

## Chapter Seven

### Snake-Headed Scylla and Charybdis the Hole

**FOUR DOZEN TAPERED** and polished blades splashed into the troughing sea as the men dropped their oars. The sea was a dark, slate gray, like the tiled roof of some endless ocean palace. Somewhere beneath that roof, Poseidon sat.

"Don't give up, men!" cried Odysseus, cheerfully striding the length of the boat, up and down between their slumping shoulders. "This is not like Laestrygonia or the Land of the Cyclops! We aren't flying like sparrows into traps! I know what lies ahead. Didn't we travel to Hades for the knowledge? Tiresias told me! Ahead of us on the port side are the Wandering Rocks. No ship has ever passed under their shadow and sailed out again. No speed of rowing, no following wind could drive us through with speed enough to escape destruction. So? A simple choice, then! We must keep to the starboard side of the channel, hard by the smooth-faced cliff. . . ."

"We're sailing toward Charybdis—Charybdis the Hole!" cried Eurylochus, his jaws clattering with fright.



“Yes, and if we time our passage carefully, we shall pass Charybdis when it’s full of sea. Courage, men! Aren’t we loved by the goddess Athene herself? And didn’t we row down to the Underworld to prepare us for this trip? What must I do to put the fire back into your hearts? Must I put on the armor I wore at Troy? All right. Here! The golden breastplate and the brace of bronze. And here! The bronze helmet on my head, so that the gods will see the sun dazzle on it and know where we are! Now split the ocean with your polished oars so that the gods may stand in admiration of your speed!”

Between every thole-pin the oars rattled, and four dozen wooden blades sliced white slits—white trenches—in the creamy ocean. But Polites said under his breath, “My lord, Tiresias warned you that no armor and no sword would stave off Scylla.”

“Did you hear the words he spoke, then, Polites? Did the others hear them?”

“Only you and I, my lord. And you are right to leave the men in ignorance. If they knew that Scylla was waiting, no words or whips would drive them through this channel.”

The words between them were washed away by salt spray, and wisps of smoke smudged the sparkling air. A noise of avalanches reached them through a screen of smoke, and, little by little, they could make out a movement.

For a moment it seemed that the sea was solid and

only the land was moving. Travelers speak of reaches in the sea where ice floats mountain-high, always cracking and rending itself, while palaces of snow slide into the water down rivers of frozen sea. History speaks of the Earth splitting open and bleeding molten fire through its wounds, blacking out the sun with ash and drowning whole kingdoms in fire. But no one could have put words to the sight that greeted Odysseus and his men.

Towers of rock, sky-high, writhed shoulder to shoulder for as far as the eye could see, grinding together their crags and precipices, striking sparks from the flint. Boulders big as bullocks stirred and rocked—as loose as an old man's teeth—then toppled and bowled down the cliff face to shatter the sea. Gouts of lava spouted from every crevice, snatching sea birds off the wing and dissolving all trace of them. Along the cliff's stony roots, the sea boiled blood-red. The channel was peppered with dead and dying fish. The hull's timbers began to bow as it furrowed through the boiling water. Steam condensed on scalded faces and ran down like sweat or tears.

Hard over to starboard they rowed, hard over as far from the Wandering Rocks as they could go . . . so hard over that their starboard oars clattered against the base of the opposite cliff. A sheer, smooth cliff it was, as smooth as the walls of Aeolia, as smooth as the forehead of Athene herself. Not a ledge, not a crevice, not even a tuft of grass to give a man footholds to climb up. The top was out of sight. But higher than an archer could

shoot an arrow, they could glimpse the dark mouth of a cave. . . .

“Are we close to Charybdis yet, Captain?” asked one of the men. They dared not look over their shoulders to see the way they were going. They could already hear the crashing of water.

“Not yet, not yet. Not till this smooth cliff drops down lower and a fig tree juts out—that marks where Charybdis opens its mouth. Courage, men! Sound carries. We’re not close to Charybdis yet.”

His men’s eyes were on him. They saw Scylla first, reflected in the bronze of his helmet. He saw that they had seen her and said, “Bend your heads to your chests and row! Whatever you see, whatever you hear, just look to your oars and row!”

Odysseus drew his king’s sword, thinking to defend his men or die in the attempt. But when she came, there was no defense against Scylla.

Liars tell of monstrous squid that rise from the ocean trench to wrap great ships in their embrace and drag them down to devour them in lairs of water and bone. But no liar could have invented the beast that came out of that cave.

Above their heads, she snaked her six necks. She cast a shadow like a many-stranded whip, each knotted end the size of a fist. But the shadow grew—larger and larger—on the boat’s deck. The Scylla’s heads were not the size of fists. They were not the size of melons. They were not

the size of drums. The Scylla's heads were larger even than the fist of King Lamus, who ate men out of his palm. Each mouth was the size of a slimy cave. And set in her jaws, like stalactites and stalagmites, were six rows of rending teeth. Her teeth were as many as the blood vessels in a man's body: vessels she loved to break, along with bone and muscle and heart.

With each head she lifted a man, pulling him from under his oar. Six heads, six mouths, six men calling on the gods for deliverance. Six heads, six mouths, and six sons of Ithaca weeping their last for their wives and children. Six heads, six mouths, and six dead men, each with Odysseus's name on his lips, begging to be spared. Six heads, six mouths, but not a limb or head or reaching hand or shrieking left, for the Scylla had devoured her catch and was coiling herself back into the bloody recesses of her cave to digest her meat. Though she had lived for centuries, her only purpose on the surface of the Earth was to ambush and to eat and to sleep.

"Row, men, row! Shut your ears and your eyes and row till we are out of reach of the Scylla, or she may strike again!"

Then Odysseus was glad of his king's helmet with its long nosepiece and cheeks of bronze. For it hid the pallor of his face and the terror, and it hid his tears, too, which flowed like blood. He looked at his king's sword and the six blunted crescents in its shining blade where he had hacked at the scaly neck of the writhing Scylla.

He shook his head and plugged up his ears, but the voices went on ringing inside his head, even though they had been long since silenced: "Save us, Odysseus! Save us!"

Only the sound of Charybdis could drown out those voices.

Charybdis was a Hole. Charybdis was a mouth. Charybdis was a gill in the throat of the fishy ocean. When the ocean breathed in, water and air, flotsam and jetsam, weeds and waves, fish and birds were sucked into its gaping pit and spun deeper and deeper than the deepest well in the world, whirled round in a spiral of sea. And when the ocean breathed out, water and air, flotsam and jetsam, scale and feather were belched out again in gouts of sea like the foam from a mad dog's mouth.

Twice in every tide, the whirlpool sucked down every atom of water and floating morsel—as deep as the seabed itself. Twice in every tide, it expelled all that it had sucked in, but for a perpetual litter which circled forever in its vortex.

The first sight they had of Charybdis was the tall mast of a ship, circling, circling, circling—as though an invisible god was stirring the water with it. The noise was of ripping canvas and cataracts of sea, of the cowhide bag of Aeolus unfastened beneath the surface. They could not make themselves heard above it; they could not hear their own thoughts; and when they breathed, they breathed in flying spray.

"Is the tide right?" they mouthed at Odysseus through the smoke of spume. "Shall we be sucked down?"

"Row!" cried Odysseus. "If the gods wish it, Charybdis will breath out and let us pass. If the gods don't . . ." They could not hear him above the racketing of Charybdis. All they could see was the brightness of his eyes in the arches of the king's helmet and the twisting of his mouth beneath the nosepiece. And they could feel the boat slip sideways beneath them, dragged toward the spiral trough of Charybdis. The six oars of the six dead men were sucked through their pins and bounded toward the whirling pit.

Then—as it seemed they must surely glide sideways over the glassy rim—there was a sudden silence, a moment's silence, as in the mind of a dying man. The solid, glassy rim of Charybdis shattered and, with a gurgling confusion, the waters leveled. The broken shipwreck floating at its center paused for a moment. They could see every open slat. They could see every gap in the ribs of the skeleton crew who sat at its oars.

The next moment the shipwreck began to swing the other way. The coil of Charybdis was rewinding . . . the other way. The waves spun, and, at the center of the coil, the water dipped like a saucer, dipped like a dish, dipped like a bowl, dipped like a trough.

"Row!" cried Odysseus, and they sped onward with their polished oars flashing like beams of sun. "Row!"

Charybdis, breathing in, grew as deep as a cave, as

deep as a well, but the boat of the Greeks was skimming beyond the reach of its centripetal pull. They were past. They were unwrecked. They were alive!

Beneath the bronze nosepiece of the king's helmet, they could see Odysseus's teeth flash white as he grinned. And when the noise of Charybdis died away, he was still repeating, "Well rowed! Rowed like true men of Ithaca!"

As they looked beyond him, they could still see the tip of the mast of the dead ship spinning.