

**THE SEVENTH LETTER**  
**A Philosophical Mystery at Plato's Academy**

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CHAPTER 8: Hemlock

Theramenes was put to death that very afternoon. Aristocles and his companions learned later that the Eleven had dragged him kicking and screaming through the agora. He was protesting his innocence, calling on the people of Athens to free him and rise against the tyranny. But the market crowd watched him in silence or looked the other way. Critias' bully-boys were milling about with their whips, and nobody seemed eager to endanger his life for the sake of a demagogue.

Satyrus, the head of the Eleven, ordered him to be quiet, or else he would bitterly regret it. Seeing that no one rallied to the rescue, Theramenes resigned himself to his fate. He even regained his spirit, retorting: "And if I am quiet, Satyrus, won't I bitterly regret it?" But after that he said nothing until Satyrus brought him the cup of hemlock. He took the poison with a steady hand and drank it in one gulp. Then he jerked out the dregs from the bottom of the cup, as though he played cottabos, and said:

"This to lovely Critias! May we soon be reunited!"

The quip was even more exquisite for those who, like Aristocles, were familiar with Critias' first elegy, in which his uncle alluded to the origins of the cottabos game in Sicily, renowned for its extravagant feasts. The elegy described how banqueting young men, invoking the name of their beloved, aimed the dregs from their wine cups at a silver krater placed at some distance from them. If the aim was accurate, and the dregs fell into the krater with a ringing sound, they regarded it as a sign that their love was reciprocated.

In turn, Socrates, when he heard of Theramenes's last words, observed that the man died better than he lived. At least his wit did not forsake him in the teeth of death, nor did he allow playfulness to abandon his soul.

After Theramenes was gone, the oligarchs grew even more heavy-handed, and Critias went on a killing spree. He proposed to implement what he called the Great Purge. He intended to cleanse the State of all the citizens without a profession or means of subsistence, as well as all the resident aliens who did not share his oligarchic ideals, or were suspected of popular sympathies. By the end of their rule, Aristocles later found out, the oligarchs executed over fifteen hundred men and expelled another five thousand. In less than a year, they had butchered almost as many Athenians as had died in twenty years of war with Sparta.

During this period Aristocles was too distraught to leave the house. He soon fell very ill. He ran a high fever and vomited green bile. His nausea was so severe that he could barely hold down any solid food. He was wasting away, to the utter despair of his mother.

Perictione brought the best physicians to her son's bedside, to no purpose. Then she suddenly remembered: "How can I be so dull-witted, Aristocles? Why, this must be the same affliction that your father used to have. After he died, you fell ill like this, remember? But I was in Eleusis at the time and couldn't take care of you."

"Yes, Mother," Aristocles replied. "But his illness was nothing like mine. I don't remember him suffering from such severe nausea as I do."

"But he did, my son, in his younger days, before he dedicated himself to the priesthood. Your father told me all about it. He even showed me how to prepare the herbal remedy for it. He said that I might need to give it to you some day. Then he started taking the potion again, just before he died. Isn't that strange, Aristocles?"

"It is, Mother, but you and I know that he was no ordinary man. Do you still remember the formula?"

"A brew of black hellebore, thyme, poppy, and savory, sweetened with wildflower honey. All of the ingredients must come from Mount Hymettus. I will prepare it for you as soon as I get the herbs."

Three days after Aristocles started drinking his father's potion, his nausea was gone. His fever intensified, however, and he began to have strange visions.

One night, as he was burning with fever, his father appeared before him. Shrouded in his priestly garments, he silently bade his son to follow him. They started climbing Mount Hymettus by a path that Aristocles had never seen before. It was leading straight up, through the wildest thickets and the sheerest crags. His father was climbing it with ease but Aristocles was at great pains to keep up with him and stopped to draw his

breath. When he looked back, there was no path behind him, just a yawning precipice. He resumed the steep climb without daring to turn his head again. His father had meanwhile disappeared from view. Yet Aristocles knew that he would be there, at the top of the mountain, waiting for him.

When he reached the summit, however, his father had vanished, and there was no mountain. He was suspended between the dark earth and a tremendous blaze of light. He ascended toward the light but was suddenly seized by panic. There was nothing to support him but ether. At that very moment he started falling, and his vision ended abruptly.

He felt his mother's cool hand on his brow.

"Heaven be praised, Aristocles," she said. "Your fever has turned. Tomorrow morning I will sacrifice a cock to Lord Asclepius."

Soon after, Aristocles was able to leave his bed. He went for walks along the Cephissus, all the way to the park of Academos. The chestnut trees were in bloom again. The bees were humming over the white and yellow blossoms, burrowing into their secret sweetness. The cicadas had resumed their loud hymns to rain. Before long they would celebrate Lord Apollo's and his own birthday.

Following Socrates's advice, he resolved to stay out of the power struggle between the oligarchs and the democrats. He came to admire Pylampes even more because his stepfather had wisely kept out of the fray, despite his wife's constant scolding. Perictione wanted him to join her cousin's oligarchic government but Pylampes chose to withdraw to the countryside, under the pretext of tending to his farms.

Aristocles wrote a long letter to Critias, informing his uncle that he intended to remove himself from politics altogether, just like his stepfather. His true calling, he felt, was music and mathematics. A fellow poet and philosopher such as Critias ought to understand his decision. He made no mention of the recent events and did not accuse his uncle of the heinous acts that he now knew Critias had committed. Instead, Aristocles pleaded with him to spare the lives of Socrates and Simon in the name of their old friendship.

Oddly enough, Critias listened to his nephew's plea. Perhaps there was still a shred of decency left in him. Or, more likely, he now had more serious threats to worry about than a couple of old fools. While Aristocles was lying sick, Thrasybulus had sallied out of Thebes with about seventy followers. He seized the fortress of Phyle that guarded the mountain pass between Thebes and Athens, in plain view of the city. The oligarchs, heading the army of the Three Thousand and their knights, attempted to take the fortress by storm. But they were repelled and had to withdraw with heavy losses.

Next the oligarchs decided to seal off the citadel from all the supply routes, thus forcing the garrison to capitulate. This plan was thwarted by unexpected snow, which fell steadily over the mountain pass during the entire night and the following day. Ambushed by this all-pervasive enemy, Critias's men beat a hasty retreat and camped near the city. As the tiny garrison at Phyle had now increased tenfold, Thrasybulus mustered enough troops to raid Critias's encampment in the middle of the night. Taken by surprise, the army of the oligarchs was routed. Many hoplites and knights lost their lives in the ensuing slaughter. By the time a reinforcement of cavalry arrived from the city, Thrasybulus's men were safely ensconced in their fortress. It was about this time that Aristocles had sent his letter to Critias. The number of the insurgents grew daily, and Theramenes's prophecy that the repressive policies of the oligarchs would bear poisonous fruit began to ring true. Realizing the precariousness of their position, the oligarchs decided to purge Eleusis and use it as their place of refuge, in case they had to abandon Athens. Under the pretext of taking a census, Critias ordered the Eleusian men to file past the tables of the scribes set up in an empty warehouse. After having their names entered in a register, the Eleusians would exit by a postern leading to the sea. At the exit, however, Critias had posted members of his death squads. They handcuffed the citizens whom they considered hostile to the oligarchy and escorted them back to Athens, delivering them into the hands of the Eleven. Three hundred men were rumored to have lost their lives on that occasion.

Now Thrasybulus, at the head of an army that had grown a thousand strong, came down from Phyle. He marched into Piraeus, where the majority of the population greeted him as a liberator. Critias quickly rallied his troops and occupied the Hippodamian agora. Thrasybulus retreated to Munychia Hill to prepare his men for battle. In turn, Critias formed a battle-line fifty shields deep, stretching along the broad street that led to the fortress of Munychia. The insurgents presented a thinner line of hoplites, but were much better positioned than Critias's men. Behind them Thrasybulus had ranged a body of targeteers and light-armed peltasts, backed in turn by a large contingent of stone-throwers, whom he had recruited from the population of the port and the district.

Critias's hoplites now began to advance up the hill, throwing lances and arrows at the insurgents. But the steep ascent before them made their projectiles fall short of the target, most of them barely touching the front ranks of the enemy. Thrasybulus's peltasts and stone-throwers countered with a volley of spears and rocks, reaching the very heart of Critias's formation. The heavy-armored fighters skulked beneath their shields, to

avoid the deadly shower. Taking advantage of their blindness, the insurgents savagely leapt on them from above and broke up their ranks. They routed and pursued their opponents all the way down to the Hippodamian agora.

Thrasybulus won a resounding victory that day. Aristocles's uncle, Critias, was killed in battle, alongside his other uncle, Charmides. His mother's older brother was a truly upright man, Aristocles knew. He had for years resisted his friends' insistence that he go into public service. Ironically, however, Socrates persuaded him to accept one of the ten archonships in Piraeus when the oligarchy had first come to power. For a while, Charmides was able to prevent some of the more egregious abuses of his colleagues. Soon he grew disillusioned, however. He had just resigned his post when Thrasybulus invaded Piraeus. Charmides died fighting valiantly for a government that he no longer believed in.

As Piraeus fell to the insurgents, a new government was elected in Athens. The remainder of the Thirty fled to Eleusis. Now the civil war raged unabated for several months with mutual recriminations, looting, anarchy, and horrendous bloodshed on all sides. Aristocles grieved for his slain uncles with the rest of the family but removed himself completely from the fray, to his mother's chagrin. Perictione believed it was in unsettled times such as these that an intrepid young man could speedily ascend to a prominent position. Aristocles remembered Alcibiades's similar advice a few years earlier. But his cousin was now dead, murdered at the instigation of his former Spartan friends.

"You and Glaucou, moreover," his mother insisted, "must avenge the death of your uncles at the hands of the Piraeus riff-raff."

"But, Mother," Aristocles objected, "you don't know half of the terrible things that they did to this riff-raff, as you call it, during their rule."

"I know that they did what they had to do to uphold the privileges that our families have won by shedding their blood for our country since the time of Melanthus and Codrus."

"Perhaps, Mother, but that doesn't give us the right to behave unjustly in our time."

"You're beginning to sound like your father, Aristocles," she retorted. "Much good did it do him to behave justly toward the Aeginetans. They practically drove him to his grave with their constant whining. He tried so hard to do right by them, and look at them now. They betrayed Athens as soon as our back was turned, and they hate us as much as ever."

Aristocles knew there was no arguing with Perictione, so he let it go at that. Once more he appreciated the wisdom of his stepfather Pyrilampes who kept out of her line of fire and came into town only to replenish her capacious larder, which had miraculously survived all the vicissitudes of the civil war. In the end Glaucou did join the oligarchs in Eleusis but, for once, Aristocles did not bow to his mother's pressure. Instead, he spent most of his days in conversation with Socrates and Simon. His friends had in turn withstood the pressure of the popular party, which wanted them to join as representatives of the simple folk persecuted under the oligarchs.

Meanwhile, the warring factions looked to Lysander to resolve their differences. At first, he brought Athens and Piraeus under the heel of the oligarchs once more. But he could not put out the fire of the popular insurgency, which kept smoldering for a while then flared up again. At this juncture, King Pausanias of Sparta intervened, eventually brokering a settlement. Under the wise king's auspices, the rival Athenian factions signed a peace agreement, allowing all exiles to return home without fear of persecution. The remainder of the Thirty and the Piraeus Ten was excluded from this general pardon. A proviso was added, however, that whoever feared to remain in Athens or Piraeus could resettle in Eleusis.

Callixenus, Thrasybulus and his lieutenant Anytus returned to Athens alongside other democratic exiles. In turn, King Pausanias disbanded his army, going back to Sparta. After his departure, the oligarchs in Eleusis made a last attempt to seize the Athenian government. They failed, however, and a general reconciliation was negotiated once again. This time all factions bound themselves by a simple oath: "We shall remember past offences no more."

After the re-establishment of the democracy, Aristocles attended the first few meetings of the Assembly to gauge the new political climate. He toyed with the idea of resuming an active role in public life. He wanted to push for constitutional reforms in line with the ancient virtues extolled by Solon and Aeschylus. But his hopes of bringing about any change were soon dashed, to the amusement of Socrates and Simon. As his friends had predicted, the demagogic practices, far from being extinguished, resurrected out of their ashes. Once more in control of the Assembly, the demagogues began to pursue their goal of reverting to an imperial Athens under democratic rule. They had learned nothing from the ordeals of the long war with Sparta or the terror of the Thirty. Aristocles now remembered his father's prophecy on Aegina, twelve years before:

"Blinded by arrogance, the State is headed for disaster."

Was there anything he could do to stop this mad race toward self-annihilation? For the first time in his life he

felt helpless. His two heroes, Alcibiades and Critias, were dead. They had perished because of their overweening ambition, as if they had acted out the script of a Sophoclean tragedy. Both of them were men of great talent and indomitable will. They had a grandiose vision for their country, sparing neither themselves nor others to attain this vision. Alcibiades had been the flamboyant general who gambled his life and that of his fellow citizens in pursuit of his dream of glory. In turn, Critias had been the intransigent revolutionary who did not hesitate to employ the most radical of solutions to forge his ideal kind of state. Yet, both of them had caused abominable bloodshed and untold miseries for their people.

On the other hand, Aristocles thought, they had at least been true to themselves, not like the tongue-wagging demagogues in pursuit of their petty self-interests. Had Alcibiades and Critias succeeded, they would have become great heroes, instead of infamous criminals, despite all their lawlessness and bloodshed. They were the symbols, indeed two faces of the same coin, of what Athens had become in the wake of the Persian wars. There was another face of Athens, though, symbolized by simple sages like Socrates and Simon. They had also been true to themselves by largely keeping out of politics at considerable risk to themselves and their families. But Aristocles was not sure what they stood for, beyond the natural piety and decency of common folk. Socrates, moreover, was an enigma that escaped simplistic labels. He was equally comfortable in the presence of the highborn and the humble, well-respected in both milieus. He had consorted with the greatest minds in old Pericles's circle. Alcibiades and Critias had been attracted to him in their youth. Aristocles's father had numbered him among his closest friends. The present-day gilded youth still flocked to him not only from Athens but from all corners of Hellas, though he denied he was a teacher, ridiculing the pedagogical claims of others. Above all, the Delphic oracle had declared him to be the wisest man of his time. Aristocles still could not understand why and was determined to find out.

He dropped out of politics once more, spending most of his time with Socrates and Simon. In the morning, he would stop by the cobbler's shop, which people started frequenting again, as soon as the oligarchy fell and freedom of speech returned. The Sophists and other learned men came to lock horns with Socrates. Invariably they went away humiliated, to the delight of the young spectators who continued to follow the old satyr about town. Aristocles found out that over the years Simon had jotted down some of these debates. He asked the cobbler if he could make a copy of them, and the old man was happy to oblige. In no time Aristocles learned the tricks of the polemical trade as well as Socrates, who would sometimes allow him to take on a challenger in his place.

From Simon's shop they would go to the agora then to the various gymnasias. There they would converse about philosophy with the young athletes, for whom Aristocles, known to them as Plato, was still a hero, despite the fact that he had given up competitive wrestling. They also attended symposia, religious festivals, and other celebrations in Athens and Piraeus, where philosophical dialogue and spiritual communion prevailed over senseless drinking and vulgar entertainment.

Under Socrates's influence, Aristocles gave up writing tragedies. From the interminable debates that he had with his mentor, he realized that Euripides had attained the peak of the genre, while bringing it to its logical conclusion. Tragedy was possible only as long as men still believed the Gods to be responsible, at least in some measure, for their fall. Once men became aware that the distance between them and the divine was immeasurable, being a question of nature rather than degree, they also realized that they were the sole architects of their misery. Radical democracy, Aristocles speculated, had also leveled the difference among citizens to such an extent that there was no longer any height for their leaders to fall from and, therefore, no tragic pathos. For example, could the Athenians really blame the Gods, or only their own folly, for their disastrous fall? And were Alcibiades and Critias truly tragic figures, or different faces of the same crowd that worshiped and hated itself at the same time?

Yet Aristocles did not stop writing altogether, as Socrates advised. Simon's transcripts, though rough like uncut gems, gave him the idea of developing a new poetic genre, the Socratic dialogue, with Old Silenus as its principal character. When he presented the first fruit of his labor to his friends, Socrates laughed. He claimed that he could not recognize himself in that ugly and contentious fellow who went around browbeating every Sophist in town. "Remember the vision of the swan I mentioned to you when we first met?" the old satyr asked him. "Well, last night, after you read your piece to Simon and me, I had another dream: A young fellow named Plato turned into a crow. Jumping on my head, he began to croak and peck at my bald pate. By the dog of Egypt, I prefer the stings of old Aristophanes who at least makes clean fun of me, without any philosophical pretensions."

Simon, on the other hand, was pleased to see his own unskilled labors achieve such beautiful form in his young friend's highly polished prose. Consequently, Aristocles did not let Socrates discourage him. He did, however, lighten up the tone of the piece. He read the revised dialogue to Cratylus and a few other friends. They appreciated it more than its main character did. Indeed, Cratylus suggested that Aristocles enter it in the

poetic contests at Athenaia and other festivals.

One day Anytus walked into the cobbler's shop. Long gone were the days when the wealthy but pedestrian tanner was a mere acolyte of Theramenes and Thrasybulus. He had now become a hero of the resistance against the Thirty and one of the most influential leaders of the restored democracy. He was on his way to the Tholos but was looking for his son. The young man had joined Socrates's train of admirers a few weeks earlier.

"You can see for yourself, Anytus, that he isn't here," Simon said. "Come to think of it, he hasn't been around for some time now."

"It's a shame, too," Socrates added. "The boy is not without promise, Anytus. Unfortunately, we hear that he's fallen into bad company."

"It cannot be worse than what I see here." Morosely, Anytus gestured toward the group of gilded youth that surrounded Socrates. They had stuck to him, Aristocles thought, like fleas to a dog, through all the regime changes in the city.

"In fact," Anytus turned to the cobbler, "my wife tells me that our son has met this bad company in your shop, Simon. We've never had any trouble with him until now."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Anytus," Simon replied. "I can't turn people away from my shop, even if I would like to. It isn't good for business."

"That's unfortunate, Simon," the tanner said darkly.

"You wouldn't chase them out of your tannery, would you now?" the cobbler countered. "I didn't do it even under the Thirty, when they ordered me to. Fortunately, we now live again in a democracy, where people come and go as they please."

"Spare me your lessons in democracy, Simon," Anytus replied, "especially since you and Socrates have refused to join our party. All I know is that my son was well-behaved before he fell in with the sort I see in your shop."

Overhearing the tanner's words, the young men around Socrates exchanged contemptuous smiles. This made Anytus rabid. "Is this what they learn from you, Socrates?" he suddenly turned on Old Silenus. "Do they think that they are better than us, common folk? They are nothing but rich parasites, loafing about town all day, carousing and disrespecting their elders. What kind of teacher are you, if you cannot teach them the first thing about good citizenship?"

"You are a man of common sense, Anytus," Socrates replied. "In the first place, you know that I don't claim to be a teacher. And secondly, I don't believe that good citizenship can be taught any more than any other virtue, despite what my friends the Sophists say. In fact, this is what we were discussing before you came in. Would you like to join our debate?"

"What's this nonsense that good citizenship can't be taught?" the tanner snapped. "I'm a busy man, Socrates. I have no time to waste in foolish arguments."

"Then you agree with my friends the Sophists, Anytus?"

"Good heavens, you are twisting my words, Socrates. I don't know anything about your Sophists except that they corrupt young men. I've never met a single one in my life, nor would I allow my son to go near them. On the other hand, I'm not surprised that you call them your friends."

"So you've had no experience of them at all, Anytus? How can you know whether something is good or bad, if you have no experience of it?"

"I don't need any experience to know that they are bad. I just know it."

"You must possess second sight, Anytus."

"Not at all, Socrates. I don't brag, like you, about communing with strange divinities. I respect and honor the Gods of our city."

"I know you do, Anytus, and so do I. But if you believe that good citizenship can be taught, please mention any Athenian you consider capable of teaching it."

"I don't need to mention any names, Socrates. Any decent statesman can teach it."

"And where did this statesman get the fine qualities enabling him to do so? Or did he acquire them spontaneously?"

"I suppose he learned them from his father," Anytus replied after a moment's thought, "who in turn learned them from his. Are you saying that there are no good statesmen in Athens, Socrates? Surely our democracy has produced many of them."

Aristocles sensed that the conversation was taking a dangerous turn and motioned to Socrates to be careful. But Old Silenus ignored his warning, continuing his argument with undiminished gusto:

"No doubt, Anytus. But my question implied something different: could the virtuous men of this and former ages hand down their excellent qualities to others? Or might it be that virtue cannot be handed down, the

way, say, property can? I tend to think that the latter is the case. Consider all the good statesmen in our history who couldn't transmit their gift even to their own sons, let alone to others. Don't you think that they would have done so, if they had been able to?"

"Are you implying that I am to blame for my son's behavior?" Anytus demanded crossly. "It seems to me it's more your fault than mine that he's fallen in with bad company. To say nothing of your former pupils, such as Critias and Alcibiades."

"That's just my point, Anytus," Socrates replied serenely. "Neither you nor I can transmit our civic qualities to others, no matter how hard we may try. To me at least, good citizenship is a gift from the Gods. We should therefore be grateful if they send it to us in the guise of a remarkable statesman."

"That may be," the tanner said gruffly. "But it appears to me, Socrates, you are all too eager to put other people down. Restrain your tongue, or else you may regret it. And stay away from these arrogant young fops, if you know what's good for you. You yourself admit that you can't teach them good citizenship or, indeed, anything at all. So stop corrupting them with your foolish words."

Without waiting for a reply, Anytus stormed out of Simon's shop.

"Where have I heard those threats before?" the cobbler observed. "So much for free speech under the democracy of Anytus."

"Oh, he's a better sort than most politicians," Socrates replied "if something of a bore. And we cannot blame him for being anxious about his son."

"I fear that there's more to it than meets the eye," the cobbler countered. "We haven't seen the last of him, Socrates."

A week later Socrates was summoned to appear before the King Archon's court, which dealt with criminal cases. His indictment was filed by one Meletus, whom Aristocles vaguely knew to be a third-rate poet. It accused Socrates of corrupting the minds of the young and worshiping divinities of his own invention, rather than the gods recognized by the State. On the appointed day, Aristocles and Simon accompanied Socrates to court. They anxiously waited outside for the result of the preliminary hearing before the Archon.

"You were right, Simon," Socrates said when he came out of the Royal Stoa. "There's more to it than meets the eye. Meletus turns out to be an acolyte of Anytus, and so is the orator Lycon, the other plaintiff. Anytus obviously wants to put on a show trial, in which the democrats will call me to account through the representatives of their most common professions. They gave me the choice of going into exile, or standing a criminal trial in which they will demand the death penalty."

"We must have made Anytus very angry the other day," Simon said. "I hear that his son has become quite dissipated lately."

"No, my friend," Socrates answered. "This has little to do with Anytus and his son. The democrats want to send a message to young noblemen like Plato here and their families that past offences will in fact be remembered. But since they swore an oath of national reconciliation and the Spartans are still watching us, they want to drive their point home indirectly, through me. It matters little to them that I've kept out of politics as much as possible. You have well described their partisan way of thinking, Simon: whoever is not with them is against them."

"That is what I feared the most, Socrates," the cobbler replied. "To them you are and will always be the mentor of Alcibiades and Critias. Anytus blurted it out the other day. By eliminating you, the demagogues can claim they have eradicated the root cause of the city's recent abominations. At the same time they will deliver a warning to the highborn. You are a perfect scapegoat, Socrates: in getting rid of you, they don't even pick up any political fleas."

"But surely, Socrates, you've agreed to leave Athens?" Aristocles asked. "If you stand trial in the Council, the democrats have the votes to condemn you to death."

"No, Plato," Socrates replied. "I told them that I'd show up for their sham trial."

"That must have taken them by surprise," Simon laughed. "It would have been so much more convenient for them to condemn you in absentia, as they have done with Alcibiades, Conon and many others. Now they run the risk that you may win your case and make them lose face."

"Well, Simon, we'll give them a good run for their money. Anytus and the others will get their lesson in good citizenship after all."

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Aristocles sat between his brother Adimantus and Simon in the packed and noisy hall of the Heliaia. They were surrounded by the other members of the Council of Five Hundred who had been summoned to hear and vote on Socrates's criminal indictment. The stuffiness and heat were unbearable. Sweating profusely, they

passed a flask of water between them.

The prosecution had already rested its case. In turn, Socrates had questioned Meletus on both the impiety and the corruption of the youth charges. He had cornered the jittery, none-too-bright poet into admitting the contradictory nature of his allegations. Now Socrates was about to explain to the jurors why he had such an ambiguous reputation, of which his accusers had taken advantage to trump up their charges.

"Of course," Simon whispered, "Socrates can't mention the prosecution's true political motives. That would automatically earn him a death sentence, given his largely pro-democratic audience. I wonder what he will say to them."

"I have a bad feeling about all this," Aristocles whispered back. "I wish he had prepared a conventional defense and stuck to it."

"Well, Plato," laughed the cobbler, "didn't you hear him say that he had prepared his entire life for this defense? Indeed, that his entire life *is* the defense?"

"Yes," Adimantus interjected, "but let us see how well that argument goes down with these jurors." Having just returned with their friend Conon from exile, Aristocles's oldest brother had joined the moderate democrats, but did not trust Anytus and his crowd. Glaucon, on the other hand, had wisely chosen to remain in Eleusis.

They turned their attention to Socrates who had paused to draw his breath and now was ready to speak again. "Why am I called wise, Athenians," Old Silenus began, "and yet have such a bad reputation among many of you? Well, this is due to a kind of wisdom I possess. You may think that I am pulling your leg, but the words I speak are not mine. They belong to a credible witness: the God of Delphi himself."

Socrates waited for the murmurs of consternation to die down.

"I must beg you not to interrupt, even if what I say may seem outlandish. You remember our good friend, Chaerephon. He shared in the recent exile of the people during the tyranny of the Thirty then returned with you to Athens. Well, old Chaerephon, as you know, was an impulsive man. So one day he went to Delphi and boldly asked the Oracle if there was any man wiser than Socrates. The Pythian prophetess replied that there was not. Alas, Chaerephon is dead but his brother, who is here today, will confirm the truth of what I'm saying."

Socrates was now interrupted by a chorus of protesters dressed in priestly garbs who started shouting:

"Shame on you! Don't take in vain the name of the priestess!"

"There they go again," Simon commented, "the paid claque of the demagogues. I was afraid they'd stage something like that. Will they ever get tired of their old games?"

Aristocles felt as if he had suddenly been thrown into a never-ending nightmare. This was Young Pericles's trial all over again. Socrates was not intimidated, however. His musical voice rose above the noisy protesters:

"I beg you not to interrupt, gentlemen, whoever you may be. When I learned about the oracle, I said to myself: What can Lord Apollo mean? I know that I possess no wisdom, small or great. And yet he is a God and cannot lie. After some reflection, I came up with a way of testing his words: if I could find someone wiser than myself, I could go to the God and point out that person to him.

"So I sought out a man reputed for his knowledge. I don't need to mention his name, only that he was a prominent politician. When I began to converse with this man, however, I found that he knew nothing and proved it to him, which made me his enemy. I left, saying to myself: How conceited we men are. Neither of us knows anything truly good and beautiful. On the other hand, I do seem to be better off than he is. He knows nothing, thinking that he knows; whereas I neither know nor think that I know. At least in this particular I seem to have a slight advantage over him. Having first gone to the politicians, I now went to the poets, and then to the artisans. The men who enjoyed the highest position or the most wealth, I discovered, were often the most foolish, while the humble ones were often the wisest.

"This inquiry has earned me a host of enemies and slanderers. I'm called wise, because my listeners always imagine that I myself possess the knowledge I find missing in others. But the truth is that only the God is wise. By his oracle he wanted to show that human knowledge is worth little, and even less without virtue. He used my name only by way of example, as if to say: O men, he is the wisest who, like Socrates, knows that he knows nothing. So I go about the city, obedient to the God, urging you to pursue not money and worldly goods, but the well-being of your soul.

"Some of you may wonder why I have mostly concerned myself with your private lives, instead of your public affairs. Well, you've heard of my divine sign or voice, which Meletus mocked in his indictment. This voice I first heard as a child. It never tells me what to do, but only what I should refrain from doing. It is this voice that has always deterred me from becoming a politician. And rightly, I think. Do you imagine that I could have survived all these years if I had entered public life

and had put justice above everything else? No indeed, Athenians, neither I nor any other person.

“Yet I’ve always been constant in my actions, public or private. I’ve never yielded to the arbitrary will of those who are slanderously called my disciples, or to anyone else. Not that I have regular pupils. But if any one comes to hear me while I’m pursuing my sacred mission, I won’t turn him away. I converse with any one, rich or poor. And if he turns out to be a good man or a bad one, neither result can be attributed to me. I’ve never taught or professed to teach him anything that he cannot discover himself, by looking into his soul.”

Socrates paused again, glancing around the crowded hall. A heavy silence had now fallen on the jurors who seemed bewitched by Old Silenus’s mellifluous voice.

“Just by looking around this hall,” he continued, “I can see how many enemies I’ve made. They’ll probably be my undoing. Now some of you may ask: Aren’t you ashamed, Socrates, of a way of life that brings you to an untimely end? I’ll answer that a man worth his salt should not calculate his chances of living or dying. He should only consider whether he is doing right or wrong. I didn’t desert my post in the face of death, when you sent me to the battlefields of Potidea, Amphipolis, and Delium. My conduct would be strange indeed, if I were to desert it now, disobeying the Oracle because I am afraid to die. Therefore, Athenians, I say to you: acquit me or not. Whatever you do, however, understand that I will never alter my ways, not even if I must die again and again.”

Socrates was once more interrupted by loud jeers, led by the demagogue’s chorus.

“He’s just pronounced his death warrant,” Adimantus remarked. “I simply cannot understand his line of defense. What does he gain by antagonizing the crowd in this way?”

“You are right, Adimantus,” the cobbler replied. “He has gone too far this time.”

Socrates waited patiently for the heckling to subside then proceeded with his harangue:

“Citizens of Athens, I have something else to say that may arouse your anger. You will sin against the God if you condemn me, because I am his gift to you. Let me use a ludicrous figure of speech to explain what I mean. I am a sort of gadfly that Lord Apollo has given to our State. In turn, the State is a great and noble steed, sluggish in his motions. Because of his very size, he must be goaded into action. Like a gadfly, therefore, I’m always fastening onto you, stinging and reproaching you. I dare say you may feel irritated, like a stallion suddenly awakened from his slumber. You think that you can easily strike me dead, as Anytus advises. Then you can go back to sleep for the remainder of your lives; unless the God sends you another gadfly.

“Let me make one more remark, Athenians, before I’m done. Perhaps some of you recall how, on similar occasions, you sought to move the jurors with a flood of tears, producing your children in court alongside a host of relatives and friends. Well, I am a man and, like you, a creature of flesh and blood. I have a family, yes, and three sons, one almost a man, and two others still young. Yet I won’t drag them into court to beg you for an acquittal. Why not? Because I feel such conduct would be discreditable to me, to you, and to the State. It is wrong to ask a favor of a judge, instead of informing and persuading him. He isn’t there to make a gift of justice. He has sworn before the Gods to judge according to the law, not to his whim. If I could override your sacred oath by dissuasion and entreaty, I would in effect be saying that there are no Gods and thus convict myself of Meletus’s charge of impiety. But I do believe that there are Gods, and in a sense higher than my prosecutors think. To you and to the Gods I commit my cause, to be determined as is best for you and me.”

Old Silenus sat down perfectly composed amid the storm of protests that his outrageous speech had raised. The criers now instructed the people how to vote. Aristocles, Adimantus, Simon and other members of their tribe cast their bronze tokens with solid hubs in urn number two, for NOT GUILTY ballots. They all agreed that Socrates had willfully marred his chances of an acquittal.

Aristocles cast a furious glance at Old Silenus. Yet he could not but admire his unruffled mien. What a contrast to his cousin Pericles and the other generals who had watched the voting with avid eyes, reawakened by hope. Socrates paid no attention to the streams of people filing past the urns. Having closed his eyes, he bore the expression of someone proud of a job well done. That in itself was an outrage and might provoke some jurors into voting against him.

The criers counted the ballots. The result was surprising, though not unexpected. Socrates was found guilty but only by a margin of thirty votes.

“The people of Athens are not as dumb as we thought,” laughed Simon. “His plain-dealing defense may work after all.”

“Well, at least he seems to have avoided the worst,” Adimantus said. “Of course, Meletus will ask for the capital punishment. But I don’t think that people will go for it.”

“Unless Socrates does something outrageous again,” Aristocles replied. “I hope he won’t push his luck and

will act sensibly for a change.”

Meanwhile the jurors had resumed their seats. The herald instructed them how to proceed. Since the law was not specific in this case, they must decide between a penalty proposed by the prosecution and one proposed by the defendant. Meletus argued for the death sentence. He tried to be solemn and inquisitorial. But he lost his train of thought, breaking off in the middle of a sentence. Then he faltered again, became flustered, and began to stutter. He finally sat down amid the general laughter. Even Socrates smiled at him with compassion.

Now it was Old Silenus’s turn. He rose, beaming at his suddenly hushed audience. Like everyone else in the hall, Aristocles waited with baited breath to hear what he would say.

“Citizens of Athens,” he began. “I’m hardly surprised by the result of the vote. I’m pleasantly surprised, however, by the number of ballots cast in my favor. We must now face the fact that our friend Meletus demands the death penalty. Very well, then. What alternative penalty shall I propose to you, gentlemen? Please consider that I’ve never led an ordinary life. I didn’t care for the things that most people care for: money, a luxurious home, high military or civil rank, membership in political clubs and secret societies, and so forth. Instead I performed what I thought to be the greatest service to you: I tried to persuade each of you to consider the advantages of the State and your own soul, rather than those of your daily existence. And I tried to show you that virtue doesn’t come from money, but that money and every other good come from virtue. What do I deserve for acting in this way?”

Socrates paused as if to ponder the choices before him. Everyone was hanging on his lips, curious to hear what remedy he would propose. Aristocles prayed to Lord Apollo to find a way to save his teacher, in spite of himself. After all, his gadfly’s work was far from done.

“Shall I suggest imprisonment, then?” Socrates addressed his jurors again. “I am too old to spend the rest of my life in prison. Or shall I propose a fine with imprisonment, until paid? But I am a poor man, and the result would be the same as in the first case. Shall I suggest banishment? I believe that most of you are likely to accept that suggestion. Let our gadfly buzz off and pester other steeds, you will say, as long as he leaves us in peace.”

There was general laughter in the hall. It seemed that this was indeed the alternative that most people favored. It would be the best solution under the circumstances, Aristocles thought. Let the irritated steed of State cool down for a while by having the gadfly temporarily removed from his presence. Aristocles was certain that Socrates would be recalled after a few months in exile, just as his uncle Critias, Alcibiades, and a host of democratic leaders had been before him.

“But is any of these alternatives really appropriate, Athenians?” Socrates asked the crowd. “I hardly think so. Then what would be appropriate, you will ask? Well, I believe that nothing would be fitter for a pauper and a public benefactor like me than to be awarded free meals at the expense of the State.”

The hall was drowned in a wave of protests. Aristocles and his companions threw up their hands in despair. His proposal was outrageous, if not sacrilegious. Only war heroes and the victors at Olympia were accorded this honor. The three prosecutors, Aristocles noticed, were laughing and embracing each other. Socrates’s fate was sealed.

“We have a last chance to stop this charade, if we act fast,” Simon said. “Plato, go up to Socrates and ask him to propose a reasonable fine, with his wealthiest friends as guarantors. Perhaps he will listen to you.”

Aristocles took advantage of the prolonged uproar that Old Silenus’ words had caused and ran up to the bema. “Be reasonable, Socrates, I beg you,” he whispered in his friend’s ear. “Save yourself for our benefit, if not for yours. Please propose a fine of no less than thirty minae. Your old friend, Crito, and the rest of us are ready to stand as guarantors.”

“So be it,” laughed Socrates, “even though you and I may differ as to the meaning of salvation and benefit.”

“Please, stop playing the fool, Socrates. We can argue the point later, if you wish. We may never be given that luxury, however, unless you do as I ask.”

As Aristocles ran back to his seat, Socrates raised his hand for the crowd to be still. The hall was hushed again, and his voice rang as clear as silver in the uneasy silence:

“Wait, Athenians. Plato over there has made a generous offer on behalf of my friends. He says that I should propose a fine of thirty minae as penalty. I’m a poor man, but my good friend Crito will be my security. You know that you can rely on him for payment. So I withdraw my first proposal, saving it for a more propitious occasion.”

“Could the harm be undone?” Aristocles wondered. He was taut and disheartened, like the rest of his friends. When everyone had voted, and the ballots were counted, Socrates was condemned to drink the hemlock by a majority of eighty votes. Like Anytus, some people did not have much use for Socrates’

warped sense of humor. For once Aristocles had to agree with them.

The herald ushered in the dreaded Eleven. The president of the Council pointed to Socrates, reciting the chilling formula which Aristocles had heard all too often in the past few years and which had, to his mind, become a mockery of justice:

"We deliver over to you that man yonder who has been condemned according to the law. Take him to the proper place and do there with him what is left to do."

Socrates listened to it impassively. He then whispered to himself, yet loud enough to be heard in the entire hall: "It is accomplished."

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Aristocles handed a few coins to the guard. It was before daybreak, and the prison would be closed to visitors for another two hours. But the man unlocked the iron gate, letting him in. He silently accompanied the visitor to Socrates' cell and left him there. He did not bother to check the contents of Aristocles's saddle bag, filled with provisions for the prisoner.

Socrates was asleep. Aristocles tiptoed to his straw pallet and placed the bag under it. The morning star shot a bright ray through the tiny cell window, lighting up the old satyr's face. Socrates had always had an easy-going air about him but this peaceful slumber was uncanny. How could he sleep so blissfully in this stinking hole, Aristocles wondered, with death prowling all around him?

Twenty-eight days had gone by since the Athenians passed the death sentence on Socrates. But he still lived. As if by divine dispensation, on the day that the verdict was handed down, the *Paralus* left for Delos, Lord Apollo's sacred island. The State could not execute anyone while her ship was on a holy mission without incurring dreadful pollution.

Aristocles and his other friends had been visiting Socrates every day, pleading with him to break out of jail and go into exile. Old Crito, who was the richest among them, had already paid off the guards and had hired a rescue party. Socrates would escape to the neighboring town of Megara, where he would teach at the school of his disciple, Euclid. Indeed, even the warden, who had meanwhile become Socrates's friend, practically begged him to leave and spare him the painful duty of handing him the bitter cup.

At first Socrates ignored these entreaties then declared that he would wait for his divine sign to countermand his decision of letting things run their course. Meanwhile they had plenty of time, he said, before the sacred vessel would return from Delos, which should be spent profitably, in philosophical conversation. The previous day, however, the *Paralus* had been sighted off the Cape of Sounion. It had apparently found a temporary haven by Lord Poseidon's shrine after being blown back and forth by contrary gales for almost two weeks. The ship was expected to reach the Great Harbor of Piraeus tomorrow, which was Socrates's birthday, as well as the eve of Lord Apollo's anniversary. The prisoner had expressed his wish to see Aristocles alone in his cell. Simon thought that they should use this opportunity to persuade him to make his escape that evening.

"Soon you and I will celebrate our birthdays," Socrates suddenly spoke, as if reading his thoughts. The morning star had awakened him. "The *Paralus* will arrive on Lord Apollo's birthday, too," he added, flashing his crooked smile. "Isn't that wonderful news, my boy?"

Aristocles, who had been ill all night with nausea and anxiety, was hardly inclined to share his celebratory mood. Why did the old satyr have to act as though the arrival of the ship signified his release, rather than the hemlock?

"You must be joking, Socrates," he said morosely. "How can the approach of the vessel cause us anything but grief? Besides, it will come in tomorrow, on your birthday, not on that of the God."

"No, it will arrive the day after tomorrow," Socrates replied. "I had a dream about it just now. A tall and fair priest, much like your father Ariston, appeared before me, clothed in white raiment. *Prepare yourself, Socrates*, he said. *The fourth day hence your soul shall break free.*"

"Rejoice, Aristocles," Socrates went on. "Both of us will embark on a journey right after Lord Apollo's anniversary, just as your father has foretold in my dream. It's as though the God has planned it all along, delaying the arrival of his holy vessel as he did."

Socrates had addressed him by his true name. Old Silenus rarely did so, and only when he intended to signal to him the serious nature of their conversation. Aristocles brightened with renewed hope. His mission to persuade his teacher to escape that evening promised to be easier than he thought.

"So your divine sign has spoken at last, Socrates," he said. "I'm delighted that you've decided to undertake the journey to Megara with us. You'll see, the Athenians will regret their foolish verdict and recall you in no time. Our escape plan is all set for tonight"

"Oh, that." Socrates laughed. "I see that you choose to ignore my meaning, Plato. But I have no desire to indulge in light banter with you this morning. Let us converse about serious matters."

"Quite, Socrates," countered Aristocles. "What is more serious than life or death?"

"What of our immortal souls and our common service to the God?" Socrates retorted.

"We'll have plenty of time to discuss these matters in Megara," Aristocles objected. "Could we please concentrate on your escape now? Simon and the others have asked me to plead with you to leave tonight. I have a duty to them and to you to carry out my mission."

"So be it, Plato," Socrates said resignedly. "Let us hear your plea."

"You already know it, Socrates. I simply beg you to leave with us tonight."

"But don't we profess to be philosophers, Plato? Just humor me and let me hear your arguments again."

"Very well, Socrates," Aristocles consented. "As we've intimated to you, your senseless death will be an irreparable loss to us. Nor are you justified in betraying your family like that. No man should get married and bring children into the world, if he's unwilling to nurture and protect them as long as he is able. Above all, you are betraying Lord Apollo who, according to your own words, has put you on this earth to be his sacred gadfly. Wouldn't you desert your post, if you insisted on dying now? Indeed, we are ashamed not only of you, but of us, your friends. Your trial should never have taken place, or could easily have been brought to another issue. Now your death would be the crowning absurdity of an already absurd affair, should we let it happen. We would rightly be accused of baseness and cowardice. You must leave with us for Megara this evening. Any delay will render your escape all but impossible. I beseech you, Socrates, listen to us and do as we say."

"If you are done, Plato," Old Silenus replied gently, "let me try to answer you. I'm very touched by your concern for me. But shouldn't this concern be directed toward the well-being of our souls? Your arguments appear to be based on the opinion of the multitude, rather than on reason. You seem to be afraid of what people will say. Yet, aren't we agreed that reason, not fear or shame, should guide our actions? And further, that only reason can decide whether a course of action is just or unjust?"

"We are, Socrates."

"Do we agree, moreover, that not life in itself, but a good life is to be chiefly valued? And that a good life means a just and honorable one?"

"I also grant you that, Socrates."

"Very well, Plato. Based on these premises, let us see whether I should or shouldn't avoid the sentence my fellow Athenians have passed on me. Now do you agree that it would be dishonorable to do evil intentionally?"

"I do, Socrates."

"What of returning evil for evil, which is the morality of the many? Is that just?"

"You and my father would say that it is not, Socrates."

"What say you, Plato?"

"I haven't made up my mind yet, Socrates. Your view is shared by very few people in this world. On the other hand, reason itself should tell us that the morality of the many cannot always be wrong. Our entire system of justice is based on retribution. Moreover, those who disagree on this point have no common ground and can only feel pity, or disdain, for one another. But finish your argument, Socrates. After all, your life, not mine, is at stake here."

"Then let me rephrase the question, Plato, so that it will be acceptable to you: Should I do what I believe is right?"

"You should, Socrates."

"If that is the case, by leaving prison against the will of the Athenians, wouldn't I betray the principles I've always held to be just? Imagine for a moment, Plato, that I'm about to play truant like a naughty child and flee with you to Megara. Wouldn't the State and the laws interrogate me: What are you doing, Socrates? Are you trying to betray us?"

"Wait, Socrates," Aristocles objected. "Couldn't you reply that the State has injured you by giving you an unjust sentence? And do you still have an obligation to respect a law that has no respect for you? Think of all the arbitrary laws that the Thirty issued, not to mention his imperial majesty, the Athenian people."

"But that argument, Plato, would not be based on your father's and my own premise. Repaying wrong with wrong is unjust by our lights."

"True enough, Socrates. Please continue your argument."

"Then the laws will say: You had seventy years to think of us, Socrates. If we seemed to you unfair, you were free to leave the city long ago. Now you run away at the first sign of trouble. Listen to us who have brought you up, Socrates. Think not of your life and family and friends but of justice first. Now you are a

sufferer rather than a doer of evil, a victim, not of the laws, but of men. On the other hand, if you go abroad, returning evil for evil, you will wrong us, your friends, and your country. We'll be angry with you for the rest of your life, while our sisters, the laws in the other world, will receive you as a traitor. Listen then to us, not to Plato."

"What you say, Socrates, makes sense in terms of your premise," Aristocles admitted reluctantly. "I'm curious about one thing, though. Aren't you afraid of death, like most people?"

"Who said that I wasn't, Plato?" Old Silenus smiled. "Doesn't death involve leaving my beloved city and going to a new place? Yet we may call on reason to come to our aid here as well. On reflection, death may turn out to be a good thing, not a misfortune. It's either a state of unconsciousness or, as I and your father believe, a passage through which our immortal souls migrate from this world to another. Now, if death means no consciousness but only dreamless slumber, it will be an invaluable gain, because eternity will seem like one peaceful night. In turn, if death is a journey, say, to the world below, as most Hellenes believe, what good can be greater than this? Wouldn't it be wonderful, Plato, to be able to converse with Orpheus, and Homer, and Pythagoras?"

"It would, Socrates."

"Then there are other worlds to which our souls may travel, such as the realm of the Gods and beyond. If my dream of last night was true, Plato, I will be with your father by Lord Apollo's side four days hence."

"But there's our quandary, Socrates. Being human, we know nothing for certain. As Homer says, our dreams may come to us through the Gate of Ivory, or through the Gate of Horn--they can either lie or tell us the truth. We are no better than children lulled to sleep by beautiful fairytales. Who can say that one day we won't awaken in a world of nightmares?"

"True, Plato. But I happen to believe that each of us will awaken in the world for which we've been preparing ourselves ever since we were born, if not before."

"That's an odd statement, Socrates, from someone who makes doubt the profession of his existence."

"Excellent, Aristocles." The old satyr was delighted, addressing him again by his true name. "I see that you finally wish to turn to serious matters."

"What are these serious matters, Socrates?" Aristocles asked.

"We'll get to them in a moment, Aristocles. First, let me explain the place of doubt in my life. In my youth I was interested, no less than Cratylus and you, in the study of the physical world and first causes. I inquired into the nature of things, wondering if they originated in fire, or air, or water, and if the earth was flat or round. Then my thirst for knowledge went beyond the physical sciences, which didn't seem able to account for the marvelous order of the universe. That was when I met Anaxagoras and learned about his principle of Mind as the first cause of cosmic order. To him, the sun, the moon, and the other planets were not Gods but boulders of stone that Mind bound together, making them rotate around the earth and around each other, in universal harmony."

Socrates sat up on his cot and flashed his twisted smile at Aristocles again.

"Next I met the Old Sophists," he went on, "Protagoras, Gorgias, and the others. They were even more scientifically inclined than Anaxagoras. They believed that man was the measure of all things. Not only is he the creator of all the arts and crafts, through which he has mastered nature, but he is also the inventor of the gods themselves. Now we come to doubt, Aristocles. The Sophists taught me that doubt is the cornerstone of all positive knowledge. Nothing can be known or worth knowing unless it can be put to the test of reason and proven true or false. At this point I knew everything under the sun, or at least I knew the best method of getting to know it. I could explain all the causes and effects in the universe, describing what things are and why they are that way. The only thing left to explain was myself. Man is the measure of all things. That is *what* he is, I thought, but not *who* he is. Even more to the point, I asked myself, who am I?"

Socrates paused and waited for Aristocles's reaction. As none came, he continued:

"It was about this time that old Chaerephon went to Delphi, as I told the jurors at the trial. What I didn't tell them, however, was that the priestess's reply shocked me to the point that I decided to go to Delphi myself. When I arrived at Lord Apollo's temple, I saw the inscription on the frontispiece: KNOW THYSELF.

"I suddenly had a profound revelation that changed my whole life. I had of course heard the God's injunction many times before, but until that moment, when I saw it written large before my eyes, I had never grasped its true meaning. It was the God's challenge not only to the Sophists' hubristic proposition that man is the measure of all things, but also to my earlier question: *who am I?* I realized that until I knew myself, I knew absolutely nothing. I had to throw everything out the window and start all over again. Instead of studying natural objects and beings, I must now delve deep inside myself.

"It also dawned on me that I had been a fraud, pretending to go around and instruct other people when I myself was ignorant. The best I could do was to pass the God's challenge to others, hoping that it would

awaken in them the same realization that it had awakened in me. Beyond that, it was up to them whether they accepted this challenge or not. As we found out at the trial, a majority of our compatriots did not. They got angry with me because it was easier than getting angry with themselves. My old friend Sophocles said it best: we know what is right, yet seldom do we act on that knowledge.

“As for me, once I knew what was right I had to live up to the principles that I discovered or, rather, rediscovered by looking into my soul. Whereas these principles are available to everyone, they can be reached only by the introspective effort of each of us. And those of us whom the God has charged with being teachers can carry out this almost impossible task not by giving lectures or writing philosophical treatises, but only by personal example. Our own life is the sole teaching method that we have.”

Socrates paused again and looked at Aristocles. As he continued to be silent, Old Silenus concluded: “I hope that you now understand, Aristocles, why I cannot accept your generous offer. I fully realize how much pain I’m causing you, my friends and my family. But I cannot act otherwise if I wish to do what is right and preserve my integrity as a teacher and a human being. Therefore, the hemlock is the best medicine all around. Like any poison, it has both destructive and healing properties. It will take me to my next destination and will also help me accomplish my mission as a teacher. My death will help reawaken and heal others. It will act as a catalyst for them to rediscover the principles that are common to all. Dying, then, will be my ultimate act as Lord Apollo’s gadfly, here on earth.”

“What of me, Socrates?” Aristocles asked. “I am at a complete loss and don’t know what to think or say any more.”

“You see, Aristocles, the medicine is already working,” Old Silenus answered. “At last you realize that you know nothing. Now it is up to you what to make of that realization.”

“It’s easy for you to say.” Aristocles was on the brink of tears. “You already know who you are and where you’re going.”

Socrates pressed his hand and said gently: “Let me indulge in a bit of prophecy, my son, as dying people are wont to do. You will take the poison of exile, which is indeed very bitter. But what would have killed me will heal you.”

“How strange, Socrates.” Aristocles was stunned. “My father said something like that to me on his death bed. He also said that I would go to Egypt.”

“You will, my son, as you’ll want to find out who you are. My cygnet will turn into a magnificent swan yet. He will soar to the stars and join the divine music of the spheres.”

“I’ve heard the swans sing on Delos, Socrates. Their song is shrill and ungainly. If anything, it is a scream of pain at the injustice of death.”

“I don’t believe that, Aristocles. Their music is divine to those who can truly hear it. They are Lord Apollo’s birds. They see the future and sing of the blissfulness that awaits us in the other world. I, too, am the holy property of the God. I’m not worried, for he will safeguard me as he does his swans. He will safeguard you as well.”

“If only I could believe you, Socrates.” Aristocles faltered. He felt the nausea grip him again.

Old Silenus gave him a penetrating glance. “It’s your nausea, Aristocles, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Socrates. It’s hardly given me any quarter since your trial.”

“Your nausea, Aristocles, is not unlike my divine sign. You better leave me then. Go and take care of your soul.”

“Please tell Simon and Crito I did my best to persuade you to escape.”

“But I will, Aristocles, four days henceforth.”