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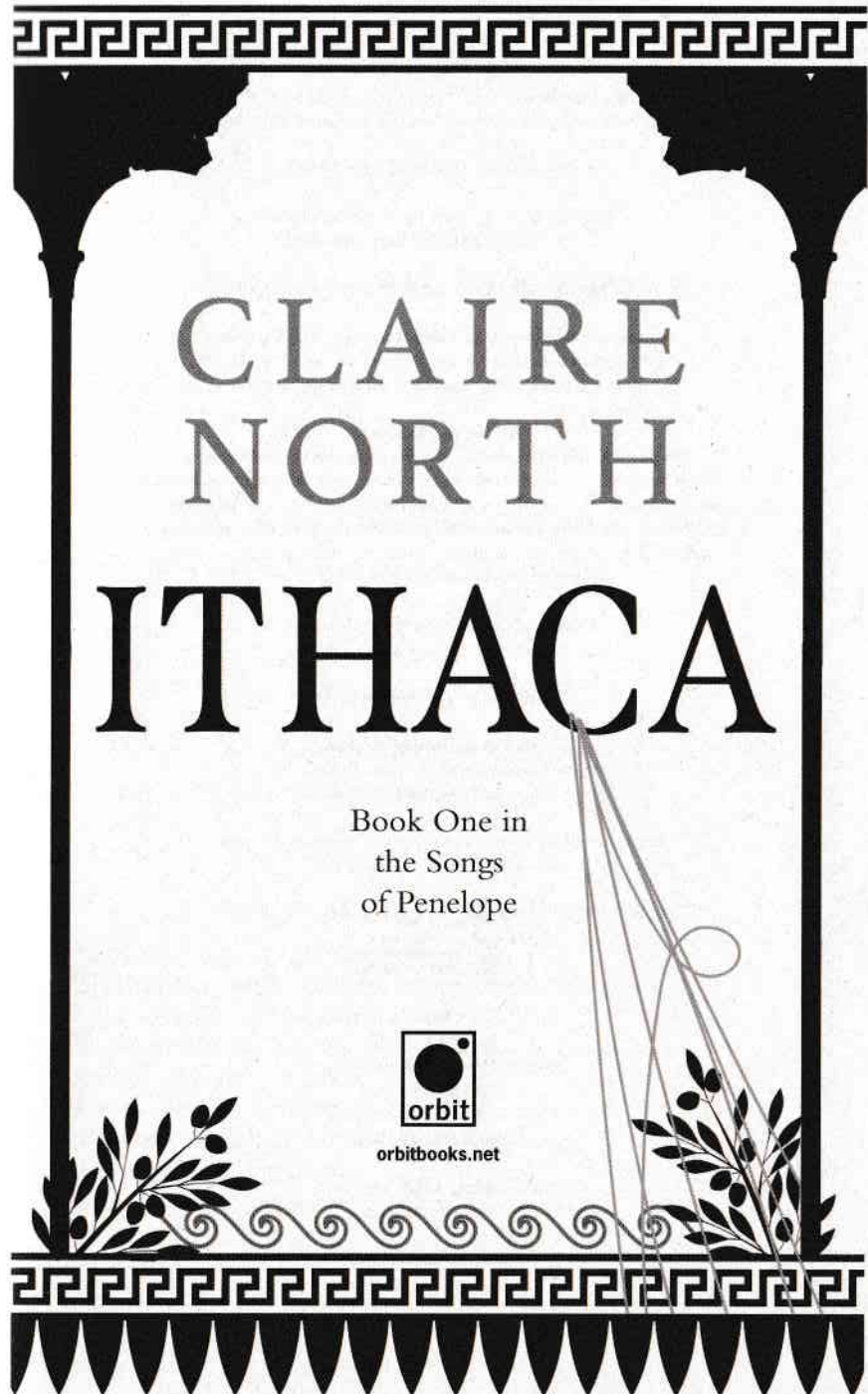
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DRAMATIS PERSONAE



The Family of Odysseus

Penelope – wife of Odysseus, queen of Ithaca
Odysseus – husband of Penelope, king of Ithaca
Telemachus – son of Odysseus and Penelope
Laertes – father of Odysseus
Anticlea – mother of Odysseus

Councillors of Odysseus

Medon – an old, friendly councillor
Aegyptius – an old, less friendly councillor
Peisenor – a former warrior of Odysseus

Suitors of Penelope and their kin

Antinous – son of Eupheithes
Eupheithes – master of the docks, father of Antinous
Eurymachus – son of Polybus
Polybus – master of the granaries, father of Eurymachus
Amphinomus – a warrior of Greece
Andraemon – a veteran of Troy
Minta – comrade and friend of Andraemon
Kenamon – an Egyptian
Nisus – a suitor of low renown

Maids and commoners

Eos – maid of Penelope, comber of hair
Autonoe – maid of Penelope, keeper of the kitchen
Melantho – maid of Penelope, chopper of wood
Melitta – maid of Penelope, scrubber of tunics
Phiobe – maid of Penelope, friendly to all
Leaneira – maid of Penelope, a Trojan
Euracleia – Odysseus' old nursemaid
Dares – a young man of Ithaca

Women of Ithaca

Priene – a warrior from the east
Teodora – an orphan of Ithaca
Anaitis – priestess of Artemis
Ourania – spymaster of Penelope
Semele – an old widow, mother of Mirene
Mirene – Semele's daughter

Mycenaeans

Elektra – daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra
Orestes – son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra
Clytemnestra – wife of Agamemnon, cousin of Penelope
Agamemnon – conqueror of Troy
Iphgenia – daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, sacrificed
to the goddess Artemis
Pylades – sworn brother to Orestes
Iason – a soldier of Mycenae
Aegisthus – Clytemnestra's lover

Spartans

Icarius – father of Penelope
Polycaste – Icarius' wife, adoptive mother of Penelope
Tyndareus – father of Clytemnestra and Helen, brother of Icarius

The gods and assorted divinities

Hera – goddess of mothers and wives
Athena – goddess of wisdom and war
Artemis – goddess of the hunt
Calypso – a nymph

CHAPTER I



Teodora is not the first to see the raiders, but she is the first to run.

They come from the north, by the light of the full moon. They do not burn any lanterns on their decks, but skim across the ocean like tears down a mirror. There are three ships, carrying some thirty men apiece, coils of rope set by the prow to bind their slaves; oars barely tugging the sea as the wind carries them to shore. They give no cries of war, beat no drums nor blow trumpets of brass or bone. Their sails are plain and patched, and had I power over the stars I would have willed them shine a little brighter, that the heavens might be eclipsed by the darkness of the ships as they obstructed the horizon. But the stars are not my domain, nor do I usually pay much attention to the dealings of little people in their sleepy villages by the sea, save when there is some great matter afoot that might be turned by a wily hand – or when my husband has strayed too far from home.

It is therefore without celestial intervention that Teodora, lips inclining towards those of her may-be lover, thinks she catches sight of something strange upon the sea. The few fisherwomen who ride the night are all known to her and their prows are nothing like the shapes she glimpses in the corner of her eye.

Then Dares – a young fool, certainly more foolish than she – catches her by her chin and pulls her deeper into his embrace, hand fumbling somewhat impertinently for her breast, and she has other things on her mind.

Above the village, a torch gutters upon the cliffs. It has been only briefly raised, a guide in the night to show these raiders where to go. Now its work is done, and the figure who has held it retreats down the hard stone path towards the inland slumber of the isle, feeling no compunction to stay and witness his work. It would be fair of this fellow to think himself unseen, save by his allies – the hour is late and the hot day had faded to a cool, slumbering dark, suitable for vast snoring and dreamless sleep. How little he knows.

In a cave above the shore, a queen in rags and dirt looks out onto the night, the blood still sticky on her hands, and sees the raiders come, but does not think they come for her. So she does not call out to the village below, but cries for her lover, who is dead.

In the east, a king rolls restlessly in the arms of Calypso, who hushes him and says, it is just a dream, my love. Everything beyond these shores is just a dream.

To the south, another fleet with black sails sits becalmed, the rowers asleep beneath the patient sky, while a princess caresses her brother's sweating brow.

And on the beach, Teodora is beginning to suspect that Dares may not be entirely pure in his attentions, and that they should really start talking of marriage if this is the way things are going to go. She pushes him away with both her palms, but he holds her tight. In the brief shuffling of their feet on bony white sand, his eyes turn up and he at last sees the ships, sees their course for this little cove, and with a sluggish wit he declares: "Uh . . .?"

Dares' mother owns a grove of olive trees, two slaves and a cow. In the eyes of the sages of the island, these things are in

fact owned by Dares' father – but he never came home from Troy, and as the years ticked down and Dares grew from whelp to man, even the most pedantic elders stopped labouring the point. One day, shortly after his fifteenth birthday, Dares turned to his mother and mused: "It's a good thing for you I let you hang around," and in that moment her hope died, though he was a monster of her own making. He can fish, not well, dreams of turning pirate, and has not yet tasted hunger in the winter.

Teodora's father was sixteen when he wed her mother; seventeen when he went to Troy. He left behind his bow, being a weapon for cowards, a few pots and a shawl his mother made. Last winter Teodora killed a lynx that was as hungry as her, the knife with which she would otherwise gut fish driven into its snapping jaw, and has few qualms about making snap decisions when death is on the line.

"Raiders!" she shouts, first to Dares, who hasn't yet released her from his embrace, and when he finally does, to the village above and the slumbering night, running towards the low mud of hut and home as if she could catch the echo of her own voice. "Raiders! Raiders are coming!"

It is well known that when a grieving wife looks to the sea for the ship of her husband and glimpses a sail threaded with gold, time will slow its pounding chariot to a crawl, and every minute of the ship's return is an hour pricked out in sweating agony. Yet when pirates come to your shore, it is as if their vessels grow Hermes' wings and leap, leap across the water, now rounding the hard pillars of stone where the crabs scuttle sideways, black-eyed and orange-backed, now driven by the relentless oars prow-first up the soft lip of the sand. Now men leap from the decks of the beaching ships; now they have axes in hand and carry crude shields of battered bronze and animal hide, their faces painted in pigment and ash. Now they charge from the water's edge,

not as soldiers do, but as wolves, splitting and circling their prey, howling, teeth bared silver in the moon's gentle light.

Teodora has reached the village before them. Phenera is a place of little square houses set above the thin stream that carves its passage between two cliffs of blackened stone to run giddy into the cove. When it rains too hard in winter, the mud walls slop and flop away, and the roofs are constantly a-mending. Here they dry fish and pick at mussels, tend to goats and gossip about their neighbours. Their shrine is to Poseidon, who protects the thin-hulled boats they push into the bay and who, if I know anything about the old fart, doesn't care a whelp for the meagre offerings of grain and wine they spill upon his altar.

That at least is the picture that Phenera wishes the eye to behold; but look a little closer and you may find trinkets that shine beneath the rough wooden floors, and many a finger that is skilled at more than just fixing a net to catch fish in.

"Raiders! Raiders!" Teodora howls, and slowly a few dusty cloths are pulled back from the crooked doors, a few eyes blink into the shallow dark and shouts begin to rise in alarm. Then voices older and a little more respected sound as other eyes behold the men rushing upon their shores, and hands reach to gather their most precious goods, and like ants from the boiling nest, the people flee.

Too late.

Too late, for so many – too late.

Their only blessing is that these men of snarling lip and beating shield do not want to kill the youngest and the strongest. It is enough to scare them into cowering submission, to beat them and bind them with rope to take to some place to sell. The two slaves kept in Dares' house look upon their new captors with weary eyes, for they have been through all this before, when they were first taken by the bold men of Ithaca. Their wretched despair at finding themselves encircled by blade and shield is a

bit of a let-down for their attackers, who expected at the least some abject grovelling, but the whole atmosphere is somewhat redeemed when the masters and mistresses of Phenera wail and weep. They are reduced now to the level of those they had mastered, and their former slaves tut and say just do as we do, just say what we say, you will learn – you will learn.

Teodora stops to gather only one precious thing – the bow she keeps for killing rabbits. Nothing more. She has nothing so precious as her life, and so she runs, runs, runs for the hills, runs like Atalanta reborn, grabbing the branch of the thin-trunked dying tree that juts out from a promontory to pull herself up; climbing over stone and under leaf to the chittering black while below her home starts to burn. She hears footsteps behind her, the drumming of heavy weight upon the scrubby path, glances over her shoulder, sees torchlight and shadow, near stumbles on a treacherous root in her path, and is caught before she can fall. Hands grasp, old eyes stare, blink, a finger to the lips. Teodora is pulled quickly from her path into darkness, into thicket-leaf shadow, where hunkers a woman with hair like autumn clouds, skin like summer sand, an axe in her hand, a hunting knife on her belt. She could with such implements perhaps fight back; perhaps slam her blade into the throat of the man who pursues them, but what use would that be? None, tonight. None at all. So instead they hide, wrapped in each other's eyes, their gazes screaming *quiet, quiet, quiet!* Until at last the footsteps of their pursuer fade away.

The old woman who holds Teodora in safety is called Semele, and she prays to Artemis, who does not deserve her devotions.

In the village below, Dares is less sensible. He was raised on stories of the warrior men of Odysseus, and like all boys has learnt something of the spear and the blade. As the straw rooftops begin to burn, he retrieves his sword from beneath the cot of his mother's house, steps four paces from his smoking door,

gripping the hilt with both hands, sees an Illyrian dressed in flame and blood approach, takes up his stance, and actually manages to parry the first blow that comes for him. This surprises everyone, including Dares, and at the next thrust he turns his body and manages to smack his blade down so hard on the end of the short stabbing spear that the wood cracks and splinters. However, his delight at this development doesn't last long, for his killer draws a short sword from his belt, turns in the direction of Dares' next attack, comes under his guard, and splits him clean across the belly.

I will say this for the pirate – he had the courtesy to drive his blade through Dares' heart, rather than simply leave him to die. The boy hadn't earned such a clean death, but neither, I suppose, had he lived long enough to deserve the one that came for him.

CHAPTER 2



Rosy-fingered dawn crawled its way across Ithaca's back like an awkward lover fumbling at long skirts. The light of day should have been as crimson as the blood in the sea below Phenera; it should have circled the island like the sharks. Look towards the horizon, and even the eyes of the gods strain a little to see three sails disappearing into the east, with their stolen cargo of animals, grains and slaves. They will be gone, long gone, before the ships of Ithaca raise their sails.

Let us speak briefly of Ithaca.

It is a thoroughly backwards, wretched place. The golden touch of my footstep upon its meagre soil; the caress of my voice in the ears of its salt-scarred mothers – Ithaca does not deserve such divine attentions. But then again, its barren misery leads the other gods to rarely look upon it either, and so it is a miserable truth that I, Hera, mother of Olympus, who drove Heracles mad and struck vain royalty into stone – why here at least I may sometimes work without the censure of my kin.

Forget the songs of Apollo, or the proud declarations of haughty Athena. Their poems only glorify themselves. Listen to my voice: I who have been stripped of honour, of power

since that city fell have not been enough for whoring to be better economics than mastery of a nice bit of dye.

Above it all: the palace of Odysseus. It was the palace of Laertes for a while, and I have no doubt the old man wanted it to remain known by that glorious name, his legacy carved into stone – an Argonaut, no less, a man who once sailed, under my banner, to fetch the golden fleece, before that little shit Jason betrayed me. But Laertes grew old before all the men of Greece were summoned to Troy. Thus the son eclipsed the father, new daubs of black and red smeared across the corridors, wide-eyed and ochre-tinged. Odysseus and his bow. Odysseus in battle. Odysseus winning the armour of fallen Achilles. Odysseus with calves of an ox and Atlas's shoulders. In the eighteen years since the king of Ithaca was last sighted on this isle, his somewhat short, unimpressive and far too hairy form has grown in stature and personal hygiene, if only in the poet's eye.

The poets will tell you a lot about the heroes of Troy. Some details they have correct; in others, as with all things, they lie. They lie to please their masters. They lie without knowing what they do, for it is the poet's art to make every ear that hears the ancient songs think they have been sung for them alone, the old made new. Whereas I sing for no creature's pleasure but my own, and can attest that what you think you know of the last heroes of Greece, you do not know at all.

Follow me through the halls of the palace of Odysseus; follow to hear the stories that the men-poets of the greedy kings do not tell.

Even in dawn's thinly mirrored light, the perfect white that bounces in off the sea, the great hall is a shadowed pit of inequity. The stench of men, of spilt wine and chewed bone, of flatulence and bile mingled with sweat – I pause in the door to pinch my nose at it. The maids are about already, trying their best to wash away the stink of last night's feast, to return the plates to the

kitchen and burn sweet herbs to clear the fetid air, but their work is interrupted by a few of the men still snoring like pigs beneath the table, hands out-reached to the ashes of the fire as if they had dreamt of ice.

These snoring lullards, these lumpen males are but a handful of suitors who sweep in and out like the tides from Odysseus's door, feasting on his land and pawing at the skirts of his maids. There were twenty of them two years ago; fifty at the last turning of the sun, and now near one hundred men have come to Ithaca, all with one purpose – to win the hand of Odysseus's mourning, lonesome queen.

The painted eyes of Odysseus may watch from the walls, but he is dead – he is dead! the suitors exclaim. It has been eighteen years since he sailed from Ithaca, eight since Troy fell, seven since he was last sighted on the isle of Aeolus – he is drowned, surely he is drowned! No one is that bad a sailor. Come, oh tearful queen, come: it is time to pick a new man. It is time to pick a new king.

I know them all, these would-be princelings, snuggled shoulder to shoulder like sleeping dogs. Antinous, son of Eupheithes, his dark hair waxed and oiled in a glistening hive swept back from his brow, so stiff it stirs neither by rain nor sweat. He wears his father's wealth in his tunic, which is hemmed with crimson purchased from a Cretan man who had no teeth, and in the tapestry of beads and gold slung casually about his neck as if to say, "What, these old things? I found them behind an amphora of wine, as one does – as one does." Antinous was five years old when Odysseus went to war, and stood on the docks and cried and stamped his foot and wanted to know why he couldn't be a soldier. Now Achilles is dead, Ajax and Hector rot in dust, and Antinous asks no more.

Snorting and slumbering next to him, Eurymachus, whose father Polybus avoided going to war by sailing to the western

colonies on “urgent business” that took ten urgent years – and whose nursemaid spoiled him rotten and told him he was descended from Heracles. Every little twerp is descended from Heracles these days, it’s practically a requirement for entry to polite society. Perhaps it is the tracery of sunlight in Eurymachus’s hair that gives the impression of some sordid divinity, but though a young man, his forehead is already climbing and his flaxen mane grows thin. Only his laughable oar-ish height and skinniness distracts from this fact, and he peers down upon the world as if perpetually surprised to find it still turning beneath his flapping feet.

Who else here of note? Amphinomous, son of a king, who was taught that honour is everything and suspects, perhaps, that he is not honourable but doesn’t entirely know what to do about the situation. His father was fruitful in sons, gourd-faced boys the lot of them, who rarely quarrelled and who made music like the whines of Cerberus. They are all dead now, three by Trojan hands, save Amphinomous, who will do what he must.

Andraemon, who does not sleep, but watches the maids with one eye open from where he has fallen across his folded arms. Did salt or sand dry his skin so that nails down his back make the sound of bone over leather? Did the harsh sun of Troy bleach his hair to such a burnished hue, does he have to throw discus every morn and every night to maintain such contours about his chest, chin, shoulders, arms – or is he blessed of Ares and Aphrodite, that men might quake and women swoon at his sight?

A little secret: he is not blessed, and arms like his are not casually made.

These are the men of note. We regard them as one might regard a rash – hopeful that it does not spread further – and then move on.

About these slumbering suitors are the other part of this story – the part that the poets do not name, save to lie. The

maids of the palace are many in number, for the palace itself is a little industry. No monarch of Ithaca dare rely on favourable winds and rich soils for regular income of grain – instead, the women keep ducks, geese, pigs, goats; they fish in a little cove where only the women go, prise mussels from black stone and tend to groves of olive and fields of barley as mere and tough as the mouths that will eat them; and at night, when the last of the suitors finally are asleep, they lie down and dream the dreams that are all their own. Listen – listen. Let us peek behind fresh-washed faces; let us swim in the soul of a passing maid.

... spin the yarn to make the thread an easy job my feet would kill for an easy job ...

Antinous looked at me last night, I wonder if he thinks ...

Must tell Melanthe must tell her she’ll howl she’ll scream it’ll be hilarious where’s Melanthe must tell her now!

But here, why listen here, here is a voice that whispers out of tune.

Death to the Greeks, beats the heart of one whose hair falls like clotted blood above her neck, her eyes down to the floor. *Death to all the Greeks*.

Of these maids of Ithaca – these slave women and sold girls, these indentured daughters – so much more of them will I have to say. I am the goddess of queens, wives and women; my tasks may be thankless, but I perform them nonetheless. But alas, events are already in motion that require our attention, and so let us look to the north.

From the hard carved road that winds down the terraced valley into what we will grudgingly call a city, Teodora comes. She has given up running; now each footfall is one at a time, counting the steps, forward without a destination, head first, heels twisting, and people scurry to clear a way before her. She carries a bow without arrows, and an old woman walks at her

side. Their arrival will only make things harder, but I never shied from trouble.

By the palace gate, a man called Medon is preparing to do his rounds of the market. He is officially the voice of Ithaca, sent from the palace to proclaim the rulings of Ithaca's king. Ithaca's king has not been home for eighteen years, and he certainly can't proclaim the rulings of some queen, so these days he proclaims very little and just hopes people get the idea and realise what's good for them. Lately his optimism on that latter point is growing thin. With a round, soft belly beneath a round, drooping face, he is one of very few men older than twenty-five on the island, and it is perhaps this novelty that causes Teodora to slow as she approaches him, swaying a little from the rising heat and broken weight of the night, before stopping altogether in front of him, staring long into his eyes as if she might find evidence that all this were just a dream resting in the pupil, and proclaiming simply: "The pirates came."

CHAPTER 3



In a chamber built to catch the morning light that hangs crooked off the side of the palace like an old dangling wart, three old men, a boy who would be a man and three women are assembled to discover just how bad a day Ithaca is going to have.

Of these, the three men and the boy consider themselves the most pertinent. They stand round a table of yew set with shards of tortoiseshell, and bicker.

One of them we have met – Medon – who has been awake since before the sun rose and is already tired of the day. The other three are called Peisenor, Aegyptius and Telemachus.

Here are some of the things they say:

"Fucking pirates. Fucking pirates! There was a day, you know, there was a day when – fucking pirates!"

"Thank you for that strategic assessment, Peisenor."

"They hit Lefkada a month ago. Full moon, Illyrians – northern barbarians! If it's the same clan then ..."

"If we still had a fleet ..."

"We don't."

"We could bring the ships up from Zakynthos ..."

"And leave the farmers open to attack before harvest?"

"Can I ask a question?"

"Not now, Telemachus!"

There are only two kinds of men on Ithaca – those too old or too young to fight when Odysseus sailed to war. (Technically, there is a third category – the cowards, the slaves and that man who could not afford a sword, but who really cares for them? Not the poets; not the gods.) Between these gulfs of age, there is a hollow where the finest of Ithaca's manhood should be. The fathers and would-be fathers of a new generation did not return, so that to see a native man older than thirty but younger than sixty-five is remarkable. There are no husbands for the wives, and more widows than shrines in the western isles.

Let us then consider these men who were too old to go to war and a whelp who had a near miss with a plough in one of his father's more bat-brained schemes when just a babe.

Aegyptius, who might well have served Odysseus at Troy but was such a pain in that king's backside, such a humourless dolt, that the wily general found some other use for him at home that left everyone's dignity intact, and the cramped deck of his ship considerably more motivated. He rises and bends like the willow tree, and his bald head is crowned with a constellation of moles, etched with flowing rivers where bone meets bone beneath the thin skin, baked to leather by the sun. "Perhaps the time has come to consider mercenaries . . ."

"Can't trust a mercenary. They're on your side until they get bored and then they're pillaging the treasure." Peisenor, hairy as the boar, squat as the low hills that bred him. He lost his left hand pillaging for Laertes and cannot hold a shield, and in private laments, laments, laments that he is less than a man and has done everything he possibly can in the last few years to remind the world that he is therefore, absolutely, a warrior and a hero.

"What treasure?" Medon, who feels the ageing process accelerating with every moment he spends in this chamber.

"Excuse me . . ."

"In a moment, Telemachus – look, every other king in Greece came from Troy with plundered riches. They say that when Agamemnon returned, it took five days just to unload his personal treasure – five days. They say Menelaus washes in a golden bath."

"Menelaus has never taken a bath in his life."

"He didn't exactly rush back from war, did he? I heard he and his brother went sailing south, there's Egyptian gold in his haul – I heard that the Cretans are pissed."

"Whereas we have just enough wealth to be plundered, but not enough to defend ourselves."

"Excuse me!"

Telemachus. Eighteen years old, he gets to stand here because he is Odysseus's son – though this is a mixed blessing. His hair is not as majestically golden as his father's (whose hair is in fact a greying brown, but the poets, the poets!), and there is perhaps something of his grandmother naiad in his pallor, a moistness about his freckled features that not even his daily hours of practice with spear and shield can harden into clay. Oh, one day his shoulders will be broad and his thighs will be like the giant's clubs, but for now he is still a boy struggling to grow his first beard, pushing his voice a little deeper than it should go and telling himself to stand up straight nearly as often as he slouches. Athena says he has great potential, and Hermes, whose blood flows through the scions of this house, reports that he just wants to fly down and give Telemachus a big sappy hug. But my brother Hades, who has a more sensible grasp of these things, looks into the mist and murmurs: "Some families never can find north."

Odysseus is a terrible sailor. I do not see any sign his son has inherited a better sense of direction.

"Surely we can train our own men, I mean, we have some men, we have . . ."

"That won't work, Telemachus!"

"But I . . ."

Telemachus never quite finishes his sentences. When he is introduced to people, it is as "Odysseus's son, Telemachus". His father's name is always put first, and it is as if this quirk of language has infected Telemachus's own voice, so that he can't quite see his way through to the end of any meaningful sentence that might have something of himself in it. His father's fame creates as many problems as it solves, for as the son of a hero Telemachus naturally needs to set sail and be a hero himself, lest his father eclipse him as Odysseus did his own progenitor. However, to set sail, it is most prudent to have an army at your back – much easier to be a hero when there's someone to patch a sheet and do the cooking – and given that Ithaca's warriors have not returned and are, truth be told, all dead save one, this presents something of a logistical challenge.

"There's an obvious answer . . ." muses Aegyptius.

"Here we go," sighs Medon.

"Eurymachus or Antinous . . ."

"A domestic match will bring the wrath of the mainland. What about the suitors from Corinth, or even Thebes? Or what's-his-face from Colchis, he seems nice."

"There's some Egyptian fella waiting outside, can you believe it?" Peisenor has never met an Egyptian before, but is certain he doesn't approve. "Smells nice, though."

"My father isn't dead!" Telemachus has said this so many times, it has become as remarkable to the ears of the listeners as the chattering of the cicada in the field, and so they ignore it.

"No, no, no! An overseas match will bring civil war, the islands won't stand for it, we'd have to send for aid to Mycenae, or worse, to Menelaus, can you imagine Spartan soldiers on Ithaca's soil, it would be . . ."

"Marry the wrong man and Menelaus will come anyway."

"My father isn't dead!"

Telemachus has shouted. Telemachus never shouts. Odysseus *never* shouted, except for once when he screamed at his men to take him to the sirens – but then those were exceptional circumstances. No one tuts at the son's breach of protocol, his lack of decorum, but for a moment even the women look up, mute, wide-eyed, watching. Oh – did you forget the women were there too, at this learned assemblage? So too will the poets, when this song is sung.

"My father isn't dead," Telemachus repeats, quieter, calm, fingers gripping the edge of the table, head bowed. "For my mother to remarry is impossible. It is profane."

The older men look away.

After a little while, so do the women, not that their gazes were particularly relevant. They are ornamentations to this scene. If the poets speak of them at all, it will be in much the same breath as a pleasing vase or a nice shield – a sculptural detail, adding a certain flavour to the event. It is perhaps sensing this that the three women have arranged themselves as a picture of modesty. One, Autonoe, chestnut hair and face hard as a dried starfish, brittle and beautiful and not for the gaze of men, busies herself with tuning a lyre. She has been tuning it for nearly half an hour now, and can't quite seem to get it right. Beside her, Eos, shorter and plump around the hips, a grape of a face and freckles across her skin, combs rough yarn into fine threads, brushing it with the same care she applies to her mistress's hair. She can do this with her eyes shut and ears open – always her ears open.

The final woman should perhaps be weaving at the small square loom she is oft seen with in public – but no, this is a private place, for serious business, so instead she sits with hands still in her lap, chin turned up, a little away from the men around the table, listening with an intensity that would frighten Ajax