MY BROTHER PLATO

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For Yvonne, Si and Elly,
with my love

PART 1

LIES AND THE LAW



My name is Potone, I'm eight years old and I live in the Greek city of Athens with my mum, my stepdad and my incredibly annoying little brother, Plato. I sometimes worry I must have been born on the fourth day of a new moon. If you are, it's really unlucky and that would explain A LOT.

There's a long war going on between Athens and Sparta, another part of Greece. We've been fighting with them since before I was born. I still don't really know *why*, though, because in other wars we've even been on the same side.

My mum has told me lots of stories about the Trojan war which happened a really long time ago. A big army from all of Greece went and sat outside this city called Troy for ten years – and the point is, the soldiers in this army came from Athens *and* from Sparta, as well as all over Greece. I don't see

why we have to be enemies at all, when we used to be friends. When I say this, Mum smiles to herself as if there's something I don't understand about the world.

I want to start by telling you about the first time that long war came really close to me, right through our door and into my home. It was a couple of years ago now, so I was quite little still and my brother Plato, who is a year younger than me, was even smaller.

Our stepdad had gone with the army to fight against the Spartans. He was already quite old but all the men had to go because there was going to be such a big battle. The Spartans were winning the war then and they and their friends were attacking a great city over the sea called Delium. Athens had decided to send everyone we could to try and defend it.

The plan didn't work. Our men had to retreat and a few days after that, messengers reached the city saying our ships were going to arrive in the harbour later in the day. Mum was hoping Dad would be back that evening and praying that he would be all right. We had had no news of him.

My mum is tall with straight brown hair, like

mine, only longer and always tidy. She's also got these amazing, beautiful hands, with long fingers. Her fingers dance together to some tune inside them. She even walks as if she's keeping time to very soft music played on a harp no one else can hear. That day, she was moving in a very slow dance around the courtyard and then the house, where she was making sure everything was ready.

She was having a difficult time. This was partly because Plato and I were in the middle of one of our squabbling times – to be honest we have quite a lot of them! He had eaten all the figs we were meant to share for breakfast. I had told him it wasn't fair and this began an argument that went on for the rest of the day – it was now afternoon.

'It's not *unfair*,' was his first reply. 'I mean, you may not like it, but what's *unfair* about it?'

That's typical of Plato. He always picks on the words I use and twists them all around. Then I have to try and put him right. 'Fair is when everyone feels they've got what they ought to,' I answered. 'And I don't!'

That just started him off again. 'But I think *I* got exactly what I ought to!'

'Well, then you're *wrong* as usual!' I shot back

and before I knew it, we had left the figs behind and were arguing about everything else in the whole world! Mum had been trying to stop us for ages, but she couldn't.

Then, as if that wasn't enough for her, there was our big brother Demos. He's grown-up now and has his own house but he was still young enough to live with us then. Demos has been another big problem in my life too. The thing is, Dad is our second dad. When we were very small, we lived with our first dad, Ariston, and our mum who's called Perictione, in a big house in Collytus, a nice area full of trees on the edge of the city. But our first father died of the sickness which was spreading around the whole of Athens. After a while, Mum married Pyrilampes, who's our second dad – and came to live in an even bigger house in another part of Collytus. Demos was already here – he was Dad's son with his first wife who had died. He didn't seem very pleased when we arrived – and he always picked on us, whenever he saw a chance.

I was scared of Demos as soon as I saw him, with his long brown hair and angry eyes and I haven't ever got less scared.

That day, he kept on fighting with Mum about

everything she was doing to get the house ready. It was as if our home had its own little war, inside the bigger one between the city and Sparta. She had Dad's favourite vase moved into the hall, and he sent it back into the kitchen; she opened the shutters to let the breeze in, and he immediately shouted for them to be closed. Mum was doing her best to ignore him, and just get on – but that wasn't helping. In fact, I think her calm was only making Demos more annoyed.

'It is for *me* to decide how things should be here!' he yelled at her, after she had the vase brought back again. Then suddenly his eyes got this angry stare that I knew too well. Without any warning, he whisked the shiny stick he always carries and knocked the vase over so it fell with a crash and smashed on the tiles. Just for a moment, I thought Mum was going to cry. I heard her take a breath like a sudden gust of wind, and I could see her eyes begin to fill – but then she caught hold of herself and just called for the mess to be taken away.

'Please could someone . . . thank you!' she said, as if it was just one of those little accidents that always happen and is nobody's fault. Demos glared around. I saw his fingers tighten again on the handle

of the stick and then he caught my eye. I looked away. I was determined that he shouldn't see any sign of the fear making my heart pump and pump so loud I thought it must be filling the room like a drum. Next to me, Plato moved forward but I stopped him with my arm – fighting was what Demos wanted! And it was obvious who would win!

The fear of Demos got all mixed in with the worry of waiting for Dad to come back.

I will always remember what happened next. Mum was coming down the stairs from arranging their bedroom with the slaves. The kitchen slaves were clattering as they got dinner ready. Then there was a hammering at the door. I can still see her standing in her best white robe with the green embroidery around the edge. For a moment, the dance of her feet and fingers stopped.

One of the slaves opened the big wooden door. And there was Dad. But he didn't walk into his home as he had left it. Two men were standing, one on either side of him, and he had his arms round their shoulders. He had his thick black cloak tightly wrapped about him. Slowly, they helped him into the house, one step at a time. He could hardly make it inside, even so.

Dad's a big man with a dark beard and bushy eyebrows. Just then, though, he looked as if he had shrunk. He hasn't got much hair left on his head and his face always has these crinkly lines all over it – in that moment they seemed to have got deeper, like the furrows in a field.

The only other time I had been so scared was when my first father was lying upstairs in our first home and even though I was so young, I knew he was about to die. Well, you tell me, if I *wasn't* born on the fourth day after a new moon, then why else do these things keep happening to me?

Dad's thick-soled sandals clunked on the tiles of the floor until he sank onto the first chair he came to. I felt *sure* he was dying too. His face was as pale as pure marble. He sat quite still, except for his hands, which shook as he clasped the sides of the seat. His eyes are dark, but that day they seemed this really deep black, like you could see right through into a strange night-time behind them.

The two men who had helped him went to the kitchen for a drink. Dad didn't move. Then I noticed that he had a cloth tied round his right leg. It must have been white once, but it was stained red from a wound underneath.

I looked up at Mum. She was standing with her hand on Plato's head. None of us could speak. She signalled to the slaves, and they went and fetched a big bronze basin of water from the washing room. I heard the water slopping as they came back.

She moved towards Dad. But then Demos, who had been as quiet as the rest of us, began shouting again, louder than I had ever heard anyone shout before.

'Leave *my* father alone! It is for me to take care of this! Women should have nothing to do with it – stand out of the way at once!'

Mum didn't reply, but she didn't do what he said either. While she unwrapped the cloth, Dad gave a groan that I can still hear. It seemed to come from far down a deep cave full of echoes, maybe even from the place buried under the earth that they call Hades, where people go after they die. I wondered if his spirit was already down there, making this moaning noise while his body was still up here on earth with us.

That groan was the first sound he had made. Immediately, Mum and Plato both started to cry. I was much too scared for crying. Demos had gone quiet again too – he didn't try to stop Mum any

more. I could see his knuckles going white on the hand that held the stick. Then he gave one sudden bellow, as if he were talking to a huge crowd of people, though really it was only to himself: '*Revenge*! We will be revenged on Sparta! They will pay for this with a thousand lives!'

He stopped and was silent again, but his anger seemed to fill the house, like the heat of a fire.

Meanwhile, Mum made sure they carried Dad upstairs to his bed. Demos stood watching until, with one more glare of rage at me and Plato, he turned and stormed up to his rooms without another word. The only sound now was our dad's soft moaning and the gentle words of Mum as she tried to get him settled. Even Plato and I couldn't keep up our argument and so the rest of the evening was one of the quietest I have known.

That was the day the big war in the world came into my home and got mixed with the little wars in the family, between Demos and us and between me and Plato. I am going to tell you about all of these wars – and how they have got churned up together to make my life. But my story is also about trying to make peace.



At first, we all thought Dad would never walk again. He lay in bed for many days, until he began at last to hobble about with a stick. I could hear it thumping on the floor of the bedroom. After that, he limped down the stairs and sat in the sun in the courtyard. And now he can walk wherever he wants, except a bit like he is on the deck of a ship in the wind.

As soon as he could, he started to go out to meetings of the Assembly again. He had to. Dad is a very important man in Athens. He's friends with the most powerful citizens. Years ago, he used to be what they call an 'Ambassador' for Athens to Persia, a huge country that was our enemy. He spent a lot of time living there and talking to their king. Eventually they did end the war between us. Even if now there's war with Sparta instead!

When there was peace, he came home to Athens with many leaving gifts, because everyone was so pleased to be friends. There's a Persian robe with lots of colours woven into it. We also have a beautiful bowl made of gold in our house that was a present to him from their king. It shines like the sun. But the best thing the Persians gave him are some strange birds that no one else has in the whole of our city. They're famous in Athens and they're called peacocks. What's odd is that they've got feathers and wings but they don't like to fly! Instead, these peacock birds walk around nicely on long thin legs. The amazing thing about them is they have tails that can spread out like the sails of a ship behind them. I used to think the blue speckles on these big tail feathers were lots of eyes looking at me!

When my brother and I first came to live in this house, the peacocks were as tall as me, and towered over Plato. While I was quite scared of them, he used to get into trouble for chasing them around the courtyard. Well, he still does sometimes, even now we're bigger! They can move pretty fast, which surprised me when I first saw them run.

He'll never catch them really – and I don't know

what he would do if he did. I sometimes tell him he's just chasing the wind with a net – that's one of my favourite old sayings that I keep in my mind and bring out to make me feel better – and to irritate Plato. The wind just blows through the holes in your net, of course, so it means doing something that is completely impossible. The picture it gives makes me smile, like a lot of the sayings, even when the meaning is a bit sad.

A sad saying makes me calmer because I feel less alone. I always think there must be lots of other people who have had the same troubles, for those words to be something people say and remember.

Plato doesn't like my sayings! He says he's not trying to catch the peacocks really, so he's not chasing any wind with a net, just running round and round to give the birds some exercise. But I can tell he'd like to grab one if he could!

Sometimes Dad comes out into the courtyard to tell my brother to stop chasing his birds. He's got a very deep voice, but actually he doesn't like to shout. Even when he's telling Plato not to bother the peacocks, he talks quite gently. Still, you can tell he's used to lots of people doing as he says. He just looks and sounds like he expects to be obeyed. In

fact, I'd say my brother is the only one who *doesn't* take much notice!

Anyway, I've told you about the Persian peacocks because they were a really big part of the next time *big* trouble came rushing into my life!