

HOMER'S "THE ODYSSEY"

Chapter 3 - [Book 10-11]



Next we came upon the homeland of Aeolus, one dear to the deathless gods. Zeus has made Aeolus, keeper of the winds, and he can provoke or calm whichever winds he chooses. He and his large, happy family lived on a floating island. A bronze wall surrounds the island, and steep cliffs rise from the salt sea to the metal wall. Aeolus entertained us for an entire month, and he was eager to hear all my tales of the war with Troy.

When we were ready to continue our journey, Aeolus put into my hands a large bag made of oxhide, which contained all the storm winds. With the destructive winds confined in this manner, we would be able to proceed safely and quickly to Ithaca. He tied the bag so securely with bright silver twine that not even the smallest breeze could escape. Then he stored the bag in my hollow ship, caused the west wind to blow upon us, and sent us on our way.

We sailed upon the wine-dark sea for nine days and nights. When Dawn shone forth on the tenth day, we were so close to Ithaca that we could see people tending their fires on land. Then my heart felt at ease, and I let sweet sleep enfold me. My limbs were weary, for I had been so eager to return home quickly that I had insisted on controlling the mainsail myself.

I did not know that my companions had decided that the bag Aeolus had given me contained gold and silver that I would not share with them. As soon as they were certain that I would not hear them, they said to one another, Look how well-loved and honored Odysseus is. Wherever we go, he receives worthy gifts! Our ships are already filled with great treasures he took from Troy, and now Aeolus has given him even more gifts. Meanwhile, we are returning with no gifts at all! While he is asleep, let us open the bag from Aeolus and see how much silver and gold it contains.

With that they opened the oxhide bag, and all the storm winds tumbled forth and blew us far out to sea. The tossing of the ship awakened me. At first the grief in my heart tempted me to jump into the loud-sounding sea and so let my shade go down to the kingdom of Hades. But soon my heart counseled me more wisely, and I chose to accept my fate.

The winds blew our ships back to Aeolus, much to the dismay of my companions. We put ashore to obtain fresh water, and I went, once again, to visit Aeolus.

Why have you returned, Odysseus? he asked me with surprise. What heartless god is punishing you? We sent you on your way with such a kind gift that you should have arrived home without a problem.

With sorrow in my heart, I replied, My companions brought trouble upon us while I slept. But I know that you can send us smoothly on our way once more, if only you will consent to do so.

Then Aeolus spoke words of wrath instead of welcome. Leave this island immediately! he cried. You have become the most despised of all living creatures! The fact that you have returned here proves that the immortals detest you, and I may not help anyone whom the deathless gods hate. Then he drove me from his palace.

With grief in our hearts, we sailed on. Because of our foolish behavior, not even a breeze would help us with our journey, so each man had to pull his oar. In this manner we sailed for six days and nights.

When rosy-fingered Dawn next shone forth upon gods and mortals, we had come to the land of the Laestrygonians. Here the night is so bright that someone who needs no sleep can earn twice as much pay by herding cattle all day and sheep all night. We could see a fine harbor, with steep cliffs rising on each side. Two jutting points of land reached toward one another at the mouth of the harbor, creating a very narrow entrance from the salt sea.

Eleven of my ships entered the sheltered harbor waters, where their captains moored them close by one another since there was no need to fear the action of waves in such a well-protected area. I decided to moor my black ship outside the harbor where the open sea met one of the cliffs.

Once we had fastened our ropes to a projecting rock on the lower part of the cliff, I climbed up to a towering height to investigate the area. The land appeared devoid of cultivation, for I could see neither people nor oxen working the fields. Only smoke drifted up from the land. I returned to my ship and ordered three of my companions to go ashore and see what sort of people lived here.

The men walked along a wagon road until they came to a spring that was clearly the source of fresh water for the townspeople. There they introduced themselves to a maiden and asked about the king of the community. She directed them to her parent's house. Upon entering, they were horrified to see that her mother was the size of a mountain peak. The girl's mother immediately called her husband, who was even larger. As soon as he arrived, he grabbed one of my men and ate him. My other two men ran swiftly back to our ship.

The king then gave a mighty shout that echoed throughout the city and brought forth a multitude of giants. As they stood upon their towering cliffs, they hurled tremendous rocks upon those of our ships that were moored in their harbor. They speared my comrades off the decks as if they were fish and carried them, dead or alive, back to their homes to eat.

Without waiting for the giant race to discover my ship, I quickly cut the cables with my sword, ordered my companions to their oars, and headed out to sea. Our hearts were filled with both joy and grief. We were very glad to have escaped death once again, but we had left to the kingdom of Hades all of our comrades on our other eleven ships.

At the next good harbor we found, we stopped to rest. At dawn I armed myself with sword and spear and went to see if the island was inhabited. I climbed to a high point and could see smoke rising from a building in the wooded area below. I decided that it would be unwise for one person to investigate that house, so I returned to my ship.

There I divided my companions into two groups, one under the command of great-hearted Eurylochus and one under my command. We drew lots from a bronze helmet to see which group would investigate the house in the woods. Eurylochus drew the lot and set off with his twenty-two men. They were weeping with anxiety, which was no surprise given the experiences we had had so far on our journey.

Soon they came to the gateway of a house built of polished stone, situated in a clearing in the middle of the forest. Mountain lions and wolves stood around the building. Instead of attacking Eurylochus and his men, they wagged their tails and licked the strangers' hands in a most friendly fashion. Just as dogs fawn around their master when he returns from a meal, knowing that he has brought back chunks of food for them, so these lions and wolves fawned around my companions. Eurylochus and his men stood as still as death, their hearts filled with terror to have such ferocious beasts at their hands.

Friends, listen! one of the men commanded. You can hear the lovely singing of some woman or goddess as she weaves. Let us call to her.

When they called, the singer immediately opened her doors and invited them inside. She was so beautiful and friendly that all of the men foolishly joined her--except Eurylochus, who was more cautious. The captain watched and waited, but not one of the men reappeared. So he quickly returned to our swift black ship and tearfully told us what had happened.

When he had finished, I quickly slung my bow across my chest, picked up my great bronze sword, and asked Eurylochus to lead me to the woman's house.

Oh, do not make me return to that place, he pleaded. No one who goes there will ever leave! Instead, those of us who are still alive and free should leave this island as quickly as we can!

I decided that it would be best, after all, to leave Eurylochus with my men at our hollow black ship and confront the woman myself. I was approaching the stone house when Hermes, the Wayfinder, came toward me in the form of a young man.

He shook my hand and said, Unlucky man! Do you still wander alone through places you know nothing about? Where are you going this time? The feared goddess Circe lives in that house. She is the daughter of Helios, who gives light to men, but unlike her father she is no friend to mortals. She likes to use evil drugs to transform the nature of beasts and men who walk the earth.

Hermes continued, Fair-haired Circe has given your friends food concealing a drug that has made them forget their homeland. The touch of her wand has transformed them into pigs, and she has confined them in sties. Your comrades now have the shape, appearance, and voice of swine, though their minds remain unchanged. They are inside that house now, locked in their pens with the kind of food that swine enjoy, weeping at their misfortune.



Have you come here to free them? If that is your hope, I assure you that, unaided, you yourself would not return, for Circe would make a pig of you and confine you with your companions.

Then Hermes said, I will protect you and save you from that fate. Take this powerful herb and follow my advice. Eat the drugged food Circe sets before you, for the herb I have given you will protect you from its power. Then, when the dread goddess touches you with her wand, draw your sword and act as if you intend to kill her. She will have such fear in her heart that she will be willing to swear a sacred oath by the immortal gods not to hurt you.



With these words he gave me the herb and returned to Mount Olympus. I continued on my way, became dread Circe's guest, and carefully followed the Wayfinder's advice.

When her magic did not affect me and I had thrust my sword upon her as if to slay her, Circe asked, Who are you, and what city are you from? You must be Odysseus, the man of many schemes, who Hermes told me would come with his swift black ship on his return from Troy. I swear by the River Styx in the dark kingdom of Hades, the oath most sacred to all the deathless gods, that I will not harm you.

Then the goddess treated me like a most honored guest, providing me with a bath, fresh clothing, and rich food. However, my heart was so filled with grief for the men who were captive in her pens that her food could not tempt me. If you wish me to eat, I advised her, you will have to free my companions and show me that they are well.

Fair-haired Circe then picked up her wand, went over to the pigpen, and opened the gate. When the twenty-two pigs surrounded her, she touched each of them with another magical device. Instantly, each man resumed his human form, only he was now younger, taller, and much more handsome than he had been before. My companions sobbed with joy as they recognized me and realized that they were free.

When the goddess invited all of us to remain with her as her guests, I agreed. We pulled our swift hollow ship onto the land and placed our things in caves, as she advised. Of the companions I had left behind at the ship, only Eurylochus spoke against my plan.

Foolish men, think about where we are going! he exclaimed. Do you enjoy trouble so much that you want the dread goddess Circe to transform us into pigs or wolves or lions so that we can protect her house? Odysseus is simply being reckless once again, as he was when he took us to the giant Cyclops' cave. Because of that foolish venture, some among us were killed!

When I heard those words, I was minded to draw my long sword and separate Eurylochus' head from his body, but my companions soothed my anger. They suggested leaving him behind to watch over our ship and our possessions, but he chose not to anger me further and came along with us.

The seasons of a full year came and went while we enjoyed an easy life with Circe. Finally, my companions came to me and said, Strange man! Have you forgotten your homeland? If it is indeed your fate to return to Ithaca and your high-roofed home, it is time to leave this goddess.

Circe was indeed willing to send us home. Odysseus, man of many schemes, she began, I shall not force you to be a guest in my house against your will, but before I can send you homeward, you must enter the kingdom of Hades and speak with the shade of the blind prophet, Teiresias.

The North Wind will guide your swift ship, but once you have crossed the stream of Oceanus, you must beach your ship upon the dark shore and enter the Underworld alone. At the rock where two rivers flow into the third, dig a pit and honor the dead by pouring into it first milk and honey, then wine, and finally water. After your prayers, sacrifice a ram and a black ewe. Turn their heads toward the dark place of the dead, but you yourself must turn your back and face the rivers instead.

Then, Circe counseled, many shades of those who have died will approach you. Use your sword to keep them from drinking the blood of your sacrifice until Teiresias has spoken to you. He will warn you of the troubles ahead of you and how to deal with them.