

The smell of the dead clings to the nostrils. Only when we had passed out of the mist, when there was wind and tide, day and night, did we shake off the chill.

We returned to Circe's island. Once my men had eaten and were asleep, I told Circe what I had learned. She shook her head in wonder. 'Mortals are meant to have only one journey to that place. You alone will have two. Listen well to what I have to tell you. There are several trials you must undergo before you find the island of the Sun God Hyperion.'

Circe told me of the island of the Sirens, and their enchantments, and how I might evade them. She told me also of straits our ship would approach. 'The current will carry you into them. You cannot prevent it. To your left you will see rising sheer from the sea a column of rock, the sides

so smooth it is as if they have been polished, the summit shrouded in thick smoke. In the column there is a cave. This cave is the lair of an ancient, snake-necked, flame-skinned, six-headed dragon. Her name is Scylla the Devourer. As you pass through these straits she will lunge and eat six of your crew. Better this than to sail too far to starboard.

‘To your right you will see an island, broad and flat like the back of a crab. One fig tree dips its branches into the ocean beneath. Under the fig tree there is a whirlpool. Her name is Charybdis, the Swallower. If your ship were to be caught in the grip of her current not even great Zeus could save you. This is why you must stay as close as you can to the bottom of the dragon’s tower.’

As soon as she had finished I asked, ‘How can I kill this Scylla?’

Circe shook her head. Then she pressed her fingers against my lips.

'This is no place for acts of daring folly. There is a price, a toll, which must be paid for safe passage through these straits. Either you lose six lives or all of you die.'

The next morning, when dawn took her golden throne, we said our last farewells to Circe. She gave us a wind to fill our sail. When the wind failed us, when the sail sagged, we knew we were approaching the enchanted region of the Sirens.

The Sirens sing a song so beautiful that any mortal who hears it forgets everything except the desire to hear more. Many a ship has wrecked itself against the rocks that lurk beneath the sea around their island. But they are the daughters of a Muse. To pass so close to such beauty without experiencing it was unthinkable. I had to hear that song. I ordered my men to tie me to the mast and block their ears with wax. They were to ignore my instructions whilst I was under the Sirens' spell.

The shimmering song began. I begged my crew to change their course. I threatened them and cursed them but they were deaf to all my pleas. As they pulled at the oars they could see two white hills on the island.

When we were closer still they saw the hills were heaps of bones, bleached white by the sun. On top of each heap they could see a creature with the body of a vulture and the head of a woman, singing.

As for me I could see nothing. I could only hear a song so searingly beautiful I nearly lost all reason.

In the song I heard so many sounds: the beating of a swan's wings, the hiss and drag of the sea on shingle, the moan of the wind as it blows across the broad face of the world, the rhythm of the passage of the seasons, my wife singing — and all the sounds I heard were in harmony. For those few moments I heard the Song of the Spheres. Ever since then all music has been clatter to me; the sound of a shield as it falls on a cobblestone floor.