

CHAPTER 10 – HEMLOCK



Delphi sprinted after Phaedo through the crowd, towards the prison door. Her mind was on fire. She had barely managed to recover from making her speech, let alone deal with the idea that Socrates would soon be dead. Plato ran behind her, pushing through the crowd like a small, determined elephant.

A guard with a grim expression nodded to her when she approached, and to her surprise, unlocked and opened the door for her. The guard led her inside and they found themselves in a small stone room. He locked the door behind them, sending the room into almost complete darkness. Delphi waited nervously as the man, without a word, shuffled over to the other wooden door, which he unlocked with some clanking metal keys. She felt so nervous she couldn't even think.

The door opened and torchlight lit up the room beyond – but it was the shouting that caught Delphi's attention.



"I told you this would happen! Didn't I tell you that you'd end up like this? You can't talk your way out of everything you know, however much you think you can! It doesn't even matter if you're right, people just don't listen. You know that! Are you even listening to me?"

It was a large and somewhat scary looking woman, clearly furious, who was doing all the shouting. And there was Socrates. Prison clearly hadn't been easy for him. His hair and beard were whiter than ever, and he looked stiff and tired. He was sitting on a stone bench in what looked like a prison cell, with no other furniture except a small stone pot under his bench. That must be for him to wee in, pointed out a naughty bit of Delphi's brain. She told it to shut up.

Socrates looked like he had been listening to the shouting for some time. Delphi and Plato hung back and waited for it to stop.

"Who's that?" Delphi asked.

"That's Xanthippe," Plato replied. "You know, Socrates' wife."

Delphi was flabbergasted.

"Socrates is married?!" she exclaimed. Plato looked at her.

"Of course! Didn't you know that?" She had never thought to ask, and now she felt rather stupid. Plato pointed through another door, where a little boy, only a couple of years old, was standing watching them. "And that's his son, Menexenus. His other two sons will be around somewhere too."

Why had Delphi never wondered about Socrates' family? She realised that she had always thought about Socrates as the great philosopher – not Socrates, the ordinary man. And of course, he was both. Right now, he looked like Socrates, the Husband in Trouble. They waited for Xanthippe to finish.

"And did you even stop to think about your friends with all this? Fancy dragging everybody into this, just so you can win an argument and feel smug about it all! Socrates, without question, you are the most irritating, annoying, stupid, selfish man I have ever met!" she paused for a breath, clearly looking for

Say it like this!
Zan-thip

Say it like this!
For Socrates' son, just
follow the sounds:
Men-ex-e-nus

another insult to shout at him, and failing to find one. Instead, she picked up the chamber pot and poured the wee over his head.



Why do you think Xanthippe is so angry?

Socrates didn't appear to react at first. Then he slowly wiped his eyes and looked up at Delphi and Plato. "After the thunder, the rain," he said, and smiled weakly at them. He stood up slowly. Then a very strange thing happened. Xanthippe hugged him suddenly, and passionately, as though she never wanted to let go of him again. Delphi pulled a face as she tried not to think about the wee going on her dress. To Delphi's faint disgust, she kissed him and whispered something in his ear. Socrates smiled again and whispered something back. Then, without another word, Xanthippe let him go, picked up her son and stormed out the room, towards where Delphi and Plato were waiting.



“I’d just give him a minute to clean himself up, if I were you,” she suggested, stopping next to them. “Good to see you Plato. Thank you for coming to see him. Who’s this?” Delphi was surprised how friendly she looked now she had stopped shouting, and she was younger than she had expected too. Her eyes were red though, like she had been crying.

“This is Delphi. She’s a philosopher, like Socrates,” replied Plato, and just for a split second, Delphi could have hugged him for saying that, even if he had been covered in wee.

“Well, I’m sure he’ll enjoy talking to you then, Delphi,” Xanthippe replied, smiling at her.

“I’m... I’m sorry!” said Delphi, before she quite understood why she’d said it. “I mean, I’m sorry... about your husband.” Xanthippe nodded, her expression blank.

“Thank you. I’m not really surprised it’s turned out like this, to be honest. I was always expecting it to happen sooner or later.” She sighed and looked at her son in her arms. “But I am going to miss the old fool.”

Xanthippe nodded to the guard, who started fiddling with the keys to let her out.

“Nice to meet you, Delphi.” Her voice sounded a bit strange, like it was weighed down by something heavy.



After Xanthippe had gone, the guard led Delphi and Plato back into the stone room, next to the cells. Socrates had clearly been allowed to go and wash himself after his wife’s visit. The guard cleaned up the mess and then waited in one corner, looking serious, as Delphi and Plato sat on another stone bench together to wait. Delphi could hear a lot of men talking from another room next door. Plato glanced in and looked back to her.

“Phaedo’s here with lots of Socrates’ friends. I’m just going to go and say hello,” he said. Plato was looking red faced.

“OK, I’ll wait here,” Delphi said. She wasn’t in the mood to talk to anyone else right now. She wanted some space to think. Plato nodded and disappeared.

Delphi rested her chin on her hand and tried to calm down her thoughts, which were running crazily around her brain like children at a party. She wasn’t sure she knew what she was going to say to Socrates – or even what he could possibly want to say to her. She felt like she would never understand him. He was prepared to die and leave all his friends behind? Even prepared to leave his wife behind? And his children? What possible reason could there be to do that?





“So you must be Delphi?”

She looked up as Socrates walked through the doorway, from where all the men were talking. He shut the door behind him. She nodded.

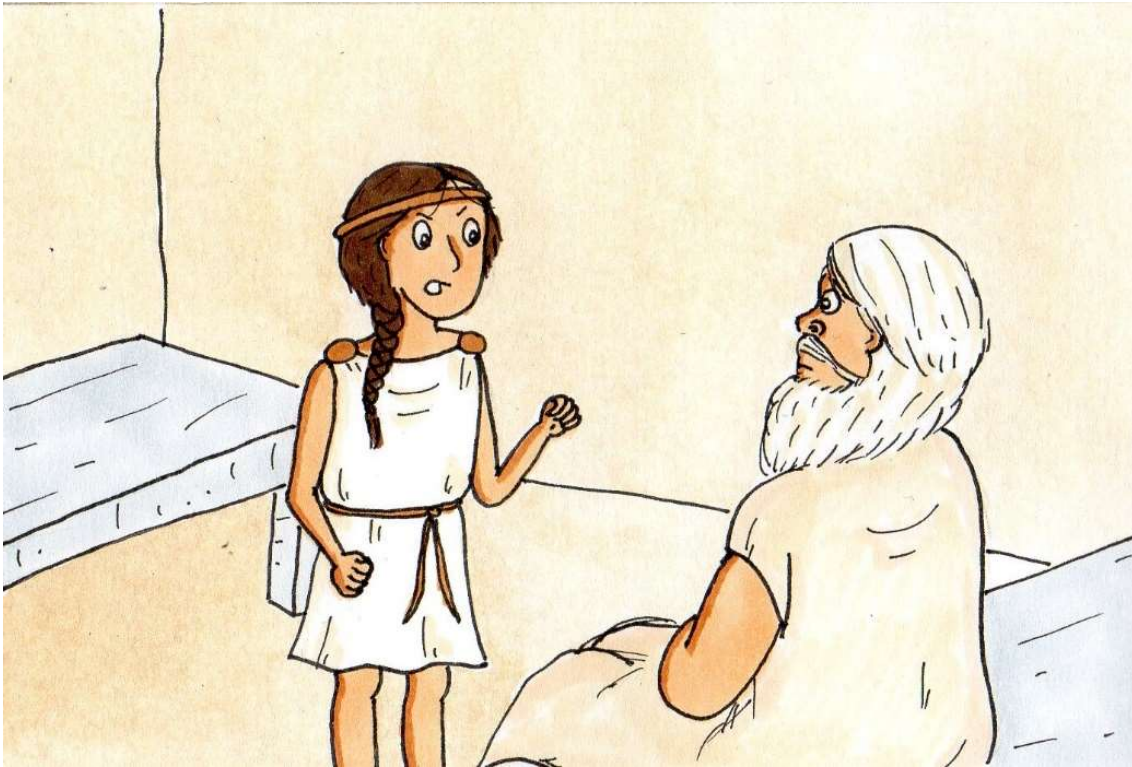
“I’m sorry about that. I’ve had a quick bath, but I wouldn’t get too close if I were you. You have to be prepared to smell a bit if my wife’s upset.” His voice was soft and calm. He sat down slowly at the other end of the stone bench. Delphi watched him warily.

It was strange to suddenly be so close to him. She had spent weeks thinking about him, trying to work out what he had said, trying to free him. Yet, she had never really expected a moment where they would come face to face like this. She had forgotten how ugly he was, for one thing.

“I heard a bit of your speech,” Socrates said, cheerfully. “I thought you did a marvellous job...”

“Don’t you dare say, ‘for a girl!’” Delphi said, cutting in, and surprising herself. Socrates hesitated.

“I honestly wasn’t going to,” he replied, carefully. Delphi suddenly realised how angry she felt.



“Do you have any idea what I’ve gone through because of you?” she asked, standing up. “I’ve spent weeks learning how to become a philosopher because of you! I got laughed at by the other philosophers and then all this weird stuff started happening and I nearly broke Plato and turned my dad to gold and got stuck in my room by a monster and annoyed Zeus and...” she took a deep breath as it ran out. “And for what?”

Socrates looked at her, helplessly. Delphi glared back at him. “So I could persuade everyone that you were worth saving - and then even when I managed to do that, it turns out you don’t want to be saved! You’d rather just die and give up!” There were tears in her eyes now but she didn’t care. She stood, her fingers curled into fists, and found herself looking for another chamber pot to pour over his head.

“Have you been speaking to my wife, by any chance?” Socrates asked timidly. Delphi let out a short laugh, despite trying not to.

“Please, will you let a condemned man explain himself?” he asked. “Plato tells me you have become a great philosopher, so let’s approach this like the philosophers we are. I’m sure you can persuade me I am being a selfish old fool after all.”

Delphi tried to calm herself down a little and slowly unclenched her fists.

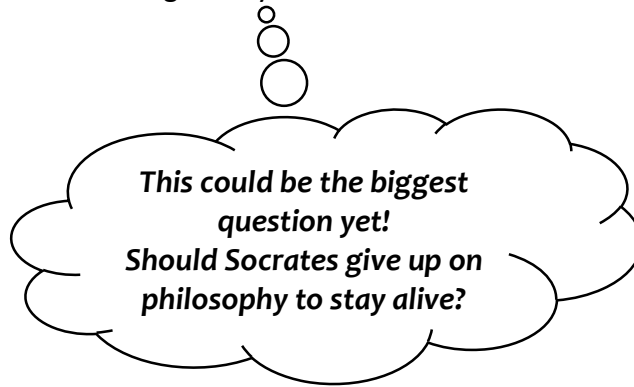
“OK. Fine,” she said, sitting down again. “I’ll argue with you then. Why didn’t you escape when you had the chance?”

“I can see why you’d ask me that,” Socrates replied, “but that’s not the important question here is it?” Delphi looked at him warily. This was Socrates. She was going to have to listen to him very carefully.

“You know that if I escaped, I would have to leave Athens and live a life in secret, away from people, so I wouldn’t be caught again. So I wouldn’t then be able to call myself a philosopher, would I? I wouldn’t be able to discuss ideas in the marketplace or ask people questions, or try and find the best way to live, would I?”

“I guess not,” Delphi agreed.

“So the question you’re really asking me – the bigger question – is this: Should I live without philosophy? Should I carry on living but without thinking for myself?”



“I believe I am better to die as a philosopher,” said Socrates. He leaned closer to her and whispered. “But I’m always prepared to admit that I’m wrong, of course.”

Delphi looked up at his white bearded face and kind eyes. She forced her thoughts into line.

“OK,” she said, after a few seconds. “I’ll tell you why you should be alive. I can think of three reasons. Firstly, it’s not fair. I know this whole thing isn’t fair on you, because you’ve done nothing wrong. But it’s not fair on your family, on your wife or children, or your friends, to leave them and make them sad. If you could have escaped you should have done, because otherwise you’re just making things worse for everyone.”

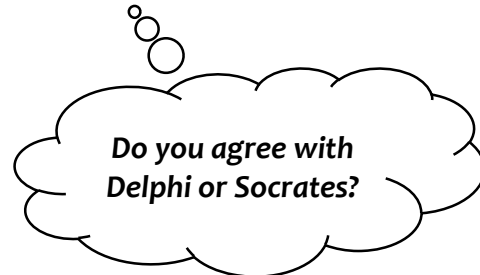
Socrates nodded. “A good point. And of course, I don’t wish to hurt my friends or my family.”

“Well then...” Delphi cut in, but Socrates raised a finger.

“But I will be hurting them more if I lived.” Delphi frowned at him. “Think about it. If I escaped with Crito last night, then I would be a hunted criminal. I would be breaking the laws of the country that I call my home. Even if I got away, not only would I never see my wife, children or friends again, I would also be putting them in danger. What do you think the soldiers do when a criminal escapes?”

“They chase after him?” Delphi suggested. “And they... oh. They’ll go and find his family and friends to look for him.”

“Exactly. It would hardly be a difficult mystery would it? They’d know that Crito and Phaedo and dear Xanthippe would know where I was. Then they could be arrested, and possibly even killed themselves, for helping a criminal escape his death sentence. So tell me, why would I want to hurt those people I love like that? Why is my safety more important than theirs?”



“Oh,” Delphi found herself nodding. “I guess that makes sense. Maybe. But, OK, here’s my second reason: Isn’t it just better to be alive than to be dead? Even if you can’t do philosophy, isn’t some kind of life better than no life at all? Surely, anything’s better than being dead, isn’t it?”

Socrates nodded.

“Yes, it would seem so, wouldn’t it?” Delphi waited for him to disagree, which, of course, he did. “But for me, the joy of being alive is being able to think for yourself. Would you agree?”

Delphi squirmed a bit on the bench. “Sort of.”

“I believe the point of being alive is to think, to be curious and find out about the world. If I do not think for myself, then it would be like I am living my life asleep – like my brain has been...” he turned an imaginary handle at the side of his head. “...turned off. To think and examine what is in the world around you is the point of being alive. The unexamined life is not worth living.”

Delphi the Philosopher

Who do you
agree with here?



Delphi thought about this for a few seconds.

"I'm not sure about that," she admitted. "There's more to life than thinking about stuff, isn't there? What about feeling happy, or..." she thought of the things that made life living. "...the taste of honey cakes, or hugging your family or playing with your friends? Wouldn't that be enough?"

Socrates nodded. "Those are all fine things indeed. But isn't life about more than just making yourself happy? Imagine mindlessly just seeking nice things and never thinking about why. That would be a very selfish kind of life, wouldn't it?"

Delphi thought of the invisibility ring and her perfect bedroom. She could see where Socrates was coming from, even if she wasn't quite ready to agree with him.

"OK, well that's kind of like the third thing I was going to say. Don't you want to be free? You've been locked up and you're going to have to... to..." she hesitated, not wanting to say it.

"Drink poison, yes," Socrates said, looking surprisingly unworried.

"Yeah. And that's not your choice is it? Aren't you angry about being forced to... die?"

Again, Socrates nodded. "I certainly was. And you are quite right, I would not choose this to happen."

"Then why are you just going along with it?" Delphi asked, and she realised she sounded a bit desperate now. It felt like nothing would convince him.

"Can you imagine something for me, Delphi?" asked Socrates. "Imagine a man who does not think for himself. Imagine he lives his life with his family, he eats his meals and he does his work and not once does

a thought go through his head. He feels happy enough, but of course, he never thinks about how he feels. Who would make decisions for this man, do you think?”

Delphi thought about it. “Other people I suppose. He couldn’t really decide for himself. I mean, he could choose something random but he wouldn’t actually think about it.”

“Exactly,” Socrates said. “So other people would do this man’s thinking for him. He wouldn’t be able to think and choose for himself. Would he be free?”

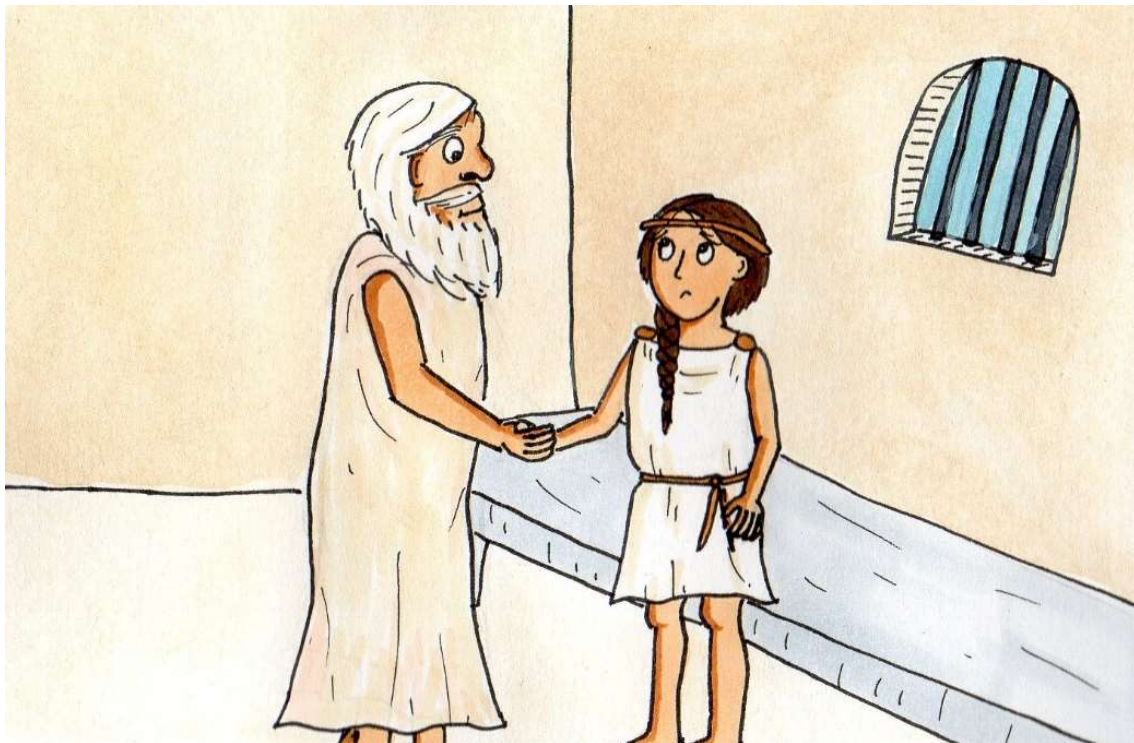
Delphi suddenly realised the point Socrates was making. “No. Other people are kind of... controlling him.”

“Right, so someone who does not think is not free. And if I gave up thinking for myself, then I would not be free either. And if I escape and am forced to leave my home and give up philosophy, in what way would I be free?”



Delphi didn’t know what to say. She suddenly felt like a massive failure. She couldn’t even convince someone that dying was a bad idea.

“I’ll say one last thing in my defence,” Socrates said, quietly, noticing that she was becoming upset. “I have lived the best kind of life. I have spent my time with wonderful people and experienced the world. I have been a soldier for my country and been a husband and father. I have looked for the best kind of life to live, and maybe I have not found it, but I would change nothing about my life or what I have done. I have no regrets.” He stood up and stood in front of Delphi. He offered his hand to her.



Slowly, she took it and stood up.

Delphi the Philosopher

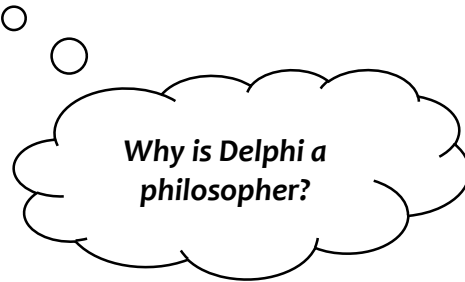
“You can disagree with everything I’ve ever said. Because to be a philosopher is to think for yourself. To think the thoughts that other people perhaps don’t want you to think. It is to be free. And I truly believe it is the best way I could have lived my life.”

He slowly shook Delphi’s hand.

“From one philosopher to another,” he said softly, his eyes sparkling in the torchlight. “I know you will carry on what I started.”

Delphi felt tears come to her eyes again, and she nodded.

“Thank you,” she whispered.



Delphi never forgot what happened next.

Socrates thanked her for their conversation and went back into the room with the men. They were all very upset and Plato had been so anxious that he had been sick. Delphi gave him a hug and he came and sat with her in the room with the stone bench, next door.

The guard had gone in with Socrates, and to everyone’s surprise, had started crying and hugged Socrates, like he was an old friend. Another man had come with the poison. It was a strange, green liquid and looked too small to end a life, and yet it could, and it would.



Delphi couldn’t help but look through the cracks of the door to see what was going on. It felt just like his trial all over again. Socrates sat in the middle of his friends, making jokes and laughing, even as his friends

Delphi the Philosopher

cried for the friend they were about to lose. The man with the poison spoke to him for a few minutes before passing the cup. Socrates looked cheerful, even then. He was shouting something about a chicken. She held her breath.

Delphi watched as the old man brought the cup to his lips and hesitated for just a second. The drink was made from something called hemlock. It was a poison, and it would kill him.

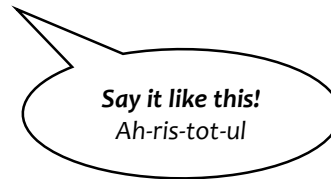
Socrates drank it all in one gulp.

Delphi stopped watching then. She hugged Plato again and they cried a little bit together. Then she took his hand and led him back outside, getting another guard to open the door for them.

When Delphi stepped outside, into the coolness of the night air, she somehow felt like a different person than when she had gone in. She still didn't quite know what to make of Socrates. She wasn't even sure that she agreed with a lot of what he had said.

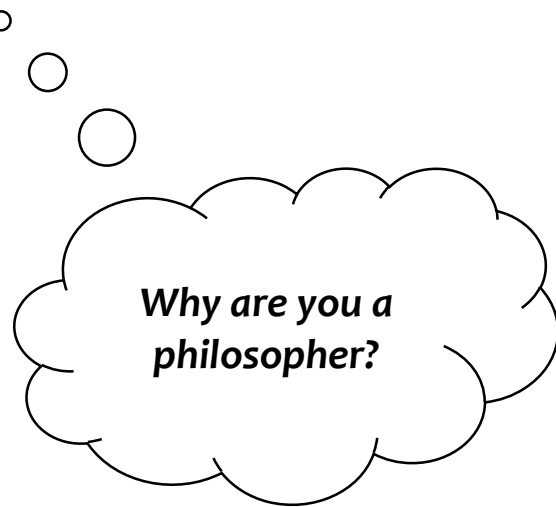
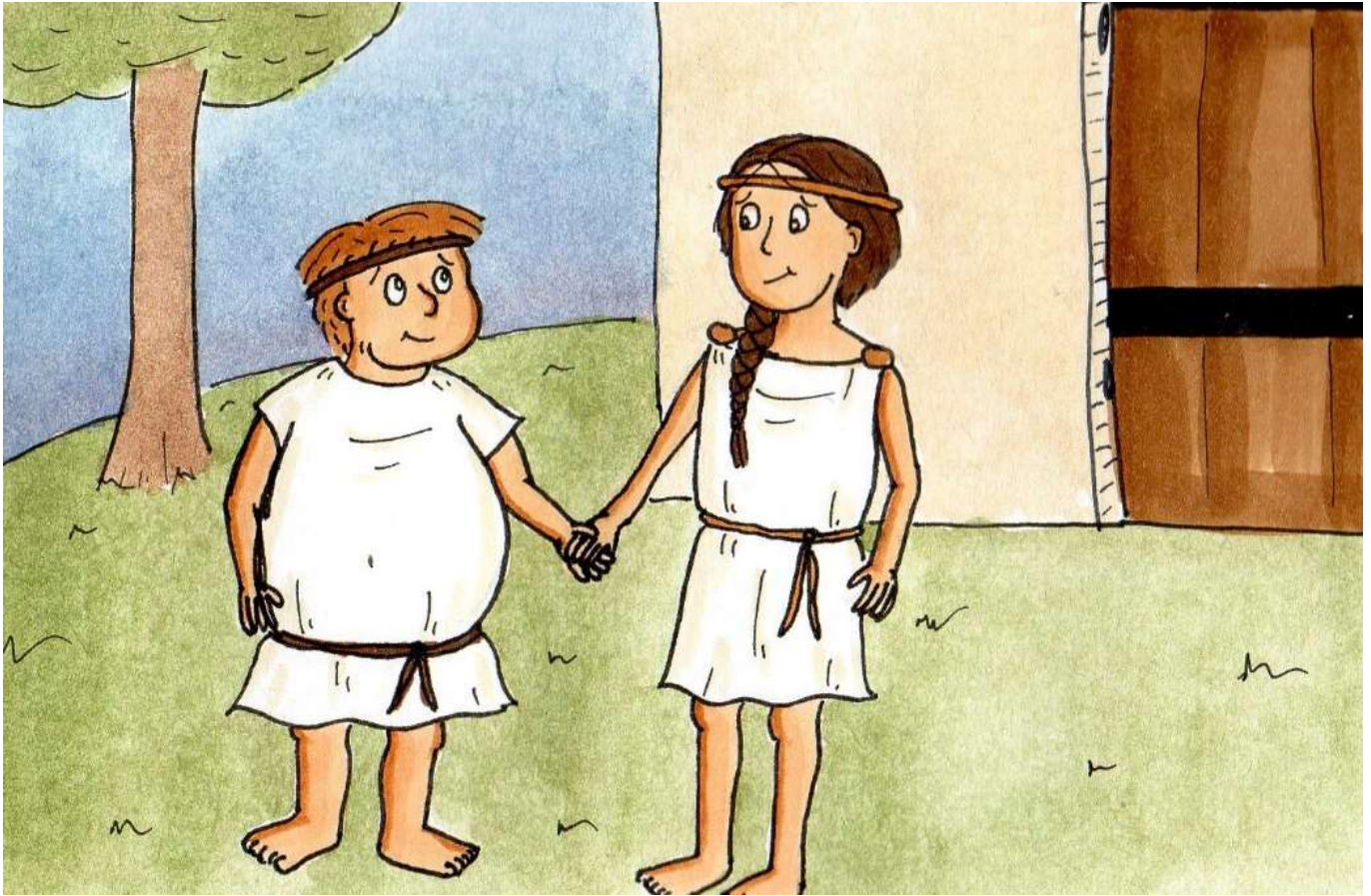
But that was the point. Socrates had died to show the world how to think for yourself. He didn't want people to agree with him. He wanted people to think.

Although Delphi would go on to have many more adventures of her own, she never forgot her brief time with Socrates and what she had learned from him. Neither did the rest of the world. Plato, when he grew up, wrote many books about Socrates and these became the first important books about philosophy ever written. Along with a pupil of his own named Aristotle, Socrates and Plato's ideas would be talked about and discussed for thousands of years after his death.



Philosophers would go on to have many more big ideas and ask many more big questions. Philosophers would change the world.

And if you've read and thought about this story, that makes you a philosopher too.



© David Whitney 2019. Illustrations © Rosie Coulson 2019. All rights reserved.

This text is available exclusively through www.delphi-philosophy.com and should not be copied or distributed, in whole or in part, by any means.

Macedonia Font licensed under the 1001Fonts Free For Commercial Use License (FFC).

The details of Socrates' life, trial and execution 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.