

# The Maiden's Odyssey

*The god vindictive doomed them never more  
(Ah, men unblest!) to touch that natal shore.  
Oh, snatch some portion of these acts from fate,  
Immortal Muse! and to our world relate.*

Homer, ΟΔΥΣΣΕΙΑ

*History, Stephen said, is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.*

James Joyce, ULYSSES

*... there was no telling whether he was long overdue to return, or just setting out on his journey.*

Charles Frazier, COLD MOUNTAIN

*Blind Seer: You seek a great fortune, you three who are now in chains. You will find a fortune, though it will not be the one you seek. But first... first you must travel a long and difficult road, a road fraught with peril. Mm-hmm. You shall see thangs, wonderful to tell. You shall see a... a cow... on the roof of a cotton house, ha.*

Joel & Ethan Coen, O BROTHER WHERE ART THOU?

*The mission is too important to allow you to jeopardize it.*

Stanley Kubrick, 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY

# Prologos

It was a moment's work for Chymides Eight-fingers to release Nerissa's leg iron. By the time she'd struggled onto bare, cracked feet, every surviving slave was standing. If they hadn't pressed so close against her, Nerissa would have fallen at the ship's first lurch. She could feel her shin bones threatening to crumble. Judging from gnawed marks in her splintered plank, she'd been more than two months on the Thallia. Chained in its reeking hold, she'd seen out her fourteenth year.

When the captain on that first day out of Tyre offered an easy voyage, she'd refused a soft berth in his cabin. She'd stepped aboard more or less a virgin, but it wasn't that. With so much lost already, one further torn place in Nerissa's body mattered little. Still, virtue mattered much. Captain Hycron's eyes were hard like the new coins made of silver/gold electrum. Every time he spoke, a foul mist of half-digested garlic spewed from his mouth. His oiled beard was split in two like some lust-maddened satyr. She wouldn't shame Father's memory by rutting with this goat.

How many nights had Hycron plagued her fitful sleep? In Nerissa's dreams, his face loomed at her like a black cloud blotting the red sky. Just as it had darkened at her insult the instant after she'd rebuffed him.

For all his rude appearance, Hycron seemed to pride himself on manly beauty. At the height of all his many qualities, Hycron saw himself as the reborn Adonis. Nerissa knew that to this depraved man, the offer had been more than generous. Not only a straw pallet by his bed and food from his own table, but the godsend of his skill in the bedchamber.

From the back row, a Thracian sailor jested underneath his breath. Capable in many languages, Nerissa heard him say the captain's face turned the exact shade of an ass's unsheathed phallus. Fortunately for the sailor's pock-marked hide, Hycron's hearing wasn't sharp. He'd flayed men for much less.

For once, Hycron mastered his rage. It would be far beneath him to force this girl into his

quarters. Nerissa's face might be exquisite, a faultless Aphrodite, her eyes two gentle pools that pulled men in their innocent, blue depths, her complexion like the finest Theban marble, her silken hair the color of honey mixed with melted butter, her body just now at the moment of perfection, a budding wonder untouched by men or time... but he could have her any day he wished. He was Zeus aboard this ship and she a friendless slave. After a few days in the hold, this girl would beg for the rare honor of being his receptacle.

Instead, Hycron jerked his forked beard at an older girl he'd bought the day before they sailed. The Tyrean broker claimed that she'd been captured deep in Scythia, the daughter of a chieftain. Her face, if not as delicate as Nerissa's, possessed appealing luster. Her onyx eyes aroused him with their promise of exotic pleasures. Her long hair was the blue/black color of ripe Minoan plums. Her voluptuous form would have tempted Tantalus to leave his eternally beguiling grapes. Hycron usually preferred lithe maidens, but a well-padded bedmate would make an amusing change this trip.

Though she didn't understand a word from any of these slavers, the Scythian beauty stepped forward immediately. Knowing well what Hycron wanted, an easy voyage suited Dzunga. Personally, she liked the smell of garlic. Her father had been the only tribesman rich enough to barter for this luxury. Maybe if she pleased the captain, he'd keep her for his concubine when they reached journey's end.

As she passed Nerissa, a flash of scorn arced across Dzunga's face. She knew this girl was worth far more. That body and that face would hold men's eyes long past the time her own flesh sagged. She wondered if the young Hellene's radiant complexion was god-sent, or was it the product of witchcraft? Those bow-shaped lips, were they always the moist pink color of pomegranate seeds, or did her people know the secret of some wondrous salve? Where had she gained such perfect serenity at this tender age? And yet, she was a fool to give another girl this chance.

*Odd*, Nerissa thought. She'd expected the derisive sneer, the toss of that black hair. The Scythian had glared at her with jealousy all day while they'd waited in the holding cage. But now aboard the ship, there'd also been a touch of pity. With a slight smile, Nerissa nodded at Dzunga as she stepped back to the ranks of slaves.

An instant later, Hycron caught her by the wrist. He held her there an instant, torn between desire and commercial instincts. *No, I'm right*, the thought formed in his eyes. *I can't let this go unpunished*. He jerked so hard, Nerissa slid across the greasy deck into his chest.

Though Hycron knew that scars would cut her value by as much as tenfold, he couldn't let Nerissa's insult pass. With a transport full of captives to control, manned by sailors scraped

from the most vicious dens in Crete, any sign of weakness could prove fatal. Who was this *doulos* to spurn his famed virility? Harsh discipline was essential to protect his reputation. He'd suffer an economic loss, but profit in the long run.

He grabbed Nerissa's peplos, ripped it open, then slashed his knife across her breasts. Forged from the finest Assyrian iron, its blade was sharper than a harpy's bite. Immediately, fine red lines welled beneath both nipples. Large drops began to splatter on the deck.

Careful not to stain his cloak, Hycron shoved her toward a knot of sailors standing by the capstan.

"For all the men, you understand," he said to Chymides, the fiercest sailor. "But you may have her first."

And so, Nerissa became common property among the crew. That first time, as she clutched torn linen to the gashes, Chymides had raped her in the rope locker. He'd laughed with pleasure at her cries of pain. He didn't bother to shut the door. Past his shoulder, Nerissa watched dark clouds bruise a brooding sky. Behind them, she could hear the silence from Olympus. This new stage of her punishment must fill the Gods with scorn. A girl who'd let her brother die deserved far worse.

Those nineteen evil-smelling men who followed couldn't blot the knowledge that her own guilt made them seem like paragons. She welcomed the pain and degradation, but day after day, her misery failed to ease her self-contempt. Afterwards, they'd chained Nerissa in the slave hold. It was a bottom berth where all could see her shame. Her breasts looked like leavings from the butcher's stall as blood continued oozing from their blackened wounds. The one consolation was that most of the captives chose to keep their dignity. Week after week, all but Evander the Samite looked away when sailors came to take their pleasure.

She'd lost track of the days consumed aboard. That's why she'd begun to chew marks into her berth. The Thallia had taken months to cross the sea. This vessel was a round ship, designed to hold much cargo, not for speed. It had a square-rigged sail, though there'd rarely been a tail wind. Hostile Triton raged against their progress while blazing Helios abandoned the drowned field both day and night. They'd pitched across oncoming waves solely by the sweat of slaves who manned auxiliary oars. And yes, these men, the personal property of Hycron, had been allowed to use her, too.

Now unchained for the first time in months, Nerissa straightened painfully. She knew they must be coming into port. A sailor called Hematheus had told her they were bound for Ithaca. He must have thought it showed consideration to offer a few words of talk before rising from her plank.

*Hematheus must feel some kindness toward me, she supposed, having mistaken groans of pain for pleasure.*

From Father's charts, she recalled that Ithaca was an island northwest of the Peloponnese mainland. And from Hematheus, she'd learned that its slave market was the largest in all of western Hellas.

Now, Chymides yelled at everyone to get above for washing. Nerissa guessed it was to make the slaves presentable before they landed.

"Maybe we'll get new clothes after bathing," whispered Berenice, her shipboard neighbor. "Something pretty to attract the highest bids. Maybe linen. Maybe even dyed."

Nerissa hardly cared. It had been weeks since she'd bothered with the torn folds of her peplos after the latest rape. There wasn't one person on this ship who hadn't seen her naked.

As she struggled up the ladder, supported by Berenice from the rung below, the fresh air reminded Nerissa of one blessing that remained. While they sluiced buckets of water on the slaves, she'd be free to take her only possible revenge. Chymides hadn't thought it necessary to shackle weakened cargo for the trip above. By leaping into the sea, she could cost Hycron the few drachmai he'd earn for a half-dead girl with a battered face and ruined body.

Nerissa found her balance on the salt washed boards. Daughter of a fisherman, the stance came naturally despite her frail condition. She took a last few seconds to gaze across the angry waves.

She saw that it was true. The Thallia finally approached landfall. In the direction of the morning sun, rows of white surf marked a large island. But Hycron appeared to be circling its headland, instead of making for port. Behind the first island was a smaller one. Smaller in circumference, that is, but with a noticeably higher profile. A steep ridge loomed above the roiled water. Its summits glinted where bright rays struck bare rock. In contrast to Poseidon's leaden sea, the isle's highlands were the green of olive trees in leaf.

Ithaca appeared to be well-watered, with favorable soil. Late in this month of Sowing Corn, its fields would be growing rich with life. Wheat and barley stalks would sprout many-seeded heads. If Demeter sent rain, they'd swell until they bent before the mild wind. Above these fertile fields, vineyards rich with grapes would fill the hillsides with their heady scent. And high above these all, gnarled olive trees would grow the fruit that had sustained this land for centuries.

Nerissa knew that she'd be dead before the olive groves would plump. Men would beat the trees with flails while crabs ate bits of flesh left clinging to her ribcage. On the seabed, she'd become a chalky skeleton, while on the land, countless olives fermented inside wicker baskets.

The tides would strew her bones before men pressed the fruit to reap its golden oil.

Nerissa had no intention of swimming toward freedom. Not that she'd soon founder, even now. Among the herring boats of Smyrna, children learned to stay afloat soon after they learned to walk. Still, the larger island was thousands of stadia across the foul-tempered sea. She'd never swum such a great distance. She could scarcely expect Poseidon's aid. Why should He relent after the dark oaths that she'd spat into the gale that capsized Father's ship?

And how she'd cursed the lightning shattered skies. Which meant that there was little chance Athena would take pity. What hubris it would be to beseech another miracle. Yes, the Goddess had guided her onto that moon washed shore with bold Andrastus, but it turned out to be the greatest heartache yet. Miracles came only once, she knew. Today, no massive owl would swoop down to pluck her gently in its talons. No Nereids enchanted into dolphins would race to her deliverance.

As for Aeolus, guardian of all the winds, Nerissa knew that He was no protector. In proof, the breeze had stiffened to a dismal whine. At last, it filled the Thallia's gray sail. Though numb and almost at an end to mortal feeling, she noticed Berenice's long hair whip against her cheek. She recalled the rage of Aeolus against her father Asclemeleon. The God had turned so furious, He blew their ship far out to sea just when they'd been in sight of home. And now, the Sail-filler's heart remained embittered against Father's last remaining child.

Nerissa entertained no visions of escape as she edged toward the rail. Hurling herself into the sea was only meant to wrest a small victory from Hycron.

*No, Mother, Nerissa had to admit, that isn't my sole motive.*

As she'd heard so many times through childhood, Mother's words came echoing in the sharp wind.

"Among decent people, the full truth is the only thing acceptable."

Even at this distance, there was no escaping Mother's reverence for honesty. Nerissa had to admit that death would also spare her many bitter days as some smallholder's drudge. The sort of man who'd thrash her at the least excuse, who'd work her to an early grave, who'd show more consideration for his meanest sow, who might use her in the dark byre where she slept, but would never foul himself by acknowledging such an ugly creature in daylight.

As loose-jawed Hematheus pulled Berenice to the sluicing trough, Nerissa touched her friend's arm as an unspoken farewell. Ever since Chloe's betrayal resulted in her capture, Berenice was the only person who'd been kind. Bracing her legs, Nerissa added a silent goodbye to her parents, brothers, sister, and all her kinsmen wherever they were now. Scorned as she might be among the Gods both great and small, nonetheless Nerissa murmured heartfelt

prayers. Despite the misery they'd caused, it seemed unimaginable that all Olympus would refuse protection for her family in death.

Her large clan was obliterated. Some slain so close beside her, she'd heard their dying rales. Some thrown so far by the deaf Fates, she'd never learned which of them, if any, still drew breath. Some like Andrastus, whom Father had adopted in his fifteenth year, he might remain alive... but the last time Nerissa saw him, Andrastus had been clouted into blank-eyed flesh and flung into the sea. From her torn heart, Nerissa released him, too. And finally, the love he'd never known she felt.

A gasp from Berenice broke into these cheerless thoughts. Nerissa turned to see what had happened to her only friend. Ah, good -- they hadn't injured Berenice. Her gasp was only from the shock as a bucket of cold water struck.

*The sea will be far colder, thought Nerissa. But I'll simply let it take me. Enyo can pull me down, or toss my body in Her spume. Either way, it will be over soon.*

Biting her lip against the pain, Nerissa got one leg over the rail. She felt the frigid, salty spray cut into her wounds. The scars had never closed. Little wonder, since the sailors often raked her breasts with filthy nails when they gripped her from behind. The sting was even sharper as a large wave broke against the oars below. Nerissa clung tightly to the rail, determined to jump over it.

Now she saw that it wouldn't be possible to simply let the water do its will. Unless she could plummet straight down, she'd have to swim rapidly away. Otherwise, Hycron would order the crew to haul her out. Neighboring slaves would clamp her with their oars. A third one would jump in, lashed to a rope.

Before another roller struck, Nerissa perched atop the rail. She gathered herself for a leap to clear the single tier of oars. She thought a last time of her family. Those butchered into soup meat on Laestrygon, others drowned or speared or crushed to mollify the heartless Gods. The fearsome end woven for her closest brother Euredon those starving days at Smyrna. Her own part in his death. Her little sister Geneia, who loved to sing among the birds, snatched from their boat into the swirling terror. Sweet Geneia would never rest inside a crypt. There'd be no figurines of loom and bed and such for comfort.

But this failure was the least of it. No one was left to tend her family altar. *No one but me*, Nerissa realized. *For half a year, I haven't even managed this. I've let my grief add to my guilt. Mother would think even less of me for that.*

Back home, she'd been instructed daily about the most important of all filial duties. Nerissa couldn't remember a day so lean that Mother failed to honor their ancestors. With each



offering, she'd always include aromatic herbs into the hearth.

"Knissa might be strong enough for Gods," she'd say, "but the smell and smoke of burning bones alone can't reach our long dead kin."

Above the seabirds' clamor, Nerissa could almost hear the cries of brave Euredon, innocent Geneia, and all the others as they languished by the Acheron, River of Eternal Sorrow.

"Hey, you!" shouted Chymides Eight-fingers. "That's right -- *you*. Geddown from there, you crazy bitch!"

As another roller broke against the hull, Nerissa launched herself into its spray. But Chymides caught her by the tattered hem of her peplos. His hands might be missing pinkies, but his arms were very long. Slender to begin with, Nerissa weighed no more than a yearling ewe-lamb now. Though she fought to break his grip, Chymides easily hauled her back aboard. He punched her jaw so hard, Nerissa was unconscious before her body struck the deck.

When she returned to this world of sorrow, Nerissa found herself chained once more to her bile-crusted plank. She understood that delaying on the rail had cost her chance at death's liberation. She cursed her faithless legs, but it had been the right decision. Someone must remain alive to carry on her family's memory.

Glancing down her body, though stung by its rebellion, Nerissa eased her scowl. She could only smile thinly at the Gods' cruel joke. So Berenice's guess was right. Indeed, there *was* another blessing. Someone had changed her clothing. Though the chiton was far too loose for her gaunt body, and its coarse wool rubbed against her wounds, the miracle was that it came freshly laundered.

Someone had scoured her, too -- she smelled of ocean salt. Her skin was scrubbed so raw, the pain was almost a relief. At least she'd have something beside despair to fill her thoughts until they landed.

# Alpha

Chained to Berenice in front and a fussy slave named Aphion behind, Nerissa stared resolutely at the port. This town was no great metropolis, yet it lay on the largest harbor she'd seen in all her travels. A high peak rose behind, extremely steep except for its bare summit. She heard the navigator Psatos call its name.

"Hail, shining Neriton, proud seat of valor-draped Ithacus," he said with words that sounded ancient. His arms were held up to the sky. "All praise to mighty, peerless Poseidon who guides us safely home."

Nerissa remembered Father's tale of the ancient hero Ithacus. He'd come shipwrecked to this island, then slain the winged monster Periphyne on the highest peak. He freed men from the torpor that the gryphon's vapor bred. Revived, they hailed Ithacus as the first king of their island.

At an order from Chymides, the galley slaves all shipped their oars. The mute who manned the kettle drum silenced his beat. The Thallia rode effortlessly into Ithaca's vast harbor. The water, now dark blue and free of waves except for a fast moving rip, surged at neap tide toward the port. Nerissa watched Psatos as he used a sounding rod to probe for clearance. She heard him sing out depths to Hycron at the helm. The Thallia glided to a smooth landing at the pier.

Above, three sailors raced across ratlines to furl the frayed sail tight. Others threw down mooring hawsers. Dock slaves tied these ropes to iron rings set into stone bollards. Rough voices rose into a great cacophony. Among the many languages, Nerissa picked out Ionian, Aeolian, Corinthian, Ionic, and Attic, alongside Minoan and Aramaic. She'd noticed the same thing in Smyrna. Slaves came from so many different places, they could hardly speak to one another, let alone organize to defy their overseers.

Bare-chested men extended a ramp from the pier up to the weather deck. Chymides shouted at his landing crew to get the slaves ashore at once. Hematheus prodded Berenice, who

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