Chapter Twelve

A Stranger at the Door

WHEN ODYSSEUS FINALLY woke, he could not think where he was. At first he thought it was Ogygia where, in seven years, he had slept away nights on many different beaches, with never an eye to their shape or features. Then he remembered the raft and thought he must have drifted to the beach on that, for indeed he was lying on planks of wood. Then he remembered the storm and the island and Nausicaa and King Alcinous and the ship full of presents. And he looked for some sign that this small bay was a part of his own little kingdom. The water was full of reflections: a multitude of colors floated there like fruit in a bowl of mulled wine. But there are many such bays in the world.

The bay was guarded by prickly oaks, columnar cypresses, and small, bushy olives. But there are many such trees in the world. He stood up and wandered among the shining presents of King Alcinous, running his disbelieving fingers round the rims of the bronze cauldrons. Perhaps the ship had brought him only as far

as Cephalonia or little wooded Zanthe, the outlying islands of his kingdom.

But there! There was the head of Mount Neriton—a shape so familiar to his eye since earliest childhood that it fitted his hopes as a key fits a lock. "I have come home to you, Ithaca," he said. "And when I have cattle and sheep to my name again, I shall sacrifice ten of the finest to Athene, goddess of the gray eyes, who gave me this moment."

He hid the cauldrons, weapons, and other gifts in a cave at the head of the beach, thinking, Home, yes. But safe? For every friend who laughs with joy to see me, a dozen villainous suitors will wish I had died in Troy or on the voyage home. I must take care how I return to Pelicata Palace.

Telemachus, though he sat down at mealtimes with the suitors, spent as little time as he could in their company. Their insults set the blood frothing in his veins, and sweat formed on his brow when he saw how their fingers twitched on their sword hilts at the sight of him. But it pleased him to see the bafflement in their faces. "Who warned you?" said their eyes. "Which god shielded you from harm?" They dared not speak a word of their cowardly ambush.

Caution advised Telemachus not to walk alone in dark places or to stroll along the clifftops when Antinous was close by. When he wanted peace, he went to the

hilltop cave where an old pigman tended the king's boars and pigs.

The hungry suitors, with their liking for roast pork, had left the pigman fewer than twenty pigs to tend; he had no need to stray far from his cave and he was always ready to talk to Telemachus about King Odysseus. He was a friend as much as a loyal and devoted servant.

But as Telemachus approached the cave that day he heard scuffling inside, and voices. Cautiously he ducked inside and saw, sitting with his back to the far wall with a fleece pulled round him and over his head, a man who was not the pigman. The stranger looked up, only his eyes showing as he raised food to his mouth. And he looked at Telemachus so piercingly that the boy was half alarmed, half affronted.

"Come in! Come in, my lord Telemachus!" called the pigman from the darker recesses of the cave. "Meet my friend. He's . . . uh . . . he's . . . "

" . . . a shipwrecked soldier," said the stranger. "Crete's my home, and misfortune's been my fate ever since I set sail from Troy."

"Troy? You were at the War?" said Telemachus. "I suppose you saw Odysseus there, fighting alongside Achilles and Nestor and Menelaus?"

"I suppose I did," said the stranger. "And what's he to you?"

"A king, sir, and a hero and a father—and a man who would give you a ship to get you home, if he were able."

"Why, is he poor, then, that he's got no ships in his fleet? I won't believe it! The harbor's full of ships, and that palace up there is not the home of a poor man."

"Oh, but it is," said Telemachus. "It's the home of a man rich in honor but too poor to call one breath of air his own. I'm afraid he's dead, you see. Poor Odysseus is drowned, sir, or pining in some dungeon or sweating over an oar in slavery."

"Then you would be glad, young sir. Surely, a young pike is lord of a pond until the big, old pike comes out from under the weed. You must be glad the old pike is gone."

Telemachus did not hesitate in answering. "Sir, I have no power on this island. I am a ball tossed to and fro between the vermin who have taken over the palace. But if I had all the power of a king and the magic powers of an Immortal, too, I would only use them to wish my father home again, safe and well!"

Odysseus let out a great laugh and threw off the fleece that hid his face and body. Telemachus flinched at the sudden movement, then frowned angrily. "What are you, then? A god from Olympus? You have the look of one, though a god would surely show more kindness than to laugh at the misery of a fatherless son."

Then Odysseus laughed again, at himself this time. "What a fool I am! I thought you'd recognize me, but how could you? I recognize you, of course. Looking at you is like looking into an old mirror where my own

reflection has been trapped for twenty years. I'm your father, Telemachus. I am Odysseus!"

Telemachus said nothing. The frown still crouched between his eyebrows, and he turned to the pigman. "He is lying, isn't he?"

"No, lad, he's not lying. This is your own father. I know every feature of his face like I know Neriton Mountain."

"But where's the king's sword? Where's the king's bronze helmet?"

"At the bottom of the sea, along with all my companions and every beam and shackle of the *Odyssey*. But I am not. Finally, boy, that's all I can say—I am neither drowned nor captive. I have come home."

For weeks upon months upon years, Telemachus the prince had smiled and reassured and comforted his mother with brave words. He had been brave—as brave as any full-grown man. Now he laid his forehead on his father's shoulder and wept out loud like a little boy.

As for Odysseus, the hero of Troy, his throat felt as choked as a pipe that the autumn rain pours down and clogs with leaves. He blinked his eyes repeatedly and pulled the fleece forward again over his face.

Telemachus went back to the palace alone for dinner. He seated himself at table with the suitors, ignoring their jibes and the way their fingers twitched on their sword hilts at the sight of him. Queen Penelope sat apart and

ate alone in a gallery that overlooked the hall. She ate where there were no knees to nudge her, no eyes to wink at her, no winy mouths to blow her unwelcome kisses.

Out in the yard, the smell of meat reached the ancient hound that lay by the door. Her mangy coat was brindled with gray, her eyes were milky with blindness, and fleas swarmed in her hackles just as the suitors swarmed over the king's property. The dog, who received no kindness from the suitors, sniffed once and twice, but had no hope of a meal, and rested her head back on her paws with a sigh. Then her nose twitched again. A smell reached her that she had not smelled since, as a year-old puppy, she had hunted Ithaca's rocky ravines. Ah, how she had raced then, through the tall grass and scrub, as fast as if her backbone were an arrow fired from her master's bow! She had been happy then, in the days of that smell!

Her ears twitched and her nose sniffed, but all her old eyes could see was a blurred shape against the sunlight. Tremblingly the aged dog rose to her feet on shaking haunches. Her tail began to wag.

"Yes, it's me, Argos, my old companion," said Odysseus under his breath. "But you are the first and last that must recognize me just now." He sat down beside the dog, his back to the doorpost, and Argos laid her old head on her master's lap and died. After twenty years, her long wait was over. She was content.

When the suitors looked up, all they saw was a

ragged and bent old beggar sitting propped in the doorway, nursing a dead dog in his lap. Telemachus called out to the beggar, "Here, old man. You are welcome to come in and ask food from everyone at this table."

The beggar pressed the heel of his hand into his eyes. Then, setting aside the dog's head off his lap, he got up awkwardly and shuffled to the table, with cupped hands, to receive whatever gifts the suitors would give him.

Antinous stole a glance at the queen. "Oh no. Oh no. I couldn't possibly give you anything, you reeking old tomcat. This food belongs to King Odysseus, hero of Troy. We are guests of his wife, the delectable Penelope. What kind of guests would we be if we made free with her food and gave it away to every stinking vagrant who crawled through that door? No, no. I know my duty toward Penelope and the unfortunate Odysseus."

"You mean you want it all for yourself," said the beggar starkly and turned to the next suitor, with his hands outstretched. But Antinous was so furious that he picked up his footstool and hurled it. It struck the beggar between the shoulder blades and knocked him flat, emptying his lungs of air. The other suitors burst out laughing. They threw things, too—bones and plates and boots. Telemachus half rose from his chair, then, as if he had remembered something, meekly sat down again.

It was Penelope who called down from the gallery, "Send the man to me and don't begrudge him a bite of

food. My Odysseus may be stranded among strangers. I hope he'd receive kinder treatment at their hands."

She should not have spoken. Her voice drew the eyes of the suitors, and the sight of her put out of their minds all thought of beggars and food. Eurymachus said, "Lady! You have much more important matters to think about. We're waiting. We're waiting to hear your decision. Who's it to be? Who'll sleep in your bed tonight and rule Ithaca ever after?"

"He's right, Mother," said Telemachus, much to the astonishment of Eurymachus. "It is time. I was with the pigman today, and of all the great herds of pig that roamed this island when I was a boy, there are fewer than twenty left. Soon Ithaca will be ruined, and you will be too old to attract a new husband. Unless you want someone to take the crown by force, make a decision and make it now. What Ithaca needs is a warrior strong enough to defend her against her enemies. Set some feat of skill and strength, then rest your fate in the hands of the gods."

All the while he spoke, Telemachus drew nearer and nearer to the gallery, fixing his mother with his eyes and defying her to interrupt him. Her jaw dropped. Her face was ashen white. But Telemachus went on remorselessly, "There! Look, there is Odysseus's hunting bow—the bow he left behind when he took with him his warrior's longbow. Let the man who strings it and fires it into a given

target claim my mother and the whole island kingdom of Ithaca!"

Penelope plucked at her skirts, her head ducked forward in grief and confusion and her cheeks flushed red. She searched her mind for the hardest target of all. Then she squared her shoulders and said, "Very well. It shall be as my son advises . . . commands me. You see those axes hanging from the roof? Each one has, at the handle end, a loop for a man's belt to pass through. Set up the axes along the table, handles uppermost. If any man can string Odysseus's bow and shoot an arrow through every loop, let him clutch my hair and call me wife. There. I have said it. And may the gods reward you, Telemachus, for this advice of yours."

Telemachus seemed not to hear. He was collecting up all the shields and swords and spears that belonged to the suitors and giving them into the arms of the servant, Melanthius. When Penelope stayed standing in the gallery watching, her son said, "Very well, Mother. You may go to your room now. I'll tell you when the matter has been decided. Go, and lock the doors behind you."

The suitors were amazed—so amazed that Melanthius had made several trips in and out of the room before any of them noticed him carrying away their weapons.

Eurymachus said, "What's he doing with those?"

Telemachus was quick with his answer. "The smoke from the fire is tarnishing them. I hate to see good weapons ruined. I told Melanthius to polish them all. . . .

Besides . . . I'm afraid, since one of you will undoubtedly win my mother tonight, that the rest of you might start fighting, in your disappointment. That would be a fearful waste of noble blood. You—beggar!—lift down my father's hunting bow, will you? I'm not tall enough to reach it."

But Polybus pushed the beggar aside and snatched the bow off the wall with a loud laugh. "Me first, I think."

He put the bow-tip to the floor and pulled on the other end to bend the bow. But though he heaved and hauled and sweated, he could not bend the bow enough to string it. Another suitor snatched it out of his hands. But he could not bend it either. Eurymachus took the ends of the bow in his two huge hands and tried to arch it. But it was as unbending as the silver spear of the goddess Athene.

"Permit me," said the beggar, taking the bow from Eurymachus.

Bracing it between his right ankle and left hip, he bent the bow and strung it with the yellowing gut that had hung loose for twenty years.

"Give it here," said Antinous, snatching the bow. The axes stood ready by now, their handles upward. He laid one of his own arrows to the bow and took aim along the row of loops. The bowstring hummed. The axes fell like skittles to right and left, and the arrow lodged in the wall.

One by one, the swaggering suitors enraged themselves

with unsuccessful attempts to shoot an arrow through all the loops. Eurymachus, when he failed, hurled down the bow in fury, but when the beggar leaned down to pick it up, he snarled, "Don't even think about it, tomcat. This contest is for the hand of a queen."

"Very well," said the beggar mildly. "I shan't shoot through the loops . . . though in my own country, I've halls and cattle and servants of my own, and I'm better thought of than a beggar by my wife and son."

They turned their backs on him scornfully and called for wine to steady their hands before they began the contest afresh. The beggar gathered up the arrows that had buried their barbs in the furniture and walls. Then he stepped onto a chair and from there onto the table. He drew the bow back to its limit and loosed an arrow. It found its target instantly.

Antinous, who had just raised a goblet of wine to his lips, neither saw nor felt the arrow. As it passed through him, it carried away with it all life and breath and heartbeat. Antinous stood dead on his feet with a look of surprise in his eyes, then fell to the floor, and the spilled wine flowed round his head.

All eyes turned on the beggar. He had thrown off his rags and was naked to the waist, with a heap of their arrows at his feet. His graying golden hair curled across his forehead and deep into the nape of his neck, and the sinews of his arms were plaited like the strands of a great anchor rope.

"Yes, it's my father," said Telemachus, leaping onto the table alongside the stranger. "It is Odysseus. Too late to regret your journeys here to Ithaca, you scum. Too late to call on the gods, you godless vermin. King Odysseus has returned!"

While Odysseus was still traveling, the story of his travels passed from mouth to mouth round the shores of the world-encircled sea. He had come face to face with the terrors of the Known World, and their reflections were in his eyes. When the suitors met his stare, they saw there the Cyclops, the Laestrygonian slaughter, the Scylla, the Sirens, the sea-shifting cyclones, and subterranean spirits beckoning, beckoning them to subterranean shores and endless silence.

Odysseus, the hero of the Known World, was home now, and the world would know of it, come what may!