

Chapter Four

And This Little Piggy . . .

THE DOG STAR hung in the sky by night, and by day the bright discus of the sun flew overhead. But there was no knowing what course they wished to lay by either sun or moon. For Odysseus did not know where disaster had brought him. He steered to the west, always to the west, and northward, hoping to see the friendly profile of some Ionian isle. His men wept over their oars until it seemed the bilges ran with tears. And sometimes rain, cold and slighting, fell in Odysseus's face as if the gods were spitting on him. He uneasily watched the horizon, half expecting Poseidon to shoulder aside the blue main and shake his hair in the sky.

There! No, it was only the welling shoulder of a green promontory, lying along the horizon. The rowers pulled toward it with half-unwilling oars, for fear that this new landfall harbored some monster as ravenous as King Lamus or the appalling Cyclops.

But the ridged sea delivered them on diagonal waves onto the dark sand of a beach overhung by Aleppo

pinetrees. The long, green bristles were so heavily laden with cones that they looked to be full of birds, but there was no birdsong.

Odysseus said to his friend Polites, "I am putting half the crew under your command. Let's draw lots to see which half goes reconnoitering." So they shook stones—one black, one white—in a bronze helmet, and Polites drew out the black. Odysseus threw the helmet aside and clutched his comrade in his arms. "Take care, old friend. The stones themselves would shed tears if any harm came to you."

He watched the party of twenty-six men climb through the steep, piny path, grunting with exertion, the green spines catching in their cloaks or woollen jerkins. Half of him felt torn away.

On the black sand, his half-crew sat beneath the slatted shade of their oars and slept. But Odysseus, to shorten the waiting, went hunting and killed a stag to roast over an open fire.

The sun went down, and the low light poured thick as honey through the sea lanes and dry-land pathways. Still Polites and his men did not return. At that very moment when the sun falls beneath the sea with a flash of green, Eurylochus stumbled out of the trees, his hair spiny with pine needles, and his face a picture of fear.

"Aboard! Aboard!" He tried to shout, but his breath was spent, and his tongue was rigid with terror. It clacked in his jaws. He fell headlong in the black sand

and clutched Odysseus's feet. "Aboard or we're all pork, bacon, and brawn!"

Not until the sky was black and a million stars cascaded did Eurylochus recover enough to say what he had seen.

"We came to a house, a magnificent villa, with animal houses and vines and great curved doors hammered out of copper. We thought we were done for when a whole pack of wild animals came tearing round the house toward us. Not just boars, I don't mean, nor wild cats, nor wolves, but lions and black-furred cats as big as lions, with yellow eyes, and great striped beasts and golden ones spotted with black. We thought they'd tear us limb from limb! One of them leaped right up at me! . . . But they just pawed at us and licked our faces and rubbed their heads against our knees. I tell you, they were like little lap dogs, the way they fawned on us! The relief! Imagine it! And then we heard singing inside the house, and Polites called out, and the big copper doors swung open. . . ." Eurylochus halted, his eyes empty, his thoughts lost inside the house with the shining doors.

"Go on, man! What opened the doors? A monster? A magician?" demanded Odysseus.

"Oh, she's beautiful. More beautiful than any mortal woman you've ever seen. Circe she calls herself. She wears her hair in plaits that swing down behind her knees, and she carries a silver rod in her hand, and she smiles and smiles. . . . I don't know why I didn't follow

the others when she beckoned them in. My legs were trembling so at the sight of her—and something inside me felt like a big brass anchor holding me back. As soon as they'd gone in, I regretted it. I ran up to the window to see what I was missing.

"She had a table laid already and high-backed seats for every man—as if she was expecting us. She pulled out footstools for each one to rest his feet on. I saw her creaming feta cheese with oil and honey and oregano and wine in a beautiful transparent bowl. Something else she added, too. . . . Something . . . something dreadful!" Eurylochus tore at his hair wildly. "I don't know what it was. Some herb with little flowers. I saw Demos, my friend Demos, troweling up the food with his fingers. He's always a great one for his food, and it did look so delicious! Then I saw him flinch a bit when the woman passed behind him and tapped him with her rod. She tapped everyone. Suddenly I thought, What's the matter with Demos's nose? It was flat, like a boxer's nose—and then like a snout. His eyes sank into his head, and the clothes fell off his back. Ach! His back was covered in bristles, and his legs were too short to balance him in his chair. He fell off onto the floor and onto his hands and knees—I mean onto his trotters. He was a hog, sir! A swine! A great grunting pig, and all the rest were like him."

"Even Polites?"

"Even him, sir. She drove them out through the back



doors and into the sties. I'm telling you, we weren't the first sailors ever to come here. She has boars and pigs and hogs more than they had in all Troy! It's dreadful to hear them. You can tell from the way they squeal and the look in their eyes that they have minds still, but they're all wrapped up in pig. And who's to spare them living out their natural lives like that—eating swill? Eh? It's the most horrible way the gods ever thought to punish us! And it's all your fault!"

Odysseus had already looped his longbow across his shoulder and was strapping on his sword. He stopped short and put his hand on the sword hilt, half drawing the blade. "What did you say, Eurylochus? What did you say?"

"I said it's all your fault for angering the great Earth-Shaker and Sea-Shifter, Poseidon. Now take us away from here before we're all turned into sucking pigs!"

The blue veins stood out on Odysseus's temples, and his knuckles whitened on the sword. But he controlled his temper and, turning his fiery eyes on the rest, said, "As soon as the sun is up, I am going to Circe's zoo to rescue my comrades or to die in the attempt. Let follow who dares, and let all craven cowards stay behind!"

The sorry crew followed Odysseus up through the Aleppo pines. Even Eurylochus, afraid to be left alone, fell in behind.

The morning sun splashed against Circe's great curving copper doors and hurt their eyes with its brightness.



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Wild animals rushed out to greet them: leopards nuzzled them, a wolf wagged its tail, a tiger rolled in the path for its stomach to be tickled. And the hogs in the sties pressed against the gates, with heart-rending squeals.

Odysseus's men crouched alongside their bristly comrades and tried to comfort them, though the smell of the swill alone was sickening.

Odysseus alone stood in plain view of the shining doors, thigh-deep in the fragrant herbs that grew in vast variety round the house. Thyme and oregano, basil and rosemary, garlic and bay flourished all round. And twining in among them, the lovely but deadly delphinium and nodding mandragora. Odysseus looked down, and, between his two sandals, a little white flower was peeping out. It was a moli flower. He bent down, picked it, and pouched it—petals, root, and all—in his cheek. Just then, the great curved doors opened, and the sorceress Circe smiled at him.

She was as beautiful as the blue-trumpeted convolvulus that twined on Ithacan walls. Her hair hung down like the first rays of dawn, and her eyes were as clear and as green as . . . the harbor of Laestrygonia.

"Come in! Come in! You look weary. Look where I've prepared a seat for you, and a meal."

Indoors, he let her lift his feet onto the footstool beneath his chair and bring him a bowl of cheese creamed with honey and oregano and oil, and a cup of purple wine.

And he ate and drank it all.

Whap! She tapped him lightly on the shoulder with her slender rod of silver and, turning away, Circe said, "Now get to the sty with your comrades."

Odysseus sat back in his chair, crossed his ankles on the footstool, and patted his stomach. "Ah, delicious!" Circe's footsteps faltered. She looked over her shoulder.

She just had time to fall on her knees before Odysseus leaped across the table, sword drawn, and raised it two-handed over her head. "No! Don't strike, my lord Odysseus! You cannot kill me; I'm immortal. And besides, my dear, dear lord, you have no reason to hate me. I know you are Odysseus of Ithaca, for it was written in my horoscope at the moment of my birth that I should be conquered in heart and body by Odysseus, the greatest of the heroes of Troy!"

Odysseus spat out the shreds of the little moli flower that had saved him from her magic potion. "You ogress! You swineherd! You unnatural woman! How can I believe the words of a creature who defied all the natural laws of hospitality and made hogs out of my men? . . . Unless you swear by all the gods on Olympus to empty your heart of mischief."

"I swear! I swear! By all the gods and goddesses who ever saw the face of mighty Zeus: my mouth is yours with all its kisses; my arms are yours with all their embraces and with all their strength to help you; and my

love is yours, bottomless as the Lake of Avothres in your own realm. . . .”

So Odysseus knotted his hand in her braided hair, kissed her on the mouth, and sheathed his sword.

She summoned five handmaidens—each as lovely as the stars in a constellation. And they brought wrappers of linen, ewers of water, jugs of wine, bowls of food, and music. Odysseus would have none of it—nor would he lie down on the soft, white bed Circe offered him—until his men were released from their misery.

Circe went to the sties, from sty to sty, anointing each bristly back with oil. Gradually, snouts, tails, ears, and hog hair melted away, and the pitiful Greeks found themselves kneeling in the muddy squalor of the pig run. They burst into tears, wagged their heads and hands in gratitude toward the heavenly gods, then looked about for their captain so as to bless him for saving them. But he had already gone. He was already behind the locked doors of the white and fragrant room to which Circe had led him by the hand.

She laid him on pillows and lambskin and cradled him in immortal arms.

Dawn, its tresses tumbling onto the bed, woke Odysseus. He sat up and looked out at the view. Beyond the herb garden were olive groves and orchards of lemons, apples, and limes. Vines entwined the marble colonnades, and hives shimmered with the early morning movement of bees. Tall, dark cypresses swayed like

dancers, and the soft green of the pine forests was sprinkled with asphodels and orchids.

All he could see of the steely sea was a strip as long and narrow as a sword. Out there, the great Poseidon, Earth-Shaker and Sea-Breaker, who stood in the ocean trench and chewed the clouds with rage—out there he was waiting to cut off Odysseus.

I'll wait, thought Odysseus. Perhaps, in time, his anger will cool. And besides . . . this is a good place. It isn't Ithaca, but it is a good place. My men are tired, and I am tired. We need to rest.

And though men said of him that his body was a strung longbow and his wit the flying arrows, he unflexed the bow, and hung up the quiver of his cunning, and lay down again beside the sorceress Circe.