

EPISODE 7 – Torment and Trial

total running time: 10:18

Back from the dead (⌚ 3:17)

The smell of the dead clings to the nostrils. It was only when we had passed out of that fog, when there was day and night, when there was change, only then did we shake off the bitter chill.

We returned to Circe's island. Once my men had feasted I went with her to her bedroom and I told her what I had learned. She shook her head in wonder, "Odysseus, mortals are meant for
5 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 encounter the island of the sun god Hyperion."

Then, Circe told me of the island of the Sirens and their enchantments, and how I might evade them. She told me also of two rocks our ship would approach. She said, "The current will carry you between them – you cannot prevent it. To your left you will see, rising sheer from the sea,
10 a tower of rock, the top shrouded in smoke. Hidden from view, out of range of any bow, hidden by that smoke, there is a cave. The cave is the lair of Scylla, the devourer. She is an ancient flame-skinned, snake-necked, six-headed dragon. As you pass through those straits between those rocks, stay as close as you can to the bottom of her tower. As you do so she will attack. She will kill and eat six of your men. Better this, than you sail too far to starboard. To your right
15 you will see a rock, broad and barren, like the back of some enormous crab. On it only one fig tree grows. It dips its branches into the ocean and under that tree, in the sea, there is a whirlpool: the swallower, Charybdis. If your ship were to be caught in the grip of her current, not even mighty Zeus could save you. This is why I tell you: stay as close as you can to Scylla's tower."

20 As soon as she had finished, I began. "What can I do to kill this dragon? How can I defeat her?"

Circe shook her head. She pressed her finger against my lips. She said, "Odysseus, that is no place for acts of daring folly. There is a toll, there is a price that must be paid for passage through those straits. Either you lose six lives or you lose all!"

Siren song (⌚ 2:50)

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 sail sagged, when the wind failed us, we knew we must be approaching the enchanted region of the Sirens. The Sirens sing a song so beautiful any mortal who hears it forgets everything except the desire to hear more. Many a ship has
5 wrecked itself against the rocks that lurk just beneath the skin of 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 to me. I needed to hear that song. I had my men tie me to the mast of the ship, and then I told them to ignore any instructions I might give them while I was under the Sirens' spell. Then they blocked their ears with wax. Soon, the shimmering song began. I
10 pulled at the ropes, I begged them, I ordered them, I threatened them, I cursed them, but they were deaf to my pleas. They ignored me. As they rowed, they looked, and saw an island. On

the island they saw two white hills. When we were closer they saw they were staring at two heaps of human bones bleached by the sun, and on top of each heap there was a creature with the body of a vulture and the head of a woman, singing.

15 As for me, I could not see – I could only hear a song so beautiful I nearly lost my mind. And in the song I heard so many sounds – the beating of a swan’s wings, the moan of the wind as it blows across the broad face of the world, the hiss and drag of the sea on shingle, the rhythm of the passage of the seasons. I could hear my wife, singing. All these sounds were in harmony – these sounds made the song. And ever since then, all other music is clatter, is an
20 awful noise to me.

***A price for passage* (☹ 4:11)**

When the sail lifted, my men knew that we were safe. They unblocked their ears, they untied me. I didn’t have long to regain my spirits before there rose above the horizon in front of us, a column of rock, the top of it shrouded in smoke. I walked between the benches with a brave word for each of them and then I stood before them, just behind the prow and said:

5 “My friends, these rocks we approach pose us a great danger, but surely no greater danger than that of the Cyclops and didn’t we defeat him? Helmsmen, steer a course towards the column of rock to port. There is a whirlpool to starboard. Oarsmen, your lives depend on the strength of your arms!”

I didn’t tell them about the dragon who waited for us. If I had, my men would have hidden
10 wherever they could, and I needed the strength of every man to break the whirlpool’s grip. As for me, heedless of Circe’s instructions, I put on a breastplate, I put on a helmet, I took a spear in each hand and I stood at the front of the ship, scanning the smoke atop that tower, hoping that I could lunge at her before she struck. Then, our ship shook, the water around us became white, hissing, boiling, the air became damp. The sound grew louder and louder and then we
15 caught our first glimpse of her, the whirlpool, Charybdis, the swallower. She was beautiful, terrible, magnificent, awful. She sucked down the ocean with such ferocity it was possible to see the very seabed, and then she spat the ocean into the sky so it fell on our cheeks like a god’s tears, until it fell on our cheeks like salty rain. As we stared at her, the dragon struck. Quick as thought she lunged from her cave, each of her six savage heads plucked from a
20 bench one of my crew. Only when they screamed did I turn and look, and for a moment I glimpsed her before her head slipped back into the smoke. Her ancient mocking eyes, her fiery skin, the flailing limbs of one of my friends between her awful jaws, and then she was gone.

I fought in a war for ten years. I saw awful things. But I never saw a sight as awful as that. The sound of their screams prowls me in my dreams.

25 Once we had passed through those straits my men and I could do nothing. We sat at our benches, our faces in our hands, our shoulders shaking, tears trickling down between our fingers. The ship drifted where it would. Then one of my men sighted land. I looked up, I saw an island where cattle were grazing. I saw no sign of human life – I saw the sun staring down and I remembered the warning of Tiresias.