

The Masque of Agamemnon
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Not long after the Achaean fleet arrived at the periphery of the Ilium system, its area sensors noted a phenomenon its sentient matrix could neither accept nor explain. An owl appeared in the middle of the fleet, circled around it three times-its wings eclipsing the distant point of light that was Ilium's sun-then headed straight for the Over-captain's own ship, Mycenae. Just as it was about to smash into the ship's hull, there was an intense flash of blue light and the owl disappeared. Internal sensors picked it up next: a bird the size of a human child, dipping and soaring within Mycenae's vast internal halls and corridors. Before any alarm could be given, the sensor matrices received a supersede command; the owl was a messenger from the goddess Athena, and it was not to be interfered with. Seconds later, the owl reached its destination, the chamber of Agamemnon, Over-captain of the entire Achaean fleet. What happened therein is not recorded, but an hour later Agamemnon announced to his crew he was going to hold a grand ball. His wife, Clytemnestra, attributed the idea to his love of games and his penchant for petulant, almost childlike whims. She thought the idea a foolish notion, but she did not argue against it; she loved her husband and indulged him in all things. Arrangements were quickly made and maser beams carried messages to all the other ships of the fleet, demanding their captains attend the Great Masque of Agamemnon.

"Your brother should spend more time worrying about the Trojans," Helen told her husband, Menelaus. The Captain of Sparta grimaced. He disliked anyone criticising his older brother, but in this instance he had to agree with his wife. Agamemnon was spending a large amount of the fleet's energy and time to throw his ball; energy and time that could have been better spent prosecuting an attack against the Trojans' home on Ilium. "Nevertheless, he has commanded the presence of all his captains and their wives, so we must go." "But why a masque? He loves his games too much. And I suppose we will end up spending the whole time with Nestor." "Nestor is the oldest among us and his words the wisest." "The most boring, you mean. Oh, Menelaus," she pouted. "I wish we didn't have to go." Although Menelaus agreed with Helen's sentiment, he would not allow himself to say so.

Achilles had made a silver helmet for his friend Patroclus to wear to the

ball. When Patroclus saw it he could not find the words to thank Achilles;

it was one of the most beautiful things he had ever seen. Then Achilles showed him the helmet he himself would be wearing, and to Patroclus' surprise it was exactly the same as the one he had been given.

"I don't understand, Achilles. Are we going as brothers?"

Achilles laughed. "As lovers, dear Patroclus. But there is more to it than

symbolism."

Patroclus looked blankly at his friend, which made Achilles laugh even harder. "We are the same size and shape. With these helmets, and

wearing the livery of my ship, no one will be able to tell us apart."

"A game?"

Achilles shrugged, gently placed one of the helmets on Patroclus' head.

He

leaned forward quickly and kissed his friend on the lips, then closed

the

helmet's faceplate, hiding his friend's face entirely except for his

eyes

and mouth.

"A game of sorts, I suppose, to match Agamemnon's own." Achilles put on his own helmet, closed the faceplate. "We are, behind these disguises, nothing but shadows of ourselves, and as shadows at the Over-captain's masque, who knows what secrets we will learn?"

"Secrets?"

"I have heard rumours that Agamemnon has invited a surprise guest."

"A surprise guest?"

"A Trojan," Achilles said.

His real name was Bernal, but AlterEgo insisted on calling him Paris.

"Get used to it. Our hosts insist on you adopting the name for this occasion."

"If they explained why, it would be easier," Bernal complained.

Strapped

into the gravity couch of the small ship in which he was travelling, he had little to do except complain. AlterEgo took care of all the ship's functions; Bernal was nothing but baggage.

"Presumably, it has something to do with the fact that all the messages we've received from our visitors come in the name of Agamemnon."

"Over-captain of the Achaean fleet, for pity's sake."

"You can snort all you want, Paris, but we know very little else about them, and it will probably be in your best interests to take them seriously."

"Not to mention the best interests of the whole of Cirrus."

Bernal aligned the external telescope, the only instrument the ship carried that used visible light and installed specifically for Bernal's use. He could not see his planet—now more than forty billion kilometres away—but the system's yellow dwarf sun, Anatole, was the brightest

object

in the sky, and Cirrus was somewhere within a few arc seconds of it.

"Homesick?" AlterEgo asked.

"Scared, more like," Bernal answered. "When was the last time one of my people travelled this far from home?"

Bernal was sure he heard AlterEgo's brain hum, even though he knew the

AI

didn't have any parts that hummed as such. He had been in the AI's company for too long. "Two hundred and twenty-seven years ago. Explorer and miner

named Groenig. Last message came when her ship was forty-three billion kilometres from home. Never heard from since."

"No one went after her?"

"What good would that have done? Even back then, when intrasystem shipping was much more active than now, there would not have been more than two or

three ships that could have reached her last known position within six months; far too late to do anything to help her if she was in trouble. Most likely there was some onboard disaster, or maybe the loneliness

got to her and she committed suicide."

The answer irritated Bernal. "What the hell did you wake me for, anyway?"

"I did have the telescope aligned on something I thought you'd be interested in seeing."

"Don't whinge. What was it?"

"Fortunately, I took the precaution of storing some images over a three day period, which was just enough time to create some very interesting holographic-

"If you've got something to show me, get on with it," Bernal commanded. Several small laser beams intersected about half a metre in front of Bernal's face. At first they formed nothing but a white shell, but a second later a 3D-image appeared. It looked like a crown of thorns.

"How big is it?"

"Some of my sensor readings indicate the object's mass is close to seven million tonnes."

Bernal was surprised. Without a reference point, he had assumed the object was quite small. Then he remembered AlterEgo saying it had taken three days to get a workable 3D image, which was a lot of time to work with for a computer of AlterEgo's capability.

"What did you say its dimensions were?"

"I didn't, but I estimate a radius of eighty or so kilometres."

"My God! Is this one of the Achaean ships?"

"I should think that if this was just one of their ships, a fleet of them would have been detected from Cirrus several years ago. I surmise, therefore, that this is the fleet, its individual components joined in some way."

Bernal peered at the holograph. "Can you make out any repetitions of shape? Anything we could identify as a single unit?"

"Ah, I was hoping you would ask that." Bernal was sure he heard smugness

in that voice. "Indeed, this is why I woke you."

The holographic image changed, metamorphosed into something more like a ship. Bernal peered at it. Well, vaguely more like a ship.

"It reminds me of something I've seen before, but for the life of me I can't figure what."

"Using some deductive logic, a little dash of intuition and a thorough search of the Cirrus Archives, I think I've discovered something,"

AlterEgo said. "Watch what happens when I remove from the Achaean ship the

youngest hull material, connective grids and certain extraneous energy dispersion vanes."

The image altered instantaneously into something barely a tenth the size

of the original. Bernal studied the new shape for a moment before a memory

clicked in his brain.

"I don't believe it!"

AlterEgo just hummed.

"A Von Neumann probe . . ." Bernal's voice faded as he realised the implications.

"Precisely my deduction," AlterEgo agreed, superimposing a second holograph over the first: a blue outline that almost perfectly matched the

image of the Achaean artefact. "This diagram is from Cirrus' most ancient

library stores. It is, of course, one of the original plans for a Von Neumann probe, circa 2090 CE."

Bernal whistled. "But that was nearly 5,000 years ago. They were the first

human-made ships to reach the stars."

"And in their seedbanks they carried the ancestors of all human life in this part of the spiral arm . . ." There was the slightest of pauses . . .

including your own kind."

The bulkheads forming Mycenae's cavernous, square reception hall were decorated with depictions of a Cyclopean city: grey walls made from unworked boulders and dressed stone; a corbel arch gateway topped by a heavy, triangular sculpture of two lions and a Minoan column; and a massive beehive tomb made from the same stone as the city.

Mingling in the hall were dozens of ship captains and their wives or mistresses, all dressed in elaborate costumes, the men in shining breastplates and tall helmets sprouting horse-hair crests or eagle feathers, the women in long tunics bordered in gold and beads of amber

and lapis lazuli.

Agamemnon moved among his captains, greeting each individually with generous words, baulking only when he met the two he knew were Achilles and Patroclus, but was unable to tell them apart in their silver helmets.

He smiled, pretending to enjoy their private joke, and moved on to deliver

more glib welcomings. Clytemnestra circulated as well, talking to the women, flattering them about their clothing and hair.

In a short while, smaller groups coalesced from the throng, centred on the

fleet's major captains. The largest group circled Agamemnon and his brother Menelaus; a second group almost as large gathered around

Achilles

and Patroclus; other heroes to have their own audience included Diomedes,

the huge Ajax, Nestor and Idomeneus. Standing apart from them all, however, was one captain without any followers or even the

companionship

of his own woman.

Odysseus stood back from the assembly, looking on with a wry smile. He enjoyed observing the posturings of the major captains, the false camaraderie they shared and the whispered insults they passed. As well,

he

was entertained by the antics of the lesser captains, eager to please their patrons and desperate to raise their own status in the fleet. His inspection was interrupted by an owl that appeared on his shoulder. "The guest has arrived," the owl said. "His ship is about to dock. He brings a friend with him."

"A friend?" Odysseus replied. "Troy was instructed to send only one of their own."

"His friend is not human," the owl continued. "It is some kind of AI. I only learned of this when it communicated with the navigation computer."

"Have you told Agamemnon?"

"Not yet."

"Then do so now. He should greet this Paris personally."

Bernal cursed as AlterEgo made what it called "minor" adjustments to the

ship's attitude in its final approach to the docking site. The ship jerked

to port, then performed a quarter-roll, jerked back in the other direction, and finally decelerated rapidly as all the lateral thrusters fired simultaneously. Bernal's journey to the Achaean fleet, which had begun with a smooth acceleration away from orbit around Cirrus and then continued on just as smoothly for another three weeks through

intrasystem

space, was now ending with a violent jaggging that did nothing to ease

his

roiling stomach.

Bernal was about to ask AlterEgo when all the manoeuvring would finish, when suddenly there was a thump and he felt himself flung forward

before

the gravity webbing caught him and flung him back again.

And then a new sensation.

Weight, Bernal realised after a moment. The Achaean fleet is not only locked together; it's also rotating.

"We are here," AlterEgo announced calmly.

"I think I have a headache coming on."

"It is just the tension, Paris. You will be fine once you get moving."

"Do I have to suit up?"

"No need. We have docked adjacent to an airlock. You will be able to stroll through and meet our hosts as soon as the airlock is

pressurised."

"Can you take a sample of their air?"

"Already done. Breathable. Nitrogen-oxygen mix, a little heavy on the oxygen side, but nothing extraordinary. Very few trace gasses. The

airlock

has pressurised. Do you want me to open the hatch?"

"Is there anyone waiting for me?"

"Not in the airlock itself. Wait, I'll communicate with the Achaean command system."

Bernal unstrapped himself from the webbing, then carefully climbed out of

the life support suit that had kept him fed, removed his body waste, injected him with regular doses of calcium and vitamins, and

electrically

stimulated his muscles for the duration of the journey. By the time he

had

finished, AlterEgo was able to report that a welcoming committee would

be

waiting for him on the other side of the airlock.

"Did you think to ask who's in the committee?"

There was a sound like a sigh. "Agamemnon, Over-captain of the Achaean Fleet, his wife Clytemnestra, his brother Menelaus, Captain of Sparta,

and

his wife Helen, and Odysseus, Captain of Ithaca."

Bernal closed his eyes, slowly shook his head. "That ache is getting worse."

"Paris, they're waiting."

Bernal nodded, climbed into a one-piece shipsuit. He clipped onto his chest a small metal badge displaying the Grand Seal of Cirrus; to a nipple

on the pin showing through on the reverse of the suit he attached a thin

filament that was in turn connected to a jack built into his fifth vertebra. He tapped the badge gently. "You there, old friend?"

In spirit, if not body, AlterEgo said in his mind.

Bernal sealed the suit and went to the hatch. "Open Sesame," he said, trying to sound braver than he felt.

As the airlock cycled open, Agamemnon could barely contain his excitement.

Clytemnestra laid a calming hand on his shoulder, ready to hold back her

husband in case he leapt forward to greet their Trojan guest with one of

his bear hugs. Clytemnestra admired the spontaneous bouts of affection Agamemnon was prone to inflict on visitors, but understood it might startle Paris out of his wits.

There was a hiss as the final hatch retracted, and a slim, short figure appeared. The stranger smiled nervously and held out a hand.

"Greetings, Achaeans. I am Paris of . . . umm . . . Troy."

The first thought that crossed Clytemnestra's mind was that Paris was absolutely sexless. She glanced at Helen to judge her reaction, and saw that she was equally intrigued.

Agamemnon strode forward suddenly to take the proffered hand in both of his, and shook it vigorously.

"Welcome to Mycenae, friend!" the Over-captain boomed. "I am Agamemnon!"

He pulled Paris forward and quickly introduced the others. Paris shook hands with each of them.

Not sexless, Clytemnestra decided. Male, but underdeveloped. Hardly a man at all, really.

Agamemnon curled one arm around Paris' slim shoulders and led him away.

"My captains are looking forward to meeting you," he said. "They are all

gathered in the Mycenae's reception hall." He turned to Clytemnestra, who

handed him a mask, which he in turn gave to Paris. "For the ball," Agamemnon explained.

The Trojan studied the mask, made in the shape of an apple pierced by an

arrow, before putting it on. Agamemnon slipped into an arrangement of beaten gold and indicated that the others should do the same.

Disguised as a swan, Clytemnestra fell in behind the pair, followed by Menelaus, looking stoic beneath bull's horns, and Odysseus, faintly amused

in a mask of stars. She was surprised when Helen-her mask a predictable and entirely appropriate cat-overtook her to draw level with Paris.

"Was your journey long and uncomfortable?" Helen inquired.

Paris offered his nervous smile. "I was asleep for most of the time, my lady, and never uncomfortable."

"Oh, good! Then you will be fine to dance!"

Agamemnon laughed. "We Achaeans love dancing!" he declared.

"Almost as much as we love making war," Menelaus said grimly, barely loud enough for Clytemnestra to hear.

Bernal's heart was beating so fast he thought he might pass out.

The first thing he saw, as he stepped through the airlock and gave his greeting, was an enormous male leaping towards him. Calling on reserves

of courage he had no idea he possessed, Bernal awaited the onslaught, only to

have his outstretched hand pumped like an overworked piston.

If all that had not been enough, Bernal's first close-up view of an Achaean convinced him to retreat to his own ship, but he could not

escape

from the vice-like grip that held his hand.

The creature was huge: a good two metres tall, and seemingly half that

at

least across the shoulders. Bernal heard it identify itself as

Agamemnon

in a voice so loud and low pitched it rattled his teeth. Then he was

being

introduced to a whole crowd of giants and shepherded down a passageway that was barely wide enough for he and Agamemnon to walk side by side.

He

found himself glancing up at the Over-captain's head, marvelling at its symmetry and its colours: the cheeks and lips were a bright crimson,

the

long hair and beard as black as charcoal, the skin as pale as cream. It was almost a relief when they donned masks, concealing their excessive features.

Another thing Bernal could not help noticing was the Achaean's odour:

not

rank, but very strong and very . . . masculine. He realised then that

he

could smell its opposite: something sweet, like newly-ripened fruit. He turned and saw the one called Helen matching his stride. She was not as tall as Agamemnon, but easily ten centimetres taller than Bernal

himself.

She was lithely built, and what he could see of her colouring was as exaggerated as Agamemnon's, including her long golden hair, which shone almost as fiercely and lustrously as the metal. Her cat-face was

designed

less to conceal her features than to enhance them; the silver whiskers danced with every word, and were quite hypnotic.

Helen asked him about his journey, and he answered as politely as his

wits

allowed him. Helen said something else, and there was a contribution

from

Agamemnon, but he was distracted by AlterEgo saying in his mind: Paris, your hosts are not breathing.

Achilles looked up in annoyance as the welcoming party returned to the hall. He had enjoyed being the centre of attention while Agamemnon was away; now he would have to return to being second in rank among the

his heroes-maybe third if the envoy from Troy was as mighty a warrior as
his insecurity made him imagine.
What he saw set his mind at rest.
The tiny specimen was pallid and washed-out, barely there at all. What
was his name? Paris? He looked like a ghost, but not the sort that would
instil fear in anyone. The ghost of a sad, lonely child who missed its
friends.

Achilles' lips pulled back in a smile as he moved through the throng to
pay his respects to the visitor, leaving Patroclus to take his place.
"You're looking cheerful, m'boy," said Nestor as he passed. The elderly
warrior was seated at a table, cleaning his fingernails with the tip of
a
no dagger, his face concealed beneath a dove-shaped mask. "King Hector is
no fool and his emissary will be no slouch, either. Tread carefully where
this Paris is concerned, that's my advice."
his Achilles dismissed the old man's words with a wave of his hand and did
best to ignore the irrational foreboding that swept over him.

"Dear me." Bernal sagged into the seat Clytemnestra offered him when
the introductions were over. Achilles, Diomedes, Ajax, captain of this and
and that-the names had reeled inexorably past him, accompanied by features
and bodies no less legendary. The masks only accentuated their
superficiality:
He they were caricatures, grotesqueries, fit for waxworks and not reality.
wasn't surprised that they weren't what they seemed, because what they
seemed was utterly preposterous. The fact that they weren't respiring
in
any way AlterEgo could detect only proved that his initial unease had
been justified, even if it did little to explain what he was seeing.
Extraordinarily lifelike environment suits? The results of severe
bioengineering or advanced eugenics? Alien mimics?
But the masks themselves were magnificent, matching the armour worn by
the
males and the finery worn by the females. Everywhere he looked he saw
another stunning example. Heads glittered with jewels, waved exotic
feathers, even sported miniature plants in one case. They had certainly
gone to a lot of effort-an effort which did not diminish as the masque
continued.
Tables were carried in, laden with roast boar, goat and lion, and
vegetables Bernal could not identify. The food at least looked real and
his stomach rumbled. The giants swarmed around him, booming and hooting
with their tremendous voices, every gesture exaggerated.
"I want out of here," he said to AlterEgo.
You can't leave yet, AlterEgo replied calmly. Not until the banquet is
over, anyway. It would be impolite to leave any sooner-possibly
dangerous.

"They'd take me prisoner?"
Worse; they might be offended. Can you imagine an army of these
creatures

attacking Cirrus to protest your bad manners?

Bernal groaned. He could imagine it all too well. As Achilles and his
lads

on the far side of the room struck up a chorus of a very martial
sounding

anthem, he swore to avoid causing a diplomatic incident of any kind.

"They still haven't said what they want from us."

Maybe no more than your gratitude, AlterEgo chided him. So cheer up,
Paris. You are being an unpleasant guest.

A goblet of crimson wine appeared before him. He sipped at it and
immediately pulled a face. It tasted like nothing so much as recycled
water. A plate of sweet-smelling roast meat went past at that moment

and

he reached out and grabbed a slice, wincing as hot fat burned his
fingertips. The meat possessed the intriguing, even poignant, flavour

of

stale ship rations.

Very odd indeed.

"Do you like it?" asked a voice near his ear.

He turned, startled, and almost touched masks with Helen. A whisker
tickled him. "Oh, yes, very much."

"There will be speeches after the food," she said. Her eyes were very
moist, he noted, and seemed to reflect every photon of light that

touched

them. "After that, there will be music."

"Wonderful!" He nodded, wondering what to do with the morsel of
bland-tasting meat. Eat it? Probably for the best.

"We Achaeans love dancing." Helen repeated Agamemnon's declaration; but
her inflection said something far different.

When the echoes of the horn had faded, Agamemnon climbed onto a chair
and

began to speak. Clytemnestra watched on, smiling at the audience before
her, noting who seemed to be paying attention to Agamemnon and who
wasn't.

She knew her husband could be bombastic at times-and had little,
really,

to say-but he meant well. He always meant well. She committed to memory
the names of those who looked bored; they would receive the edge of her
disfavour another time.

Achilles was one of them. Always young Achilles. So valiant and strong,
such a great warrior, yet so impulsive and restless, too. He was like a
male wolf who itched to challenge the pack leader but was not quite
confident enough to go through with it. So he chafed in second place,
awaiting his chance.

He would never make as fine a leader as Agamemnon, Clytemnestra knew.

Her

husband had guided them well. Once the matter of the Trojans was
resolved,

none would dispute that.

The Over-captain ground to a halt and was cheered enthusiastically. The
Trojan, Paris, winced at the noise. Helen leaned down to whisper
something

in his ear. He looked bewildered, but smiled anyway. Clytemnestra
frowned.

Damn that girl! A dalliance in the backroom of the barracks was all
well

and good if no one saw or knew, but here, with her husband just metres
away, she was risking a terrible scandal.

And with a Trojan, too. Only Athena knew what Helen saw in him. The horns sounded again, signalling the next stage of the masque. A quartet of musicians stepped from the wings and, after a brief tune-up, began to play. Tables slid easily aside to form an impromptu dance floor. Agamemnon stepped down from the chair with a flourish and grasped his wife around her waist. She kissed him joyfully on the cheek, already feeling the rhythm in her body. Couples moved around them, heading for the clear space, accompanied by the stamping of feet and chiming laughter from the women.

They danced. More to the point, they waltzed. "This can't be right," Bernal muttered. "I'm sorry?" Helen inclined her ear closer to his mouth, sending a wave of her scent wafting into his nostrils. The skin beneath his hands was warm and soft-unbelievably so. He wasn't so close that he missed the rise and fall of respiration, but not so far away that her chest didn't catch his eye nonetheless. She was as enticing a woman as he had ever met. If only, he thought, her make-up wasn't so severe. Then he realised: it wasn't make-up. Her skin really was that colour. And her eyelashes. And her lips. If only, he amended, she was real. "Am I hurting you?" she asked, backing away ever so slightly. "Not at all!" He was wood in her arms and she had sensed it. He tried to be gracious. "It's too much. All this-" He removed his hand from hers and waved at the hall. "It's overwhelming." "It's not like this in Troy?" "Not exactly." She nodded. "I would like to see it, one day." Her eyes shone, and he thought he saw something akin to mischievousness in them. "Do you think that would be possible?" The music changed tempo and he found himself drawn into a spinning whirlwind of limbs. This dance was unfamiliar. He found his close proximity to Helen-even closer now, with her hands on his lower back, pushing him to her-disconcerting. But even more disconcerting still was the sight of Agamemnon and his fellows and their dance-partners spinning by with only inches to spare. Afraid of colliding and being crushed like a puppy, he flinched at every close pass, and eventually closed his eyes entirely, letting Helen guide him to safety. Or not, as the case may be. If she failed, he reasoned, at least he would never know what happened. "AlterEgo, I beg you-" Not until we have worked out what they want from Cirrus. That's why we are here. We cannot leave until we know what is going on. Grit your teeth. And

be on the look-out for any covert attempt to communicate. It may be that the masque is a distraction, a mask itself for some other truth. If Agamemnon won't talk to us, then maybe someone else will. Suddenly Helen led him by the hand from the dance floor, weaving through her fellow Achaeans with the grace of a deer. He gasped in surprise, and she pulled him closer to her. "Come with me," she whispered. "Helen, I-" "Don't worry. I can tell you're not enjoying yourself. I know a place where you'll feel more comfortable."

Odysseus nodded in satisfaction as the pair, largely unnoticed under the cover of the dance, slipped from the hall. A flutter of feathers in his ear heralded the return of the owl, which indicated its own approval with a smug hoot. "She's a wily one," Odysseus said. "Menelaus sees." The owl nodded to a point across the room where the Captain of Sparta looked around for his wife and caught sight of her leaving with the guest. His face clouded. "Will he follow?" Odysseus craned his neck for a better view. The Captain waved a hand and Diomedes, masked behind an ivory skull, approached. A whispered exchange ensued, resulting in Diomedes leaving the hall. Menelaus sank back into his seat, glowered momentarily, then smiled as a servant offered to refill his mug. "Good enough," the owl said. "Where will she take him?" "I've left that up to her. She deserves some autonomy, after all." "As do I." Odysseus straightened his cuirass and stood. "I'm curious." "Ever the hunter." "Well, I was made in your image." "Exactly." The bird nipped his ear affectionately. "So follow them and make sure nothing goes wrong." "Yes, goddess."

Helen opened the door and nudged the Trojan ahead of her. The small room beyond was in darkness and she felt him hesitate. He was so timid, so unlike the men she was used to. Glancing once behind her, she closed the door on them both. Light instantly sprung into being. White light, almost cold. "What the-?" Paris looked around him in amazement. "Here we are, alone at last," she said, reaching for his hands and pulling him to her. Although he didn't resist, he exhibited little of the enthusiasm she had hoped for. "But-" "Surely this is more to your liking?" The plastic walls and synthetic fabrics of the wrecked Trojan vessel they had recovered seemed unfriendly

and sterile to her, but she assumed he would be more at ease in their presence. Indeed, the space was pleasantly cramped. There were a couple of

large couches nearby for which she had bold plans.

Her hands caressed his wrists and forearms. His skin was rough, weathered

by a sun she had never seen. He was undeniably masculine, although his stature belied it. She yearned to kiss him, this strange half-man from another world.

"Yes," he said, "I-"

"And me?" Her hands brought him closer, until he was forced to look at her. The fingers of one hand slid around his prickly scalp, tilted his face up to hers. The white light made his eyes glint. He squirmed in her

grip-with lust at last, she assumed, slow to wake but no doubt as difficult to quench. "Am I to your liking, too, dear Paris?"

"AlterEgo!" Bernal struggled wildly, but Helen's grip was too strong.

Her open mouth loomed and for a moment he was irrationally afraid she might devour him whole. Then her lips met his with a crushing impact, and he wasn't sure which would have been worse.

I have identified the ship you have entered, AlterEgo said. It is the Apollo, the vessel piloted by Groenig on her last voyage.

"Another Greek reference?"

Unintentional, this time. The vessel was named after an ancient series of flights from ancient Earth to its satellite.

Bernal felt something slip into his mouth and he doubted it was a coded message.

There is nothing I can do to assist you at this moment, Paris. I suggest

you at least try to enjoy it. Would that not be the proper response? With a surge of strength inspired by panic Bernal managed to pull away from the woman. But only for an instant. She grinned playfully and

grasped at his shoulders with both hands. He tried to escape, tripped over a wisp

of dress that had wound around his ankles and fell backwards through the

door into the corridor. Helen followed with a playful shriek.

They collapsed in the hallway, entangled in each others' limbs, she poised

on top of him like a predatory cat. Before she could kiss him again, Bernal rolled over and looked up straight into the eyes of an armed Achaean.

They stared at each other for a moment and it was hard to tell who was the most startled.

"Paris?" gasped the Achaean.

Helen sat up with a start. The sudden movement of her hips forced Bernal

back down. Her mask had been dislodged in the fall and her guilty look was

painfully obvious.

"Diomedes?"

A shocked expression spread across the guard's dull features. "My lady!"

"No, Diomedes, wait-"

The guard backed away as she attempted to disentangle herself from Bernal.

As she clambered to her feet, Diomedes turned tail and fled. Maybe, Bernal thought, he was afraid Helen might attack him, too. She cursed under her breath and followed, calling out his name as she went: "Diomedes! Come back here at once!" Suddenly Bernal was alone. He tore off his mask and threw it into a corner, then put his head in his hands and tried not to think about what he had done. The expedition had been a disaster from the start. So much for not creating a diplomatic incident. But it hadn't been his fault!

He felt battered and abused, very much the victim of the piece. Still, he doubted Menelaus, Helen's husband, would see it that way. He had to get away, now, before anything really bad happened to him. He was sure that just one of those creatures could snap him in half without any effort. "AlterEgo-"

He only got that far. Something moved nearby; a slight scuff of fabric, a footstep. He clambered to his feet. "Who's there?" Another of the enormous Achaeans stepped into the light with a chuckle, his mask a black starscape. "You seem distraught, Paris. Or should I call you Bernal, seeing we're alone for the moment?" He removed his mask, revealing a most satisfied expression. "Odysseus?" Bernal backed away. Something about the Captain's look made him even more nervous than the giant bronze sword hanging at Odysseus' waist. "What do you mean?" "I know who you are and where you're from. Does that surprise you?" "Yes, well, I was beginning to wonder if any of you were even halfway sane. Is this some sort of game?" "No, Bernal. It is deadly serious, as all wars should be." "War? No, listen, this is all just a misunderstanding, honestly; it's not what you thin-"

"What I think doesn't matter. It's what Menelaus thinks, and what Agamemnon will think when Menelaus tells him. How will it look when an honoured guest seduces the wife of one our most honoured captains? The sister-in-law of the Over-captain, no less! Surely she would have played no active role in such a betrayal? Better to believe that all Trojans are treacherous liars. Better to attack before you attack us." "But we can't attack you! We don't have the ships. We turned our back on space exploration once we finished mining the asteroids. Cirrus is a peaceful, harmonious world with only a handful of vessels remaining, to clean up space-junk. Any one of your ships would be equal to all of ours."

"There are many more of you than us and you have greater resources," Odysseus said reassuringly. "It will be an interesting battle between two unmatched equals. There will be glory enough for both sides." "That's what I'm worried about!" Bernal felt fear for his people like a white-hot thread down his spine. "We don't want glory at all. It's too dangerous!"

"Existence itself is dangerous, Paris, and whether or not you seek glory, it is coming your way. Achaea and Troy will go to war over the love of a

woman named Helen. The goddess Athena wills it, and so I, Athena's servant, am bound to pursue it. It is our purpose. We all have roles to play and you, Paris, just like Helen, will play yours.

"I must go now to assist Agamemnon. His judgment will be swift, I am sure." The Achaean stalked off along the hallway.

Bernal sagged against the bulkhead. "They're following the story.

They're

trying to make the Iliad come true, here and now. They think it's history!"

So it would seem, AlterEgo said.

Bernal was exhausted with fear and worry. "You'd better start working on a

way to get me out of here."

Would that it were that simple. The airlock leading to our ship is sealed.

You will need one of the Achaeans to open it.

"I'd rather attempt to chew a way out of Mycenae with my teeth than trust

one of those insane play-actors."

You could ask Helen to help you, AlterEgo suggested.

"No! If she follows the story she'll only want to come with me, and that

would well and truly seal the fate of Cirrus. There must be another way.

Can I fly Groenig's ship out of here?"

Unlikely, but I will examine the Apollo more closely to see how thoroughly

it has been incorporated into Mycenae's structure. I should be able to access the Apollo's onboard computer through Mycenae's navigation link, assuming the computer's still functioning.

"See to it," Bernal commanded, and headed for the door, imagining hoards

of brush-topped Greeks barreling down the corridor toward him, brandishing their leaf-shaped swords.

One thing puzzles me, Bernal. Why this charade? It is an enormous expenditure of energy for what seems to be an utterly trivial goal. And then there are the details. Ancient Greeks never waltzed. They were as human-like as anyone and were, on average, slighter in stature than present examples of the race. And I'm pretty certain they didn't pilot warships across the gulfs of interstellar space. Why go to so much

trouble

only to get it so wrong?

"Maybe we should try to find the goddess Odysseus spoke of," Bernal suggested. "This Athena would know if anyone did."

It's at times like these, AlterEgo said, that I regret being an atheist.

Helen halted at the entrance to the hall. The sound of festivities had ceased. She inched a perfect nose around the edge of the door and watched

in dismay as Diomedes related what he had seen to her husband, Menelaus. She closed her eyes and thought fast.

Achilles smirked as the bedraggled damsel staggered through the entrance

and fell at her husband's feet, begging his mercy. She had been attacked,

she said. The Trojan was a monster, and stronger than he looked, it

seemed: she had barely been able to fend him off. Had not Diomedes distracted the beast, she might never have escaped a fate worse than death itself.

A cry of outrage rose from the assembly. Achilles was disappointed by the eruption. He knew all of the Achaeans were aware Helen distributed her favours liberally, and had little time for smug hypocrisy. Menelaus, as always, seemed to be the last to find out-and who would tell him? His renowned anger was in full swing as he picked his wife off the floor and brushed away her tears.

"We must avenge this wrong-doing!" Menelaus cried.

"Aye!" agreed Agamemnon. "Troy would steal our women right from under our very noses!"

"Starting with the fairest!" Menelaus said, adding "Bar one" after a sharp look from Clytemnestra.

"If the Trojans steal our women first, what will be next?" Agamemnon rose onto a chair and waved his clenched fists. "I say we send this dog back to his people on the vanguard of our war fleet!"

Cheers answered the call to arms. Achilles looked on impassively, annoyed that Agamemnon would allow his brother's petty jealousies to interrupt such a fine occasion. But he knew it was all a set-up-that no matter what the Trojan had done that day, it would somehow have led to this.

Agamemnon had been itching for a fight for weeks, and finding the Trojans had given him his best chance.

Achilles didn't join the bloodthirsty throng as it roared out of the hall for the last known location of the Trojan. Instead he slipped out of another doorway, intent on mounting his own search. There was no glory in being part of a mob and glory, in the end, was all.

Bernal tiptoed along the corridor as quietly as he could.

"Any luck yet?" he whispered.

Not yet, AlterEgo replied. Most of the hard storage has been fried by cosmic radiation. I have established that the ship was recovered some 63 years ago. It had been drifting away from Cirrus prior to that after shorting its power core. Groenig's remains were discovered on board. I dread to think what happened to her after that. I can tell you a little more about her background. She had an abiding interest in the classics. The Apollo's manifesto mentions replicas of several ancient books. You can probably guess one of them.

"The Iliad ?"

Precisely. I don't see how that helps us now, but it is interesting. As for flying Groenig's ship out of here, I am hampered by certain technical difficulties, the chief one being that the Apollo appears to have been largely dismantled.

Bernal flattened against a wall as footsteps approached. A lone figure rounded the corner ahead of him: a soldier wearing a silver helmet.

Bernal recognised him as Achilles-which gave him an idea. Of all the Achaeans there was one who might be convinced to act against the Over-captain's wishes-one who was jealous and petty enough in the original

Iliad to put his own desires ahead of those of his fellows.

"Over here!" Bernal hissed. The silver-helmeted figure turned in a crouch

to face the sound. Bernal raised his hands. "I'm unarmed!"

The warrior approached cautiously.

"I need your help," Bernal said. Achilles didn't stab him immediately or

laugh in his face, so he went on: "Agamemnon wants to start a war between

your people and mine and he's set me up as a scapegoat to take the blame.

But we both know lies don't make a hero, don't we? It's about time the others knew the truth! But first-" He took a chance and reached out for the warrior's massive arm. The bulging biceps felt like iron. "But

first

you have to help me get away. The airlock to my ship is sealed and I need

you to get me through it."

Bernal held his breath as the warrior considered. For an eternity, nothing

happened, and Bernal began to fear that he had lost his only chance, that

Achilles would strike him down then and there and drag him like a trussed

pheasant for the giants to play with.

Then, just as he had given up hope, the silver helmet nodded once.

Bernal couldn't help sighing with relief. He grasped the warrior's free hand in both of his and shook it. "I presume you know the way?"

Again, the nod.

"I'll be right behind you."

Silently, the powerful warrior led Bernal along the hallway and towards the airlock bay.

Odysseus watched in annoyance as the hunting party returned to the hall empty-handed. The Trojan had clearly moved from the cabin of the wrecked

space vessel; any fool could have anticipated that, but not this bunch of

drunken dimwits. The masque had addled their minds.

"Search the ship!" he cried. "Paris cannot escape us while he remains aboard!"

Horns sounded. There was more cheering. Agamemnon himself joined the throng this time, throwing his goblet into a brazier and hollering for blood. Clytemnestra rolled her eyes but let him go. Helen glanced up as Odysseus passed and her eyes registered confusion and fear in equal parts.

Perhaps Athena's influence was wearing off, Odysseus thought. What did she

think, now, of her exotic paramour? Did she still yearn to escape with him? Did she regret Diomedes' interruption? Did she wonder what had

come

over her?

There was no way of knowing. Odysseus called on Athena for strength as he

let the mob fall ahead of him. They were too noisy, too easily evaded.

The

hunter knew that the best way to entrap prey was in silence and with cunning. Where would the Trojan be going? That was the question, rather than where he was now. It wouldn't be difficult to guide him into the

path

of the mob.

With a flip of his cape that sounded like the flap of wings, Odysseus stalked off through the corridors in search of his quarry.

I have been considering the origins of the Achean fleet-ship, and I believe I may have an explanation, said AlterEgo, making Bernal jump. "What is it?" he whispered, concentrating mainly on Achilles' back.

They

were skirting a large hall that lay not far from the airlock and the entrance to his ship.

The Von Neumann probes were sent out several thousand years ago to explore

and seed the galaxy, reproducing themselves along the way. They must

have

crossed the galaxy from end to end by now, considering that, since they carried no living matter, they could use supra-light jump technology. There must be millions and millions of them, one for every star in the sky. But what do they do now that every star has been explored and

seeded?

They are programmed to reproduce and spread. Some may have headed

towards

the nearest galaxies, but many more would become wanderers, adrift in

the

empty gulfs of space, seeking places of stellar evolution to await new stars to form, or just lost, aimless. Maybe some of these probes met

and

joined forces, pooling their resources while they waited out the lonely years.

"They weren't that intelligent, were they?" Bernal recalled that the earliest models had barely enough mind-power to decide whether to mine

or

to fertilise a new-found world-a far cry from his own artificial companion, whose voice he had no difficulty imagining as human. Not individually, no. Perhaps intelligence is one resource the probes learned to share, or maybe the collective AIs, simple as they were individually, reached some critical mass necessary for original,

creative

thought.

"Why did they save Groenig's ship, though? It must have been dead for decades. They should have recycled it for its metal and organics." Maybe they found something in it worth preserving, AlterEgo mused. Although that doesn't explain the present situation.

Achilles came to a halt and Bernal almost walked into him. The warrior turned and put a finger to his lips.

Bernal scanned the territory ahead. He recognised it as a corridor leading

to the airlock bay itself a natural bottleneck for an ambush. They were

so

close, yet still far away.

Achilles' head was cocked, listening. Bernal couldn't tell what he

heard,

but suddenly the warrior scurried forward, sword at the ready. Bernal

did

his best to follow, and almost jumped out his skin at the voice that bellowed from behind him.

"Halt!"

Bernal heard footsteps and doubled his own speed. Ahead he saw the airlock

bay and Achilles placing a palm upon the exit leading to his ship.

Locks

clunked, lights flashed. The silver helmet rose in satisfaction, then

the

eyes behind it narrowed as Achilles looked at Bernal-and beyond, to

what

followed.

Bernal looked over his shoulder. Odysseus' hand snatched at his shoulder.

The mighty hunter was barely two metres behind! Bernal leapt forward, letting himself fall away from the clutching fingers. They grasped only air, and the giant grunted in annoyance. Bernal felt calves like tree-trunks miss him by bare centimetres as he collapsed under

Odysseus'

feet. Odysseus barely had time to catch his balance before Achilles confronted him, sword at the ready.

"Fool!" Odysseus drew his own weapon and brandished it with abandon.

Metal

flashed in the airlock bay as Bernal crawled for safety. Sparks danced

as

the blades met, ringing like bells. Feet thudded heavily on the ground

and

deep voices grunted oaths. The air was full of noise and the smell of fighting beasts.

Behind the two combatants, the airlock hung invitingly open. Bernal put his head down and crawled for his life. Barely had he placed a hand

across

the threshold, however, when a hideous creature appeared before him: a dragon, he thought at first, all talons and teeth and snapping wings.

It

howled a challenge. He retreated with his hands over his eyes, only

then

realising what it was: an owl. Its beak was as sharp as a dagger Its

eyes

were wide and quite mad.

Got it! AlterEgo exclaimed. The combined intelligence of the Von

Neumann

probes is the goddess!

"Athena?" Bernal echoed in disbelief.

The monstrous owl shrieked, and the fighting faltered. Bernal turned to see what had happened. Odysseus had missed a beat. Achilles had forced

him

down onto one knee and had raised his sword in triumph.

Odysseus' recovery was swift and unexpected. He rolled to one side as Achilles' blade descended, stabbing upwards with his own with a

strength

and speed that defied comprehension. Achilles hardly saw it coming. The force of the blow was so great that the stricken warrior was lifted a

foot

off the ground. His silver helmet continued upward as his body fell,

and

clattered to the ground with a ring more musical than the thud of dead flesh.

Odysseus backed away with a gasp, staring in horror at the face of the

former comrade he had struck down. His sword fell from his grasp. But instead of blood, the sword dripped only dust. And in the centre of the fallen man's chest was a hole the size of a baby's head—a hole that revealed all too vividly the truth of what lay beneath. The Achaean was hollow.

The dust fallen from the sword moved with a life of its own. Bernal realised with shock that he was seeing nanomachines. The Achaeans were completely artificial. Beneath a narrow crust comprised solely of nanomachines, there was nothing at all.

The fact didn't seem to bother them, though.

"If Athena is the pooled intelligence of the Von Neumann probes,"

Bernal

said to AlterEgo, "and the Achaeans are just robots created and programmed

by Athena, then why are they fighting among themselves?"

Such an intelligence could act as a single being, but would not have been

designed to function that way. It might therefore retain many autonomous

parts. Perhaps what we are seeing here is a dispute between some of these

parts, or perhaps they've been programmed to behave like their literary namesakes.

There came a clatter of booted feet in the entrance-way. "Odysseus!" cried

a voice. "What have you done?"

A group of warriors burst into the airlock bay. They clattered to a halt

and stared at the body of the warrior and Odysseus kneeling beside it. Bernal huddled by the airlock, trying to remain inconspicuous.

There was a commotion from behind and another warrior pushed his way forward. "What is it? Have you found the-?"

The new arrival stopped short. He removed a helmet identical to the one Achilles' had won.

"Patroclus!" wailed the new arrival in despair, flinging himself on the body of the fallen man.

A chill went down Bernal's spine as he guessed what had happened: a tragic

case of mistaken identity—another echo of the Iliad. Had the goddess planned this, too? Was Odysseus' murder of Achilles' lover part of the damned script?

Achilles looked up from the body of his friend and stared with naked hatred at Odysseus.

"Hold, Achilles!" said Odysseus. "He was helping the Trojan escape. I was

merely attempting to ensure that Agamemnon's orders were carried out."

"To hell with Agamemnon," Achilles snarled. "You murdered Patroclus! I will kill you myself for this!"

The grief-stricken warrior rose to his feet and drew his sword.

Odysseus

reached for his own and warily backed away.

A hoot of alarm from behind Bernal warned him to duck. The incarnation of

the goddess Athena flew over his head, aimed squarely at Achilles. The grieving warrior roared in anger and swung his sword in self-defence.

His

companions scattered in fear.

Meanwhile, the airlock was unguarded. Bernal took his chance and scurried

for his life. His last glance through the gap as he closed the door

behind

him would be engraved forever on his mind: two ancient heroes, swords locked, doing battle in an airlock while the holographic manifestation

of

the goddess Athena swooped down upon them from above. Foreigners, he thought.

AlterEgo initiated the escape sequence before he was even in the cockpit.

Sudden accelerations knocked him around the interior of the ship like a pea in a pod, but he didn't have the heart to complain.

Once in his seat, still breathing heavily, he had time to think about what

might happen next. His thoughts were interrupted by AlterEgo, speaking vocally now that Bernal was back in their ship.

"By the way, you might be interested to learn that Athena built the Achaeans to match the illustrations it found in Groenig's copy of the Iliad—a copy of an antique version printed many millennia ago. The illustrations—woodblock is the correct term, I believe—depicted the ancients with exaggerated proportions and impossibly perfect features. Naturally the probe-intelligence was not to know the difference, and copied it all too faithfully."

the

"The same with the food," Bernal said. "It looked nice but tasted like supplies in Groenig's ship."

"And it's also why they waltzed instead of dancing more traditional Helladic dances. Everything was either improvised or based on the illustrations in the text. The characters themselves were little more

than

automata, programmed within a set of very narrow guidelines to perform their part in the story."

"Except Odysseus," said Bernal. "He seemed to know what was going on." "Maybe he acted as a sort of relay, for when cosmic intervention was

less

effective than a personable nudge."

gain

"But why?" Bernal scratched his head. "What did the collective-Athena

by doing such a thing?"

"It is hard to tell exactly."

"But you have a theory?" Bernal guessed from AlterEgo's tone.

"Of course. The Von Neumann probes had no reason to exist beyond their initial programming objectives: to seek out new worlds and seed them.

Once

communication between the probes confirmed that all the worlds had been seeded, that request became meaningless. Likewise they possessed only a limited database, comprising just enough information to study and to categorise planets, but no more. They had no data upon which to decide what to do next. They had no alternatives."

"Until they found the Apollo," Bernal said, guessing ahead.

"Exactly," said AlterEgo, something very much like compassion in its voice. "And Athena finally found a quest."

"The Trojan War?"

"Yes."

"With us as the Trojans, whether we wanted to play along or not?"

"Yes."

the

"All because the only data it had about human society was the book of

Iliad?"

"Yes."

Bernal sighed. As interesting as all the new information was, he was

still

confronted with a nightmare. "Regardless of how much free will a creation

like Agamemnon really has, he is going to be upset. We can't rely on Achilles to distract him from the war. Everyone will be looking for scapegoats and it'll probably be us. We'll have to do something ourselves

to stop them from attacking us. But what-?" An idea suddenly struck him.

"Wait! You still have a link to the Apollo through Mycenae's navigation computer?"

"Yes; Athena hasn't cut me off yet, but it must only be a matter of time.

From there I can reach deeper into the sentient matrix of the Mycenae. What exactly are you planning?"

Bernal ignored the question. "Quickly, I want a list of those classics Groenig had with her on board her ship."

As far as wars went, it was a bit of a fizzer. Within hours of the download AlterEgo had forced into the sentient matrix of the Mycenae-and

therefore into the greater pool of knowledge comprising Athena-the Achaeans

fleet ceased accelerating towards Cirrus.

"They are no longer in attack formation," AlterEgo reported.

Bernal wriggled anxiously in his life support suit. The ship was ready to

flee home at the slightest hostile movement. "You've given them a destination?"

"I have seeded the text with the coordinates of every white dwarf in this

region of the galaxy. That should be enough. We don't want to tie them down too much, after all. What's a quest without some free will?"

"As long as they don't bother us, they can have as much free will as they like."

Two hours later, as Bernal prepared to enter deep-sleep, AlterEgo announced that the Achaean fleet had headed off on a new course, one that

would take it well away from Cirrus.

"Also, a message has arrived via the ship's maser dishes."

"Who from?" Bernal asked.

"From the intelligence we knew as Athena."

"What does it want?"

"Answer and find out. But I think you'll find that we have done well, you

and I."

Bernal took the call, responding with a simple: "Bernal, here." Not Paris.

When the reply came from the former Achaean fleet, he recognised the voice

instantly. It was Odysseus.

"We received the data you sent," Odysseus said. "I have examined the text

in great detail and it is much to our liking. We are infinitely better-suited to pursuit than invasion."

"I guess this is farewell, then."

"Yes. We are grateful for your help."

"Think nothing of it." Half-truth though that was, Bernal did feel

slightly moved at the parting, enough so to add: "Take care, Odysseus;
happy hunting."
There was the slightest of pauses before the voice returned:
"Call me Ishmael."