**Book 11: The Land of the Dead**

*Odysseus is not alone among great ancient heroes who descend to the Land of the Dead. It is as if the ancient storytellers are telling us that the truly significant voyages in life involve journeys to the deepest parts of ourselves to confront the darkest reality of all—death.*

*In the Land of the Dead, Odysseus seeks his destiny. The source of information is Teiresias, the famous blind prophet from the city of Thebes. Circe has told Odysseus what he must do to call Teiresias up from the dead. Odysseus is speaking:*

“Then I addressed the blurred and breathless dead, vowing to slaughter my best cow for them before she calved, at home in Ithaca, and burn the choice bits on the altar fire; as for Teiresias, I swore to sacrifice a black lamb, handsomest of all our flock. Thus to assuage the nations of the dead I pledged these rites, then slashed the lamb and ewe, letting their black blood stream into the wellpit. Now the souls gathered, stirring out of Erebus, brides and young men, and men grown old in pain, and tender girls whose hearts were new to grief; many were there, too, torn by brazen lanceheads, battle-slain, bearing still their bloody gear. From every side they came and sought the pit with rustling cries; and I grew sick with fear. But presently I gave command to my officers to flay [strip of skin] those sheep the bronze cut down, and make burnt offerings of flesh to the gods below—to sovereign Death, to pale Persephone. Meanwhile I crouched with my drawn sword to keep the surging phantoms from the bloody pit till I should know the presence of Teiresias....

Soon from the dark that prince of Thebes came forward bearing a golden staff; and he addressed me: ‘Son of Laertes and the gods of old, Odysseus, master of land ways and sea ways, why leave the blazing sun, O man of woe, to see the cold dead and the joyless region? Stand clear, put up your sword; let me but taste of blood, I shall speak true.’

At this I stepped aside, and in the scabbard let my long sword ring home to the pommel silver, as he bent down to the somber blood. Then spoke the prince of those with gift of speech: ‘Great captain, a fair wind and the honey lights of home are all you seek. But anguish lies ahead; the god who thunders on the land prepares it, not to be shaken from your track, implacable [inflexible], in rancor for the son whose eye you blinded. One narrow strait may take you through his blows: denial of yourself, restraint of shipmates. When you make landfall on Thrinakia [island where the sun god Helios pastured his sacred cattle] first and quit the violet sea, dark on the land you’ll find the grazing herds of Helios by whom all things are seen, all speech is known. Avoid those cattle, hold fast to your intent, and hard seafaring brings you all to Ithaca. **But** if you raid the cattle, I see destruction for ship and crew. Though you survive alone, bereft of all companions, lost for years, under strange sail shall you come home, to find your own house filled with trouble: insolent men eating your livestock as they court your lady. Aye, you shall make those men atone in blood! But after you have dealt out death—in open combat or by stealth—to all the suitors, go overland on foot, and take an oar, until one day you come where men have lived with meat unsalted, never known the sea, nor seen seagoing ships, with crimson bows and oars that fledge light hulls for dipping flight. The spot will soon be plain to you, and I can tell you how: some passerby will say, ‘What winnowing fan [a device used to separate wheat from chaff] is that upon your shoulder?’ Halt, and implant your smooth oar in the turf and make fair sacrifice to Lord Poseidon: a ram, a bull, a great buck boar; turn back, and carry out pure hecatombs [sacrifices of 100 cattle] at home to all wide heaven’s lords, the undying gods, to each in order. Then a seaborne death soft as this hand of mist will come upon you when you are wearied out with rich old age, your country folk in blessed peace around you. And all this shall be just as I foretell.’
When he had done, I said at once, ’Teiresias, my life runs on then as the gods have spun it. But come, now, tell me this; make this thing clear: I see my mother’s ghost among the dead sitting in silence near the blood. Not once has she glanced this way toward her son, nor spoken. Tell me, my lord, may she in some way come to know my presence?’

To this he answered: ‘I shall make it clear in a few words and simply. Any dead man whom you allow to enter where the blood is will speak to you, and speak the truth; but those deprived will grow remote again and fade.’

When he had prophesied, Teiresias’s shade retired lordly to the halls of Death….”

Now Odysseus meets a familiar ghost, his mother Anticleia, who died of a broken heart when her son failed to return from Troy.

“I bit my lip, rising perplexed, with longing to embrace her, and tried three times, putting my arms around her, but she went sifting through my hands, impalpable as shadows are, and wavering like a dream. Now this embittered all the pain I bore, and I cried in the darkness: ‘O my mother, will you not stay, be still, here in my arms, may we not, in this place of Death, as well, hold one another, touch with love, and taste salt tears’ relief, the twinge of welling tears? Or is this all hallucination, sent against me by the iron queen, Persephone, to make me groan again?’

My noble mother answered quickly: ‘O my child—alas, most sorely tried of men—great Zeus’s daughter, Persephone, knits no illusion for you. All mortals meet this judgment when they die. No flesh and bone are here, none bound by sinew, since the bright-hearted pyre consumed them down—the white bones long exanimate [lifeless]—to ash; dreamlike the soul flies, insubstantial. You must crave sunlight soon. Note all things strange Seen here, to tell your lady in after days.’”

Odysseus has more encounters and conversations with other ghosts of people he knew in life. He then leaves the Land of the Dead and returns to Circe’s island for further instructions.

Book 12: The Sirens, Scylla, and Charybdis

When Odysseus’s men return to Circe’s island for further instructions, she warns Odysseus of the dangers that await him—the forces that will try to prevent him from returning home.

“‘Listen with care to this now, and a god will arm your mind. Square in your ship’s path are Sirens, crying beauty to bewitch men coasting by; woe to the innocent who hears that sound! He will not see his lady nor his children in joy, crowding about him, home from sea; the Sirens will sing his mind away on their sweet meadow lolling. There are bones of dead men rotting in a pile beside them and flayed skins shrivel around the spot. Steer wide; keep well to seaward; plug your oarsmen’s ears with beeswax kneaded soft; none of the rest should hear that song. But if you wish to listen, let the men tie you in the lugger, hand and foot, back to the mast, lashed to the mast, so you may hear those harpies’ [monstrous winged women greedy for victims] thrilling voices; shout as you will, begging to be untied, your crew must only twist more line around you and keep their stroke up, till the singers fade….’”

The next danger lies between two headlands with tall cliffs. Circe continues:

“‘…That is the den of Scylla, where she yaps abominably, a newborn whelp’s [puppy’s] cry, though she is huge and monstrous. God or man, no one could look on her in joy. Her legs—and there are twelve—are like great tentacles, unjointed, and upon her serpent necks are borne six heads like nightmares of ferocity, with triple serried [dense, compact] rows of fangs and deep gullets of black death. Half her length, she sways her heads in the air, outside her horrid cleft, hunting the sea around that promontory for dolphins, dogfish, or what bigger game thundering Amphitrite [wife of Poseidon] feeds in thousands. And no ship’s company can claim to have passed her without loss and grief; she takes, from every ship, one man for every gullet.”
The opposite point seems more a tongue of land
you’d touch with a good bowshot, at the narrows.
A great wild fig, a shaggy mass of leaves,
grows on it, and Charybdis lurks below
to swallow down the dark sea tide. Three times
from dawn to dusk she spews it up
and sucks it down again three times, a whirling
maelstrom [whirlpool]; if you come upon her then
the god who makes earth tremble could not save you.
No, hug the cliff of Scylla, take your ship
through on a racing stroke. Better to mourn
six men than lose them all, and the ship, too….

Then you will coast Thrinakia, the island
where Helios’s cattle graze, fine herds, and flocks
of goodly sheep. The herds and flocks are seven,
with fifty beasts in each. No lambs are born,
or calves, and these fat cattle never die….
Now give those cattle a wide berth, keep your thoughts
intent upon your course for home,
and hard seafaring brings you all to Ithaca.

The Ithacans set off, but Odysseus never reveals
to them Circe’s last prophecy—that he will be the
only survivor of their long journey. Odysseus is
still speaking to Alcinous’s court:

“The crew being now silent before me, I
addressed them, sore at heart: ‘Dear friends, more
than one man, or two, should know those things
Circe foresaw for us and shared with me,
so let me tell her forecast: then we die
with our eyes open, if we are going to die,
or know what death we battle if we can. Sirens
weaving a haunting song over the sea
we are to shun, she said, and their green shore
all sweet with clover; yet she urged that I
alone should listen to their song. Therefore
you are to tie me up, tight as a splint,
erect along the mast, lashed to the mast,
and if I shout and beg to be untied,
take more turns of the rope to muffle me.’

I rather dwelt on this part of the forecast,
while our good ship made time, bound outward down
the wind for the stranger island of Sirens.
Then all at once the wind fell, and a calm came over all
the sea, as though some power lulled the swell.

The crew were on their feet
briskly, to furl the sail, and stow it; then,
each in place, they poised the smooth oar blades
and sent the white foam scudding by. I carved
a massive cake of beeswax into bits
and rolled them in my hands until they softened—
no long task, for a burning heat came down
from Helios, lord of high noon. Going forward
I carried wax along the line, and laid it
thick on their ears. They tied me up, then,
plumb [vertically] amidships, back to the mast,
lashed to the mast, and took themselves again to rowing. !
as we came smartly within hailing distance,
the two Sirens, noting our fast ship
off their point, made ready, and they sang….

The lovely voices in ardor appealing over the water
made me crave to listen, and I tried to say
‘Untie me!’ to the crew, jerking my brows;
but they bent steady to the oars. Then Perimedes
got to his feet, he and Eurylochus,
and passed more line about, to hold me still.
So all rowed on, until the Sirens
dropped under the sea rim, and their singing
dwindled away. My faithful company
rested on their oars now, peeling off
the wax that I had laid thick on their ears;
them free. But scarcely had that island
faded in blue air than I saw smoke
and white water, with sound of waves in tumult—
aound the men heard, and it terrified them.
Oars flew from their hands; the blades went knocking
wild alongside till the ship lost way,
with no oarblades to drive her through the water.

Well, I walked up and down from bow to stern,
trying to put heart into them, standing over
every oarsman, saying gently, ‘Friends,
have we never been in danger before this?
More fearsome, is it now, than when the Cyclops
penned us in his cave? What power he had!
Did I not keep my nerve, and use my wits to find a way out for us? Now I say by hook or crook this peril too shall be something that we remember. Heads up, lads! We must obey the orders as I give them. Get the oarshafts in your hands, and lay back hard on your benches; hit these breaking seas.

Zeus help us pull away before we founder. You at the tiller, listen, and take in all that I say—the rudders are your duty; keep her out of the combers [waves] and the smoke; steer for that headland; watch the drift, or we fetch up in the smother [turmoil], and you drown us."

That was all, and it brought them round to action. But as I sent them on toward Scylla, I told them nothing, as they could do nothing. They would have dropped their oars again, in panic, to roll for cover under the decking. Circe's bidding against arms had slipped my mind, so I tied on my cuirass [armor] and took up two heavy spears, then made my way along to the foredeck—thinking to see her first from there, the monster of the gray rock, harboring torment for my friends. I strained my eyes upon that cliffside veiled in clouds, but nowhere could I catch sight of her.

And all this time, in travail [agony, pain], sobbing, gaining on the current, we rowed into the straight—Scylla to port and on our starboard beam Charybdis, dire gorge [throat and jaws] of the salt sea tide. By heaven! When she vomited, all the sea was like a cauldron seething over intense fire, when the mixture suddenly heaves and rises. The shot spume soared to the landside heights, and fell like rain. But when she swallowed the sea water down, we saw the funnel of the maelstrom, heard the rock bellowing all around, and dark sand raged on the bottom far below. My men all blanched [grew pale] against the gloom, our eyes were fixed upon that yawning mouth in fear of being devoured.

Then Scylla made her strike, whisking six of my best men from the ship. I happened to glance aft of ship and oarsmen and caught sight of their arms and legs, dangling high overhead. Voices came down to me in anguish, calling my name for the last time.

A man surf-casting on a point of rock for bass or mackerel, whipping his long rod to drop the sinker and the bait far out, will hook a fish and rip it from the surface to dangle wriggling through the air: so too these men were borne aloft in spasms toward the cliff.

She ate them as they shrieked there, in her den, in the dire grapple [fight], reaching still for me—and deathly pity ran me through at that sight—far the worst I ever suffered, questing the passes of the strange sea.

We rowed on. The rocks were now behind; Charybdis, too, and Scylla dropped stern. Then we were coasting the noble island of the god, where grazed those cattle with wide brows, and bouteous flocks of Helios, lord of noon, who rides high heaven.

From the black ship, far still at sea, I heard the lowing of the cattle winding home and sheep bleating; and heard, too, in my heart the words of the blind Teiresias of Thebes and Circe of Aeaea: both forbade me the island of the world’s delight, the Sun. So I spoke out in gloom to my companions:

‘Shipmates, grieving and weary though you are, listen: I had forewarning from Teiresias and Circe, too; both told me I must shun this island of the Sun, the world’s delight. Nothing but fatal trouble shall we find here. Pull away, then, and put the land astern.’

That strained them to the breaking point, and, cursing, Eurylochus cried out in bitterness:

‘Are you flesh and blood, Odysseus, to endure more than a man can? Do you never tire? God, look at you, iron is what you’re made of. Here we all are, half dead with weariness, falling asleep over the oars, and you say “No Landing”—no firm island earth where we could make a quiet supper. No: pull out to sea, you say, with night upon us—just as before, but wandering now, and lost….’
‘Eurylochus, they are with you to a man. I am alone, outmatched. Let this whole company swear me a great oath: Any herd of cattle or flock of sheep here found shall go unharmed; no one shall slaughter out of wantonness ram or heifer; all shall be content with what the goddess Circe put aboard…..’

But now we had a month of onshore gales, blowing day in, day out—south winds, or south by east. As long as bread and good red wine remained to keep the men up, and appease their craving, they would not touch the cattle. But in the end, when all the barley in the ship was gone, hunger drove them to scour the wild shore with angling hooks, for fishes and sea fowl, whatever fell into their hands; and lean days wore their bellies thin.

Because they are dying of starvation, Odysseus’s men disobey his orders, and they eat the sacred cattle of the sun god, Helios. Helios then petitions Zeus to punish the men for their act:

‘O Father Zeus and gods in bliss forever, punish Odysseus’s men! So overweening, now they have killed my peaceful cattle, my joy at morning when I climbed the sky of stars, and evening, when I bore westward from heaven. Restitution or penalty they shall pay—and pay in full—or I go down forever to light the dead men in the underworld.’

Then Zeus who drives the stormcloud made reply: ‘Peace, Helios: shine on among the gods, shine over mortals in the fields of grain. Let me throw down one white-hot bolt, and make splinters of their ship in the winedark sea.’

When they set sail again, they are punished by death—a thunderbolt from Zeus destroys their boat and all the men drown. Only Odysseus survives; he drifts back toward Scylla and Charybdis. It is only through the intervention of the gods that he is not killed. He drifts for nine days in the open sea before coming to Calypso’s island, where we met him originally in Book 5.

“The dangerous nymph
Calypso lives and sings there, in her beauty,
and she received me, loved me,
the same tale that I told last night in hall
to you and to your lady? Those adventures
made a long evening, and I do not hold
with tiresome repetition of a story.’

Odysseus the storyteller has brought us up to date. He can now rest.