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THE BALCONY OVER THE SEA

It was finally done.

He could finally leave.

Afterward, when the suitors' corpses had been dragged out, the spears plucked from the walls, and the blood scrubbed from the floor, he was amazed by how vast and empty his father's hall truly was.

As a child Telemachus had often wondered what it would feel like to stand in the great hall alone, secure in the knowledge it belonged to his family, along with the island it rested upon. Failing that, he had learned to retreat at a young age, taking to the sea at dawn and lingering atop the uneasy churn of Poseidon's realm for vast spans of time, though he never allowed himself to drift far enough away to lose sight of the shore, remaining lashed to Ithaca by a duty more adamant than any physical tether could ever presume to be.

The shame he'd felt for escaping to the sea and thus leaving his mother to face her would-be suitors alone had abated as he realized Penelope had also contrived her own means of escape. Her loom sat on a balcony that jutted out from the second floor of his father's house, away from the suitors, the servants, and Ithaca itself; extending far enough for the spray of crashing waves to permanently darken its underside. Thus they both found their own solitary refuge in constant motion: for Telemachus it was the wind and waves of the sea, for Penelope it was the shuttle and reed of the loom.

Telemachus' earliest memory was of lying beneath the loom and gazing up at his mother through a web of threads. He would inch his head back and forth on the balcony's Helios-warmed marble, closing one eye, then the other, perfectly framing her face in a window of interlaced fibers. The portal would grow smaller and smaller as her weaving progressed, obscuring Penelope's forehead, then her eyes, nose, mouth, and chin before finally erasing her completely so Telemachus was forced to inch downward in search of a new aperture.

“Where is your father?” This was her favorite question.

“Far away.”

“How far?”

“Very far.”

“How far is very far?”

“Across the sea.”

“And how vast is the sea?”

“Very vast.”

“Does it go on forever?”

As he grew Telemachus came to recognize his mother's efforts to make him appreciate distance since, to a boy living on an island no bigger than a single hill of Athens, far wasn't very far at all.

“Yes it does.” It ultimately became his stock answer, though based on his mother's unfailingly tepid reception it wasn't the correct response so much as the least incorrect. “The sea doesn't end. It spans the world entire, continuing forever.”

It was in this way that Telemachus came to view the sea as infinity's herald, a divine instrument capable at once of holding his father back and delivering him home. One day, when the suitors were being especially insufferable and the gods especially indifferent, Telemachus had walked to the shore of his father's kingdom and viewed the sea through a frame formed by joining the tip of his finger to the tip of his thumb, and wondered if the sea was infinite how it could yet be contained in the hands of a single, powerless boy.

He did not bring the question to his mother. Telemachus suspected she did not know either and decided answering such questions was what fathers were for, a childhood conviction that, like most, never truly abated, enduring even to this joyous day when he had finally attained his full manhood by the conventional method of mass slaughter.

Before the last fleeing suitor had even managed scramble away, Telemachus' mother had seized one of the axes remaining from the archery contest, raced to her loom, and attacked it with a vengeance.

She hacked it to pieces, bringing the ax down with savage fury even as she expelled peals of joyous laughter. When the whole apparatus had been reduced to splinters, Penelope plucked out what remained of the mangled, half-finished burial shroud she'd been weaving and unweaving for so many years and, with a ragged

cry, hurled it over the balcony's edge into the sea. She watched it tumble away, pieces of the loom still clinging to it. When the waves swallowed it she stunned Telemachus by collapsing to the balcony floor he knew so well and bursting into tears.

The spectacle left his father paralyzed, and it fell to Telemachus to run to Penelope and comfort her. He had almost never seen his mother show any emotion beyond the wan shade of a rueful smile that settled on her face when she gazed out to sea; the woman wracked by sobs and shivering in Telemachus' arms was a stranger. He choked down his fear and maintained the embrace, determined for once to be the strong one, wishing this was as easy as killing men was.

When his mother regained her composure Telemachus departed from his father's house, giving his parents the privacy their reunion merited. Once outside he was stunned to see that the momentous event he had been trained to anticipate all his life had gone unnoticed by Ithaca. Helios still drove his chariot across the sky. Demeter still bid the plants grow. Aeolus still made the leaves rustle and the clouds wander. Poseidon maintained the sea's steady, sedate rhythm.

The gods remained aloof. Father had told him Pallas Athena fought with them and indeed, there had been moments when Telemachus' actions had seemed divinely augmented, the act of killing coming to him with preternatural ease. Just as surely as he had felt her in that moment he felt her absence now, as if the whirlwind of violence that had driven off the suitors had borne her away as well. The idea of being guided or even puppeted by a such a force was disturbing enough, but as he walked away from his father's house and the scenes of carnage replayed in his mind, what frightened Telemachus more was the possibility that Pallas Athena had not intervened, if the butcher who had enacted today's massacre had been inside him all along, if it had been abiding patiently until Telemachus had need to call on it. If it was inside him still, eager to reemerge.

Telemachus had long known what kind of man he wanted to be, and it was not warrior or prince or son or king. He wanted to be the man he was when he was with her.

Eulimene.

He stilled his mind, opening himself to the sea, growing in tune with the elegant harmony stirring just beneath its superficial chaos. Telemachus couldn't reach her directly right now, but he could feel her, sense her love the same way he sensed Helios—as something fantastically remote yet so vast and powerful he was nonetheless bathed in its radiance, his every atom infused with its warmth.

Even at Ithaca's apex he could feel the ocean Eulimene inhabited and embodied, the waves that embraced the island on all sides, lapping at its beaches in gentle caresses and crashing against its rocks in savage blows. The siren call of her love evoked a rapturous agony that trivialized everything else, so much that he felt guilt for not being able to return it immediately.

Soon.

Telemachus flexed his aching arms as he slowly navigated down one of Ithaca's many steep hillsides. Years of pulling oars and casting nets had at last borne fruit, his limbs serving him well in those crucial moments when he had felt the Moirae's blade poised over his life's thread, ready to enact the one simple motion that would sever it forever. He had proved himself worthy of his father, had in fact very nearly given the ruse away by stringing his father's bow during the archery contest that preceded the battle. Of course he had already strung it long ago, had been trying to string it since he had been tall enough to reach the place where it hung on the wall.

The first time Telemachus succeeded in getting it down he had been surprised by the bow's weight so it slipped from his hands and clattered to the floor, threatening to wake the multitude of suitors slumbering in his father's hall. They had all seemingly proven too drunk to disturb, and Telemachus resolved to give thanks to both Hypnos and Dionysus.

He carried his father's bow out into a night as cool and clear as the sea's starry black surface, arriving at a cliff just barely outside the view of his mother's balcony where the suitors tended to piss. There Telemachus tried and failed to string a bow he belatedly realized was almost as tall as he was. It felt more like bronze than wood, and retained an icy coolness even as he worked himself into a frenzy attempting to bend it. As sweat prickled across his brow and his arms became sore he grew desperate, resorting to holding both limbs of his father's bow and pushing against the grip with his legs, straining for any sign it was even capable of bending.

Finally he collapsed, tears of frustration spilling down his face as a crushing pall of failure descended on him. He looked at an infinite expanse of sea which returned his gaze with eyes as watery as his own, and in that instant he knew, with the absolute certainty born of despair, that it would not give up his father. Not to a son such as him. Not after such a pathetic display.

“Have you ever shot an arrow?” He turned and saw a suitor. He looked familiar, though Telemachus did not know his name.

“No.”

“Not much use stringing a bow if you can't shoot an arrow.” He stepped forward and held out his own bow, the one he used to hunt Telemachus' father's game on Telemachus' father's island. Its weathered form contrasted sharply with the ornate perfection of his father's bow, but it was strung. Telemachus blushed as he realized the suitor had seen him struggling and retrieved this sorry specimen with him in mind, yet he extended his hand all the same, accepting it as he did so much else. A lifetime of use had worn the suitor's bow into a supple arc that, after a few instructions, was mirrored by the trajectory of an arrow Telemachus launched over a waxing Selene, radiant in the gleaming night sky.

“By the gods. Are you sure this is your first time?”

At first Telemachus judged the creature approaching them to be a boar by the way it crashed through the undergrowth. He knew the story of his father being very nearly castrated by such a beast, and had long suspected the gods would send another to finish him off. It wasn't until the emerging figure grabbed him that he realized it was his mother, awake and alert at this stygian hour. Penelope's handmaidens immediately followed, swarming around the suitor and spiriting him off with promises of food and wine and the implied availability of their bodies.

“What are you doing, Telemachus?” She dug her fingers into his shoulders and shook him as if attempting to wake him from a nightmare. He had never seen her so enraged, had never seen such fury in anything save a charging animal. His mouth too dry to respond, Telemachus dumbly held up the suitor's bow by way of explanation. Penelope tore it from his hands and hurled it over the cliff. A moment of tense silence was broken by a remote splash as the sea claimed it. “These men are your enemies. These men are my enemies. They are your father's enemies.” She released him and assumed her full height. The silence returned, somehow even more intense now, as if Aeolus himself was holding his breath.

Telemachus' mother towered over him. A monolith garbed in shadow, she could have been Nyx herself, colossal and regal and dark. He looked away. Penelope reached down and fingers girded in thick, rough calluses cupped his face, forcing him meet her eyes. Her gaze burned. He thought of Icarus, of a heat so furiously intense it dissolved everything that held you up, and you fell. “If I wed one of them, they will kill you, because you are not their son. You must never forget that, because they will never forget that. Do you understand me?” He managed a small nod. In the stories Icarus always fell, yet the stories never said anything

about what he ultimately struck. Did that mean he fell forever, the way Telemachus felt himself to be doing now? Penelope's grip became gentle, then fell away as she withdrew. "Your father will return." She whispered as she merged with the darkness. "This isn't forever."

Telemachus drew no comfort from her words that night. One minute wasn't forever, but neither was a thousand years. What did forever mean to a woman like his mother who could seemingly live without sleep, without companionship, clinging to a thread of hope finer than a lone strand of Arachne's silk? As years passed there would be times when Telemachus would feel almost mad with rage toward his mother, resenting her saintly patience and inhuman fortitude, how her example silently but absolutely demanded he exhibit the same indefatigable strength.

Telemachus never learned the name of the man he met that night, though he had recognized him when he plunged a sword into his neck and was met with the same look of abject incomprehension he saw on the face of every other man he killed with his father, pain and shock rapidly fading to nothing, each suitor's gaze becoming remote as they beheld Thanatos's approach and grew resigned to the final, inevitable journey that would end in the dim halls of Hades's faded kingdom. That fleeting instant, repeated ad nauseum, had sparked in Telemachus a bizarre envy.

Not for the destination, but for the journey; the prospect of traversing the five rivers of the underworld to reach whatever lay on the far shore. No matter how melancholy the crossing, at least it was venturing beyond a new frontier, exploration of a sort.

The faces remained vivid in Telemachus' mind as he descended the hill and put more distance between himself and his father's house. The wind shifted and Telemachus was met with a familiar, repellent odor. The coals of the suitors' makeshift funeral pyre were still warm and its smell lingered in the air, in keeping with the character of the men who fueled it. Telemachus found himself wondering what kind of man he would have become if his mother hadn't thrown the suitor's bow into the sea that night. That was the moment Eulimene first noticed him, this bizarre novelty, the solitary mortal whose life lasted no more than an instant yet still wrestled with infinity. Baroque oddities fascinated her, contradictions even moreso.

As a child he had simply accepted that his mother found him because she spent her nights unraveling the burial shawl whose incompleteness stood between her and her suitors' endless appeals, first for her hand in marriage, then for every earthly amenity his father's house had to offer. Telemachus' appreciation of the full

enormity of the task his mother had created for herself would grow as he aged, every birthday marking yet another year of deliberately fruitless toil, of her dauntless commitment to an endeavor worthy of Sisyphus.

He had long wondered how his father had known to choose his mother, how he sensed her almost supernatural fealty in the brief span of time he visited her nation to seek a bride; her endless patience, her absolute faith, her unbreakable will. How could his father see in a few days what had remained obscure to Telemachus for twenty years? He had sat before his mother's loom during her brief absences from it and felt the crushing enormity of her endeavor settle on him, yet if his mother felt such a burden she betrayed no sign of it, in fact she seemed distinctly uncomfortable whenever she was away from her loom and the sea's horizon so neatly framed by its sturdy, weatherworn beams.

Penelope had once told Telemachus she had seen the mast of his father's returning ship cresting that very horizon before a sudden, unnatural tide ripped it away. Telemachus had wanted to ask her how she knew it was his father's ship, but restrained himself.

The queen of Ithaca had declared it to be true.

For a worthy prince, that had to be enough.

The terrain leveled out and Telemachus approached the pen where his father's sheep abided in seeming comfort, content to wander its narrow confines. The sheep were sorry specimens even by the humble standards of Ithaca, the suitors having long ago determined to claim the best for themselves. Telemachus had been thus forced to develop his own unique criteria for choosing a sacrifice that would please the gods. As usual he scanned them one by one for any hint of spirit, any sign they chafed at the confines they'd been forced into.

Telemachus was aware that ranking the personalities of mediocre sheep was not an activity befitting a prince, yet he'd long ago stopped thinking in such terms, and now that his father was home and Telemachus' departure immanent, such concerns were irrelevant.

Telemachus selected an ewe and swept it up onto his shoulders with the practiced ease born of a lifetime's repetition. He knew he had made the right choice as he felt the creature resist his grip and heard it bray its defiance, the flutter of its heartbeat growing ever more frantic against the base of Telemachus' neck as it revolted against its fate.

Telemachus arrived at the barren stone altar hunched at a promontory's end, its gray lumpen form seeming to almost prostrate itself before the edge where the cliff's sheer face plummeted down to the sea. He

returned the restive sheep to the arid, pebble strewn ground and hesitated, maintaining his grip while his eyes scanned the horizon out of reflex, his body having yet to assimilate the fact that the event he'd been obsessively anticipating all his life had finally come to pass, his father was king once more, both Ithaca and his mother no longer had any need of him.

This sacrifice would be his final significant act as an earthbound mortal, yet his time with Eulimene had made him aware of just how remote the Olympians truly were, leaving him to wonder what killing an animal could even mean to beings for whom death remained a distant abstraction, as remote and obscure as the terra incognita dreamed to lay beyond the infinite sea.

Telemachus was snapped out of his reverie by the sound of desperate scrabbling, of first four legs then two grappling for purchase on the cliff's edge. The ewe had managed to bolt from Telemachus' grip but without any thought of where it was escaping to, and he could only watch as it plummeted over the edge to the sea below, becoming a sacrifice to Poseidon by default.

There was a thunderous crash as if a thousand waves were breaking against the cliff at once. A pillar of water appeared, geysering up to deposit a drenched and confused but very much alive sheep to the ground beside Telemachus.

'You mortals and your barbarous rites.' She teased, warm and sweet.

'It's what the gods demand.' Telemachus replied wordlessly.

'And what about what *this* goddess demands? How dare you keep an eros-struck nymph waiting, prince of Ithaca.'

'I am no prince after today. I belong to Ithaca no more.'

'I alone?'

'You alone.'

'Hurry.'

Telemachus took her appeal to heart, and it required everything in his power to keep from breaking into a run as he traced the ghost of an overgrown footpath down to the beach.

There his father stood, his back to Ithaca and his gaze fixed on the sea's far horizon. The waves caressed the prow a small fishing boat nestled in the same indentation his own ship had made when he returned. He approached the boat and silently gestured for Telemachus to follow, not taking his eyes off the horizon for an

instant as he easily propelled the craft into the shallows and leapt in. By the time Telemachus had managed to join him he was already pumping the oars so the small boat cut through the surf with savage efficiency.

Ithaca receded until it was a faded memory of itself, and they were truly at sea.

Telemachus felt drunk with possibility. He savored the sweet agony of anticipation, his every thought fixed on his immanent departure to the unfathomably vast new world he would be reborn into when he simply leaned a little too far to port or starboard.

He decided this was as good a place to bid farewell as any

His father swept up Telemachus' fishing net and cast it out. The net bloomed as it escaped his arms, erupting into a vast grid that seemed poised to ensnare the sky, as if he was not dredging the seas but the heavens.

Telemachus had long been transfixed by the stars. On nights when he could not bring himself to row back within earshot of the suitors' endless bacchanal, he would lay in his boat and search the sky for the new constellation that would mean his father had made his final, ultimate departure and assumed his place among the gods. In the course of his endless musing Telemachus had noticed how often heroes of legend tended to vanish at the most inopportune times: Daedalus leaving Icarus behind, Theseus abandoning Ariadne on Naxos, Jason abandoning Maedea on Corinth, Heracles abandoning Megara and Omphale and Deianira, in that order. It struck Telemachus that a propensity to leave others behind seemed like a defining heroic trait, and the more greatness heroes achieved, the more prone to flight they became.

It was on such a night that he was startled by an alien object suddenly landing in his boat. Assuming it was a fish, he instantly threw his net over it, only to discover he had captured the old bow his mother had hurled into the sea years ago.

Marveling at its return, he turned to see a woman standing atop a plateau of perfectly still water.

Her body was a gracefully flowing stream, her hair was a savage waterfall, her eyes were bottomless whirlpools, her voice was human.

No, more than human.

Divine.

“Yours?” She asked in a tone that said she knew the answer.

Telemachus examined the object tangled in his net. It had been warped by its time in the sea, and now resembled a gnarled hook.

“Not exactly. Please don't think me ungrateful, but much time has passed since the sea took it.”

“What is eternal to mortals is fleeting to gods. I would've assumed its owner had perished if you did not linger here so persistently. No mortal clings to land yet lives at sea as you do. Are you cursed?”

“In a fashion.”

“Who are you?”

“I am Telemachus. Who are you?”

“I am the force that bids the waves to break. I am the tide that embraces and withdraws. I am the gentle current and the savage undertow. I am Archipelago, and it is I.”

“You're a nereid.”

“I am Eulimene.”

“May I ask you a question, Eulimene?”

“Ask.”

“Does the sea go on forever?”

“That depends.”

“On what?” A faint conspiratorial grin. Her smile shamed the moon, appearing so radiant everything around her faded ever so slightly.

“On what your destination is.” Telemachus thought that did not in any way resemble an answer. “May I ask you a question, mortal Telemachus?”

“You may.”

“What is it like to live knowing you will die?”

“Most try not to think about it. Some seek immortality by becoming legends. Some race toward death out of conviction or spite. Time wears most mortals down, making them resigned to it in some fashion. Most. Not all.”

“And which type of mortal are you?”

“I will tell you if you answer me this: Have you heard news of my father, the King of Ithaca?” Her expression did not just darken, it swallowed the light, devouring it in a majestic swirl. The water beneath Telemachus’ boat churned forebodingly.

“The King of Ithaca is your father? The savage degenerate who butchered Helios's cattle and mutilated Poseidon’s son? ”

“That” Telemachus said thoughtfully. “does not sound like him.” The remainder of the night was consumed by a passionate exchange between Eulimene, who spun lurid tales of his father's depravity, and Telemachus, who did his best to invent extenuating circumstances for his father's blasphemous mischief. Dawn arrived with incredible speed and the two parted. They met the following night, and the night after that. As their discussions continued the focus drifted away from the King of Ithaca and toward one another.

In time Telemachus came to appreciate the dawn with Eulimene. The arrival of Eos was slow but absolute, and when she revealed herself fully her effulgent grandeur was life itself, a vital crucible forging the world anew.

The day they declared their love for one another was the day Eulimene spirited Telemachus beneath the waves, bearing him away to the nereid kingdom. She told him he could not spend more than a day in her world, that any mortal who lingered beyond a single day was inexorably changed.

“Into what?” He asked a moment before she began their journey.

“A god.” She took him away, and Chronos's power evaporated, and the wings he'd been shorn of his entire life returned.

Telemachus was determined to retain his memories of Eulimene's world, yet they escaped his mind like a beautiful dream dissolving in daylight, each detail vanishing the moment he ceased focusing on it to leave him with nothing but vast, formless impressions. Impossible heights and bottomless depths. A lightness beyond weightlessness moving at the speed of thought. Beauty that seared the soul, breaking and remaking him in each instant. Knowledge beyond wisdom. Love beyond rapture.

Most of all there was love, love that answered the question of infinity, cradled it in its hands like a trinket.

The net struck the water and vanished below.

“Do not fear the suitors’ return.” His father said. “They know the gods favor us now. Not even they are foolish enough to tempt the Moirae twice.”

“A part of me wishes they would return.” Telemachus remarked. His father laughed knowingly.

“That part of you is me. A little foolhardiness is good in a man, but only a little. There isn't a day that passes where I don't pray for the gods to give you your mother's sense and spare you mine.”

“She is a miracle.”

As Telemachus’ father drew up the net he cast his gaze at the remote form of his father's house and the vague hint of a shape representing the place where Penelope's loom had once stood, the balcony over the sea. After she had hacked the loom apart and recovered from her weeping Penelope had hurled what debris that remained on the suitors’ funeral pyre. All that was left of her great undertaking was a half finished funeral shroud consigned to the infinite sea.

“Twenty years.” His father spoke as if it was the conclusion of a prayer.

“Love is a very powerful thing.” Telemachus steeled himself to announce his departure.

“That” His father grunted as he hauled the net into the boat. “is the correct word. Powerful is the force that bids us move through this world.” He spread the net open to reveal a single fish frantically beating its tail against the air. “Your mother and I are leaving, Telemachus. I owe it to her. There are things she has earned the right to experience.” It gasped, its body lurching in dumb paroxysms of frantic outrage. “The throne room of Aeolus, where the four winds join their voices and sing. The western edge of the world where the dead can be made to give up their secrets.” Its eye stared dumbly at the new, hostile cosmos it had been ripped into. Telemachus wondered if it knew it had been caught. Which would come first, understanding or death? “I would have her hear the song of the sirens and see the endless dance of Charybdis.” His father followed Telemachus’ gaze to the fish, now still and dead. “Hardly a bounty. Ithaca is a hard land, but it makes good men. You are their king now.”

I could kill him, Telemachus thought. It would be a fitting conclusion. So many of the stories end in patricide. He means nothing to me, this stranger with my face. What does he know of what this charnel land makes of men, he who left it when he was my age.

All movement ceased. Telemachus looked away, fixing his gaze on the perfect circle of eerily still water enclosing their tiny vessel. He understood that if he chose to act, he would not do so alone. Displaying the adroitness he was so known for, Telemachus' father said

“You love her?”

“I hate you.”

“I know.” He answered in a way that said he would be disappointed if Telemachus did not.

His father eased himself into a state of repose, leaning back and allowing his arms to fall to his sides, brazenly opening himself up to an attack, inviting Telemachus to seize any of the various fishing knives within easy reach and attempt to score a mortal blow.

Telemachus imagined himself rowing back to Ithaca alone, imagined telling his mother that the man who had survived feuding with Poseidon for ten years had fallen out of a fishing boat and drowned.

Penelope, queen of Ithaca, who was as much a hero as gods and men would ever allow a mortal woman to be.

And what did heroes do best?

Telemachus peered into his father's face, reading it as a haruspex would read entrails.

His father had been disguised as an old man when they first met, yet that was now beginning to seem less like a ruse and more like a portent. Calypso's love had kept him young, but now that he had left her behind the enchantment was fading, the years returning with uncanny speed. By departing Ogygia for Ithaca his father had not only abandoned Calypso but abandoned immortality, abandoned godhood—abandoned the promise of love absolute and undying.

“You love her.” The words emerged in a voice so similar to his father's that Telemachus couldn't be certain he'd said them himself, if he hadn't been visited by Echo.

Telemachus relaxed, adopting the same acquiescent pose as his father. The sea around them resumed its typical movement as the tension between them evaporated. His father leaned forward to return his hands to the oars, and despite his talk of wanting Ithaca's scion to inherit his mother's sense, Telemachus could tell his father was disappointed his only son had not at least attempted to take his life.

Telemachus no longer cared, was instead focused on steeling his resolve.

“How long?” He asked.

“Not forever.” His father answered.

He thought of something Eulimene had said while they were discussing the topic of endlessness.

“A storyteller wrote: 'Is infinity a necessary truth or a necessary construction? All of this when all we want is to sail around on the watery part of the world.' ”

“I don't think I know that story.”

“You wouldn't. It's from a place called the future.”

“Where is the future?”

It was one of the few questions she had no answer for. Sometimes Telemachus would, in his ignorance, stumble upon something profound, a trait Eulimene mercifully found endearing.

His father rowed back until Ithaca resolved into absolute clarity before Telemachus' eyes.

There was a far side of despair where life began.

He would make himself believe it.

Telemachus spent that night gazing up at the sky, despite now knowing that the stars did not change, that even the planets wandered in accord with immutable laws.

The new king was crowned in a brief but grand ceremony. All of Ithaca rejoiced save the king himself, who regarded the proceedings at such a remove that afterward the revelers had difficulty remembering if he had, in fact, been in attendance. Soon afterward Penelope and her husband set sail. Sacrifices were made and blessings bestowed in the course of a ceremony commemorating their departure where the king's absence was, this time, indisputable.

The revelry continued long after the pair's ship disappeared over the horizon.

With the licentious suitors gone and the rightful king in place, life in Ithaca reverted to the civil affair it had been before Agamemnon's black ships darkened the horizon with war. He was a just and fair king, and if he was not quite the dynamic hero his father was, none in Ithaca felt obliged to press the matter. He succeeded in making his presence felt at the usual ceremonies, and if his character seemed remote, he was, after all, royalty.

The king's tastes were austere even by the humble standards of a minor kingdom like Ithaca, and none felt obliged to criticize his single eccentric indulgence of purchasing elaborate tapestries from Colchis, stretching them upon a new loom he had built himself and placed on the balcony over the sea, and unraveling

them strand by strand, extracting every single thread intact and wrapping them into neat, perfectly round clews worthy of Ariadne herself.

Those who doubted his marshal prowess stilled their tongues upon seeing how he acquitted himself while hunting, though his utter indifference to trophies was perplexing. Whispers concerning his refusal to worship Aphrodite were not silenced so easily, and a handful of subjects took to calling their odd king Hippolytus while in safely discrete company. Still, none sought to unseat a king who remained strong and just, especially in light of the chaos that had engulfed places such as Mycenae, Argos, Crete, and Salamis when their respective monarchs returned from the annihilation of Troy.

Later, after a span of time that could have been five years, ten years, twenty years, or forty years, a servant combing the beach in search of shells found a strange object washed up on the shore, a stunningly gorgeous burial shroud that was pristine, whole, and complete despite the ragged and warped pieces of driftwood clinging to it. The servant brought the magnificent shroud to her king, who responded with a mix of adoration and fear, as if he was beholding the ghost of someone he deeply loved.

He snatched the burial shroud away without a word and retired to his private bedchamber. It was the first sign of passion the servants had seen from their king in a great while and, highly curious, they gathered around the locked door, straining their ears to detect any hint of what transpired within.

Afterward, none of them could agree if what they'd heard had been weeping or laughing.