

The Muses Sang Not of Us

Book 22 of the *Odyssey* Retold

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We pretended as though we could not hear the sounds of the battle.

The directions Eurycleia gave us were clear. Keep quiet. Keep working. There may be screams. Pretend you do not hear them. By her tone, and the stiff tilt of her chin, it was evident these were the words she had been instructed to tell us. Then she leaned in, breathless exhilaration overwhelming poise, and told us the rest in a hushed whisper.

The great Lord Odysseus had returned, after ten years at Troy and ten years at sea, disguised as the old beggar we had laughed at. His thirst for revenge demanded quenching. It was unlikely, she told us, that any one of the suitors would live to see the first rosy breath of dawn.

I was unsure this information was meant for our ears, but I suppose it did not matter. Had she not told us then, we would have found out soon enough.

And so, to the best of our abilities, we acted as though we could not hear the screams. Crashes resonated through the walls, and we pretended not to feel their reverberations. On occasion, the pitch of a male voice rose to an almost feminine height, a wailing plea that cut off abruptly. The first time this happened, Adeia flinched hard, one of her carding brushes clattering to the floor. She was one of the youngest of the girls, still round with the remnants of childhood. Pylia snatched the brush up and shook her head, firm. I did not see her flinch again.

The few girls Queen Penelope favoured returned from her bedside. We did the work that we could, swiftly and without speaking, until the night was

well settled over us. Then came the hours in which we were meant to sleep. Instead, we sat silent on our cots. We did not have some god to pour sweet sleep on our eyelids as Penelope did. And the din of battle was no lullaby to our ears.

We found our own ways to pass the time. I took over Adeia's carding for something to do with my hands. I found the repetition soothing, and I had more skill at the task regardless, more muscle in my forearms. Melantho wept, her body forming a ball in the corner. Against good reason, she had fallen in love with a suitor, Eurymachus. I had thought her one of the lucky ones, for pleasing him pleased her, and she took great delight in their dalliances. This was not the case for most of us. Now, she convulsed as though she was dying, and I was no longer convinced of her luck. Whether she was afraid for his fate or her own, I was not sure; the king of Ithaca may not easily forgive the cruel words she had spoken to his disguised self. Althia and Adeia huddled together on a cot, hands clasped tightly together. They were sisters, a few years apart in age but equal in beauty, both made with soft curves and lustrous dark hair and rose petal lips. Suitor's eyes followed them wherever they went, expressions akin to looking at a particularly excellent cut of steak. Never once had I seen the two of them share space without bickering. This was something of a miracle.

They were not the only ones who drew the attention of the suitors, although the requests for their presence at night came with more frequency than most. Pylia was another favourite, with her fair hair and the birch-like column of her neck. She was looking at a wall now, biting her nails ragged. Dorothea was similarly favoured, often praised for her charming dimples, which were nowhere to be found as she lay unblinking on her back, hands resting on her stomach. More than once, a suitor had asked for my own

company, although I was older than many of the girls they preferred. I was not old, by any stretch, but they liked the ones with a bit more youth left in their cheeks, a bit of innocence left in their eyes. Adeia was a particular darling, and I did not think her years could number more than fourteen.

Who were we to refuse these men? They were not allowed Penelope, the ultimate prize, but they could hardly be denied other pastimes in the meantime. Some of the girls found pleasure in their company. Most of us endured it politely because the alternative would be even less pleasant.

I did not know what outcome we desired in this fight. I did not know if we bated our breath for the lives of the suitors or their deaths. All I knew was that we waited, and we did not sleep, and we listened until the sounds eventually faded and were no more.

Dawn came. We looked at each other in the first ashen rays of morning, wondering if we were to return to our tasks as usual. Before we could make the decision, Eurycleia threw the doors open. She was trembling with something, although I could not tell what. Fear? Delight? Anticipation? Her voice wavered with it.

“Lord Odysseus has requested the presence of a number of you. Those of you I call will come with me. The rest of you will proceed with your work.”

Twelve of us she named, a compilation I did not fail to notice featured all the most beautiful among our numbers. Her eyes found mine as she called my name. I had known, somehow, that she would, but I felt the wash of cold dread all the same—a premonition. We stood and followed her.

“What’s to happen to us?” Adeia whispered. The words were directed at her sister, whose arm she clutched, but they echoed in the silence left by the rest of us.

“Now that Lord Odysseus has returned, he is anxious to restore all to its former glory,” said Eurycleia, as she led us down the stairs. “He has asked for the presence of the girls who have dishonoured him in his absence. I imagine you will be punished for your actions.”

“What actions?” asked Melantho, too loud, as she often was. Her pretty face was ugly and blotchy with crying.

Eurycleia turned to face us, blocking the bottom of the stairs. “It is your duty to follow the directions of the masters of the house and keep yourselves pure. By engaging with these despicable suitors of Queen Penelope without permission, you have disgraced yourselves and the lady who raised you, and King Odysseus himself.”

The girls whispered nervously to each other. I found it funny, in an unfunny sort of way, that we were capable of such a feat of disgrace, when not a single one of us had truly met the fabled Odysseus. Several of the girls around me had not even been alive for the duration of his absence from Ithaca. We had laughed at him, though, when he was disguised as beggar. I imagined he would not take lightly to such offense. Perhaps this was why he really called for our presence.

Then we entered the dining hall, and all other thought left my mind. Beside me, Melantho gave a shriek and grabbed at my hand.

I had never seen such carnage in my life. The tables and floors were coated with enough blood to fill a pond, and it dripped thickly from the edges of the benches. The walls were splattered with it, dark rusty red like pig’s blood. And, scattered across the room, suitors lay in the gore. Broken limbs, impaled chests, in every corner of the room. I spotted a head, severed from its neck, mouth still lolling. I looked away.

A man stood in the middle of the room, and he looked up upon our entry. Like every other figure present, he was drenched head to toe in blood. Unlike the rest of them, he was alive. He was sturdily built, with long dark hair and beard, and his presence seemed to demand the attention of everything in the room. He looked nothing like an old beggar. My first thought, which I am not certain would please his hubris, was how very much the king of Ithaca resembled Telemachus.

I had heard many tales of Odysseus. How he was clever, in much the same mischievously charming way as Queen Penelope was. How he was brave beyond bravery. I had heard of his great strength, and his great loyalty, and his marvellous adventures. For a brief moment, he met my eye, this legendary hero of Troy. There was no spark of warmth in his stare. Only cold calculation.

He addressed us, his voice deep and weathered. “You are to take these corpses outside and pile them underneath the roof. Then you will clean this mess from my tables and chairs.” For a moment we all stood frozen with horror at our task. Something glinted in Odysseus’s eye, a flash of bronze. “Now.”

He did not raise his voice, but there was something like the crack of a whip in his tone. We snapped into motion.

Most of the suitors were too heavy for us to carry alone. Some we dragged through the door, smearing blood across the floor. Others we carried together, one of us holding the legs, another the shoulders. Our muscles screamed with the effort. Melanthe found Eurymachus’s corpse, pierced through the ribs with an arrow, and wailed until Odysseus came over and kicked her to her feet. Iola and I took over the task of carrying him outside, away from Melanthe’s screeches. I made the mistake of looking at his face,

briefly, as we picked him up. It looked as though his skull had been smashed hard with a stone. He looked so young, too, although it was hard to tell.

“Is this our punishment?” Iola asked, as we carried him. “Cleaning this horror?”

“It is part of it, for certain,” I said. “Whether it is all of it, I do not know. I think it unlikely.”

We dropped the suitor on the pile. Iola swayed a bit, her face drained of blood. She was another one of the younger girls, and willowy enough that she looked younger still than her years, a lanky child. I squeezed her shoulder hard enough to hurt and shook my head.

When the last suitor was on the pile, we began the work of cleaning the tables and chairs. It was no easy task; the blood was thick and had started to coagulate. The coppery smell of it was inescapable. We scrubbed with all our strength, until the water began to run pale pink across the tables. Beside us, Telemachus and his herdsman scraped the floors of their gore. Several of the girls worked through tears, and several more were silent and calm like I had never seen them before. I do not know how much time passed in this way. It felt endless.

Eventually, the hall was clean. Eerily so. Had you walked in then, you would never have known how many lives had been taken within its walls just hours before. We surveyed our work and felt no satisfaction.

“This is a job well done,” Odysseus said, as we stood before him. We all looked exhausted, covered in stains of foreign blood. Melantho touched her cheek, bruising where she had been slapped. Adeia seemed close to collapse, leaning heavily against her sister. Odysseus smiled at us, satisfied but not kind. “Take them outside and deal with them as I instructed.”

With that, he strode from the room, leaving us with Telemachus and his men. We were led outside, to the space between the courtyard wall and the rotunda. Telemachus walked up and down the line of us, surveying each huddled form. He was walking differently than I had seen him do before, as though imitating the heavy-shouldered swagger of his father's stride.

"I refuse to grant these girls a clean death," he said finally, "since they poured down shame on me and Mother when they lay beside the suitors."

A ripple went down our line. The word *death* had not yet been used to our ears. Iola broke into desperate sobs. Althia made a noise as though she was choking. Most of us just stared, something shutting down inside.

Telemachus tried to smile in the same way I had seen his father do earlier, but he did not match the effect. "We will hang them instead."

So, this was the punishment we were to be given for our treachery. Our punishment for obeying the calls of the suitors. For our laughter, for our bodies. For the crime of our existence.

Telemachus strung the rope by his own hand. I could still see the way he had looked as a boy. I was older than him, by nearly a decade, and he had been young when I was first sold to these halls. I remembered the way he would run around naked on chubby toddler's legs, as though clothing was too big a burden to bear for one so small. I remembered the way it took him nine years of life to learn to form certain letters without his tongue tripping over their shapes. I remembered the tantrums he threw, as loud as Zeus's thunderbolts, but I remembered also the way the girls would coo over him and his long lashes when they found him asleep in some strange corner, sweet as any babe could be.

He was no stranger to us. He knew us all well. He had played with some among our numbers in childhood, oblivious to the clear differences of sex or status. He was not oblivious anymore.

I was the last of the line. He did not look at me when he raised the noose, although I did not let my eyes leave his. His hands shook on the rope, and I had to duck my head to help him get it past my ears and around my neck. Even now, fully grown, he looked a boy pretending to be a man. The beard he had so valiantly been growing was still in patches. I stared at him. I did not allow him the reprieve of a blink.

He tried his best not to look at me, but he could not resist a glance, in the end. His eyes were dark, wide, long lashed, and I stared at them as though my face was made of stone. He flinched and stepped down.

“Look what a man you have grown into, Telemachus,” I said softly, for his ears alone. “Your father will be so proud of what you have become.”

I could see the words hit him, by the way his shoulders clenched as he walked away.

Somewhere beside me, Adeia was whimpering quietly, the kind of sound a small, frightened animal might make. I looked to the sky and tried to imagine how it must look from the edge of Ithaca’s cliffs, reflected cloudless and pure on the sea. As the ground fell out from underneath me, a gull arched across the great expanse of blue, free.

The rope went taut.