Final part of the Odyssey

Penelope gets Odysseus's bow out of the storeroom and announces that she will marry the suitor who can string it and then shoot an arrow through a line of twelve axes. Telemachus sets up the axes and then tries his own hand at the bow, but fails in his attempt to string it. The suitors warm and grease the bow to make it supple, but one by one they all try and fail. The suitor Leodes tries the bow and fails: it is too stiff to bend. Other suitors lack the strength to string it as well. Meanwhile, Odysseus speaks to Eumaeus and the cowherd, Philoetius, outside the palace: he tells them his true identity, shows them his scar as proof, and enlists them in the coming battle. He asks Eumaeus to carry him the bow after the suitors have tried it, and to tell the maids to lock their doors; he asks Philoetius to lock the courtyard so that no men can escape.
We are reminded, after watching Odysseus beg in rags and tolerate insult after insult, that he is a hero in the traditional sense as well: he has extraordinary strength and skill. His weapon alone shows that he is far superior to the other men; they can't even string it! But even a hero like Odysseus is not too proud to resort to trickery or to accept help from servants. The notion of the mighty, singular hero is no longer accurate, in this book; 2700 years ago, it is already outdated. Ancient ideas of glory give way to more human notions of honor.

Odysseus reenters the palace, where Eurymachus has just failed to string the bow. Odysseus-the-beggar advises the suitors to rest and pray to the archer god while he himself tries the bow, just to amuse them. Antinous warns him angrily that he may end up like the drunken Centaur Eurythion, who was mauled by his hosts the Lapiths. But Penelope urges the suitors to let the stranger try his luck; there is no shame in such a thing, she says, compared to the shame the suitors have brought on the household. Telemachus asserts his right to be the one to hand over the bow and sends Penelope to her quarters.

Meanwhile, Odysseus follows Eumaeus and Philoetius outside. He assures himself of their loyalty and then reveals his identity to them by means of the scar on his foot. He promises to treat them as Telemachus's brothers if they fight by his side against the suitors.

When Odysseus returns, Eurymachus has the bow. He feels disgraced that he cannot string it, because he knows that this failure proves his inferiority to Odysseus. Antinous suggests that they adjourn until the next day, when they can sacrifice to Apollo, the archer god, before trying again. Odysseus, still disguised, then asks for the bow. All of the suitors complain, fearing that he will succeed. Antinous ridicules Odysseus, saying

that the wine has gone to his head and that he will bring disaster upon himself, just like the legendary drunken centaur Eurytion. Telemachus takes control and orders Eumaeus to give Odysseus the bow. Needless to say, Odysseus easily strings it and sends the first arrow he grabs whistling through all twelve axes.

Summary: Book 22

Before the suitors realize what is happening, Odysseus shoots a second arrow through the throat of Antinous. The suitors are confused and believe this shooting to be an accident. Odysseus finally reveals himself, and the suitors become terrified. They have no way out, since Philoetius has locked the front door and Eumaeus has locked the doors to the women's quarters. Eurymachus tries to calm Odysseus down, insisting that Antinous was the only bad apple among them, but Odysseus announces that he will spare none of them. Eurymachus then charges Odysseus, but he is cut down by another arrow. Amphinomus is the next to fall, at the spear of Telemachus.

Telemachus gets more shields and swords from the storeroom to arm Eumaeus and Philoetius, but he forgets to lock it on his way out. Melanthius soon reaches the storeroom and gets out fresh arms for the suitors. He isn't so lucky on his second trip to the storeroom, however, as Eumaeus and Philoetius find him there, tie him up, and lock him in.

A full battle now rages in the palace hall. Athena appears disguised as Mentor and encourages Odysseus but doesn't participate immediately, preferring instead to test Odysseus's strength. Volleys of spears are exchanged, and Odysseus and his men kill several suitors while receiving only superficial wounds themselves. Finally, Athena joins the battle, which then ends swiftly. Odysseus spares only the minstrel Phemius and the herald Medon, unwilling participants in the suitors' profligacy. The priest Leodes begs unsuccessfully for mercy.

Odysseus has Eurycleia come out. She openly rejoices to see the suitors dead, but Odysseus checks her impropriety. She rounds up the disloyal servant women, who are first made to clear the corpses from the hall and wash the blood from the furniture; they are then sent outside and executed. Odysseus tells Telemachus to cut them down with a sword, but Telemachus decides to hang them—a more disgraceful death. Last of all, the traitor Melanthius is tortured and killed. After the bloodbath, Odysseus has the house fumigated.

Telemachus brings out Eurycleia; she is happy to see the suitors dead, but Odysseus warns her that it is wrong to rejoice over the bodies of the dead. He tells her that the men's dishonorable behavior earned them the wrath of the gods. He then asks her to gather the dozen servant women who shamed the household by sleeping with the suitors. Once they arrive, he tells the servant women to help Telemachus, Eumaeus, and Philoetius clear away the corpses and the blood. When they finish the job, Telemachus hangs the women with a cable; then the three men take Melanthius outside and cut off his nose, ears, genitals, hands, and feet. Finally, Odysseus asks the servants to sterilize the house with smoke.

Eurycleia tells Penelope that Odysseus has finally come home and killed the suitors. The nurse mentions the telltale boar tusk scar on Odysseus's knee, but Penelope refuses to believe the story. She comes downstairs to speak to the stranger; he looks like Odysseus but also like the mysterious beggar. As she considers the stranger in indecision, Odysseus tells Telemachus that the palace must look as though they are celebrating a wedding; he wants to keep secret the fact that he has killed most of the high-born young men in Ithaca.
The scar is not proof enough for Penelope. Her suspicion is not cold-hearted, but just the opposite: she is so loyal to Odysseus that she fears betraying him in any way – even accidentally. To be loyal, she has to act disloyal at first; to love him, she has to act as though she doesn't love him. Disguise, to many of the characters, is a circuitous route to sincerity.

Athena changes Odysseus back into a handsome younger man. He chides Penelope for her cold welcome and tells the nurse that he will sleep alone. To test the stranger, Penelope tells Eurycleia to bring him the bridal bed, but Odysseus cries out angrily that the bed cannot be moved because he built it around an olive tree. The story is definite proof of his identity; Penelope cries and embraces him.