

## 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





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!





A colorful illustration spanning two pages. On the left page, a woman with long, flowing red hair and a white face mask with a gold eye is shown from the chest up. She wears a blue and white patterned garment. Her hands are clasped in front of her. On the right page, a man with dark, wavy hair and a white face mask with a gold eye is shown from the chest up. He wears a blue and white patterned garment. He holds a long, silver sword upright in his right hand. The background is a vibrant, abstract landscape with green trees, yellow and orange ground, and a blue sky with white clouds. The style is reminiscent of traditional folk art or indigenous art.

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,

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





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.'





## 5 • THE LAND OF THE DEAD •

Home is what a gull cries for over rough waters. There is nothing worse for mortal man than wandering. How many more storms before my ship could lower its sail?

I was haunted by memories of home. The long shadows of the afternoon stretching down the terraces and vineyards that ladder every slope, the scent of herbs on the breeze, the tongue of my dog against my palm, great Mount Neriton, the rocks, the goat tracks, the sandy beaches. A wife without a husband and a country without a king: these things compelled me to walk among the ghosts of the dead.

Circe gave us provisions and blankets. We soon discovered their purpose. The further north you sail, the colder it becomes. One morning when we woke, we could see our breath curling from our lips and our nostrils in a silver mist. A few days later we saw shards of ice hanging from the mast and the rigging. Then we found ourselves approaching a wall of fog that rose from the sea to the sky. I could not tell you for how long we sailed once we passed







inside that fog. 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 companions took a pair of sheep ashore. We set off. The further we walked, the more uneasy we felt. Everything was infected with the greyness of the mist. All colour bled from our clothes and our skin. My companions became shifting forms in the fog beside me. My thoughts, too, became grey, sluggish, stupid, lumpen. Every doubt and regret I've ever felt crowded in on my mind, each with its own persuasive voice. All my old wounds ached. Every step took a little more effort. It was as if we were wading against the current of an ocean we couldn't see.

We reached the banks of a broad, oily river. It was the River of Forgetfulness. On the other side, hidden from our



view by the fog, was the Realm of Many Guests, the Land of the Dead.

We scooped a hole in the sand at our feet. We lifted the heads of the sheep and slit their throats. Their dark blood flowed into the hole. Shapes formed in the fog. We heard a moaning, a hissing. The ghosts of the dead were coming, summoned by our sacrifice. We saw young brides, warriors with gaping gashes, gurgling children. The sight of them made my soldiers shake with horror. Most of the spirits of the dead have lost all memory of their previous life. They are stupid, hungry wraiths until they can drink the blood of a mortal sacrifice. They long to remember their lives.

Our blood offering was for one of the few who has kept his mind: the blind prophet Tiresias. Though I had instructed my companions to hold back the flickering ghosts until



Tiresias had drunk his fill, they could do nothing but stand and shake and gape. It was as though they had fallen into some kind of trance. It was left to me to draw my sword and keep the dead at bay. One of the wraiths was as insubstantial as all the others, but he had a dignity, a purpose, that the others lacked. Surely this was Tiresias. I guided him with the sound of my voice towards the pool. He cupped his hands and drank. His white eyes twitched in their sockets.

‘What can you see?’


‘You are Odysseus. You seek a way back to rocky Ithaca, but it will be hard for you. Poseidon longs to avenge the mutilation of his son Polyphemus. There is only one way that you will see the lights of home again. You must learn humility. You must rein in your desires and those of your crew. During your voyage you will approach an island that will seem to you the perfect place to land. You’ll see cattle grazing, no sign of human life. You will want to stop and feast on their flesh, but Odysseus, be warned, this herd is the prized possession of the Sun God Hyperion. If he were to see you harm them — and he is the Sun God, he sees all — he would go to Zeus

and demand revenge. The Cyclops’s curse would pursue you relentlessly. If ever you reached your homeland, it would be alone and unknown, and under a strange sail, and there would be danger waiting where there should be a welcome.

‘If you can overcome this danger there is another journey you must make. You must put an oar on your shoulder and walk inland, leaving behind everyone, everything, everywhere you know. At last you will reach a crossroads. There a man will stop you and gaze in wonder at the oar. He will ask you what it is, whether it is some kind of winnowing fan for separating the grain.

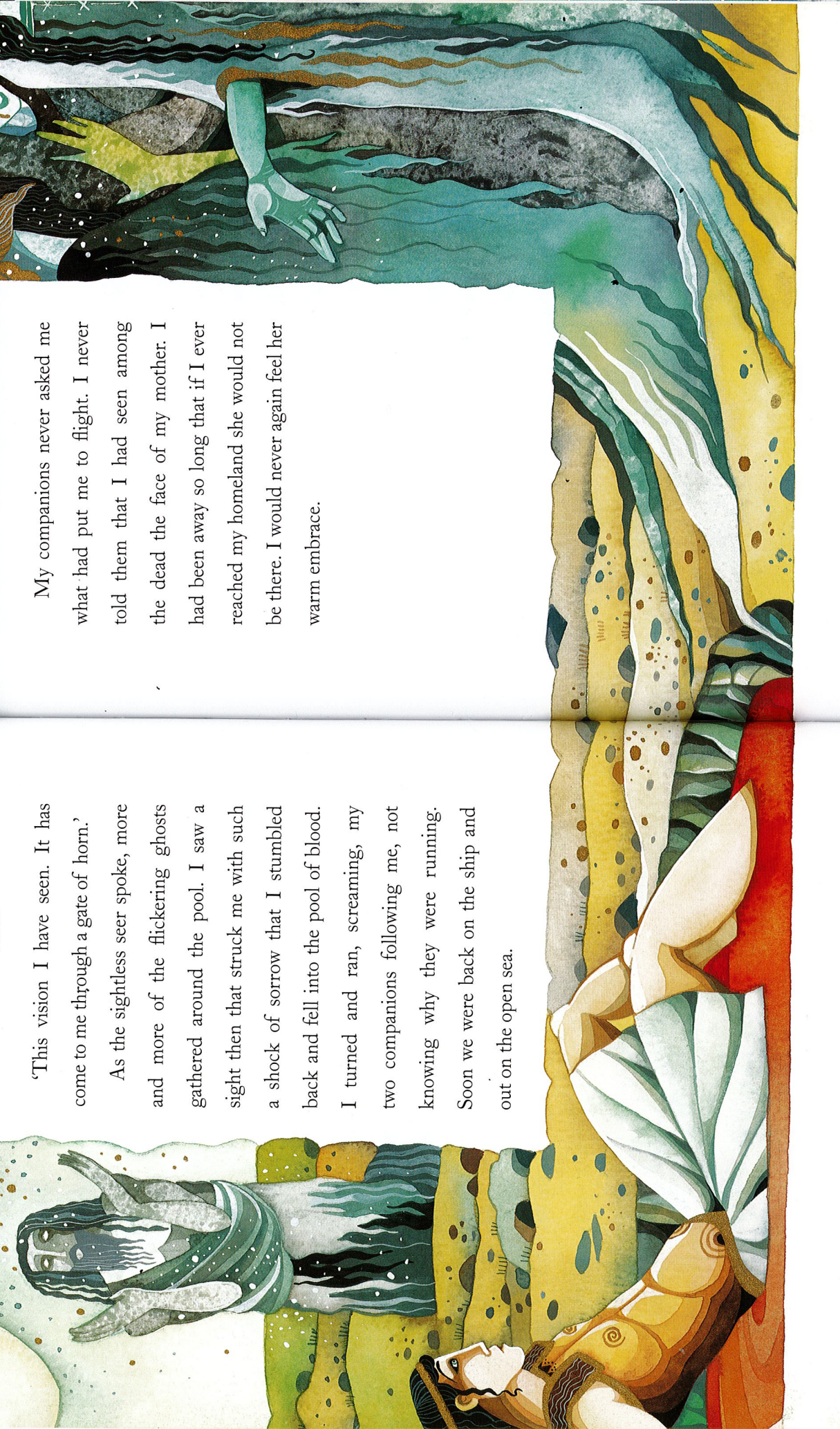
‘This is a place where they do not know what an oar is because they do not know what the sea is. This is a place where you truly are Nobody. In this place you must plant the blade of the oar in the ground so that the shaft rises up towards the sky. Make a sacrifice to great Poseidon of a ram, a bull and a breeding boar. Then you will have made your peace with him. If you can do all these things, your death will come to you in old age, from the sea, in the veils of sleep, like a long-awaited friend.





'This vision I have seen. It has  
come to me through a gate of horn.'

As the sightless seer spoke, more  
and more of the flickering ghosts  
gathered around the pool. I saw a  
sight then that struck me with such  
a shock of sorrow that I stumbled  
back and fell into the pool of blood.  
I turned and ran, screaming, my  
two companions following me, not  
knowing why they were running.  
Soon we were back on the ship and  
out on the open sea.



My companions never asked me  
what had put me to flight. I never  
told them that I had seen among  
the dead the face of my mother. I  
had been away so long that if I ever  
reached my homeland she would not  
be there. I would never again feel her  
warm embrace.