
The Secret of Delphi

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Chapter One

An Accident

“Are you sure you don’t want to see what I found?”

Kyra dropped the handful of wool she was about to begin twisting into a long thread. She smiled slyly at Panora, her older sister.

“We have to work this wool, Kyra,” Panora said quietly. “If we don’t, Mother will be angry, and then....”

“I don’t care. She’s not really our mother anyway.” Kyra never had trouble speaking her mind. Ariadne, wife of Davos the woodworker and actor, had found each of the girls in baskets outside the door of a house in Athens. The unwanted infant girls had been left to be picked up by someone who took pity on them or who couldn’t afford to buy a slave but was willing to raise one. Panora and Kyra were not yet certain about Ariadne’s motives.

“Shhhh! If she hears you....”

Kyra shrugged. She got up from the stone floor of the four-room house near the center of Athens. From a small chest in the corner of the room that served as kitchen and dining room, she pulled out a scroll.

“Where did you find that? It’s worth two days’ wages!”

Kyra rolled her eyes. “In the chest! I saw Davos put it there last night after he came home from the *symposium*.”

Davos made extra money entertaining. He was a master at juggling, acrobatics, cracking jokes, and singing. Although

he was a fine woodworker and worked for Herodotus making exquisite furniture for wealthy Athenians, his first love was making people laugh.

“What do you think it says?” Panora stood and moved to Kyra, who had now unrolled part of the scroll.

The letters were written in columns three inches wide with a small margin between the columns. Kyra’s finger pointed to a word.

“That says *Athena*” she announced triumphantly.

Panora smiled. “Very good! And this word is *temple*.”

“Excellent!” Kyra congratulated her sister.

“This must be a tribute to the goddess,” Panora said after scanning the small document. “It’s a prayer.”

Kyra sighed. “Will I ever read as well as you?”

“Of course you will,” Panora smiled. “Let me show you. The tribute begins ‘I proclaim—’”

“What are you two doing?”

The sharp snap of Ariadne’s voice pierced the room.

Kyra hid the scroll behind her back, but shrewd eyes caught her movement.

“What are you hiding?”

Before Kyra could answer, Ariadne had snatched the scroll from the girl’s hands.

“What is this?”

Panora glanced at Kyra, who looked more defiant than fearful. “It’s a scroll we found, Mother.”

Ariadne sighed and almost crushed it in her hands. “What is he doing wasting our money on this?”

“It’s a prayer, Mother!” Kyra blurted out angrily.

Ariadne’s eyes widened. “How would you know that?”

Neither girl answered.

“Has Davos been teaching you to read?”

Again the girls were speechless.

Ariadne handed Kyra the scroll and slowly shook her head. “Put it back.” With a glance at Panora, the ten year old did as she was told.

Ariadne picked up the bolt of wool on the floor. “Why is this on the floor? Your job is to twist the wool into thread.” She raised her fingers to her right temple, which she gently massaged.

“But, Mother!” Kyra protested. “Rebia can do the wool!”

“No! Rebia is going to the Agora. We need lentils.”

“We can go to the market, and Rebia can sing to you while she twists the wool.”

The slave Rebia had a beautiful and soothing voice, which often lulled Ariadne to sleep when her head hurt. As if on cue, Rebia entered from the street, lowering the *himation* that covered her head, protecting her from the sun.

“Very hot out today, my dears,” she said with a smile. “But look!”

Rebia held up a basket of olives.

“They’re beautiful!” Kyra said, almost tasting the fine fruit.

“The trees on the ridge are full of them. We could pick more this afternoon, with your permission, ma’am.”

Panora cast a glance at Ariadne, whose face was pale with pain.

“May we, Mother?” she asked

Ariadne nodded weakly, then almost whispered, “Rebia, come sing to me while I lie down. The gods are torturing my head.”

“Of course, my dear,” the old woman said as she handed Panora the olives.

“We’ll get the lentils,” the eleven year old said confidently. “It’s a good day for a walk.”

Ariadne paused at the door to the bedroom in the front of the house. “Don’t get used to such walks, girls. It’s not proper. Not proper at all.” She gave them some small coins.

She and Rebia disappeared into the room.

Panora smiled at Kyra. A thrill passed between them. They were going to the *Agora* themselves, without Rebia to hold their hands. They felt as if they were old enough to own the entire world!

Rebia hadn’t exaggerated the heat. Both girls wished they had worn himations to shade them but quickly forgot their discomfort as they walked up their small, narrow street to the larger road that led to the *Agora*. They passed many houses that looked like theirs, a pale, clay-brick structure with a wooden roof and a painted door that opened to the dirt street. Small children played here and there. Dogs dashed about looking for a bone or a fight, and occasionally chickens scurried before a slave wielding an axe.

The Piraean Street led directly into the *Agora*, which was the main meeting and market place in the city still being rebuilt. The armies of Xerxes had destroyed Athens in 480,

but in the end the Greeks had won the war, the year before Panora was born.

As soon as Panora and Kyra entered the Agora, they stopped and stood before the *Stoa*. Numerous men stood or sat under the long porch-like roof fronted with a series of columns. They discussed history, politics, and philosophy.

“The city states should be united!” the girls heard one man announce. “We are weak if we are not together.”

Another man shifted his cloak dramatically about his shoulders. “Then we lose our identities,” he said with an edge of anger in his voice. “We share a common language, true, but our cultures are very different.”

“And what is wrong with having different cultures?” another man piped up.

A man on the edge of another conversation sighed. “If only Odysseus were with us now. We could use such guidance.”

A companion shrugged. “We only need to read Homer to see the outcome of Odysseus’s decisions.”

The shrill voice of an old woman cut through the din of conversations. “See the future! Fortunes told!”

Panora looked brightly at Kyra. “Would you, if you had the money?”

The younger girl shook her head. “How does she know what the future will bring?”

“Perhaps the gods tell her!” Panora suggested.

Kyra looked at the shabby dress the old woman wore, her matted gray hair, her yellow teeth, and leathery skin. “She doesn’t look like a messenger from the gods.”

Panora grabbed Kyra by the shoulders. “Never think that the gods place much value in appearances! You know what happened to Narcissus.”

Every child knew Narcissus, the beautiful mortal man who broke many female hearts as he rejected one after another. Finally the goddess of the moon, Artemis, punished Narcissus by having him look at his own reflection in a pool of water. Taken by his own beauty, Narcissus fell in love with himself. And when he realized he could only love himself, he killed himself in despair.

Kyra grimaced at the thought of Narcissus’s wasted life. “Would you ask her about your future, Panora?”

Panora now stood directly in front of the old fortune teller, who sat on a small wooden box. Her hands rested on another box serving as a table. It was covered with charms, amulets, leaves, and stones. The woman told Panora to sit on an empty box opposite her.

Panora quickly stepped back and shook her head.

“Your future, my dear!” the woman hissed. “Give me your hand, and I will tell you what lies ahead!”

“I...I haven’t any money,” Panora stammered.

“But you do!” the woman smiled, showing a row of broken, yellowed teeth. “You have twenty-four *chalkoi* in your purse. The price of a bag of lentils.”

Kyra’s eyes widened, and she grabbed Panora’s arm. “How does she know that?”

The old woman waved the question aside. “You must hear me, girl! You must! There are many things you need to know. There is danger!”

Panora took a step toward the woman, but just then a nervous-looking man drew up the box across from her table

and sat down. His hand fumbled with a broken sandal on his left foot.

“You must help me!” his voice wavered.

The old woman nodded and held out her hand. “Two *obols!*”

The man hesitated, but from the purse tied to his belt he pulled out two bronze coins and dropped them into the waiting hand.

Panora and Kyra backed away into the crowd.

“Maybe we’d better find the lentils, Panora. There’s something about this place....”

The crowd was increasing as the afternoon came on. Vendors working from makeshift tents lined the walkways between stoas and temples. They hawked everything from leather belts and purses to papyrus scrolls to musical instruments such as aoli and lyres.

Delicious aromas mingled with the earthy scents of grass, dirt, and flowering bushes. Bread frying in olive oil, lamb roasting on open braziers, honey cakes baking in small ovens made the girls’ mouths water.

“Let’s buy a cake,” Kyra suggested. “We can buy a smaller bag of lentils and tell Mother—“

“Tell her what?” Panora asked, knitting her brows.

Kyra thought for a second, then added brightly, “The price went up!”

Panora couldn’t help but smile at Kyra’s quick thinking. Kyra was a year younger than Panora, but she was much quicker. She always seemed to have an answer for everything. And she had no fear.

Whereas Kyra was impetuous, Panora was cautious, thinking things through before making a move. Kyra was so outgoing that sometimes Panora felt she was obnoxious. *Why can't Kyra know her place and wait until she is spoken to?* Panora asked herself frequently. And Kyra could make people laugh. Davos and she would play characters in the evenings when he was home, and Panora would laugh until she cried.

Panora had decided that she would always love Kyra despite their differences.

“Look!” Kyra suddenly shouted. Panora saw her pointing to a man juggling blocks of wood. Near the Altar of the Twelve Gods, a crowd had gathered to watch him.

As the girls approached, Kyra called out, “It’s Davos!”

They reached the crowd just as Davos caught the blocks, spun around, and bowed to applause.

“Bravo, Davos!” Panora shouted. He heard her voice above all others and smiled brightly when he saw the girls.

“A special audience,” he said with a wink.

When he stood up again, he was eye-to-eye with Herodotus, the woodworker.

“Davos!” the sweat-covered, barrel-chested man shouted. “I don’t pay you to stand out here on the street acting like an idiot!”

“He was juggling!” Kyra said indignantly. “He was entertaining.”

Herodotus sneered. “Children should be seen and not heard! Especially female children!” He then turned back to Davos. “Get back to work! Now!”

Davos bowed, but not without winking at Panora and Kyra, who glared at his boss.

Carrying the blocks, Davos headed back to the shop, which stood behind the Fountain House where fresh water flowed from pipes into a pool. Here Athenians fetched their water in large clay jugs called *hydria*.

Panora and Kyra walked with Davos. “What are you doing in the Agora?” he asked them. “Making some good deals?”

Panora grinned. “We’ve come to buy lentils. Ariadne has a headache, and Rebia had to sing to her.”

Davos looked concerned. “Is she all right?”



Kyra nodded. “Of course. It’s one of the usual, but it was good for us because she didn’t even argue about sending us outside. And we saw a fortune teller!”

Davos grinned again. “And what’s in the stars?”

Kyra shrugged. “She didn’t tell us because we only have enough money for the lentils.” Then Kyra brightened. “She did warn us, though...about danger!”

“Hurry up, Davos!” Herodotus shouted from behind them. “We must finish the chairs today! Diokles is anxious to have something to sit on in his new house!”

Ahead of the group a huge crane, operated by the hands of several workmen, was lowering part of a large marble column that would help hold up the roof of a new stoa. The wooden crane, which rested on blocked wheels so it wouldn’t slide, squeaked and creaked as the operator called signals to the workers to begin lowering the column onto a base already in place.

Around the corner of a new wall appeared a handsome, tousle-haired man of about thirty. He was tall, wearing a short chinton with a purple border. His arms and legs were powerful, the result of much exercise. His attention was completely focused on a scroll he held in his hand. The girls could see his eyes taking in every word he was reading.

As he walked under the crane, it broke. The column plummeted to the ground. The crane’s fall was not immediate, but it came down in stages directly above the distracted pedestrian. The dust cloud seemed to obscure everything for a time.

Chapter Two

The Man with the Scroll

“Where’s Davos?” Panora asked.

She and Kyra ran towards the fallen crane, shouting, “Davos! Davos!”

Davos got up and looked around. “Is he all right?” he asked, mindful of his own near miss.

“Are you all right? That’s what matters, Father!” Panora said. His knees were bloodied, his elbows scraped, but otherwise Davos just shook off the dust and smiled.

“I’m fine, but that man...”

Coughing, but still grasping his scroll, the man with the unruly hair appeared before them as if a messenger of the gods.

“Are you all right?” Kyra asked the man. He looked down at her and smiled brightly. But then his eyes returned to his scroll. She grabbed it from his arm.

“Kyra!” Davos chided. Turning to the man, he said, “I am very sorry, sir.”

As if a cloud parted before the man, he again smiled broadly. “Oh, no! No, it is I who should be sorry! So wrapped up in my work I haven’t properly thanked you for saving my life. My very life I now owe you, sir!”

Davos shook his head. “You owe me nothing.”

“Please, my name is Sophocles,” the man said humbly.