

## *The Odyssey: Slaughter in the Hall*

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Having strung the heavy, polished bow and put the arrow right through the lined up axe heads, Odysseus, still in the guise of an old beggar, put his back against the great oaken doors to the hall. They had been bolted from the outside by the bent, elderly nurse Eurycleia, and then she had gone somewhere safe as he had asked her. His son Telemachus, tall and starting to fill out, stood by him, as did short, stocky Eumaeus his swineherd, and his cowherd stood with him as well. The ringing sound of the axe heads, and the solid meaty thunk of the king's weighty war arrow sticking into the oak wall at the back of the hall were almost drowned out by the drunken laughter and chatter of the suitors.

Odysseus tore from him most of his rags, an important part, along with a hunched posture and doddering walk, of not being recognized as the newly returned king of Ithaca. He stood up straight on the threshold and upended his quiver of arrows into a pile at his feet. He held one of the arrows loosely in his right hand, rolling it thoughtfully between his fingers. His face had no expression. He cast his eyes over the hall, filled with carousing suitors, many of whom were not paying much attention, and the lightning-quick brain of the strategy master of the Trojan war made some quick calculations.

While he did this, the divine art of Athena continued to tell everyone in the room that here was a decrepit, worn-down old beggar, but the minds of many started to feel a strain, as the actions taken by Odysseus increasingly were in conflict with that message. Their eyes and brains told them one thing, and their primal guts another.

As quickly as a dream flies into the head of a sleeping child, Odysseus assessed the room. The entire time he'd been back in Ithaca, he'd been gathering information on everyone and everything. As an old beggar, he'd many things spoken within earshot that would never have been spoken around anyone more important.

Counting Odysseus himself, Telemachus, Eumaeus and the cowherd, there were just four of them. There were many more of the suitors, none of whom were friendly. It would make a lot of sense to take out Agelaus, as he was the most likely military leader in the room. The man wasn't even looking his way. An easy shot. But then there was Antinous. Antinous was much less likely to lead the suitors in an armed attack, but he had tried to have Telemachus killed. He was also, along with Eurymachus, one of the most insistent and disrespectful seekers after Penelope's hand in marriage. And then there was that chair he'd thrown at Odysseus, thinking him a defenseless beggar and safe to bully. That was what decided it. A thrown chair.

"*Apollo give me this!*" Odysseus' voice rang out, sounding nothing like that of an old beggar, and more or less exactly like the voice of the king of Ithaca most men in the room remembered. His face remained still as a pond. As gently as a child stroking a duckling, the veteran bowman loosed (*thwhish*) and Antinous, who was raising a bronze and silver goblet (Odysseus') of fine wine (also Odysseus') to his full lips got a heavy war arrow (*gluck*) through the neck instead.

The suitor's eyes bugged out in shock, and the goblet fell into his braised mutton and gravy, the spattering wine looking remarkably like the arterial spray that soon fountained generously out of his nose and mouth. Antinous' head fell to his platter, and he quickly bled out into his leeks and carrots. A violent death twitch of his left foot sent the heavy table behind him right over, pouring everyone's suppers into their laps, and nearly breaking blond Eurymachus' foot. Thick slices of dark bread grew darker as they began to absorb the blood that was swirling across the floor, mixed with crumbs, wine and gravy.

There was a general wounded cry of outrage from the suitors as a whole, and incoherent threats. The opening salvo had been launched.

One angry voice gritted out “You’ve killed a prince of a man, stupid old bum.”

Another bugled “Vultures will eat your corpse, old man!”

Odysseus, eyes still reading the room, an arrow nocked, and the bow not yet drawn, called out “You never expected to see me here, back from Troy!”

*Back from Troy? What did that mean?*

“You’ve been bleeding my household white, harassing my good servant women, and drunkenly wooing my faithful wife, pressing her as to which of you dogs the poor woman would have to marry. Well, you’re done now. Your necks are in the noose. The game is over.”

*My household? My wife?*

“You have no respect for gods or men. No fear of whom you’re trifling with. No respect for how a guest acts when not in his own house. Your doom is here. Now.”

There was a moment of deafening silence, with white faces and wide eyes trying to catch each other’s glances to see what the hapless suitors would do to salvage the situation.

Finally blond Eurymachus, the other suitor most ardent in his pursuit of unwilling Penelope, spoke up: “If you really are Odysseus, then you’re right. Your household, your servants and your wife have been disrespected and taken advantage of. But it wasn’t us. It was all Antinous’ doing, and you’ve killed him. Wouldn’t you rather we live healthy, safe lives so we can pay you back in taxes, than... hurt us? He’s the one who tried to have your son Telemachus killed. He’s the one who wanted your throne. He’s lying in his own blood on your floor in your food and drink. Wouldn’t you say you’re done being angry? Aren’t you finished having a temper tantrum like a spoiled child?”

Odysseus’ cold, bright smile was the same one that had smiled grimly on Trojans, sea monsters and a cyclops. “No, Eurymachus, no. Not if you all gave me everything you and your fathers own. The only choice you have is to fight me or run for your lives and never be seen by me again.”

Tall, graceful Eurymachus, somewhat the worse for wine and wishing he hadn’t eaten so much ham, turned wildly and addressed the room: “Friends! Look at him! Standing on the door sill with a massive warbow aimed at us and a quiver’s worth of arrows ready at his feet. He’s not going to *let* us leave. Our only hope is to charge him in a pack. Swords out! Tables over! (We need something to stop his shower of deadly war arrows!) Once he’s run out, we’ll get out of this place, rally people from the town, and return to put him down like a mad dog!” Curly blond hair flopping over one eye, Eurymachus kicked over the table nearest him, drew his sword, and not waiting to see who was with him, rushed Odysseus in a shockingly fast sprint, followed by a headlong leap, sword coming down with his full body weight.

The battle-forged Odysseus stepped slightly to one side and put an arrow through Eurymachus’ liver, dropping the corpse heavily to the floor in front of him. The sound of the man’s forehead smacking off the stone flagstones and his bronze sword clattering across it were painfully audible, as was his dying gasp.

Splendidly dressed Amphinomous was next, running recklessly at Odysseus, sword out. What he wanted was to get the king clear of the main doors and force them open so they’d no longer be trapped and could get reinforcements. He wore a pair of silver rings and a golden armband that had all been Odysseus’.

As Odysseus turned to face this new threat, Telemachus, who’d somehow been holding a spear the whole time, standing a few paces from his father, thrust the spear through Amphinomous’

body as the attacking dandy tried to push past the young man. Amphinomous was down immediately, pulling the spear from Telemachus' grasp with his full body weight as he fell. Telemachus had felt a lot safer while holding the spear, but he knew that if he turned away from the room and took time trying to wrest the heavy bronze-headed spear free of the man's ribcage, he risked getting stabbed in the back. Instead, he ran empty-handed to his father's side.

"Father, let me get you some of your gear. A shield, a helm, a pair of throwing spears... And I'll arm myself too. Also, the swineherd and cowherd." Telemachus' face was a bit flushed with having just killed his first human being, and he breathed heavily, but he was holding himself together. And like his father, he was always thinking ahead to his next couple of moves.

"Right! I'll run out of arrows soon." As he said this, Odysseus' eyes never stopped scanning the room, and before Telemachus managed to run off in the direction of Odysseus' armoury, his father had put another two arrows into vital bits of suitors who tried to approach him. The whole while the Trojan War veteran was keeping an eye out for suitors whose gaze went to the side door, or up toward the ceiling.

Swineherd and cowherd close behind him, as they all knew the building well, Telemachus ran as fast as he could out the side door of the hall and around a bend to the armoury. Flinging over the ornately carved, heavy door and rifling through enormous piles of old helmets, bucklers, greaves, swords, shields, spears and the like, Telemachus quickly sorted out four complete sets of gear: a shield, a helmet and two spears each. He weighed Eumaeus the swineherd down with the eight spears, the cowherd with the four shields, and carried the four helmets himself. Then, leaving the door to the armour room hanging open, Telemachus put one of the bronze helmets on his head, the black horsehair crest bristling atop it, and charged back into the great hall, dodging around drunken and confused suitors to stand once again beside his father.

Eumaeus and the cowherd were right behind him, and as Odysseus fired off his last three weighty arrows one after another, scoring solid hits with all three, Telemachus and the two servants geared up. Then the three thrust their spears at anyone who approached the battle-seasoned Odysseus, who was seating a bronze helm with a red horsehair crest firmly on his head, strapping a dented shield that had once belonged to his father Laertes to his forearm, and grabbing a pair of weighty ash spears.

Odysseus had a quick word. "The main doors are blocked, but there's still that small side door. Eumaeus, your job is to make sure no one gets in or out of the side door. The armoury is through there."

The swineherd made his way to the side door. Although he was across the room from Odysseus and the other two, something in his demeanor showed that he was part of that team, where the suitors were milling around leaderless. One drunken suitor tried to block Eumaeus' path with a sword, but he could not get at Eumaeus, the swineherd's spear having many times the reach of the bronze blade, and Eumaeus put him down and got to the door.

Odysseus went on; "The rest of us need to work together. So far these idiots have each fought like it's him alone against the four of us. Stupid. Let's hope that continues. And they're sluggish, full of our good mutton and beef, and not a little of our best wine. They're totally caught off guard and are very confused. *We* knew what we were going to do today, and now we're doing it. They've... Whoops! Agelaus has thought of the smoke hatch..."

Because entire pigs were often roasted inside the hall proper, there was a firepit at the rear, and in the ceiling above it, a small hatch to let out the smoke.

Telemachus saw what his father was thinking. “An agile climber might be able to get out on the roof and call for reinforcements! Then they could break through the main doors or even light the whole place on fire!”

“Or,” Odysseus said, “They might simply raid the armoury. I don’t suppose you barricaded the door?”

“No! There was no time. I just left the door hanging right open. I’m so sorry...”

“We’ll manage. But while I was getting geared up I wasn’t able to keep my eyes on the hatch. Have either of you seen anyone trying to get up there?”

“I didn’t think to look” the cowherd admitted.

Another lone suitor, emboldened with wine, rushed at Telemachus with a sword, and Odysseus let him run right onto the bronze head of his long spear. Odysseus expertly twisted and yanked the spear free before the man took it to the floor with him. He had clearly done this many, many times.

At that point, the hatch in the ceiling was flung fully open, and armloads of shields, helmets and swords started clattering and clanging to the stone of the fireplace below.

“Hera’s teats!” Odysseus swore. “Who do you think is doing that? Treacherous women servants? No, my money’s on our goatherd Melanthius. He’s always had the most to prove. Tries too hard. Goes too far. Drinks too much. He never liked me much. And he’s brought enough gear for ten, maybe a dozen!”

Telemachus listened and could hear heavy footsteps running back across the roof, and then the sandy crunch of a pair of sandaled feet hitting the ground outside, before running back into a side entrance across the building from the main hall.

Eumaeus, peering around the doorframe up the hall called, “Ok. Do you want me to kill him, or bring him back in here, my king?”

Odysseus thought. “There’s some good sailing rope in the armoury. Surprise him in there and tie him up. Tightly and painfully. I’ll want a word with him. Telemachus, give him a hand.” The air of command Odysseus exuded meant that, although Athena’s influence told the minds of the people in the room that this was still the dirty, down on his luck old beggar in the room with them, the illusion was starting to wear very thin.

Leaving Odysseus to fight off stray suitors with the cowherd at his side, Telemachus pelted out the side door after Eumaeus. As for the cowherd, he was picking up spearcraft very quickly.

Telemachus rounded the corner to the armoury just in time to see Melanthius, staggering under another enormous load of helmets and spears, come out into the hall and get knocked backwards by Eumaeus. The swineherd grabbed the goatherd by the hair and dragged him back into the armoury.

There were still enough weapons in there to kit out an army. Telemachus found the rope in question and they lashed Melanthius brutally tight, throwing the end of the rope over a supporting beam and hoisting him to dangle several feet above the floor. Fastening the rope so Melanthius remained suspended, roaring with pain and rage, the two then flung the door closed and blocked it with a couple of heavy beams that had been brought in the previous month to use as additional roof supports. Between the two of them, Telemachus and Eumaeus could just barely drag them into place.

Running back into the great hall, the two saw Odysseus and the cowherd starting to falter under an onslaught of increasingly desperate and aggressive suitors. They were able to take up their places again, Telemachus needing to skewer two sword-wielding suitors before he stood next to his father once more. Sizing up the situation, Telemachus could see that it was the three of them

against twelve fully geared-up suitors trying to get the main doors open, with Eumaeus manning the side exit.

As the fighting heated up, a hulking dark-haired suitor who was not entirely equipped thrust a spear at the cowherd, only to be smashed across the back of the head with a bronze shield. This brought him down, and a spear then pinned him to the floor. A tall, noble warrior in beautifully crafted armour scowled at them.

“Mentor?!” Odysseus exclaimed. “How did *you* get in here? It’s great to see you. We learned how to fight as boys together. Let’s show them how it’s done.”

The warrior-who-was-really-Athena punched another suitor in the neck with the edge of the splendidly-decorated shield and said “You’re not doing very well, old man. Rumour has it that you are really Odysseus, king of Ithaca and veteran of the Trojan War, survivor of maritime adventures. Are you sure? It doesn’t look much like it at the moment. I’m not sure I believe it.”

Especially now that he was speaking at close range with the goddess pretending to be his boyhood friend Mentor, Odysseus began to have doubts. Some interference from the gods was afoot here. He’d seen plenty enough meddling by the Olympian gods during the Trojan War not to know in his bones that something wasn’t quite right. He peered deeply into Mentor’s eyes, looking for a sign of the man he’d grown up with, but couldn’t quite penetrate the illusion.

“Mentor!” called Agelaus, who was starting to gather the suitors into a more organized group. “Don’t be fooled into making the mistake of siding with this one. If he is indeed Odysseus, you know how manipulative and untrustworthy he is. The man’s brain is filled with serpents. You’d best withdraw and let us do what we’re here to do, or we’ll kill you too once we’ve taken care of Odysseus and his son. You, your family and your servants will be next. One of us will absorb your lands, servants and goods into his own, marry Penelope and rule Ithaca in his stead!”

Athena had already been outraged by the suitors trying to murder Odysseus in his own hall. Now, though she was trying not to interfere too much, and was trying to let Odysseus win his own battles, she truly lost her temper. The warrior who still looked kind of like Mentor rounded on Odysseus. “Where have your fighting heart, your cunning, your perseverance gone? Tell me the man who led an army which mowed Trojans down by the thousands, fighting relentlessly over fair-faced Helen, striding down the main street of Troy killing everyone in his path, tell me this leader of warriors is not about to be killed by goatherds, farmers, shopkeepers and *suitors*! Let’s teach them fear in the face of certain death, if you have it in you!”

With this, Athena/Mentor leaped on top of one of the tables that had not been knocked over, took a leap that Mentor on his best day could never have managed, grabbed the smoke-blackened central roofbeam and clambered lightly onto it to stand, spear and shield ready, looking down at the room. She was not about to fight Odysseus’ battles for him entirely, but she was not above some fairly heavy-handed meddling.

Agelaus laughed theatrically at this and called out “Noble men of Ithaca! To me! They can’t take us together. Not if we work as a unit. We’ll catch that bird!”

And eleven fully equipped suitors stepped up to stand by him, halfway down the hall from the entrance.

Agelaus hefted the spear he’d been given from Odysseus’ armoury, and the less equipped suitors formed up beside the dozen ready ones. “This is going to be easy. You five, hurl ash spears in unison with me. You six, wait for my command. When they’ve thrown their four spears, they’ll get hit with another six of ours before they can arm themselves for a second volley. Ready? I’ll take the idiot who thinks he can fly!”

As Agelaus cast confidently at the man he thought was Mentor, the other five threw their spears at Odysseus, Telemachus, Eumaeus and the cowherd. Amazed at a mortal man attacking a goddess of Olympia, Athena smashed the spear aside with her divine thundershield. The shockwave created by this made a deafening clap of thunder worthy of Athena's father Zeus. Agelaus' spear disintegrated into fine splinters before it even touched the divine shield.

The spears arcing in to strike Odysseus and his men were buffeted by the divine thunder and were knocked off target. Three of them struck the door, a table and the wall, while the other two simply skittered pointlessly to both sides.

Stunned to silence, no one moved for a moment. Fine ashwood particles drifted slowly down from above, illuminated in a shaft of sunlight that fell across the floor.

Odysseus didn't have to tell Telemachus and the rest to throw their spears on his command. As he drew back and set his back foot expertly, they did the same, and all four men threw at almost exactly the same time. Athena-pretending-to-be-Mentor did nothing.

They had targeted four suitors who were not fully equipped, and therefore less protected. Also, these four were the closest to them, so the spears would be most easily retrieved. The four spears arced halfway across the hall, Eumaeus' cast coming in from the side from where he stood guarding the side door.

Odysseus' powerful throw killed Demoptolemus, who carried only a sword, instantly, going in under his left nipple. He fell, landing with his head resting at a sharp angle on an entire broiled pheasant like an odd cushion. At nearly the same time, Telemachus' cast killed Euryades, who'd been taking a step toward him at the time. As the red-haired suitor fell bleeding to the floor, he took a bowl of peas and some dinner rolls with him, Off to the side, Elatus fell too, sword clattering to the floor as the ash shaft of Eumaeus the swineherd went through his lower abdomen. As for the cowherd, his surprisingly strong cast took down Pisander, who bled from his face into a platter of wild rice that had been knocked to the floor earlier. In almost perfect unison, the four stepped toward their targets to pull their spears free, still armed with a spare spear each.

While they were doing this, Agelaus, reaching for a spear to replace the one Athena had disintegrated, raised an arm and brought it down. The second wave of suitors launched their spears while Odysseus and his crew were retrieving their own.

Exactly the same thing happened again. This time it was Eurydamus who was foolhardy enough to throw his spear at Athena, standing in her Mentor guise on top of the central roofbeam. The concussive blast of her thundershield was just as deafening, and the splinters of Eurydamus' spear rained down. A slender suitor named Amphimedon had cast at Telemachus, and despite the room-shaking thunder of Athena's shield, the spear still opened Telemachus' wrist, almost causing the king's son to drop his spear.

Ctesippus, wearing a lot of jewelry that had not until previously belonged to him, had pivoted unexpectedly and thrown his ash shaft at Eumaeus, hoping to clear the path to the side door. Seeing the spear incoming, Eumaeus held his shield high and crouched down, trying to let it go over his head, but it still brushed the edge of shield and grazed his shoulder blade before caroming off the floor and clattering into a corner. Wincing slightly, Eumaeus snatched it up, and now had three spears.

Odysseus raised his own bronze-headed shaft, and the other three did the same. Eurydamus, deafened by the thunderclap of Athena's shield shattering the spear he'd hurled at her, did not get his shield up in time and took Odysseus' cast right through the left side of his chest. He fell into a chair, breaking it, and rolled under a table, knocking a bowl of goat's milk pudding off it.

Telemachus, bleeding from the wrist Amphimedon had nearly skewered, threw low, hitting the slender suitor just below the navel, the bronze head jutting out his back. A spattering of blood drew a straight line from Telemachus' bleeding wrist to his target.

Eumaeus, at his oblique angle, saw an opportunity to take out a chubby suitor named Polybus, putting his spear right through Polybus' jaw and bringing him to the floor, wallowing in gravy and blood, his sword sliding under a chair.

Odysseus had never gotten the cowherd's name, but the man was showing an unexpected gift at spear throwing. He'd certainly thrown enough stones at animals that had bothered his cows. Seeing Ctesippus try to hit Eumaeus, the cowherd returned the cast, and his ash shaft pinned Ctesippus' bangled arm to his body, piercing through it to his lungs and dropping him to the floor where he lay wheezing and bleeding out.

Then the master of longhorn cattle said, "Where are your rude insults now, son of blabbering Polythereses! Made fun of me for being a lowly cowherd, did you? Look at you now! Not so much to say. What's that? Can't quite catch a breath? I can't quite hear you... Don't worry. You can keep the spear!"

The two groups were now too close for spear-throwing, but not quite in comfortable range for sword cuts. Agelaus opened his mouth to give an order to the suitors, but Odysseus stepped in and rammed his spear deep into the man's guts, and wrenched it free, letting Agelaus fall at his feet. Eagle-eyed Leocritus thrust at Telemachus, and the young man, still bleeding down his forearm, managed to deflect the incoming spear downward with his own low thrust to the man's groin, the bronze head poking out just between the last few vertebrae before Telemachus yanked his weapon free, and let Leocritus fall at his feet, imitating his father's practiced spearwork precisely.

Their leader dead, the suitors began to panic, and so when Athena, high on the beam, brandished her golden shield, thunder ringing out, it heartened Odysseus and his men to know that the thunder was on their side, and it routed the suitors who knew it was not. They tried to make a break for the side exit, all turning and running as one.

Like falcons dropping out of a clear sky onto fleeing field mice, Odysseus and the others pursued the fleeing suitors the length of the hall, hacking limbs and cleaving skulls. Before, tables and floors had grown slippery with dark blood and trampled supper, but now gouts of blood were hitting the walls and supporting beams as well. No suitors got past Eumaeus and out the door. In fact, very few got near him. The tide of battle had decisively turned.

No one looked up enough to notice that the person they knew as Mentor was somehow no longer there.

Looking around the disgusting, stinking hall afterward, Odysseus found one small man, slight of build and wearing a white robe, cowering behind a table. The war hero raised his shield slightly, in case of an attack, but the little man crawled out and grasped Odysseus by the calves, pleading for his life.

"I am Leodes, neither suitor nor warrior. I am a prophet, and as theological council, my role in this godless invasion of your hall was solely to warn the suitors against doing it. I spoke against them doing it to begin with, and once they showed they had no fear of god nor king, I visited them daily to plead with them to leave this place, lest they incur the wrath of both. Please believe me. I did nothing wrong here, but only sought to restrain the suitors from their shameless wrongdoing. On my daily visits, while giving my talks I did sit at your table and partake of your food and drink, and for that I am most sorry."

Looking off to one side of him, Odysseus spotted the largely ornamental sword Agelaus had been using in the fight, recognizing it as part of his own collection. He picked it up and looked at it for a moment, remembering how and when he'd first acquired it. Then, almost without looking, he struck Leodes' head off, where it rolled across the floor, coming to rest against a barrel of summer wine. There was an audible gasp from Telemachus, who'd thought perhaps his father was finally done being angry.

Odysseus, still fully fired up for battle and accustomed to fighting for many hours in a day, scanned the room again and saw a tall, lanky young man trying to sneak out. He was clutching a lyre to his chest as if it would shield him from sword and spear.

Odysseus took a step toward him, and the young man squeaked "No! I'm Phemius. I'm just a bard. I haven't done anything. They made me come here each day and play for them, and never paid me a solitary coin for my trouble. Please give me your mercy, king of Ithaca!" He set his lyre down on the floor, carefully, and clasped his hands together. His gaze fell on Telemachus. "Your honest, dependable son can vouch that what I say is true."

Telemachus put his wounded hand on his father's shoulder. It left a bloody handprint there. "It's true. Phemius has never done anything worthy of death. Nor has Medon, over there. Medon! Behind that chair! Throw that cow hide away and come out. We won't hurt you." To Odysseus he said quietly, "He's just a herald. He only brought and took messages."

At this, the overlooked man threw aside a dusty cow hide he'd thrown over himself and stood up, very careful not to look at the blood and corpses that littered the room.

Telemachus stepped in from of the king of Ithaca. "My father is acting a bit more than usually like Achilles today, and who can blame him? You two had best leave this place."

At this, both men hastily left.

Odysseus then walked the length and breadth of the room carefully, stepping around outflung hands and bloody shields with delicacy. The room looked, he thought, like a net filled with dead fish. Disgusting. Not a suitor left alive. The only treacherous manservant still living was Melanthius, strung up in the armoury. The two faithful manservants, the cowherd and Eumaeus the swineherd, were more than welcome to keep their weapons and armour, mementoes of a great battle.

The wily war hero spoke; "Telemachus? We've got a couple of things left before I talk to Penelope. Fetch Eurycleia, the noble nurse. She saw through Athena's disguise of her master and bolted the doors for us when we asked her to. Have her come and open them wide."

Telemachus soon found the old woman, who had been hiding somewhere safe. She flung open the main doors, and seeing the mess and carnage in the room, her face lit up as if she were a little girl. A cheer rose in her chest, but before she could voice it, Odysseus stopped her. "There is a time for cheering, and this isn't it. We have begun the work of sending these dogs safely to Hades, but we have not finished it. They likely deserved what they got, or nearly, most of them, but they do not deserve to wander forever as stranded shades unable to cross the Styx. I have met their like. I will kill a man, but I will not do that to him."

Telemachus nodded soberly.

"Also," Odysseus continued. "We need to make sure you and your mother are safe. Plots within plots, hatched by spies and traitors in our midst almost resulted in your death. We have fought with the men, seeing which of our manservants would side with our enemies and try to kill us. What about the woman servants? Which are innocent and loyal, and which have and will



continue to consort with our enemies, plot treachery, steal from us, rutting shamelessly in our house with men who seek our deaths? What say you, Eurycleia?"

The old nurse thought for a moment. "That's easy," she said. "You have fifty women servants all told, including me. They have, in almost all cases, mourned your reported passing bitterly, and served you well all of these years. They were for their faithfulness harassed, ravished and mistreated by the suitors you have slain for us. But as to who was behind the plot against Telemachus? Who spied on this house and passed information on to our enemies? Who did I find entangled with your enemies in the larder, willing to seek our undoing? I can name only twelve, but of their character I am certain. Their whorish treachery and vindictive duplicity are known to all of us. *How* they lorded the situation over us! What would you like done? Penelope can back me up. Shall I try to wake her from the mysterious sleep in which she has lain all day?"

"No. Not yet. I do not quite... look myself. My boundless rage has not quite subsided. And I don't want her to see... what's happened to our dining hall. I can think of twelve lazy sluts who ought to earn their wages by cleaning this room until it is spotless. And once they're done, I think they should follow their suitor lovers to Hades."

And so Telemachus, bronze sword in hand, went with Eurycleia to fetch the twelve woman servants.

It took endless buckets of water, and the strongest soap and lye imaginable to clean the room, its furniture and the bloody armour and weapons. First the bodies had been dragged into the courtyard and burned on an enormous fire. The doors were left open while the scrubbed hall dried out, and then the place was ritualistically purified in a ceremony involving burning sulphur which stank, but overpowered the stench of blood and trodden on food.

The twelve women who had worked and mingled with the suitors had at first gasped in shock when they saw the hall. Once they were forced to clean it, they were uniformly angry. When the hall was purified, Telemachus went and stood beside his father. Odysseus was standing by the bonfire, looking out to sea. Three strong, intelligent young dogs, the offspring of loyal Argos, lay near him.

Telemachus spoke quietly. "Are we done? Has your mighty rage gone now?"

Odysseus looked back toward the hall entrance, where one of the spying women servants was arguing with Eurycleia. The dark-haired, mean-eyed servant was trying to flee. The old woman was telling her she could not. The servant woman shoved the nurse aside, and the eyes of father and son met.

Odysseus pointed silently at the women in the hall, and then at Telemachus' sword, a question in his eyes.

Telemachus nodded grimly and got Eumaeus. And some rope.

The two men and Eurycleia took the group of treacherous serving women to a stout oak tree. And the three returned alone.

"What about Melanthius?" Telemachus asked then. "Do you have wrath left? What should we do with him? He broke into our armoury and supplied our enemies with weapons and armour today in hopes they would kill us."

"Fetch him," Odysseus said, in a voice like a spear hitting a shield.

Melanthius was thrown down in front of Odysseus, still trussed up with heavy rope.

Odysseus looking at him idly for a time, swinging the mostly ornamental sword Agelaus had used against him that afternoon, and then in three quick blows cut off the treacherous goatherd's ears and nose. Two more cuts freed Melanthius' hands and feet from the rope, as well as from his

wrists and ankles. A final scooping cut freed Melanthius from his manhood, which Odysseus stooped down and tossed to the three dogs. The battered war hero's face was without expression the entire time. Odysseus turned on his heel and walked away from Melanthius, who had begun to wriggle gorily away on his belly in the dust. "I'm not angry anymore," he said, over one shoulder.

Odysseus, the illusion Athena had put on him not fooling anyone who had once seen through it, went into the spotless dining hall. He ran a finger over a deep mark a sword had gouged into a table, planning to fix it later. His face was without expression. He sent Eurycleia to fetch the faithful women servants.

When they trooped into the hall, they burst into tears of joy at the sight of their old king returned, and the lecherous suitors gone. Odysseus began grinning from ear to ear as the servants cried and clung to him. Soon he was crying tears of overwhelming joy with them. Inwardly he told himself over and over, because he could scarcely believe it: *I am home*.

And Eurycleia went off to wake Penelope.