

## Sample Chapter

*Watch guardedly every man, lest he have a sword hidden in his breast while he accosts you with bright countenance, and lest his tongue utter words of double meaning from a black soul.*

-THE POEMS OF SOLON

*Throughout the Summer the Grasshopper was singing and playing in the field while the Ants toiled in the heat, laying up food for the Winter. "Come on, the sun is shining," the Grasshopper called to them. "Stop working and come and sing and dance."*

*"No, no," replied the Ants. "You must grab everything you can while it is there and store it against bad times in the future." "Why bother about the future when there is abundance at present," the Grasshopper chided them. Which I suppose is precisely why Grasshoppers only live for one season. But what a season...*

-THE FABLES OF ÆSOP

That might have been the end of the matter—I suppose I should have tucked my lyre under my arm and run for my life—but the fates had other plans. I sang a few more songs but no one wanted to come anywhere near someone seen so blatantly talking to the doomed Chief Archon, and I was packing up to return to my lodging when a man came running up to me. He was a slave, but plainly that of a wealthy man, and not the sort of person who was used to finding himself out of breath.

"You are Æsop the Fabulist, are you not?" he gasped out.

"Yes."

"I am Laxos, my master is Peisistratus. He has sent me to find the Chief Archon. It is very urgent. He is to go to the house of Diomedes on a matter of life and death. I heard that he was last seen talking to you."

From the way he was puffing, it was plain that word of my social indiscretion had already travelled considerable distance. But what I really noticed was the look of sheer terror in the man's eyes which convinced me that the urgency of the matter was not overstated.

"Wait here," I said. "I'll fetch him for you."

He sat on a stone and I limped off toward the gymnasium, fascinated by my own willingness to get further involved in matters I knew I would regret later. But there was a more practical reason. Solon, I knew, was still taking his refreshment in the gymnasium, where, by law, slaves were forbidden to enter, but laws are made to be broken. I entered boldly, and soon found him sitting naked, recovering from his bath.

"Æsop, you really shouldn't be in here."

"Consider it revenge for driving my audience away."

"Of course, I keep forgetting you only pretend to be a slave."

"Yes master."

"Stop that. What do you want?"

"Laxos, slave of Peisistratus, brought a message that you ought to go to the house of Diomedes immediately, master."

"Damn it, Æsop, don't make it so obvious. Did he say what it was about?"

"Slaves know nothing, but apparently it's a matter of life and death."

We hurried through the streets, led by Laxos because Solon was not too sure where Diomedes lived, and I tagged along for no sensible reason that I could think of. The house was that of a wealthy nobleman; outside a small curious crowd had gathered and soldiers barred them from the door.

In the courtyard, Peisistratus was pacing anxiously. Tall and lean and very handsome, he was one of those people you always regarded as young although he must have been over forty by then. They'd been lovers for many years, Solon and Peisistratus, until they both married, for such is the strange custom amongst Athenian nobility. By the time I'm talking about, the relationship was rather more like father and son, although in fact there was only twelve years between them.

Solon had two dead wives behind him and a bunch of grown-up children who had all left home and his fabulously successful mercantile enterprise ran itself, which was no doubt why he had nothing better to do than stand around the Agora reciting utopian poetry to the masses. Peisistratus, on the other hand, had led a number of brilliant military campaigns and was the brightest rising star in the High Council of the Areopagus.

"Ah, the famous Æsop," Peisistratus greeted me enthusiastically, when slaves were supposed to be ignored.

"A mere utility such as I am is honoured at the words of one so eminent as the Young Peisistratus," I demurred, my head bent. A slave, after all, could have his throat cut by his master for assuming himself the equal of a citizen.

"Stop that nonsense, Æsop," Solon chided. "Peisistratus can be trusted, as well you know. Come on. Show me this matter of life and death."

While 'that nonsense' was being played out, Peisistratus led us across the wide courtyard and into the lobby beyond.

"I didn't touch anything. I thought you'd want to see it right away."

Urgency rushed us along at his heels, into what was plainly a spacious bedchamber.

Here was a scene that needed to be taken in several gulps. The room was large and airy as befitted the house of a very wealthy nobleman but the shades had been drawn over the windows, causing the images to reach the eyes only slowly. Focal point of the room was a very large bed and on it a couple lay naked, she underneath, he pressed between her thighs in the classical position, such that it was the lack of animation on the part of either body that struck you first. Surely no one could be so still under such circumstances.

Then, rather belatedly, I noticed the sword driven hilt deep into the middle of the man's back, such that the blade passed right through his heart and into her breast, locking them into their intimacy for an apparent eternity. There was some blood splattered about but little sign of resistance nor even awareness of the blow—you liked to imagine that they simply enjoyed their orgasms along with the pain, and died. Certainly, the tenderness of the moment seemed to have remained intact. Or perhaps a poet should not be allowed to view such ambivalent scenes.

No, it wasn't just me. One of us wasn't poetic at all, yet all three stood silent and still and breathless, regarding the couple for a long moment, awed by this vision of simultaneous love and death.

Finally, still without a word being spoken, Solon broke the spell and went forward, kneeling where he could get a good look at their faces. Peisistratus, in a voice edged with an hysteria we all felt, caught the wrong mood entirely. "Well, if you've got to go, this is the way to do it."

Like I said—not at all poetic. But it seemed his idiocy was infectious, for I heard myself adding. "They say that a man's greatest erection occurs at the moment of death."

"That's only if they hang you," Peisistratus pointed out.

"Shut up, you two," Solon snapped—and very wisely, I should think.

Peisistratus attempted a more serious view of the matter. "You see that the man isn't Diomedes, although the woman is his wife."

"Yes, I see that," Solon growled, and then, touching her throat, recoiled violently. "My God, Peisis! She's still alive!"

"I know that. But I thought you'd want to see it before I moved them."

"I can't believe you left her here like this..."

"She's only a woman..."

"Get a physician! Now!"

"I've sent for one," Peisistratus bleated defensively.

"Then come on. Help me get him off her."

"Can't. They're stuck together."

"Give me a hand, now! Gently."

Gently indeed, Peisistratus withdrew the blade a little way and they hauled the body of the lover from the loved. It was already stiffened, but I don't wish to dwell on that. There were, now that I looked, bruises on his flanks where plainly she had tried to escape his weight, prior to succumbing to shock and insensibility. Fortunately, the short sword had only penetrated a small distance into her breast. Still, the wife of Diomedes—whose name continues to escape me—was a very lovely woman and somehow the superficial wound on her breast looked far crueler than the steel transfixing the man.

"Who is he?" Solon asked. "Do any of you know him?"

"Xabrias, son of Callicles, I believe," Peisistratus said.

A name well known. The father had died in the Megaran war and the boy had inherited a fine estate and a place on the Areopagus, but now there was no son to inherit unless his final thrust had done its work... but I dwell on the undwellable again. Sorry.

The physician bustled his way in as they tend to do and soon enough, under his care, the woman began to revive, only to launch into a screaming hysteria precipitating the need for her to be sedated again. By then, the body had been removed.

"I've sent men out to find Diomedes," Peisistratus said.

"I hope they have careful instructions not to harm him," Solon said archly.

"A murderer can be dangerous."

"Peisistratus, have you forgotten the law on adultery?"

"An adulterer caught in the act may be slain by the husband with impunity. As may his wife. I remember."

"Good. So call your men in, before someone gets killed resisting a wrongful arrest, okay? And then pass the word. If anyone should see Diomedes, I'd like to have a few words with him immediately."

Peisistratus scurried off to put the matter to rights. Solon walked over to where I stood.

"What are your thoughts on this, Æsop?"

"I'm not sure which of the many possibilities you are referring to."

"Why isn't Diomedes here?"

"Not everybody knows the law as well as they should."

"Every young man knows that one."

"True."

"And Diomedes, as a Member of the Council, especially."

"Maybe he panicked? Perhaps he fears the law might not be properly upheld."

"No. A sensible young fellow, from what I know of him. I'd have expected him to, first, get help for his wife, and second, immediately report the matter."

"A cuckold man might not be keen about helping the woman."

"Oh, I don't know. A good functional wife—a little unfaithful maybe—but perhaps after this experience she might be more subdued in that regard."

"You think there's some other reason why he isn't here."

"Yes. I do."

"Like maybe that he didn't do it?"

"Oh no. He did it alright. But I fear there's something else we haven't thought of."

"He's an Alcmaeonid, isn't he?"

"I'd rather not think about that possibility, Æsop."

"And the boy was the son of Callicles which makes him a Cylon, I believe."

"Don't say it, Æsop."

"It's *The Pollution* returning."

"It's not *The Pollution*, Æsop. It's a simple case of adultery. *The Pollution* is gone forever. It can't and won't return. I forbid you to suggest otherwise, nor speak of it, nor even think about it."

So there you have it—for he meant what he said. Which is a pity, since the story of *The Cylon Pollution* is a very interesting one, but you'll just have to wait until I'm allowed to tell it.

And it was then, as we walked together back out into the sunlight, that he turned to me and put a hand lightly on my shoulder.

"Æsop, I wonder if I could ask a favour of you."

"Certainly," I said, ignoring the knot tightening in my intestines.

"I wonder if you'd be good enough to come and be my guest for a while."

"Gladly," I lied.

"I'm afraid I can offer you little entertainment. There's no one in the house except me and my servants."

"Entertaining is my profession."

"I don't need to be entertained, Æsop. I need someone I can talk to... someone capable of understanding what I'm talking about... someone with no vested interest in any of these matters. An unbiased view to bounce my thoughts off."

As he stuttered and stumbled out those words, I realized I was looking at a man who was truly, completely, alone. Alone and standing against the world, with no one to talk to and no one on his side. The sadness I felt in itself would have compelled my answer—as it was I knew his appointment as Chief Archon was limited to one year, and I didn't have anything much planned for the next thirteen months anyway.

"It will be an honour, Chief Archon," I smiled.

"And will you please stop calling me that."

"Yes Master."

"And that too."

And so began the most tumultuous year of my life.