

Chapter One

The Land of the Lotus Eaters

“WHEN WILL FATHER come home?”

Queen Penelope turned away from the bright window to look at her son. “Soon, Telemachus. Soon.”

“But the war has been over a long time now,” said the boy, fingering his father’s golden spear and quiver of polished satinwood.

“Troy is a long way away—the other side of the world-encircled sea, on the far eastern shore. If there are no winds in his favor, his men can only row. It would take many, many months to row from Troy to Ithaca.”

Telemachus tried to lift the huge sword that stood in the corner of the room, but it was too heavy for him. How much more must the king’s sword of gold weigh that his father had worn when he went away to war!

“Why don’t I remember his face, Mother?”

“Child! You were only a baby when he sailed for Troy. The siege lasted for ten years. I can describe him to you—how his hair curls forward from the crown, how he wears his beard trimmed to a point, how his tan is darker

than the mainland Greeks', who never sail between the sun and the sea. And his hair is almost the color of his bronze helmet—ah, I forget, you never saw his warrior's helmet, or his blue eyes looking out. I can describe him to you, child, but I wish there were someone to describe his son to him . . . or that he were here to see you for himself."

"But you say he'll come soon, Mother?" said Telemachus.

"As soon as the gods allow. This island of ours, this Ithaca, it's his home. It's his kingdom. And what use is a king without a kingdom or a kingdom without a king?"

And her eyes returned to the sea below the palace, to the brimming ocean, whose waves were always arriving, always beaching, on Ithaca's rocky shore.

In the prow of his boat, Odysseus stood and gazed ahead at the gray swell of the sea, which seemed always to be moving but never arriving. And he longed for the rocky shores of Ithaca and for his dear wife, Penelope, and for a sight of the son he had seen only as a baby.

For ten days the wind had torn white spume off the wavetops. It scudded into the clouds and mixed sky with sea so that there was no horizon. Odysseus's twelve ships had been driven aslant across the heaving water, and his sailors had lifted their oars for fear they'd be smashed like twigs. Not even the seamanship of their captain could steer them where they wanted to go or tell them where the storm had brought them.

Somehow the twelve boats had stayed together.

Somehow none had been snatched down by the sea. And now they were sailing in unknown waters, and the exhausted men lay slumped over their oars. The twelve sails hung in strips, slit from top to bottom three, four times. And Odysseus was at the prow of his ship watching for some friendly sign of land.

There! A cluster of birds, rising like ash from a bonfire, hung in the sky over a yellow coastline.

"Look and praise the gods! There's rest and food and fresh water for you. Lean on your oars and let the first crew ashore be the first to go foraging!"

In each ship the oars rattled home between their thole-pins, and forty-four wooden blades sliced white slits in the creamy ocean. The lead ship moved forward with such a leap that the cockerel on the stern—Odysseus's own mascot—was unbalanced and spread its speckled wings and threw back its scarlet comb and crowed with all its might.

The shores of the island were turquoise where the sea spread transparent skirts over soft, white sand. The ships slipped ashore with such ease that the weary sailors could simply step over the sides and throw themselves down on the warm, white dunes beneath the shade of palm trees. Most fell asleep then and there. But the first crew to step ashore was eager to press inland to find what lay beyond a green clump of palms.

"Be careful," said Odysseus. "Find out what people or beasts live here. They may be unfriendly. They may be

frightened by five hundred strangers on their shores. Tread carefully."

So the foraging party agreed to take care and to return by nightfall with news of the land's people and animals and plants. On the beach, Odysseus lay down and waited.

As the sun went down, and the low light poured thick as honey through the sea lanes and dry-land pathways, he watched for his crew to return. Night fell over land and sea alike, and a million stars cascaded. But the crew of the first ship did not come and did not come and did not ever come.

"Do you think they've been ambushed, lord?" asked Polites, captain of the tenth ship. "Or maybe wild animals have eaten them or trapped them somewhere in the darkness."

"Bring your crew, and we'll go and see. But let us be stealthy. Remember how we had to fight the Cicones in Thrace when they had us outnumbered. I don't want to lose more good men in fighting."

So without helmets or swords to clatter, the second party crept off the beach and inshore, through thickly and more thickly wooded pathways. They could hear the pretty tinkling of fresh water. In the darkness, they could smell the thick, sweet smell of coconut. And as they felt their way, the plush skins of hanging fruit brushed their hands and faces, and over-arching blossoms dropped petals in their hair.

All at once, dawn stood in the sky and let fall strands of golden light, like curls of hair. Odysseus and his company found themselves on the edge of a beautiful clearing, where a glistening pool lay full of early morning sunlight.

Stretched out on its shores, in their dark and gleaming skin, lay smiling men and women. And in among them—their sword belts unfastened and their helmets full of fruit—sprawled the crew of the first boat. Raucous laughter flew back and forth across the pool, and the light flashed on the rims of bronze bowls piled high with succulent fruit. A girl was picking still more from the overhanging trees. So soft and ripe it was, that the juice ran down her arms. She carried it to the sprawling Greeks who crammed it into their mouths and threw the stones—*plop*—into the center of the pool.

In his hiding place, Odysseus was speechless with amazement. But Polites leaped forward into the clearing and called out angrily, “Why didn’t you come and tell us about all this? Did you want to keep it all to yourselves?”

The idle soldiers grinned and waved their hands. The dark-skinned strangers smiled, too, and hurried to bring a bowl of fruit to the newcomers. But Odysseus (who was quick of hand, but quicker still of wit) took the bowl and held it in the crook of his arm, untasted. “Stir yourselves, men! We’ve got a long day’s rowing ahead of us.”

A disheveled soldier flapped one hand at Odysseus. “What? Leave our friends here? For what? To heave

some wooden hulk over the lousy sea? Sit down, why don't you? Have some fruit. By all the gods on Olympus, it's the most delicious stuff you ever ate in your life!"

The soldiers behind Odysseus were anxious to taste the wonderful fruit and jostled forward. But Odysseus held up his hand and continued speaking in a loud, good-humored voice. "Not as good as your wife's goat stew, surely, Stavros—and nothing to compare with the first cup of cold wine your daughter will bring you as you beach on the shores of Ithaca?"

The soldier picked up another fruit and bit into it and let the juice run down his chin and chest before answering. "Ten years we've been gone from Ithaca. My wife will be old and fat by now. My daughter—she'll be married and good riddance. This is the life for me."

The man next to him sniggered and scratched his head. "I'm beggared if I can remember if I'm married or not. Seems to me I did have a wife once. Ach, who needs one? I'll live on fruit and friendship till I die!"

Polites and Odysseus exchanged glances. "I know that man," said Polites under his breath. "He has nine children waiting for him at home. What spell have these devils put on him?"

Odysseus showed the bowl by way of reply. "Have you seen what they're eating? The fruit of the lotus tree. By tomorrow they won't remember Ithaca itself, let alone their wives and children. Tell your men, and warn them on no account to taste the fruit. When I give the

word, let two good men each seize on one poor fool and carry him back to the boat. Something tells me it won't be easy, either. I've heard tell of these Lotus Eaters."

The dark-skinned strangers were pressing close round Odysseus now, with smiles and outstretched hands, full of fruit. "Rest! Eat! You're welcome to everything we have!" they seemed to say. But Odysseus slipped free of their juice-sticky hands and, with a shout, seized on Stavros and flung him over his shoulder. His soldiers fell on their companions—two to one—and hauled them to their feet, belaboring them with reproaches: "Think of your wife! Think of your children! Think of Ithaca!"

But the lotus-eating Greeks only clung to their precious fruit and cursed and struggled. As they were overpowered, they begged to be allowed to stay. They implored Odysseus to leave them, forget them. Then they began to cry and sob pitifully. Stavros beat with his fists on Odysseus's broad back and howled, "Please don't make me go! This is my home! This is where I belong! Don't make me leave my friends. The fruit! At least take some fruit aboard! I'll die if I don't have more fruit!"

Closing their ears to the wailing, Odysseus and Polites led the way back to the beach, calling ahead for the boats to be made ready. The juice-sticky natives followed on for a time, clinging to their Greeks, wheedling and pleading and all the time smiling. But they would not be parted long from their beloved trees and began



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to drop off like contented leeches and patter back toward the clearing.

On the shore, five hundred men sprang to their feet. Masts were lifted, rooted in the deep sockets of the boats' keels. Sails were raised. Oars were run out.

"Put them aboard and lash them under the thwarts!" commanded Odysseus. And the writhing and wriggling Lotus Eaters were stuffed under the seats like so many furled sails and bound there with strong rope. The dismayed crews heaved their boats off the soft, clinging sand and into the surf, then leaped aboard and leaned on their oars. And in every boat, forty wooden blades sliced white slits in the creamy ocean. The lead ship moved forward with such a leap that the cockerel on the stern unbalanced and spread its speckled wings and threw back its scarlet comb and crowed triumphantly.