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# 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 that she was supposed to be twisting into a long thread and smiled slyly at her older sister.

“We need to work this wool, Kyra,” urged Panora. “If we don’t, Mother will be angry, and—”

“Mother’s *always* angry about something,” interrupted Kyra. “Besides, she’s not really our mother anyway.” The ten-year-old had never had trouble speaking her mind. Ariadne, the wife of Davos, the woodworker and actor, had found each of the girls, separately, in baskets outside the door of their four-room house near the center of 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 weren’t yet certain about Ariadne’s motives.

“Shhhh! If she hears you....”

Kyra rolled her eyes and got up from the stone floor. From a small chest in the corner of the room that served as a kitchen and dining room, she pulled out a scroll.

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

“I saw Father put it here last night after he came home from the symposium,” replied Kyra.

Their father, 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 went over to Kyra, who 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*.”

Kyra studied the word that her sister indicated, trying to make sense of the letters.

“This must be a tribute to the goddess,” said Panora, scanning the 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 Ariadne's shrewd eyes caught her movement.

"What are you hiding?"

Before Kyra could answer, Ariadne snatched the scroll from the girl's hands. "What's this?"

Panora glanced at Kyra, who looked more defiant than fearful. "It's a scroll we found."

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

"It's a prayer, Mother!" Kyra blurted angrily.

Ariadne's eyes widened. "How would you know that?"

Neither girl answered.

"Has Davos been teaching you to read?"

Again the girls were silent.

Ariadne handed Kyra the scroll and slowly shook her head. "Put it back."

With a glance at Panora, Kyra did as she was told.

Ariadne picked up the bolt of wool on the floor. "Why is this on the floor? I need you 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," corrected Ariadne. "We need lentils."

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

The servant Rebia had a beautiful, soothing voice that often lulled Ariadne to sleep when her head hurt. As if on cue, the old woman entered from the street, lowering the *petasos*, a wide-brimmed hat, that covered her head to protect her from the sun. “It’s hot out today,” she said with a smile. “But look!” She held up a basket of olives.

“They’re so beautiful!” Kyra praised, her mouth watering at the sight of the fine fruit.

“The trees on the ridge are full of them,” said Rebia. “We could pick more this afternoon—with your permission, madam.”

Panora cast a glance at Ariadne, whose face was pale with pain. “May we, Mother?” she asked.

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

“Of course, madam,” said Rebia, and she handed Panora the olives.

“We’ll get the lentils,” Panora 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. Then 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 travel the entire world!

Rebia hadn't exaggerated the heat. Both girls wished they had worn petasos to shade them 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—pale, clay-brick structures 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 street led directly to the Agora, the main meeting and marketplace in the city—a city that was still being rebuilt. The armies of Xerxes had destroyed Athens in 480 B.C.E., but in the end, the Greeks had won the war. That was twelve years ago—the year before Panora was born.

Panora and Kyra entered the Agora and passed a stoa. Several men stood or sat under the long porch-like roof fronted with a series of columns. They were taking advantage of the shade and the breeze that blew through the open colonnade while they discussed history, politics, and philosophy.

“The city-states should be united!” a man was insisting. “We’re weak if we’re 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’s wrong with having different cultures?” another man asked.

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

His companion shook his head. “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, and her wrinkled, 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 women’s hearts as he rejected one after another. Finally the goddess of the moon, Artemis, punished him by having him look at his reflection in a pool of water. Taken by his own



beauty, Narcissus fell in love with himself. When he realized that he could love only himself, he killed himself.

Kyra grimaced at the thought of Narcissus's wasted life, then looked again at the fortune teller. "Would you, Panora? Would you ask that woman about your future?"

The old fortune teller was sitting on a small wooden crate in front of them. Her hands rested on another crate that served as a table. It was covered with charms, amulets, leaves, and stones. The woman saw the girls staring at her and gestured with her hand, inviting Panora to sit on an empty crate opposite her.

Panora quickly stepped back and shook her head.

"Your future, my dear!" the woman rasped. "Give me your hand, and I'll 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 crate across from her table and sat down.

His hand fumbled with a broken sandal on his left foot. “You must help me!” he said.

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 coins and dropped them into the woman’s waiting hand.

Panora and Kyra backed away into the crowd.

“Maybe we’d better find the lentils,” said Kyra.

The crowd was increasing as morning gave way to afternoon. Vendors working from makeshift tents lined the walkways between the stoae and temples, hawking everything from leather belts and purses to papyrus scrolls and musical instruments.

Delicious aromas mingled with the earthy scents of grass, dirt, and flowering bushes. Bread frying in olive oil, lamb roasting on open braziers, and 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....” She trailed off, thinking of what to say.

“Tell her what?” asked Panora.

Kyra thought for another moment, then said, “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 savvier. She always seemed to have an answer for everything, and she had no fear. Whereas Panora was cautious, thinking things through

before making a move, Kyra was impetuous. In fact, Kyra was so impulsive and outgoing that sometimes Panora felt she was obnoxious. But Kyra could make people laugh. She and Davos would play characters in the evenings when he was home, and Panora would laugh until she cried. Even though they weren't sisters by birth, Panora loved Kyra, despite their differences.

"Look!" Kyra 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 Father!"

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

"Bravo!" shouted Panora.

Davos heard her voice above the others and smiled when he saw the girls. "A special audience," he said with a wink. But he turned at a tap on his shoulder and found himself eye to eye with Herodotus, the woodworker.

"Davos!" shouted the sweaty, barrel-chested man. "I don't pay you to stand out here on the street acting like an idiot!"

"He was entertaining!" Kyra defended indignantly.

Herodotus glanced at her and snarled, "Children should be seen and not heard. Especially female children!" He 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 is singing 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 raised his eyebrows. “And what’s in the stars?”

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

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

Ahead of the group, a huge wooden crane, operated by the hands of several workmen, was holding part of a large marble column that would help hold up the roof of a new stoa. The crane, which rested on blocked wheels so it wouldn’t slide, squeaked and creaked as the operator called 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 and wore a short chiton with a purple border. His arms and legs were powerful, the result of much exercise. His attention was focused on a scroll he held in his hand.

As the man walked under the crane, it broke. The column plummeted to the ground. Pieces of the crane fell down in stages as it broke apart directly above the distracted pedestrian, obscuring everything in a cloud of dust.

## Chapter Two

### The Man with the Scroll

“Where’s Father?” asked Panora, panicked.

She and Kyra ran toward the fallen crane shouting, “Father! Father!”

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

“Are *you* all right?” Panora exclaimed.

Davos had a few small cuts on his legs and arms, but otherwise he seemed unharmed. He dusted himself off 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 him.

The man looked down at her with kind eyes. “I think so,” he said. Then he glanced down to see if his scroll had been damaged. Curious, Kyra took it from his hand.

“Kyra!” Davos scolded. Turning to the man, he said, “I’m very sorry, sir.”

The man smiled. “Oh, no! No need for that. I must thank you for saving my life. You pushed me out of the way, yes? I felt it. And now I owe you my life!”

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

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

Davos’s eyes widened. “But sir! I’ve heard of you!”

Sophocles shrugged. “I hope that it has only been good things.” He smiled proudly and pointed to the scroll in Kyra’s hands. “That is my proposal for three tragedies and one satyr play to be performed in the dramatic contest at the City Dionysia.”

Davos stepped back. “Even to be selected to present your plays is a high honor.”

“And to win the contest must be the sweetest fruit on Earth,” Sophocles said with a sigh.

Kyra handed him back the scroll and said glumly, “I’ve never seen a tragedy.”

“It’s not our place,” Panora told her. “Mother doesn’t go to the theater.”

“Oh, but you must!” Sophocles insisted. “It is through drama that we learn what’s important in life.”

“And what’s important is that you get back to the shop, Davos!” Herodotus, who had hung back until the dust settled, stepped up to his worker. He poked his finger in Davos’s chest. “We’ve got work to do! Real work!” Then, with a dismissive glance at Sophocles, he stalked off toward the shop.

“I’m sorry, sir,” Davos said to Sophocles, “but I must obey; Herodotus pays my salary. I’d like to know what your tragedies are about, though, and perhaps—”

But he was cut short when a gruff, sweaty giant of a man lumbered over. “What’s the meaning of getting in the way of our work?” he demanded.

“Sir, I meant no harm,” replied Sophocles.

“Oh no? You’ve destroyed my crane!” the operator accused.

Kyra looked at the broken beam. “Looks like it broke apart all by itself.”

The operator glared down at the girl. “You don’t know anything about it! Whoever you belong to had better put you back in your cage!”

Davos spun on the man like an angry dog. “And just what do you mean by that?”

“A child knows nothing! She should be at home, not in the streets!”

Seeing Davos’s fists clenching, Sophocles stepped between him and the operator. “Really, sir, I’m afraid this has all been nothing but an accident.”

“This will set us back at least ten days,” the man snapped.

“What can I do to help?” asked Sophocles.

“Unless you can convince the gods to make a new crane appear, there’s nothing you can do, you fool!”



Davos glared at the operator. “This man here is not a fool but the playwright Sophocles, who will present his tragedies and satyr play at the City Dionysia.”

If Davos thought that the operator would be impressed, he was mistaken. The man’s eyes narrowed to slits. “I don’t care if he’s an archon!”

Panora glanced at Kyra in fear. Nine *archons*, or magistrates, governed Athens, along with ten generals, the city assembly called the *ekklesia*, and a city council, or *boule*. The complex system was based on a constitution developed forty-five years earlier. An archon had tremendous power, and to make a veiled threat to an archon was the equivalent of treason. But the operator merely sneered.

Suddenly, Davos stood taller and looked down his nose at the burly man. “I see,” he said, his voice assuming an authoritative tone. “Well, I’m afraid I have to report all of this.” He spoke loud enough for the knot of spectators who stood around the broken crane to hear him.

“And just who are you going to report this to?” the operator demanded.

“In your anger, you failed to recognize me, I imagine,” Davos replied confidently.

Panora had to bite her tongue. Kyra turned away to repress a smile. Davos was sliding into a performance.

“And who am I supposed to recognize?” the operator asked.