

## Chapter Two

### Polyphemus and the Man Called No Wun

**ALL AT ONCE,** dawn stood in the sky and let fall strands of golden light, like curls of hair. Odysseus's fleet lay on the open sea. The gentle water was dented like hammered gold, and rowing was easy. In time, the madness of the Lotus Eaters died in their hollow stomachs, and they took their places, shamefaced, at their empty oars.

At the stern of every boat, great amphoras of blood-red wine were rammed into heaps of sand, to keep them upright. Odysseus had looted the wine from the Cicones in Thrace, and though the enterprise had cost him six good men out of every boat, they now had wine enough for the journey, however long it proved. The wine was so strong that they drank it diluted ten times over with water, for fear of falling insensible over their oars. No, drink was not lacking, even when the sun hammered day after day on the dented golden sea. But there was not a morsel of food in the boats. They had to find land and sustenance quickly.

There! A spire of dust and a choir of bleats hung in the air over a craggy, wooded island. As the boats drew closer, the men could see shaggy, long-horned goats watching them from every ledge of the cliff-ringed shore.

In each ship, the oars rattled between the thole-pins, and forty-four wooden blades sliced white slits in the brazen ocean. Odysseus stood at the prow with his cockerel on his arm, and, as the ship leaped forward, the cock's talons sank in and drew blood as red as the comb on its head. It gave a squawk that chilled the sweat of those that heard it—even under the brazen sun.

The little island was uninhabited except for the goats. But from the top of its single pointed hill, Odysseus could see across a strait to fertile land. Terraces of vines and olive trees plumed gray-green above the shore, and there was a harbor guarded by elegant, swaying, black poplars, like Trojan sentries in their plumed helmets.

"This time I shall go and reconnoiter, myself," said Odysseus. "Eleven ships will stay here. I and my men will go across the strait to scout about."

On the far shore, Odysseus chose just twelve of his best men to venture farther inland. All they carried with them for baggage was an amphora of wine to offer as a gift to the king of the country. At the very top of the slopes, huge arching cave mouths embellished with vines showed that men lived here. But Odysseus did not have to climb so far before finding a cave with a walled



yard in front of it, ripe with the smell of sheep. No one was inside.

"Look, Captain! Cheeses! And look at the size of them!" cried a soldier, trying to lift a cheese as big as a millstone. "Let's take these before the owner comes back. They'll last us all the way to Ithaca!"

"Where's the hurry?" said Odysseus. "I've a mind to see what kind of a man builds walls this high and makes cheeses like these. The laws of hospitality will oblige him to give us food and presents. We might get better than cheese to take away with us! And since when did Greek fighting men have anything to fear from a shepherd?"

So the scouting party went inside the cave and settled themselves down to wait for the shepherd's return.

The sun sank down, and the low light poured thick as honey through the olive grove, vineyards, and the mouth of the cave. All round the cave walls, between the heaps of dung, pans of milk were settling into curds and whey. From the size of the pans, the skimming spoon, the firewood, and a great club lying on the floor, Odysseus knew that the owner must be a giant of extraordinary strength. But nothing prepared him for the creature that came.

A herd of sheep and goats, huge as cows and horses, clattered down the slope and into the yard. Behind them came a hill—an overgrown hillock of sinews and rolling flesh. Hairy skin, with pores as big as rabbit holes, wrinkled over the muscle and bone of a breathing, walking

mountain. Odysseus might have called it a man, but for the one giant eye that stood in its hideous forehead, above the cavernous nostrils and the pothole of a mouth.

The moment the ogre had chased the last of his animals inside, he rolled across the gateway a boulder so huge that twenty Greeks could not have rolled it away again. Then he kindled a fire, and yellow light washed over the floor and up the walls of rock.

"Well, well, well. And who have we here?" said the one-eyed giant.

"Ha-ha. A dozen poor, unfortunate Greeks sheltering from weariness and hunger in the hospitable portals of your charming home," said Odysseus, walking forward jauntily and greeting the ogre with a wave of his hand. "Ha-ha. We might have been scared out of our skins by your . . . your ample size. But we are the servants of Great Zeus, father of all the gods, and of course we know that no god-fearing man would do harm to a fellow servant of Zeus."

The ogre squatted down with his hands spread over his grinning mouth and peered at Odysseus with his one great rheummy eye. "Is that so? Is that so? Well, and surely you aren't all alone on the big ocean? Just the . . . eight . . . ten . . . thirteen of you? Are there no more? Where's your boat, good sir?"

But Odysseus (who was quick of hand, but quicker still of wit) said, "Brother! I'm appalled to have to tell you that our boat was wrecked on that promontory beyond

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the beach—smashed to pieces. We are the only survivors. Still, we count ourselves fortunate to have found our way here to your delightful home. May I have the honor of knowing your name?”

The ogre’s mouth gaped in a laugh as noisy as falling trees. He reached over Odysseus’s head, picked up two of his crew—the fattest ones—and smashed them heads-down on the floor. He ate them then like men eat slivers of honeycomb trying not to lose a drop of the juice. And he said, while his mouth was still full, “So, you think Polyphemus ought to be frightened of old Zeus, do you? Huh! You ignorant little worm. Why should a Cyclops give a spit what Zeus thinks? Least of all Polyphemus, son of the great god Poseidon, who just now smashed your boat like an eggshell. My father stands in the ocean trench and chews on the clouds. Poseidon has the better of Zeus, as Polyphemus has the better of . . . what did you say your name was?”

Most of the crew were huddled together against the back of the cave, weeping at the terrible death of their friends. But Odysseus said, “I didn’t tell you my name. And why should I tell it to an unholy monster like you? I shall keep it secret now, till I die!”

“Oh, don’t be like that! You’re my guest! Tell me your name. Go on. Tell me. I’ll grant you a favor if you tell me.”

“Oh, very well, then,” said Odysseus. “My name is No Wun. Now spare the rest of us if only because we are your guests!”

Polyphemus picked his teeth. "No Wun. What a stupid name. All right, No Wun. Because you're my guests, I promise I won't eat another man . . . until breakfast time! Ha-ha-ha!"

Delighted with this joke of his, the hideous Cyclops lay down beside the fire and went to sleep on his back so that he snored all night long.

At the sound of the first snore, Odysseus's men drew their swords, ready to stab the creature in its knotty neck. But Odysseus held up his hand and whispered urgently, "Don't be so rash! If we managed to kill him, how would we shift the boulder out of the doorway? We'd be trapped in here like prawns in a pot until the other giants came looking. A mouth for every man of us, I dare say."

"What then, Lord Odysseus?" said the youngest man of all, trying to hide his helpless tears. "The goddess Athene made you quick of hand and even quicker of wit, so save us from being eaten!"

Odysseus was looking at the giant club or shepherd's crook that lay in one corner of the cave. "There might be a way," he said. "For all but four of us."

At dawn the Cyclops grunted and opened his one bleary eye. Quickly Odysseus kicked dung over the crook. All night long they had sat blunting their swords on it, hacking off splinters of the hard wood. As Odysseus nonchalantly scuffed dung over the hiding place, his men embraced each other for fear Polyphemus had wakened hungry.

None too soon did they say their good-byes. The Cyclops reached out one lazy hand and then another, and chose two thick-set men for his breakfast. He bit into them like apples and spat out their belts like pips. Then rolling back the stone in the door and shooing out his sheep and goats, he fixed his malicious eye on the Greeks. "Until tonight, honored guests," he said, grinning. And ducking outside, he rolled the stone back across the mouth of their prison. The sound of the bells round the animals' necks grew more and more distant.

Horror and misery paralyzed the poor, trapped men. They looked into each other's faces and wondered, "Will it be you or will it be me for supper?" All day long, as they faced each other across the massive shepherd's crook and hacked at it with their blades, they wondered, "Will it be you or will it be me?" Sooner than they wanted, they had their answer.

Polyphemus unsealed the cave and drove in his goats and sheep. There was no chance of a dash to freedom before the stone was in place again. Choosing two of the crew, Polyphemus nibbled them like skewered lamb, then crunched on their bones for the marrow.

"I brought you a present—before I knew you for what you are," said Odysseus as the Cyclops wiped his mouth on his forearm. "It would have gone down well, too, with that miserable meal of yours."

"Oh, give it to me, No Wun! I like presents! I'll tell you what: give me my present, and I'll grant you all the honor due to a guest of mine. Is it a bargain?"

"A bargain," said Odysseus. He and two others crawled into the darkest recess of the cave and fetched the amphora of wine. Polyphemus's one bulging eye gleamed. He grabbed the great stone jar, lifting it without the least strain, and drank a greedy swig.

"No Wun, this is delicious! Nectar! A drop of liquid sunlight. I have vines of my own, but my wine tastes like . . . vigenar compared with . . . like nivegar . . . like givenar . . . oof! This stuff is strong, No Wun!"

"Before you drink it all, you owe me a favor," said Odysseus tartly.

"Thasstrue. Very droo! How troo-oo-oo!" slurred the ogre, wagging one drunken finger. "Tell you whassit to be! I'll eat you la-la-lasht! Ha-ha-ha!"

Overjoyed with this joke of his and hiccupping happily, he keeled over onto his back and fell asleep beside the fire.

Throwing aside the clods of dung, the Greeks unearthed the crook they had sharpened to a point with their swords. This point they hardened in the hot embers of the fire until it glowed red hot and was on the verge of bursting into flames. Humping it onto their shoulders, they ran at the Cyclops's lolling head, lifted the wooden shaft and plunged it into his one, closed, flickering eye—right through the lid.

The scream deafened them, like the clap of a bell deafens a man with his head inside it. They scattered to all corners of the cave, holding their hands over their

ears to dull the re-echoing, redoubling roar. Frightened sheep lumbered up against them. Polyphemus's hands groped for them . . . and the rest of the night lay ahead.

Giants from the caves higher up the hill heard the agony of Polyphemus and were roused from their beds. Their gigantic feet could be heard displacing rocks as they slithered down the steep paths in the darkness. "What's the matter, Polyphemus? What's the matter?"

"My eye! My eye! I'm blinded!" screamed Polyphemus from inside his cave. "Help me!"

"Who did it, Polyphemus? Who has done this terrible thing to you?" they shouted back.

"No Wun! No Wun did it! No Wun blinded me!"

There were grunts and disgruntled noises from the outer darkness. "An accident, maybe," said one voice.

"Struck blind by the gods, maybe," said another.

"In that case, his father can help him. Let's not cross the gods by interfering."

"Too dark for dressing wounds, anyway," said a voice growing smaller as the speaker climbed back up the hill.

All night stars cascaded in the sky. But Odysseus and his men, sealed in the cave, did not see them, and Polyphemus would never see them again. He groped and scrabbled about for the Greeks, but felt only his animals and their udders fat with milk. When morning came, the animals wanted to be out in the sun, with grass and leaves to eat.

Still groaning and grinding his teeth with agony, the



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giant Cyclops crawled to the boulder blocking the entry. He rolled it away, but immediately sat down across the doorway, with his hands barring the gap to either side of his hips.

"Try it! Just try to escape!" he taunted his prisoners. "I'll swat you like flies and eat you slowly, slowly, slowly." The goats stumbled forward and he fumbled furious fingers over each one before letting it pass by and run free.

Odysseus was too busy to tremble. He was dragging together the giant sheep and lashing them, three by three, side by side, with rushes from the matting on the floor. Beneath each middle sheep, a member of his crew clung to handfuls of fleece. The sheep bleated forward toward the doorway, and Polyphemus fumbled furious fingers over each back, side, head, and tail. But of course he could not feel the man slung beneath each center sheep. Soon only Odysseus remained and only one sheep. It was the biggest animal of all—a ram with coiled horns and clumps of fleece that overhung it like snow overhangs a mountaintop.

Odysseus crawled underneath the ram and clung so tightly to its fleece that his arms and legs were smothered in wool. The big ram headed for the daylight, which crept in round the giant shape of the Cyclops. Polyphemus stopped it with his right hand.

"What's this, Woolly? Are you last of all, today?" said the ogre, recognizing his ram by its coiled horns and wealth of wool. "You're usually first away, first out to eat



up in Odysseus, and he, too, crowed like the cockerel: "Hey! You with the blind eye! Do you see what comes of scorning Zeus? Great Zeus and the goddess Athene—she of the two beautiful, gray, and shining eyes—sent us to teach you humility! So much for the son of Poseidon!"

Polyphemus gave a bellow of anguish and knelt up, his frame casting a shadow over the whole length of the boat. He picked up the boulder from the doorway of the cave and hurled it in the direction of Odysseus's voice.

It fell just ahead of the prow, and a huge wave pitched the boat backward for twice its length—almost smashing it against the shore. The crew only saved it by heaving on the oars with all their might.

Odysseus laughed crowingly and wagged his fists in the air. "Missed, Polyphemus! Don't you wish you had your eye now?"

"Sit down, Captain! Sit down, please!" his men begged him. "One more boulder like that and we are dead men, for all your cunning and wit!"

But the cruelty of battle welled up in Odysseus, such as he had not felt since he saw Troy burn. He cupped his hands round his mouth and yelled, "Know this, Polyphemus! That it was Odysseus, King of Ithaca, who blinded you and stole your woolly sheep. That is my true name, and darkness is your true fate forever and a day!"

This time Polyphemus did not let out a shout. He rose silently to his feet and stretched out both arms toward the sky he could not see. "Poseidon! Hear me! Father

and god who stands in the ocean trench and chews on the black storm clouds—look down from holy Olympus and see what Odysseus of Ithaca has done to your only son! Blind! Blind as night, I am, forever and a day. Reach up out of the sea! Reach down out of the clouds! And plunge him and all his boats deeper than the depth where all fishes are blind. Forbid that he should ever see wife or home again, since I shall see no such comfort! And let his doom be remembered on every shore that fringes the world-encircled sea!”

His swinging fists smashed a gobbet of rock out of the cliff face, and, raising it over his head, he hurled it down on the sound of the ship’s dipping oars.

It fell just behind the stern, and a huge wave picked up the boat and flung it, spinning on the crest, across the narrow straits, and drove it ashore on the beach of the desolate, uninhabited island. Startled goats scattered. But for a time no man moved from the oar he was grasping. For a time, no man breathed.

“Take out that huge ram of mine and roast it here on the beach! And let’s offer it up to Zeus for our happy escape!” cried Odysseus.

The six remaining men looked up at him across their oars, and the sheep bleated under the thwarts. After a time, they did as he said, according to every rule of holy law. Afterward they and the crews of the other boats roasted other sheep and greatly enjoyed eating them, washed down with Ciconian wine.

But they did not omit to plant each of the six empty oars upright on the shore and to call the names of their oarsmen three times across the mist-smothered sea, so that they might always be remembered.

Night fell over land and sea lanes alike, and a million stars cascaded. From the top of a lonely summit, Odysseus looked up at them and saw huge navy clouds swell like pride and blot out the stars one by one. At last only one bright star remained, awash in the night sky, like a shipwrecked sailor afloat in the world-encircled sea. The waves breaking on the shore of the little island seemed to whisper, "Poseidon. Poseidon. Poseidon."