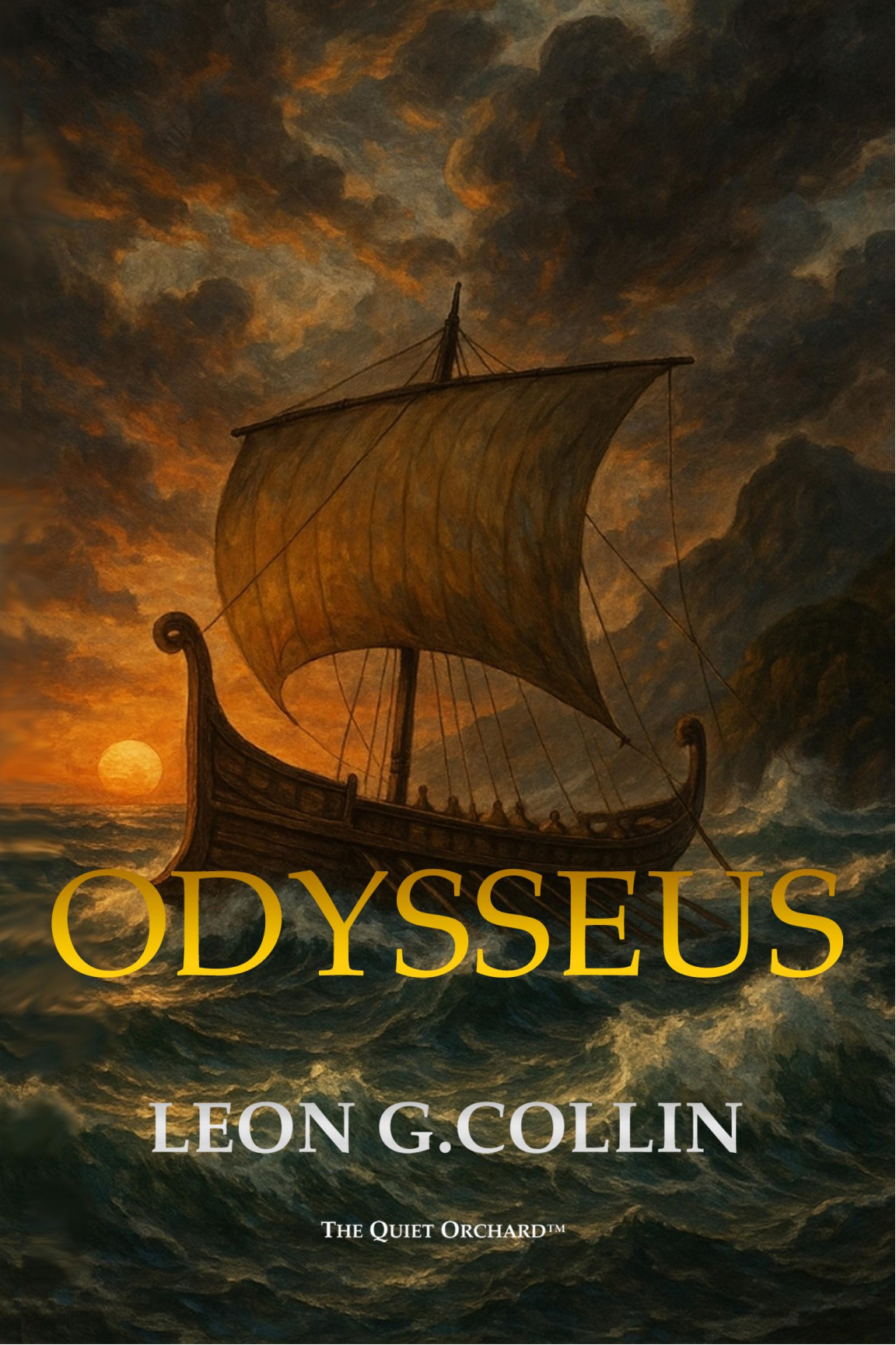




ODYSSEUS

LEON G. COLLIN

THE QUIET ORCHARD™

PALINGENESIS – THE QUIET ORCHARD™

LEON G. COLLIN

ODYSSEUS

This is a work of fiction.

It is freely inspired by Homer's *Odyssey*, but reinterprets its episodes, characters, and symbols through a narrative thriller lens.

Some names, places, and mythological figures are drawn from classical tradition, but their use in these pages is the result of literary elaboration.

This work does not intend to provide historical, archaeological, or religious reconstruction, but only an imaginative retelling for entertainment purposes.

Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, institutions, or contemporary events is purely coincidental.

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*To my father,
always with me beyond time*

*If a man knows not to which port he sails,
no wind is favorable.
Seneca—*

Prologue

Troy – The Fall and the Choice

Troy burns.

Odysseus walks through ash. The walls—the ones that withstood battering rams, scaling ladders, corpses stacked like steps—crumble beneath his boots. To his left, behind a door hanging from one broken hinge, something howls. A horse, maybe. No one goes to check.

He stopped counting the dead when his son spoke his first words.

Greeks loot. Trojans flee or die trying. Women weep behind shattered doors. Children make no sound. They've learned silence is currency.

This is what they called victory.

He stops before a body. A boy, barely past adolescence. Spear through the ribs. Eyes still open to the black sky, reflecting only smoke and falling embers. A braided leather belt circles his waist. Careful work. Hands that knew the craft. Hands that braid nothing now.

Is Telemachus still a child or nearly a man?

Odysseus tries to remember his son's face. The curve of his cheek. The way he laughed when taught to skip flat stones across the sea. But ten years of war have replaced memory with images of stacked bodies and the taste of blood that never leaves the mouth.

Movement catches his eye.

Among collapsed columns—the ones that once held up a temple, now reduced to splinters and dust—a figure staggers through rubble. A young man, broad-shouldered but bent beneath weight. An old man clings to his neck, too weak to walk. With his free hand the young man grips a child, maybe seven, running to keep pace.

They're fleeing toward the mountains. The sea. Anywhere away from what Troy has become.

The young man doesn't see him. He has eyes only for the path ahead. The old man murmurs prayers the wind swallows. The child cries without sound.

A family. Still whole. Still together.

Odysseus looks away.

His hands still know how to grip a sword. The weight of bronze, the balance of the hilt, the exact point to strike to split bone. They no longer know how to touch his wife's skin. Don't remember if it was soft or rough, warm or cold in the morning.

At the harbor Greek ships bob on calm waters.

His are there. Twelve hulls filled with men who've forgotten what peace tastes like. They want home. They want to stop dreaming blood.

His second approaches, salt-crusted and hollow-eyed. "Ships are ready. Menelaus leaves at dawn." A pause. "Coming with us?"

Odysseus looks toward the Greek camp. Agamemnon's pavilions still stand, surrounded by priests. The king wants to appease Athena before sailing. Sacrifices. Prayers. Days of waiting. Maybe weeks.

"Yes," Odysseus says. "We leave with Menelaus."

Home.

The word tastes strange in his mouth.

Ithaca. White stone and blue sea. Olive trees that smell of salt. Penelope weaving on the terrace, fingers flying between threads with that precision that made him stop to watch. Telemachus running on the beach, small, laughing, calling for his father.

But that was Ithaca ten years ago. What waits for him now?

Dawn comes gray.

Troy's smoke covers the sun. The ships slide from the coast. Menelaus leads.

Nestor follows. Odysseus keeps his prow straight, eyes forward.

Wind fills the sails. Troy disappears behind a curve of coast, black smoke rising toward the sky.

The youngest helmsman laughs. "It's over! Finally over!"

No one else laughs.

The island appears on the third sunset.

Tenedos. Small, rocky, sacred to Apollo. Ships pulled onto beach. Men light fires, slaughter sheep, pour wine on sand that drinks it down.

Odysseus stands apart, watching the sea.

West: Ithaca. Three days, maybe four, and he'll see his son again. Touch his wife. Walk his own land.

East: Troy. Agamemnon. The others who remained behind.

"Captain." His second's voice is quiet. "Something wrong?"

Odysseus doesn't answer immediately. The sea stretches in both directions, identical, indifferent.

"Agamemnon is still there."

"Yes. And we're here. His choice."

"We were together ten years." His jaw tightens. "Is it right to leave him?"

His second watches him. "You want to go back."

Not a question.

"Three days," Odysseus murmurs. "Three damned days and I'd be home."

But the words sound hollow even to his own ears.

At dawn Menelaus and Nestor sail west.

Odysseus turns his twelve ships east. Returns to Troy.

His second says nothing. He knows. When a man chooses duty over home, he pays a price. The gods watch these moments. They remember.

The sea grows calm.

Too calm.

No waves. No wind beyond barely enough to fill the sails. The water lies flat, reflects nothing.

Odysseus grips the rail. The wood is warm under his hands. Wrong. Everything is wrong.

In the distance a cloud gathers on the horizon. Dark. Dense. Moving against the wind.

His throat closes. The air has weight, a pressure that crushes lungs like invisible hands.

The wind changes direction.

Sails snap violently. Sailors shout, scramble for ropes. The sky darkens in seconds, swallows the sun. The sea swells, rises, churns.

Odysseus stares into the black clouds.

And from the depths something laughs.

The sound vibrates through the hull, through his ribs, through bone. Not wind. Not water.

Something else.

I - Athena Calls

*The man for wisdom's various arts renown'd,
Long exercised in woes, O Muse! resound;
Who, when his arms had wrought the destined fall
Of sacred Troy, and razed her heaven-built wall,
Wandering from clime to clime, observant stray'd, ...*

Homer's Odyssey, Book I, translated by Alexander Pope—

Olympus – The Council of the Gods (Day 1, evening)

The hall shimmered—not with light alone, but with the weight of voices that shaped the world below. Thunder grumbled through the marble, like the earth remembering its maker. The gods sat in their stations, some restless, others carved into stillness like monuments. The air smelled of frankincense and something sharper—ozone, the residue of power barely contained.

They had been debating mortals—how men brought ruin upon themselves and then blamed the heavens. Zeus leaned forward on his throne, his jaw working as if chewing on a grievance too old to spit out and too bitter to swallow. He gestured toward the assembled immortals.

“Mortals,” Zeus said. The word fell heavily. “They ruin themselves and cry to us for rescue.” He shook his head. “Look at Aegisthus. Hermes went to him—warned him in my name. ‘Leave Agamemnon’s wife alone. Do not murder the king when he returns.’ But did he listen? No. He took Clytemnestra to his bed and cut the war-king down in his own hall. And now Orestes has struck him down in turn.”

Murmurs rippled through the assembly. A few gods nodded; others stared at their hands, remembering their own interventions—warnings given, warnings ignored.

Athena stood. She didn’t rise slowly or with ceremony; she was simply standing, and every eye turned to her.

“Father.” Her voice cut through the murmurs like a blade through silk. “You speak of Aegisthus, I speak of Odysseus instead.”

Zeus tilted his head. “Go on.”

“Ten years he fought at Troy. Ten more he has wandered, hounded by storm and spite. Now he sits on Ogygia, prisoner to a goddess who loves him but cannot let him go. His son grows to manhood among wolves. His wife weaves and unweaves her hope. His halls rot under the weight of men who devour his stores and plot his son’s murder.” She paused. Her eyes—gray as a winter sky—fixed on her father. “Where is the justice in that?”

Poseidon was absent. That mattered. His grudge against Odysseus ran as deep as the trenches of the sea, but he was far off now, feasting among the Ethiopians. Athena had timed this carefully.

Zeus leaned back, his fingers drumming once on the throne’s armrest. “Poseidon’s wrath—”

“Poseidon is not here,” Athena said. Her tone remained level, but steel lay beneath it. “And Odysseus has suffered enough. Let him come home.”

The gods waited. Zeus watched Athena.

Then he nodded once, slowly.

“Let it be so,” he said. “Hermes will go to Ogygia. Calypso will release him. Odysseus will build a raft and sail. The sea will test him one last time, but he will reach Scheria. The Phaeacians will carry him home.”

Gray-eyed Athena bowed her head in thanks.

Zeus continued, his voice softer now. “And you, daughter. Go to Ithaca. Wake the boy. Give him courage. Send him to Pylos and to Sparta. Let him hear his father’s name spoken with honor. Let him learn what it means to be a son of Odysseus.”

“I will,” Athena said.

The council dissolved. Gods drifted away—some in shafts of light, others in whispers of wind. Voices thinned to silence, the kind that follows thunder when even the air holds its breath. The hall emptied.

Athena stayed a moment longer. She looked toward the east, to where Ithaca lay small and besieged beneath the turning stars. Then she vanished into the wind, leaving the hall echoing with her absence.

Only the scent of rain on stone remained—a trace of something vast moving just beyond sight.

A figure appeared—not from the tree line, nor rising from the water, but simply there, standing at the tide’s edge as if the world had blinked and found him already in place.

He wore a dark cloak, salt-heavy. The wind stalled, as if waiting for permission to move. His hood shadowed his face. In his hands, he held a wheel.

Not large—no more than a span across. Three rings of bronze, interlaced but not fused. They moved independently, smooth and silent. He turned the wheel between his fingers, studying how the light caught the metal.

Then he knelt.

The sand was damp, packed firm by the retreating tide. He set the wheel flat on the ground and spun it.

The rings blurred; the air itself began to hum—low, insistent. The sea responded.

A wave climbed. No wind pushed it. It simply rose, a smooth swell that should not have been there, and rolled toward the shore. When it reached the beach, it did not crash. It fell—heavy, deliberate, as if the ocean had shifted its weight in its sleep.

The figure stopped the wheel. The hum died. The sea went still.

He lifted the wheel and held it over the water. For a heartbeat, it floated. Then it sank—slowly—until the surface closed over it without a ripple.

But the sand kept its mark.

Three rings lay imprinted in the ground—perfect circles, edges sharp as if carved by a jeweler’s tool.

He lowered his hood.

His face resisted memory—neither young nor old, the kind you might see in a crowd and forget before you fully turned away. But the eyes had seen too much and forgotten nothing.

He studied the pattern once more, expression unreadable. Then he straightened, pulled the hood back up, and disappeared into the air as if he had never stood there at all.

At dawn, three fishermen found the rings intact, gleaming with dew. No footprints. No human trace.

High above, a hawk circled in slow, precise loops, then flew west.

Ithaca — The Suitors' Hall (Day 1, evening)

The great hall of Odysseus reeked of smoke, sour wine, and men who had forgotten the sea. Voices tangled—laughter too loud, boasts too sharp. A hundred men sprawled on benches and cushions, tearing bread, draining cups, calling for more. Servants moved among them, faces blank, arms heavy with platters.

At the center of it all sat Telemachus.

He was twenty now—tall and lean, with his father's build beginning to show in his shoulders. But his face was young—too young for the weight behind his eyes.

He sat apart from the others, back to a pillar, watching. His cup stayed full. His hands rested on his knees, fingers tense.

The suitors didn't notice. They never did.

Antinous lounged near the hearth, gesturing with a rib bone as he held court. Eurymachus reclined opposite him, smiling his politician's smile, nodding at every crude joke. Around them, the pack laughed and drank and tore through the household's stores like locusts.

Three years now. Three years they had come—day after day—demanding hospitality, devouring the wealth of a house that was not theirs. They courted Penelope with gifts and threats. They swore they loved her. They swore they would wait.

They lied.

Telemachus knew it. His mother knew it. Everyone knew it.

But knowing changed nothing.

A stranger entered the hall.

Telemachus saw him first—a traveler, middle-aged, dressed for the road. Weathered face. Steady eyes. A bronze-tipped spear in hand. He paused at the threshold, scanning the room. No one else looked up.

Telemachus rose.

He crossed the hall, stepping over scattered bones and spilled wine, and reached the stranger before any servant could. “Welcome,” he said. His voice was quiet but clear. “Come. Sit.”

Something passed between them—not recognition, but a different kind of knowing.

Telemachus led him to a carved chair near the doors, away from the suitors’ noise. A servant brought water for his hands, then bread and meat. The stranger ate sparingly, scanning the hall with a measured attention.

“They come every day?” he asked.

Outside, the surf struck against the cliffs—a dull heartbeat through the floor. Telemachus nodded. “Every day.”

“How many?”

“More than a hundred.”

The stranger’s jaw tightened. “And your father?”

Telemachus looked down. “Gone. Twenty years now. No word. No sign.”

“You think he’s dead.”

“I don’t know what I think.”

The stranger leaned forward. “What’s your name?”

“Telemachus. Son of Odysseus.”

“Then act like it.”

Telemachus looked up, startled.

“Your father is not dead,” the stranger said. The words were quiet but absolute. “He’s alive—held on an island by a goddess who won’t let him

leave. But he will come home. And when he does, these men”—he gestured at the hall—“will answer for what they have done here.”

“Who are you?”

“Mentes. Son of Anchialus. An old friend of your father’s.” He leaned closer. “You can’t wait for him to save you. You have to save yourself first.”

“How?”

“Call an assembly. Stand before the whole island. Tell them what’s happening here. Make them see it. Force them to choose—stand with you, or stand with these wolves.” He paused. “And then sail.”

“Sail where?”

“Pylos. Ask Nestor about your father. Then Sparta. Menelaus will know more. Hear their stories. Learn what kind of man your father was. Learn what kind of man you need to become.”

Telemachus stared at him. “And if I do all that? If I call the assembly, if I sail—what changes?”

“You do.” Mentes stood. “Right now, you’re a boy sitting in his father’s chair. They see it. Your mother sees it. The gods see it.” His eyes locked on Telemachus’s. “Stop waiting for someone to save you. Stop asking permission to live in your own house. You’re the son of Odysseus. Act like it.”

Before Telemachus could respond, a bard began to sing.

The hall quieted as Phemius struck the first notes on his lyre. His voice rose—clear and mournful:

“Sing, Muse, of the Greeks who sailed from Troy—

Of ships broken, men drowned, homes never reached...”

It was a song of returns—of the warriors who made it back, and those who didn’t. Of Agamemnon, murdered in his bath. Of Menelaus wandering for years before finding Sparta again. Of others still lost, still seeking.

Telemachus watched the suitors. They listened, rapt—drunk on tragedy that wasn’t theirs.

Then a voice cut through the music.

“Stop.”

Everyone turned.

Penelope stood at the top of the stairs. Veiled, but her voice carried like a blade. “Phemius. Sing something else.”

The bard’s hands stilled on the strings.

“My queen—”

“Not that song. Not tonight.”

Silence spread. Men shifted, unsure. The suitors watched, hungry for drama. Telemachus rose. He crossed the floor and positioned himself at the base of the stairs—between his mother and the watching men.

“Mother.” He didn’t look back at her. He kept his eyes on the hall. “The bard sings what bards sing—grief, glory, truth. You can’t ask him to pretend the war didn’t happen.”

“I’m not—”

“You are,” Telemachus said. He turned then, looked up at her. “You’re asking him to sing lies. To make this hall feel lighter than it is. But it won’t work. The weight is still here.”

Penelope’s expression flickered—hurt, then anger.

“I know what the weight feels like, Telemachus.”

“Then let him sing the truth.” His voice softened. “Go upstairs. Rest. This hall—tonight—is not a place for you.”

They stood long enough for the song to die, mother and son, locked in a gaze that held twenty years of unspoken things. The suitors watched, fascinated, sensing theater.

Penelope broke first.

She turned and ascended without another word.

Men released their breath.

Antinous laughed, breaking the tension. “The boy has teeth after all!”

Eurymachus raised his cup. “To Telemachus! May he grow into the man his father never had the chance to be?”

The others joined the toast, roaring—mockery dressed in praise.

Telemachus heard the blade beneath it.

He turned to Mentès.

The stranger was already at the threshold, adjusting his cloak. "I should go. The night's getting old."

"Will I see you again?"

Mentès smiled—brief, enigmatic. "You'll see me in Pylos, in Sparta, in every man who remembers your father with honor. You'll see me in every wave that brings you closer to the truth."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the only one I have." Mentès gripped his spear. "One more thing. When you sail, don't tell them where you're going until you're already gone. Trust no one here except your blood."

Then he stepped into the dark and was gone.

Telemachus stood at the threshold, night air cold on his face. Behind him, the feast continued—loud, heedless. Ahead: darkness and stars.

One step forward. One step back. Both felt wrong.

Then Antinous called his name, demanding he join them, and the moment broke.

Telemachus turned back to the hall. He sat. He drank a single cup, speaking to no one.

When the suitors finally left—stumbling, singing into the night—he waited until the last one was gone. Then he helped the servants bar the doors and douse the lamps.

The hall fell into shadow.

He stood alone in the center of it, listening to the quiet.

Tomorrow, he thought. Tomorrow, I stop waiting for someone else to save us.

He climbed the stairs.

Ithaca — Telemachus's Chamber

The house settled into quiet. Servants cleared the hall. The suitors staggered out—loud and careless—into the dark. Telemachus climbed the stairs to his room.

Eurycleia waited there—old and bent, but her eyes missed nothing. She had been his nurse and his father’s nurse before him. She knew every secret the house held.

“You spoke well tonight,” she said, setting a lamp on the table.

“I spoke. They didn’t listen.”

“They heard.” She smoothed the coverlet on his bed, her hands slow and deliberate. “And so did she.”

“My mother?”

“She knows you’re changing. It frightens her.”

Telemachus sat on the edge of the bed, exhaustion hitting him all at once.

“I’m going to call an assembly. I’m going to tell the whole island what these men are doing.”

Eurycleia nodded. “Good.”

“And then I’m sailing to Pylos.”

Her hands stilled. “Alone?”

“With a crew. Twenty men. I’ll find Nestor. Ask him about my father.”

“And if he has no answers?”

“Then I’ll go to Sparta. Menelaus will know something.”

Eurycleia crossed to him and cupped his face in her worn hands. “You look like him.”

“I’m not him.”

“No. But you could be.” She kissed his forehead. “Sleep. You’ll need your strength.”

She left, taking the lamp.

Telemachus lay back in the dark. Through the window, he could see stars—cold and distant. Somewhere out there, his father lived. Or was dying. Or suffering.

He closed his eyes.

In his mind, he heard the stranger’s voice: *Your father is not dead.*

He held the thought—refused to let it go.

Tomorrow, everything would change.

Tomorrow, he would stop being a boy.

Ithaca — Penelope's Chamber

She sat near the window, veil discarded, her face illuminated by a single oil lamp.

The loom stood in the corner, half-finished work stretched between the beams. The same work. Always the same work.

Three years ago, when the suitors first came in force, she had begun weaving a shroud for Laertes, Odysseus's aging father. She told them: *When the work is finished, I will choose.* By day, she wove. By night, she unraveled. The trick held for three years—until a servant betrayed her and the suitors discovered the deception.

Now she wove only to keep her hands occupied. The delay had bought time, but time was running out.

Eurycleia entered without knocking. "He spoke well tonight."

Penelope didn't turn. "He spoke like his father."

"Is that so bad?"

"It is—if he gets himself killed trying to be him."

Eurycleia crossed to the loom and ran her fingers along the threads. "You can't keep him a boy forever."

"I'm not trying to keep him a boy. I'm trying to keep him alive." Penelope's voice broke. "Do you know what they'll do if he challenges them? If he makes himself a threat?"

"He's already a threat—he breathes and he's a threat." Eurycleia faced her.

"They're waiting for you to choose one of them. And when you do, what happens to Telemachus? Do you think they'll let him live? Let him inherit? The moment you marry one of them, your son becomes a problem to solve."

Penelope closed her eyes. "I know."

"Then let him go. Let him sail. If he stays here, he withers. Or worse."

"And if the sea takes him?"

"Then at least he will have died trying." Eurycleia's voice softened. "He's not Odysseus. But he could be something just as strong—if you let him."

Penelope turned to face her. The lamplight hardened her features to stone. “I’ve waited twenty years. Woven and unwoven the same threads for three. I’ve held this house together with words and delays and hope so thin it cuts when I breathe. Don’t tell me to let go of the one thing I have left.”

“I’m not telling you to let go. I’m telling you to let him become who he needs to be.” Eurycleia moved to the door. “That stranger tonight. He wasn’t just a traveler.”

“I know.”

“Do you?” The old woman paused. “His eyes. Did you see them?”

“I didn’t see his face.”

“Neither did I, really. But I saw enough.” Eurycleia’s hand rested on the doorframe. “The gods are moving again, my queen. After twenty years of quiet, they’re moving. And they’re moving toward us.”

She left.

Penelope sat alone with the lamp and the loom and the view of stars beyond the casement.

She didn’t weep. She’d learned long ago that tears changed nothing.

But she prayed.

Not to Zeus, who seemed deaf to her voice. Not to Poseidon, who hated her husband. But to Athena, goddess of wisdom, guardian of heroes.

If he lives, she prayed silently, bring him home. And if he’s dead, send me a sign so I can finally stop this waiting.

The lamp flame guttered.

Outside, an owl called—once. Clear and close.

Penelope lifted her head.

The flame steadied.

She rose, crossed to the loom, and began to weave.

II - The Assembly

*Now reddening from the dawn, the morning ray
Glow'd in the front of heaven, and gave the day
The youthful hero, with returning light,
Rose anxious from the inquietudes of night.
A royal robe he wore with graceful pride, ...*

Homer's Odyssey, Book II, translated by Alexander Pope—

Ithaca – The Sacred Square (Day 2, dawn)

Dawn broke cold over Ithaca. The harbor smelled of salt and rotting seaweed, of fish guts left too long in the sun. Telemachus walked through the lower town alone, past shuttered houses and fishermen mending nets with fingers gnarled as driftwood. Dogs barked once and fell silent. The sound of his sandals echoed—the only heartbeat in a town that had forgotten how to wake. Nobody met his eyes. Twenty years of waiting had taught the island to look away.

Dreams of his father—always the same dream—had left him restless. A ship on a dark sea. A voice calling his name. He'd woken before sunrise, throat dry, and dressed in the dim light of his chamber. His best tunic, the one his mother had woven two winters ago. The fabric still smelled faintly of cedar from the chest where she stored it. He wanted to look like a prince; he needed to prove himself one.

The sacred square filled slowly. Old men came first, leaning on staffs, their beards white as winter smoke. They took their places on the stone benches worn smooth by generations of assemblies. Farmers followed, smelling of turned earth and sweat, their hands callused from plows and hoes. They stood at the back, uncertain, as if they'd forgotten how to participate in their own governance.

The suitors arrived last. Always last. Loud and perfumed, their cloaks dyed in purples and crimsons that no honest man could afford. Tyrian purple, Egyptian crimson—colors that cost more than a fisherman earned in a year. They took the best seats, spreading out as if they owned the stone itself. Antinous wore a cloak pinned with a golden brooch shaped like a bull. Eurymachus had rings on every finger. They glittered when he gestured, and he gestured constantly, making sure everyone noticed.

Telemachus stood at the center. His hands shook. He pressed them flat against his thighs, willing the tremor to stop. The linen clung to his back despite the morning chill. Around him, the square held perhaps two hundred men—a mere fraction of what it would have been in his father's time. The rest were dead at Troy, or lost on the journey home, or had simply given up and stayed indoors, surrendering the island to whoever had the stomach to claim it.

Aegyptius rose. The oldest man on Ithaca, bent like a question mark, skin loose over his bones. His hands trembled as he gripped his staff. He'd lost a son at Troy—Antiphus, devoured by the Cyclops alongside Odysseus's men. Or so the rumors went. Nobody knew for certain. That was the curse of this war: even the dead remained unburied, their fates scattered across the wine-dark sea like so much flotsam.

"Twenty years," Aegyptius said. His voice cracked on the first word, then steadied.

Twenty years since we last gathered in formal assembly. Not since Lord Odysseus sailed for Troy with our sons and brothers." He paused, scanning the crowd. His eyes were milky with cataracts, but something in them still saw clearly. "Who calls us here today?"

Telemachus stepped forward. The stone felt cold beneath his feet. He wore sandals, not boots—another mistake. He should have worn boots. Princes wore boots. Sweat ran cold down his spine despite the morning air. Every eye was fixed on him. He felt their weight. Their judgment. Their pity.

“I do.” His voice came out thin. A boy’s voice. He cleared his throat and tried again, forcing the sound from deeper in his chest. “I call this assembly.”

Murmurs rippled through the square like wind through wheat. The suitors leaned back, grinning. Antinous whispered something to Eurymachus. They both laughed—not loudly, but loud enough for Telemachus to hear. That was the point. Always loud enough to hear.

“Speak, son of Odysseus,” Aegyptius said. There was pity in his eyes. Telemachus hated it more than he hated the suitors’ laughter. Pity meant they’d already decided he would fail.

“My house is being devoured.” The words came faster now, hot and bitter, twenty years of silence breaking open like an untended wound. “Every day, more than a hundred men—nobles, they call themselves—feast in my halls. They slaughter my cattle, five or six head each day. They drain my wine cellars, vintage wine my father laid down before he sailed. Wine that should have been for his homecoming.” His voice cracked. He pushed through it. “They treat my mother like a prize to be claimed, a throne to be seized through marriage. They sit at my father’s table, sleep in his guest chambers, and behave as if they have every right.”

“You sit there in your fine cloaks, paid for with my inheritance. Every brooch, every ring, was bought with cattle that belonged to my father. You laugh while my household starves. The servants get less food each week. My mother grows thinner. You dishonor my father’s memory and defile his home, and you do it with smiles on your faces, as if the gods themselves had handed you the keys to this hall.”

The silence was complete. Telemachus could hear his own breathing, the sound of his pulse in his ears. Then Antinous rose. Slow and deliberate, taking his time, making Telemachus wait. He was tall, broad-shouldered, with a face that might have been handsome were it not for the cruelty in his eyes. The cruelty, and something else—a coldness that reminded Telemachus of a butcher examining livestock.

“Dishonor?” He smiled, but his eyes stayed cold. “We dishonor nothing, boy. Your mother dishonors herself.” He turned to address the crowd, playing to them like an actor in a theater. “Three years ago, Penelope promised to choose a husband when she finished weaving a shroud for old Laertes. A noble task. A widow’s duty. We respected it.” He spread his hands, his face composed, reasonable. “Every day she sat at her loom. Every night—”

“Every night she crept down to the hall and unwove what she’d made. Thread by thread, she undid her own work. She lied to us for three years. Three years of our lives wasted, waiting for a woman who had no intention of keeping her word.”

A murmur spread—like flies rising from rot. Men shifted, unwilling to meet each other’s eyes.

“One of her maids finally told us the truth,” Antinous continued. “We caught her in the act. Found her in the hall past midnight, pulling out the threads by lamplight. Her fingers were bleeding from the work.” He shook his head, as if saddened by the memory. “So don’t speak to me of dishonor, boy. Your mother strings us along like fools, hoping your father’s ghost will sail home and save her.”

He stepped closer to Telemachus. Close enough that Telemachus could smell the wine on his breath, the perfumed oil in his beard.

“He’s dead. Twenty years dead. The sea took him, or the gods did, or some monster on some forgotten shore. No one survives twenty years of wandering. Accept it. Tell your mother to choose a husband and be done with it. Then we’ll leave your halls in peace. You’ll have your inheritance back. What remains of it.”

The last words carried a threat. Barely veiled. Telemachus’s jaw locked; his voice caught in his throat before he forced it out.

“My father is not dead.”

“Then where is he?” Eurymachus called out. He was smoother than Antinous, more polished. His voice carried the cultured accent of nobility, the kind of voice that made lies sound like wisdom—more dangerous in a

different way. “Where is the great Odysseus, the sacker of cities, the man who built the Trojan Horse? Why does he let his wife suffer, his son grow up fatherless, his house fall to ruin?”

He spread his hands. His rings caught the light. Each one was worth a fortune.

“I’ll tell you where. The sea has him. His bones lie white on some distant beach, picked clean by gulls. The fish has eaten his eyes. The crabs have nested in his ribs.” His voice softened, became almost gentle. “Mourn him, boy. Honor his memory. But don’t cling to fantasies. The dead don’t come home.”

“I will not mourn him until I know.” Telemachus’s voice steadied. Something hardened in his chest, something that burned like his father’s blood finally waking in his veins. “I’m going to Pylos. To Sparta if I must. I’ll ask Nestor, Menelaus—anyone who fought at Troy, anyone who might have news. And when I return, if my father is truly dead—”

He paused. Let them hear it.

“Then I’ll tell my mother to choose.”

The crowd shifted. Some nodded. Antinous’s face went hard.

“And if we decide we’ve waited long enough?” Antinous asked softly.

“Then the gods will decide,” Telemachus said.

As if summoned, a scream split the air. Every head turned skyward. Two eagles dove from the sun, talons locked, tearing at each other with beaks and claws. They screamed and fought above the assembly, feathers falling like snow, blood spattering on the stones. Then they broke apart and flew east, wings beating hard, disappearing over the mountains toward Pylos.

The square fell silent. Men and women made signs against evil, hands raised to the sky.

Halitherses stood. He was ancient, his voice gone thin with age. But those eyes had seen omens before—read the flight of birds, the patterns in smoke and flame. He’d been a seer when Odysseus was a boy.

"A sign," he said. His voice carried despite its tremor. "The eagles fight above us—nobles fighting over the house of Odysseus. But they fly east together. The king returns. Death comes with him."

He pointed at Antinous, at Eurymachus. "You mock the gods. You devour another man's house. You court his wife. When he returns, blood will run. Your blood. On these very stones."

Antinous laughed. It sounded forced. "Old man, you see omens in your soup. Eagles fight. That's what they do. It means nothing."

"It means everything," Halitherses replied. "And you'll learn it when an arrow finds your throat."

The clamor still rang out; shouts over the omen of the eagles filled the sacred square. Telemachus struggled to breathe, heart pounding in his throat. He heard a dry sound at his feet. An ancient copper nail, curved and corroded, had appeared from nowhere.

Antinous laughed and kicked it away in scorn. "Trash!"

The nail skittered, tracing an arc over the stone, then stopped right in front of Telemachus, as if it were waiting for him.

He bent and picked it up. The metal was icy—colder than the wind. The metal bit into his palm; a scent of bronze—sharp and metallic—rose faintly from it. It wasn't an object. It was a message.

Under the portico, a still shadow. A dark cloak, a hidden face. When Telemachus narrowed his eyes, it was gone.

He closed his fist, the nail pricking his skin like a summons. In that instant, he chose: either remain a prisoner of the suitors or leave to seek his father. There was no more room for waiting.

He rose. "Tomorrow, I sail for Pylos. I will be silent no longer."

The crowd murmured. None understood that those words were addressed not only to the men of Ithaca.

The assembly dissolved. Men scattered, muttering prayers and curses. The suitors made their way toward Odysseus's hall, where they would feast again at his expense. Telemachus stood alone in the center of the square, watching

them go. His hands still trembled. Not from fear now. From something else. Anticipation. Or recognition.

The nail burned now, not with heat, but with purpose. He pressed his hand against his belt, and the warmth seemed to answer his touch.

Ithaca—The Shore (Day 2, after assembly)

Telemachus walked away from the square, but not toward his father's hall. His feet carried him down the steep path to the shore, where the waves broke white against black rocks. The harbor smelled of salt and kelp, of things dying and being reborn with each tide.

He knelt at the water's edge. The stones bit into his knees. He cupped his hands, let the cold seawater fill his palms, and washed his face. The salt stung his eyes. He welcomed it.

«Athena,» he whispered. His voice was raw from shouting in the assembly. «Grey-eyed goddess, if you ever loved my father—if you still remember him—help me now. I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know if he's alive or dead. But I can't stay here and watch everything rot.»

The wind died. The waves stopped mid-crash, suspended. The world held its breath.

A voice spoke behind him. «You sound like him.»

Telemachus spun. Mentor stood three paces away. Not the old traveler from yesterday, not quite. The same face, the same worn tunic—but something in the eyes had changed. They were too bright, too knowing. Like lamplight through grey stone.

«You,» Telemachus breathed.

«Me.» Mentor smiled, but the expression didn't reach those impossible eyes.

«Did you think I'd left?»

«I thought—» Telemachus stopped. He didn't know what he'd thought.

«The assembly. The suitors. They'll kill me if I stay. They'll kill my mother.»

«They'll try.» Mentor stepped closer. The sand made no sound beneath his feet. «So you leave. You seek word of your father. You become a man worth killing—or worth fearing.»

«I don't know how.»

«You will.» Mentor reached out and gripped Telemachus's shoulder. The touch was solid, real—but cold, like bronze left in winter. «Tonight, I'll have a ship ready at the harbor. A crew of twenty. Young men like you, hungry for something beyond feasting and waiting to die. Be there when the moon sets. Bring nothing the suitors would miss.»

«How will you—»

«I'll manage the ship. You manage your courage.» Mentor released him. «Your father walked into Polyphemus's cave when wiser men would have fled. You have that same blood. Use it.»

Telemachus straightened. The trembling in his hands had stopped. «I'll be there.»

«I know.» Mentor turned toward the sea. For just a heartbeat—less than a heartbeat—his outline blurred. Taller. A woman's shape, crowned with something that might have been a helmet or might have been light itself. Then the moment passed, and he was just an old man again, staring at the horizon.

«Go,» Mentor said without looking back. «Walk through the town. Let yourself be seen. Then slip away when the time comes.»

Telemachus climbed back up the path. When he reached the top and looked back, the shore was empty. Only his own footprints marked the sand—and beside them, pressed deep and perfect, the print of an owl's talon.

Ithaca—The Dockside Path

Telemachus walked alone toward the harbor. The assembly had scattered, the suitors had proceeded to his hall, and the sacred square lay empty behind him except for the bloodstains where the eagles' feathers had fallen. His legs were unsteady. The confrontation had drained something from him, leaving him hollow.

He passed the bronze-smith's shop, the door he had seen a hundred times before. But now it stood ajar. Just slightly. A finger's width of shadow between the door and its frame.

He stopped.

He'd walked this street that morning, before dawn. The door had been closed. He was certain. The smith lived alone and kept to himself, always barring his workshop at night against thieves.

Telemachus stepped closer. The gap was too deliberate, too precise—as if someone had opened it just enough to watch the street below. He reached out, fingers hovering near the wood. On the frame, barely visible in the grain, three curved lines had been carved. Fresh. The wood beneath was pale where the blade had bitten.

They weren't deep. You'd miss them if you weren't looking. But once seen, they caught his eyes—three arcs that almost closed, never quite touching.

He heard nothing from inside. No movement, no breath. Just the empty sound of wind through the shop's dark interior.

His hand dropped. He backed away slowly, keeping his eyes on that sliver of shadow between the door and its frame. No face appeared. No voice called out. But the air hung as if it were being watched.

Telemachus turned and walked faster toward the harbor. He didn't look back. Behind him, the door stayed open, and the marks stayed carved, and the bronze-smith's hammer lay silent in its rack.

Ithaca—The Hall

The great hall stank of roasted meat and spilled wine. The suitors had reached the palace from the assembly and resumed their feast as if nothing had happened, as if they hadn't just been threatened with death by eagles and prophecy. They sprawled across benches, tearing at lamb with greasy fingers, shouting jokes and insults. Servants moved among them like ghosts, refilling cups, clearing bones, eyes downcast. A harp played somewhere, but the music was lost beneath the noise.

Telemachus slipped through a side entrance and climbed the stairs to the storage rooms. Each step creaked; his hands shook with urgency. If anyone caught him taking provisions—real provisions, the kind he'd need for a sea

voyage—they'd know something was wrong. They'd stop him. Or worse, they'd tell Antinous.

He worked fast. A skin of wine from the second cellar, the one the suitors hadn't found yet. Two jars of flour sealed with wax. Dried figs wrapped in linen. Salted fish that stank but would last for weeks. He stuffed everything into a leather sack, working by feel in the dim light. His hands trembled—not with fear this time, but with a need that burned hot.

"Where are you going?"

He froze, his breath catching in his throat. Eurycleia stood in the doorway, the old nurse who'd raised him from infancy, who'd fed him and cleaned his scrapes and told him stories of his father when no one else would speak the name. Her face was carved with lines of worry and grief, the erosion from twenty years of caring for a house that was dying by degrees. But her eyes stayed sharp.

"Out," he said. His voice came out hoarse.

"With a sack of provisions? In the dark?" She crossed her arms. "I'm old, boy, not stupid. And I've known you since you drew your first breath. Don't insult me with lies."

Telemachus set the sack down. His shoulders sagged. He couldn't lie to her. Not to Eurycleia. He lowered himself to one knee and took her hands. They were rough, callused from work, warm and familiar.

"I'm going to find my father. Or learn what happened to him. I have to, Eurycleia. I can't stay here and watch this house die. Watch my mother fade. Watch the suitors destroy everything. I can't."

She looked at him for a long moment, then pulled him close. When she finally spoke, her voice was rough. "You're just like him. Too proud. Too brave for your own good. He said he'd come home too. Look what happened."

"Then tell me to stay."

She remained silent for a long moment. Outside, the suitors roared with laughter. Something shattered. More laughter. It was the sound of jackals over a carcass.

"I can't," she said finally. "You're right. You have to know. Even if the knowing destroys you." She squeezed his hands hard. "But promise me this: come back. Whatever you find, whatever truth you learn, come back to us. Your mother won't survive losing you, too."

"I promise."

"Liar." But there was love in the word. "You chose well—the wine from the second cellar. The suitors haven't discovered it yet. And that fish needs better wrapping—it'll spoil before you reach Pylos, and the smell will drive your crew mad. Take this too."

She pressed something into his hand. A small clay figure, worn smooth. A sailor with arms raised to the sky in prayer.

"Your father carried it to Troy. It came back with his armor. Keep it close."

He kissed her forehead, grabbed the sack, and left before she could see him weep.

Ithaca—The Wait (Day 2, evening to night)

Telemachus descended the stairs slowly, the sack of provisions hidden beneath his cloak. The great hall roared below—the suitors at their evening feast, louder and drunker than usual. Someone had brought out a second cask of his father's finest wine, the vintage laid down before Troy. They were draining it like water.

He pressed himself against the wall, watching from the shadows of the colonnade. Antinous sprawled across the head table, his face flushed, shouting a story about a conquest—real or imagined, it didn't matter. Eurymachus laughed too loudly at every jest. The others pounded tables, slopping wine, tearing at roasted meat with greasy hands.

They would feast until they couldn't stand. Then they would collapse where they sat, or stagger to the guest chambers they'd claimed as their own. It was

always the same. Every night for three years, the same drunken feast, the same sprawl of bodies snoring in his father's hall.

Telemachus waited. He'd become good at waiting—at making himself invisible, at moving through his own house like a ghost. He slipped along the outer corridor, past the kitchens where he'd gathered the provisions hours before, past the armory where his father's weapons hung covered in dust.

The hall's noise faded behind him. He reached a side door, one the suitors never used—too small, too servant-like for men who saw themselves as princes. The bronze handle was cold under his palm.

He paused. Listened. From the hall, a crash. More laughter. Then voices slurring into song—some obscene ballad about a shepherd's daughter. The sound peaked, then began to fade, replaced by the heavier sounds of men succumbing to wine and exhaustion. Snoring. The thud of bodies hitting benches. The clatter of a cup rolling across stone.

Telemachus counted his own heartbeats. When he reached one hundred, he opened the door.

The night air struck his face—cold, clean, free of smoke and wine-stench. He stepped out into the darkness and closed the door behind him. The latch clicked soft as a whisper.

Behind him, the hall settled into its nightly stupor. Antinous sprawled across the table, one arm dangling, drool pooling beneath his cheek. Eurymachus had collapsed onto a bench, rings still glittering on his slack fingers. The others lay scattered like corpses across the floor, empty cups rolling among the bones and spilled wine.

None of them heard the door close. None of them saw the prince slip away into the night, toward the harbor where a ship waited and a goddess watched.

Ithaca—Night Departure (Day 2, night)

The harbor was black. No moon, only stars scattered thick as salt across the sky, more stars than seemed possible. Telemachus made his way carefully along the dock, glancing back once at the hall on the hill—dark now except for the dying glow of the hearth. The suitors slept. He was free. His breath

fogged in the cold air, and he quickened his pace. Water lapped at the pilings. Somewhere, a rope creaked. The smell of tar and fish was overwhelming.

A ship waited at the far end—low and sleek, its hull freshly tarred and gleaming like the back of some sea creature. Twenty men sat at the oars, silent shapes in the darkness. Telemachus couldn't see their faces, but he felt the tension in them, their readiness. They were young. He could tell from the way they held themselves, the nervous energy radiating off them.

Mentor stood at the stern, one hand on the tiller. He wore a sailor's tunic now, practical and worn, the same impossible brightness in his eyes that Telemachus had seen on the beach. He nodded once—no words needed. They'd already made their pact.

"You came," Mentor said. "Good."

Telemachus climbed aboard. The wood rocked beneath him, solid and real. He set the provisions down and looked at the crew. He recognized some faces—young men, sons of his father's old companions. Men who'd grown up on stories of Troy, who'd never fought but wanted to. Who needed to.

"We sail for Pylos," Mentor said, addressing them all. His voice carried without being loud. "We seek word of Odysseus, son of Laertes, king of Ithaca. Any man who doesn't want to come, leave now. No shame in it. This isn't a war. It's a search. Might be dangerous. Might be pointless. But it matters."

Nobody moved. Telemachus released something in his chest. He wasn't alone.

"Then let's be gone." Mentor pushed off with a pole. The ship drifted free of the dock, silent as a shadow on water. "Oars," he called softly.

The crew pulled. The blades bit into the water, and the ship surged forward, as responsive as a living thing. They rowed in silence, keeping close to shore until they cleared the headland where the watch tower stood dark. Then Mentor raised the mast. It rose smoothly, well-balanced. He bent the sail, and wind filled the canvas with a sound like an indrawn breath, like the world exhaling.

Telemachus sat in the bow and watched Ithaca fade behind them. The lights of his father's hall glowed faintly on the hill, surrounded by darkness. A single point of warmth in all that black. He touched the pouch at his belt, tracing the shape of the copper nail through the leather, and held the small clay sailor Eurycleia had given him.

A message. A summons. A choice.

He'd made his choice.

The ship heeled over, cutting through the swells. Spray struck his face—cold, clean, tasting of endless distance. Above, the stars wheeled in their ancient tracks, the same stars his father had sailed beneath. Telemachus gripped the rail and stared east, toward Pylos, toward answers, toward whatever truth the gods had set waiting.

Behind him, Mentor smiled. The old man's face shifted in the starlight—impossible to age, impossible to read. Then he blinked, and he was just Mentor again, an old friend guiding a young man into the dark.

The ship sailed on. The oars dipped and rose with measured precision. Ithaca disappeared into the night, swallowed by distance and darkness. And on the shore they'd left behind, in the sacred square still littered with feathers and blood, three drops of eagle blood caught the starlight and gleamed like copper nails driven into stone. They gleamed and did not fade.

The wind rose. The ship flew east. And Telemachus, son of Odysseus, sailed into his destiny.

Far astern, in the darkness over Ithaca, an owl called once—and the sound was answered from the sea.

III - Pylos

*The sacred sun, above the waters raised,
Through heaven's eternal brazen portals blazed;
And wide o'er earth diffused his cheering ray,
To gods and men to give the golden day.
Now on the coast of Pyle the vessel falls,...*

Homer's Odyssey, Book III, translated by Alexander Pope—

Pylos – The Shore at Dawn (Day 5, dawn)

They had sailed through the night—three days from Ithaca, the wind steady but not strong. The ship cut through black water under stars that burned cold and distant. Telemachus hadn't slept. He'd stood at the rail, watching the darkness for shapes that never came. Athena—Mentor—had stood beside him, silent, occasionally pointing to constellations he should know.

Dawn broke slowly. First, a pale line on the horizon, then bronze spreading like hammered metal across the sky. The sea changed from black to gray to blue. Ahead, land rose—hills covered in dark green, and a long crescent of beach where white sand glittered.

"Pylos," Athena said.

Telemachus gripped the rail. His knuckles were white. Behind them, the sea still churned restlessly, but here the water gentled into a shallow bay protected by headlands on either side. The ship's oarsmen had rowed in shifts through the night; now they pulled with renewed energy, sensing land, home, and rest.

Smoke rose from the beach—nine columns, black and thick, twisting skyward.

"What are they doing?" Telemachus asked.

"Sacrifice," Athena said. "To Poseidon. Nestor honors the god who shakes the earth."

The keel scraped sand—not the soft whisper of a gentle landing but a grinding drag as the ship pushed through shallow water and beached itself. Rowers shipped oars with practiced movements. Telemachus stepped over the side into water that came to his shins—cold, biting, waking him fully. He waded toward shore, legs heavy from days at sea.

The beach was crowded. Hundreds of men, maybe more, gathered in nine distinct groups around nine separate pyres. Each group faced its fire, mouths moving in synchronized prayer. The sound was a low rumble, rhythmic—like distant thunder.

At the center stood an old man—white-haired but still broad-shouldered despite his years, back straight despite the weight of decades. His voice carried over the beach, deep and resonant, shaped by practice and authority.

"Poseidon, lord of the deep places, accept our bulls. Accept our wine. Guard our ships and bring our sons home safe."

The crowd roared. The sound hit Telemachus in the chest—a physical force. Nine bulls collapsed simultaneously, throats cut clean by nine priests moving as one. Blood darkened the sand in spreading pools that caught the morning light and shimmered red-black. The pyres flared higher. Fat crackled and spattered. The smell hit him—burned meat, salt, incense, and something sweet underneath like myrrh or frankincense.

His stomach turned, but he steadied himself. He'd seen sacrifices before. Ithaca had its rituals. But nothing this coordinated. Nothing this vast.

Athena touched his shoulder. Her fingers were strong—stronger than Mentor's should be. "That is Nestor. Come."

They walked forward through loose sand that grabbed at their heels. The crowd parted without seeming to notice them, gaps opening just wide enough for passage. Eyes followed, though—sidelong glances, quick assessments. His tunic was salt-stained and shabby. His sandals were worn thin at the straps. But he walked straight, head high, the way his mother had taught him. A prince does not slouch, even in rags.

A young man in a red cloak saw them first and stepped close. Telemachus's age, maybe a year older. Taller. Broader in the shoulders. His face was open and friendly, but his hand rested on the knife at his belt.

"Strangers," he said. Not hostile. Curious. "You come at a sacred hour."

"We seek Nestor," Athena said. Her voice bent the air—quiet yet commanding, low but impossible to ignore. The young man blinked, studied her for a long moment, then nodded slowly.

"I am Pisistratus, his son. Follow me."

He led them through the crowd. Men made way without question now, stepping aside quickly. Telemachus caught fragments of whispered conversation: —*from the sea*—, —*no herald*—, —*the old one walks with power*—. He kept his face blank.

Nestor turned as they approached. His face was lined, weathered by decades of sun and salt, and wind. But his eyes were clear—pale gray,

sharp as obsidian blades. He looked at Athena first, held her gaze for three long breaths, and Telemachus saw something pass between them—recognition, perhaps, or understanding. Then Nestor shifted to Telemachus. His expression changed. A flicker of something crossed his face—memory, perhaps, or prophecy.

"Welcome, strangers." He opened both arms in the traditional gesture of hospitality. "You arrive when the god is honored. That is good fortune." He paused, studying Telemachus's face with the intensity of a man reading omens in a bird's flight. "Sit. Eat. Then we will talk."

Servants appeared. Stools carved from olive wood. Cups of hammered bronze, the metal still showing marks from the smith's hammer. Wine poured dark and sweet, smelling of honey and summer grapes. A slave set roasted meat on wooden platters—still hot, fat dripping, the outside charred black, and the inside red and steaming. Telemachus took the cup and drank. The wine burned going down. Good. Strong. It steadied the trembling in his hands.

Nestor sat across from them on a larger stool—almost a throne, carved with images of ships and waves. His sons gathered around him—seven of them, Telemachus counted. All tall, all armed, all watching the strangers with careful eyes.

"You sail from where?" Nestor asked. He held his cup but didn't drink yet, studying them over its rim.

"Ithaca," Athena said before Telemachus could answer.

Nestor's eyes sharpened. The change was subtle but unmistakable—pupils contracting, focus intensifying. "Ithaca. Odysseus's island." Telemachus swallowed. His throat was dry despite the wine. "I am his son."

Silence. The crowd noise around them seemed to fade. Pisistratus leaned forward. The other sons shifted their stances, weight redistributing, hands moving closer to weapons without quite touching them.

"His son," Nestor repeated slowly. He studied Telemachus with the same careful attention he'd given the sacrifice—reading every detail, weighing every feature. His gaze traced the young man's face—eyes, nose, jawline, the set of his mouth when he wasn't speaking. "You have his eyes. The same intensity. And the way you hold your jaw when you speak—determined, stubborn. Yes. I see him in you." He paused, and his voice gentled slightly. "You have your mother's height, though. Penelope was always tall for a woman. Proud in her bearing."

Telemachus exhaled. His chest loosened slightly. The old king's recognition felt like validation—proof he wasn't invisible, wasn't nothing.

"I came to ask about him," he said. The words came out steadier than he felt. "No one knows if he lives or if the sea took him. I need to know."

Nestor nodded slowly. He lifted his cup, drank deeply, and set it down with deliberate care. Wine stained his white beard dark purple at the edges. When he spoke, his voice carried the weight of years and memory.

"Come to my hall," he said. "We will speak of your father. And of Troy. And of the men who came home and the men who did not." He stood, joints popping audibly in the sudden quiet. "The god has been honored. Now we honor our guests."

Pylos – Nestor's Hall

The walk to the palace took longer than Telemachus expected. The town spread up from the harbor in terraced streets—white buildings with red tile roofs climbing the hillside in orderly rows. People moved aside as Nestor's procession passed. Children stared with wide eyes. Old women bowed their heads respectfully. A merchant selling fish from a wooden cart called out a blessing, hands raised. Pisistratus walked beside Telemachus, matching his pace. "Your first time in Pylos?"

"Yes."

"It's a good city. Quiet. My father keeps it that way." He smiled. "No wars here. No raiders. The gods favor us."

"You're lucky then."

"We sacrifice often." Pisistratus glanced at him sideways. "Your father—I've heard stories. They say he was the cleverest man at Troy. That he thought of the horse."

"So they say."

"Do you remember him?"

Telemachus shook his head. "I was an infant when he left. I don't remember his face. Only what others tell me."

Pisistratus was quiet for a moment. Then: "That must be hard."

"It is."

They reached the palace. Stone walls, thick and whitewashed, gleamed in the late morning sun. The gate stood open—tall bronze doors propped back against the walls. Inside, the hall stretched long and high, beams darkened by decades of smoke from torches and cooking fires. Torches burned in bronze sconces even though daylight still poured through high windows set near the roof.

Servants moved through shadows, silent and efficient, appearing and disappearing like ghosts.

Nestor sat in a carved chair at the hall's center—a massive thing, backed with tooled leather and studded with bronze nails that caught the light. Telemachus and Athena took places of honor beside him on cushioned stools. The sons of Nestor arranged themselves in a half-circle—Pisistratus closest, the others fanning out in order of age.

Tables filled rapidly. Servants brought bread still warm from the ovens, crusts crackling when torn. Olives swimming in golden oil. Cheese sharp enough to sting the tongue—aged, crumbly, pungent with age. And meat—ribs of bull from the sacrifice, haunches of lamb, fish grilled with herbs Telemachus couldn't name. The smell filled the hall, rich and heavy and overwhelming.

"Eat," Nestor commanded. Not a suggestion. A requirement.

Pisistratus set a platter of steaming meat before Telemachus. "You've already eaten once today—on the beach, with the blood still warm. But my father insists: a guest eats twice in Pylos. Once for the god, once for the house."

Telemachus ate. The food was good. Better than anything in Ithaca lately. The suitors devoured everything at home—the best cuts, the finest wines, the ripest fruit. His mother's stores dwindled daily while they gorged themselves. Here, the table groaned under abundance. Platters refilled as soon as they emptied. Wine flowed without measure.

He ate slowly, careful not to betray his hunger. But his stomach had been tight with anxiety for weeks, and now it unknotted slightly.

The meat was tender. The bread had honey baked into it—small luxuries he'd almost forgotten existed.

When the meal ended, Nestor leaned back in his chair and studied Telemachus with those pale gray eyes.

"You want to know about your father."

"Yes."

"What do you know already?"

"That he sailed for Troy. He fought for ten years. That he sailed for home and never arrived."

"True. All true." Nestor picked up his cup, swirled the wine slowly.

"But incomplete. The truth is more complicated. Tonight, at the feast, I will tell you everything. About Troy. About the returns. About the gods' anger and the price we paid." He paused. "Your father's story is not simple. It deserves the full telling, not hurried words over a midday meal."

Telemachus nodded, though impatience gnawed at him.

"Menelaus might know more recent news," Nestor added. "He wandered longer than I did. Saw more shores, spoke to more travelers. Tomorrow, my son will take you to Sparta. You can ask him directly."

"Thank you."

Nestor stood. "Rest now. The servants will prepare rooms. Tonight, we feast properly, and I will tell you what I know."

Pylos – The Banquet Hall (Day 5, evening)

That evening, the hall filled. Nestor's household gathered—sons, daughters, cousins, servants, warriors, priests. Tables groaned under roasted meats, fresh bread, and fruits piled in bronze bowls until they

nearly toppled. Wine flowed in rivers. Music played—lyre and drums, rhythmic and hypnotic.

Telemachus sat at the place of honor beside Nestor. The food kept coming. He ate mechanically, barely tasting. His mind churned with anticipation.

Athena—in the guise of Mentor—sat across from him, eating sparingly, watching everything with those sharp, too-knowing eyes that saw more than an old man's should.

The meal stretched long. Courses came and went. The wine made the room warm and blurred the sharp edges of his anxiety. Voices rose, laughter echoed off the high ceiling. Stories were told—battles, heroes, victories long past.

Nestor eventually stood, cup raised high.

"A toast. To Odysseus, wherever he wanders. May the gods bring him home. And to his son, who seeks the truth with courage his father would recognize."

Everyone drank. The hall roared approval, cups hammering on tables.

Telemachus drank too. The wine was sweet and strong. It burned pleasantly going down, warming him from the inside.

Nestor sat and leaned close. His breath smelled of wine and roasted meat.

"There is something else. Something I didn't say before the others."

Telemachus straightened. His pulse quickened.

The fire burned high in Nestor's courtyard—visible through the open doorway behind them. The flames lit faces, carving them into masks of light and shadow that shifted and changed.

"Not all of Troy burned," Nestor said, voice grave and low beneath the feast's noise. "Some fled—not with gold but with pierced bronzes, wheels of air, and star-maps. They called them mad. I call them Custodians."

Telemachus shivered. *Custodians*. The word pressed against his chest like a brand—heavy, burning, and impossible to ignore.

"And my father?" he asked.

Nestor lifted his gaze to the fire beyond the doorway. The flames reflected in his pale eyes. "He saw more than others. When he understood what they guarded, he chose not to touch it."

The fire crackled. In the leap of a spark—or something more than a spark—three incandescent rings appeared in the flames. Bright as molten metal, spinning slowly, independent yet connected. Telemachus turned his head sharply. No one stood behind him. Only darkness at the edge of the torchlight that seemed to pulse, as if it breathed.

"Do you wish to possess what commands," Nestor said softly, still watching the fire, "or let the sea remain free?"

Telemachus lifted his cup. The wine tasted wrong now—sour, as if it had turned in his mouth. He set it down without drinking more.

Nestor's hand covered his briefly. "Forget what I said. Or remember it. The choice will come whether you understand it or not."

The old king drained his cup and set it down heavily. The hall quieted, sensing a story was coming.

"You asked about your father," he said, voice carrying to every corner. "Let me tell you about Troy. About what happened when we sailed home."

He drank again, then began.

"Troy fell. You know that much. We burned it to ash and scattered the stones. The gods had promised us victory, and they kept their promise. But the cost..." He shook his head. "We paid for that victory in blood and madness. The Greeks went wild after the walls fell. They raped the women, murdered the priests at the altars, and looted the temples without regard for sanctity. Sacrilege. The gods do not forget sacrilege. They punish it across generations."

His voice dropped lower, rougher.

"Ajax the Lesser dragged Cassandra from Athena's altar and violated her there—in the goddess's own sanctuary—while she clung to the statue. The Greeks did nothing. Said nothing. We were drunk on victory and blood. The gods marked us for that silence. We became complicit by our inaction."

Telemachus felt cold despite the hall's warmth, despite the food heavy in his stomach.

"When we sailed," Nestor continued, "the gods divided us. Storms scattered the fleet like leaves in the wind. Ships sank. Men drowned screaming. Those who reached land found no welcome—only more war, more death. Agamemnon came home to be murdered by his own wife and her lover. Menelaus wandered for eight years, blown from shore to shore. Diomedes lost his kingdom to usurpers. Ajax the Greater died screaming in the waves, cursing Athena with his last breath."

"And my father?"

"Your father was cleverer than most. He knew the gods were angry. He tried to appease them. He sacrificed properly. He sailed carefully. He gave thanks at every altar. But Poseidon hated him."

"Why?"

Nestor hesitated. His eyes shifted, looking at something Telemachus couldn't see. Memory or vision or something else.

"The Cyclops," he said finally. "Polyphemus. Your father blinded him in his own cave. The creature was Poseidon's son, born of a sea nymph. The god swore vengeance. Said Odysseus would wander for years, lose all his men, and return home unrecognized and alone." He paused. "If he returned at all."

The words landed like blows. Each one heavier than the last. Telemachus's hands gripped the edge of the table. The wood felt solid under his palms. Real. He focused on that.

"Is he alive?"

"I don't know." Nestor's voice was gentle now. Almost fatherly. "I haven't heard a word of him in years. No one has. But your father is the most resourceful man I've ever known. If anyone could survive the god's wrath, it's him. He has a gift for turning disaster into advantage."

Telemachus felt something break inside him—not hope, exactly, but the carefully maintained wall between hope and despair. It cracked. "Menelaus might know more," Nestor said. "He wandered longer than I did. Saw more shores, spoke to more travelers. Go to Sparta. Ask him. If anyone has news, it's Menelaus."

"I will."

"Good." Nestor stood. The sons stood with him, moving in perfect unison like a trained guard. "Tomorrow, my son Pisistratus will take you to Sparta in a chariot. The road is good. You'll be there in two days."

Relief flooded through Telemachus. He wouldn't have to sail again so soon. Solid ground. A chariot. Faster than a ship.

"Thank you."

Nestor stepped close and gripped his shoulder. His hand was strong despite his age, fingers digging in with surprising force.

"Your father was my friend. One of the best men I knew. If he lives, find him. If he's dead, honor his memory. Either way, you deserve the truth." He paused, and his grip tightened. "But be careful, boy. The truth about Troy is dangerous. Not all knowledge is safe to possess."

The old king's eyes held something else—something he wasn't saying. A warning, perhaps. Or pity. Or fear.

Pylos – The Courtyard Vision

Later—much later, when the feast had dissolved into smaller conversations and the wine had made men sleepy—Telemachus stepped outside for air.

The courtyard was dark, cool. Stars blazed overhead in patterns he was still learning to read. His mother had started teaching him before he left, tracing constellations with her finger against the night sky. The sea murmured in the distance—a constant whisper, the world's breath.

He walked toward the center, where a stone hearth stood—used for outdoor sacrifices when the weather was good. The ashes from the day's offerings still rested there, gray and supposedly cold.

Or they should have been cold.

The sigil returned—three bands of light hovering above the hearth. Not flames exactly, but something compressed, geometric, precise. They spun slowly, each one independent yet synchronized, moving

in a harmony that felt ancient and deliberate. They pulsed—bright, dim, bright—like a heartbeat.

Telemachus couldn't move. Couldn't breathe. The rings threw shifting shadows across the courtyard stones—patterns that seemed almost like writing in a language he didn't know.

He heard no sound. Felt no heat. But the air around the fire tasted of metal—sharp, acrid, and wrong, like breathing near a forge where bronze is worked.

They expanded. For a moment, they grew large enough to surround him, floating at different heights. He stood at their center, frozen, as they orbited his body like moons around a planet—one at head height, one at chest level, one circling his feet.

Then they collapsed back to the hearth. The fire snuffed out instantly. Darkness returned—absolute and sudden.

Telemachus staggered back. His heart slammed against his ribs. He gasped and caught himself against the doorway's stone frame—cold, solid, and real.

Behind him, Nestor's voice—calm and utterly unsurprised: "So. Athena herself walks with you."

Telemachus turned slowly, still gripping the stone. Nestor stood in the doorway, arms crossed over his chest, his face unreadable in the shadows.

"She favors you," the old king continued quietly. "As she favored your father. That is a blessing." He paused. "And a burden. The gods take as much as they give. Their love costs more than gold or blood. It costs your freedom to choose your own path."

Telemachus couldn't speak. His mouth was dry. His tongue felt thick and clumsy.

Nestor stepped closer and clapped a hand on his shoulder—a solid, grounding weight. "Come. We will sacrifice to her at dawn. A proper offering. A heifer with gold on its horns. The best we have. A goddess who guards you personally deserves no less. And perhaps she will tell us more in the omens."

Pylos – The Palace Chambers

They gave him a room on the palace's upper floor.

A real room—not a corner of a hall or a spot by the fire like a servant. Four walls. A door that closed. Privacy. A luxury he'd almost forgotten existed.

The bed had thick wool blankets and a mattress stuffed with soft fleece. A basin of clean water sat on a wooden stand. Oil in a small jar for his skin, scented faintly with lavender. A lamp burned in the corner, its flame steady and bright.

A slave girl appeared—young, with downcast eyes and careful movements. She offered to wash his feet, but he waved her away gently. He could wash himself.

He stripped off his salt-stained tunic and washed. The water was cool and clean. He felt like he was shedding a skin—days of travel, fear, and uncertainty. He dried himself and lay down on the bed. The mattress was soft. Too soft. He wasn't used to it. At home, he slept on a pallet in his mother's rooms, or sometimes in the hall when the Suitors got too loud and he needed to watch them.

He stared at the ceiling. Shadows danced from the lamp in the corner, moving in patterns he couldn't quite follow—random yet somehow purposeful.

Athena. A goddess. Walking beside him. Guiding him. Protecting him.

His father had sailed with her favor. And still he was lost. Still gone. Twenty years wandering or dead or trapped somewhere beyond reach.

Would favor be enough? Or was he walking into something too big for mortals to survive?

He closed his eyes. Sleep wouldn't come. His mind churned. He saw the rings of fire again—three circles overlapping, glowing red, pulsing with heat and something else. Power. Command. The word echoed in his thoughts: *custodians*.

What had his father seen at Troy? What secret knowledge had fled with those refugees Nestor spoke of? What had Odysseus chosen not to touch, and why?

And who—or what—were the custodians?

Sleep came finally, long after midnight. That night, a new dream came—not the familiar ship on dark seas, but bronze wheels spinning in darkness and a hooded figure—always behind him, walking in step with his shadow, never catching up but never falling behind.

He woke once in the night, sweating, his heart racing. The lamp had burned low. The room was full of shadows that moved wrong—too purposeful, too aware. He listened to the silence and heard nothing. Just his own breathing. Just his own fear.

He slept again. This time without dreams.

Pylos – The Altar at Dawn (Day 6, dawn)

Sunlight poured across the courtyard. The air smelled of salt from the harbor and fresh bread from the kitchens. Telemachus woke to voices outside—servants preparing something, the clink of metal on stone, and low chanting.

He dressed quickly in a clean tunic someone had left folded on a stool. His old one was gone—taken to be washed, most likely. This one was finer. Softer. He tied it with a belt and went out.

Nestor stood by a stone altar in the center of the courtyard, hands raised to the morning sky, speaking in the formal cadences of prayer—each word precise, weighted with ritual.

"Athena, bright-eyed daughter of Zeus, hear me. You honored my house with your presence. You walked among us as Mentor. I honor you in turn with this offering."

A white heifer stood beside the altar, ropes looped around its neck. Its horns had been covered in thin sheets of hammered gold that caught the sunlight and shone like fire. The animal was calm, breathing slowly, its eyes placid and unaware of what was coming.

Servants in white robes surrounded the altar, each holding something—barley in bronze bowls, wine in jugs, and knives of bronze polished to mirrors.

Pisistratus appeared at Telemachus's elbow and pressed a bowl of barley into his hands. "Scatter it," he whispered. "For the goddess."

Telemachus stepped forward. His hands shook slightly. He cast the grains over the altar in a wide arc. They landed with a soft whisper and hissed when they touched the hot stone—someone had been burning offerings already, warming the altar.

Nestor drew a knife—bronze, old, its blade etched with symbols Telemachus couldn't read. He whispered a prayer too low to hear, then cut the heifer's throat in one clean, practiced stroke.

Blood poured dark and thick. Servants caught it in a wide bronze basin, not spilling a drop. The animal's legs folded. It collapsed without sound—one moment standing, the next lying on its side, eyes already glazing over.

They butchered it with practiced speed and reverence. Thigh bones wrapped in layers of white fat went onto the fire. The flames leapt up, greedy, consuming. The smell was overpowering—burned meat, fat, and incense. The rest they divided—meat for the feast that would follow, hide for working, bones for tools. Nothing was wasted. Everything was sacred.

The smoke rose straight and white—no wind to scatter it, no rain to dampen it. A perfect column climbing into the blue morning sky.

Nestor turned to Telemachus, smiling. "She has accepted. You see? The smoke rises true. You travel under her protection. No man can ask for more."

Telemachus nodded. Something shifted inside him—not peace exactly, but certainty. A sense of rightness, of being exactly where he was meant to be.

Pylos – The Hearth Mark

The servants moved to clear the altar, sweeping ashes and gathering the bronze implements. One of Nestor's younger sons—Thrasymedes—knelt by the stone hearth in the courtyard where the vision had appeared the night before. He paused, frowning.

"Father."

Nestor turned. "What is it?"

Thrasymedes pointed. "Look."

Three marks on the stone. Dark circles, each the size of a fist. They looked as if they'd been burned into the surface—not charred exactly, but stained deep into the granite itself, as if something impossibly hot had pressed there and left a permanent scar.

Telemachus stepped closer. The marks weren't there yesterday afternoon. He was certain. He'd stood in this courtyard before the feast. The hearth had been clean, unmarked.

He reached out slowly, touching one circle with his fingertip. The stone was cold. Not warm. Cold as winter iron, cold enough to sting. His fingers recoiled.

Pisistratus crouched beside him. "Were these here before?"

"No," Thrasymedes said firmly. "I cleared this hearth myself yesterday afternoon after the sacrifices. The stone was clean. I would have noticed."

The marks formed a pattern—not quite touching, but aligned with geometric precision. The spacing was deliberate, measured, and exact.

The sigil, repeated. The same geometry that had burned itself into sand on a forgotten shore, the same form that had flared in Nestor's fire the night before.

Telemachus understood none of it yet, but somewhere a patient hand was writing a message across his journey—one circle at a time. Nestor stood above them, looking down at the marks. His face was unreadable—neither surprised nor frightened, just contemplative.

"Leave them," he said quietly. "Do not scrub them away."

"But Father—"

"Leave them." His tone allowed no argument. "They are a sign. Not for us to erase. Let them remain as witness."

Telemachus stood. His hand still felt cold where he'd touched the stone, as if the chill had seeped into his bones. The marks stayed dark against the pale granite—three perfect circles that shouldn't exist, that no natural fire could have made.

No one spoke of it further. But as they walked away, Telemachus glanced back once. The marks seemed darker than before, as if they were still burning somehow—slowly, almost invisibly.

Pylos – Departure

"When do we leave?" Telemachus asked.

"Now," Pisistratus said with a grin. He gestured to a chariot waiting by the courtyard gate. Two horses stamped and snorted, restless, eager to run. Their coats gleamed in the morning sun—one black, one chestnut, both powerful. "We'll reach Sparta by tomorrow evening if we push hard. The road is good—my father keeps it well-maintained."

Telemachus looked back at the palace. Nestor stood watching from the steps, old and steady, unmoved by time or weather. His white hair stirred in the light breeze. His sons flanked him—seven pillars of strength.

"Thank you," Telemachus said. His voice was firm. Clear. "For everything. For the truth."

Nestor inclined his head slowly. "Find your father, boy. Or find the truth about what happened to him. Either way, find peace. You deserve that much. Your mother deserves it more."

Telemachus climbed into the chariot. The floor was smooth wood, worn by years of use. Pisistratus took the reins in both hands, leather strips wrapped around his wrists for a better grip. The horses danced, impatient.

"Hold on," Pisistratus said.

He snapped the reins. The horses leapt forward. The chariot lurched and then flew, wheels drumming on stone, then on packed earth. Pylos fell away behind them—white walls, red roofs, and the blue curve of the harbor shrinking to a memory.

The road stretched inland, winding through hills covered in olive groves. Ancient trees, thick-trunked, gnarled with age, leaves silvery in the morning light. Dust rose from the wheels in a pale cloud. The sun climbed steadily, growing hot.

Pisistratus drove with easy confidence, correcting the horses with small movements, reading the road ahead. He glanced at Telemachus.

"You all right?"

"Yes."

"You look like you're carrying the world."

Telemachus almost laughed. It felt true. "Maybe I am."

"Your father will come home," Pisistratus said. Not a question. A statement. A certainty.

"You don't know that."

"I know the gods don't waste their time on the dead. Athena favors you. She wouldn't—not if your father was gone. Think about it."

Telemachus did. The logic was simple but compelling. Hope kindled—painful, dangerous, but real.

He gripped the chariot's rail. Watched the horizon. Somewhere out there, his father wandered. Or lay dead. Or sat trapped on an island, yearning for home, fighting to return against impossible odds.

He would find the answer. Whatever it costs.

The chariot rolled on. The horses ran smoothly and tirelessly. The wind carried salt and dust and something else—the faint metallic scent of heated bronze.

Telemachus didn't look back.

Behind them, if he had turned, he might have seen something: a figure standing on a distant hill, its dark cloak fluttering, watching the chariot diminish into the distance. But he didn't turn. And the figure vanished like smoke.

The road to Sparta stretched ahead.