! So come on out!”



There was again no response, except for the song of the birds and the tick of the watch.



She looked at it again. There was something disturbing about the way it kept ticking, kept moving, even without anything apparently making it move. Whatever it was, it was working.

“What’s keeping you going?” she whispered to it. And presumably, she thought, something, or someone, at some point, must have started it.



Holding the watch carefully, she walked out of the clearing and back into the shadows of the trees again. What would be above the trees? Sky or ceiling? She tried to stop thinking of questions. Her brain was aching enough as it was.

Squirrels darted up trees as she approached, pausing only to give her suspicious glances. A rabbit crossed her path and Delphi watched it with narrow eyes, just in case it tried to turn into a duck when she wasn't looking.

However, it was the birdsong which caught most of Delphi's attention. There were tiny little birds lined up on the branches above her and were shrilly calling to each other all at once, turning the air into a cacophony of notes and melodies. Delphi didn't know what kind of birds they were. She watched as one flew down to the ground, hopped around a bit and then picked up a small twig.

"What are you doing, little bird?" she asked, bending down to watch it.

It wrestled with it for a few seconds, clearly trying to get it balanced in its beak, before it shot up again.

"Hey, wait!"

Delphi raced after it, trying to keep it in sight. It led her to a low branch of a bent tree, where there was a tiny nest.



The bird was nudging the stick into place with its beak.

Delphi had tried to make a nest once, when she had found an egg in the gutter. It was a lot harder than it looked. The bird had done a much better job than she had.

"You're good at that, aren't you?" she said to the bird. "You know what to do. I wonder who told you?" It twittered a reply, and Delphi felt a pang of stupidity for not being able to understand it. Then it flew off.

The watch was still ticking in her hands. She looked at it, then looked at the bird's nest, and then looked at the forest. She ran back to the clearing, found a big rock to stand on and faced up to the sky. Then she cleared her throat.



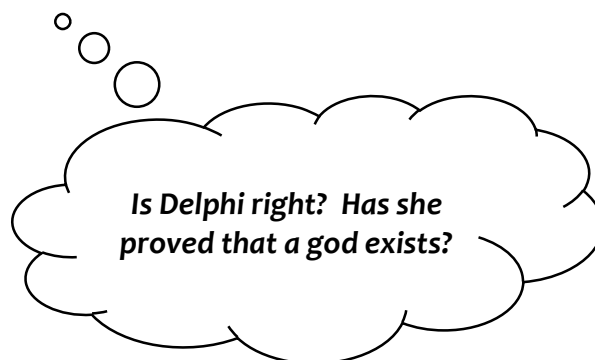
“I know you’re there!” she declared. “You have to be. Because this thing, whatever it is, must have been made by something. And... therefore someone must have taught it how to tick.” She held up the mysterious object to the sky.

“And then there’s the birds. They know what songs to sing so therefore... someone must have taught them! And someone must have made them too and told them what to do. And if that’s true for birds, then that would be true for the forest too. Someone must have told the forest how to grow. And taught the rabbits how to hop. And all of that.”

She paused for a breath.

“Therefore... there must be a creator. Otherwise, how would anything get created? So come out!”

She stood back and waited.



Delphi waited some more.

The clouds drifted by, the birds continued to sing, the wind blew her hair into her eyes. But that was it.

She got down off the rock and sat down on it heavily, resting her fist on her chin. She was sure that was going to work. Now what?



Then, she saw the owl.

It was sitting on the branch of a tree at the edge of the clearing, watching her, its head twisted round from its body. Delphi's heart leaped.

"That's Athena's bird!" she cried. She had seen it before – not least on every statue of the goddess ever made.

She jumped up in excitement and started to run towards it. The owl's eyes widened as it panicked and took off in a hurry, flying over Delphi's head. She turned round, trying to follow it, but soon lost sight as it disappeared into the treetops.

Delphi felt relief pouring off her. It was a sign! It was sent by the goddess!

She laughed and stopped, and then looked up into the sky. Her smile faded.

Unless... it was just an owl.

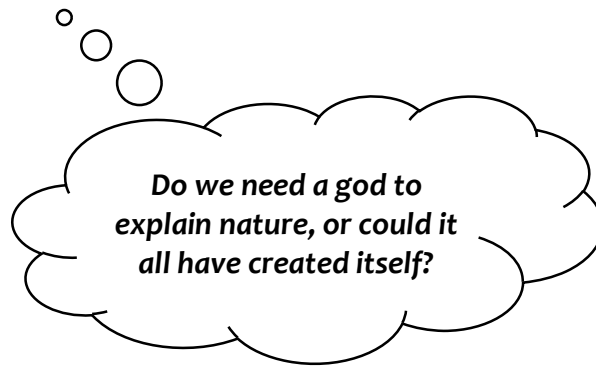
"Um... excuse me?" Delphi asked, into the air again. "Was that a sign, or was that just an owl? Sorry if I'm being stupid! Could you send another sign just so I know for sure? Maybe like a thunderbolt or something?" She thought about what she'd just said. "Actually, maybe not a thunderbolt, but..."

She paused. Even if there was a thunderbolt, would that make her certain it was the gods who sent it? She couldn't say that there was a thunderbolt, therefore there was a god. There just were thunderbolts after all, and owls, and birdsong and squirrels. Did they have to come from a god? Couldn't they just be?

She listened to the birdsong again. Now she came to think about it, it did sound like they were just making it up as they went along.

She cleared her throat again.

"Is anyone there?" she asked. "Or am I just talking to myself?"



Delphi's fingers were pinching into the palms of her hands. She realised she was feeling angry. Very, very, angry.

"I always believed in you!" she shouted to the sky. "I was always sure you existed! Sometimes you just get this feeling that there's something much bigger than you are. And we do so much for you! People build temples to you and pray to you and make sacrifices and everything! But the world doesn't need you, does it? It gets on perfectly fine without gods!"

She looked at the watch in her hands, still ticking. It was suddenly incredibly irritating. She threw it down on the ground, and there was a dull crack. It gave a couple more hesitant ticks, and then stopped.



Delphi stared at the dented case. She'd broken it.

Someone made that, came a voice inside her head.

Yes, she said back to it. But who?

It doesn't matter who, someone made it. It had a creator.

So everything has a creator?

The voice in her head sounded irritated. Of course, it said.

But birds and trees and the wind aren't like this thing, she replied. Nobody made them, really. They just are.

Something must have started them, she pointed out to herself. Something must have started everything.

She didn't know what to say to herself.

Delphi looked at the broken watch again.

"You might have started everything!" she declared to the sky. "But who started you?"

The sky darkened slightly as a heavy cloud blocked out the sun. The wind felt colder. But there was no response. What kind of response could there possibly be?

Can you prove that a god exists, or is it something you must believe in even if you can't prove it?



Delphi stood up as she felt the first drop of rain hit her cheek. She felt a bit stupid now.

There was nothing she could find here that would ever give her proof. Not the cast iron, hard, solid proof that she needed. There would always be doubt.

“You might be there,” she said to the sky, to the rain, to the world. “But you might not be. And I need something stronger than that. I need something I can’t doubt even a tiny bit. And I’m not going to find that here.”



She started to trudge back through the forest, her feet sticking in the damp ground. The rain was picking up and the trees sounded angry.

The voice in her head cleared its throat.

You can't trust anything here anyway, it said. Maybe none of this is real.

Maybe nothing's real, Delphi said back to it. Maybe the Demon's right.

There is something, the voice insisted. You just have to find it.

"But how?" Delphi asked aloud, stopping and shouting into the air. "I've tried everything!"

The voice in her head was calm. Soft. Reassuring.

Then get rid of everything that you can doubt. Reject everything that might not be true - and find what you have left.

Delphi waited, but there was nothing more.

"Wait..." she whispered, to herself. "Who are you?"

But there was no response. And Delphi knew she would never know, even if she asked and asked and asked. But for some reason, she did feel a little better.

After a while, she saw a glimpse of the white temple columns through the undergrowth. She paused as she felt the warmth of the sun from outside, starting to dry the false rain from her skin.

She took a deep breath and stepped outside.



The Demon was sitting on a low wall, waiting for her. It was wearing an owl mask, and its strange green face was curled into a feline grin. Its yellow eyes shone.

"Well?" it asked. "Have you found it?"

Delphi the Dreamer

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*This story was inspired by the famous allegory of the watchmaker, presented by William Paley's *Natural Theology or Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity*, though references to this idea can also be found in the works of Isaac Newton and René Descartes.*

*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 Dreamer* is fictional but has been written to at least be consistent with historical events and practices. Any errors in that regard are my own.*