

CHAPTER 6

ZENO THE RACING TORTOISE



Delphi looked up at the stars.

Now, they were something that didn't change. Every night, there they were, as immovable as the largest mountains. OK, they do move around a bit apparently, but that doesn't mean they change, does it? Or does it?

Delphi had been thinking like this quite a lot recently. Even now, as she walked home late in the evening, staring up at the sky, she was still trying to find one thing, something, that didn't change. Finding it was proving surprisingly difficult.

Take that star, she thought, her eyes fixed on it as her feet led her down a side street towards home. There it is, twinkling away for ages, ever since one of the gods placed it there. It must have started its life, or whatever you'd call it, at some point, surely, unless it had been there forever, but then that would mean it would always be there forever. But if one day it wasn't there, and then the next day it was, then that would...



“Aaaaagghhh!”

Delphi screamed and the next few seconds passed in a blur as the world spun over backwards, the ground swallowed her up and her arms and legs got tangled round each other. She landed in a heap.

She only realised what had happened when she heard a woman laughing, in that unpleasant way that adults sometimes use when they laugh at children. The kind of laugh you know that you’re going to remember through a mental scar of embarrassment for the rest of your life.

Delphi opened her eyes and looked up. The woman’s face appeared at the top of the hole that she had, apparently, just fallen into.



“Are you all right down there? They’ve been digging out a new well today. You shoulda looked where you was going!”

Delphi angrily got up, the hot rush of humiliation keeping away the pain in her knees and elbows, where there would be some impressively colourful bruises tomorrow. When she stood up, the top of the hole was only just above her head. The woman stretched an arm down and helped pull Delphi up.

By the time she was back at street level again, she still hadn’t thought of what to say, other than a mumbled thank you. The woman was still laughing.



“I don’t know, children these days, what are they like? Got their heads in the clouds all of them...” and she wandered off, clearly keen to tell someone what had happened and how it proved her point about ‘Young People Today’. Somewhat painfully, Delphi just walked away, her mind focused only on the path in front of her feet, all thoughts of the stars forgotten.

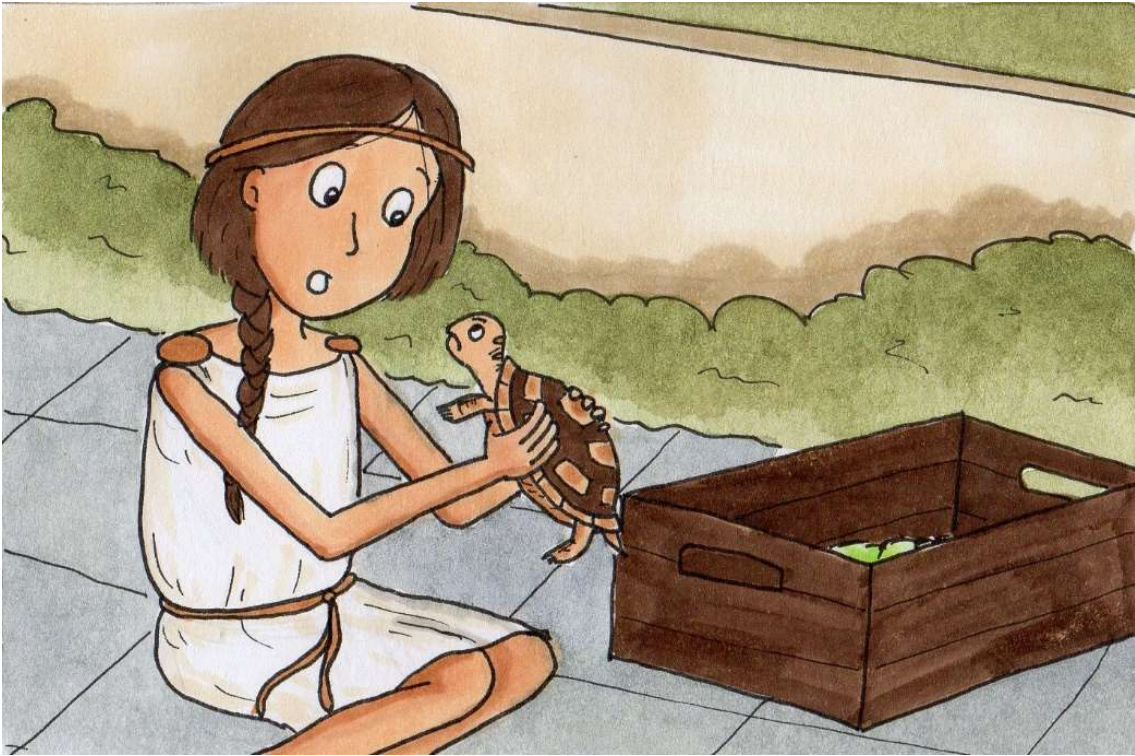
*Is it more important to think,
or to observe?
Do you learn more by thinking
or by perceiving the world?*



“Hello! I’m home!” Delphi shouted as she walked inside her house. “I fell down a hole and I hurt myself! Probably broken some bones or something!” She peered into the men’s quarters, but her father wasn’t there. He must be in the courtyard. “I might need something to cheer me up! Like some honey cake or...” she stopped when she reached the courtyard as it became obvious there was nobody home. Sure enough, her father wasn’t in the courtyard or asleep in his bedroom either.

Delphi was used to being at home by herself – an unusual situation for most young girls in Greece but ‘circumstances’ (as her dad would mysteriously explain it to their neighbours) had meant that it was just her and her dad living here now. But she’d never been at home by herself at night before. Where had he gone?

“Dad?” she called out, just to make sure, but no-one answered. The only reaction she got was from Zeno, her pet tortoise, who slowly eased his head out of his shell and looked up at her hopefully. Delphi slumped down next to his little enclosure.



“Ah, Zeno,” she said. “You think everything I say means food.” She picked him up, making his legs wobble in a mild panic, and tried to give him a hug. It’s quite difficult to give a tortoise a hug.

“Where’s my dad gone Zeno? He’s never here when I need to talk to him. I guess you’ll have to do,” she said, looking into his stubborn little face.

“Oh, I’ll do, will I?”

Delphi blinked a couple of times.

Then she blinked a bit more.

“Um...” she started.

“Don’t just stand there, put me down! I’m getting nasty flashbacks to when I met that eagle, but don’t get me started on that.” The voice was old and cracked, but fierce too. Delphi gently placed Zeno back on the ground.

“Um... sorry,” said Delphi. She looked around to see if anyone was nearby. Then it dawned on her what was happening.

“You can come out Dad!” she shouted, her eyes shooting around the courtyard. “It’s a really silly joke and I knew it was you all along!”



"Oh, you don't even want to talk to me now, do you?" croaked Zeno, from ground level. "I don't know, young people these days, they're all so busy rushing around they can't even tell who's talking to them. Not that I was going to get any sense out of..."

"Is that you Zeno?" Delphi asked, who had sat back down next to him and was staring, horrified at his little mouth.

"Well Zeus hasn't turned himself into a tortoise, has he?" And yes, the tortoise's mouth was flapping, much quicker than Delphi had expected. Not that she had expected him talk at all, in fact.

"I didn't know you could talk!"

"Clearly," replied Zeno, rolling his eyes at her.

"You've never talked before!" Delphi insisted.

"You've never heard me before," Zeno said. "That's not the same thing."

"Oh," said Delphi, and then an idea occurred to her. "Are you a demon? Your eyes aren't turning yellow or anything?"

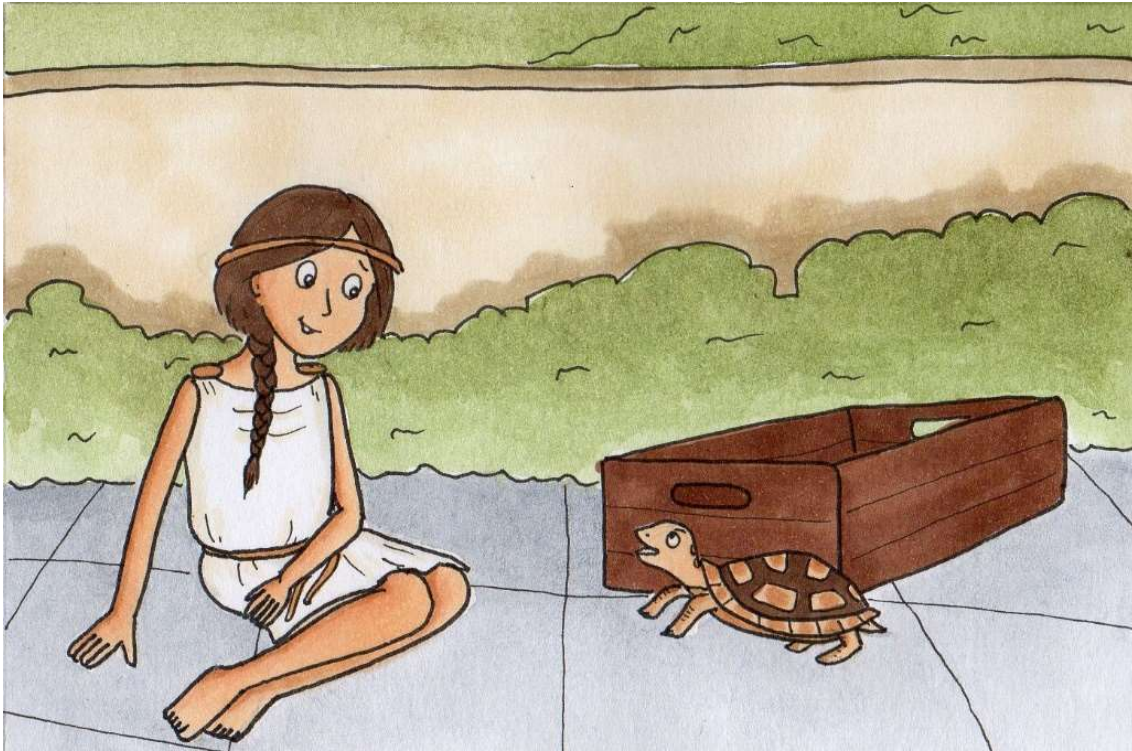
The tortoise gave her another scowl. Tortoises are good at scowling.

"No, I am not a demon," he snapped. "Is there anything else you want to rudely ask me? Go on, it's not like you've paid much attention to manners before, so I don't see why..."

"What happened with the eagle?" asked Delphi, who didn't pay much attention to sarcasm either.

"What?"

"What happened with the eagle?" she repeated. "You said not to get you started."



"Oh that!" cried the tortoise, though he looked rather pleased to be asked. "That was a long time ago. You see, back then, I was famous and I used to get all sorts of folk coming along to see me. This one time this eagle came along, and said," and Zeno paused, clearly trying to get the voice right. "'Well hello there, Zeno, you must be the famous racing tortoise, yes?'" and I said 'Of course' and then..."

"Wait, wait, wait," interrupted Delphi. "Did you say you were a famous... racing tortoise?"

Zeno nodded enthusiastically. This took a while and Delphi had to wait for him to finish.

"Most famous tortoise in the world I am!" he croaked. "No-one can beat me in a sprint across the flat! Never been caught by any man, beast or god!"

Delphi sucked her lip, wondering what to say.

"Only... I found you next to the river," said Delphi. "Years ago. You were trying to eat a dandelion." And you were struggling to catch up with it, she added to herself.

"I had a life before I met you, you know!" replied Zeno, hotly. "Thought it was time to retire, you know, settle down a bit. Give the legs a bit of a rest, you know?"

"Right..."

There was an awkward silence.

"You don't believe me, do you?"

"Well..." said Delphi, because she felt like she had to say something.

"Don't let your eyes fool you!" snapped Zeno. "Just because I don't look that quick that doesn't mean I couldn't outrun anything in my day! That's the problem these days, everybody uses their eyes and not their brains. That's how I won all my races, you know. By thinking."

Delphi raised an eyebrow. "How do you win races by thinking?"

Zeno wiggled a little bit, clearly rather happy.

"Ooh, I can tell you. Have you ever heard the story about when I out-ran Achilles himself?"

Say it like this!
Ah-kill-ees

Delphi shook her head. Achilles was a famous Greek hero, said to be the greatest soldier who ever lived and part god himself.

"You could never beat Achilles!" Delphi laughed. "If you had a race he should win by a mile!"

Zeno looked angry again. "That shows what you know! You see I was..."

"I have heard a story about a tortoise beating a hare in a race, but that's just..."

"Don't interrupt!" snapped Zeno. "Don't get me started on that hare either, he was just a big-eared idiot..."

"That was you?" asked Delphi.

"Will you be quiet?"

Delphi opened her mouth to say something else but then bit her lip and nodded. And so, Zeno began his story.

*If Achilles raced a tortoise,
what would, should and
could happen?*



The story went that one day the tortoise had been crawling along a beach, where Achilles had set up camp with his army.

Achilles was standing proudly with his men, and as usual for a hero, was boasting of his many strengths and accomplishments. The tortoise waddled up to him and said in a loud, steady voice: "Hero you may be,

Achilles, and no doubt none can match you in strength and bravery. But say nothing about your speed! I say it is impossible for you to out-run even the smallest creature like me!"

Achilles and his men laughed at the tortoise's words.

The great hero looked down at the bold, little creature who had addressed him. "Well then, that sounds like a challenge, little tortoise!" roared Achilles. "I'll race you along the beach to where the rocks meet the sea, and we'll see if I can't out-run you!"

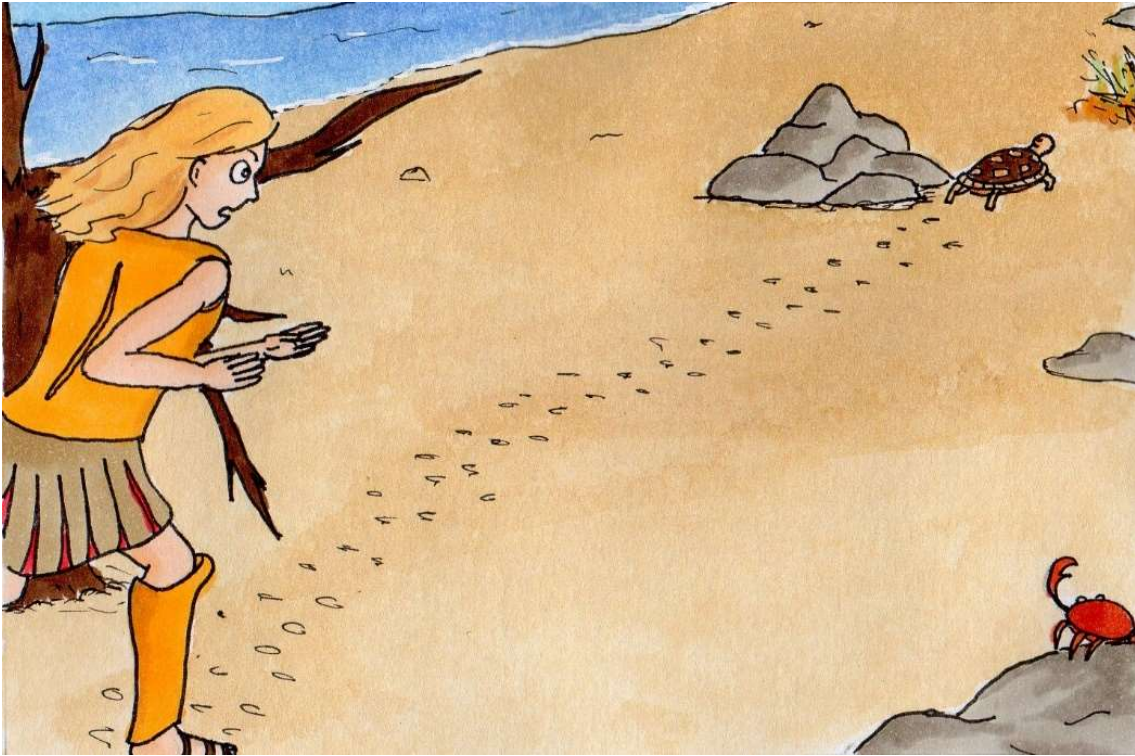
"Very well," replied the tortoise. "But as I am at least half the size of you, I say it is only fair that I have to run half the distance."

Achilles could see no problem with this request, after all, he thought he could easily catch up.

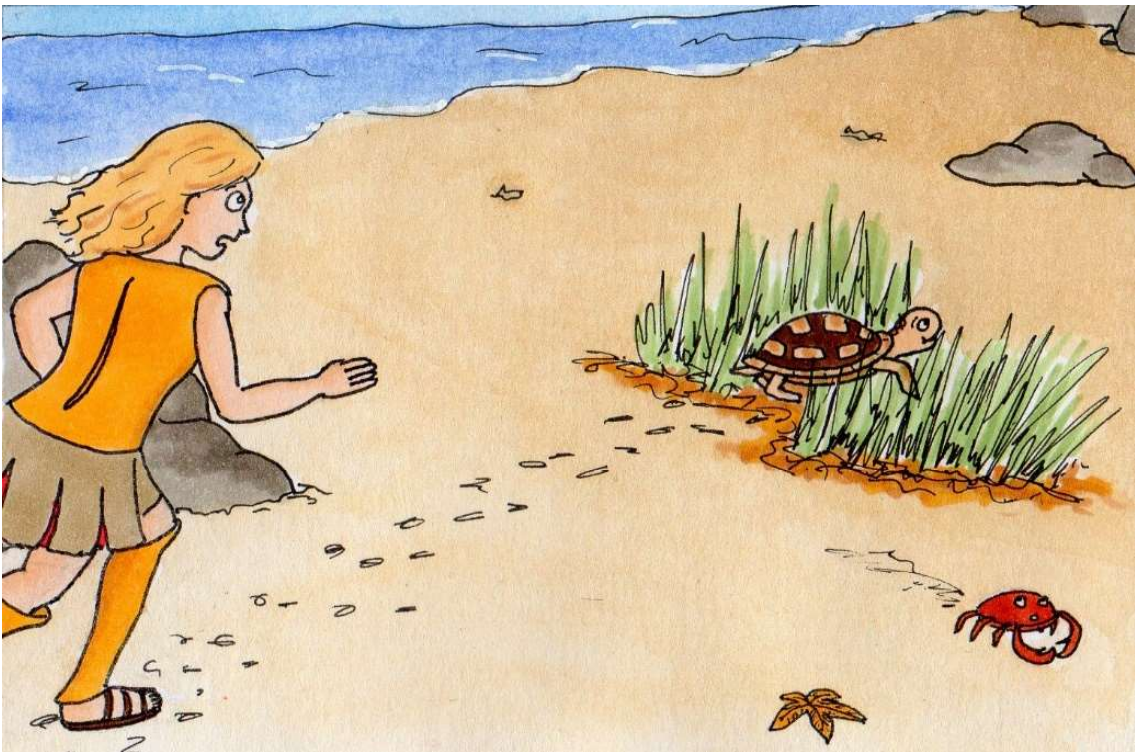


So the race was set – Achilles began at one end of the beach and the tortoise started at the husk of an old tree halfway along. The soldiers, who were watching, shouted a countdown and the race began.

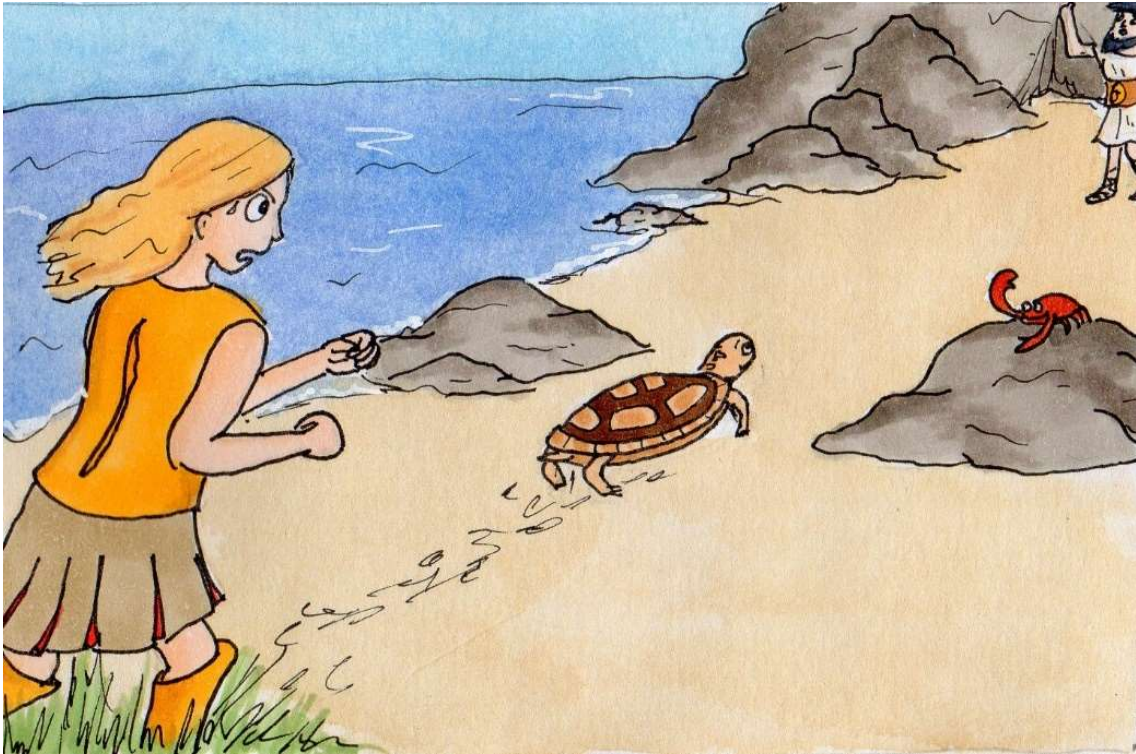
Achilles almost instantly got himself up to full speed, his huge muscles gleaming in the sun as he pounded through the sand.



He soon reached the tree halfway along the beach, but of course, the tortoise had already moved on from there. Achilles could see him next to a large rock ahead of him.



It didn't take long before Achilles reached the rock, but again, the tortoise had moved on by then, and was now in a small patch of grass ahead of him. It took even less time for Achilles to reach the grass, but again, in the time it took him to get there, the tortoise had moved on.



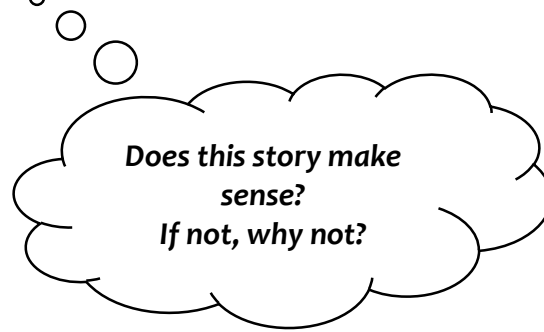
And so the race continued – Achilles kept running towards the tortoise, but every time he caught up to where the tortoise was, he had already moved on. The distance between them got shorter and shorter, but Achilles never seemed to catch up – because by the time he reached where the tortoise was, it was already further ahead.



After a while, Achilles panted to a halt. The tortoise was only a few steps ahead of him, but he still couldn't catch him.

"Fine! I concede defeat!" cried Achilles. "It is impossible to catch you! Every time I reach you, you have already moved on!"

The tortoise nodded graciously. "Do not feel ashamed, great Achilles," it said. "For it is logically impossible for a man to out-run a tortoise."



Delphi listened to this story cross-legged, sitting on the courtyard floor next to Zeno's pen. By the time it was finished, her mouth was hanging open. It all made complete sense. And yet, it didn't.

"Don't be stupid," she said. "That can't really have happened."

"Oh and what would you know about it, hmm?" grumbled Zeno. "You were there, were you? Go on then, prove to me why it can't be true."

Delphi waved her hands around a bit.

"Well, you know. If Achilles is faster than you are then he would overtake you at some point, but I don't get it because if he caught up with you, then... you must have..."

"You can't argue with logic," said Zeno, smugly. "I know you've been learning philosophy young Delphi, so I thought you'd agree with me on that."

"What's logic?" asked Delphi.

"It's when something has to be true based on what you already know." Zeno cleared his throat. "I started ahead of Achilles. I'm moving forwards. If Achilles reaches where I started, then I've had time to move on. Then it just keeps repeating itself. Therefore, he would never be able to catch up."

“What’s... therefore?” asked Delphi.

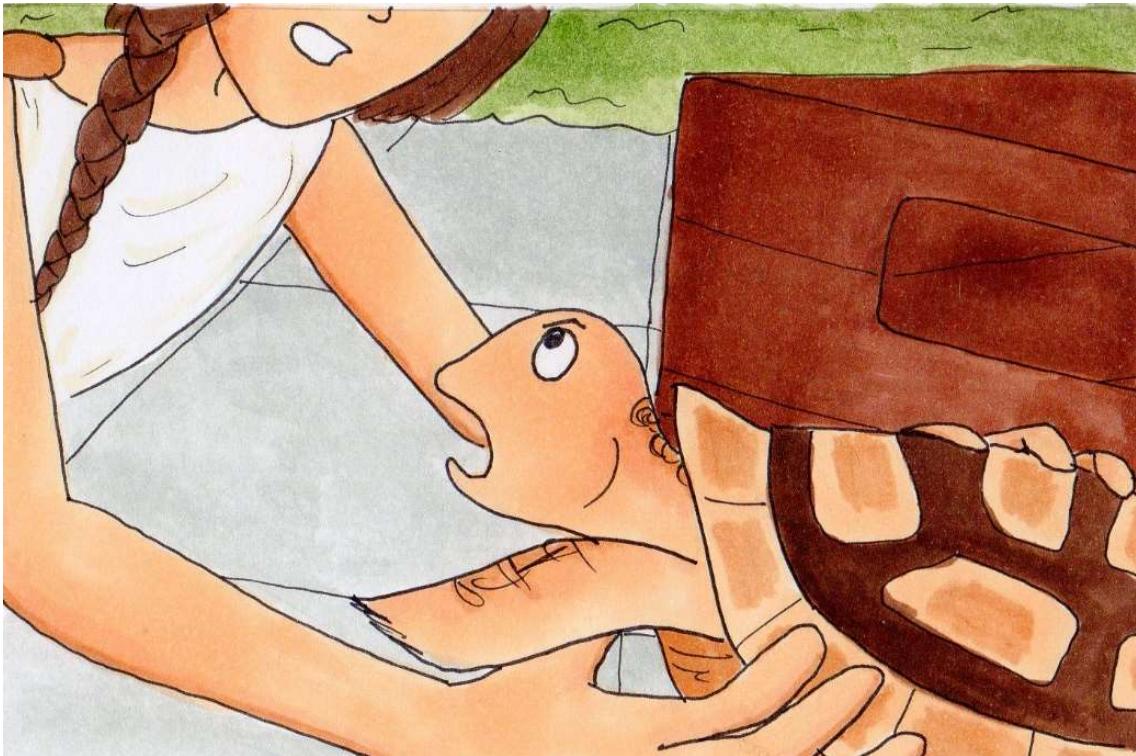
“It means it has to be true because of what you just said.”

“But it wouldn’t work! I don’t get it!” shouted Delphi, standing up. “Every time I imagine it, Achilles would catch you up and run straight past you – he wouldn’t just get slower and slower behind you.”

The tortoise shifted uncomfortably.

“You can’t argue with logic,” he repeated.

Delphi sat thinking about this for a few seconds, then an idea occurred to her. She reached down and picked Zeno up again.



“Aaaagh! Eagle!” screamed Zeno, wriggling his legs. “I don’t care if you can show me the world, you’re just going to drop me again, I know you!”

“Just shut up, will you! I’m not an eagle!” snapped Delphi. She gently put him down again on the flagstones, and then rustled through a sack in the corner and pulled out a small bow and some toy arrows made of sticks.

“What are you doing? I can’t see!” moaned Zeno, stretching his neck around.

“I’ve got an idea!” said Delphi, turning to face him. “If what you’re saying is true then you should be able to outrun my arrows too. If you keep moving, and I aim at you, by the time the arrow reaches you, you will have moved on. So it must be impossible for me to hit you, right?”

“Arrows?” yelped Zeno, his head darting back inside his shell. “Are you mad?!”

“They’re only toy ones made of sticks, relax! But I won’t hit you anyway, will I?”

“Of course!” said Zeno. “Out-run many an arrow in my time, I’ll tell you that!”

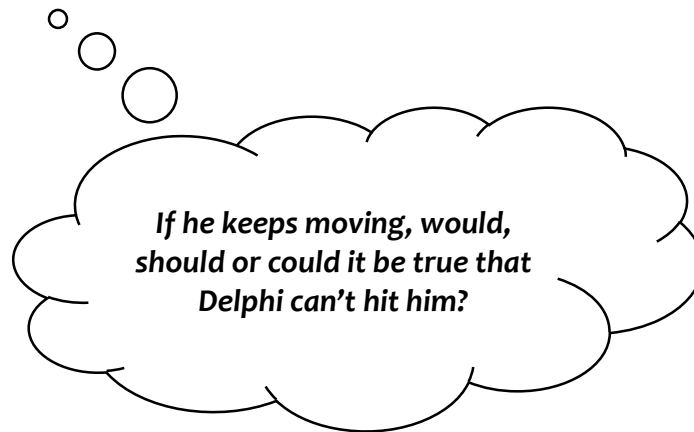


Delphi tried shooting a couple of arrows at the wall to get her eye in. She was not a particularly good archer, but then, it wasn't a particularly good bow.

"OK, are you ready?" she asked, taking aim.

"Wait, wait! Hang on, let me get moving!" said Zeno, desperately trying to get his feet to move.

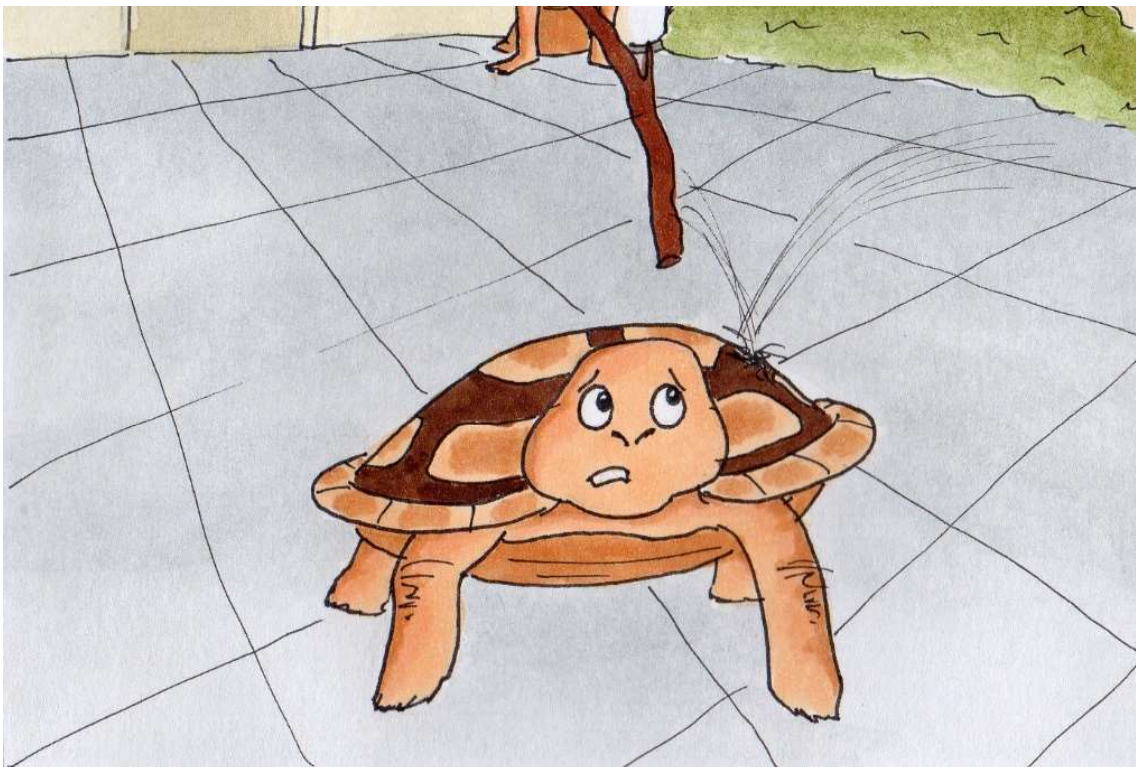
"You don't need to worry," said Delphi. "It's logically impossible for me to hit you, isn't it?"





Delphi's first arrow missed, but only because the string hit her thumb and the arrow fell onto her foot. This gave Zeno a bit more time to get up to full speed.

The second arrow pinged off his shell.



"Hey, stop it!" cried Zeno. "Give me a chance, will you?" Another arrow gently rattled off his back. He managed a few more steps but after a couple more arrows clattered into him, Delphi stopped out of sympathy.

Zeno slowed down and stopped, looking thoughtful.



"Are you OK?" asked Delphi, kneeling next to him. "They didn't hurt you, did they?"

"Course they didn't hurt me, think I'm soft?" mumbled Zeno, but his heart wasn't in it. Delphi gave him a little pat.

"I think it was possible to hit you with an arrow," she said.

The tortoise sighed. "Yes, I agree it certainly looks that way."

"But then logic doesn't work! If logic was definitely true, then I wouldn't be able to hit you with the arrow, would I?"

"Oh that," replied Zeno dismissively. "That's just a paradox."

"What's a paradox?"

"It's when you logically prove something is true, even though it's also impossible. There's loads of the blighters," sighed Zeno. "At least they won me a few races though."

Delphi thought about this.

"You're just a conman, I mean, con-tortoise! You just use paradoxes to make it sound like you're impossible to beat," said Delphi.

"But this only goes to show you can't trust what you see, can you? Just because it looks like I'm much slower than an arrow, it doesn't mean I definitely am."

"What, you mean, this might not be real?" asked Delphi.

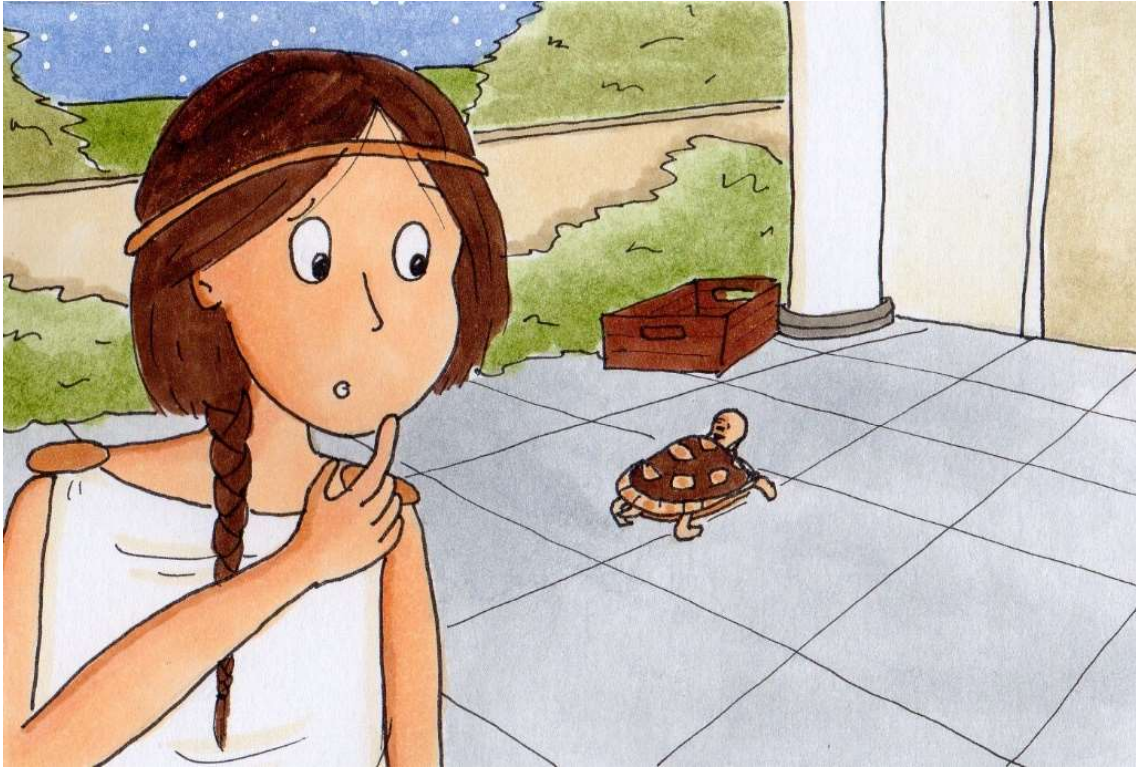
"You can't trust your senses, like I said," replied Zeno. "But logic, and reason, well... you can't argue with them."

Delphi swallowed and shook her head.

"Yes, you can. It seems like they can get it wrong too. If you can't rely on logic and reason to show you what's real, and you can't rely on your senses to show you what's real, then what do you rely on?"

Zeno shrugged, which is quite a difficult thing to do when you're a tortoise.

“Who’s to say what’s really real? Right now, you’re having a two-way conversation with your pet tortoise.”



Delphi paused and looked down at him. She wiped her eyes a couple of times. She suddenly realised she had a headache. Had she hit her head when she’d fallen down that hole?

“Zeno?” she asked. But the tortoise just slowly started to wander back towards his enclosure.

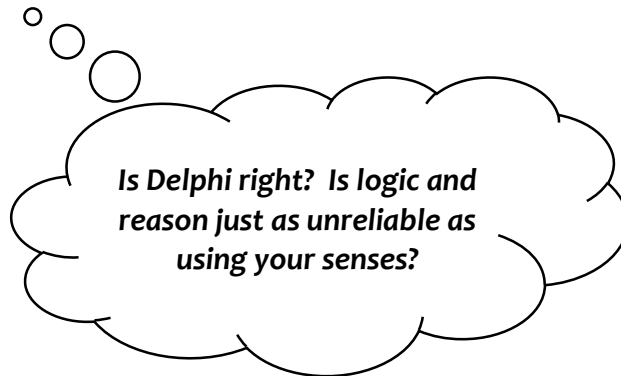
“Did I just...” she asked, but she didn’t finish, because she didn’t want to ask the question, and really didn’t want to know the answer.

She gently picked him up.

“I don’t care if you’re not really a famous racing tortoise. Or that you’re a grumpy old fart. I love you anyway.” She kissed the top of his shell and put him back in his enclosure. Zeno seemed to give her a nod, but he may have just been looking for food.



Delphi went to bed and closed her eyes, trying to ignore the pounding headache and any thoughts of yellow eyes. It took a long time to get to sleep, but eventually her thoughts lost all sense, and she could no longer tell what was real and what was dream.



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This story is a presentation of 'Zeno's Paradox', said to have originated from Zeno of Elia in 5th century BC. There are also references to stories found in Aesop's Fables, a famous set of animal stories written by a slave who lived in ancient Greece between 620 and 564 BC.

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.