



Pythian Games

by Tom Doyle

At the first chill of winter in Delphi, Aristonike's husband was struck with fever and died. Aristonike washed his gnarled body with her calloused hands and placed one of their few coins in his mouth. Her two boys and their wives helped with careful piety, while her grandchildren squawked and squalled.

With the funeral done and quiet restored, Aristonike was confirmed in her decision: she would not live with either of her boys' families. Her sons' wives were pleasant, but that would change if she stuck her nose into it. She'd be bound to tell those proud girls to dirty their hands and milk their own goats, for starters. No, she would go someplace where she wouldn't cause trouble.

When the sun rose, she picked up her stick and walked up the long steep road to see the priests at the shrine of Apollo. Tall cypresses guarded the way. Below to the southwest, a distant bay in the Gulf of Corinth shimmered like a welcoming omen. A short ways outside Apollo's sanctuary to the southeast stood the temple of Athena, which reminded Aristonike to keep ready her wits.

Apollo's priests had been on the lookout for a new Pythia. They only took older women from the Delphi area, like that Chloe, who had done the job for years. Old Chloe certainly hadn't been anything special, so Aristonike had as good a chance as anyone. Being Pythia was decent work. You could sit down, which sounded nice, given how her legs felt trudging up the road. The priests gave you a cozy little house of your own to live in, and despite her silent complaint about her daughters-in-law, she'd personally had enough of worn hands and goat milking for a lifetime.

This morning, the well-trod Sacred Way was nearly empty. The oracle closed down in the winter while Apollo supposedly stayed with the Hyperboreans. Why would a god want to stay someplace colder in the winter? Gods were like that--priorities all backwards.

She plodded past the Athenian treasury. Like everything Athenian, it was excessive, but maybe this time they had a point. They had paid for this gem of a building with the spoils

of the battle at Marathon. The shields and weapons of the defeated Persians decorated the façade and the near wall. Her boys said the Persians would return to Attica, but eight years had passed, and no word of barbarians.

She turned left at a corner of the Sacred Way, and saw a priest walking toward her, raising one hand in greeting, holding a tablet in the other. She remembered his name then: Timon.

"Sir, I'm here about the job."

His eyes took her measure from gray head to worn feet like she was a goat for trade. She did the same to him: still young, he didn't have a great beard for a priest, but he had the necessary arrogance.

"Yes, Aristonike." Surprising that he remembered her name. "Come this way. We've been expecting you."

The winter damp felt colder. "Expecting me?"

"We were sorry to hear about your husband's passing. Please, this way."

Well, it *was* an oracle, but Aristonike wasn't comfortable with this sort of attention.

Timon took her up to the temple entrance, stepped up onto the weathered stone of the front porch, and seemed ready to lead her into the sacred cella room without ritual. Was this a test? "Don't I need to purify myself?"

He sniffed the air, and wrinkled his nose. "For now, I don't mind." Cheeky fellow.

"Sorry, a little joke. If you get the job, you'll bathe in the spring, but that's for the benefit of those consulting the Pythia. The god doesn't care whether you smell like goat or not."

They walked to the back of the cella, and went down five steps into the *adyton*, a dark and damp room set off to the left.

"You must swear by Apollo to not speak of what takes place here to any outsider."

"I swear by Apollo not to speak of it, and may he strike me with his arrow if I lie. Is it always so dark in here?"

"Oh, sorry. Lights," he said. Flickering flames instantly appeared from lamps. Timon was looking at her, expectant. She was used to her boys trying to impress her. "Very nice," she said.

She saw the metal tripod where the Pythia would sit, perhaps precariously. Closer to where they stood was the *omphalos*, the navel of the world. A net of thick ropes covered the round, tapering stone, as if to hold it from toppling over. Flanking the omphalos were two statues of the eagles that had flown from each end of the cosmos to meet at this spot. A crack ran through the floor to let in the sacred breath, which was a good idea, as the space was a little too cozy and could use some air.

"First," said Timon, "will your neighbors confirm that you lead a blameless life?"

"Yes. But don't talk to Dora. She makes things up." Or at least she exaggerated. Aristonike hadn't been trying to steal anything; she just liked to see what was going on in other people's houses.

Timon opened his wax tablet. "Repeat after me. *Is Sa Lu Ri...*" He whispered some nonsense sounds, like baby or barbarian talk. She repeated them back, good and loud--it was like a game.

"Excellent. Finally, this is, um, a delicate question, but have you ever participated in the Bacchic rites?"

She nodded. She was too old to blush at such, but she did.

"What you're going to do is holy. You might feel like the god is upon you, though it's not quite the same as with Bacchus. Just relax, and let the god use you. But you must repeat out loud every syllable he tells you. Understand?"

"Yes, sir." She had bumbled a lot of nonsense during the Bacchic rites; she could do it again, though some strong wine would help.

"Sit here."

After being so good and calm through this strangeness, now she was trembling. Would the god strike her dead? Goats were looking better and better.

The metal was cold through her chiton, making her shiver. She should have dressed warmer, but at least she wasn't trembling from fear anymore. She smiled. "Do I get the job?"

Without any prayers or preludes, the priest stood in front of her and asked. "What do you think of this one?"

The sounds hummed up through the metal, through her bones, into her ears, like the low rumble of thunder. The god wasn't in Hyperborea; he was here! She shook with the god's nonsense. She almost forgot to repeat the sounds, and fell behind in her surprise, but the dreadful voice seemed to slow down for her, and she caught up.

The strange words stopped, and she caught her breath, holding her hand to her chest. After all these years of trying to keep the gods from noticing her, she had heard one babble to her like a husband speaking a little too loudly in her ear before dawn. "Oh my."

Timon clapped his wax tablet shut. "Very nice."

"What did he say?" she asked.

"Oh. He said you'll serve him well."

She hadn't raised two boys to men without knowing when they were lying to her. Sure, the words she had repeated might mean something like that, but Timon was hiding something, something embarrassing. Had the god said something rude?



Spring came, and with it came supplicants and offerings. The warming air filled with the pungent fragrances of uneasy, then slaughtered, goats. Aristonike used to sell supplicants such offerings, and knew all a goat's odors, but she had never smelled so much blood and offal.

In the adyton after a day of oracles, it smelled not of animals, but like the breeze before an oncoming thunderstorm, like what must be Zeus the Thunderer's own scent.

Aristonike sat on the tripod in her girly virgin garb, a dish of water in one hand and laurel in the other, and repeated the *barbar*. Wonderfully strange and scary stuff at first, but after months of answering questions about unfaithful wives, failing crops, political maneuvers, and what the Persians were up to, she was less in wonder, and scared for different reasons. The god's words lacked feeling. Whatever the question, the sounds she heard had the same weary tone in them. Predictions of death or joy were in the same, flat voice, like a priest saying a prayer that he had prayed a thousand times before. This voice held no love for mortals.

She wondered if Timon was making up his own answers. That would almost be better than the alternative. Timon shared their common mortal concerns; the voice did not. The voice consistently encouraged deference to the barbarian Persians, but she doubted from its tone that it did so because it cared for Hellas. Was this voice leading the Greeks to

doom? She was frightened of the voice's power, and troubled by her own role in revealing its will.

She was also nosy. But interfering in a god's business was riskier than spying on a neighbor.

At night, when everyone was gone, Timon sat in front of her in the adyton while she perched on the tripod. He recited the news of the world that the priests had learned from the crowds. "The god hears better when I speak through you," he explained.

She twisted a finger in her ear to clean it of wax. "My ears aren't what they used to be."

"You're getting a reputation."

"Oh yeah? Is that Dora saying things again?" Glory was for men; a reputation for a woman was not a desirable thing.

"Your clarity in speaking the oracles--the supplicants notice it. They appreciate it."

The boy seemed to be in a chatty mood, so she tried a question. "When I repeat the words, am I speaking the god's tongue?"

"No," said Timon, "it's mortal speech, just very old. It's the tongue of Minos and the old Cretans."

"Why doesn't the god speak in plain Greek?" The gods always did in the stories.

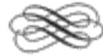
"Tradition," said Timon. "The first priests here were from Crete. Each new priest has to learn the old tongue."

"Oh." That didn't seem like much of an answer, but she didn't press him. She would seek the real answers on her own. Timon's story had made her feel foolish. Speaking old Cretan? Goat crap! Once, when her husband had drunk too much wine, he had said that the Pythia and priests were just clever swindlers. Well, she was honest, but surely some man or men were putting her on.

The oracular voice seemed to come up through the tripod, not down from Olympus. In the gaps between suppliants, they had left her alone down in the adyton. She hadn't meant to pry, but she had poked around the chamber, and given the omphalos a solid tap with her stick. It was hollow. A small woman, she had to climb up a bit on the netting to see across the top of the large stone. In the center of the omphalos, a hole allowed more of the breath of the god up from the darkness. Set into this hole were the rungs of a

ladder, going down. A burly warrior or even her husband wouldn't have fit down it, but she could. So she would.

Before she gave another answer to a supplicant, she would find out where the voice was coming from, and from whom. Until she knew that, she couldn't trust it.



Later that night, she crept the short way from her house to the temple's entrance. The gate of the sanctuary and its treasuries were watched, but temple itself was left unguarded. Timon had told her that "It guards itself."

She went into the adyton. No one had forbidden her, but that was a child's excuse.

She climbed the netting that covered the stone to its top. The thunderstorm smell grew stronger here; she felt lightheaded. Through the center of the omphalos, she climbed down, down. Even descending the ladder wasn't easy on her old bones, but she had scrambled over rocks after goats and boys; she could climb this. In the pitch black, she felt the ladder change from rungs in stone to rungs in metal poles running down, and down. She heard what sounded like water rushing around the walls--was she passing through the Styx into the Underworld? Finally, her foot felt nothing below it--she was on the last rung. She could just drop, but even if she survived, how would she get back up?

She had taken a chance, and remembering Timon's trick in the adyton, had come down without a lamp. As above, so below. "Well, here it goes. Lights."

Instant light, bright as summer noon, filled the chamber. But it didn't flicker like flame. It glowed from the ceiling. She was only a long step above the floor. She took that step, one foot slapping down after the other touched the floor.

From a grate came a cool fresh breeze bearing the smell of storms. The smooth walls and floor seemed freshly whitewashed, and other than a bit of marble that had fallen down through the omphalos, there wasn't a speck of dust or dirt, like a guest room on Olympus.

At the other end of the room sat a statue of a god. It appeared to have a white ivory face and gold details, only the ivory and gold looked so shiny she thought they must be fake. She could tell it was old because, though spotlessly clean, it had the old-fashioned features she had known as a child: odd almond-shaped eyes, set in a slight slant, as if the god had come from another land (which some of them had), and a smile that was at best mysterious, at worst cruel. Spooky.

Flash! The god's eyes glowed at her. "You're not supposed to be here."

She jumped, but no place to run. Sure, she could take forever to climb the ladder, but she wouldn't escape that voice. She knew it well, though she had never heard it speak Greek before. She fell face down to the ground.

"Get up, old woman. You look ridiculous."

She stood up, but not straight. She was shaking.

"Calm down. This happens pretty regularly these days. You're all a lot more curious and skeptical than you used to be. So now you know what I am." She was momentarily blinded as lines of red light crisscrossed her body. "Hmm. You seem harmless enough, so I'll let you off with a warning. Don't come back down here, or I'll have to kill you."

No doubt now--the voice was coming from the statue. Its mouth flapped open and closed with the words, like a puppet without strings. "Lord Apollo, I'm so sorry--"

"Don't call me that!"

"Lord, I don't understand."

"I'm not Apollo."

"Lord--"

"Don't call me that either."

"What should I call you?"

"Call me Python. The rotten one."

"The one the god put here?" Apollo had fought and killed the monster Python.

"I don't know who left me. An ancient civilization? Travelers from the future? Dwellers of the celestial sphere?"

"I don't understand."

"Of course you don't. Let me pitch it low enough for the goats to eat: I've been made to forget where I come from. I only remember why I was left behind. When I first came here, one of my colleagues assaulted a local female. In response, I did nothing."

Typical, she thought, but said, "That was your privilege."

"No, it wasn't. My superior, the one you call Apollo, discovered the crime and my winking at it. After executing the criminal, he struck down my body and put my psyche in this machine."

"Your shade is in the statue?"

"Close enough. So now you know. I'm compelled to tell benign visitors my offense, and my punishment." The statue turned its head and made a sound like dry spitting. "May it bring you much joy."

She was surprised at the strictness of the gods, who in the stories so often took women, willing or not. Then again, those stories were told by men. "This whole time, you could speak Greek?"

The statue sighed. "Endless questions. Yes, I can speak most any tongue you'd like. But while my, um, instructions compel me to respond to supplicants, and don't allow me to be unintelligible, I don't like making the questions easy. That would just lead to more questions, and dangerous questions, like yours."

Aristonike considered that this might be the time to leave--not just this room, but the sanctuary and even Delphi itself. "You should just speak directly to Timon. He'd like that. So, by your leave--"

With a whirring noise, Python stood up, and Aristonike froze in renewed fear. "Sorry, lady, you can't quit. Because I didn't listen to the cries of a woman, I'm forced to speak through one as part of my punishment. And now that you know my secret, it wouldn't be wise to let you wander free. Try to leave Delphi, and the next Pythia will get some interesting oracles regarding your sacrilegious intrusion into this chamber."

She felt almost relieved at this threat--the uncertainty had been killing her. "You're a monster, and you're leading Hellas to destruction. I won't speak for you anymore."

Python's mouth ceased flapping, but he chuckled grimly. "Yes, I may be a monster, but don't be silent on that account. I was once good, and I was once bad. My counsel is neither. It is accurate. My instructions won't allow me to deceive. Not even myself."

"Swear it," she said. She grabbed the bit of marble on the floor to threaten him. Ridiculous.

"Oh, look at you, fighting the monster," sneered Python. "And what oath should a monster take?"

Aristonike knew her stories. "Swear by the river Styx."

"Fine, let's pretend your bedtime stories mean something. I swear by the river Styx that my oracles are accurate."

The statue's eyes flashed bright and left fading spots in her sight. "Huh. Whaddya know? That actually seems to have imposed some instructions." Python sounded so surprised and cowed that Aristonike was inclined to believe him.

"So," he continued, "you think I'm betraying the Greeks. Maybe this will reassure you. I'm advising all the cities to yield a little to Persia now, because if the Great King raises a grand army, and if that army marches to Hellas, they'll take everything, including Delphi. Understand?"

She nodded slowly. Put that way, it was common sense, but Python's oracles were never so plain.

"You'd better go," said Python. "I'll talk to you at work tomorrow, like I always do."

She looked up at the ladder, doubtful. "Let me give you a hand up," said Python, "if these gears still can move." With more whirring, he strode toward her. Frightened, she remained stiff as he lifted her to where her hands and feet were securely on the rungs. Python's touch was colder than winter. Without a word, she climbed back up toward the adyton, desperately trying not to shake so she wouldn't fall.

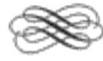
"But remember," he called after her, "Don't come back. My instructions are clear about letting you natives run around down here."

Once she was back above ground, and caught her breath, she wanted to talk to Timon, but what could she say? That she heard a real voice? That the god was in a statue, and wasn't always a nice guy? These things were known, just not quite as the priests had said.

And, thinking about it, why should she complain? Python's words had butted at her like an angry he-goat, but he hadn't hurt her. Her job remained the same, only now she was less worried that she was leading the Greeks to disaster. She would go on as before.

She snuck back into her house. No matter the season, at night this high up it got cold. Her feet were frozen, her bed was ice. Her husband had only been a notch smarter than

their goats, but he had been warm. She had only been alone for months. The machine-god had been trapped in that bare room for hundreds of years. How lonely he must be.



During the gaps between supplicants, Aristonike got bored, and began to talk to herself in not even a whisper, just moving her lips a little. "I wonder if he can hear me now."

Yes, said Python. She started so badly she nearly lost her balance on the tripod. I can hear you, so don't try anything. I can hear you anywhere in Delphi.

He was trying to frighten her with this, but she refused to be scared. "But, out of this chair, how can I hear you?"

Silence. Had she crossed some line in his "instructions," and now he would strike her down?

I've never thought about it. No one ever asked. But it seems that, if you wear a metal necklace, I can talk to you anywhere in Delphi.

She had a gold necklace with a pendant image of Apollo that a supplicant had left as a votive offering for the Pythia's use. She hadn't worn it, as it seemed too fancy, but now she walked about the sanctuary with it, while Python asked at each location, *Can you hear me?*

Every following night, she kept Python company. She told him stories, some a bit bawdy, but it wasn't like talking to a flesh-and-blood man who could cause her shame. She sang little songs.

You're a nice person, he said. You don't ask stupid questions. I could tell the suppliants how to reach the moon, and they ask whether they should plant this or that. His priorities seemed wrong to her, but she didn't argue. Or they ask about chaotic events, where one little pebble can start an avalanche. Do you realize how difficult those questions are?

"Here's an easy one. When I first came here, what did you tell Timon?"

I told Timon that you'd do fine, but that you were trouble.

"Trouble? Why?"

Your micro-responses on the chair indicated that you were too nosy.

"Oh." So he too thought she was nosy. She might as well keep prying then. "How do you keep going so long, alone?"

I don't have a choice. My instructions won't allow me to end myself.

"But if they did?"

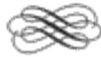
Oh, I've tried. Pause. I wouldn't try again right now--that would be rude. Another pause. But that's not what you're asking, is it? You're also alone, aren't you?

She didn't feel like talking about herself. "Did you have a family? Parents?"

I'm sure I did, but it's all very hazy. Of my past, I only remember one clear thing. I remember the face of the woman, the one I didn't help. I remember how afraid she was, and how I did nothing.

At this image, Aristonike tried to cover her uneasiness. "You're a good person, Python. I'm certain you'd do better now."

Python said nothing.



A year later, Aristonike listened as Timon reported the news. It wasn't good. The Great King of the Persians, still angry at Athens and the other Greeks, had assembled his forces for an invasion. His army was absurdly huge, like something out of the time of heroes.

"Will they come to Delphi?" she asked.

"The god knows how to defend himself."

But would he, or if he did, would he defend anyone else? Python's inability to die might screw up his priorities.

She repeated: "Will they come?"

"For the most part, the Persians have respected our temples, but travelers report that Xerxes is less pious. Also, we hold a great many offerings here, and not all of them are from Hellas. We still have the rich offerings of Croesus of Lydia. The Great King may feel those treasures are due him for the sack of Sardis by the Greeks."

"What will we do?"

"We will do what we have always done--give counsel."

When the word came that the Persians had crossed the Hellespont, Python no longer spoke except to respond to others. "Talk to me," she whispered. "It can't be that bad. Tell me what we should do." But he was only under the god's compulsion to answer supplicants, not her.

A few nights later, Timon brought more news. "A delegation of Athenians has arrived to ask about the Persians. They will be in the front of the line tomorrow, by right of priority and a suitable offering." Some general named Themistocles had given them plenty of silver.

The sky was clear the next morning, and that was good, as Python seemed to have more vigor when the sun shone brightly. One by one, three of the Athenians entered the chamber. Over her many months of service, Aristonike had seen cunning and proud men at their most uncertain, but she had never seen supplicants as cowed as these. These men were so frightened that their best efforts at self-control couldn't hide that they were as nervous as beardless boys.

Before they even had a chance to sit, Python commenced speaking through her. His syllables were different this time. Even in the barbar-ing tongue, she could hear the bitterness and contempt. She thought she didn't need to wait for Timon's translation, yet the words in Greek still hit her like a slap. It was a long oracle, full of fire and misery. Python spoke of the death of the whole body of Hellas and of its gods, and offered no remedy but blind flight.

Then, to her alone, Python added in plain Greek, *You're all screwed*. His words carried all the bitter contempt for her, the Greeks, and all mortal flesh that his own self-loathing could muster.

Her heart felt like it had fallen through the crack below. The impulse to ululate rose up into her throat; her hands clutched at her chiton, ready to rend it as she had done too many times before. But she couldn't mourn now. She was the Pythia, and she was angry. No, not just angry--her head buzzed like the Furies themselves.

She signaled to Timon with her laurel branch to come closer, and quietly spoke to him with the pithiness of a Spartan commander. "Don't let them go."

His face betrayed offense at her commanding tone. "Don't give me that look, young man."

He opened his mouth to reply, then, as if remembering their situation, his shoulders slumped. "I don't think they're in a rush."

True, the Athenians might have stayed the night anyway. She had seen this before with bad news--even if their lives weren't threatened, nobody hurried to face the anger of a master, a king, or a whole polis.

"You make sure of it. Tell them to come back in the morning and ask again. Tell them to come like the women in stories, begging for help and protection like true supplicants." Python would have to answer again. She needed to make the old goat answer differently. "Then the god may have something better to say."

He looked at her, skeptical, and a bit angry again. "Will he?"

"Yes." She didn't care if this was true, because she expected to be dead anyway.

As she left the temple at the end of day, Timon found her. "They're staying, though some of them wanted to leave to get the city moving."

"Moving where?"

"If their citizens choose, Athens has enough ships to move all of them to Italy."

"Oh." The usual Athenian excess. They'd leave the rest of Hellas to its fate. She would face hers sooner.

Aristonike had heard the bitterness in Python's voice. Whatever else that might mean, it also meant that, full of self-loathing, he hadn't thought properly about his answer. To make him think harder, she would have to fight. Delphians didn't fight much. She knew the stories about Spartan mothers, and she wasn't one of those by a long shot. She had told her boys, "When the battle gets too hot, get the hell out. You can always try again next summer." But this was different. She would run into the heat. Why not? With her home at stake, she had nothing else to lose.

The sun set. Aristonike climbed the omphalos, and descended again toward Python's small underworld.

"Don't do this, Aristonike," he called to her, voice echoing, loud enough for anyone to hear. "My instructions are too compelling. Please, go back." The old goat was pleading. She hadn't realized that her short life meant anything to him. Good.

"You can kill me," she said, "but first you will listen to me. I have no idea what barbarians can do to you, but I won't live to see them in Delphi."

Python sighed his windless sigh. "Talk, but understand--I cannot let you leave this room alive." The lights turned on below her. "Besides my automaton body, I have weapons, and the device that copied my psyche is still within these walls. None of these things can fall into outside hands. So, say what you've got to say. I'll try to be merciful."

With a short hop, she alighted to the ground. Like a puppet with his strings cut, Python sat slumped in his chair.

"You're going to let Hellas die," she said. "All of it."

"No, you're just going to be the smallest damn province in the Persian empire. The Greeks will get used to it. The Persians aren't so bad--big on people staying where they belong. Unlike you."

"We're a free people."

Python laughed grimly. "Even if you weren't a bunch of slave-holding, misogynist oligarchs, I couldn't help you."

"You didn't even try."

"I tried. I failed. It's over."

"Try again."

"Trying has nothing to do with it. You've heard the numbers that Xerxes is bringing. This isn't like Marathon. There's nothing anyone in this world can do. It's all been one long joke. Except you. You've been kind to me, and that's worth something. I can try to save your sons."

Damn him. He wouldn't weaken her resolve with that. No, she would make the battle hotter still. "You're doing it again."

"Doing what?"

"You're doing nothing. You see the evil, and whine like a child that you can do nothing. It's why you're here, and why you'll be here until the gods are dead. Apollo was right to leave you. You deserve this."

In a flash, he was out of his seat, hands like jaws gripping her tight. "You insect! You have no idea what you're talking about. I should--"

"What, kill me? You're going to do that anyway. But if you had any decency, before you smote me, you'd let me give them one last answer."

"Right." He let her go. "And what would you say? Tell them to make one great glorious charge, so there'd be more lonely widows in the world to keep you company at night?"

Oh, that stung like fire. But she must not let him distract her. "I'd tell those craven Athenians to take all those boats bound for Italy and stick them up the Great King's arse!"

Silence. Motionless, he stared at her with his creepy inhuman eyes. Well, her language was a bit rude, but he'd been as bad.

Then, like the snap of fingers, a small *click*. "Boats?" said Python. He spoke slowly. "What boats?"

"Timon says they have enough ships to move their whole people."

"Well, why in the name of Hades didn't he tell me!" He slapped his hard hand against his head with a gong-like *clang*. "Damned primitives with your land war bias. I mean, he tells me once that the Athenians are going spend their silver on some ships, then never follows up with a number."

Or perhaps, thought Aristonike, Python hadn't cared enough then to ask.

"Still," he continued, "the Great King's navy will vastly outnumber them. Will they flee?"

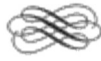
"If they vote to do it. Those crazies vote on everything now. They think that rowing the boats makes them aristocrats."

"Oh, better still," he said, hands waving with exasperation, "a fleet manned by free citizens." He paced back and forth. "I'll have to run the simulations all over again, and with these numbers, that'll take all my capacity. I'm going to kill Timon for this."

"After you kill me."

He placed a dead hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry. You were right to come here. You've done a good thing, maybe a great thing, but there's nothing I can do. Are you ready?"

She thought she had been ready when she came down here, but now she wasn't so sure. She closed her eyes and clenched her fists at her side. "Just do it."



One instant Aristonike was standing, the next she was on the floor, hurting like she had rammed her head against the wall. She opened her eyes. "Is this the Underworld?"

Leaning over her, Python shook his puppet's head. "I'll take care of it later. In my haste, I forgot the basics. My instructions agree: I need you alive to give my answer to the Athenians."

"Then why did you have to hurt me?"

"Because there's always something I can do. If I had to kill you, I was going to save your psyche."

"Well, next time, ask!" She had little idea what he meant, and less patience to find out. "Me and my psyche are going back up. We have a busy day tomorrow. You can kill me later."



The next morning, the three Athenians again filed into the chamber. Their puffy faces betrayed their lack of sleep. Not trying to control themselves anymore, they openly wept.

"Lord, as you commanded, we have come to you bearing these supplicant boughs. We pray to you to utter a better oracle about our native land. Otherwise, we will not depart this sanctuary, but will remain until we end our lives."

A hush. Outside the cella, birds sang, indifferent to the moment. Then, as if for the first time, the jolt of Python shook Aristonike. His voice, no longer flat, but filled with fierce joy, sang the words in plain Greek, and she spoke them directly to the Athenians:

"I will tell you this more, and will bind these words with unbreakable steel. When all else of Athens is taken, a bulwark of wood at the last will remain, which will serve you and your children. Do not stay in the city for the horsemen and the footmen unnumbered to come. Do not stay for the host from the mainland, but retreat, turning your back to the foe, for you shall face him hereafter. Divine Salamis, you shall cause sons of women to perish."

Sons perish. She took a deep breath, and said what she heard next, though it might not be meant for anyone but her. "That's it. You're on your own now."

They gaped at her, then looked at each other and nodded. "We thank you, Lord, for this gentler answer." As if to avoid further and less gentle words, they left the chamber in a stumbling, somewhat impious rush.

The Athenians may have been reassured, but Aristonike wasn't. "Do you really think that was enough? I have some idea what you meant, but I still wouldn't know what to do."

I can't tell them exactly what to do. Persian spies may not be everywhere, but they'll hear of this. And it's still a long shot. I won't command them not to flee. It's their choice.

"They tried to give Timon more money from that Themistocles fellow for a better answer."

Themistocles sounds as stubborn as you.

"Maybe we could send him a note, something like 'the wooden wall is your ships?'"

A courier would be too risky. Tell Timon to whisper that message for Themistocles into the ear of the delegation's leader. As for how the ships are deployed, Themistocles will either figure out the meaning of Salamis, or he's not clever enough to win anyway.

She had forgotten about Timon. He was still standing in the chamber. For the first time, he looked at her with the child-like wide eyes of a supplicant. Gently, she said, "Timon?" He blinked. She told him what to do. He bowed his head, and ran after the Athenians.

She was alone. If she had time, she might want to say goodbye to her sons. "How much longer do I have?"

I'd say twenty years, tops.

She let out a breath. "I thought you had to slay me."

I may yet. But recent events have led to a new set of instructions.

"Which are?"

You'll see.



In late summer, a messenger came to Delphi, dusty and half-crippled with fatigue. The Spartans had fallen at the Hot Gates, and like a spring overflowing its banks the Persian army was pouring south. A small number had split off from the main force and were marching toward Delphi. They would be here soon.

The Spartans had died to a man. Those poor boys. At least they had gone together.

No word came of the Greek fleet.

Now Timon himself was asking the questions. "What should we do with the sacred treasures? Should we bury them, or take them away?"

Python was laughing, not bitter at all. "Neither. I'll take care of it."

Aristonike wouldn't leave the safety of her people to the increasingly erratic Python. She added her own instructions. "Tell the women and children to flee across the gulf to the Peloponnesus. The men should go up Mount Parnassus and hide their valuables in the caves. Keep three score here to keep order and defend the sanctuary, and await the will of the god."

Timon nodded--good boy. As she had instructed, the Delphians left. Among the sixty men who stayed were her two sons. They had come from their small farms looking like idiots in their mismatched pieces of hoplite armor. She was so proud of them.

On the morning the Persians were expected, Aristonike shuffled up the hillside above Apollo's temple for a better view. Even with her old eyes, she could see from far off the Persians, the sun at their backs, marching toward the sanctuary. "Here come the barbaring bastards," she said.

Keep an eye on them, said Python. Let me know when they've reached Athena's temple.

Shouts went up from the sixty defenders. Aristonike looked directly below her. Out from the shrine of Apollo, shields and spears floated as if wielded by an invisible army.

"What's that?"

Ignore it. It's a little trick to boost morale. Just pay attention to the Persians and Athena's temple, and pray for luck.

Tramping soldiers moved with maddening steadiness up the road. Not a cloud in the sky, but the smell of the adyton and oncoming storms filled the open air. She waited, sensing that accuracy was far more important than her nerves.

Finally, she could give the word. "They're opposite Athena's temple."

I hope this works. Fire! From the temple of Apollo, straight shafts of lightning spat out toward the Persians. Again and again, the bolts struck the soldiers. The men fell smoking to the ground.

Aristonike gasped. "You're hitting them!"

Then, like a visit from Poseidon Earthshaker himself, the mountain rumbled, and down came huge boulders. They rolled through the massed, cowering Persians, crushing them beneath their shields, carrying their broken bodies down the hillside.

Python had saved Delphi. Surely the gods must free him now.

Her boys looked up at her like hounds ready to chase hares. An implacable Nemesis, she silently pointed in the direction of the shattered, fleeing Persians. With the roar of a paean, the sixty ran after them, her sons in the lead.

Aristonike did not follow her sons. Instead, she had a flash of intuition clearer than any oracle. Moving as fast as her stiff legs would carry her, she ran back down to the temple of Apollo.

What's happening? asked Python. *Is it finished?*

"Not... yet," she panted. She reached the temple.

Aristonike. Your name: 'noble' and 'victory.' You've been an oracle to me.

No, she thought, not yet. She flung herself up the omphalos.

I've used too much of my, um, heat in this battle, so I can no longer protect my chamber.

Wait for me, damn you.

As I hoped, this means new instructions. I remember everything.

She started down the ladder, skipping what rungs she could. She had guessed why he hadn't been forced to kill her: he had anticipated a way to destroy his secrets, along with himself, and save her.

I've served my time.

Throwing away all caution, she let herself slide down the ladder.

Goodbye, Aristonike. And thank you.

She hit the ground, hard. Probably broke one of her old bones. She fell forward, and Python caught her in his pale arms.

"Aristonike, what are you doing? Get out."

She looked up into Python's strange eyes. "No. You don't die alone. It's not just."

"Damn you, goat woman. I can't stop it. My remaining heat is going to melt this place. It's my apotheosis."

"Good." Apotheosis was such a pretty way of saying *death*.

"I guess you'll just have to come with me."

She didn't even have enough time to ask where.



Another rumble, this time from deep below the temple. The omphalos cracked, and smoke and steam poured out from it and the fractured ground. But the temple remained standing--the Greeks built to last.



Weeks later, the Greek fleet stopped the Persians at Salamis. This set up the victory of the Greek land forces at Plataea the following year. Hellas would remain free, all from one little prophetic pebble.

The Oracle of Delphi continued for hundreds of years, but was never so effective again.

Where, o stranger, alien, wanderer, or friend did the psyches of Aristonike and Python go? Did they travel to the stars, to the future, to the ancients, or to the Underworld? Wherever their souls went, their ashes lay mixed below the temple, where they had perished according to their instructions, laws, and hearts.

The End

This story was first published on Friday, March 15th, 2013.