

9 · ITHACA ·

Odysseus stood in the bronze-floored feasting hall of King Alcinous. He looked at the king, the princess and the old blind storyteller. There was a long silence broken at last by King Alcinous.

‘Odysseus, you have suffered much in your wanderings across the broad face of the world, but now that you have reached my bronze-floored feasting hall I swear that I will send a high-prowed ship to carry you safely back home to rocky Ithaca. And I swear by the mighty Gods and Goddesses that you will not return to your homeland empty-handed.’

The king ordered that great chests of gold and silver, and rolls of purple cloth be fetched. They were carried down to the quayside, where a ship was waiting. They were loaded on to the deck of the ship. Odysseus was led down to the quayside. As he walked across the gangplank towards the deck he felt a hand tugging at his cloak. He turned and saw Princess Nausicaa.

‘Odysseus,’ she said. ‘It is to me above all others that you owe your life. You will not forget me, will you?’

Odysseus smiled. ‘Princess,’ he said, ‘if by the grace of the mighty Gods and Goddesses I set foot once again on the shores of my beloved Ithaca, I swear that I will remember you for as long as I draw breath.’

He stepped on to the deck and the sails were raised, the anchors were lifted, the wooden oars struck the waves and the prow cut a path through the churning waves. Soon the wind was filling the sails like a swollen belly. The ship made its way out of the harbour and across the blue sea.

Odysseus lay down on the deck and wrapped himself in his cloak. He closed his eyes and fell into the sweet oblivious balm of sleep. All that day he slept. The sun set and the sky darkened, and still he slept. The moon rose and set, the night brightened with countless stars, and still he was fast asleep.

He was still sleeping when the ship reached the island of Ithaca. The sailors lifted him tenderly in their arms and they waded ashore. They set him down gently on the shingle beach with the chests of treasure beside him. Then they returned to their ship and sailed away.

But nothing is hidden from the eyes of the mighty Gods and Goddesses. Owl-eyed Athene, the Goddess of War and Wisdom, was fond of Odysseus. He had been one of the bravest and shrewdest of the Greek warriors in the Trojan War. The wooden horse that had brought down the city walls had been his idea. What if one of the wretched suitors found him sleeping on the beach? His throat would be slit before he could open his eyes. Surely he deserved better than that.

With a gesture of her hand the Goddess covered the island with a white, swirling mist. Then she strapped on her sandals of burnished gold, seized her spear and flashed down out of the sky until she was standing just a short distance from where Odysseus was lying.

The sun rose and shone through the white mist. The opaque light woke Odysseus. He sat up and rubbed his eyes. He looked about him. All he could see was mist.

‘Where am I? What is this place? Where has my bitter destiny driven me to now?’

Then he saw, not far away, that there was the dim outline of a figure. Taking it for a shepherd or a fisherman, he said, ‘Stranger, tell me, where am I? What is this place?’

Athene answered him with the voice of a man. 'You must be a fool or a dolt if you don't know this place! This place is famous from Troy to the Ocean Streams, from the rising to the setting of the sun — this is the island of Ithaca!'

Odysseus peered into the mist, and Athene walked towards him, her grey eyes shining with light.

She laughed. 'Noble Odysseus, you are home at last!'

She reached down and lifted the mist, as though she was lifting a curtain. Suddenly Odysseus saw Mount Neriton, he saw the beetling rocks, the hills, the terraced fields, the cliffs and the beaches of his native land — his own homeland. He threw himself down on to the ground and kissed the nourishing earth.

Athene shook his shoulder. 'Odysseus,' she said, 'there is no time to be wasted. First of all we must hide these great chests of treasure!'

She helped him lift the chests and carry them to a cave. She caused a huge stone to roll in front of the cave entrance.

'Odysseus,' she said, 'listen, the situation is this: you are home, but alone, unknown, under a strange sail and there is danger waiting where there should be a welcome.'

Athene told Odysseus about the suitors who had invaded his feasting hall. She told him about Penelope's long, lonely wait and the weaving and unravelling of her loom. She told him how Telemachus had made a great journey to Sparta, to visit red-haired Menelaus and beautiful Helen, in search of news of his father. And she told him that the suitors were planning to murder Telemachus on his return.

When she had finished speaking Odysseus drew his dagger from his belt. 'Goddess, if you would fight alongside me now, as you fought alongside us Greeks when we brought down Troy's shining diadem of towers, I swear the floors of my hall would soon run red with blood!'

But Athene lifted her shining fingers and touched his lips. 'Shh, Odysseus, I had thought you were becoming wise. This is no time for acts of daring folly.'

She coughed discreetly. Telemachus woke with the little hairs on the back of his neck prickling. He knew he was in the presence of one of the mighty Gods or Goddesses.

‘Telemachus!’

He opened his eyes and gasped. Athene was standing shimmering beside his bed. ‘Telemachus. The time has come for you to go home. Your mother Penelope has been discovered by the suitors, unravelling the shroud on her loom by moonlight. She has been forced to finish it. Now she must choose a new husband. You must go home, but be careful. The suitors are planning to murder you on your return. Do not go to your father’s feasting hall. Go rather to the hut of your faithful swineherd Eumaeus.’ Suddenly the Goddess was gone.

Telemachus was filled with spirit and awe. Straight away he prepared for his journey home.