

EPISODE 4 – The Calm Before the Storm

total running time: 10:02

The greatest gift (⊕ 4:46)

“Father Poseidon, did you hear his name? It was Odysseus who blinded your son. Blight his voyage with trial and calamity, so that if at last he reaches his homeland let him be alone, and unknown, and under a strange sail, and let him find danger waiting where there should be a welcome!”

5 I laughed at the Cyclops’ rantings, I looked around me, I could see no sign of retribution. The sea was calm. But little did I know. Far below our ship the sea god Poseidon was scratching his barnacled chin and pondering a plan.

Far from suffering from a storm my men and I found that we were becalmed, there was not a breath of a breeze. My men had to row for days until their hands were studded with blisters,
10 until they bandaged their palms, and the blood oozed through the bandages. It was with great relief then that we saw something flashing, bobbing, reflecting the light of the sun. When we came closer we saw it was a floating island surrounded with tall walls of bronze. We had heard stories of this place from travellers and the stories proved true. When we were closer still the guards atop those walls shouted, “King Aeolus offers sanctuary in exchange for tales of your
15 adventures!”

We passed through the bronze gates, we were welcomed warmly by the people of that island. Our ship was tethered to the jetty, we were led up a cobblestone hill to the palace of their old, mad king: Aeolus. He loves to hear the stories of travellers but he’ll never leave his island. For seven days and nights he filled his hall with the scent of roasting meat. For seven days and
20 nights we told him tales, of our trials on the fields of Troy, of our ordeal with the Cyclops. Eventually, we thanked him for his hospitality, we told him the time had come for us to resume our voyage. The old man ordered his soldiers to fill our ship with good things to eat and drink. Then, he led me up some steps into his bedroom. He pointed at an alcove. He pulled back a curtain and I saw there a sack, tied tight with a silver thong. As I stared at it, it wriggled, as
25 though there was something alive inside it. He gestured for me to come closer. I had to come so close that I could taste his breath on my tongue. And then he said:

“Zeus is my friend! He is in the middle of a feud with his brother, the sea god Poseidon. He has stolen all the winds of the world from Poseidon, and he has put them in this sack. This is why
30 you’re becalmed. You see, Odysseus, the winds of the world are all in this sack, that I have been given for safe keeping. Now it crosses my mind, Odysseus, that I could release one gust to fill your sail and I could give the sack to you. You would sail straight back to rocky Ithaca and then you could open the sack and release the winds as I have promised I will to Zeus. Soon, you will be home.”

I am not ashamed to say that I wept a few tears of joy then. The old man knelt. He unpicked
35 the knot in the silver thong, he dipped his hand into the mouth of the sack, and he pulled out what looked to me like a wriggling snake of smoke. He opened his hand and it was gone. And

the two of us shivered, and then he pulled the knot tight again. He gave the sack to me. The two of us made our way down the cobblestone hill. There were people of that island lining the jetty to wish us farewell. I climbed aboard the ship. There were my men, at their benches. I
40 walked to the foredeck, the deck just behind the prow at the front of the ship. I put down the sack and then I said:

“In this bag there is the greatest gift that ever I have been given. A greater treasure than even the spoils of Troy!”

***Sight of home* (☉ 5:16)**

The people of that place cheered then and the old king beamed. My men stared at the sack. We set off. We rowed through the bronze gates, then we lifted the glistening oars and we unfurled the sail and immediately it bulged like a great belly, no need to row, no need to steer. It was as if our ship was following a path across the trackless waves of the sea. It was as if we
5 were an arrow, loosed from a bow. For nine days and nights I sat on the foredeck, just behind the prow, scanning the horizon. For nine days and nights I barely ate or drank – I did not sleep. And then I saw her. I knew her, immediately. Great Mount Neriton, the terraces, the vineyards, the goat tracks, the shingled beaches, the land that had given me life. Great rocky Ithaca! She became more real by the moment. As we approached her, my relief became fatigue. The
10 rigours of my vigil overcame me. I felt so tired I ordered my men to wake me when at last I could jump from the ship, and plant my feet on the shingle of an Ithacan beach. And I lay, with the sack by my side, and I fell asleep.

As soon as I did so, Poseidon saw his chance. He made a little gesture with his hand. The gesture caused a wave. Our ship had to climb. As the prow of the ship rose, the sack by my
15 side slid from the foredeck and landed with a plop in the lap of one of my crew. He turned to his companion beside him. He said, “Did you hear what Odysseus said? He said in the sack is the greatest treasure that ever he received. All the treasures of Troy he shared with us. And he ought to after all, we have risked our lives as often as he. But this he keeps from us, he keeps for himself – where is the justice in that? What harm would there be in seeing what he has
20 been given, while he sleeps?”

And so that man, he unpicked the knot, he dipped his thumbs into the mouth of the sack and as he opened it he was blasted from his bench onto the deck. Astonished, he looked up to see rising from the sack a thousand wriggling snakes of smoke, surging into the sky, and the sea god had all the weapons he needed now. The sky darkened above us. Waves began to batter
25 against the bows, the sail was torn to shreds. The spinning of the ship woke me. I sat up. Poseidon spat brine into my eyes. I looked out. I could just see the edge of Ithaca. Among the clouds I reached out over the edge of the ship as though I could grab her, as though I could pull her to me but then she was gone. And the north wind threw us for the south wind to catch. The west and the east were fighting over us. Sometimes we were climbing mountains of water,
30 sometimes sinking into valleys and the sky could not be seen. When we sighted the floating

island of Aeolus, we made for it. We fought our way through the waves, we passed through the bronze gates and within moments the storm had abated. I made my way up the cobblestone hill, I entered the palace of the king. As usual he was in the middle of a feast. He was astonished to see me return. When I told him what had happened, I saw his expression
35 change.

“Odysseus,” he said, “this is a floating island. We are reliant on the goodwill of the sea god for our very survival. You are a threat to every one of us in this place. You must leave now!”

I was bundled from his palace. I was thrown down the cobblestone hill. I jumped into the ship. We made our way through the bronze gates. We looked above us. The sky was frowning over
40 us. It was low, swollen, sullen. The sea god wanted us dead. How would we ever see our homes, our hearths, our fields and farms and families again?