

A SAMPLE OF

*Penelope*

BY LAUREL KORNHISER

Often, before heading up to my chambers, I lingered in a shadowed corner behind a pillar near the stairwell, where, leaning against the night-cooled stone column, I listened to Phemius' lute and observed and weighed the men. I measured how they treated the servants and slaves who dropped off more baskets of bread and blocks of cheese, laid more trays of meat, and replenished their seemingly bottomless wine bowls. Some ignored these ministers to their appetites. Others, in a flush of drunkenness, made jokes. The generous handed trinkets of appreciation, while too many grabbed arms and pulled the helpless attendant in—boy or girl—whispering in their ears the particulars of which I could guess.

That night, when Antinoös, who always positioned himself closest to the passageway, caught sight of me, he rose, stepped from the hall, and stopped my forward movement. I motioned my maids to wait for me on the landing.

Antinoös had always been gentle with me, expressing concern when he found me too pale, praising me when he thought it would advance his cause: "Penelope, you look beautiful tonight, though you act like you don't know how beautiful you are. I like that about you, your shyness, your modesty—so becoming a queen."

After a pause, his eyes, the color of a cloud-washed sky, gauging the effect of his words, he would add something like, "Though many think your cousin Helen the most beautiful in the world, in my mind, that honor goes to you."

Antinoös understood aspects of me better than the others, even the always sweet Amphinomus. He once told me, "You are intelligent. Of course you are. Odysseus would never have married a beautiful but empty vessel. When he chose you, he chose Wisely."

When he added, "Let me follow in his footsteps," the thread of whatever web he was spinning snapped. There was no following Odysseus. His footsteps vanished behind him.

But on that night, he seized my arm, leaned his head so close to mine I could have been intoxicated by the wine on his breath, and said with a coldness I had never heard in his voice before, "I have been told of your deception. Your father, too, will be informed. You will finish Laertes' shroud immediately and choose a husband." He pulled back but cupped my face, causing my veil to slip slightly. His eyes bore into mine like needles.

It was all I could do to stop myself from asking, "How did you find out? Who told

you?” Instead, I feigned innocence and said in my most honeyed voice, “Antinoös, whatever are you suggesting?”

“For too long, we have waited patiently for you to finish Laertes’ shroud. We believed you were in earnest, though none of us ever knew of a shroud that took so long to weave. Now we learn that under the cover of night, you have been undoing the work woven by day just to hold us off. What do you say to that?”

I wriggled my arm free of his grip and met his gaze. “I confess I am never satisfied with my work, even less so when I am creating something as precious as a shroud for my father-in-law. He has suffered so much.” I willed my voice to remain steady. “If I see the slightest snag or fray, even the hint of a loose weave, I become like a crazed woman, compelled to take the work apart and weave it again. I hope the care I am taking with Laertes’ shroud brings him comfort,” I paused, “for eternity.”

I then sealed my lips, daring Antinoös to betray selfishness in the face of such daughterly devotion.

“My dear Penelope, I am not a fool. It is not a matter of fixing this part or that.” His face softened. “I thought we trusted each other. I see I was wrong.”

He squared his shoulders before adding. “I want you to know, this wounds me.”

I was thankful my veil hid the rise of heat along my cheeks. What could I say?

Then I remembered something I learned from observing Odysseus. The best defense sometimes is not to defend, explain, or squabble over details. I would admit nothing. “Antinoös, I am sorry you feel hurt.” I reached for his hand, rubbing my fingers along the edge of his. “I promised that when the shroud was complete, I would choose a husband. I will honor my word.”

There. I didn’t cower before him, a powerful man and king in his own right. I kept my voice calm, not defiant, not pleading.

“Well,” his face contracted, “your lies will no longer have currency with us. See that the shroud is finished within a week’s time. And I think you owe it to me to tell me your choice first.”

I had always thought Antinoös handsome, the dark waves of his hair nesting in neat layers, his beard full but trimmed, his nose strong, straight, but having been

crossed, now all I saw were clamped, bloodless lips and pitiless eyes.

As if remembering whom he was speaking to and what he wanted from me, he smiled, placed his free hand around mine, and said, "I truly hope, I really want to be your choice. You wouldn't be sorry. I know I can make you happy. I would make a good husband for you," he paused, then added with a cloying smile, "both out of bed and in."

Amphinomus chose that moment to step from the great hall. When he spied me, my eyes pleaded with him to interrupt this uncomfortable moment.

"Penelope, my dear, you look fatigued. Let me call for your maid," he said, beckoning Eurynome.

"Thank you, Amphinomus, I am a bit tired," I said.

"Antinoös, you'd better go eat. A fresh tray of meat has just been laid out, and Eurymachus is boasting that his javelin outpaced yours by a hair's width."

A slight scoff escaped from Antinoös, and with a conspiratorial nod toward me, he walked away.