

EPISODE 6 – The Land of the Dead

total running time: 10:10

A prince among the dead (⊕ 5:33)

Circe's words put a chill into my very soul. She said, "If you want to find out how to soothe the anger of the sea god you must sail north, and north again, until you walk among the ghosts of the dead."

Home. "Home" is what a gull cries over rough waters. There is nothing worse for mortal man
5 than wandering. How many more storms before my ship can shed its sail? The smell of Ithacan earth after rain. The long shadows of the afternoon stretching down the terraces and vineyards that ladder every slope. My dog licking my palm. A wife without a husband, a country without a king. These things compelled me to sail beyond the limits of human life and walk among the shades in the realm of many guests.

10 Circe gave us provisions. She also gave us blankets. We soon discovered why. The further north you sail, the colder it becomes. One morning when we woke, we could see our breath rising from our lips and our nostrils in the mist. Then one morning, hanging from the mast and the rigging, we could see shards of ice like a dragon's teeth. Then we found ourselves approaching a wall of fog. Once we passed inside that mist, for how long we sailed I couldn't
15 say. Suddenly day and night had no meaning. There was only an endless, clammy gloom.

The prow of the ship hit a sandbank. I and two of my men fetched a pair of sheep ashore, and we walked. The further we went, the more uneasy we felt. Everything was infected with the greyness of the mist. All colour bled from our clothes, from our skin. My companions became shifting forms in the fog beside me. Every step took a little more effort. All my old wounds
20 ached. It was as if we were wading against the current of an ocean we couldn't see. Then we were at the banks of a dark, oily river, the river of forgetfulness. On the other side, hidden from view by the fog, was the land of the dead, Hades. We knelt, we scooped apart the sand at our feet, then we lifted the chins of the sheep we had brought and cut their throats. Their dark blood made a pool. Shapes formed in the fog. We heard a moaning, a hissing, like flies to
25 carrion the ghosts of the dead were coming, summoned by our sacrifice. The sight of them, fresh brides, warriors with gaping gashes, laughing, shambling, stumbling children, the sight of them made my seasoned soldiers shake with horror. All but one of the spirits of the dead has lost all memory of their previous life. They are stupid, hungry wraiths until they can drink the blood of a mortal sacrifice. This is what they crave above all else: to remember their lives, how
30 offering this blood was for the only one who has kept his mind, the blind prophet Tiresias.

I had instructed my companions to stand on either side of the pool and keep the other ghosts away until Tiresias had drunk his fill and spoken to us, but in the event my companions could do nothing but stand, and shake, and gape. It was as if they had fallen into some kind of trance. So it fell to me to draw my sword, to swipe it in the air. But then, I saw a face I knew. It was Achilles, the
35 great hero Achilles. My companion, my ally through most of the Trojan War. He had fought alongside me in countless battles, severing heads with every stroke of his sword, he had died before the war's end. This was my chance to tell him that his death had not been in vain. I guided

him towards the pool. I let him drink. I saw the memory return to his face. I saw him recognise me. Joyfully, I began to tell him of our great and bloody victory. I began to tell him that Troy was nothing
40 but smouldering, blood-soaked rubble now, but as I spoke he lifted his hand.

He said, "Odysseus, down here it matters not who won the war. In life I chose to die young and win great glory. I chose to die young and become a story. But now ... I would rather be a beggar. I would rather be a beggar, who is spat at and cursed upon by every passer-by. I would rather be a beggar, who can see his wife and child every day, who can feel the heat of
45 the sun upon his skin. I would rather be a beggar among the living, than a prince among the dead!" And then he fled.

The vision of a blind man (☺ 4:37)

Here was one who had a dignity, a purpose that all the others lacked – surely this was Tiresias, the ghost that we sought. I guided him with the sound of my voice towards the pool. He knelt, he cupped his hands, he dipped them into the blood and he drank. And his white eyes twitched in their sockets.

5 He said, "You are Odysseus. You seek a way home but it will be hard for you. Poseidon longs to avenge the mutilation of his son. Odysseus, there is only one way that you will see the honey lights of home again. You must learn humility. You must rein in the desires you feel and the desires of your crew, or they will destroy you. During your voyage, you will approach an island where you'll see cattle grazing, no sign of human life. You will want to stop and feast upon their flesh. But,
10 Odysseus, this herd is the prized possession of the sun-god Hyperion. If he were to see you harm them (and he is the sun - he sees all), if he were to see you harm them he would go to Zeus and demand revenge, and Zeus would ensure that the Cyclopes' curse would chase you relentlessly across the world until if at last you reached your homeland, it would be alone, and unknown, and under a strange sail and you would find danger waiting where there should be a welcome.

15 If you can overcome those who await you, Odysseus, there is another journey you must make. You must go to the mainland and put an oar on your shoulder and walk inland leaving behind everyone, everything you know, until at last you come to a crossroads where a man will stop you. He will point at the oar that you are carrying, he will ask you what it is. In that place, where they do not know what an oar is because they do not know what the sea is, in that place where, truly, you
20 are nobody, you must plant the blade of the oar in the ground so that the shaft rises up towards the sky and sacrifice to the sea god a ram, a bull and a breeding boar. Then you will have made your peace with him. This vision I have seen, it has come to me through a gate of horn."

As the blind prophet spoke, more and more ghosts gathered round the pool. Then I saw a sight that struck me with such a shock of sorrow I dropped my sword, I stumbled back, I fell into the pool
25 of blood. I turned and ran screaming, my two companions following, not knowing why they were running. We climbed aboard the ship and soon we were out on the open sea. They never asked me what I had seen. I never told them that I had seen among the stupid, hungry dead, the face of my mother. I had been gone too long. If I ever reached my homeland again she would not be there. I would never again feel her warm embrace.