

4 · CIRCE ·

As soon as we sighted land we made for it. We beached the ship and dragged it up out of the reach of even the fiercest wave. Once the ship was safe, the storm abated. It was plain that this tempest had been sent by Poseidon.

My men sank into dark despair. They sat on the shore and wept but I am always craning my neck towards the horizon, yearning for the place where the sea meets the sky. I decided I would explore this place that our bitter fate had brought us to.

I climbed a hill to survey the island. Not far from where we'd landed there was a forest. In the forest there was a clearing. I saw in the clearing a white palace of a strange design. This island was inhabited! Perhaps these people could provide us with some way to placate or outwit the Sea God.

I ran back to the ship to tell my men what I had seen, but it was deserted. I found their footprints leading into the forest. I followed them into the clearing I had seen from the

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hill, but between the palace and me there was a pack of lions and wolves.

I drew my sword and crept towards the first of them. It was a lion. As I approached it, it closed its eyes, flattened its ears and purred! I could stroke the velvet fur between its eyes. It licked my hand. Next I approached a wolf. It rolled on to its back and showed me its belly to scratch. What kind of wild beasts were these?

When I reached the palace I looked through the window. I could see my crew. They were sitting round a table laughing and singing, eating and drinking as if they were home.

Out of the shadows behind them came the mistress of this place. Long-limbed she was, pale-skinned, dark-haired and dark-eyed. She brought them cheese and wine and honey and barley-meal. As they ate I saw her take a wand from beneath her skirts. She touched each of them in turn. As each man was touched he dropped the cup he had been clutching and stared at his fingers as they grew together. His arms and legs shrank to stubs. His belly swelled and his nose stretched out into a snout. These were no longer men — for sitting around the table I could see only pigs!

wing-heeled Hermes. He was in the guise of a beautiful young man.

'Odysseus, this is Circe. She is a woman of great knowledge and power. If you enter this place with no protection you will suffer the same fate as all the others. But if you have the strength of character to follow the instructions that I am about to give you, not only will your crew be restored to you, but you may gain some of the knowledge you need to find a way home.'

The Gods visit us in dreams and visions. Sometimes they tell us truths, but sometimes not. Sometimes they tell us

The lady clapped her hands, and the pigs flopped from their stools and followed her into the shadows. Now I understood. The lions and wolves had once been human. She had tested them, and had found them wanting.

Half of me was furious. The other half was terrified.

I drew my sword, intending to rush in and attack, but then all the hairs on the back of my neck stood up.

I knew this sensation. I knew this meant I was in the presence of a God or Goddess. Sure enough, shimmering above me was the messenger of the Gods,

half-truths, to betray us. I saw it happen at Troy. Hermes is not just the Messenger of the Gods; he is also the God of Trickery and Storytelling. But what choice did I have? I could not sail my ship alone.

Hermes led me into the forest. He showed me a plant, black of root, white of petal. Moly is its name. This, he said, would protect me against Circe's enchantments. He picked it from the ground as only a God could do. He told me to pouch it within my cheek. I bowed my head to give thanks. When I lifted my head I was alone.

I was shaking as I approached Circe's palace. She opened the door and greeted me but I did not meet her eye. I knew if I looked into her eye for even a moment I would be enthralled by her. She led me to the table. I ate and drank, but all I tasted was the bitter root of Moly.

Suddenly I felt something cool touch my neck. Circe was standing over me with the wand in her hand. She gasped to see that her magic had had no effect.

I leaped to my feet. With my sword I struck the wand out of her hand. I showed her the sharp end of my blade

and said, 'You must promise there'll be no more tricks and restore my crew to their human form or you'll learn why they say my name means trouble.'

'Trouble!' she said. 'One hundred years ago there was a prophecy that a man would come who was worthy of the knowledge I bear. The prophecy said his name would mean trouble. You are Odysseus, Laertes's son, and you are welcome here. I promise I will only give you what you desire.'

She picked up the wand, and led me outside into the fierce sunlight. She walked to the pigsty and touched each beast in turn, and as she did so the pig once again became one of my crew, on his hands and knees, guzzling acorns. At first they were terrified of Circe, but when I told them of the promise she had made me, we returned to her palace. That night she gave us a great feast. Once my men were asleep she stroked my cheek and whispered, 'Odysseus, your ship is in need of repair. Your sail is torn to shreds. Don't go at once. Give me a little month before you sail away.'

‘A month,’ I said.

But one month became three, then six, and then nine. After a year, the crew demanded that we leave. Reluctantly I went to Circe and told her the time had come for us to voyage on. I asked if she might know of a way to placate or outwit the Sea God. She shook her head.

‘I know who would have an answer to that question — the blind prophet Tiresias,’ she said.

‘Where is he?’ I said. ‘I will consult him.’

Her answer put a chill into my soul. ‘Tiresias lived and died long ago. If you want to speak to him you must sail north and north again until you reach the Land of the Dead.’