Chapter 8 - [Book 19 - 24]

When rosy-fingered Dawn next shone forth upon gods and mortals, the suitors gathered in the great hall of Odysseus' palace. One gave the man of many schemes a gift similar to the one Antinous had chosen to give; he threw the hoof of an ox at Odysseus' head. However, Odysseus quickly moved his head aside to avoid it, and it hit the wall instead.

Telemachus said to the suitor, If you had struck the stranger with that hoof, I would have run you through with my bronze spear. Then your father would have to hold a funeral rather than a wedding feast for you. I want no more of this behavior in my house!

Then the prophet Theoclymenus spoke. He had arrived from Pylos with Telemachus and was his guest. Oh, unhappy men! he cried. What kind of evil sits upon you? Your heads are shrouded in night, and tears fall from your eyes. Blood spatters the beams and the walls. Ghosts crowd the porch and the courtyard. An evil mist has veiled the sun, and in the darkness, the ghosts hurry down to Hades' dark kingdom.

This stranger surely is out of his mind! exclaimed one of the suitors. We'd best take him outside if he finds it so dark in here!

I need no one to help me leave, Theoclymenus replied. Nor do I intend to stay. I see evil approaching all of you, and no suitor will be able to escape it. And with these words he left the great hall.

Penelope then appeared with Odysseus' great bow, his quiver of arrows, and a chest containing the ceremonial axes. I am putting before you the polished bow of Odysseus, she announced. I will marry whoever among you most easily strings this bow and shoots an arrow through the holes in all twelve axe handles.

Come, all of you! Telemachus encouraged them. Surely I do not need to praise the prize of this contest. Even I will try the bow. I would like to be able to use my father's weapon.

He jumped up, dug a trench, and arranged the axes with their handles upright in a straight line. Then he tried to string his father's great bow. When it looked as if he would succeed in his fourth try, Odysseus signaled to him to stop. Obviously I cannot do it, Telemachus said. I am either too young or too weak. You are much stronger than I am, so it is your turn to try!

However, not one of the suitors could string Odysseus' mighty bow. They tried warming it and waxing it, but nothing helped. One of the men complained, I am sorry to lose a woman like Penelope, but there are many other fine women in Greece. What distresses me most is that not one of us is as strong as godlike Odysseus. Men to come are sure to think less of us because of our weakness.

Then Odysseus, man of many schemes, called out, Suitors of good Penelope, give me the polished bow so that I can see whether I still have the strength I had before my wanderings began and I had to start begging for food.

Antinous replied, Is it not enough for you to eat in our presence and listen to our conversation? What other beggar is treated so well? Besides, if you do manage to string the mighty bow, we shall quickly ship you to some other land, where you will not fare as well as you have in Ithaca.

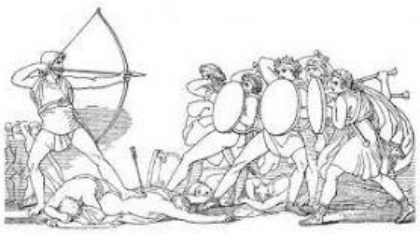
Another suitor said, And how would it look if a wandering beggar could string the bow that younger men cannot?

Wise Penelope replied, You suitors have already injured your reputations by your behavior in this royal house. What more do you have to lose? This stranger is well born and well built. If he strings the bow, I shall not marry; surely he can have no hope of that. But I shall give him a set of fine clothes and good weapons to use in his own defense.

Telemachus then counseled, Mother, I am in charge of the bow, and I will give it or withhold it as I choose. If I decided to let the stranger take it away with him, no one has the right to stop me. This is a matter for men, not women, so I ask you to return to your rooms and take up your usual tasks at your loom.

Penelope left the great hall, and the swineherd approached Odysseus with the polished bow and put it into his hands. Odysseus then quietly told the old nurse to bar all the doors.

He picked up his great bow and inspected it carefully, testing it this way and that. Then, with no effort at all, he lifted the bow and strung it. As a man skilled in the use of the lyre easily stretches the string of twisted sheep gut around a new peg and then fastens the string at each end, so godlike Odysseus strung his polished bow. While Zeus, lord of Olympus, set forth a loud clap of thunder, Odysseus stood by his chair, set one of his arrows upon the string, and sent it flying through all twelve holes in the axe handles.



Then the man of long suffering said to Telemachus, See, the stranger you have fed and housed is as strong as he used to be, and he has not shamed you in any way. Now it is time to feed the suitors, for the sun has not yet set. These words signaled Telemachus, who armed himself with spear and sword and joined his father.

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Odysseus then tore off his tattered clothing and said, The contest is over, but I have other targets in mind. May Apollo, lord of the silver bow, grant me glory if I hit the mark!

He aimed his first arrow at Antinous, who was lifting a golden wine cup to his lips. The arrow pierced his throat. Terror filled the hearts of the suitors as they ran this way and that through the great hall, searching for the weapons that used to line the walls but were now concealed in the storeroom.

You dogs! Odysseus exclaimed. You were so sure that I would never come home from Troy! You sat here day after day for over three years, wasting my goods and wooing my wife, without fear of gods or mortals. Now black Death will come upon each and every one of you; you cannot escape.

When Odysseus had used all of his arrows, he, Telemachus, the swineherd, and another loyal servant armed themselves with bronze weapons and continued the attack. But the goatherd, who was a loyal supporter of the suitors, brought arms to them, for Telemachus had inadvertently left the storeroom door open.

Even weapons could not protect the suitors, for Athena now entered the great hall. Disguising herself as a swallow, she flew up to the roof beam and surveyed the battle from there. Thereafter, every spear Odysseus or his men hurled hit its mark, while the suitors' spears always flew far and wide of their targets. Finally, all of the suitors lay dead, and the floor of the great hall swam with their blood.

Unseen by mortal eyes, Hermes then appeared with his golden wand, which he uses to awaken or put to sleep whomever he chooses. He awakened the shades of the dead suitors and led them all down to Hades' dark kingdom. As in the deepest depths of a hollow cave bats fly about and squeak when one among them falls from the rock that they have clung to, so the shades of the suitors babbled to one another as the Wayfinder led them down past the streams of Oceanus and the gates of the sun into the land where the shades of the dead live on forever.

When Telemachus brought the old nurse into the great hall, she found Odysseus standing with the corpses of the suitors surrounding him. As a lion returns all covered with blood and frightful to look upon, from feeding upon an ox it has ravaged in the farmyard, so Odysseus was stained with blood and gore.

Before she could say anything, her master advised, Your heart can overflow with joy, Nurse, but it is wrong to exult over the dead. The suitors were blind to the consequences of their own rash behavior. They honored no one who came among them, and the gods have punished them dearly for it.

While the servants were cleaning and purifying the great hall, the old nurse went up to Penelope's room and cried, Wake up, dear child, to see what you have waited for so long. Odysseus has returned, and he has killed all of the arrogant suitors!

Penelope replied, Dear Nurse, your mind is usually quite sound, but the gods can both make the simple-minded wise and rob the wise of their understanding. They appear to have made you witless. Why tell me such a fantastic story?

Odysseus is the very stranger that the suitors taunted in the great hall, the old nurse explained. He confided in Telemachus but no one else, so that they could surprise the suitors with their attack.

Penelope jumped out of bed, hugged the nurse in her joy, and asked, If this is true, how did Odysseus manage to slay over 100 men with so few to help him?

I did not see it until it was over, the nurse replied, but his vengeance was swift and complete.

No, Nurse, Penelope replied. Clearly it was the gods who killed the suitors. And as for Odysseus, he is somewhere far from home.

It is you who are wrong, my child, the old nurse replied. When I washed the stranger's feet, I saw the wound the boar made so long ago above Odysseus' knee. When I tried to tell you, your lord closed my mouth with his hand and told me I had to remain silent. Come with me, and see for yourself.

As Penelope went to meet her husband, she wondered whether to stand apart and question him or to embrace him warmly. When she entered the room, she simply sat down and silently observed him. Odysseus also sat silently, waiting to see if his wife would speak.

Finally, Telemachus became impatient and said, Mother, your heart is as hard as rock and cruel besides! Why do you not sit next to my father and talk to him? No other woman would greet her husband in such a manner after he has been away from home for twenty years and has suffered so much.

Wise Penelope replied, My son, I am too amazed to speak! If this really is my husband, then I must be more certain of it, for we two share knowledge that is known to us alone.

Then the long-awaited Odysseus smiled and said to his son, Telemachus, let your mother test me, to be certain of my identity. Meanwhile, have everyone in the house dress for a festive occasion and make merry in our halls. This will mislead the people in the city and the suitors' families about what has really taken place here.

Great-hearted Odysseus then bathed and dressed. Bright-eyed Athena made him taller, stronger, and more handsome. As a skilled artisan overlays gold upon silver and creates objects of great beauty, so Athena made Odysseus appear as striking as a god.

When he returned to his wife, Odysseus said, Strange woman! No other wife would remain apart from her husband after an absence of twenty years and so much suffering. It appears that nothing can soften your heart. So,

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Nurse, prepare a bed out here for me, for my wife has an iron heart.Penelope added, Come, Nurse. Move the bed out of the bridal chamber and cover it with fleeces, sheets, and blankets.

To this direction Odysseus responded with great anger. Penelope, he cried, I am losing both my patience and my sympathy! Who has moved my bed? Only a god would possess such skill. Certainly no mortal, no matter how young or strong, could budge it. I built our bridal chamber around the trunk of an olive tree and then removed all the branches, smoothed the trunk, and fashioned it into one of the bedposts. You know this as well as I do. Has someone cut the bedpost from the tree trunk and moved our bed?

Penelope's heart softened at this, for she knew that this was her husband. Tearfully she embraced him and said, Forgive me, Odysseus, for not welcoming you like this when I first saw you. I have always been afraid that some man would come and fool me into thinking that he was you. But your knowledge of our secret has convinced me that you are my Odysseus.



As the sight of land is welcome to shipwrecked swimmers, whose swift hollow ship Poseidon destroyed by sending tumultuous waves and mighty winds to attack its strong frame, and with hearts overflowing with relief and happiness, they finally set foot upon that land, so was the long-suffering Odysseus welcome to Penelope. Once she embraced him she could not release him, and Odysseus wept as he finally held his dear, loyal wife in his arms.

Rosy-fingered Dawn did not bring light to gods and mortals until bright-eyed Athena gave her permission. The goddess extended the night and delayed Dawn at the streams of Oceanus in order to give Odysseus and his Penelope time to weep, and to love, and to exchange tales of the past twenty years. And only when the last of the tales concluded were they content to fall asleep.

When Dawn finally shone forth upon gods and mortals, word of the fate of the suitors spread through the city. Each family collected its dead, and the corpses from far lands were sent home. Then the men of Ithaca assembled to discuss whether or not to take vengeance upon Odysseus.

The father of Antinous blamed Odysseus for the deaths of all his companions who left the land of the horse-taming Trojans aboard their twelve hollow ships as well as for the deaths of the suitors. Two of Odysseus' servants explained how the gods had taken Odysseus' side in the battle in the great hall. Finally, a prophet told the men of Ithaca that it had been their responsibility to curb the suitors' behavior, but they had been too cowardly to take action against their children and their countrymen.

Half of the speakers decided against vengeance and returned home, but the other half decided to attack. Zeus, lord of counsel, then directed his bright-eyed daughter to bring peace to Ithaca. When Odysseus and his small group of armed men faced the armed group from the city, Athena joined Odysseus disguised as a family friend.

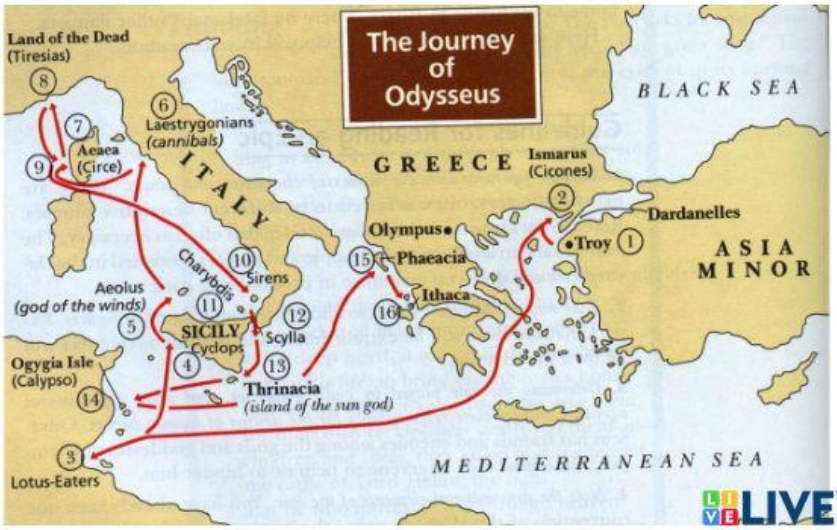


Odysseus and Telemachus set upon the armed men with their spears and would have killed all of them, but Athena terrorized the group by calling out in her immortal voice. Men of Ithaca, she shouted, spill no more blood! Quickly return to your homes with your lives and live in peace with one another.

The long-suffering Odysseus ignored her words and started after the frightened men like an eagle diving down upon its prey. Zeus, lord of the bright lightning and the dark cloud, then hurled his blazing thunderbolt at the feet of his flashing-eyed daughter.

Odysseus, Athena counseled, drop your weapons! Put aside what is past and love your people. Then you will be king the rest of your life and will live peacefully and well. If you cannot obey, you will arouse the anger of mighty Zeus.

When Odysseus heard these words, his heart filled with joy. Thus Athena, in the form of a loyal friend, brought lasting peace between Odysseus and his people.



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