

CHAPTER 4 OF HOMER'S "THE ODYSSEY"

Chapter 4 - [Book11]

So we took leave of Circe, daughter of Helios, lord of the sun, and went forth to the kingdom of dread Hades. I did not expect the fear that flooded my heart as shades of the dead in countless numbers surrounded me, drawn as they were to a living visitor in their dark, hopeless land. But my fear turned to grief when the shade of my mother approached me. She had been alive when I left for Troy. Even so, I would not let her come near the dark blood until I had talked with Teiresias.

Then the shade of the blind prophet came up to me. Odysseus, man of many schemes, he began. Why have you come to view the dead and this dark, joyless place? Withdraw your sword and move aside so that I can drink the dark blood and speak with you.

When I had obeyed his wishes, Teiresias said, I think that there will be no honey-sweet journey back to Ithaca for you, since the Earthshaker's heart overflows with anger against you. He will not forget that you blinded his son, Polyphemus. Yet, if you control your companions and yourself and do no harm to the sheep and cattle of Helios, who sees and hears all, you will bring your swift black ship safely home.

However, if any one of you harms the flocks and herds of the lord of the sun, then your companions will be destroyed along with your black ship. You will return home after many seasons have passed, alone and in a strange ship. You will find your house occupied by men who wish to marry your godlike wife and who are wasting your household goods. You must reward their rude behavior by slaying them and sending their shades down to the kingdom of Hades.

When you have slain the suitors in your house, Teiresias concluded, you must take a well-shaped oar and journey forth until you come to a people who know nothing of the salt sea, or of ships, or of oars like wings.

When you meet a stranger who tells you that your oar is a fan to blow the chaff from the grain, you must plant the oar in the earth and sacrifice a ram, a bull, and a boar to Poseidon, lord of the sea. Then you may return home. Death will come peacefully to you from out of the salt sea when you are old and living in the midst of your prosperous people.

To his prophecy, I replied, Teiresias, surely the gods themselves have spun the words you have spoken to me. Now advise me. The shade of my mother is sitting near this blood, but she will neither look at me nor speak with me. How can I get her to know me?

Teiresias counseled, If you wish to speak with any shade of the dead, permit him or her to approach the dark blood and drink some of it. The shades you deny will withdraw into the kingdom of Hades.

The blind prophet retreated into the dark land of the dead, and my mother's shade approached me again. She swallowed the dark blood and cried, My child, how did you enter this dreadful region with life in your limbs? Are you still on your way home from Troy?

I told her the purpose of my visit and something of my troubles, but I was more interested in hearing what she had to tell me. How did you die? I asked. How are my father and my son, Telemachus? And tell me about my wife. Has Penelope waited with a faithful heart for my return, or has she married another?

My mother answered, Your wife weeps for your return as she lives within your house with a loyal heart, and your son has kept your kingdom whole. But your father has withdrawn into the country, where he lives like a peasant in his sorrow, longing for your kindness and your counsel. My heart, too, overflowed with sadness, and it was that grief over your absence that crushed my honeysweet life.

When she had spoken, I tried three times to embrace her shade, but each time she escaped my arms as if she were a shadow or a dream. Finally I said, Mother, why won't you let me hold you so that we can comfort one another? You act as if you are merely an apparition and have no substance to your form.

My mother replied, Oh, my son, this is the way one exists after death. As soon as the spirit of life leaves the body, it becomes this dreamlike shade and departs for its new home in Hades' dark kingdom. Then her shade withdrew from me so that I might offer the dark blood to other shades with whom I wished to speak.

When the shade of wide-ruling Agamemnon approached me, I wept and hastened to offer him the blood to drink, for I had last seen him in good health by the hollow ships that lined the shore at Troy. Most honored son of Atreus, I cried, why are you here? Did Poseidon destroy your ship with a mighty storm while you were homeward bound? Or were you slain while raiding some wealthy city?

No, he responded, although it would have been far better to lose my life as you suggest. Clytemnestra helped her new husband slay my companions and me while they entertained us at a rich feast. As white-tusked pigs are slaughtered



in some wealthy lord's house to provide meat at a marriage feast, so we were attacked at our table, causing the floor to flood with our blood. In this vile manner did my wicked wife devise my death.

And so, I have words of counsel for you, Odysseus, Agamemnon concluded. Your wife has a wise and understanding heart, and I am sure that she will truly welcome your return. Nevertheless, it is best to be cautious. It is far more prudent to return to your homeland in secret than to announce your arrival openly. And do not reveal all of your innermost thoughts to your dear wife, for one can no longer trust even the most loyal woman.

As we concluded our sad conversation, I noticed nearby the shades of godlike Achilles, his great-hearted friend Patroclus, and Ajax, the most impressive-looking of the long-haired Greeks after Achilles.

When I offered the dark blood to Achilles, he said, Odysseus, your visit here is the greatest plan you have yet devised! Why have you come? And how did you ever reach this dark land where the useless shades of dead men dwell?

I needed to see the prophet Teiresias, I replied. I hoped he would tell me how I might return home to Ithaca, for I have had nothing but troubles since leaving Priam's great city, and I have yet to set foot upon my homeland.

You, on the other hand, should not be sorry that you are dead. No man has ever been more blessed than you. When you were alive, the long-haired Greeks honored you as if you were one of the deathless gods; even here, in Hades' dark kingdom, you rule with some power over the dead.

Do not talk to me about the pleasures of death, swift-footed Achilles answered. I would much prefer to be a servant or a very poor man, and yet be alive, than to rule over all the shades in the Underworld. But what can you tell me about my father and my son? Is Peleus still honored in his old age? Did Neoptolemus become a leader in the war against the Trojans?

I have heard nothing about your father, I replied, But it was I who brought Neoptolemus to Troy to join the bronze-coated Greeks. He stood third, next to godlike Nestor and myself, in the gift of thoughtful speech. Upon the plain of Troy, he was a mighty slayer of the horse-taming Trojans and always fought at the forefront of the Greek lines. Later, he fearlessly stepped from the body of the Trojan horse, eager to begin destroying Priam's great city. When I last saw him, he was on board his hollow ship, in good health, and well-honored with his share of the Trojan treasure.

With these words, the shade of swift-footed Achilles happily left me, for he was content to learn that he could be proud of his son. But the shade of Ajax, who still stood nearby, was not pleased with me at all.

Ajax, I called, will you not forget our contest for Achilles' armor now that you are dead? Must your heart still overflow with anger toward me because I won it?

I wish that we had never competed for such an honor, and that I had never won it, I admitted. Surely Zeus must be to blame, for when you died, we lost our great strength against the might of the horse-taming Trojans. And we mourned for you as we mourned for godlike Achilles. Won't you put aside your anger and talk with me? However, the wrath of Ajax was unrelenting, and he chose to rejoin the shades who had left me.

Before I returned to my black ship, I saw Tantalus, whom the gods have condemned to an eternity of agonizing thirst and hunger. Although he stands in water that reaches his chin, whenever he lowers his head to drink it the water dries up so completely that he looks down upon the barren, black dirt at his feet. Then, as soon as he raises his chin, the clear water sparkles beneath it once more.

Tantalus also stands beneath trees that bear honey-sweet fruits -- apples, pears, pomegranates, figs, and olives -- upon their branches. But whenever he stretches forth his hands to grab one of these ripe fruits, a gust of wind suddenly blows that branch out of his reach. Then, as soon as he lowers his arms, the branch swings back into place above his head.

Not far from Tantalus I found Sisyphus, whom the lord of Olympus has condemned to another kind of eternal suffering. Sisyphus must continuously strive to push an enormous boulder up and over the top of a steep hill. I watched him gather all the strength in his arms and his legs to move the mighty rock slowly up the incline.

Just when it looked as if Sisyphus would indeed be able to thrust the gigantic boulder over the crest of the hill, the great weight of the rock became more than he could endure, and he could no longer move it. He was forced to use all of his remaining energy to scramble out of the boulder's path as it came tumbling back down the hill to the dusty plain below.

Then, as the sweat poured from his dusty limbs, Sisyphus began to push the rock up the hill once again. I wondered what he was thinking, or if he was thinking at all. Did he know that he would never be able to push the boulder over the crest of the hill? Or did he hope that, this time, he would have the strength to succeed?

Finally, I saw the shade of godlike Heracles, although Heracles himself lives among the immortal gods upon Mount Olympus as the husband of Hebe, daughter of Zeus and Hera. Even his shade terrified the dead, for he stalked the dark kingdom of Hades with an arrow in place upon the string of his giant bow, ready for action. He wore a golden sash across his chest from shoulder to waist, decorated with scenes of his many feats: wild boars, bears, lions, and death-dealing conflicts between mortal men. Wherever he moved, the shades of the dead flew from his path as frightened birds scatter in panic at the sight of an approaching predator.

When Heracles recognized me, tears ran from his eyes. Odysseus, man of many schemes, he cried. I see that you, too, endure wretched burdens like those I bore in the days of old when I walked the earth. Although Zeus is my father, it was my fate to serve a man far inferior to me and to perform the difficult labors he devised. The greatest task he

demanded was that I enter the dark kingdom of Hades, capture the three-headed dog that guards the gates here, and return to him with it. Bright-eyed Athena and Hermes, the Wayfinder, helped me, he concluded, and with these words he walked on.

At this point I decided to hurry back to my ship before Medusa approached me. Even in the kingdom of Hades I was afraid that one look at the Gorgon's monstrous face would turn me to stone.