

8 · SHIPWRECKED ·

Once we had escaped the dragon and the whirlpool we could do nothing. We sat at our benches and wept. The ship drifted where it would. Then one of my men sighted land. I saw cattle grazing, no sign of human life. I saw the sun staring down and I remembered the terrible prophecy of Tiresias. I told them we would voyage on. At this something snapped inside them. One of them, Eurylochus was his name, spat and stood.

‘Odysseus,’ he said. ‘I am beginning to suspect you are not a man at all. I think you are one of the Gods in disguise. For like the Gods, you have no pity! We want to mourn the deaths of our friends! We want to recover from this awful ordeal but you insist we sail on blindly into the night, across a foreign sea when a friendly coast beckons us. I say we listen to our desires, not the ranting of a dead man!’

By the nodding of the heads around me, I saw it would be hard to cheat Poseidon of his quarry. I made them all solemnly promise me they wouldn’t harm any of the cattle

on the island. They did this at once. We still had plenty of the food from the gifts of Circe. And so we beached the ship, we lit a fire, we tried to eat, but none of us had any appetite. We were thinking of the victims of the dragon Scylla, our friends with whom we had seen so much. Many of us fell asleep with tears coursing down our cheeks.

I was woken during the third watch by Eurylochus shaking my shoulders. As soon as I opened my eyes I could see why. There was a terrible storm. It was as though the sea and the sky were at war with one another.

‘You see!’ shouted Eurylochus. ‘If we’d listened to you, we’d have been out there now! By the morning our bones would have been rolling across the ocean bed.’

That storm howled throughout the night. It continued throughout the next day. It raged for a month. First we ran out of bread, then meat, then wine, then everything else we had. We were living on what we could find, what we could catch — birds’ eggs, fish — and it was not enough. I began to understand the nature of the trap in which we were caught. I could see hunger gnawing at the patience and the bellies of my crew. They looked longingly at the cattle.

One morning I left them behind. I clambered over the dunes until I found a place where the ground was dry and there I lit a fire. I made what offerings I could. I prayed to the mighty immortals that they would end the storm so that we could sail away from this dangerous place. In return for my act of devotion, some God or Goddess kissed my eyelids and I fell into a deep sleep.

When I opened my eyes the sky was high and blue. I heard no moaning wind now, only birdsong. My clothes were dry. The storm had ended! I climbed over the dunes. There was the ship. Beside it my men were squatting round a fire. On the fire the carcasses of two of those cattle. Eurylochus saw me approaching. He pulled a lump of meat from one of the carcasses, held it up, and said, 'Odysseus, the Gods are not angry with us! We made offerings! We gave the best cuts of the meat to the Gods and Goddesses. As soon as we had done so the storm ended. They feel hunger too. All they expected was the respect they deserve! Eat!'

I looked at that meat and I saw a sight they could not see. The two carcasses on the fire opened their lipless mouths and moaned. That meat was cursed. Even though I was

starving I would not let it pass my lips. My men ate their fill and sealed their fates. They wrapped the hides around the remains of the meat. They loaded it aboard the ship. We unfurled a sail and lifted the oars.

As the island dipped beneath the horizon I shivered and looked around me. Suddenly the ship was in shadow. Blotting out the sun, there was the strangest cloud I had ever seen. It was as if blood was being dropped into clear water. It was swelling out and staining the sky. Then I heard Hyperion's cry for vengeance and Zeus answered it with a thunderbolt that struck our ship where the mast reached the deck. The mast crashed down and cracked open the head of my helmsman. The whole ship bucked. A wall of water rose against us. I could see into it, the brown weed quivering at the heart of it, and then it broke with a white roar and our ship was dashed to pieces. Fuming breakers tore at every plank. I sank beneath the surface. For a moment all was silent. I could feel the Sea God pressing against my eyelids, my nostrils, my lips, my ears.

Then I broke the surface and the world was filled with sound: the rumble of thunder, Poseidon's laughter, the crashing of the waves and the screams of my friends. I fought against the storm. Time and again I was sure the darkness would descend over my eyes. The surface of the ocean was white, hissing, boiling. The whirlpool! We were caught in the great grip of Charybdis. I kicked and fought, but she was far too strong for me.

A wave lifted me a little and I looked up. I saw something blacker than the night sky. I reached out and I clutched it. It was one of the branches of the fig tree that hung over Charybdis! As I hung from the tree I watched, shivering and moaning, as she dragged my men down, down, down until they were just black specks. She spat out their corpses and they bobbed lifeless in the brine. With a cry I let go of the branch. Taking advantage of the few moments between the suck and spout of the whirlpool, I hit the water near a piece of the ship and I grabbed it. I fought, I kicked and I prayed to the immortals on Mount Olympus that

I would pass out of these straits before the drag of the whirlpool began again.

Surely some God or Goddess was smiling on me. Somehow I made my way out of those straits before the whirlpool began to suck me down again. For many days and nights I clung to that piece of wood. More dead than alive, I was found on the shore of an island by a nymph. Her name was Calypso. She carried me to her cave where she nursed me back to health. As she nursed me she fell in love with me. She offered me immortal life if I would only stay with her. But as I lay there, unable to move, I knew that all I wanted from the rest of my life was a simple human thing.

I wanted to live, grow old and die with the woman I loved, my wife Penelope. And so I refused Calypso's offer.

She kept me on that island for seven years. Every day she tried to persuade me. For seven years I walked the shore of the island, staring out across the restless waves, longing for my homeland. For seven years I pondered all my moments of bravery and honour and arrogance and folly. Seven years to wonder that I had put my trust in the kindness of a witch and the vision of a blind man. I had become nobody, and

I had heard the song nobody should hear. Seven years to wonder that I had refused the chance to live for ever for the sake of a woman I hadn't seen for half my life.

Eventually, prompted by the Goddess Athene, Calypso gave me the tools to build a raft. I lifted a mast, put a sail upon it, and once again I rode the broad, bucking back of Poseidon. By chance he saw me and raised a terrible storm, and my raft was destroyed. For three days I swam through the lashing, crashing waves.

Naked, I was found on the shores of this island, King Alcinous. Everything I took from Troy is gone — my treasure, my ship and my friends lie at the bottom of the sea. All I have left now is my name. And a longing as sharp as pain to see the land that gave me life.'