Circe

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MADELINE MILLER

Madeline Miller was born on July 24, 1978 in Boston. She grew up in Philadelphia and New York City, where she frequently visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Her favorite exhibits were on Egypt and Ancient Greece. These interests were reflected in her later studies; in the late 1990s and early 2000s, she attended Brown University, where she received her BA and MA in Classics. She also briefly studied toward a PhD at the University of Chicago's Committee on Social Thought, and toward an MFA at the Yale School of Drama. In 2011, she published her first novel, *Song of Achilles*, which received the 2012 Orange Prize for Fiction. Following this success, Miller published *Circe* in 2018, which won several awards and was short-listed for the 2019 Women's Prize in Fiction. Miller currently lives near Philadelphia, where she continues writing and teaches Greek, Latin, and Shakespeare at the high school level.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Miller's *Circe* spans thousands of years in the world of Ancient Greek mythology. While many of the places, such as Colchis (part of modern-day Georgia), Crete, and Rome are real, the stories as told in *Circe* are myths. In *Circe*, Miller explores questions regarding women, power, and sexual violence that have been a part of the feminist movement that has been in motion for decades. Recently, these topics have been discussed as part of the "me too" (or #MeToo) movement that gained global attention following the sexual-harassment allegations against Harvey Weinstein in 2017, although the movement had been started years before by activist Tarana Burke. Miller was already in the final stages of writing *Circe* when #MeToo went viral.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Miller draws from many of the plot points from ancient myths and texts, particularly Homer's *Odyssey*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, *Argonautica* by Apollonius of Rhodes, and *Telegony*, a now-lost epic believed to have been written by Eugammon. Homer's *Odyssey*, which is about Odysseus's journey home from the Trojan War, includes an encounter between him and Circe, during which she turns his men into pigs. *Metamorphoses* is a compilation of many myths and features the story where Circe turns Scylla into a monster. *Argonautica* and *Telegony* focus on Jason and Telegonus respectively. Circe shows up in all of these stories but is not the central character. In her novel *Circe*, Miller flips the script, making Circe the main character and giving Odysseus, Jason, and Telegonus cameos in the same way that she is only a secondary character in their stories. Miller's novel *The Song of Achilles* is written in a similar way; in *The Song of Achilles*, Patroclus is the main character, although he is just a character at the margins of Homer's *Illiad*. Miller is not alone in retelling the well-known myths of Ancient Greece. Many authors and poets have reexamined these stories, such has Alfred, Lord Tennyson in his poem *Ulysses*, Margaret Atwood in *The Penelopiad*, and Rick Riordan in his young adult series *Percy Jackson & the Olympians*. Circe's tale specifically has been retold many times. Eudora Welty's short story "Circe" and Margaret Atwood's *Circe/Mud Poems* are two such examples that explore Circe's side of the myths that surround her.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Circe
- **When Written:** Around 2012 to 2018
- **When Published:** April 2018
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Fantasy, Literary Fiction
- **Setting:** Ancient Greece
- **Climax:** When Circe encounters monstrous Scylla for the second time and succeeds in turning her to stone
- **Antagonist:** almost every god and Titan (Helios, Zeus, and Athena to name a few), Scylla, and misogyny
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Story for the Silver Screen. Shortly after publication in 2018, Miller's *Circe* became a number one *New York Times* Bestseller and went on to win several awards, including Goodreads Choice Award for Best Fantasy of 2018. In 2019, HBO Max announced that they will be making an eight-episode miniseries adaptation of the book.

Enchanting Etymology. In *Circe*, the herbs of power that Circe uses for her witchcraft are called *pharmaka*, and the term for someone who wields these magical powers is *pharmakis*, now translated to "sorcerer" and "poisoner." These Greek words may look familiar—they are roots for the modern-day words "pharmacy" and "pharmacist."

PLOT SUMMARY

Circe begins telling her origin story by stating that "the name

for what [she is] did not exist" when she was born. She describes how her mother Perse, a beautiful nymph, enticed Circe's father Helios, a Titan, to marry her. When Circe was born, Perse was disappointed that her child was a girl. Perse and Helios have another daughter, Pasiphaë, and a son, Perses. Both are cruel, so Circe avoids them and prefers to sit at Helios's feet.

Rumors circulate that Prometheus is going to be punished by Zeus because he had given humans fire against Zeus's orders. To begin his torment, Prometheus is whipped by a Fury before an eager crowd of other immortals. After the whipping, Circe and Prometheus have a brief conversation during which he tells her that "Not every god need be the same." Afterwards, Circe goes to her room and cuts her hand, feeling that she has autonomy for the first time.

Perse has another son, Aeëtes. When he doesn't earn a prophecy from Helios, she rejects him, too. Circe decides to care for him, and the two become close. Aeëtes tells her that he knows of some powerful herbs called *pharmaka*, which grow from the blood of gods.

Helios gives Pasiphaë away in marriage to Minos, the king of Crete. On the day of the wedding, Circe sees mortals for the first time and is struck by how fearful they look. Aeëtes informs her that Helios has given him a kingdom. Circe pleads with him to bring her along, but he refuses and leaves for his kingdom. Shortly after, Perses also leaves.

Circe is painfully lonely after Aeëtes's departure. One day, she sees a man in a fishing boat. She can tell from his **scars** that he is a mortal. She calls out to him and, after a few fearful moments, he relaxes, and they become friends. The man's name is Glaucos.

Circe falls in love with Glaucos. Distraught that she cannot marry someone as lowly as a mortal fisherman, she asks her grandmother Tethys whether there is some way to change Glaucos into a god. She staunchly tells her that it is impossible. Desperate, Circe asks whether *pharmaka* would help. Tethys is enraged and, Circe realizes, afraid.

Now sure that these powerful herbs do exist, Circe finds out from her Titan uncles where immortal blood has fallen on the earth and brings Glaucos to one of these places. There, she cuts some of the flowers and, feeling a sense from these flowers that they are magic, she pours their sap into Glaucos's mouth. He becomes a god. She brings him to the halls of the gods, where he gets a lot of attention from nymphs and other gods.

Glaucos becomes enamored with Scylla, a beautiful nymph. Scylla flaunts Glaucos's presents in front of Circe, who is eaten up with jealousy. She pours some of the magical flowers' sap into Scylla's bathing pool with the intention to reveal her inner ugliness. The next day, Circe hears that Scylla has transformed into a horrific monster and has fled into the ocean. Glaucos doesn't mourn the loss, and he quickly moves on to other nymphs.

Circe confesses to Helios that she has used magic, but he ridicules her claim until Aeëtes visits to confirm Circe's statement. Aeëtes adds that he, Pasiphaë, and Perses also have these powers—they are all *pharmakis*, or witches and sorcerers. Helios confers with Zeus on how best to handle these unpredictable powers, and they decide to exile Circe to a deserted island, Aiaia, as she is the only one who admits to seeking out magic.

The next day, Helios drops Circe off at Aiaia. The island is lushly forested and has a house for her to stay in. She begins to practice witchcraft and explore her new powers. As she brews potions and magically tames a lion to be her companion, her confidence grows.

Hermes begins visiting the island and he and Circe become lovers, but not friends. He tells her gossip, and one day he says that Scylla resides in a strait nearby, where she eats passing sailors. Circe is sickened with guilt.

One day, Circe has a visitor: a ship led by Daedalus, an ingenious mortal craftsman under Pasiphaë's restrictive rule. He tells her that Pasiphaë has ordered that Circe come help her through labor and mentions that they must go through Scylla's strait. In the hopes of defeating Scylla, Circe agrees. They make it through Scylla's strait, but the spell that Circe casts to change her back into a nymph doesn't work.

When they arrive at Crete, Circe and Daedalus perform a cesarian section on Pasiphaë to remove her baby, which is a vicious bull-headed monster, the result of Pasiphaë's sexual encounter with a bull. Pasiphaë orders that they not harm it. After Circe sees a vision that the Minotaur, as the monster is named, will only die many years into the future, she makes a potion that will limit its craving for human flesh to just one season of the year.

When Circe asks Pasiphaë to explain why she summoned her, Pasiphaë explains that it is because she knew that Circe could withstand pain. That night, Daedalus and Circe become lovers, bonding over their guilt from past actions and feelings of impotence against those in power. When Circe leaves Crete, Daedalus gives her a beautiful loom. Circe returns to her island, feeling lonely and trapped.

One day, another ship arrives, carrying with it Aeëtes's daughter Medea and her husband Jason. They ask her to perform *katharsis* to cleanse them of evil. Afterwards, Medea tells Circe that they are running away from Aeëtes, who is trying to kill them for taking his **golden** fleece and for killing his favorite son in their escape. Circe notices Jason shrinking from Medea, so she privately invites her niece to stay on Aiaia with her. Medea spurns her and declares undying love for Jason, and the two depart.

Lesser gods begin sending their disobedient nymph daughters to Aiaia, much to Circe's discontent. Shortly after, Circe's lion

dies, and she mournfully burns the body, feeling more alone than ever.

Another ship arrives, bearing a crew of supposedly lost sailors. Delighted to help, Circe offers them food and lodging. After dinner, however, Circe notices a shift in their mood when they discover that there is no man on the island. She adds a potion to their wine out of caution. After drinking the wine, one of the men chokes her and rapes her. After, Circe speaks the potion's spell and turns them into pigs and kills them.

Circe feels broken. More boats come, and she turns the men from the ships into pigs. One day, another such ship comes, and Circe turns the men into pigs as usual. But then a man knocks at her door; he had waited behind the rest of the crew. The man, later introduced as Odysseus, doesn't drink the wine she offers him and reveals that Hermes had given him moly, an herb to ward off Circe's spells. Circe is intrigued by him and agrees to turn his men back into humans after she and Odysseus have sex. She then invites Odysseus's men to stay a month to rest.

Circe falls in love with Odysseus, who tells her stories of the Trojan war and explains that Athena is his patron. He stays longer than originally planned, but he eventually leaves to return to Ithaca, where his wife, Penelope, still waits for his return.

Circe discovers that she is pregnant. She is sick throughout her pregnancy, and her labor is painful. After her son Telegonus is born, she realizes that someone is trying to kill him. Athena appears, demanding that Circe hand over Telegonus. But Circe refuses. She creates a protective spell that covers the island and keeps Athena out.

Telegonus grows up to be an adventurous boy. One day, he reveals to Circe that he has made a boat with the help of Hermes, who has been secretly visiting him. Telegonus intends to sail to Ithaca to meet Odysseus. Panicked, Circe refuses at first, but eventually relents out of love for her son. To protect him, she visits Trygon, an ancient stingray with a poisonous tail. After she tells Trygon that she would suffer the poison herself to get the tail, he offers it to her willingly, without her suffering. She takes the tail and binds it to Telegonus's spear.

Telegonus leaves and is gone for several days. When he returns, he is in despair; when Odysseus saw him, he attacked Telegonus and accidentally killed himself on the spear. Telegonus has also brought two guests back from Ithaca: Penelope and Telemachus, Odysseus's son by Penelope. Circe is suspicious of them, as she fears that they will try to kill Telegonus. But Telemachus tells Circe that he has no intention of avenging his father. He tells her that Odysseus had become a violent and paranoid man after his return. After being sharply interrogated by Circe, Penelope confesses that she is trying to protect Telemachus from Athena, who wants to send him on a quest. Circe agrees to host them for the winter.

The two families grow closer, with Circe especially enjoying Telemachus's calming presence. One day, Hermes visits Aiaia to inform them that Athena requests that Circe lower the protective defenses so that she can speak to Telemachus of his quest. Upon hearing that Athena has also sworn not to harm Telegonus, Circe relents.

Athena appears and tells Telemachus that he is to go west to help found a new empire. When he declines, she offers the same quest to Telegonus, who eagerly agrees. Circe is heartbroken, but she knows that he will never be happy until he explores the world. Telegonus's departure leaves Circe feeling hollow and acutely aware that all the people she loves will leave her in death. Struck by an idea, she summons Helios and demands that he end her exile. He initially refuses, but he angrily relents when she threatens him.

Circe prepares to leave Aiaia, first explaining several herbs and potions to Penelope and then agreeing to Telemachus's request to join her. They go to Scylla's strait, where Circe uses a potion and spell to turn her into stone. Circe feels relieved at last.

Circe and Telemachus become lovers. They sail toward the halls of the gods, helping mortals in small ways—mending ships and offering magical remedies—as they travel. When they approach the halls, Circe locates the hill with the flowers that she used to transform Glaucos and Scylla. She cuts several, and then they return to Aiaia.

Back on Aiaia, they discover that Penelope has taught herself witchcraft. That night, Circe makes a potion using the flowers that she cut from the hill by the halls of the gods. Imagining her future with Telemachus—in which she has children and grows old with him—she drinks the potion, hoping that it will turn her into a mortal.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Circe – An ancient Greek nymph, Circe is the story's protagonist and first-person narrator. She is described as a "**golden** goddess" and "golden witch," although she begins the story as an insignificant nymph in the halls of her father, Helios. As a child, Circe longs to be loved, but no one returns the love she pours into them. Finally, when she meets a mortal named Glaucos who pays attention to her, she meddles with witchcraft in order to turn him into a god and turn his lover, Scylla, into a murderous monster. Circe's power scares the gods, so Helios and Zeus exile her to a deserted island where they hope to contain her. On that island, Circe hones her powers, becoming an incredibly powerful witch who primarily draws her power from plants. The island is quite lonely, though, and she develops a casual and unfeeling relationship with the god Hermes who visits her from time to time. She is also occasionally visited by mortal sailors. One ship brings a group of sailors, whom Circe—longing to help others—invites into her home to feed.

But the captain rapes her and, to protect herself, she turns him and his crew into pigs and then kills them. Traumatized, she begins to turn any men who arrive on her island into pigs until she meets Odysseus who gains her trust. With him, she has a child, Telegonus. When Athena threatens Telegonus's life, Circe goes to extreme lengths to keep him safe, including going to Trygon, a mighty stingray, to borrow his poison tail as a weapon for Telegonus. When he offers it to her willingly, she is moved by his sacrifice and feels sick of the brutal world in which one must harm others to protect themselves. By this point in the story, Circe hates her immortality, as it associates her with the cruelty and vanity of the gods. So when Trygon tells her to "make another" world, she takes his words to heart. She kills Scylla—thus ending her participation in both her family's violence and in the cycle of power and abuse—and then makes a potion to give up her divinity, hoping to live and die with Telemachus, a mortal with whom she has fallen in love.

Prometheus – Prometheus, a Titan infamous for having given mortals fire, is Circe's uncle. Circe meets him when he is being whipped as part of his punishment for bringing fire to the human world. Zeus had wanted to keep fire from humans because fear and misery are tools to subjugate others; without "the arts and profits of civilization" that fire brings, humans were more easily kept below gods on the power hierarchy. But Prometheus rebelled, giving the mortals fire to disrupt the endless cycle of power and abuse started by the gods. As punishment for his rebellion, Zeus first has Prometheus whipped in Helios's halls (where he meets Circe) and then chains him to a cliff, where an eagle rips out his liver every day. With this eternal torment, Prometheus loses his power, a sacrifice that is one of the most impactful acts of the book, as it sparks dramatic development for humans and inspires Circe to distinguish herself from her family of cruel immortals. Throughout the novel, Circe frequently recalls the sight of him covered in his **golden** blood and asks herself how she can be more like Prometheus and less like the vicious world that she lives in.

Helios – Helios is the Titan god of the sun, an egotistical and tyrannical person whose personality reflects the horrific nature of the gods. He embodies a major theme of the novel, how power breeds abuse, since he uses his power to make the lives of others—particularly mortals—miserable. Circe is one of Helios's daughters, but she never gets any affection from him. This is typical of Helios, for the only thing he cares about is power. When Aeëtes reveals to Helios that he, Circe, and their other siblings (Pasiphaë and Perses) have the power of magic, he is frightened that there is another power that "[is] not bound by the normal laws of divinity." Zeus is also frightened, and he and Helios agree to exile Circe to an island for eternity. Helios doesn't care about how his daughter feels about being sacrificed—he cares only about maintaining his alliance with Zeus, the most powerful god. Additionally, by exiling Circe, he and Zeus send a warning to the other sorcerers, a reminder that the gods still have power over them. This scramble for power is emblematic of Helios, and of the gods in general. Helios is a static character, never once deviating from his brutality and always intent on gaining more power and thoughtlessly abusing those beneath him. At the end of the story, Circe demands that he end her exile. At first he refuses, but then he relents when Circe threatens to use her powers—whose extent Helios does not know—on him. Essentially, Circe plays his game of using fear to gain control, and she succeeds.

Telegonus – Telegonus is Circe's and Odysseus's son, although Odysseus never learns of his existence. Telegonus's name means "far away," which represents how Circe has him far away from everyone else and tries to keep him for herself alone. Although she never explicitly states why she decides to have a child, she seems to be inspired by both Daedalus's and Odysseus's affection for their sons (although, when Odysseus actually meets his son Telemachus as an adult, the love evaporates quickly when he sees that his son is not like him). It is also implied that Circe decides to have a child to alleviate her loneliness while in exile and to give her a purpose beyond mere survival. When Telegonus is born, Circe loves him deeply, and also knows that, because of her boundless love for him, he is "the thing the gods could use against [her]." Her fear of the gods' involvement is almost immediately realized when Athena starts trying to kill Telegonus, because she knows that he will grow up to kill Odysseus. Circe is ignorant of this prophecy and does everything in her power to keep her son alive, including creating a protective barrier around the island. But Telegonus grows up restless and always wanting to leave the island. Circe wants to keep him with her on Aiaia forever, but she also wants him to have a happy life, one where he can feel free as she never felt when living with Helios. Telemachus loves stories of heroism and virtue, and he is childishly sure that Odysseus, his father, is a hero. He leaves Aiaia to meet his father, but the prophecy comes true, and he accidentally kills Odysseus with his spear tipped with Trygon's poison tail. He is consumed with guilt, but it lessens over time as he gets closer to his half-brother Telemachus and Telemachus's mother Penelope, who tell him of Odysseus's true nature. Telegonus eventually leaves Aiaia for good when Athena offers him the opportunity to create an empire in the west.

Aeëtes – Aeëtes is the youngest son of Perse and Helios, and the brother of Circe, Pasiphaë, and Perses. Perse rejects Aeëtes after Helios doesn't give him a prophecy, so Circe decides to raise him. Circe loves him very much and feels that they are close. Years later, however, Pasiphaë tells Circe that Aeëtes only tolerated her because she admired him so much. Aeëtes grows up to be as cruel as so many of the other gods. He is king of Colchis, where he reigns as a cruel sorcerer who tortures men for pleasure and to show off his power. Aeëtes

also participates in the abuse of women that pervades the novel. His wife is simply someone to give him children; in fact, he kills her as soon as she gives birth to an heir. Aeëtes also has no affection toward his daughter Medea, whom he intends to brutally punish after she helps Jason steal his **golden** fleece, "a thing of great story and power."

Telemachus – Telemachus is the son of Odysseus and Penelope. He is unlike his proud and adventurous father, preferring chores to conquering cities. Circe is especially surprised by his openness and honesty, which is very different from Odysseus's wily nature. Telemachus first comes to Aiaia with Telegonus and Penelope after Odysseus's death. Circe is at first suspicious of him, as she fears that he will try to kill Telegonus to avenge his father, but he assures her that he has no intention of harming Telegonus. In fact, Telemachus knows that Odysseus's death is his own fault. At Circe's prompting, Telemachus tells her of Odysseus's cruelty after returning to Ithaca and he admits to his own guilt in aiding Odysseus in murdering all the suitors who had come to court Penelope. He is especially haunted by his responsibility for the murders of the serving girls whom the suitors raped. Circe is drawn to Telemachus because of his patience, steadiness, and honesty. He treats Circe with a respect and dignity that she only experienced with Daedalus. When Athena offers Telemachus the opportunity to go west to find fame in starting an empire, Telemachus declines. He has no intention of being like his father; he wants a quiet life instead. Circe, who has already started falling in love with him, then asks him to accompany her to Scylla's straits, where she turns Scylla to stone. Afterwards, Circe makes a potion to turn herself into a mortal. Before she drinks it, she imagines her life with Telemachus. She pictures traveling with him and helping mortals in small but tangible ways—he patches ships while she uses her witchcraft to heal diseases—the two of them "taking pleasure in the simple mending of the world."

Pasiphaë – Pasiphaë is Helios and Perse's daughter, and the sister of Circe, Aeëtes, and Perses. When in Helios's halls, Pasiphaë follows her mother's lead and is malicious toward Circe. Because Pasiphaë spends most of her time with Perses, Circe thinks that the two are close, but years later, Circe discovers that this is not the whole truth. As a woman in ancient Greece, Pasiphaë has less power than Perses, and she hints that he abused her, although she does not explain further. Helios contracts Pasiphaë into marriage with Minos, which strengthens Helios's alliance with Zeus. Pasiphaë further experiences the misogyny of ancient Greece when married to Minos, who wants her to be "a simpering jelly he keeps in a jar and breeds to death." But Pasiphaë is a witch and uses her powers to maintain a considerable amount of control over him. She also gives birth to the Minotaur, a man-eating, bull-headed monster, the result of her sexual encounter with a sacred bull. The Minotaur is her way of gaining fame and, most importantly, it is "her whip to use against Minos" in order to keep him in fear of her. Pasiphaë is unlike Circe, in that, while Circe grows and finds fulfillment through love, Pasiphaë remains static. She is too caught up in the battle of power and her scramble to stay ahead of the abuse that men may bring her way. She becomes what she always hated, just another person for whom "the only thing that makes [her] listen is power."

Daedalus – Daedalus is an ingenious craftsman, whom Pasiphaë and Minos imprison to work for them. When Pasiphaë wants to get close to a sacred bull that the gods sent to Crete, Daedalus constructs an artificial cow that Pasiphaë crawls into. Using this invention, Pasiphaë has sex with the bull and conceives the Minotaur. Daedalus feels terribly guilty for his complicity in the Minotaur's existence, which is similar to how Circe feels over the existence of Scylla. He and Circe bond over their regret and their love for their work (he has his inventions and Circe has her witchcraft) and they become lovers. Circe loves Daedalus's **scars**. To her, his scars are the unique markers of his identity and they show his development as an inventor—he has only attained the success he has because he has learned from his failure. When Circe leaves Crete, Daedalus gifts her a beautiful loom. Long after they have parted ways, Circe thinks of Daedalus with love. He is the first person who treats her with kindness and respect, something that she rarely experiences as a powerful woman in a misogynistic society.

Glaucos – Glaucos is initially a mortal fisherman whom Circe meets when he sails close to the shore near Helios's halls. Glaucos admires Circe; she, a goddess, is a marvel to him. Circe falls in love with him, and he is the first of many mortals that Circe comes to love. She is astonished at how appreciative he is when she helps him with his fishing, particularly because gratitude is not a quality found among the gods. Circe's first act of magic is on him, as she turns him into a god when experimenting with *pharmaka*. As soon as he becomes a god, though, Glaucos becomes vain and egotistical, demonstrating how immortality strips away the virtues that come with mortality, like thankfulness and empathy. Circe hopes to marry him, but Glaucos is drunk with his power and wants "the best" of the nymphs. As a god, to him the best is the most beautiful, and the most beautiful nymph is Scylla. It is not love, but a shallow lust, that leads him to her. After Scylla's transformation, Glaucos swiftly forgets her and moves on to other nymphs.

Hermes – Hermes is the Olympian messenger of the gods. He is the first person to visit Circe on Aiaia, and since he is an excellent storyteller and an amusing companion, he and Circe become lovers. They do not, however, fall in love; in fact, Circe says that he is "scarcely even a friend." Hermes embodies the carelessness of the gods. He only does what amuses him and gets annoyed at Circe when she takes anything seriously—he especially taunts her for crying over mortals. When Circe asks him to advocate for her to Helios so that the gods stop sending

their nymph daughters to Aiaia, he gets annoyed and calls her "dull." Hermes is also an ancestor to Odysseus and, therefore, to Telegonus. Hermes gives Odysseus moly so that he can resist Circe's magic, and Hermes helps Telegonus to build the ship that he sails to meet Odysseus.

The Minotaur – The Minotaur, a man-eating monster that craves human flesh, was born after Pasiphaë had sex with a sacred bull. The Minotaur is Pasiphaë's way to gain fame among gods and men, and it also serves as her "whip to use against her husband Minos." Minos hates Pasiphaë, and the two of them are always looking for ways to exercise power over the other. With the Minotaur, Pasiphaë has another way of making Minos fear her power. Because Daedalus helped Pasiphaë become impregnated by the bull, Daedalus feels guilt for all the deaths that the Minotaur causes.

Scylla – Scylla starts the story as the most beautiful nymph in the halls of the gods. When Glaucos falls in love with her, Scylla flaunts his affection before Circe. Circe is pained by Scylla's cruelty, but she is mostly heartbroken that Glaucos would choose someone else over her. Still hoping that Glaucos will marry her, Circe meddles with *pharmaka* with the goal of exposing Scylla's ugliness in a way that would make Glaucos uninterested in her. But Circe does not have a good grasp on magic at this point and ends up turning Scylla into a horrific monster. While Glaucos simply moves on to different nymphs, Circe has to grapple with the consequences of her cruelty. When on Aiaia, Circe learns from Hermes that Scylla eats men. Circe is filled with guilt, knowing that these deaths are her responsibility. While the other gods of the story do not worry about the mortal lives they ruin, Circe constantly reminds herself of the suffering she has caused. Her regret is one of the things that sets her apart from the other gods, and it also prompts her to take action. At the end of the story, she demands an end to her exile so that she can kill Scylla by using the poison from Trygon's tail. After turning Scylla to stone—and thus ending her part in perpetuating the careless violence that the gods inflict on the world—Circe decides to leave all the immortals behind for good and drinks a potion to become mortal.

Medea – Medea is Aeëtes's daughter and Circe's niece. She is also a witch, which Aeëtes resents, as he fears that she will eventually arm her husband with magic. Medea falls fiercely in love with Jason and uses her magic to help him get the **golden** fleece. As they are escaping from Aeëtes, Medea knows that they will be caught and tortured by her father unless she does something drastic. She then kills her brother—who is also Aeëtes's favorite son—and dismembers him, throwing his limbs into the ocean. She knows that Aeëtes must stop and collect all the pieces to give him a proper burial, which slows him down and allows Medea and Jason to escape. It is a heartless and selfish act, but Medea does so anyway, which shows not only how she is like her callous father, but also how she feels like she must exploit others in order to survive. Circe tries to persuade Medea to stay with her on Aiaia, where Medea will be safe and Circe can teach her witchcraft. But Medea refuses; she is too in love with Jason. Circe warns her that Jason will leave her—he is already shrinking from her powers—but Medea refuses to listen. Circe finds out years later that Jason does leave Medea for another woman. In retaliation, Medea burns the new wife alive and then kills her own children so that Jason cannot have them. Circe is not surprised, but she is nonetheless saddened to hear that Medea turns out to be just like her cruel father, Aeëtes.

Odysseus – Odysseus is a warrior who, on his way home to Ithaca from Troy, stops on Circe's island. Odysseus is extremely clever, which attracts Athena to be his patron. Odysseus is also extremely proud, and he gets his men in trouble many times because of his vanity and greed. When he arrives on Aiaia, he sends his men ahead to her house, where Circe—still traumatized from the violent rape she suffered at the hands of previous sailors—turns them into pigs. Odysseus then arrives bearing moly, which Hermes (his ancestor) gave him to protect him from Circe's magic. He and Circe have an enjoyable conversation, and they become lovers, with her restoring Odysseus's men to their original forms after she and Odysseus have sex. Odysseus and his men stay on Aiaia for several months: first to rest from their journey and fix their ship, and then because Odysseus enjoys Circe's company. Circe falls in love with Odysseus and his sharp intelligence. She particularly loves Odysseus's **scars**, which she sees as integral to his identity. Before Odysseus returns to Ithaca, Circe becomes pregnant by him, although Odysseus never learns of this. When Penelope and Telemachus come with Telegonus to Aiaia, Circe hears the rest of Odysseus's tale: after returning to Ithaca, Odysseus killed all the men who hoped to marry Penelope. And he didn't stop there; he wanted to send a message about what happens to those who try to usurp his power, and so he killed everyone connected with the suitors, even the innocent bystanders and the serving girls whom the suitors raped. Telemachus is especially haunted by what happened and feels guilty for having been a part of the murders. Odysseus continues a downward spiral into paranoia and violence until he accidentally kills himself on Telegonus's poison spear when he attacks Telegonus, thinking that he is a pirate.

Athena – Athena is the goddess of wisdom, weaving, and the art of war. She is also the patron of Odysseus. She wants to bring him glory and power, and so she encourages him to seek out action even after his return to Ithaca, instead of letting him rest. As Circe puts it, Athena wants Odysseus to be "always delighting her with some new twist of cleverness." In this way, Athena exemplifies the selfishness of the gods, since she—like other gods—cares for mortals only for selfish reasons. When Athena hears a prophecy that Telegonus will cause Odysseus's death, she tries to kill the infant Telegonus, even demanding

that Circe hand him over. In return for Telegonus, Athena promises to send along another man with whom Circe can have a child, a child that Athena vows to protect and lead to become a renowned leader. But her offer overlooks the inhumanity of killing an infant and assuming that the child can be easily replaced by another. So Circe declines Athena's offer and sets up protective spells around her island to keep Athena out. After Odysseus's death, Athena offers Telemachus the opportunity to found an empire for her in the west. She is shocked and enraged when he declines, but she then quickly offers the opportunity to Telegonus, who accepts. The quick change from one human to another demonstrates how mortals are interchangeable to her; the only thing that matters is that they bring her glory, power, and satisfaction.

Penelope – Penelope is the wife of Odysseus and the father of Telemachus. When Odysseus doesn't return home from Troy, many suitors squabble for Penelope's hand. Although she has no intention of marrying anyone while she waits for Odysseus's return, none of the suitors heed her requests to leave her home. As a woman alone, she has no power, and the men know that. So she waits, and with Telemachus she schemes about how to delay the suitors until Odysseus's return. Odysseus describes Penelope to Circe as being "a fixed star, a true-made bow . . . she is steady." These traits can be seen in her son Telemachus, although he does not have her subtlety and secrecy nor, it appears, does he wish to. Telemachus resents his mother's silence in the face of Odysseus's violence; only Telemachus confronts Odysseus in an attempt to curb his hostility. His directness sets him apart from Penelope. When Penelope comes with Telegonus and Telemachus to Aiaia, some of this jealousy still remains, although now it is mixed with suspicion, as Circe fears for her son's life. When she finds out that Penelope has come to Aiaia not to kill Telegonus but to keep Telemachus safe from Athena, Circe is initially angry that Penelope has brought danger to Aiaia. But Circe feels empathy for Penelope's position—after all, Circe certainly knows what it means to protect one's child—and so she agrees to let them stay. Circe and Penelope become close, and Circe even introduces Penelope to witchcraft. Penelope, who loves weaving, is already a skilled artisan and knows the value of "will and work." When Circe ends her exile, she asks Penelope to be the witch of Aiaia in her stead, which Penelope agrees to.

Jason – Jason is the rightful king of Iolcos. When his uncle seized the throne, he told Jason that he could become king only if he brought back Aeëtes's **golden** fleece. When Jason goes to Colchis, Aeëtes's kingdom, he meets Medea, who falls in love with him. When Jason and Medea escape with the fleece, they stop at Aiaia so that Circe may perform the cleansing rite of *katharsis*. After the rite is completed, she asks them for their story, which Jason and Medea tell together. While they speak, Circe notices that Jason takes the credit for getting the fleece, even though it was all thanks to Medea's magic. His dismissal of Medea's aid indicates that he sees women as not just inferior to men, but also as duty-bound to help men. As Circe puts it, he acts as though "a demigoddess saving him at every turn was only his due." Circe also notes that Jason is afraid of Medea's powers, and she predicts that Jason will leave Medea for a wife who is not as threatening to his sense of control. Circe finds out many years later that this is exactly what happens.

Perses – Perses is a son of Perse and Helios, and the brother of Circe, Aeëtes, and Pasiphaë. He is a sorcerer, like the rest of his siblings. Perses is named after his mother, Perse, who was inspired by Helios' declaration that "Every son reflects upon his mother." Although Perses shares Perse's malice, he doesn't appear to harbor any special sympathies for her. Her naming him after her has less to do with encouraging a sympathetic bond, and more to do with her egotism. Circe has no fond memories of Perses, as he is cruel to her from childhood. Perses exhibits the vices of the gods—cruelty and egotism—and the misogynistic and abusive behavior against women that is prevalent in the novel. Later in the story, Circe hears that he has "some goddess of Sumeria he keeps in chains for a wife." Clearly, he takes part in the subjugation of women and uses his wife to simply breed with. Even Pasiphaë, who Circe always thought was close with Perses, hints at his cruelty. He, like so many of the other gods, is devoid of affection.

Perse – Perse is the wife of Helios and mother of Circe, Aeëtes, Pasiphaë, and Perses. As a nymph, she has no power among the divinities. The only way she can gain more power is through marriage, which is representative of how, in ancient Greece, marriage was typically the only way women could gain power. Of course, because her power is dependent on a man, she pretty much lives by his whim. Perse is disgusted upon Circe's birth—first because she is a girl, and then because Helios says that Circe is not beautiful enough to attract another immortal for a husband. Because Circe will therefore not bring Perse any more power through a future marriage, Perse dismisses her and is cruel to her for the rest of her existence.

Trygon – Trygon is an immortal creature who has god-like status. He is a stingray whose tail is so poisonous that it can kill a mortal instantly and cause eternal pain to a god. Circe first learns of Trygon from Aeëtes who wants to make Trygon's tail into a weapon. Later on, Circe goes to Trygon to challenge him for his tail, as she knows that such a powerful weapon would deter Athena from trying to approach Circe's son, Telegonus. When Circe meets Trygon, he tells her that the only way for her to get his poison tail is to experience the poison first. She knows that the poison will cause her unending agony, but she is willing to sacrifice herself for Telegonus's safety. She agrees to Trygon's request, but when she reaches for his tail, he pulls it away. He tells her that her offer was good enough, and then he instructs her to cut off his tail. The implication is that, because she understands the meaning of sacrifice (she was about to give herself everlasting pain for her son), she will not take his

sacrifice lightly. Accordingly, Circe balks from his order to cut off his tail, but she nevertheless does so, as she believes that this is the only way to protect Telegonus. As she watches him bleed his **golden** blood, she feels sick of living in a world where one must harm others to protect oneself (and one's loved ones). As she thinks of how she "cannot bear this world a moment longer," Trygon tells her to "make another." These words are her call-to-action later in the story, when she feels despair at Telegonus's departure and the knowledge that all the mortals she loves will die. She takes her fate into her own hands and demands an end to her exile before killing Scylla and drinking a potion to give up her immortality.

Minos – Minos is Pasiphaë's husband and the king of Crete. He fears Pasiphaë because of her powers—he does not want a powerful wife, but instead wants "a simpering jelly he keeps in a jar and breeds to death." When Pasiphaë gives birth to a bull-headed monster, he names it after himself, calling it the Minotaur. He is terrified of the monster, but he wants to associate himself with it so that he can share in its fame and wield it as a weapon of fear over others. He does exactly this and uses the Minotaur to keep the people of Crete—who are terrified of losing their children to the beast—under his control.

Zeus – Zeus is the king of the gods and ruler of the Olympians. He is the son of Kronos, whom he kills to gain control. Zeus is similar to Helios in that he is obsessed with power. Circe never directly meets Zeus, but he exercises a lot of control over her life—he is the one who sends her into exile—which is representative of how those in power are often very removed from the people they affect. Zeus is also the one who sentences Prometheus to eternal torment for giving humans fire. As Hermes tells Circe, Zeus (like the other gods) wants to keep humans miserable, because miserable people give the gods more offerings. Suffering reminds mortals of their fragility, and this vulnerability breeds fear—particularly fear of the gods and what they may do to mortals. In efforts to please the gods who control their fates, humans give offerings to and abase themselves before the gods, which is exactly what the vain and power-hungry gods want.

Kronos – Kronos was the king of the Titans before Zeus, his son, defeated him. Before the days of the Olympians, Kronos heard a prophecy that one of his children would overthrow him. Afraid to lose his power, Kronos eats each one of his children, although his wife, Rhea, manages to save one and raises the child in secret. That child is Zeus, who grows up to indeed overthrow Kronos. He is the first one to use the magic herbs *pharmaka*, which he shoves down Kronos's throat to make him vomit up his siblings. Zeus and his siblings are the Olympians, and they launch a war for power against the Titans. The Olympians win and Kronos is chained for eternity. The war is the story's oldest example of the relationship between power and fear. The pattern is the same throughout the story, which demonstrates how this violent cycle is passed down and maintained by the gods.

Tethys – Tethys is a Titan goddess of water and is Oceanos's wife, which makes her Circe's grandmother. Tethys helps Circe when she begs her to send Glaucos good fishing, as Circe herself does not have the power. Tethys does agree to help, but she warns Circe that she should require that Glaucos give her something in return, or else he "will forget to be grateful." Glaucos *is* grateful, however—until he becomes a god, which indicates that the problem of ingratitude is actually a problem among immortals. Tethys is also the one who tells Helios that Circe experimented with *pharmaka* after Tethys had ordered her to never "speak of that wickedness again." Tethys, like the other gods, is afraid of the threat to her power that witchcraft poses; she has no problem selling out her granddaughter so long as she maintains her power.

Ariadne – Ariadne is Pasiphaë's and Minos's daughter. She is sympathetic toward the Minotaur, as she sees the creature as her brother. When she falls in love with Theseus, one of the mortals that is sent by the king of Athens as a sacrifice to the Minotaur, she arms him and teaches him how to make his way through the Labyrinth, the maze that Daedalus constructed to hold the Minotaur. She later runs away with Theseus, but Dionysus decides to claim her as his own. It is not stated whether Ariadne had any say in the matter, but it is likely that she didn't; the story shows time and time again that the gods and men of ancient Greece take what they want of women. However, Dionysus never gets to her, as Artemis kills her. The reason is not known, but Hermes guesses that it was "Some incomprehensible slight" that threw Artemis into a rage, demonstrating once again the callousness of the gods.

Polydamas – Polydamas is the captain of the ship that Daedalus and Circe sail on to get to Crete. When Circe asks him for his cloak (she plans to use it as part of her disguise when facing the monster Scylla), she sees that Polydamas wants to say no, although he does finally agree to. She can see that he is "jealous of his little power," and Circe is "only a woman" to him. This exchange demonstrates how those who have only a little power hold onto it tightly. They are aware of their vulnerable position and will do their best to keep other people beneath them. Polydamas is a man, and he sees all women as inferior to him, exemplifying the misogyny of ancient Greece.

Alke – Alke is the first nymph who is sent to Circe's island. Circe tries to welcome her, but Alke is rude and sulky. When Circe tries to dismiss her, though, Alke defiantly stays put, telling Circe that she has no power in comparison to the gods who sent her. The gods who sent her are men, and therefore they have more power than Circe, a woman. Alke is used to the sexism of ancient Greece, so she accepts these gods' power as "natural . . . like the movements of the spheres." Instead, Alke uses her energy to defy Circe who, as an unmarried woman, is "in her reach." Alke's actions show how the women of ancient

Greece often scrabble among themselves for power because they see taking down each other as their only chance to advance—the men are beyond their reach.

Icarus – Icarus is Daedalus's son, whom he loves very much. Pasiphaë uses Icarus as her weapon to keep Daedalus obedient. Pasiphaë's cruelty in keeping Icarus imprisoned demonstrates how bystanders become collateral damage in the gods' quest for power; Icarus grows up locked away in a palace and never gets to live free—he dies when trying to escape.

Lampetia – Lampetia is one of Helios's daughters and Circe's half-sister. Like her sister Phaethousa, Lampetia is a caretaker of Helios's sacred cattle. She is one of Helios's most beautiful children and she, just like the other gods, is obsessed with perfection and beauty in a very vapid way. She suggests that Circe never speak in order to hide her ugly voice.

Phaethousa – Phaethousa is one of Helios's daughters and Circe's half-sister. Like her sister Lampetia, Phaethousa is a caretaker of Helios's sacred cattle. She is also obsessed with perfection and encourages Circe to hide the streakiness of her hair. Circe's unique hair is a detriment because it is different from the other gods', whose perfection leaves them all looking the same.

Polyphemus – Polyphemus is the Cyclops that Odysseus meets on his journey home from Troy. Odysseus goes into Polyphemus's cave out of greed—he wants to get the cyclops's treasure—but Polyphemus traps them and then begins eating Odysseus's men. Odysseus tricks the monster, blinds him, and then escapes with his crew. Just as Odysseus and his men get back to their ship, he calls back to Polyphemus, telling the Cyclops his name so that he can get credit for his cleverness. Now armed with Odysseus's name, Polyphemus then tells his father, Poseidon, to punish Odysseus. Poseidon punishes him by making his journey home extremely difficult. All of Odysseus's men die on the journey back to Ithaca, so it could be said that Odysseus's vanity is responsible for their deaths. This not only illustrates Odysseus as a selfish and narcissistic man, but it also shows how the gods do not care whose lives they destroy when they try to teach someone a lesson.

Artemis – Artemis is goddess of the hunt and is Hermes's sister. She kills Ariadne, although the reason is never clear, which suggests that it was a thoughtless murder. Circe is enraged to hear that Ariadne died is such an arbitrary and meaningless way, and she despises Artemis for her callousness, a quality common among the gods.

Achilles – Achilles is the best of the Greek warriors at Troy. He is of the people that Odysseus fought alongside. Odysseus meets Achilles at the gate to the underworld, where Achilles tells Odysseus that he wishes that he had lived a quiet and humble life. Odysseus does not live this way, but Telemachus—who chooses to be very different from his father—does.

Oceanos – Oceanos is the Titan god of the fresh water and is god of the fresh-water river that the ancient Greeks believed circled the Earth. Oceanos is Perses's father and Helios's cousin. When Helios expresses interest in Perse, Oceanos offers her to him, telling him that "She is [his] if [he] want[s] her." His indifference toward Perse's feelings on the matter demonstrates the misogyny of ancient Greece. His daughter is simply an object to give away to other men.

Elpenor – Elpenor is one of Odysseus's men. He likes to sleep on top of Circe's roof. The evening before Odysseus and his men go to the gates of the underworld, Elpenor falls from the roof and dies. Odysseus has to return to Aiaia to bury Elpenor, which is when he gives her the vial that she requests be filled with the sacrificial blood used to summon the dead.

Eileithyia – Eileithyia is the goddess of childbirth who has the power to help women give birth. Circe calls for Eileithyia's help during her labor with Telegonus, but she does not come, which indicates that some other divinity does not want Circe's labor to go well. The god preventing the birth turns out to be Athena, who does not want Telegonus alive, because he is prophesied to kill Odysseus. Odysseus is a favorite mortal of Athena's, so she is selfishly determined to keep him alive, even if that means the death of an innocent child.

Boreas – Boreas is the Titan of the north wind. When he and Apollo fall in love with the same mortal man, Boreas kills the mortal so that Apollo, an Olympian, can't have him. Boreas's heartless murder of the mortal demonstrates the callousness of the gods. It also demonstrates how people in power do not care about who is collateral damage in their squabbles for status.

Apollo – Apollo is the Olympian god of light, music, prophecy, and medicine. He visits Aiaia once with a prophecy for Odysseus. Without asking Circe's permission, he forces his prophecy on her. Bearing Apollo's prophecy is unpleasant, and Circe feels used. What's more is that it puts Circe's power in perspective and reminds her of how the gods can and will disrupt her life without a second thought.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Teiresias – Teiresias is a blind prophet. He speaks to Odysseus at the gates of the underworld to inform him of his next steps in his journey home to Ithaca.

Rhea – Rhea is Kronos's wife and the mother of Zeus and Zeus's siblings. After hearing a prophecy that one of his children will overthrow him, Kronos eats all his children. But Rhea manages to save Zeus and raises him in secret.

Allecto – Allecto is one of the Furies, the goddesses of vengeance. She whips Prometheus in the halls of the gods.

Nereus – Nereus is one of the Titan gods of the sea. He was made subordinate to Poseidon after the war between the

Titans and the Olympians.

Poseidon – Poseidon is the Olympian god of the sea.

Selene – Selene is the Titan goddess of the moon and Circe's aunt.

Theseus – Theseus is the mortal with whom Ariadne falls in love. Ariadne helps Theseus defeat the Minotaur.

Hector – Hector was the prince of Troy during the battle of Troy.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

POWER, FEAR, AND SELF-PRESERVATION

Circe is a novel about power, showing how the quest for power often leaves a chain of abuse in its wake. *Circe* is set in mythological ancient Greece and depicts the brutal worlds of gods and mortals, both of which embody a dog-eat-dog mentality: in order to survive (or, for the immortals, thrive), one must trample on others or else be trampled on. As a result, power is an obsession for humans and gods alike, with characters using whatever means necessary to eke out power for themselves. Throughout the story, there are three roles that come into play when power is used: the one who wields power, the one whom the person with power dominates, and the ones who suffer collateral damage. Circe, the main character, experiences and witnesses each one of these roles as she makes her way from the halls of the gods, where she is bullied and manipulated by other immortals, and through the world of humans, who jealously guard whatever power they possess. In depicting Circe's story, the novel shows power to be "a great chain of fear," with each level abusing those beneath it.

Ancient Greece's many hierarchies show how a society becomes obsessed with power. The novel quickly establishes that ancient Greece is constructed of power hierarchies: gods over mortals, royalty over subjects, men over women. Those on the higher rungs of the power ladder exercise control over those below them. This power structure has deep roots: eons ago, the Titan Kronos ate his children out of fear of being overthrown, and the ensuing war between Zeus and his siblings (the Olympians) and Titans like Kronos is foundational to their society. This kind of power struggle is also apparent in Zeus sentencing Prometheus to everlasting torture because Prometheus gave humans fire, which was a way of giving them power that Zeus didn't want them to have. Fear has a primary role in power hierarchies, as those on top, who are afraid to lose their power, use fear to maintain their control over others. For instance, when Circe's brother Aeëtes tells their father, Helios, that he and his siblings have powers that are "not bound by the usual limits of gods," Helios is panicked. After discussing with Zeus on how best to manage these capabilities, they exile Circe so that she may be an example of what happens to those whose powers threaten the hierarchy.

In a world where one must use others or be used, characters rush to exert control over the people around them. With every occasion being an opportunity to accumulate power, interpersonal relationships—such as the one between Pasiphaë (Circe's sister) and Minos—become races for dominance. Pasiphaë knows that Minos only wants her as "a simpering jelly he keeps in a jar and breeds to death," so she does her best to stay one step ahead of him. She uses her poisons to keep him at heel and even gives birth to the Minotaur, a man-eating monster, so that it may be "her whip to use against Minos." No bonds are sacred when power is on the line. The novel is also full of family members using each other in attempts to get ahead. Marriages are especially used toward this end, with Helios giving Pasiphaë to a son of Zeus to maintain their alliance, and Aeëtes looking for "some sorcerer-god" to be his daughter Medea's husband, as he hopes to exchange her for "exotic poisons." In the cutthroat culture depicted in the story, even those who are not grappling for power are endangered, as anyone can become collateral damage in someone else's quest for more dominance. Odysseus treats those around him in this manner. When he returns to Ithaca, Odysseus murders not just his wife's suitors, but also everyone connected with them (such as the serving girls whom the suitors raped), to demonstrate what happens to those who challenge his status.

Because everyone lives in fear of losing power, the cycle of power and abuse continues uninterrupted. Circe is a perfect example of how hard it is to break the cycle. She hates the heartless violence spawned from others' race for power, but she feels that she has no choice but to play a part, since she herself is relatively powerless and needs power to protect herself. Circe learns the hard way that she suffers when she is kind, such as when a ship arrives at her island and she welcomes sailors into her home. Seeing that she is a woman alone, the men begin raping her. Traumatized, Circe turns all men who arrive on Aiaia into pigs. This tactic protects her and proves (to both herself and others) that she is not weak. She has internalized Pasiphaë's words, that "The only thing that makes [others] listen is power." In another show of power and fear, Circe cuts off Trygon's poison tail to use it as Telegonus's protection against Athena. Circe feels horribly guilty for taking Trygon's tail, but she prioritizes protecting her son's life over not causing another being's suffering. Trygon therefore becomes collateral damage in Circe's move to intimidate

Athena.

The "great chain of fear" is so woven into the fabric of ancient Greek society that even its few disruptions never destroy it. At the story's end, Circe is so sick of the violence she witnesses that she decides to end her participation in the cycle of power and abuse, choosing to give up her powers and become a mortal. As a mortal, Circe hopes to help other humans, therefore contributing to "the simple mending of the world." While her actions will undoubtedly help some, they will not dismantle the system of power and abuse that she tries to leave; the other gods, filled with "spite and malice," still remain in power. In this way, the story suggests that unless all of those with disproportionate power willingly give it up, the world will continue to suffer the terror and violence produced by the competition for power.

WOMEN, POWER, AND MISOGYNY

Circe explores how women cope with a society that sees them as inferior to men. The novel's protagonist is a nymph named Circe, who experiences ancient Greece's misogyny firsthand. Nymphs are at the bottom of the gods' ladder of power and, as women, they are susceptible to violence and abuse from mortal men and immortal gods alike. From a young age, Circe witnesses how women are not expected to hold power—and, if they do, it is almost always through a man. Some women, however, do manage to create their own power to wield autonomously. Circe is one of these women, as she possesses the power of magic. When her capabilities are revealed, she quickly learns that the misogynistic society in which she lives does not welcome women having power. The gods fear her, with Zeus and Helios exiling her in the hopes of containing her. Upon being ejected from the halls of the gods, Circe becomes enmeshed in the lives of mortals and discovers that their attitudes toward powerful women are similar to the gods'; women like her are consistently met with distrust. Consequentially, Circe spends much of her time in isolation, both physically and emotionally. Circe is not unique in her lonely experience as a woman with power. Circe's niece Medea and sister Pasiphaë, also witches, have similar fates. Through their experiences, the book illustrates how, in a misogynistic society where women rarely possess power of their own, each independently powerful woman faces the world alone.

In ancient Greece, women are at the bottom of the power hierarchy, which limits—if not totally erases—their means to gain power. Although there are a few powerful goddesses, women are largely represented by nymphs. Nymphs are "allowed to work only through the power of others," which means that any influence is usually gained through marriage. Circe's mother, Perse, does just this: she entices Helios to marry her so that she may "hold sway in [his] halls." Women's value is generally restricted to their sexuality. Parents, such as Perse and Helios, use their daughters as pawns in marriages in order to "trade[] [them] for something better." In these arranged marriages, the husband sees the wife as just a means to breed children. Circe's brothers Aeëtes and Perses approach marriage in this way: the former "dispatche[s] [his wife] as soon as she [bears] him an heir" (he kills her), and the latter "has some goddess [...] he keeps in chains." In this way, women in ancient Greece have no say in their own lives—they are seen only as bearers of children or as sexual objects, and they're discarded once they can no longer fulfill these prescribed roles. Moreover, the book's female characters—from the serving girls whom Penelope's suitors rape to Circe herself—are also vulnerable to male violence. At one point, a sailor learns that Circe lives alone and rapes her—he does not expect consequences if there is no man to punish him.

When women do have power, they are distrusted, and others in power try to constrain them. When Circe and Pasiphaë's abilities are discovered, Zeus and Helios are afraid of their powers, and they exile Circe to a remote island so that "she can do no more harm." As for Pasiphaë, the gods figure that her husband Minos "will be sure she is held to her proper place." Although Perses and Aeëtes also possess magic, no significant attempts are made to constrict their power—presumably because they're male. Medea is also treated with suspicion. When Aeëtes discovers that Medea has powers, he tries to discourage her from witchcraft by punishing her—he is scared that she will arm her future husband with magic. Jason, Medea's husband, is terrified of her powers. Encouraged by his kingdom's people, who "despise[] her," he leaves Medea and takes a new wife.

Ostracized for their power, the powerful women of the novel are left to face the world alone. Hardened by the attacks they face, the women often isolate themselves further as a means of self-preservation. To prevent Minos from keeping her "in a jar [...] [to] breed to death," Pasiphaë wields her poisons and magic with cruel abandon. Relying only on herself, Pasiphaë is loveless and alone. She rejects all forms of attachment, perhaps because she knows that love could be used against her. To her, "loath[ing] [...] is where [her] power comes from." Medea, too, is a solitary figure. After Aeëtes's attempts to curtail her powers, she runs away with Jason, whom she loves obsessively. But when Jason, intimidated by her power, leaves her, Medea kills his new wife before slaughtering her own children, "swearing that Jason [will] never have them." Upon being abandoned, Medea, who "would rather set the world on fire than lose," rejects the world completely. Circe, on the other hand, is physically isolated by the gods and is plagued by loneliness. Yet even when she meets others, she remains emotionally alone. When ships begin to stop at Aiaia, she learns quickly that the men on them see her only as a woman to dominate—she is raped by the captain of one of the first ships that comes. Traumatized and determined to protect herself, she turns all

men who arrive on the island into pigs, further isolating herself. She does not even trust the men whom she creates a rapport with. She is wary of revealing anything about herself to Hermes and Odysseus, as she knows they will "gather [her] weaknesses up" to use them against her when they choose.

Of the three women, only Circe is able to find true love. "[Carrying] his wounds openly in his hands," Telemachus treats Circe with dignity and respect, which she is not accustomed to. After years of being either feared or abused, Circe at last meets someone who treats her as an equal, and it is for this man—Telemachus—that she decides to give up her immortality. So, although misogynistic societies force powerful women to face the world alone, the book demonstrates that it is still possible for these women to find fulfillment through equality and respect from their peers.

CHANGE, INITIATIVE, AND THE SELF

Change is a central topic in *Circe* and plays a key role in the main character's development. Transformation is Circe's greatest skill—she is able to transform people and things into different kinds of beings—and she also longs to transform the world around her to be less cruel. But the most remarkable change in the story is Circe's own, as she transforms herself from an impotent nymph into a powerful goddess-witch and then, at the end of the novel, into a mortal. But making these changes is not easy. Throughout the book, Circe's attitudes toward the act of transformation evolve. She begins the story looking to others to bring about the change she wishes to see, whether this be from Glaucos, whom she hopes will give her a happy eternity by marrying her, or from her father, Helios, whom she desperately hopes will save her from the man who violently rapes her. Time and time again, no one intervenes to help her. With no other choice, Circe takes matters into her own hands, ending her exile, killing Scylla, and becoming a mortal. In this way, the story suggests that the most effective way to bring about change is to do it oneself rather than relying on others to act.

Circe, who begins the story as a very passive nymph, learns that she cannot rely on others to intervene when a situation needs changing. Although Circe's childhood is a stream of "dull miseries," she is passive and never takes steps to alleviate her wretchedness. Her hopes for escape rely on other people acting for her, such as her brother Aeëtes taking her to his kingdom, or a man marrying her. Neither of these two dreams come to pass, demonstrating that simply hoping other people will help is ineffective in making change. When Circe learns that monster-Scylla feeds on humans, she is horrified—having been the one who made Scylla a monster as a means of revenge, she knows that she has perpetuated the gods' careless cruelty against mortals. But instead of brainstorming ways that she could stop Scylla herself, Circe's first thought is whether another god will kill the monster. Yet no other god intervenes; they benefit from the deaths and therefore have no motivation to act. Their inaction teaches Circe that she cannot trust others to make the world a less cruel place. However, Circe's passivity ends after she is raped by sailors who arrive on her island. When one of the sailors approaches her, Circe is sure that "[her] father would appear [...] outraged at the insult to his child." When no one comes, it sinks in that she cannot trust anyone else to protect her.

Through the limited impact of Circe's magic—particularly transformation—the novel demonstrates how one cannot expect to better the world by trying to change other people. Circe's greatest talent is transformation, yet she finds that her power has significant limitations: "Transformation touche[s] only bodies, not minds." In other words, Circe is unable to genuinely influence others' thoughts or actions, even if she can change their physical form. For instance, Circe transforms Glaucos into a god, assuming that he will marry her once they're both immortal. But Glaucos—drunk with his new power—becomes vain and egotistical and decides to marry the most beautiful nymph, Scylla, instead of Circe. And even after Circe transforms Scylla into a monster, Glaucos still won't marry Circe. She has changed him into a god, but she's powerless to change his thoughts or behavior, which makes her suffer. In general, Circe's magic allows her to meddle in various situations, but it does not allow her to solve the underlying issues that cause her or others pain. She can momentarily curb the Minotaur's appetite, for instance, but she can't change that her sister Pasiphaë and Pasiphaë's husband, Minos, use the man-eating monster as means to maintain power. And Circe changes boatloads of men into pigs to demonstrate that she, a woman, is not weak, but that does not change the systemic violence against women that pervades the novel.

The only time that Circe is able to create significant change is when she does it herself. After her son Telegonus leaves, Circe is struck with the realization that all her actions up to that moment have not changed her situation: she is still alone and exiled for eternity. While despairing at the world she lives in, she recalls Trygon telling her to "make another" world. At last, she understands that if she wants to improve her own situation or the world at large, she has to do it herself. Her first step is summoning Helios and strong-arming him into ending her exile, demonstrating that she must make the change that she wants to happen. Having liberated herself from exile, Circe then plans to kill Scylla, since she wants to end Scylla's incessant murdering of mortals—violence for which she feels personally responsible, since she was the one who made Scylla a man-eating monster in the first place. Although Circe knows that she cannot stop every abuse of power in the world, she can at least stop her own part in it by turning Scylla into stone. Upon killing Scylla, Circe decides to leave the destructive world of the gods by transforming herself into a mortal, thereby formally ending her participation in the cycle of abuse that the gods perpetuate.

By the end of the novel, Circe knows that she cannot rely on other people to better her situation or to change society's cycles of violence and cruelty. But she has power to both improve her own life and improve the world in small ways by helping others and refusing to be violent. At the end of the novel, Circe dreams of her life as a mortal. She imagines traveling with Telemachus, him patching ships and her curing sicknesses, the two of them "tak[ing] pleasure in the simple mending of the world." There is no seismic shift in the way of the world, but Circe and Telemachus take action to improve it in the ways they can.

MORTALITY, FRAGILITY, AND FULFILLMENT

Circe explores the differences between gods and humans. The novel follows Circe from her beginnings as a bullied nymph in her father Helios's halls, to Aiaia, her island of exile, where she encounters gods and mortals alike. As the story progresses, Circe's life becomes intertwined with mortals: she falls in love with mortal men, thwarts the attacks of mortal sailors, and even gives birth to a mortal child. At the same time, Circe distances herself from the gods, whom she knows to be spiteful, cruel, and egotistical. Although she learns that mortals can be just as wicked as gods, Circe finds that mortals, with their fragility, imperfections, and finite existence, are better able to appreciate their lives. After she knows herself to be in love with Telemachus (a mortal), Circe decides to transfigure herself into a mortal, too. Her decision paints immortality as a curse, rather than a blessing. Through Circe's decision to give up her divinity in order to become mortal, the book demonstrates that, by its nature, immortality strips away the things—such as empathy, personal growth, and connection—that give meaning to life.

Because the immortal gods never fear for their existence and rarely experience pain, they have no sense of compassion for those who do. While there are instances when a god is in pain (such as when Prometheus is tortured), the majority of immortals do not experience pain—and if they do, they heal quickly. As Circe puts it, "There is nothing more foreign to them" than suffering. And because the gods have no knowledge of pain, they have no empathy for those who experience it. In fact, they are more likely to be excited by someone else's suffering, as is seen when Prometheus is tortured; the other gods are thrilled to see his agony, and no one stops it. Protected by their immortality, gods have no empathy for mortals and are generally dismissive of mortals' lives and deaths. When a god does care about a specific mortal—as in Athena's interest for Odysseus—the god treats the mortal as a tool to gain personal satisfaction. Instead of letting Odysseus settle into a peaceful life after the Trojan War, Athena provokes him, hoping to incite him to action, but ultimately causing his demise. Odysseus's happiness doesn't matter; rather, he is simply a source of amusement to Athena, for whom "He must live in action's eye [...] always delighting her with some new twist of cleverness." By contrast, mortals—since they can die—are inherently vulnerable, and it is this vulnerability that generates both gratitude and empathy. This is most clearly established with Glaucos, who is a mortal before Circe transforms him into a god. As a mortal, he is gracious and kindhearted; fearing starvation, he is appreciative when Circe helps bring him good fishing. He knows how benevolence improves his life, so he is kind to Circe in return. But when he becomes a god, his tenderness evaporates. He chooses to forget his "burdened" mortal life and, in doing so, loses his compassion and becomes cruel toward others: he kills his mortal father, withholds help from his former village until he sees their offerings, and coldly rejects Circe's friendship and love.

While gods do not have to work, mortals must labor in order to live, but their existences are richer because of it. With "excellences already bursting from their fingertips," gods have no need to work. Ignorant of labor—and the fulfillment that accompanies it—gods spend their eternities idly existing. When they want attention, they gain renown "by proving what they can mar." The gods honor (which is to say, fear) their fellow gods' ability to destroy more than their ability to create. Mortals are the opposite—with no supernatural power, they must work to live. Through labor, mortals learn the value of "practice and diligence" and enjoy the accompanying sense of achievement. As Circe notes, it is through the "tending [of] their skills" that mortals gain fame. Furthermore, to achieve their success, mortals must try and fail repeatedly. Throughout the story, **scars** are used to represent how this failure leads to personal growth. Both Odysseus and Daedalus are scarred because of their experiences—Odysseus from years of battle, and Daedalus from attempted inventions. Circe sees these scars as their "name[s] stitched into [their] skin," suggesting that a mortal's failures and consequential growth are integral to their identity. Because the gods never experience failure, they never grow, which is reflected in the "smooth sameness" of their skin.

With their eternal life, gods are easily jaded, which diminishes their ability to form deep emotional connections. Because the gods live forever, they become uninterested by the people and events around them. It is for this reason that "gods love nothing more than novelty." Helios marries Circe's mother, Perse, not for love, but because she puts constraints on their relationship, which is new to him and therefore exciting. Hermes's relationship with Circe is similar in that he is only interested in her insofar as she excites him with challenges. Even Circe experiences this indifference toward others as, after hundreds of years of living, the people she meets "yellow and fade as everything faded in the endless wash of centuries." Daunted by how meaningless it feels to care about people when faced with eternity, Circe finds herself tempted into the same lack of

interest in others that the other gods have.

But, in the end, Circe resists, for it is only when she feels love that she feels joy. Instead of giving up her capacity to connect with others, Circe gives up her immortality. For Circe, love, personal growth, and empathy—all of which are rarely found among the gods—are integral to life. As she puts the transformative potion to her lips, she realizes that, although she once thought that "gods are the opposite of death," she realizes that "they are more dead than anything," for they never really live.

FAMILY AND INDIVIDUALITY

Much of Circe's story involves her trying to distance herself from her family, the cruel immortals of ancient Greek mythology. She is not alone in these endeavors; characters from Pasiphaë to Medea to Telemachus also seek to escape the violence in their families. In fact, all the families in *Circe* have significant faults, with Circe's family being perhaps the most ruthless. Circe grows up in her father, Helios's, halls, where she witnesses and experiences his callous brutality and narcissism. This environment leaves a lasting effect on Circe and her siblings, with many of them becoming just as cruel as the family they grew up in. As Circe becomes more involved in the goings on of the world, she learns of her siblings' gruesome acts, from her sister Pasiphaë's spite-fueled killing of serving girls to her brother Aeëtes's grotesque torturing of sailors. She even faces the chilling fact that she, too, contains her family's wickedness. After all, Circe does user her powers as a nymph to create Scylla, one of her world's most infamous monsters. But, unlike her siblings, Circe finally refuses to perpetuate her family's cycle of cruelty. By confronting her flaws and working to undo them, she becomes a deeply empathetic character. By depicting families and the few outliers who defy them, the novel illustrates how, although family is a formative influence on a person, it is possible to free oneself of one's family and their faults.

Through depicting the family of the gods' generational vices, the book illustrates how families shape a person. The gods are characterized by their egotism and cruelty. Except for Prometheus, all the gods that Circe meets in Helios's halls act in the same petty and selfish way, often from birth. Circe sees this happen with her siblings, Pasiphaë and Perses, who immediately mirror their mother, Perse's, malice. As she puts it, "The two of them were clever and quickly saw how things stood." They assimilate to the family that they are in by emulating their parents' cruelty, mocking and ostracizing Circe. Even when removed from their families, the gods are still marked by the wickedness that they grow up with. Aeëtes especially exemplifies this: when he leaves the halls of the gods, he becomes a sorcerer who tortures men for pleasure and display of power. This reflects Helios's amusement when speaking of the mortal astronomers who are killed whenever he, appearing to mortals as the sun, does not follow their predictions. Aeëtes even seeks to murder his disobedient daughter, Medea, an act reminiscent of Helios's melting the defiant Circe in a fit of rage.

Even those who hate their families nevertheless adopt their faults, as the vices that they have learned from their families are the same tools they know to use in order to survive. When Pasiphaë tells Circe that she loathes their brutal family and their obsession with power, Circe is shocked, as Pasiphaë "ha[s] always seemed […] their distillation, a glittering monument to [their] blood's vain cruelty." Despite her hatred for them, Pasiphaë believes that the only way to survive in their family is to play their games of power. As she tells Circe, "The only thing that makes them listen is power," so in order to be heeded, she is as cruel as the rest of them. Circe's niece Medea undergoes a similar development: when Circe first meets her, Medea does not hesitate to condemn her father, Aeëtes, as evil. Yet Medea eventually follows her father's footsteps, showing the same readiness to spill blood for pride and vengeance. After her husband Jason leaves her, Medea burns his new wife alive before killing her and Jason's own children. As Circe notes, Medea "had grown up trained around [Aeëtes's] cruelty, and in the end it seem[s] she ha[s] not learned how to hold another shape." In other words, although Medea recognizes and disapproves of her family's cruelty, she easily falls into their same patterns of behavior.

But a few characters are able to break their families' vicious cycles of cruelty by confronting their own flaws and ending their complicity in their families' wickedness. Circe hates her family but nevertheless finds herself mirroring her father's cruelty and vanity, which is especially apparent by her transformation of the nymph Scylla into a monster. Upon learning that Scylla eats humans, Circe knows that she is responsible for the deaths of countless mortals. Instead of dismissing her crimes (as Pasiphaë does) as simply her way of surviving in the world created by her parents, she nurtures her guilt and empathy—feelings that are foreign to her family members—for others' pain and loss. These feelings are what motivate her to kill Scylla—a violent act in itself, but one that puts an end to Circe's participation in her family's cycle of violence. Symbolically, she then gives up her immortality, leaving her family for good. Telemachus similarly resents his family, namely his father, Odysseus. Telemachus is consumed with guilt over his complicity in Odysseus's brutal schemes—especially when, at Odysseus's orders, he murders the serving girls who were raped by Telemachus's mother, Penelope's, suitors. Like Circe, Telemachus keeps his guilt close. His regret and empathy for others are what set him apart from Odysseus, who is thoughtless in his grabs for power and fame. Telemachus refuses to be like his father, a decision epitomized in his refusing Athena, Odysseus's patron, when she orders him

to make an empire in the west. Unlike proud Odysseus, Telemachus chooses a quiet, nonviolent life.

The first character in the novel to defy their family is Prometheus, who sacrifices himself to eternal torture so that mortals can benefit from "all the arts and profits of civilization." Prometheus defies Zeus, whom his Titan relatives defer to, by giving humans fire—something that Zeus kept from them to prevent them from forming civilizations, knowing that living difficult, uncomfortable lives would make humans give more homage to the gods. It is Prometheus's defiance of Zeus that shows Circe that "Not every god need be the same" and inspires her to be different as well. But beyond the impact that Prometheus's rebellion has on Circe, his action suggests that sacrifice is necessary to truly separate oneself from one's family. Just as Prometheus sacrifices himself to unending pain, Circe relinquishes her immortality, and Telemachus gives up glory. They must sacrifice the advantages that they inherit from their family (divine power and fame) to break away from their families and their families' faults.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

SCARS

Scars are a physical record of the pain a person has experienced and the mistakes they have made. In this way, scars represent how people learn and grow from pain and failure, making them unique. Throughout the novel, Circe is mesmerized by mortals' scars, as well as their wrinkles and creases, as these are a testament to what they have lived through. This symbolism is most clearly established with Odysseus, who is heavily scarred from years of battle. When Circe asks him whether he would like her to "wipe [the scars] away," he declines, asking "How would [he] know [him]self?" His response pleases Circe, who sees his scars as his "name stitched into his skin," proof that he is "a captain with stories to tell." This exchange clearly links a person's scars to their identity—scars are a living monument to the important experiences that shape a person.

Scars also show how trying and failing at something leads a person to growth. As a child, Odysseus dreamed of being a craftsman like Daedalus, but he stopped because he "was always cutting [his] fingers open." This makes Circe think of Daedalus' hands, which are heavily scarred. The implication is that Daedalus is such an accomplished craftsman *because* of all of his failure—in other words, because of all the times he tried to make something and accidentally cut his hands. In this way, his scars reflect his growth and are an integral part of his success. Without them, he would be an entirely different person—someone much less accomplished and self-assured. Circe learns this lesson, too, while honing her witchcraft. When she first starts teaching herself magic, "all [she] brew[s] [are] mistakes." Her skill must come "through errors and trials, [and] burnt fingers." Failure, in other words, is how a person succeeds and, therefore, grows.

Of course, like all other divinities in the novel, Circe cannot have physical scars; her skin heals swiftly and perfectly when it is damaged. The gods' lack of scars is symbolic of how they remain static throughout eternity—their personalities, values, and behaviors rarely change. While the nymphs have a "smooth sameness," mortals are "relentlessly distinct," mostly due to their imperfections. As the story continues and Circe yearns to leave her immortality behind, she longs to have the scars of mortals, even once imagining what she would look like if her wounds showed on her skin, "[trying] to imagine [her body] written over with its history." When she does create a potion to become a mortal, having scars is one of the things she anticipates, excited at last for her body to reflect her story.

GOLD

The novel's association between the color gold and power shows how power is what is most valuable to the ancient Greeks. The society in the story is a brutal one; a person must abuse others or be abused. Leveraging power is how a person "buys" themselves protection and dominance. In this way, power is like wealth, so it's no coincidence that the story's most powerful characters are associated with the color gold, which is also a color associated with wealth. This symbolism is especially prevalent with Helios, the sun god. He is one of the most powerful Titans, and he is strongly connected with gold, since he gives off a gold light. Circe describes how, "At [her] father's feet, the whole world was made of gold. The light came from everywhere at once." Helios wields his power cruelly, and people obey and honor him because they fear him.

Because power is so precious, sacrifices of it are notable. In the story, the color gold sometimes emphasizes how selfless it is for someone to give up their power to help others. Both Prometheus and Trygon bleed gold blood when they give away their power. The gold blood flowing out of their bodies is a physical representation of their loss of power; they are sacrificing the very thing their society most values in order to make the world a better place.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Back Bay Books edition of *Circe* published in 2020.

Chapter 1 Quotes

"A girl," my mother said to him, wrinkling her nose.

But my father did not mind his daughters, who were sweet-tempered and golden as the first press of olives. Men and gods paid dearly for the chance to breed from their blood, and my father's treasury was said to rival that of the king of the gods himself [...]

"She will make a fair match," he said.

"How fair?" my mother wanted to know. This might be consolation, if I could be traded for something better.

Related Characters: Helios, Perse, Circe (speaker), Helios, Perse

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

This passage takes place at the beginning of the story, at the moment of Circe's birth. Circe's mother, Perse, is disappointed—even disgusted, judging by her wrinkling of her nose—to find out that her child is a girl. This is a testament to how the mythological ancient Greece of the novel is misogynistic: people treat women as inherently inferior to men. Women rarely have any power, and if they do, it's often through a man.

This situation is very true for Perse: she is a nymph, so she has neither significant supernatural powers nor influence in a society that sees her as less valuable than her male family members. The way she gets power is by marrying Helios, one of the most powerful Titans. When she has a child, she hopes to have a son so that she can have another man who is bound to her by blood, one that can protect her and secure power for her. When she finds out that her child is actually a girl, she is disappointed because a daughter can't guarantee her any more power than she already has.

But Helios knows that his daughters are deemed very valuable by men and gods—not for their character or their own qualities, but because they are related to Helios. Circe describes Helios's daughters as being "golden," a color that symbolizes wealth and power. This description ties the girls' value to the power that they promise to the males who marry them. Human men and gods alike hope to marry Helios's daughters because the girls guarantee an association with Helios's power, which can boost the men's status and maybe secure some kind of protection from the Titan.

Additionally, men desire to have children with Helios's daughters in the hopes that their children will inherit some of the Titan's power. In all these circumstances, Helios's daughters aren't valued for their character or capabilities, but for their sexuality and their relation to their father. And Helios, in turn, benefits from having daughters because people pay him a lot of money to marry them, demonstrating how women are treated as objects in ancient Greece.

When Perse realizes that her daughter could secure a good match, Circe describes her mother thinking that this is good news, that her daughter could be "traded for something better." The implication is that the daughter could be traded for both money and a connection to a man, both of which Perse finds preferable to having a daughter. Thus, this exchange between Perse and Helios regarding Circe drives home the misogyny of ancient Greece, and how its society viewed women only as valuable as the men that they are associated with.

Chapter 2 Quotes

I found that I was not afraid of the pain that would come. It was another terror that gripped me: that the blade would not cut at all. That it would pass through me, like falling into smoke.

It did not pass through. My skin leapt apart at the blade's touch, and the pain darted silver and hot as lightning strike. The blood that flowed was red, for I did not have my uncle's power. The wound seeped for a long time before it began to reknit itself. I sat watching it, and as I watched I found a new thought in myself. I am embarrassed to tell it, so rudimentary it seems, like an infant's discovery that her hand is her own. But that is what I was then, an infant.

The thought was this: that all my life had been murk and depths, but I was not a part of that dark water. I was a creature within it.

Related Characters: Circe (speaker), Prometheus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23-24

Explanation and Analysis

This passage takes place after Circe meets Prometheus, who tells her that "Not every god need be the same." Up until this point, every god that Circe has met is selfish, power-hungry, and cruel. Prometheus's words spark an epiphany for her, that maybe she doesn't have to be like the other gods but can choose to be different. Yet Circe is not sure if she can. Her life has been miserable and vapid, and

she feels insubstantial and powerless in it. So, she decides to cut her hand to test both whether it will draw blood—and thus, if she even exists. She's also trying to determine if she has the agency to do an un-godlike act at her own volition (gods fear pain, so it is very unlike them to cause themselves pain on purpose).

But the blade does cut Circe's skin, and the sight of her blood comforts her because she is indeed alive. At that instant, she has an important realization: she has agency. Up until this moment, the vapidity and misery of her life has felt like "murk and depths"—nothing substantial has taken place, and nothing has felt meaningful. When the knife doesn't pass through her hand "like falling into smoke" but cuts her instead, Circe realizes that she is not as insubstantial as her life makes her feel. In other words, she is "not a part of that dark water" of her meaningless environment but is "a creature within it"—she is not defined by her experiences up to this point. She is not defined by her circumstances and can choose how to act. This moment marks Circe's realization of her own agency, and how she has the power to control her own action. As she puts it, "her hand is her own."

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ I had heard by then the stories whispered among my cousins, of what [mortals] might do to nymphs they caught alone. The rapes and ravishments, the abuses. I found it hard to believe. They looked weak as mushroom gills. They kept their faces carefully down, away from all those divinities. Mortals had their own stories, after all, of what happened to those who mixed with gods. An ill-timed glance, a foot set in an impropitious spot, such things could bring down death and woe upon their families for a dozen generations.

It was like a great chain of fear, I thought. Zeus at the top and my father just behind. Then Zeus' siblings and children, then my uncles, and on down through all the ranks of river-gods and brine-lords and Furies and Winds and Graces, until it came to the bottom where we sat, nymphs and mortals both, eying each other.

Related Characters: Circe (speaker), Minos, Pasiphaë, Helios, Zeus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31-32

Explanation and Analysis

While at Pasiphaë and Minos's wedding, Circe is surprised when she sees mortals for the first time. Her fellow nymphs have told Circe to fear mortals, as mortal men are known to rape nymphs, which speaks to the misogyny of ancient Greece. As women, nymphs are vulnerable to the attacks of all men, whether immortal or not. The nymphs' divinity doesn't grant them any strength or power, so mortal men do not fear them and therefore believe that they do not need to respect them. This progression suggests that when people in the story honor one another, it is not out of recognition of their humanity, but instead is out of fear. The ancient Greeks of the novel deemed women to inferior to men—weaker and less powerful—resulting in widespread abuse and oppression of women.

But the social divisions in ancient Greece aren't solely based on gender. When looking at the mortals, Circe realizes that they are terrified of the gods, whose power could ruin their lives. At this moment, she understands that her world is a hierarchy structured on power: those with less power fearing the people with more power, especially since the people with power abuse the people below them. This creates a "great chain of fear," as Circe calls it, which extends from the very top of society (the most powerful gods) to the bottom (the least powerful mortal men and women).

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ I was too wild to feel any shame. It was true. I would not just uproot the world, but tear it, burn it, do any evil I could to keep Glaucos by my side. But what stayed most in my mind was the look on my grandmother's face when I'd said that word, *pharmaka*. It was not a look I knew well, among the gods. But I had seen Glaucos when he spoke of the levy and empty nets and his father. I had begun to know what fear was. What could make a god afraid? I knew that answer too.

A power greater than their own.

Related Characters: Circe (speaker), Tethys, Glaucos

Related Themes:

Page Number: 45-46

Explanation and Analysis

At this point in the story, Circe is trying to make Glaucos immortal because she wants him by her side for eternity. When she asked her grandmother Tethys whether *pharmaka* (magical herbs) would allow her to make Glaucos into a god, Tethys snapped at Circe, angrily forbidding her to so much as speak of the herbs again. It takes a moment for Circe to understand that Tethys is afraid, because fear is uncommon among the gods. This is because, since the gods

are at the top of the social hierarchy, they are generally not afraid of others. If Tethys looks panicked at the mention of *pharmaka*, it must be because its power outranks hers, which means that the herbs do indeed have significant properties. Tethys's reaction demonstrates how people in power desperately fear losing it, often resorting to scare tactics to discourage people from challenging their power (like Tethys forbidding Circe to seek out *pharmaka*).

Circe's thoughts regarding her grandmother's fear betray her selfishness. Circe decides that she doesn't care about her grandmother's anxieties—in fact, she doesn't care if she has to destroy the world, "tear it, burn it, do any evil" in order to get what she wants. Her prioritization of her own desires over everyone else's lives shows that she possesses the same egotism and violence of her family. Even though she despises her family's callousness and cruelty, she is following in their footsteps. Their vices—selfishness and violence—are the tools that she has learned to use in order to achieve her goals.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ [Glaucos] pushed me from him. His face was caught, half in anger, half in a sort of fear. He looked almost like his old self [...]

"No!" He slashed his hand through the air. "I will not think on those days. Every hour some new bruise upon me, some new ache, always weary, always burdened and weak. I sit at councils with your father now. I do not have to beg for every scrap. Nymphs clamor for me, and I may choose the best among them, which is Scylla."

Related Characters: Glaucos, Circe (speaker), Scylla, Helios

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

Glaucos is rejecting Circe's advances. Attempting to discourage him from pursuing Scylla, Circe has just told him that she has always loved him, even when he was a mortal. But Glaucos interrupts Circe, telling her that he doesn't want to hear about his time as a mortal—in fact, he deliberately avoids thinking about those days. Now that Circe transformed him into a god, Glaucos never feels the weaknesses and pains that he experienced as a mortal man. By forgetting what it felt to be "weary, always burdened and weak," Glaucos has lost his capacity for empathy, which suggests that experiencing pain is what often encourages a person to understand and sympathize with others' pain. Because the gods rarely experience pain or vulnerability, they are generally callous towards others' suffering, as Glaucos is toward Circe's heartbreak in this moment.

Glaucos has also bought into the superficiality and power games of the gods, which is clear in the reasons behind his dismissal of Circe. He wants to marry Scylla because she is the most beautiful nymph, which, according to Glaucos, means that she is "the best among them." He has no interest in having a meaningful connection with his wife—he wants her to be a trophy for him, a sign to the other gods that he is so powerful that the most beautiful nymph chose to marry him. His objectification of Scylla demonstrates one of the ways in which men in the novel demean women; women are valued not for their character, but for their superficial beauty and their ability to buy a man more power.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ My face was hot. "I suppose I should take you as my tutor and deny everything?"

"Yes," [Aeëtes] said. "That is how it works, Circe. I tell father that my sorcery was an accident, he pretends to believe me, and Zeus pretends to believe him, and so the world is balanced. It is your own fault for confessing. Why you did that, I will never understand."

It was true, he would not. He had not been born when Prometheus was whipped.

Related Characters: Aeëtes, Circe (speaker), Scylla, Prometheus, Zeus, Helios

Related Themes:

Page Number: 75-76

Explanation and Analysis

Circe's brother Aeëtes is telling Circe that it is her own fault for getting exiled because she confessed to transforming the nymph Scylla into a monster. Aeëtes has completely adopted their family's philosophies regarding power, demonstrating how easy it is for a child pick up their family's vices. He knows that there are specific rules that a person should follow if they want to survive in his family—one must be egotistical and prioritize power over principles. Aeëtes has learned from his family that honesty has no practical purpose in a society where power is most important. As Circe has learned, being honest only leads to other people exploiting her honesty.

And yet Circe is unwilling to let go of her principles, even though doing so would better guarantee her survival among her family. Earlier in the book, Prometheus's rebellion against the gods to help mortals made Circe realize her agency—that she can make her life meaningful, even though she isn't sure how. At the very least, she knows that she doesn't want to be like the rest of her family, whom she despises for causing her so much pain. Although she isn't sure exactly what she wishes to accomplish on her own, she knows that she would rather be like Prometheus than her father, and so she tries to follow Prometheus's example by being honest. Because Aeëtes has never seen anyone rebel against the gods for moral reasons (Prometheus was tortured before Aeëtes was born), Circe realizes that he will never understand why she defied the gods. She is more interested in living a meaningful life than a vapid life she would live if she, like Aeëtes, only cared about power.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ Witchcraft is nothing but such drudgery […] Day upon patient day, you must throw out your errors and begin again. So why did I not mind? Why did none of us mind?

I cannot speak for my brothers and sister, but my answer is easy. For a hundred generations, I had walked the world drowsy and dull, idle and at my ease. I left no prints, I did no deeds. Even those who had loved me a little did not care to stay.

Then I learned that I could bend the world to my will, as a bow is bent for an arrow. I would have done that toil a thousand times to keep such power in my hands. I thought: this is how Zeus felt when he first lifted the thunderbolt.

Related Characters: Circe (speaker), Pasiphaë, Perses, Aeëtes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 84

Explanation and Analysis

At this point, Circe is beginning to teach herself witchcraft, and she finds out that it is hard work. She humorously remarks on how witchcraft is not a hobby designed for the gods, who generally despise work of all kinds. Because gods can effortlessly satisfy any of their needs by using their supernatural powers, immortals generally avoid any form of labor. But now that Circe has to work in order to learn witchcraft, she finds that she doesn't mind the labor at all. Now that she is working, she feels a sense of achievement and empowerment for the first time in her life.

Circe's life up until this moment has been vapid and meaningless. As she puts it, she "had walked the world drowsy and dull […] [she] left no prints, [she] did no deeds." Now, however, she is developing a skill and gaining power. With her witchcraft, she can arm herself and also have more influence in her life. As opposed to "[doing] no deeds," Circe can now "bend the world to [her] will." By laboring, she gains power, and for someone who has never possessed power before, the feeling is exhilarating. Moreover, as she teaches herself witchcraft, she experiences the sense of satisfaction that comes with achieving a task through hard work. Between her newfound power and the satisfaction that she feels from mastering a skill, witchcraft—and the work that comes with it—enriches her life.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ "Tell me," he said, "who gives better offerings, a miserable man or a happy one?"

"A happy one, of course."

"Wrong," he said. "A happy man is too occupied with his life. He thinks he is beholden to no one. But make him shiver, kill his wife, cripple his child, then you will hear from him. He will starve his family for a month to buy you a pure-white yearling calf. If he can afford it, he will buy you a hundred." […]

"So this is how Olympians spend their days. Thinking of ways to make men miserable."

"There's no cause for righteousness," he said. "Your father is better at it than anyone."

Related Characters: Circe, Hermes (speaker), Scylla, Prometheus, Zeus, Helios

Related Themes:

Page Number: 96-97

Explanation and Analysis

Circe has just asked Hermes why Zeus was so mad at Prometheus for giving humans fire. He explains to her why gods prefer humans to be miserable, and how the gods exploit this misery. Essentially, when humans suffer, they will do all they can in order to improve their situation. In the ancient Greece of the novel, humans turn to the gods, begging them for help and sending the gods as many offerings as they could, even if that means putting others into miserable conditions. As Hermes says, a desperate man will "starve his family for a month to buy [a god] a pure-white yearling calf" as a means to implore the gods for help. The humans are forced to fear the gods, knowing that if a

god is unhappy with them, their lives will continue to be miserable. The gods are therefore careful to keep humans wretched, as it encourages humans to fear and respect the gods more.

When people are happy, they don't need to beg other people to help them. Because of this, they don't feel it is necessary to pay a god homage or acknowledge the gods' power. When Prometheus gave humans fire, they were able to create for themselves technology and comforts that made their lives enjoyable. Because they could rely on themselves for happiness—as Hermes puts it, they felt "beholden to no one"—humans had less need to keep the gods pleased. In this way, independence is a kind of power, because it frees a person from needing to answer and fear others. Thus, when Prometheus gave humans fire, Zeus was furious because this diminished the gods' power and control over them.

Circe is horrified at this and criticizes Hermes and the Olympians for their cruelty. But Hermes reminds her that Helios, Circe's father, "is better at [making humans miserable] than anyone." Circe has to confront the fact that her family is one of the major causes of mortals' suffering. In fact, she herself is at fault too; after all, she turned the nymph Scylla into one of the most infamous monsters of ancient Greek mythology. Circe must acknowledge her own complicity in her family's violence against mortals and right her own wrongs in order for her to truly distinguish herself from her family members.

Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ "You fools," I said. "I am the one who made that creature. I did it for pride and vain delusion. And you thank me? Twelve of your men are dead for it, and how many thousands more to come? That drug I gave her is the strongest I have. Do you understand, mortals?" […]

The light from my eyes beat down upon them.

"I will never be free of her. She cannot be changed back, not now, not ever. What she is, she will remain. She will feast on your kind for all eternity. So get up. Get up and get to your oars, and let me not hear you speak again of your imbecile gratitude or I will make you sorry for it."

The cringed and shook like the weak vessels they were, stuttering to their feet and creeping away […] I yanked off the cloak. I wanted the sun to burn me.

Related Characters: Circe (speaker), Helios, Hermes, Daedalus, Pasiphaë, Scylla

Related Themes:

Page Number: 117

Explanation and Analysis

On her way over to Crete at Pasiphaë's request, Circe tries to kill Scylla but is unsuccessful. After the ship makes it safely past the monster, the crew members—led by Daedalus—bow to Circe in thanks, grateful that they lost no men. Feeling horribly guilty for having made Scylla, Circe misdirects her rage at herself toward the crew members. Although Circe felt awful about Scylla's transformation as soon as Hermes told her that the monster eats mortals, her guilt becomes much worse now that she has lived through Scylla's attacks and has seen first-hand the fear and anguish that the monster causes. This is an important moment for Circe, as her guilt over the deaths that she is responsible for is what motivates her to work toward making the world a less violent place.

Scylla also serves as a constant reminder for Circe that she is not so unlike her family; in fact, she now acknowledges that she made Scylla out of "pride and vain delusion," two vices that are common among her family members. Circe longs to distance herself from her cruel family, but she cannot do so until she recognizes that she carries their same vices and works to undo them. Her guilt over Scylla leads to considerable self-reflection, which leads to character development and personal growth that set her apart from her family. But for now, she is still burdened by her vices, which her rage makes apparent. In a Helios-like moment, Circe rages against the crew men simply because she can. It is possible that, in the face of her realized helplessness (her magic couldn't get rid of Scylla), she proves to herself that she does have power by exerting is over the men, making them cringe in fear under her fury. She is at a crossroads in this moment, yearning to be unlike her wicked family but still embodying their vices.

Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ This was how mortal found fame, I thought. Through practice and diligence, tending their skills like garden until they glowed beneath the sun. But gods are born of ichor and nectar, their excellences already bursting from their fingertips. So they find their fame by proving what they can mar: destroying cities, starting wars, breeding plagues and monsters. All that smoke and savor rising so delicately from our altars. It leaves only ash behind.

Related Characters: Circe (speaker), Ariadne

Related Themes:

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

Circe is in Crete and is watching her niece, Ariadne, dance. As she watches Ariadne move skillfully, Circe realizes that humankind's mortality is what encourages them to be creative and skillful. Because their lives are finite, mortals know that the primary way for them to leave a legacy (and therefore "live forever" in history) is through invention or talent that catches the attention of gods and other mortals alike. Mortals, therefore, are more inclined to develop a craft than gods are, and so Circe associated them with creation. In order to attain the level of talent necessary for fame, mortals must labor, which teaches them the values of "patience and diligence," two qualities that also lead to personal growth and, in turn, a more enriched life.

The gods, meanwhile, are associated with destruction. Circe explains that the gods never know the value of working because they are born with powers, "excellences already bursting from their fingertips." Because of their powers, they never have to labor, and therefore never end up developing skills. While mortals find fame through their creations and talents, gods "find their fame by proving what they can mar." When they make humans miserable, the unhappy people give the gods attention, giving them offerings and paying them homage. In this way, the gods rarely contribute anything meaningful to mankind. As Circe puts it, all their destructive actions "leave[] only ash behind."

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ [Pasiphaë's] words were falling on my head like a great cataract. I could scarcely take them in. She hated our family? She had always seemed to me their distillation, a glittering monument to our blood's vain cruelty. Yet it was true what she said: nymphs were allowed to work only through the power of others. They could expect none for themselves.

Related Characters: Circe (speaker), Minos, The Minotaur, Pasiphaë

Related Themes:

Page Number: 147

Explanation and Analysis

Circe has confronted her sister Pasiphaë about why she requested Circe's presence for the birth of the Minotaur.

Pasiphae explains to Circe that she knows that Circe is strong and capable enough to handle the pain and horror of delivering a baby monster, citing the fact that Circe endured a similarly miserable childhood as Pasiphaë. Circe is astounded that Pasiphaë hates their family because Pasiphaë is so much like them—she is selfish and cruel, "a glittering monument to [their] blood's vain cruelty." But she acknowledges that Pasiphae had only so much opportunity to be different from their family. The implication is that, in order for Pasiphae to gain the power she needs to survive in the brutal society of the ancient Greeks, she saw that she had little option other than to play by the same wicked rule of their family: one must abuse others or be abused.

Although all the book's characters feel pressured to engage in this cycle of power and abuse in order to survive, women are in an especially difficult position. Because the ancient Greeks of the novel don't respect women as equals to men, women generally have very little power of their own. As Circe says, "nymphs were allowed to work only through the power of others." This limitation makes Pasiphaë even scrappier and more defensive of her power; as a woman, she is surrounded by people trying to take her power away from her. One such example is her abusive husband, Minos, who essentially wants her to act as a sexual object . Pasiphaë commits all kinds of terrors to maintain her power over him so that he cannot subjugate her, demonstrating how her efforts to preserve herself lead to her contributing to the cycle of power and abuse.

And yet, even though it is understandable, Pasiphaë's violence and cruelty still causes people to suffer . On the other hand, Circe is a woman who is working toward becoming a more compassionate and less violent person. But unlike Circe, Pasiphaë refuses to take responsibility for her crimes, simply blaming them on the cruelty of her family and never resolving to do better. Without confronting her faults, Pasiphaë will never stop contributing to her family's violence.

Chapter 13 Quotes

❝ "I am no child to him. I was his to dispose of, like his seed-warriors or his fire-breathing bulls. Like my mother, whom he dispatched as soon as she bore him an heir. Perhaps it might have been different if I'd had no witchcraft. But by the time I was ten I could tame adders from their nests, I could kill lambs with a word and bring them back with another. He punished me for it. He said it made me unmarketable, but in truth, he did not want me taking his secrets to my husband."

Related Characters: Medea (speaker), Circe, Aeëtes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 170

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Circe's niece Medea is telling Circe about how she was treated by her father, Aeëtes. Aeëtes has no love for his daughter, which Medea makes very clear. He only ever saw her as something "to dispose of," which is reflective of people's obsession with power in the world of the novel—people see those around them as tools to exploit in order to get more status and influence. But Medea also suggests that Aeëtes's dismissive attitude toward her is because she is a woman, which speaks to the misogyny of ancient Greek society. Aeëtes has no respect for women; he sees them merely as pawns for his own projects. Medea's mother was one of Aeëtes's victims, as he killed her as soon as he got what he wanted from her: an heir. Medea's mother's death demonstrates how most men in the novel see women's value as being strictly limited to their sexuality or their ability to reproduce.

But Medea is a witch, so she has power that protects her from sharing her mother's fate. Aeëtes resents her power, even "punish[ing] [her] for it." His use of violence to discourage her from exploring her abilities suggests that he wants to keep her too afraid to learn magic that would threaten his own power over her. Aeëtes's actions demonstrate how men often treat powerful women with distrust. He tells Medea that he is discouraging her from magic because it makes her "unmarketable" to men—a remark that betrays his sexist belief that women are only valuable insomuch as they are desired by men. But Medea suspects that it is actually because Aeëtes is scared that she would arm another man with magic, which he possessively refers to as "his secrets." This shows not only that he respects men's power more (he is more wary of what another man can do with magic than what Medea can do), but it also betrays his entitlement. He calls magic "his," when in fact, all his siblings have magical capabilities that they each individually learned.

Chapter 15 Quotes

From time to time the wood buckled and a pig escaped. Most often, he would throw himself from the cliffs [...] If it were a man, I wondered if I would pity him. But it was not a man.

When I passed back by the pen, his friends would stare at me with pleading faces. They moaned and squealed, and pressed their snouts to the earth. *We are sorry, we are sorry.*

Sorry you were caught, I said. Sorry that you thought I was weak, but you were wrong.

Related Characters: Circe (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 195

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Circe is contemplating the men that she has turned into pigs. At this moment, Circe's sexual trauma has deadened her sense of empathy for others. Since the captain of a ship that arrived on her island raped her, Circe has been turning boatloads of men into pigs as both a protective measure and as a way for her to prove to them and to herself that she has power. She feels no pity for the men who die—she does not see them as men, but as pigs. Her transformation of men into pigs reflects the symbolic transformation that has occurred. Because of the terrible attack that she experienced at the hands of men, men are no longer humans to her, but sloppy and greedy animals . In this way, the story shows how the abuse that women experience in a misogynistic society leads to a self-isolation in the interest of self-preservation.

Although Circe's pain understandably affects her perception of men, her reaction only contributes to the cruelty of the world. Circe hasn't just been turning the men who intend to attack her into pigs—she has been transforming *all* men who come to her island. The fact that she is indiscriminately transforming men means that at least some of these men are likely innocent, and she is making them suffer because she wants to feel in control. While in many cases her transformations of these men keep her safe from their attacks, she is also using her magic to prove to them (and to herself) that she is powerful—she wants the men to feel "Sorry that [they] thought [she] was weak."

Circe's transforming men to show them that "[they] were wrong" in their assumption that she has no power also speaks to the limitations of her magic. While she changes countless men into pigs to disprove their sexist belief that women do not have power, these individual changes do not change the systematic violence against women. She cannot

change the world by trying to change other people.

Chapter 16 Quotes

❝ The scars themselves I offered to wipe away. [Odysseus] shook his head. "How would I know myself?"

I was secretly glad. They suited him. Enduring Odysseus, he was, and the name was stitched into his skin. Whoever saw him must salute and say: There is a man who has seen the world. There is a captain with stories to tell.

I might have told him, in those hours, stories of my own [...] His face would be intent as he listened, his relentless mind examining, weighing and cataloguing [...] He would gather my weaknesses up and set them with the rest of his collection, alongside Achilles' and Ajax's. He kept them on his person as other men keep their knives.

I looked down at my body [...] and tried to imagine it written over with its history: my palm with its lightning streak, my hand missing its fingers, the thousand cuts from my witch-work, the gristled furrows of my father's fire [...] And those were only the things that had left marks.

There would be no salutes. What had Aeëtes called an ugly nymph? *A stain upon the face of the world.*

Related Characters: Odysseus, Circe (speaker), Aeëtes, Achilles

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 215

Explanation and Analysis

Circe is hosting the warrior Odysseus and his men on Aiaia. As she watches Odysseus injure himself and recover, Circe marvels at the resilience of mortals. She uses her magic to ease his pains, but he refuses her offer to erase his scars, asking her "How would [he] know him[self]" without them, a response that pleases Circe. To Circe, Odysseus's scars are the physical record of what he has lived through, experiences that are integral to his identity. As Circe puts it, Odysseus's scars are his "name [...] stitched into his skin." In this way, the story establishes that scars symbolize the failures that one makes, and how these mistakes—and how one grows from them—are what makes a person unique.

But while Circe listens to Odysseus's stories, she never tells him any of her own. She has experienced too much cruelty—particularly men's cruelty—to trust Odysseus. She knows that he is a wily man, and while he is kind to her, he is always trying to stay one step ahead of others and outsmart people before they can harm him. Because of this, Circe is aware that if she told him of her past mistakes, he would "be intent as he listened [...] weighing and cataloguing" her faults. "He would gather [her] weaknesses up" so that he could use them against her if he wanted to do so. She knows that it is safest for her to keep her past hidden from him, even if it means that she will never feel fully understood and appreciated by him. In sum, she prevents herself from enjoying a deeper relationship out of self-preservation.

As a goddess, Circe doesn't scar, so her failures don't show on her body the way they do for mortals. She tries to imagine what her body would look like if it was "written over with its history," but she realizes that people would not respect what they saw, as they appreciate Odysseus's battle scars. For her, "There would be no salutes." Powerful women aren't respected in the ancient Greece of the novel, a misogynist society that only values women for their sexuality. So, while people hail Odysseus as a hero when they see his scars, they would deem Circe's scars as ugly. She would not be valued or applauded but rejected as "A stain upon the face of the world."

Chapter 19 Quotes

❝ "Why can you not be more peaceful?" I whispered. "Why must it be so hard?"

As if in answer, a vision of my father's halls drifted up: the sterile earth floor, the black gleam of obsidian [...] I had laid quiet and still, but I remembered the ravening hunger that was in me always: to climb into my father's lap, to rise and run and shout, snatch the draughts from the board and batter them against the walls [...] shake [Helios] for every secret, as fruits are shaken from a tree. But if I had done even one of those things there would have been no mercy. He would have burnt me down to ash [...]

Why should [Telegonus] be peaceful? I never was, nor his father either, when I knew him. The difference was that he was not afraid to be burnt.

Related Characters: Circe (speaker), Helios, Telegonus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 258

Explanation and Analysis

Circe is raising Telegonus, who is a toddler at this point in

the book. He is a restless child, and Circe finds herself struggling to keep up with parenting. Exhausted, she asks the sleeping toddler one night why he can't be more peaceful before realizing that she had always felt just as restless when she was a child. Reflecting on her childhood, she remembers her own restlessness and how desperately she wanted to get her father's affection and attention. But while she longed to "climb into [her] father's lap" and "shake [him] for every secret," she knew that her father would obliterate her for disrupting him. Helios has no love for his children; he prioritized himself above everyone else. So, when Circe was young, she had to remain "quiet and still," and very much alone.

Telegonus's wildness is therefore not unusual. If anything, he inherited his mother and father's restlessness and desire for adventure. The difference now is that "he [is] not afraid to be burnt." Circe will not punish him for expressing his curiosity or his trying to get his mother's love and attention; she wants Telegonus to grow up feeling loved, not terrified. Circe's commitment to giving Telegonus a better childhood than her own demonstrates how she is determined to be different from her cruel family. While Circe cannot altogether eliminate their cycle of power and abuse, it is in her power to give Telegonus a loving childhood and to raise him in an environment that will not poison him with the same vices that she inherited from her family. In this way, she is doing what she can to make the world a less cruel place.

❝ *How would you know?* I wanted to say. *Often those men in most need hate most to be grateful, and will strike at you just to feel whole again.*

Related Characters: Circe (speaker), Telegonus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 263

Explanation and Analysis

Telegonus has just spotted a ship sinking off Aiaia's shores, and he is urging Circe to invite the men of the ship into the house, where Telegonus and Circe can help them. He is certain that the men will greatly appreciate their help, whereas Circe is much less certain. Circe's trauma makes her doubt that the men will be grateful when they receive help. In the past, a man violently raped her only moments after she had fed him and his entire crew. She knows from this traumatic event that, in a society that is obsessed with power, people hate having to ask for help, as it means that they must recognize their weakness and appeal to someone else who has power.

In Circe's case, the unnamed captain from the first ship was likely bitter about having to ask a woman—whom he believed was inferior to him—for aid. Appealing to a woman for help suggested that he was below her on the ladder of power, which he resented; in the ancient Greece of the novel, women are generally judged to be lesser than men. He felt weak in that moment, so in order to feel powerful again, he raped her. He likely wanted to reinforce his misogynistic belief that women are inferior to men, as well as to prove to the woman who helped him that he still had more power. Of course, Circe was actually the more powerful of the two, and she ended up killing him later. The trauma, however, has a life-long effect on Circe's attitude toward men.

So, when Telegonus tells Circe that the men on the ship will doubtlessly be grateful for any help, she knows that he is wrong. One can never be certain whether people will resent needing to ask for help, in which case they may lash out at the person helping them in order to feel like they are still superior.

Chapter 20 Quotes

❝ *You were ready to fight me to have it. Not if I am willing?*

My stomach churned against itself. "Please. Do not make me do this."

Make you? Child, you have come to me […]

I lifted the blade, touched its tip to the creature's skin. It tore as flowers tear, ragged and easy. The golden ichor welled up, drifting over my hands. I remember what I thought: surely, I am condemned for this. I can craft all the spells I want, all the magic spears. Yet I will spend the rest of my days watching this creature bleed […]

The darkness around us shimmered with clouds of his gilded blood. Beneath my feet were the bones of a thousand years. I thought I cannot bear this world a moment longer.

Then, child, make another.

Related Characters: Circe, Trygon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 282-283

Explanation and Analysis

The sea monster Trygon gives Circe his tail (a powerful weapon) without making her suffer, which is usually the trade-off that he requires people to make. He does so because she agreed to sacrifice herself in order to protect her son; from her readiness to give herself up for someone else, he knows that Circe understands the value of a sacrifice. Thus, he trusts that she will appreciate the weight of his sacrifice, in that he is giving up his power in order to help her.

Circe does indeed understand the significance of Trygon's sacrifice, to the extent that she doesn't want to get his tail at all—she feels selfish for taking away another being's power for her own. She was willing to fight Trygon and suffer the poison to get the tail, but to take it without paying a price feels like a violation to her. Circe is accustomed to the brutality of the society in which she lives, where people are pressured to abuse others in order to save themselves. That is why she was willing to suffer pain in order to try to get the tail—she is used to these kinds of violent transactions in order to try to get what she wants. But Trygon's sacrifice makes her stop and think about the fact that she is selfishly taking power away from someone else.

Circe does end up cutting Trygon's tail, as she is determined to protect her son—and in order to do so, she needs more power to keep the gods at bay. When she cuts Trygon's tail, he bleeds gold, which symbolizes the preciousness of his sacrifice. Gold is traditionally associated with wealth or treasure, and it's specifically associated with power in the novel, as power is what the ancient Greeks most treasure. Trygon's bleeding represents how he is losing his power in order to help someone else, a sacrifice that is priceless in a society where power is what a person needs in order to buy protection and security. By losing his power, Trygon becomes vulnerable for Circe's sake.

As Circe watches Trygon's gold blood "drifting over [her] hands," she recognizes that, by taking his tail, she literally and figuratively has his blood on her hands—he suffers because of her. She feels "condemned" and guilty for participating in the cycle of power and abuse, as she is using Trygon as a tool to achieve her own goals. At that moment, she is aware that she is standing on "the bones of a thousand years," which could symbolize how ancient the violent hierarchy of power is, and how people's selfish battles for power have caused endless violence. Circe is disgusted by this dog-eat-dog world and feels that she "cannot bear this world a moment longer." Trygon responds by telling her to "make another." This remark reminds Circe that if she wishes for the world to be a kinder place, she has to do it herself—she cannot wait for anyone else to act on her behalf.

Chapter 21 Quotes

❝ "You pity me. Do not. My father lied about many things, but he was right when he called me a coward. I let him be what he was for year after year, raging and beating the servants, shouting at my mother, and turning our house to ash. He told me to help him kill the suitors and I did it. Then he told me to kill all the men who had aided them, and I did that too. Then he commanded me to gather up all the slave girls who had ever lain with one of them and [...] kill them as well." [...]

"I hanged them" [...] Each word was like a blade he thrust into himself. "I had never seen it done [...] I had some thought that it must be more proper. I should have used the sword instead. I have never known such ugly drawn-out deaths. I will see their feet twisting the rest of my days."

Related Characters: Circe, Telemachus (speaker), Scylla, Penelope, Odysseus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 308-309

Explanation and Analysis

Telemachus is telling Circe about Odysseus's brutality when he returned to Ithaca after the war. When Odysseus came home to find many suitors vying for Penelope and his throne, he wanted to discourage any other attempts at usurping his power. He killed all the suitors and ordered that Telemachus to kill everyone connected to them, so that their deaths would serve as an example of what would happen to the people who dared to try to challenge his power. Odysseus's reaction to the suitors is a good example of how people use fear in order to maintain their power.

Telemachus feels guilty about cooperating with his father's violent demands because he knows that he is complicit in Odysseus's brutality. By "let[ting] [Odysseus] be what he was," Telemachus is partially responsible for his father's "raging and beating the servants, shouting at [Penelope], and turning [their] house to ash." But most of all, Telemachus feels guilty about the deaths of the innocent enslaved girls. He doesn't shy away from his responsibility, instead, while telling the story, "Each word was like a blade he thrust into himself." He keeps his guilt close, like Circe does with her guilt regarding Scylla—it reminds him of his capacity for evil, and how he must overcome it. It is Telemachus's remorse that motivates him to become a kinder person than this father.

❝ An owl passed its wings over my head. I heard the sound of scuffling brush, the beak snap, A mouse had died for its carelessness. I was glad Telemachus would not know of those words between me and his father. At the time I had been boasting, showing off my ruthlessness. I had felt untouchable, filled with teeth and power. I scarcely remembered what that was like.

Related Characters: Circe (speaker), Telegonus, Athena, Odysseus, Telemachus

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 310

Explanation and Analysis

Circe is pacing the beach, thinking about a conversation that she had with Odysseus. During this conversation, Circe told a smiling Odysseus of how she never cared whether the men she turned into pigs were kindhearted or not; the only thing that mattered to her was that they were in her house. She regrets her callous words now. At the time of the conversation, Circe was feeling vengeful. After being violently raped by a man, she wanted to prove to men—and to herself—that she was powerful. When exercising her power over mortals, she "felt untouchable, filled with teeth and power," and didn't care how her actions destroyed the lives of innocent people, an attitude that makes her similar to her vain and cruel family.

But Circe has changed since then. She "scarcely remember[s] what [it] was like" to feel totally in control. Her battling against Athena to secure her son's safety has taught her what it means to be vulnerable and constantly scared of death—even if it is Telegonus's death, not hers. She is weary of the cruelty that's common in ancient Greek society, where one must abuse others or be abused. Even as she walks, she hears "A mouse [die] for its carelessness," which is suggestive of how anyone can become a victim in the dog-eat-dog society in which she lives.

Since her conversation with Odysseus, Circe has tried to avoid contributing to the violence in the world. She recognizes her faults—as she does in this very passage—so that she can do better in the future. It is through this process of reflection and improvement that Circe grows away from her family. In this instance, she embraces her vulnerability and doesn't long for the days when she callously transformed men into pigs for the sake of showing off her power. Now, she is more focused on making the world a less violent place than she is on subjugating others.

Chapter 22 Quotes

❝ "When I was young, I overheard our palace surgeon talking. He said that the medicines he sold were only for show. Most hurts heal by themselves, he said, if you give them enough time […] I took it for a philosophy. I have always been good at waiting, you see. I outlasted the war and the suitors. I outlasted Odysseus's travels. I told myself that if I were patient enough, I could outlast his restlessness and Athena too […] And while I sat, Telemachus bore his father's rage year after year. He suffered while I turned my eyes away […] But this world does have true medicines. You are proof of that. You walked the depths for your son. You defied the gods. I think of all the years of my life I wasted on that little man's boast. I have paid for it, that is only justice, but I have made Telemachus pay as well."

Related Characters: Penelope (speaker), Telegonus, Circe, Telemachus, Athena, Odysseus

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 329-330

Explanation and Analysis

Penelope is trying to convince Circe to let her and Telemachus stay on Aiaia to avoid Athena, who is trying to recruit Telemachus to go on a quest for her. In this passage, Penelope tells Circe how she regrets her inaction. Throughout her life, Penelope has tried to wait out bad situations. As she tells Circe, she "outlasted the war and the suitors. [She] outlasted Odysseus's travels. [She] told [her]self that if [she] were patient enough, [she] could outlast his restlessness and Athena too." But her inaction never improved her life, and the change that she wanted never came: Odysseus remained restless and only became more paranoid while Athena continued to provoke him. The result of Penelope's inaction is what she feared all along—she lost Odysseus.

Circe is inspirational to Penelope because Circe takes action to try to achieve the change that she wants. While she does not always succeed, Circe nevertheless manages incredible deeds—she "walked the depths for [her] son […] [and] defied the gods." Circe is proof to Penelope that people can better their situations. As Penelope puts it, Circe's initiative and achievements are evidence that "this world does have true medicines."

Chapter 24 Quotes

Penelope's face was bent to the floor. "I have, goddess. He is set in his course. You know his father's blood was always stubborn."

"Stubborn in achievement." Athena snapped each word like a dove's neck. "In ingenuity. What is this degeneracy? [...] I do not make this offer again. If you persist in this foolishness, if you refuse me, all my glory will leave you. Even if you beg I will not come."

"I understand," he said.

His calmness seemed to rage her. "There will be no songs made of you. No stories. Do you understand? You will live a life of obscurity. You will be without a name in history. You will be no one." [...]

"I choose that fate," he said.

Related Characters: Circe, Telemachus, Athena, Penelope (speaker), Odysseus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 352

Explanation and Analysis

The goddess Athena has just asked Telemachus to go west to found an empire for her. Much to her surprise, Telemachus declines, an act that demonstrates his dedication to be unlike his power-hungry father. Athena is shocked that Telemachus turns down her offer, particularly when it is an opportunity that Odysseus would have leapt at. But while Telemachus may share his father's stubbornness, he is determined to not share much more. Wracked with guilt over his participation in Odysseus's bloody vengeances, Telemachus has spent many years wishing that he had defied his father and chosen to act with peace instead of violence. Now that he has another chance to follow his father's glory-bound footsteps, Telemachus chooses the opposite—he wants "a life of obscurity."

Athena is furious that someone dares to refuse her. Her reaction demonstrates that the gods do not care about the lives of mortals, including the lives of the mortals whom they take an interest in. Although Athena is supposedly "helping" Telemachus by offering him the opportunity to go west, she doesn't actually consider that he may not want to. She simply wants someone to found an empire for her so that she can gain more glory through a mortal who serves her. Now that Telemachus has refused, she takes back all of her aid, informing him that "If you persist in this foolishness, if you refuse me, all my glory will leave you. Even if you beg I will not come." With Telemachus's refusal to serve her, Athena doesn't care whether he lives or dies—in fact, his life never mattered to Athena apart from what she could get out of it.

My island lay around me. My herbs, my house, my animals. And so it would go, I thought, on and on, forever the same. It did not matter if Penelope and Telemachus were kind. It did not matter even if they stayed for their whole lives, if she were the friend I had yearned for and he were something else, it would only be a blink. They would wither, and I would burn their bodies and watch my memories of them fade as everything faded in the endless wash of the centuries [...] For me there was nothing. I would go on through the countless millennia, while everyone I met ran through my fingers and I was left with only those who were like me. The Olympians and Titans. My sister and brothers. My father.

I felt something in me then [...] I seemed to hear that pale creature in his black depths.

Then, child, make another.

Related Characters: Circe (speaker), Trygon, Helios, Aeëtes, Perses, Pasiphaë, Penelope, Telemachus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 357-358

Explanation and Analysis

Telegonus has just left Aiaia, and Circe despairs as she considers the implications of her immortality. Because she is doomed to exist forever, all the mortals that she ever loves will leave her in death. In light of this, Circe struggles to see the purpose in creating relationships with people. Because they will die, Circe begins to think that "It [does] not matter [...] if [Penelope] were the friend [Circe] had yearned for and [Telemachus] were something else, it would only be a blink," for they would die and Circe would be forced to live "on and on, forever the same" in her exile.

Indeed, Circe's existence starts to seem very monotonous the longer she considers it. She will live for all eternity, which means that all her memories of the people she has loved and the events she had witnessed are bound to blur together and fade away over time, washed away in "the endless wash of the centuries." Feeling purposeless, Circe begins to feel indifferent, an attitude common among the gods, whose immortality has jaded them to the point that they're disinterested in the people and events around them.

But right as Circe is giving up, she remembers her

conversation with Trygon, who, in response to her weariness of the world's cruelty, told her to "make another." She hears his words again, which prompts her to recognize that if she wants change to happen—if she wants freedom from her exile and a chance to give up her immortality—she must make it happen herself.

Chapter 25 Quotes

❝ With every step I felt lighter […] I had been old and stern for so long, carved with regrets and years like a monolith. But that was only a shape I had been poured into. I did not have to keep it.

Telemachus slept on […] So often on Aiaia, I had wondered how it would feel to touch him.

His eyes opened as if I had spoken the words aloud. They were clear as they always were.

I said, "Scylla was not born a monster. I made her."

His face was in the fire's shadows. "How did it happen?"

There was a piece of me that shouted its alarm: if you speak he will turn gray and hate you. But I pushed past it. If he turned gray, then he did. I would not go on anymore weaving my cloths by day and unraveling them again at night, making nothing. I told him the whole tale of it, each jealousy and folly and all the lives that had been lost because of me.

Related Characters: Telemachus, Circe (speaker), Scylla

Related Themes:

Page Number: 373

Explanation and Analysis

Circe and Telemachus have just turned the monster Scylla into stone and are now resting on a nearby shore. Killing Scylla symbolizes Circe's ending her participation in the cycle of power and abuse. Now that Scylla is dead, Circe feels lighter "With every step;" she is at last at peace with herself. Now that she is freed from the weight of guilt over creating Scylla, Circe realizes that she can grow into a happier, unburdened version of herself. As she puts it, "I had been old and stern for so long, carved with regrets and years like a monolith. But that was only a shape I had been poured into. I did not have to keep it." She is free to choose what to become next—she can perhaps even become the mortal she longs to be.

Her first step is to tell Telemachus about her past. She loves Telemachus, but until he knows her full story, she knows that she will never feel truly close to him. Although she is nervous that "he will turn gray and hate [her]" for her past, she nevertheless decides to tell him. She is tired of shallow relationships in which she doesn't feel loved and respected for who she is, flaws and all. So, she takes the risk and tells him the whole tale.

❝ "Her name," he said. "Scylla. It means *the Render*. Perhaps it was always her destiny to be a monster, and you were only the instrument."

"Do you use the same excuse for the maids you hanged?"

It was as if I had struck him. "I make no excuse for that. I will wear that shame all my life. I cannot undo it, but I will spend my days wishing I could."

"It is how you know you are different from your father," I said.

"Yes." His voice was sharp.

"It is the same for me," I said. "Do not try to take my regret from me."

He was quiet a long time. "You are wise," he said.

"If it is so," I said, "it is only because I have been fool enough for a hundred lifetimes […] I must tell you, all my past is like today, monsters and horrors no one wants to hear."

He held my gaze. […]

"I want to hear," he said.

Related Characters: Telemachus, Circe (speaker), Trygon, Odysseus, Scylla

Related Themes:

Page Number: 373-374

Explanation and Analysis

Circe has just told Telemachus about how she turned Scylla into a monster. He responds by trying to comfort her, telling her that it was perhaps Scylla's destiny to become a monster, which would thereby alleviate Circe's responsibility. Circe is quick to shoot this down, telling Telemachus to "not try to take [her] regret from [her]." It is Circe's guilt that motivated her to overcome the flaws that she inherited from her family and to work to become a compassionate person dedicated to making the world a less cruel place. Without feeling the pain of her regret over her past actions, it is likely that Circe would have never changed. To make this clear to Telemachus, Circe tells him that his regret over killing the enslaved girls is "how you know you are different from your father."

When Circe references the ugliness of her past, Telemachus tells her that he wants to hear it, making it clear that he wants to know her fully, not just the side that she feels is more presentable in a society that teaches that a woman's value lies only in her sexuality. While other men in Circe's past have either distrusted Circe's divinity or have given her cause to distrust them, Telemachus only ever respects her. He is not suspicious of her for having powers, nor does he expect her to be a flawless, "perfect" woman. He has committed crimes that he regrets, too, and he doesn't expect her to be any different. Telemachus sees and treats Circe as his equal, which is what allows her to trust him and invest herself fully in the relationship.

Chapter 27 Quotes

❝ I wake sometimes in the dark terrified by my life's precariousness, its thready breath. Beside me, my husband's pulse beats at his throat; in their beds, my children's skin shows every faintest scratch. A breeze would blow them over, and the world is filled with more than breezes: diseases and disasters, monsters and pain in a thousand variations […] How can I live on beneath such a burden of doom? […]

Circe, [Telemachus] says, it will be all right.

I listen to his breath, warm upon the night air, and somehow I am comforted. He does not mean that it does not hurt. He does not mean that we are not frightened. Only that: we are here. This is what it means to swim in the tide, to walk the earth and feel it touch your feet. This is what it means to be alive.

Related Characters: Telemachus, Circe (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 384-385

Explanation and Analysis

Circe is about to drink the potion that she hopes will turn her into a mortal. As she hesitates, she pictures what her mortal life will be like. One of the aspects of mortality that she focuses on is "[her] life's precariousness," how her life—and her loved ones' lives—could end at any moment. Yet while these impending deaths do sometimes make her panic, they also make life sweeter, because these conditions make her savor every moment.

Circe uses several metaphors to describe what mortality means. She says that it "is what it means to swim in the tide," which is to say that mortal living is about being fully immersed in and affected by life and all its fluctuations. By being "in the tide"—which is always changing—mortals are constantly at risk of drowning, and therefore must work every day to stay afloat. But while mortals experience the lows of life, they also get to rejoice at the highs.

Circe also says that mortal living is "walk[ing] the earth and feel[ing] it touch your feet." This is to say that being mortal means being part of the cycle of life, the natural growth and inevitable death that sends people back into the same earth that they feel beneath their feet while they're alive. Quite simply, living while knowing that life and death affect you is "what it means to be alive." By describing mortality as "what it means to be alive," Circe implies that being immortal is the opposite: it means being dead, or at least "unliving."

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

At the time of Circe's birth, there is no name for what she is. Others initially assume that, like her mother Perse, Circe is a nymph. Nymphs are the least powerful of all goddesses, and the word *nymph* means "bride."

The novel's beginning establishes the sexism of ancient Greece. Nymphs have no (or very limited) supernatural powers and are therefore are at the bottom of the hierarchy of the gods. While there are some powerful female gods, the people on the lowest rung of the ladder are female, which suggests women's inferior position to men in ancient Greece. Additionally, the fact that the term nymph *means "bride" shows that powerless women are seen as sexual objects for men. Because of their gender, women's societal value and future are limited to marriage.*

Circe's father, Helios, is a Titan. Perse met him through her own father, Oceanos. As Oceanos's cousin, Helios frequently visited his palace, which is where he first saw Perse. Circe pictures her mother arranging her dress seductively to catch Helios's eye. When Helios asked about Perse, Oceanos told him that he could have her if he wanted her.

Perse's calculated posing demonstrates the idea that women must objectify themselves in order to get some power in ancient Greece's sexist society. Perse is a nymph, so as a woman without significant supernatural capabilities, she is effectively powerless. Aware that the only way she can get power is through a man, she shows herself off to catch the attention of Helios, one of the most powerful Titans. Meanwhile, Oceanos sees his daughter as merely an object to give away. Women have no say in their futures, as is demonstrated when Oceanos never asks Perse for her opinion on marrying Helios.

When Helios first approached Perse, she refused to have sex with him until he married her. Helios had been with many women, but he'd never been given an ultimatum before—it thrilled him. He, like all the other gods, was intrigued by novelty. Helios sealed the engagement by giving her a necklace that he made himself with rare amber beads.

Perse knows that simply having sex with Helios will not get her what she wants, which is power. In ancient Greece, marriage is the primary way that a woman can gain any influence—it permanently attaches them to a man's protection and power—so Perse demands that Helios marry her. Helios is like other gods in that his immortality has made him jaded. Having seen just about everything, he is moved not by genuine love for or connection with Perse, but by novelty. The necklaces that Helios gives Perse are signs of the limited power that she gets from their marriage. Amber is a color that is close to gold, which is associated with power throughout the story. As a woman, her only power is what she has through her husband, which is represented in the beads he gives her.

Helios would go on to give Perse a similar necklace after the birth of each of her four children, and she treasured both the necklaces and the envy they inspired among her sisters. Circe speculates that her mother would have continued having children forever, just to get more necklaces, if the more powerful gods hadn't found out what her children were and forbidden her from having more children with Helios.

In describing Perse's love of the beads, Circe implies that Perse has little to no love for her children. She cares only about the power that she gains by having them—they're a mark of her high social status as a Titan's wife, and they make others envious. Power is so important in this society that a person's eagerness to have it supersedes the love that one is expected to have for their child. Circe hints to the limited nature of Perse's power by foreshadowing that the other gods are able to take it away.

When Circe is born, Perse is disappointed to have a girl. But Helios is pleased—as with all his other daughters from different women, he knows that men and gods alike will pay him a fortune to marry Circe. Momentarily consoled that Circe "could be traded for something better," Perse asks Helios what kind of match Circe will make. He replies that she will likely marry a mortal prince, as she is not pretty enough to attract a god. Disgusted by mortals, Perse is revolted at the thought of her daughter marrying one. Already healed from giving birth, Perse tells Helios that they will create a "better" child.

Perse's disappointment over having a daughter speaks to the prevalence of misogyny in ancient Greece. Women aren't expected to have any power, so Perse, whose hopes for power rest on the men she is associated with, sees daughters as useless. Helios, however, doesn't mind having daughters, as he can sell them for high prices to men who wish to marry them. Because men and other gods are eager to associate themselves with the powerful Helios—and hope to pass some of Helios's power to their children by mating with Helios's daughters—the girls are considered valuable. Of course, they are not valued for their character, but only for their sexuality, which again reveals ancient Greece's misogyny. So, when Perse hears that Circe is unlikely to marry a powerful god, but to a mortal, she is upset—association with a lowly mortal will not bring Perse and status or influence. So, she rejects Circe, demonstrating how power takes precedence over any paternal feelings of love.

Perse takes no interest in raising Circe, and with Helios gone each day to ride his chariot across the sky, Circe spends much of her young childhood on her own in her father palace, where she wanders the obsidian halls. Without Helios there to give off light, the palace is quite dark; in designing the palace, he picked obsidian so that it would reflect his light, and he never considered what it might be like there without him. Whenever Helios returns for the night, Perse tries to entice him to their bedroom. He usually agrees, but Circe likes it when he doesn't, since it makes Perse storm off.

Helios's design of his palace reveals his egotism. He is obsessed with his own magnificence, and he doesn't bother considering how his decisions—even small ones like the design of his palace—affect others. Helios's egotism is representative of the gods' general disinterest in anyone beyond themselves, which is also seen in how Perse, upset that Circe brings her no power, completely dismisses her own child. In the meantime, Perse continues exercising the power that she possesses through her sexuality by trying to seduce Helios.

Sitting at her father's feet, Circe sees the world as "made of **gold**" because of the light he gives off. While Circe can stare into his face, looking at Helios would turn a mortal to ash. Circe asks what would happen if a mortal saw *her*, and Helios replies that the mortal would consider himself fortunate but would not be burned. Burning a log in the fireplace with his eyes, Helios explains that Circe doesn't even have the "least of [his] powers."

The gold that Helios gives off is representative of his power, which Circe, though young, already appreciates. By describing how Helios's power changes the appearance of the world—it appears glittering and golden—Circe is suggesting that having power can change one's perspective. Indeed, because gold is associated with wealth, it may even be that, with power, the world appears to be full of riches awaiting to be exploited for one's own gain. Circe wants to know whether she has any of Helios's powers, starting with whether her mere appearance can turn mortals to ash. This suggests both her detachment toward mortals—not understanding death, she sees the ability to kill others as desirable—and her interest in having power of her own. But Helios tells her that she doesn't have any, which speaks to the fact that women in this society aren't expected to have any special abilities or influence.

Perse gives birth to two more children: one girl and one boy. The daughter, whom she names Pasiphaë, earns a prophecy from Helios, who declares that she will marry "an eternal son of Zeus." Perse is thrilled about Pasiphaë's promising prophecy, and Circe is sure that she is already planning which dress she will wear on the day of the wedding. For his newborn son, Helios has no prophecy but states that he "reflects upon his mother." Glowing with pride, Perse names him Perses, after herself.

Perse's reaction to the births of Pasiphaë and Perses again emphasize her obsession with gaining influence—and the fact that she can only gain it through other people. Because Pasiphaë will marry a (presumably immortal) son of Zeus, Perse knows that she will have some amount of influence and status through her daughter's marriage. The fact that Perse values Pasiphaë because of her future marriage illustrates how women only gain value through men. Meanwhile, Perse is thrilled to claim Perses as her own and names him after herself. In this way, his deeds will reflect on her. Although she does not know what his path in life will be, as a male, he'll have far more opportunities to make the world know his name. Naming Perses after herself to ensure that he "reflects upon his mother" is Perse's only way to have glory.

Perses and Pasiphaë quickly notice that Perse loathes Circe, and they begin to incessantly mock her, calling her ugly and shrill. Soon Circe isn't the only one they torment—they start terrorizing all the other nymphs and river-lords in Oceanos's palace. Circe does her best to escape her siblings, choosing instead to sit at Helios's feet in his halls.

Perses and Pasiphaë quickly assimilate to their family by joining their mother in being cruel to Circe. It is possible that they begin taunting Circe simply to align themselves with Perse and thus avoid her malice, which is indicative of the dog-eat-dog mentality that exists in a society obsessed with power. Their behavior also demonstrates how a person picks up the faults of their family; having seen their mother's cruelty toward Circe, Perses and Pasiphaë join in.

One day, Helios invites Circe to join him in visiting his sacred cows—which are envied by the other gods—so they ride in his chariot across the sky. When they arrive at the pasture, Circe's half-sisters, Lampetia and Phaethousa, are there. Two of Helios's most beautiful daughters, they are caretakers of the cows. With a kind tone, they insult Circe's eyes and advise her to keep her hair braided to disguise its streakiness and to hide her ugly voice by not speaking.

Circe's trip to the pasture of sacred cows reveals the gods' obsession with superficial perfection. Helios's cows are perfectly beautiful, just as their caretakers are perfectly beautiful. This perfection is a way of gaining status among the gods, who are always looking for ways to gain dominance over each other. Lampetia and Phaethousa are quick to point out Circe's physical faults and suggest ways for her to hide her "ugliness." Their recommendations, such as Circe no longer speaking so as to hide her ugly voice, take away Circe's individuality and make her look and sound more like them. Lampetia and Phaethousa's physical similarities suggest that perfection translates to a sameness. This uniformity is reflected in the cows, which Lampetia and Phaethousa struggle to tell apart. The encounter demonstrates one way in which the gods resist change. With their strict and superficial definitions of beauty, they pressure each other to behave and appear in certain ways, all for the sake of a "beauty" that has nothing to do with a person's character. When someone doesn't adhere to their expectations—like Circe and her "ugly" voice—the gods seek ways to remove that person's differences, which they see as flaws.


The cows are pure white and perfect, with **gilded** horns and gleaming coats. Lampetia and Phaethousa (whom Circe struggles to tell apart) try to teach Circe the names of the cows but get them mixed up. Abruptly, Helios spots a scab on one of the cows. He becomes suddenly cold and demands that Lampetia and Phaethousa fix it by tomorrow. The two women become frenzied: they bow, apologize, and promise to fix the scab. Circe observes that the scab is no bigger than her fingernail.

Phaethousa and Lampetia's attempts to silence Circe for the sake of making her similar to them is a lot like Helios's furious demand that Phaethousa and Lampetia remove his cow's scab. In both cases, the gods do not tolerate difference.

As Helios and Circe fly home in the chariot, Circe remembers something Helios once told her: that there are mortals called astronomers whose job it is to track Helios's path, predicting when the sun rises and sets. When the astronomers are wrong, the kings whom they serve kill them. Helios believes that these deaths are deserved, as he's offended by the notion that anyone could predict his behavior.

Helios's total lack of empathy toward the astronomers reflects two aspects of his character. On one hand, he is cold and unfeeling toward mortals and their deaths. To him, they live to die, so if they die in a manner that reflects his power, he is pleased. Similarly, his offense at the astronomers' predictions indicates his obsession with his own power—he resents that anyone would try to restrict his behavior. The astronomers' deaths are only more proof of his power, as their failure suggests that no one else can control him. The kings in the anecdote also play into the chain of power by killing the astronomers.


Circe asks Helios whether tonight they are late enough to get the astronomers killed. When Helios says yes, Circe feels sick to her stomach, imagining astronomers begging for their lives and explaining that it's not their fault that the sun is late. Helios dismisses her discomfort as hunger.

In contrast to Helios's cool dismissal of the mortals' deaths, Circe pities them, although she does not know the name for her feeling. The fact that Helios misidentifies her discomfort as hunger shows that pity is not an emotion that the gods often feel. With a family and an environment in which this emotion is not felt (or, at least, not discussed), Circe is ignorant of it.

Back at the palace, Perses and Pasiphaë ask Circe about the cows and mock her for not knowing something about them. When Circe asks what that something is, her sister explains that Helios sometimes turns into a bull and has sex with the cows, fathering their calves. Perse joins in their laughter and calls Circe stupid. In moments like these, Circe believes that her life will be miserable forever.

Perses's and Pasiphaë's mocking of Circe for her ignorance is a way for them to exert their dominance over her; they know more than she does and will make her suffer because of it. Circe, meanwhile, feels trapped in her unhappy childhood but does nothing to change it. Her inaction only perpetuates her misery, but at this point in her development, she does not understand that she must take action if she wishes a situation would change.

CHAPTER 2

A rumor is circulating in Helios's halls that a Titan named Prometheus is going to be punished. Prometheus had long ago disobeyed Zeus by giving humans fire, a tool that brought humans out of a primitive existence and guided them to civilization. Zeus was furious; he wanted to keep cultural pleasures and technological comforts for the gods alone. In response, Zeus imprisoned Prometheus until he could devise a proper punishment. Now, Zeus has at last decided what that torment will be.

Zeus's determination to keep fire from humans has to do with his desire for gods to maintain power over the mortals. Without fire, mortals were stuck in a miserable and primitive state. Because only the gods were able to enjoy the world's pleasures and comforts, they easily kept the mortals fearful of the gods' power and indebted to the gods for any of life's pleasures. But now that the humans have fire, they gained some independence from the gods, as it has enabled them to progress and form civilizations.

Circe's Titan relatives are frantic; to them, Zeus's punishing Prometheus reads as an example of Olympian power over the Titans. After all, the Olympians are now the ruling divinities, a situation that the Titans, who pre-existed them, resent. Not only are the Titans older, but the Olympians are actually descended from the Titans; Kronos, the king of the Titans, was the father of the original Olympian gods. Long ago, Kronos heard a prophesy that one of his children would overthrow him. In an effort to prevent the prediction from coming true, Kronos ate each of his children as they were born. When Zeus was born, however, his mother, Rhea, concealed him and kept him hidden until adulthood.

Zeus's punishment is not just revenge—it also serves as an example to the other Titans that the Olympians are the ones in power. Zeus wants to instill fear in the other Titans so that they don't rebel. The use of abuse to maintain power has a long-standing history among the gods, and this history demonstrates one way that families pass down their vices. In punishing Prometheus in order to flex his power over the other Titans, Zeus follows the footsteps of his own cruel father, Kronos. Titan Kronos ate his children in an attempt to maintain power, which again illustrates how the gods' love for power supersedes any love that they have for their families. Zeus narrowly escaped being eaten by his father, but he appears to have absorbed Kronos's violent ways.

Once grown, Zeus poisoned Kronos and freed his siblings from Kronos's stomach. Gathering them together, Zeus then led his siblings into battle against the Titans. Although most of the Titans joined Kronos in the fight against the Olympians (as Zeus and his siblings named themselves), Helios and a few other Titans joined Zeus. While some people believe that Helios sided with Zeus because he hated Kronos's pride, others say it was because Helios, who has prophetic powers, knew that Zeus would win. The war was gruesome and bathed the earth in divine blood. Eventually, the Olympians won, and Zeus stripped the defying Titans of their powers.

Helios's prophetic abilities suggest that he choose to side with Zeus not because he disapproved of Kronos's character, but because he wanted to be on the winning side. In other words, Helios doesn't really care about the personalities or temperaments of the people in power—he just wants to be among them, holding onto his own power. Sure enough, Zeus strips the rebellious Titans of their divine abilities in order to maintain his own newfound power.

Centuries have passed since the war, but gods' grudges never die. The Titans are still bitter about their subjugation at the hands of the Olympians. Circe frequently overhears her Titan relatives' defiant whispers, and though Helios quiets them with concessions that Zeus "does well enough," he insinuates that the Olympians' reign won't last forever. Helios's words satisfy the resentful Titans, and they hope for a future battle.

It is likely that immortality is one of the reasons why the gods refuse to let go of grudges. Not pressed with impending death, the gods do not have a mortal's pressure to fix wrongs before it is too late. Mortality, on the other hand, allows only a finite amount of time to mend relationships or find personal contentment, which could prompt a mortal to let go of a grudge. Additionally, because power is of utmost importance in ancient Greece, the gods know that their superiors will subjugate them forever, unless they gain back power that they can then use against their oppressors. The Titans, therefore, never forget about their loss and hope for a battle that will result in them taking back power.


Now that Prometheus is going to face punishment, the other Titans again seek Helios's council, as they suspect that the Olympians are flexing their power over the Titans by making an example of rebellious Prometheus. But Helios dismisses their fears and refuses to defend Prometheus. To Helios, Prometheus deserves to be punished for "his foolish love for mortals." The other Titans nod and passively accept Helios's judgement.

Always anxious of the Olympians' power over them, the Titans suspect that Zeus is making an example of Prometheus. They don't actually care about Prometheus, though; they are afraid for themselves, worried that the Olympians are tightening their control over the Titans in general. But Helios refuses to intervene. He is not interested in possibly losing his power to defend someone else, even if that someone is a relative. Sacrifice is clearly uncommon among the gods—not only does Helios refuse to help Prometheus, but he also dismisses Prometheus's selfless act as "foolish" and even deserving of punishment.

Leading up to the punishment, the other divinities eagerly debate what horrors wait in store for Prometheus. Gods rarely ever experience pain, and this novelty is what makes them so excited to see it in action. Of course, the thought of being in pain themselves is terrifying.

Here, the story establishes the link between empathy and first-hand suffering. It is because the gods never (or rarely) experience pain that they are unmoved when other people suffer. Additionally, the gods' love of novelty makes pain exciting to witness. Having never experienced pain, they watch it happen with detachment and morbid curiosity. That is not to say that they aren't scared of pain—they are—but having never experienced it and knowing that pain is not likely to be a part of their future, they have the privilege to not worry about it. Instead, others' suffering is their entertainment.

On the day of the torture, the Titan gods and their offspring crowd into Helios's halls to watch. A Fury (a goddess of vengeance) appears in the doorway, dragging Prometheus and a whip behind her. She chains him high on the wall so that he dangles, his body stretched tight. Circe anxiously waits for one of the other Titans to intercede for him—"they were his family, after all"—but no one does. The Fury begins to whip Prometheus viciously as the spectators look on, occasionally jostling for a better view.

The fact that Prometheus is a relative has no effect on the other Titans' ability to watch him suffer. Excited by the novelty of seeing pain, the other gods put their own curiosity above Prometheus's agony, which demonstrates another way that the gods are selfish. It is also likely that none of the gods intervene in the torture because they are afraid of what would happen to them. In this way, Zeus's plan to use Prometheus as an example to deter other rebels is successful. Fear effectively keeps the Titans under Zeus's control.

Eventually the watching deities become bored and meander back to their feasting and lounging. The Fury also leaves. At last, only Circe remains in the hall with Prometheus, whose **golden** blood streams down his back. Circe remembers having heard that Prometheus could have begged for a lighter punishment, but that he turned down the chance.

The gods are no longer interested in Prometheus as soon as the novelty of seeing pain wears off. They are totally unempathetic toward Prometheus, showing another example of the gods' dismissal of others' pain. Prometheus, however, is quite different from the other selfish gods. His blood is the color of gold, which is associated with power. With his golden blood streaming out of him, his bleeding represents how he is losing his power—he is, in fact, choosing to give it up so that mortals can have fire. This sacrifice sets him apart from the other gods and his immortal family. He has taken it upon himself to try to disrupt the cycle of power and abuse in which the gods feed off mortals' suffering.

As Circe listens to Prometheus's ragged breathing, it sinks in that she is the only one left. With her pulse quickening, she offers to bring Prometheus nectar, which he accepts with thanks. As she hurries to the feasting hall, she knows that she is taking a risk; even though no one has banned her from talking with Prometheus, she would nonetheless likely be punished. But no one notices her, so she brings back nectar for the Titan, who thanks her. She is surprised at his gentle manner and realizes that "*Bold action and bold manner are not the same.*"

Unlike so many of the other gods, Circe is moved by Prometheus's suffering, which sets her apart from the rest of her callous family. Although no reason is given as to why Circe is the only one who shows empathy, it may be that her youth has something to do with it—she's not jaded yet. Additionally, although she has never felt pain, she knows what it is to be miserable and alienated from one's family, which shows how experiencing pain leads to empathy. Circe's emotion shows that Prometheus's sacrifice has influence beyond helping mortals, as it has inspired Circe to act with kindness.

Circe asks Prometheus what mortals are like. He replies that they are all different, sharing only the fate that they all die and go to the underworld. There, they become as insubstantial as shadows. Circe is deeply disturbed by this description. She then asks Prometheus why he refused Zeus's offer to let him beg for forgiveness. Instead of answering, he turns the question on her and asks what *she* thinks would drive him to do so. She has no response, and he tells her that "Not every god need be the same." Suddenly they hear a noise in the hallway, and he urges her to leave.

In Circe and Prometheus's conversation, Prometheus contrasts mortals' individuality with the gods' uniformity. While Circe puzzles over why Prometheus would willingly get tortured, he challenges her to question the systems of behavior—particularly the cycle of power and abuse—that the gods perpetuate. In telling her that "Not every god need be the same," Prometheus wants her to realize that she does not need to be like the other gods who selfishly prioritize their power over all else, including others' well-being.

Circe leaves Prometheus and goes to the feasting hall, where no one acknowledges her. A sense of awareness dawns on her. She walks into her Helios's treasury and takes one of his daggers, which she brings back to her room. She lays it on her unmarked palm. With the blade in hand, she finds that she doesn't fear pain so much as not being able to be cut at all. She slices at her hand, and the knife does cut her, revealing her red blood. As she looks at her oozing hand, she suddenly realizes that, while her life feels like "murk and depths." She is "not a part of that dark water. [She is] a creature within it."

Circe's conversation with Prometheus sparks an epiphany for her. After hearing Prometheus's words that "Not every god need be the same," Circe questions whether she has agency. Having spent most of her life aimlessly existing in the halls of the gods, her life feels insubstantial, like "murk and depths." She decides to cut her hand as a test of her existence. Essentially, her fear that she may be unable to draw blood from her hand illustrates her deeper fear that her existence is so meaningless that she isn't really alive. As soon as she cuts her hand, she knows that she does *exist and that her life's emptiness does not define her. Or, as she puts it, she is "not a part of that dark water." She realizes her agency, that she has a life and can choose how to live it.*

CHAPTER 3

When Circe wakes up, Prometheus is gone. In the hall, his blood has been washed away. One of her cousins delightedly tells her that Zeus has declared Prometheus's eternal torment: he is sentenced to be chained to a cliff, and every day, an eagle will rip out his liver. Chilled, Circe regrets that she didn't think of arming Prometheus with a spear or something useful, but then she remembers that he wouldn't have been interested in weapons, since he turned himself in.

Circe's cousin's callous delight at Prometheus's punishment once again demonstrates the gods' general lack of empathy. Circe, however, does feel pity for Prometheus, even wishing that she had helped him in a more practical way, such as arming him. But Prometheus wouldn't want weapons because he isn't interested in fighting or trying to get his power back. He has sacrificed his power totally in order to help humans, which sets him apart from the rest of his immortal family.


Circe often asks her Titan uncles for updates on Prometheus, but they dismiss her with a frown—what news could come from someone's unending punishment? Instead, they move on to the latest gossip, such as how Titan Boreas and Olympian Apollo have fallen in love with the same mortal. The mortal in question dies shortly thereafter; Boreas killed him, just to spite Apollo.

Circe's uncles' disinterest in Prometheus's fate is two-fold. For one thing, they lack empathy and therefore aren't concerned about his pain. For another, there is nothing new in an unending punishment, the other Titans are only interested in novelty. Meanwhile, the latest gossip reveals another example of the gods' callousness: Boreas killed a mortal just to spite another god, which demonstrates how careless the gods are with mortals' lives. Additionally, while the gods say that Boreas "loves" this mortal, it is quite evident that Boreas doesn't really love him, as he cares more about spiting someone else for a petty show of power than he does about this mortal's life.

Perse has another son, but after Helios doesn't have a prophecy for him, she spurns her newborn. Knowing that the infant will otherwise be neglected, Circe steps forward to care for her new brother, who is named Aeëtes. Circe raises him and, the more time they spend together, the deeper she comes to love him. To her wondering delight, Aeëtes appears to love her in return. He finds a deserted beach for the two of them to meet and talk away from Pasiphaë and Perses. To Circe, this barren strip of land is a bounteous haven.

Perse again demonstrates her prioritization of power over love when she rejects her newest son, Aeëtes, because Helios doesn't prophesize anything about Aeëtes that would bring her clout. Her disinterest in forming meaningful connections with her children is reflective of how the gods—selfish and fixated on power—rarely experience love. Circe, however, does feel love as she cares for her Aeëtes, and the effect is significant. The fact that a sandy beach feels like a lush haven symbolizes how enriched Circe's life feels now that she loves someone who loves her in return.

Very quickly, Circe is astounded by Aeëtes's intuition, knowledge, and understanding. He becomes Helios's favorite son and is invited to sit as council in meetings. Aeëtes teaches Circe some of what he learns, such as the name for the powerful herbs that Zeus used to kill Kronos: *pharmaka*, a plant that grows when divine blood falls on earth. He likes philosophy and asks Circe questions such as: "*How does your divinity feel?*" She responds that she feels like a conch shell with nothing but air inside.

Circe's response to Aeëtes's question regarding her divinity reveals her budding dislike of her immortality. It makes her feel empty, which suggests that there is something about immortality that can make a person feel lifeless and meaningless.

Philosophy is rarely a topic that interests gods and Aeëtes's passion for it reminds Circe of Prometheus, so she one day tells him about how she met the infamous Titan. Aeëtes is quiet after the story. After a moment, he tells her that Prometheus, as a god of prophecy, must have known his fate before he helped the mortals. Aeëtes then orders Circe to not tell anyone else the story, especially Helios.

Besides Prometheus and Aeëtes, the story hasn't included any other gods interested in philosophy, which reflects the vapidity of most gods. Circe and Aeëtes's conversation reveals that Prometheus's sacrifice was even more generous than Circe realized. The fact that he knew his punishment prior to helping the mortals illustrates the profundity of his self-sacrifice, as well as his determination to disrupt the abuse of mortals at the hands of the gods. Prometheus's sacrifice in light of his prophetic knowledge sets him apart from his relative Helios, who, in the Titan-Olympian war, used his prophetic powers to ensure his own security. Although most of the gods are selfish, Prometheus refused to be like them, demonstrating that it is possible to break free of one's family's faults.

Surprised at Aeëtes's certainty of Helios's fury, Circe reminds him that Prometheus is Helios's cousin. Aeëtes derisively responds that they "are all cousins, including the Olympians" and that, regardless of family ties, Helios would unflinchingly destroy Circe if he knew of her conversation with Prometheus. Laughing at Circe's dismay, Aeëtes tells her that, should she ever disobey the gods again, she should "do it for a better reason."

Aeëtes's certainty that Helios would destroy Circe for her disobedience points out a reoccurring truth in the story: that family ties are meaningless to the gods in the face of personal gain. The gods are far more interested in gaining and exercising power than they are in maintaining healthy familial relationships, which is another way that the gods deprive themselves of love. Even Aeëtes appears to subscribe to this heartless philosophy—he certainly doesn't believe that Circe should have helped Prometheus, which seems to him a foolish decision given that she could have been severely punished. Helping others is not a good enough reason, in his eyes, to risk losing his power. In this way, Aeëtes is like so many of the other gods, as he is focused only on himself and his own power.

Meanwhile, Helios has finally picked a husband for Pasiphaë: Minos, Zeus's mortal son and king of Crete. Both Perse and Perses sour at the announcement—they are disgusted that Pasiphaë will be married to a mortal. Perses even sarcastically questions Helios, but the Titan silences him in fury. Across the table, Circe sees Aeëtes's disdainful expression and is certain of his thoughts: Pasiphaë's disappointing engagement isn't "*a good enough reason*" to spark Helios's rage.

Perse's and Perses's disgust at Pasiphaë's engagement to a mortal is likely because they are disappointed that Pasiphaë won't be marrying a god and, in turn, further elevating the family's power and status. While Perses expresses his outrage, Circe can see that Aeëtes thinks his brother is being foolish to risk punishment over such a small issue, particularly one that doesn't affect Perses very much. Aeëtes's reaction shows his selfishness—he is never willing to risk his power or comfort for anyone else. In this way, Aeëtes embodies the egotism of his immortal family and the gods as a whole.

Realizing that mortal Minos will undoubtedly invite other mortals to his wedding, Circe is excited at the prospect of finally seeing the "creatures" that Prometheus sacrificed himself for. The celebration does indeed gather together mortals, Titans, and Olympians alike. Circe searches around and spots the mortals clustered at the fringes of the party. She remembers the stories that other nymphs have told about how mortals rape and attack them. But looking at them in the wedding hall, Circe finds them weak and anxious, likely afraid of offending a god. Reflecting on their apprehension, Circe realizes that the relationships between all people—deities and mortals alike—reveal "a great chain of fear."

The "great chain of fear" is Circe's theory (and one of the story's central concepts) that ancient Greek society is a hierarchy in which people are afraid of those who have more power than they do. This fear is reinforced when those in power abuse those beneath them. Circe realizes this "great chain of fear" when looking at mortals—whom nymphs fear, as mortal men are known to sexually assault nymphs—and realizing that the mortals are afraid of the gods at the wedding. The nymphs' fear of mortals reveals how, even though they are gods, their rank is inferior to men on the hierarchy of power because they are vulnerable to sexual abuse at the hands of men. Circe's revelation regarding the "great chain of fear" and women's place on that chain (the bottom) further establishes the misogyny of ancient Greece.

Uninterested in mortals, Aeëtes leads Circe to the Olympians. After looking at them from afar, they then catch sight of Minos who, although an impressive figure among other mortal men, pales in comparison to stunning Pasiphaë. Circe perceives Minos's sullenness over being outshone by his wife. Meanwhile, Circe is sure that Pasiphaë will adore all the attention that she will receive in Crete.

Minos's annoyance at being outshone by his wife suggests that he resents being inferior to a woman in any manner. As a man in a misogynistic society, he is not accustomed to a woman usurping him, even if it is simply because of her beauty.

Aeëtes abruptly points out another man, a mortal and ingenious craftsman by the name of Daedalus. When Aeëtes becomes a king, he says that he will surround himself by such mortal marvels as Daedalus. At first Circe thinks he is joking, but Aeëtes informs her that Helios is indeed gifting him a kingdom. Circe asks if she can come with him to his kingdom, but Aeëtes refuses, coldly telling her "to get [her] own." Stunned and horrified, Circe pleads with him, but Aeëtes continues to rebuff her.

Aeëtes's interest in Daedalus is not to be confused for admiration or even respect. Aeëtes sees Daedalus as a potential tool to use for his own gain and as an ornament to display as a show of power. Although Aeëtes has shown many signs of being an egotistical person, Circe is surprised when he coldly refuses to bring her along with him to his kingdom. Circe has been blinded by her love for him—unlike so many of the other gods (her beloved brother included), Circe shows a capacity of love. Aeëtes's callousness at this point throws many of his previous unfeeling statements into relief, and it now raises the question of whether conforming to his family's selfish ways drowned out his love for his sister. Or did he simply never love her and only care for himself from the beginning? At this point in the story, it is unclear. Either way, Aeëtes appears to be more and more like his father, Helios, while Circe's empathy and ability to love makes her an outsider among her family.

Aeëtes leaves for his new kingdom right after the wedding. Shortly after, Perses leaves for Persia, where he hopes to find demons. Circe abruptly finds herself alone once again in Helios's halls. Dejected and despairing, she often visits the "old deserted shore" that Aeëtes used to take her to. There, while pacing across the sand that had once marked Aeëtes's steps, she recognizes that she was "*Not a good enough reason*" for him to stay. In the depths of her loneliness, she regrets not having asked one of the mortals at the wedding to marry her. And then, one day, she sees a boat.

While her brothers leave for adventures, Circe stays put. While it is not explicitly stated, it is likely that Circe remains because, as a woman, she is expected to stay at home until Helios marries her off. Circe has even internalized this unfair expectation, as she laments not having thrown herself at one of the mortals at Pasiphaë's and Minos's wedding in hopes of marriage. Circe's attitude also betrays her inaction: instead of taking matters into her own hands and scheming a way to leave Helios's halls, she passively hopes that someone will marry her. She hasn't learned yet that she cannot wait for other people to bring about the change that she longs for.

CHAPTER 4

As the boat nears the shore, Circe spots a thin mast and ragged sail and, in the boat, a sunburnt man: a mortal. Circe remembers the nymphs' stories of mortals, and how they rape and abuse defenseless goddesses, but she decides that the man looks kind, not cruel. Circe takes a step toward the approaching boat and calls out to the mortal, telling him to "Hail, mortal." The man is clearly startled, but he recovers and greets her, asking which goddess she is. She tells him her name and states that she would like to ride on his boat. When she boards the boat, she tells him to carry on with sailing. The man hurries to obey her, shaking and twitching with fear.

Circe can tell that the man is a mortal by his sunburn, which is the first instance of a mortal being identified by the marks on his body. This begins to suggest that a mortal's marks or scars say something deeper about their identity. By greeting the man with "Hail, mortal," Circe identifies herself as a goddess, which makes the man frightened. The man's fear is due to her divinity—he is afraid of her power, which gives credence to Circe's theory regarding the "great chain of fear." As a mortal, he fears that gods may abuse him. But as a woman, Circe is afraid of being raped by the man.

But Circe doesn't want the sunburnt man to be afraid. She tells him that she has hardly any powers and asks him to be calm. Her words have no effect on the trembling man, whose timidity makes Circe laugh. At the sound of her laughter, the man calms, and they soon start chatting. At the end of the day, the fisherman kneels before her to thank her for the prosperous day of fishing. But Circe asks him to rise, realizing that she would rather see the man's face than see him kneel.

To Circe, forming a friendship is more important to her than having someone fearfully obey her, a preference that is not common among the gods. When the man kneels—the expected reaction for a mortal before a god—Circe gets no pleasure from it, which both distinguishes her from the other gods and demonstrates that intimidating people doesn't fulfil her. She wants a genuine connection with another being, indicating that she is not interested in perpetuating the cycle of fear and abuse that many of the other gods benefit from.

After Circe tells the sunburnt man that she does not have the powers to fill his nets with fish, the man nevertheless asks if he may visit her again, as she is the most "wondrous thing" he's ever known. Deeply touched, Circe knows that no one has ever made her feel so "warm."

The man wants to see Circe again not because he gains something out of it, but because genuinely likes her company. Circe is moved because she has not experienced affection before, suggesting that this selfless emotion is rare among the gods.

The man, whose name is Glaucos, visits Circe every day afterward. He tells her all about his life—his family's poverty, his ailing sister, his cruel father—and Circe savors her newfound role as his confidant. She loves watching him perform manual chores, tasks that she has only seen completed with divine powers. Self-conscious of his mortality and the physical marks it leaves on his body, Glaucos believes himself to be ugly to Circe, but she secretly finds him more beautiful than all the deities in her father's halls. When she tells Glaucos about Aeëtes and how he left her, Glaucos calls Aeëtes a fool to leave behind such a "beautiful and kind" sister.

Glaucos's empathy and kindness is evident in his interactions with Circe. He trusts in her, and the two build a kind of relationship that Circe has never known. Even her relationship with Aeëtes pales in comparison, particularly since his leaving suggests that he never truly loved her. Glaucos empathizes with Circe's pain over being left behind by her brother, listening to her sorrows just as she listens to his. Their conversations are interspersed with evidence of Glaucos's mortality—his manual chores and his imperfect body—which suggests that Glaucos's empathy and kindness are intertwined with his mortality. The patience, tenderness, and humility that he displays while laboring or contemplating his physical weaknesses are the same traits that Circe appreciates and that allow them to form an affectionate relationship. This implies that mortals have a greater capacity for empathy and interpersonal connection.

One day, as Glaucos is making a fire to cook lunch, Circe tells him that she had once met Prometheus. At first, Glaucos is confused, pointing out that she and Glaucos are the same age. Circe laughs and informs them that he is wrong. Glaucos pulls back from her, looking panicked. He demands to know how old she is. Surprised at his revulsion, she walks back her claim, telling him that she had been joking and that they are indeed the same age. Glaucos is relieved.

Circe discovers that there is a limit to hers and Glaucos's closeness—she cannot tell him much about her own past because she risks frightening him away. Glaucos's insistence at Circe being his age is likely rooted in the sexism of ancient Greece. He is uncomfortable at the concept of her being older and more knowledgeable than he is, which suggests that such an age gap in her favor upsets his expectations of women's submissiveness to men. Glaucos's reaction deters Circe from telling him more about her life and even prompts her to lie about her experiences, which means that he will never truly respect and love her for who she is. As a woman, she feels pressured to reduce herself to be what the man in her life wants her to be.

One day, Glaucos arrives late to Circe's shore. He has a bruise on his face, which Circe assumes is from his father. She greets him with concern and tells him to rest, but he doesn't leave his boat. Glaucos's voice is cold, and he informs her that, because he hasn't been catching enough fish, his father blames Glaucos and his laziness for the starvation that his family will certainly suffer. He sails away after declaring that he will never be able to see her again.

The cycle of power, fear, and abuse is active among the mortals as well. Glaucos's father, who presumably has more power in the family as the patriarch, beats Glaucos to discourage him from spending time with Circe, which distracts him from fishing. The abuse makes Glaucos afraid of his father, so he obeys him.

Desperate, Circe runs to her grandmother Tethys, the mother of the earth's waters. Circe begs Tethys to bless Glaucos's nets, as she doesn't have the power to do so herself. Tethys asks her what Glaucos has offered in gratitude, a question that takes Circe by surprise. Tethys warns her that mortals will "forget to be grateful" if they aren't required to make a sacrifice. But Circe brushes aside the question, saying that she does not need anything in return. Resigned, Tethys concedes, but first she makes Circe promise that she will not have sex with Glaucos.

Tethys's advice that Circe ask for a sacrifice before helping Glaucos reveals that the gods interpret helping a person as a kind of transaction. Tethys is certain that Glaucos won't appreciate Circe's help unless he has to lose something in order to receive her aid. Her ignorance of the nature of generosity and gratitude suggests that these characteristics are uncommon among the gods. Generally unaffected by suffering, the gods do not know what it is to be in need and consequently do not know the relief of receiving aid. The gods are unmoved to simply help others out of empathy, instead requesting something in return so that they benefit from the transaction. The gods also jealously guard their power and seek to rule over as many people as possible, so they are unmotivated to give the mortals tools that they could use to gain independence from the gods. The gods would sooner prolong others' suffering so that they do not diminish the gods' power. Circe, however, is not interested in maintaining power over Glaucos. While she does benefit from helping him in that she doesn't want to lose his companionship, she is largely motivated to help him because she loves him.


Glaucos returns to the shore, racing across the water and joyfully calling out to Circe. He tells her that enormous fish had jumped into his boat, giving him enough to pay off their fees and even get credit for the future. He drops to his knees before Circe, who tells him that it was her grandmother's doing, not her own. Nevertheless, Glaucos remains bowed before Circe, thanking her for interceding. If only he were a god, he tells her, then he could "thank [her] as [she] deserves." Circe, meanwhile, silently mourns her lack of powers, wishing that she could always bless Glaucos's fishing so that he would never leave her.

Tethys's concern that Glaucos would be unappreciative is disproven here. Glaucos is extremely thankful for Circe's assistance, even dropping onto his knees to offer unprompted homage. But Circe doesn't want the homage, again revealing her discomfort with the distance that her divinity creates between her and the mortal she loves. She would rather be loved than feared, which implies that she finds genuine connection more fulfilling than being worshipped. Yet she does wish to be more powerful so that she can keep Glaucos close to her. Although she wants to help him, her desire for the power to bless mortals reveals that her perception of relationships is affected by the selfishness of the gods she grew up with and her world's system of power and abuse. She sees power as a way of keeping someone indebted to her, not realizing that love alone (and not obligation) should keep a person in a relationship. Granted, Glaucos reinforced this belief in his vowing to never see her again, which he did out of fear of retribution from his father. Circe's feeling that she needs power in order to override someone else's control (in this instance, Glaucos's father's) illustrates how the society-wide competition for power continues.



Circe and Glaucos continue to meet day after day. Glaucos tells Circe of his plans for the future, and after she insinuates her desire for a chair in his home, he nervously asks her if Helios will pick her husband. Although she desperately wants to hold Glaucos close and tell him that she chooses him, Circe confirms that Helios will indeed select her husband, who will likely be a prince or a king. Glaucos dejectedly accepts her response.

Circe and Glaucos's conversation reveals how women in ancient Greece had very little control over their lives. Even though Circe loves Glaucos and longs to marry him, she cannot do so without Helios's permission, which she knows he will not grant because Glaucos will not bring the impressive connections or pay the high prices that Helios wants from his daughters' marriages. Helios does not see his daughters as independent people with their own desires—they are simply objects for him to bargain off for his own personal gain.

That night, while Helios is playing a game of draughts, Circe asks him if it is possible to transform a mortal into a god. Irritated, he tells her no, that not even a god as powerful as he "can change the laws of the Fates." The significance of Glaucos's mortality suddenly hits Circe: one day, Glaucos will die and leave her forever. Distraught, Circe races back to Tethys for guidance, but Tethys simply affirms that the fate of mortals is indeed death.

Circe's selfishness in her relationship with Glaucos is again apparent in this passage. When pondering his mortality, she worries most about how his death will affect her. She doesn't consider the pain or fear that mortals have regarding their own impending death. Although she knows what it means to love someone and have a deep connection with them, she still thinks of herself first, which reflects the selfishness of her family and the other immortals she grew up with.


Nearly hysterical, Circe does not accept this answer. When going through possible options, Circe mentions the word *pharmaka*. Tethys abruptly snaps, enraged that she dares to say that word, and orders Circe from her halls. As Circe leaves, she realizes that her grandmother's reaction was one of fear. She knows that gods only fear "power greater than their own." After a moment of reflection, Circe accepts that she would do anything, no matter how evil, to keep Glaucos alive. After getting dressed, Circe goes to Helios's feast and asks her uncles about the war against the Olympians, inquiring particularly where the most divine blood had been spilled. While caressing and sweet-talking them, she hears that one such place is located near the shore where she and Glaucos meet.

Tethys's reaction to the word pharmaka *demonstrates how people who fear losing their power employ fear as a means to maintain it. Tethys unleashes her fury on Circe to make her too afraid to seek out* pharmaka, *which Tethys fears because it threatens her own power. This doesn't work on Circe, who is intent on getting what she wants: an eternity with Glaucos. Circe is aware of her selfishness, prioritizing her desires over everything else and even mentally preparing herself to commit evil in order to attain her goals. This mentality is a common one among the gods, which indicates that Circe—even with her capacity for empathy—still inherited her family's vices, such as their egotism and ruthlessness. In order to find* pharmaka, *Circe uses what power she has: her sexuality. As a woman, she doesn't have any other forms of power, so she uses her sexuality to persuade her uncles to tell her the information she needs.*



CHAPTER 5

It is noon. Circe has walked Glaucos away from where he has moored his boat. He is grouchy; he has a headache and is anxious to be so far from his boat. Circe talks him into lying among the flowers that carpet the hill where they have stopped. Meanwhile, she imagines what Glaucos will look like as a god and fantasizes about the moment when he, newly immortal, will pull her close while saying "*I may thank you as you deserve.*"

Circe doesn't tell Glaucos that she's planning to transform him into a god, which is another example of her selfishness—she is so intent on getting what she wants that she doesn't even consider asking him his opinion on his future. Additionally, her fantasizing reveals that she already sees him as being indebted to her. This attitude—that her help deserves a reciprocal act, in this case sex—shows that she is still similar to the other gods (like Tethys) who expect something in return when they help someone.

As soon as Glaucos falls asleep, Circe brushes the flowers around him and sprinkles some on his chest, willing them to work. Nothing happens. Circe slumps beside Glaucos's sleeping body and sobs, certain that Aeëtes had been wrong about *pharmaka*. Heartbroken, she rips up the flowers around her. Her hands sticky with the sap, she suddenly hears "a dark humming." At once, she senses that the flowers are indeed powerful, and that their sap reveals any being's "truest self."

This passage is the first time that Circe possesses significant power. Interestingly, she credits the flowers and their sap for her newfound ability and doesn't consider that there could be something special about her that makes it possible for her to innately know the properties of the flowers. Even if anyone would be able to sense the flowers' power, Circe's deflection reveals that she has internalized her society's expectation that women are not inherently capable or powerful.

Circe squeezes the flowers' sap into Glaucos's mouth, silently urging him to be his "truest self." Moments later, he transforms into a sea-god, blue-green and muscled. She wakes Glaucos, who immediately senses the change. Instead of passionately pulling her into the forest as she imagined, he marvels at his new form—his strength and smooth, **scarless** hands—and asks her to bring him to the halls of the gods.

As soon as Glaucos becomes a god, his sense of gratitude evaporates. Indeed, the focus on his now scarless hands signifies how his previous identity—one marked with kindness and compassion born from his own painful experiences—has been wiped away. Additionally, while Circe assumes that she has no power and credits the transformation entirely to the flowers' sap, Glaucos never once asks Circe whether she had a hand in his transformation. He either doesn't expect or doesn't want to believe that a woman could have such power (particularly power over him).

Circe brings Glaucos to Tethys. Nervous that her grandmother will suspect her meddling with *pharmaka*, Circe tells her that Glaucos's transformation was his own, that he had unexpectedly become a god while he napped. Tethys readily believes the tale and welcomes Glaucos to stay with her until he gets his own palace. He accepts.

No one suspects that Circe has had a hand in Glaucos's transformation. In the misogynist society of ancient Greece, people generally do not expect women to have power. This is seemingly why Tethys doesn't consider that Circe may have powers of her own that can override the gods'.

Glaucos no longer meets Circe on their old beach. They spend all their time in the halls of gods, where Circe introduces him to the other immortals, who are fascinated by his story. The tale he tells implies that the Fates were the ones who transformed him. Circe watches him, adoring his face and basking in his excitement. Although she wishes to tell him the truth of his transformation, she doesn't want to diminish his joy by informing him that his divinity comes from her.

Glaucos again never considers giving Circe credit for the transformation, which stresses how he either doesn't expect or doesn't want to believe that a woman could have and exercise such power. Meanwhile, Circe wants to tell him the truth, but she holds back so that she doesn't bruise his ego, which is similar to what she did when she decided to lie about her age for Glaucos's benefit. She is afraid that her power will drive away the man that she loves, so, as a result, she silences herself. Circe's prioritization of Glaucos's ego over her desire to be fully recognized and respected for her abilities demonstrates one way that sexism leads to a woman's loneliness and emotional isolation.

Hoping to marry Glaucos at last, Circe introduces him to Helios and Oceanos. She helps him dress up and kindly instructs him how to behave with these powerful Titans. The meeting goes well, and Helios and Oceanos introduce him to Nereus and Poseidon, who help him make his palace. Circe goes to Glaucos's new palace every day to see him, but he hardly pays any attention to her—he is too busy entertaining other nymphs and gods. He loves telling these guests about his terrible mortal life and how now, as a god, he has killed his father and his village appeals to him for blessings. When asked whether he will help his former neighbors, he snidely responds that he will wait to see "what they offer [him]."

Circe still clings onto hope that Glaucos will marry her, which demonstrates how she is still relying on other people to make her happy. Instead of planning a way to independently leave her miserable home situation, she puts her effort into literally transforming someone else in the hopes that he will get her out of Helios's halls by way of marriage. In this way, Circe is also still playing by the rules of the misogynist society in which she lives, which dictate that she, as a woman, has little control over her own life and must wait for a powerful man to help her. But trying to achieve the change she wants by appealing to someone else isn't very effective. She can't control Glaucos's thoughts, so her transformation of him brings about none of the change she was longing for. In fact, her transformation of Glaucos has stripped away many of the things that she loved about him in the first place. He is as cruel as a god: drunk with power, he kills his father and withholds help from his former village. No longer feeling weak and oppressed by others, he has lost his empathy that he had as a mortal. His transformation from mortal to god is what causes the transformation in his moral character, which suggests that immortality breeds callousness and cruelty.

Circe watches as Glaucos, who is now one of the most powerful sea gods, joins the ranks of the other dominant divinities, laughing just like her Titan uncles do. One day, while Circe is daydreaming about how Glaucos might propose to her, he asks the name of a beautiful nymph. Circe names the nymph—Scylla—but thinks no more of his question, as she is inwardly sharing in his joy and success.

Glaucos behaves just like the other Titans, which shows how he is assimilating into the divine world. His mortal past and identity are distant. Circe is still blind to the depth of Glaucos's transformation—his personality has changed for the worse since becoming a god—as she is too wrapped up in her increasingly unrealistic dreams of Glaucos making her happy through marriage. She doesn't realize that passively hoping for someone else to make her happy will likely be ineffective.

Scylla becomes a constant presence in Circe's life. She takes to showing off her jewelry to Circe, so much so that Circe wonders if the nymph loves her. Looking back, Circe is sure that Scylla must have been annoyed at how long it took her to catch on. At last, Scylla bluntly tells her that Glaucos is the one who has given her so many gifts and that he has asked her to marry him. As the news sinks in, Scylla delights at the horror on Circe's face.

Scylla flaunts Glaucos's affection for her over Circe because it's a way for Scylla to establish dominance over someone else. As a woman in ancient Greece, Scylla has very little power of her own, so she has used the little power she does have—her sexuality—to attract the attentions of a powerful male Titan. Her relationship with Glaucos doesn't give her much power, but it gives her enough to distinguish herself among the other nymphs, including Circe.

Circe asks Helios if she can marry Glaucos, and he responds with a mocking laugh, telling her that the sea god will pick his own bride. She races to Glaucos's palace and demands to know if he really means to marry Scylla. His face alight with admiration, he begins praising Scylla's beauty. Circe urges him to see that the nymph is cruel. Stroking his arm, she tells him that she knows of a better match for him. Recognizing her intention, Glaucos pushes Circe away from him with fear and anger. Pleading now, she tells him that she has loved him from his mortal days. He interrupts her—he doesn't want to remember such a painful time, not now when he is so powerful, and can marry the "best" nymph of all: Scylla.

As a male, Glaucos has control over his marital future. Circe, however, must wait for a man to pick her, which limits her control over her future, demonstrating the sexism of ancient Greek society. Circe tries to persuade Glaucos to marry her, but it doesn't work—becoming an immortal has made him superficial, and he now prioritizes beauty over character. Beauty is a form of status, and he wants to marry beautiful Scylla to show that he has enough power and influence to get the "best" nymph. He doesn't want a partner—he wants a trophy. Glaucos's callous and egotistical behavior is explained when he tells Circe that he's deliberately chosen to forget his mortal life, which suggests that he lost his empathy and humility by forgetting what it feels like to be vulnerable.

Glaucos uses his power to return Circe to her room, where she sobs, heartbroken. Her thoughts turn to Scylla, the idea of whom fills her with hate. That night, Circe sneaks out of her father's palace to pick the yellow flowers that had transformed Glaucos. She pours their sap into the pool in which Scylla bathes, hoping it will expose the nymph's ugliness and cruelty to the world. Circe knows that the gods will likely punish her, but she is ready to accept their punishments to show her love for Glaucos.

Instead of getting upset with Glaucos, Circe decides to hate Scylla, which is likely because Circe sees Scylla as within her reach to hurt. Circe is a nymph like Scylla, so they are both on the same low level in the hierarchy of power. Glaucos, however, is superior, as both a male and a powerful Titan. In plotting to harm Scylla, Circe demonstrates her capacity for selfishness and wickedness—both common traits among her family members. She prioritizes her own desires above both Scylla and Glaucos and is willing to harm them in order to get what she wants.

CHAPTER 6

Contrary to Circe's expectation that she will be swiftly punished, no one comes for her. That evening, she hurries to the dinner feast. When she arrives, there's a big crowd listening to Circe's aunt Selene tell a story. Circe starts listening and realizes that Selene is detailing a horrific transformation that happened to Scylla: the nymph has become a 12-tentacled, six-headed monster who now lives in the sea. Circe is surprised to see that the other nymphs and gods maliciously rejoice in Scylla's fate; the nymph had been a favorite in the hall for so long. As the whole hall revels in Scylla's demise, Circe thinks back to when Prometheus was punished.

There is very little sympathy among the gods, as is apparent from their delight at Scylla's terrible transformation. Clearly, being a "favorite" had very little to do with genuine appreciation or affection and likely had to do with her beauty, which she wielded as a tool to get what she wanted. Circe's reminiscing of Prometheus connects her cruelty to that of Zeus; just like Zeus, Circe committed a terrible crime for personal gain. Circe's transformation of Scylla reflects the same selfish cruelty as the rest of her family.

When Glaucos arrives at the feast, Circe can tell that the rest of the hall can't wait to tell him of the disaster that has befallen his love, Scylla. But Helios pulls him into another room. Circe follows and overhears them: Glaucos asks if Scylla can be turned back, and Helios informs him that no one can undo what another divinity has done. Circe finds herself hoping that Glaucos will mourn Scylla's loss and pledge undying love for the nymph. But he shrugs off the situation and asks after another nymph.

Other beings' suffering is amusing to the gods—they eagerly await the opportunity to destroy Glaucos's hopes of marriage to Scylla, which once again demonstrates their cruelty. Circe wants Glaucos to mourn Scylla's transformation because it would signify that he still retains his former tenderness and humanity. When Glaucos is unaffected and asks after another nymph, Circe realizes that the kind, mortal man she once knew is long gone, replaced by a cruel immortal.

Circe is devasted. She knows that her future holds no happy union with Glaucos. She senses all the other nymphs and gods passing around her, and it strikes her how similar they all are. She recalls what Prometheus had told her long ago: "Not all gods need be the same." The night of his punishment rises in her mind, and she remembers her relatives' zeal as Prometheus was tortured. She knows that she is not like them. Prometheus's voice speaks in her mind, asking what she will do that others won't.

To Circe, the gods are all alike in their cruelty, as proven by their collective thrill regarding others' pain. Although her selfish transformation of Scylla does suggest that Circe is like them—she shares their vices—she has not always been so cruel. As she remembers, she did not relish Prometheus's pain when he was tortured, which shows that she does have empathy, unlike so many of her family members. This suggests that one does not automatically inherit their family's vices through birth, but that one adopts their family's patterns of behavior over time. Circe, for instance, implements the same philosophy that she sees in her family: she has learned that using power indiscriminately is how a person gets what they want. But Circe doesn't want to be like her family, who have caused her pain. She thinks about Prometheus, whose sacrifice inspired her to realize her own agency. To cast off her family's cruelty, she must do more than think differently from them—she must act differently than they do, too.

While Helios is in conference with other gods, Circe announces that she used *pharmaka* to transform both Scylla and Glaucos. Helios dismisses her claim, telling her that the flowers she references were stripped of their properties long ago. When Circe doesn't back down, Helios reminds her that if such magic existed, wouldn't every god and goddess use it? He callously adds that Circe is far too insignificant a person to discover such power, even if it did exist.

Circe decides to show that she is different from her family by doing what Prometheus did: she turns herself in. But her confession doesn't have the same effect as Prometheus's because Helios dismisses her, likely for two reasons. On one hand, Scylla, as a nymph, is unimportant to the rest of the gods—her absence only causes a stir because the other gods find it amusing. On the other hand, Helios doesn't believe that Circe, a woman, could possess such remarkable power.

Circe keeps insisting on her guilt and the flowers' power, even telling Helios that he is wrong. In a flash, Helios unleashes his white-hot rage on Circe and begins to melt her. He calls her worthless as she dissolves in agony on the floor. At last, she begs forgiveness, and he stops the heat and turns back to the other gods, blaming Perse for his children's unruliness.

Helios becomes furious with Circe when she contradicts him because he sees her disobedience as a threat to his power. In response, he tortures her, demonstrating how those in power use abuse to subjugate those beneath them—even their own family members. Circe eventually gives in to the pain and begs forgiveness, which shows that, while she is willing to confess her guilt, she is not willing to fully defy and denounce the gods as Prometheus did. By recanting her confession, Circe reaffirms Helios's power over her. Helios doesn't appear to care whether or not she transformed Glaucos and Scylla, as he has no sympathy for either. He only cares that his power is acknowledged and respected. Circe, who started the conversation to confess her guilt, hasn't quite pieced together that Prometheus's sacrifice was significant in part because he challenged the gods' power. He withstood the pain out of principle to disrupt and condemn the gods' cycle of power and abuse; by disobeying them, he showed that the gods do not have unlimited power. By taking back her confession, Circe's makes her defiance meaningless.

Skin charred and bubbled like wax, Circe is unable to move from the pain. Helios and the other gods don't pay her any attention. She finally manages to pull herself from the floor and staggers to some woods, where the shade and wetness are gentle to her damaged skin. Circe's skin begins to heal itself at last. When night comes again, she goes to the field of yellow flowers. She plucks a few, hoping for some sign that she was right about their powers. While holding them, she feels again the humming that she had sensed before. For a moment, she considers eating the sap to see what it reveals her to be, but she is too afraid to know what her "truest form" might be.

None of the other gods intervene to help Circe—they are too selfish—so she has to care for herself. Her encounter with Helios has made her doubt her abilities; she has already internalized society's expectation that women have little or no power, so Helios's show of power crushed the little confidence that she gained by transforming Scylla. When Circe confirms that the flowers do have power, she almost drinks the sap to discover her "true self" but is afraid to do so. She committed such a terrible act in transforming Scylla that she is unsure of her own character and fears that her wickedness defines her.

Circe's uncle Achelous finds her the next morning. He informs her that her brother has come and that she must return to Helios's halls. When she arrives, she sees Aeëtes, who is dressed in richly embroidered robes and standing beside Helios. Thrilled to see him, Circe greets him joyfully. He responds by asking what happened to her face, which is still peeling from Helios's heat. Helios interrupts and demands that Aeëtes explain his visit. Aeëtes says that he has come because he knows of the transformations that Circe has done.

Aeëtes unemotional greeting of Circe signifies his callousness. He doesn't respond to Circe's joy and instead greets her by pointing out a physical imperfection. Whether he ever loved Circe is unclear, but what is certain is that he doesn't reciprocate her love now—he has become as self-obsessed as many of the other gods.

Helios contradicts Aeëtes, telling him that Circe has no such powers. But Aeëtes insists that Helios is wrong and that he, Aeëtes, also shares these abilities. He names these skills *pharmakeia*, a form of magic based in *pharmaka*, herbs that come from both divine blood and from common plants. Pasiphaë and Perses, Aeëtes elaborates, also practice pharmakeia. Helios is dumbstruck.

Helios reacts very differently to Aeëtes's contradiction of him than he did to Circe's, which is likely because he both respects and fears Aeëtes—a man—more than he does Circe, whom he sees as a powerless woman.

To demonstrate, Aeëtes takes out a small container, which contains a liquid that he smears on Circe's face while whispering something that she doesn't catch. Almost immediately, her face heals. Aeëtes goes on to say that this "is the least of [his] powers." Additionally, because these powers come from the earth, they aren't restricted by the gods' laws. After a pause, Aeëtes acknowledges that Helios must discuss the situation with the other gods and adds that, if needed, he can perform some of his greater powers to Zeus. While Aeëtes eyes glitter "like teeth in a wolf's mouth," Helios's expression betrays his fear.

Notably, Aeëtes heals Circe's face in order to show off his own capabilities. He could have healed it as soon as he saw her, but he chooses to wait and use her pain as an opportunity to establish his power. He is careful to make his father fear his powers, even explicitly stating that his powers are not bound by the gods' usual rules. Helios is indeed frightened—as one of the most powerful Titans, he is not used to people threatening his power.

Helios confirms that he must speak with the other gods. He orders Aeëtes and Circe to stay in the hall until they reach a decision. Aeëtes assents. After Helios departs, Aeëtes asks Circe, who is both confused and hopeful, what took her so long to figure out that she is a *pharmakis*. Circe doesn't respond but only repeats the word, unknown to all until now.

Although confused, Circe is relieved and hopeful to discover that she may indeed have power, which means that she will have more control over her life. Aeëtes further demonstrates his callousness as he insults her, asking her why she didn't realize her powers sooner.

The news of Circe and Aeëtes's powers travels fast; by dinner, the other gods and nymphs avoid her. Aeëtes nonchalantly tells her that she'll get used to being alone. But Aeëtes, it seems, is never alone; he still joins the other Titan gods, talking and drinking. After the others leave, Circe spends time with Aeëtes and asks him about his kingdom. He tells her stories of what he has been able to accomplish with his magic, but when she asks if he can teach her, he staunchly refuses, saying she has to discover it for herself. Although Circe wants to be affectionate with her brother, she holds back, finding him intimidating.

While Aeëtes always has company, Circe is alone, as the other gods avoid her. She is experiencing how, in a misogynist society, people often fear women who defy societal expectations and have power. Their distrust of her leads to her isolation. Meanwhile, the other gods welcome Aeëtes—because he is male, others expect him to have power and respect him for this reason. But his acceptance of their company doesn't mean that he seeks emotional connection. He is so cold to Circe that she doesn't feel comfortable being affectionate with him. His power has only integrated him deeper into the heartless cycle of power and abuse, making him more callous and egotistical than ever before.


After Aeëtes tells Circe that he has always known of his powers, she feels betrayed, but she can't bring herself to confront him. Instead, she asks if he was afraid of Helios's wrath. He tells her that he wasn't, that he is smart enough not to announce his powers in a way that embarrasses Helios. He is also sure that Helios will see these powers as a tool to use against Zeus.

Aeëtes is very attuned to how those around him react to power. He knows that those with power—like Helios—are quickly enraged when others threaten it. Aeëtes knows that provoking Helios could encourage Helios to try to curb or take away his (Aeëtes's) power, which is why he approached Helios in a calculated manner. Aeëtes is very aware that people in their society are always looking to accumulate more power, so he purposefully presented his abilities in a way that would encourage Helios to protect them for his own benefit (he wants to use them against the Olympians). There is no emotion or familial affection in any of these exchanges—each person is just looking out for themselves.

Circe asks Aeëtes whether she has the same powers as he does. He tells her no, that he is the most powerful of their siblings, but that she does seem skilled with transformation. Circe dismisses his statement, declaring that it was the flowers that reveal one's "truest form." Aeëtes asks if she doesn't see the coincidence that both Glaucos and Scylla became exactly what she wanted; after all, Scylla was just the same as every other pretty nymph. But Circe stays firm, saying that Scylla really was especially cruel.

Circe's deflection of her power has two sources. On one hand, she still doubts that she, a woman, could possess such capabilities. On the other hand, it is also likely that she is trying to distance herself from the atrocity of Scylla's transformation. She doesn't want to believe that she could commit such evil, so she finds something to blame for her actions instead of confronting her faults.

Aeëtes then says that Circe missed the opportunity to really punish Scylla. As a monster, "she always has a place." She will be hated, but she will be famous and will answer to no one. Had she just been made ugly, she would have truly suffered. Pretty nymphs already have next to no power; an ugly one would be despised and rejected, doomed to live alone in obscurity. Meanwhile, after two days of conference, Helios leaves for Olympus. The tension in the halls is thick. Only Perse celebrates, proud of her powerful children.

Because women in this society typically only have their sex appeal to use as a form of power, ugly women are at the very bottom of the social hierarchy. So, although some women can benefit from the current system of power, the system actually hurts all women, as it encourages them to compete with one another instead of working together to challenge the men who hold the majority of power, which they use to subjugate all women. Circe's transformation of Scylla illustrates this phenomenon: Scylla flaunted her little power over Circe, who retaliated by attacking her, but neither of them is any better for their fight. Aeëtes thinks that Scylla is better off as a monster, which shows how little he cares about the women around him, and how little power and respect women generally have in ancient Greece—it is better to be a senseless monster than a woman.

Helios returns in a blaze of light. To everyone's relief, he announces that he and Zeus have reached an agreement. They both acknowledge that these powers are new to the world and come from the children of Helios and Perse, who looks smugger than ever. Helios says that they have decided that his children's magic doesn't pose a threat at the moment: Perses is far away from the gods, Pasiphaë will be checked by her husband (who is a son of Zeus), and Aeëtes will agree to be watched. Circe glances at her nodding brother, whose eyes betray his defiance.

Anxious to protect their own powers, Helios and Zeus reach a decision that relies on checking the power of those who challenge them. Notably, neither Aeëtes nor Perses is very affected. Perses is deemed out of the gods' control, and Aeëtes agrees to supervision, although Circe can tell that he plans on deceiving Helios and Zeus to maintain full control of his powers. Pasiphaë, however, will have to answer to her husband, which reveals that the gods are willing and eager to curb a woman's power.

Helios explains that all his children discovered their magic by accident—all except Circe, who had been warned about *pharmaka* but experimented anyway. Circe catches sight of Tethys's stony face. Circe will be punished for her transgression: she will be exiled to an island, starting tomorrow. Speechless with dismay, Circe looks to Aeëtes for a friendly face, but his expression is blank. Lastly, Helios announces his promise to Zeus that he will have no more children with Perse, whose gloating expression dissolves into sobs.

Circe gets no sympathy from her family, all of whom are more interested in guarding their own power than in helping her. It is suggested that Tethys betrayed Circe by telling Helios that she had warned Circe against pharmaka. *Tethys wants to keep her own power, which she believes* pharmaka *threatens. Aeëtes is also unsympathetic to Circe. He doesn't show her any affection, probably to avoid any possible association with someone whom the gods want to punish, lest they punish him and limit his powers as well. Perse, meanwhile, doesn't care about Circe's fate—she's only upset that she can't have more powerful children to associate herself with.*

The evening feast begins, and no one speaks to Circe, so she starts packing, although she's unsure what to bring. While packing, she looks at a tapestry of a wedding that an aunt gave her, unsure of whether to bring it. Aeëtes stops by her room and reminds Circe that her punishment could be much worse: Zeus wants her to be a warning to others, but luckily, Helios has to show *some* control. After he makes a jibe about the folly of confessing, Circe sarcastically asks whether she should start "deny[ing] everything" like he does. He responds that she should. Her exile is her own fault, he says, because she was foolish enough to admit guilt.

Circe is collateral damage in the gods' battles for power. Zeus is using Circe as an example to discourage anyone else from threatening his power, similar to what he did to Prometheus. The only reason why Circe doesn't receive a worse punishment is because Helios wants to show that the Olympians do not have unlimited power over the Titans. Circe is a pawn to both of them. Aeëtes has no sympathy for Circe, telling her that she deserves her punishment for not playing by the established rules in the game of power, namely that she blatantly challenged someone who is much stronger than she is. Aeëtes makes it clear that honesty has no place in a society obsessed with power, in which one must always jealously guard the power one has. In his argument, Aeëtes demonstrates that he has taken his family's attitudes and patterns of behavior to heart.

As Aeëtes expresses his incredulity at her confession, Circe realizes that he won't understand her decision because he didn't see Prometheus being punished. She coolly thanks him for his advice and, looking again at the tapestry, decides that the family depicted looks stupid. She has always hated it and will leave it.

Circe realizes that Aeëtes will probably never understand her actions because he never witnessed someone standing up for their principles, like she did when she met Prometheus. Her rejection of the tapestry symbolizes her rejection of her family—she hates them and everything they stand for, and she's ready to leave them behind.

CHAPTER 7

The next day, Helios wordlessly flies Circe to her island. As soon as she steps out of his chariot, he departs. Circe refuses to let herself cry, knowing that none of her family mourns her. She surveys her island, spotting a house and a thick forest. The forest fills her with wonder—it is so full of life after the barren halls of the gods—but its unfamiliarity scares her. She finds herself waiting for someone to tell her it's okay. As the sun sets, Circe decides to explore tomorrow.

Circe's hesitance to explore her island illustrates her passivity. Having spent most of her life letting other people dictate her life, she relies on others to help her, which indicates that she doubts her own abilities (possibly because she is a woman and has internalized her society's sexism). Even though she has seen that relying on other people to aid her in her goals—such as hoping that Aeëtes or Glaucos will be her ticket out of Helios's halls—is ineffective, she struggles to break the habit. Hence, she finds herself waiting for someone to encourage her to explore her island.

Circe enters the house. It's lovely—spacious, well-furnished, and well-stocked. In the future, she will learn that the house cleans itself and the pantry automatically refills. All things considered, it doesn't seem much like punishment. Thinking of Prometheus, Circe feels disappointed at the mildness of her punishment. But she recognizes that she and Scylla were just nymphs—their lives and struggles are meaningless. She is also sure that the luxuriousness of the island is Helios's way of showing off Titan power to the Olympians.

Helios never passes an opportunity to show off his power, as is seen in Circe's beautiful new house. At this point, Circe knows that her father has no real affection for her, so she is sure that her home's luxury must serve him somehow. Circe's disappointment at her punishment is likely rooted in the fact that its mildness suggests that she is not worth anything more dire. Her defiance was not meaningful enough for them to punish her more severely.

After the sun sets, Circe lights a fire using flint and tinder and experiences a rush of pride after achieving this manual task. She helps herself to food from the pantry. As the shadows deepen, she becomes afraid and wonders if her punishment involves wild animals tearing through the walls. She makes her way to her bedroom where she lies awake, too terrified to sleep.

Circe's life prior to arriving on her island was idle enough that just making a fire feels like an accomplishment. This suggests that the majority of gods rarely feel the satisfaction that comes with completing a task—after all, they usually just rely on their powers to get things done.

When morning dawns, Circe circles her house, looking for marks that would indicate a sinister presence, but nothing is there. As her solitude sinks in, she realizes that no one will guide her or tell her what's safe. Suddenly giddy, she heads off to explore and becomes swiftly acquainted with her island. She learns the different plants that grow there and explores every peak and cave. After her bleak childhood, she feels herself thrive at last. The shadows and loneliness no longer frighten her; singing merrily, she embraces the absence of her malicious family.

It is upon realizing how truly isolated she is that Circe decides to take things into her hands and explore the island. Instead of fearing her loneliness, she embraces her independence, and in doing so, she thrives. As a woman, it is likely that Circe has not had such freedom before—for the first time, she feels free to do as she chooses. Her singing emphasizes how Circe now has the freedom to act how she wishes, as her family used to complain about her "ugly" voice. In ancient Greece, women had to be careful in hiding their flaws, as Circe's siblings have made clear—"ugly" women have no value in ancient Greece. Now that Circe is on her own, however, she has some distance from their expectations. Without restrictions, Circe has more room to grow.


Initially too timid to try witchcraft again, Circe finally tries her hand at it. She has no idea what to do, so she starts experimenting. Witchcraft, she learns, is a lot of work. She humorously reflects that this form of magic is not for gods, who despise labor of all kinds, especially the tedious work that witchcraft requires. But after such a vapid, purposeless youth, Circe embraces the work that comes with her new power.

The labor that goes into witchcraft makes it an unlikely hobby for immortals, who are accustomed to simply exercising their power to complete any tedious tasks. But Circe finds that the labor makes the outcome all the more satisfying, which suggests that gods are typically deprived of the sense of achievement that comes with a well-done task. Additionally, Circe has never had power before, so she is willing to put in the work in order to obtain it. In this way, witchcraft and its work can represent the personal enrichment that comes with labor.


At first, everything Circe tries is a failure. She has no knowledge of plants, and so she has to teach herself the basics, trial by unsuccessful trial. After her first success—turning an acorn into a strawberry—she increases her repertoire and builds on her power with each spell. She deepens her knowledge of plants and dapples with illusions. Her strongest skill is transformation, yet she discovers that her capabilities have limitations: no matter how strong the potion or spell, transformed creatures maintain their original minds. This makes her wonder if monster-Scylla is aware of her old self.

It is only through mistakes that Circe achieves success, which suggests that a person's failures are a necessary part of their growth. As Circe works at her magic, she discovers that her greatest talent is transformation, which is a nod to her personal transformation that is underway. Circe has already changed since her childhood in Helios's halls, where she was passive. On Aiaia, she has started to take control of her life: she develops a skill, hones her powers, and even enjoys her isolation. Yet she realizes that her powers have limitations—she can't change the minds of the beings that she transforms. This restriction symbolizes her broader inability to change the world around her. Attempts to create change by influencing others is largely ineffective, as is evident by her failed attempts to find happiness by way of Aeëtes (whom she begged to bring her to his kingdom) and Glaucos (whom she hoped would marry her).

One day, Circe comes across a wild boar, a massive and ferocious creature. Circe locks eyes with it and verbally dares it to try attacking her. After a moment, it walks away, and Circe feels at last like a true witch.

Circe feels like a witch when she feels powerful, which is to say that she establishes dominance over another being. Although there is no evidence that the boar listened to her (it could have simply not wanted to attack her), Circe nevertheless feels like she was able to influence its behavior—she feels like it respected and obeyed her command.

That night, Circe thinks of the goddesses that have adoring pets. Wanting to "put them to shame," Circe summons a female lion that, with the help of a potion, becomes a loyal companion. With her magic and her lion, Circe realizes that she looks different: bolder and fierce. She wishes that her relatives could see her now, walking among wolves and casting spells. She now knows how Aeëtes could be so calm before Helios—her magic makes her feel similarly strong.

Now that Circe has some power, she is hungry to show it off, which reflects a trait that her family has: eagerness to display power for the sake of status. One of the ways she shows off her power is by magically taming the lion, a majestic animal that symbolizes her own might and newfound strength. That this lion is both female and a symbol of strength also suggests that women aren't inherently powerless—a woman can be just a bold and formidable as a man if she's willing to summon her courage and rely on herself.

CHAPTER 8

One sunset, Circe's work is interrupted by Hermes, who greets her by teasing her plain appearance and gardening. Although nervous to see him, she swallows her fear (she knows that such a powerful god would leverage it) and bluntly asks what he expected. He tells her that Zeus is certain that she is crafting magic to attack the gods. Hermes denies Circe's accusation that he is a spy and reveals that he is visiting in hopes that she will host him while he is hiding from Apollo, whose lyre he has stolen. Circe hesitates—Apollo's wrath is deadly. But she is tired of fearing what gods might do to her, so she welcomes him into her house.

Circe has grown wiser since her time in Helios's halls, and she's now wary to show her real emotions lest someone (like Hemes) uses them against her. After all, the last time she was truthful to someone (confessing her powers to Helios), it resulted in Zeus and her father exiling her. In this way, Circe understandably feels like she cannot trust those around her, which leads to a sense of emotional isolation. Circe welcomes Hermes not out of kindness, but out of spite for the gods. She is tired of living in fear, and now that she feels confident and in-control of her power, she's no longer as willing to honor the gods for the sake of winning their favor. After all, none of her kindness or deference helped her in the past—the gods exiled her anyway.

Hermes is a wonderful storyteller. That evening, he tells Circe tales of the gods' fights and vices. She's captivated by his skill, acknowledging that the rumors of his charm and wiliness are true. When she asks whether he will get in trouble for visiting her, he says that while she can't leave, anyone can visit. Helios and Zeus didn't consider the details.

The fact that Helios and Zeus never planned out the details of Circe's exile demonstrates how insignificant she is to them. Although their reasoning isn't explicitly stated, it is likely that they assume that Circe will remain relatively powerless because she is a woman, and they don't expect her to ever obtain a significant amount of power.

Hermes starts playing the lyre upon Circe's request and asks if she can sing. She tells him that she can, but that others cringe at her voice, which they say "sounds like a gull." He says that she doesn't sound like a gull at all, but she has a human voice, a common characteristic of lesser nymphs. He also informs her that, should she ever meet mortals, they will not fear her as much of others, because she sounds like them. Circe humors him and sings.

Circe's having a mortal's voice suggests that she is caught between identities. She is a goddess, and yet her voice—the tool she uses to express herself—indicates that she has some qualities of a mortal, although the exact qualities aren't established here. The implication—that she has mortal-like characteristics—provides a reason for why she always felt out of place among the gods; she is, in this way, a mortal trapped in an immortal's body.

Circe asks Hermes the name of her island, which he gives her: Aiaia. She recognizes that name as a battle site during the Olympian-Titan war, which means that divine blood fell on her island. Hermes slyly voices the coincidence that Helios would choose to exile her here. Circe knows that he's trying to pry information from her, but contrary to her past self, she will not give him whatever he wants. She asks him whether he would dare to stay, knowing that she is a witch. He rises to the challenge, and they become lovers.

The fact that Aiaia was doused in divine blood means that the island most likely hosts pharmaka, *the powerful herbs that spring up from gods' blood. Given Helios's egotism, it is possible that he purposefully exiled Circe to an island with* pharmaka *in so that he could eventually benefit from her magic, possibly in an attack against the Olympians. Hermes appears to suspect this as well, but again, Circe is too jaded to tell him any of her thoughts on the matter; her prior experiences trusting people have ended poorly for her.*

Hermes continues to visit Circe, and the two become close. They have enjoyable conversation and sex, but they are not in love. When Hermes asks Circe to have his child, she laughs at his request. They are barely friends—they amuse each other, but that could change at any moment. Hermes tells Circe gossip from around the world, from Pasiphaë's family to Perse's gloating pride about her children. She enjoys his stories but knows that he gossips about her in the same way.

Hermes embodies the careless side of the gods' selfishness. Circe enjoys his company, but she knows that he is only concerned with his own amusement. She doesn't feel any genuine emotional connection and knows that as soon as she stops amusing him, he will leave her. As Circe mentions at the beginning of the story, the gods love novelty. Because they see so much in their eternal lives, they are usually jaded and only interested in people or things that are new to them. Therefore, Hermes is likely only visiting Circe because she's new to him—he has no true feelings for her, which she knows. In this way, his immortality-bred boredom prevents Hermes and Circe from ever having a meaningful relationship.

One day, Circe asks why Zeus had been so furious at Prometheus for helping mortals. Hermes says that it is because miserable people make better offerings to the gods. Happy people are too busy with their lives, which they come to claim as their own. When Circe expresses outrage, Hermes reminds her that Helios is one of the most brutal gods. Circe is silenced, thinking of how she used to be proud of the offerings Helios got.

In this passage, Hermes explains how the gods exploit people's misery: when people are suffering, they will do anything they can to buy themselves comfort or pleasure. When people are happy, they don't feel the need to beg someone else to improve their lives. When the humans received fire, they were able to create the technology that they desired to make their lives more comfortable and therefore less reliant on the gods and their powers. In this way, independence is a kind of power, as it frees a person from relying on others. The humans didn't have to fear the gods' whims and wrath as much because, with their own comforts, they wouldn't be as affected when the gods deprived them of something. Thus, the implication of Prometheus giving humans fire is that it diminished the gods' power over the humans. When Hermes reminds Circe of Helios's role in exploiting humans' misery for his own gain, she's forced to confront her own complicity in the "great chain of fear"—she used to benefit from her fathers' abuse of mortals by bragging about his offerings and associating herself with his power.

During another visit, Circe asks Hermes about Scylla. He says that she is near Aiaia; she lives in a cliff on one side of a strait whose opposite border has a whirlpool. Whenever a ship passes, she eats sailors. Circe is horrified, knowing that all these deaths are her fault. Hermes admits that Helios or Zeus could stop her, but they won't: monsters inspire many prayers. On this same visit, he tells her that a prophecy states that a man named Odysseus, who is also a descendant of Hermes, will come to her island.

When Circe finds out that Scylla eats humans, she knows at once that she is responsible for all the deaths that the monster causes. In this way, Scylla is Circe's contribution to the cycle of power and abuse that makes humans suffer. Scylla is also a monument to Circe's vanity and cruelty, both traits associated with her immortal family. But although Circe recognizes her responsibility of Scylla's deaths, she doesn't take responsibility in trying to stop Scylla—she hopes that someone else will get rid of the monster. But this hope is a foolish one, as the gods benefit from the terror that Scylla (and all monsters) inspires—humans send more prayers to the gods when they are scared for their life. Although Circe wants the world to be a less violent place, many of the gods selfishly do not, demonstrating how trusting others to bring about a desired change is often ineffective.

Circe's favorite moments are when she walks the forests with her lion at midnight, after Hermes leaves. After waiting several months since their first talk (she doesn't want Hermes spying on her), Circe finds the flower she wants: a blossom that sprang from divine blood. She names it moly and sees that it has the capability to ward off evil. The days pass, and her island thrives. She is mostly happy, although she cannot forget the deaths she causes via Scylla.

Circe finding moly growing on her island may symbolize how her ability to fight off evil is growing. Circe is distraught that she is causing so much harm in the world via Scylla. She keeps this knowledge close and lets her regret grow. The simultaneous growth of her regret and the herb that fights off evil may suggest that acknowledging one's faults and failures fosters personal growth.

CHAPTER 9

One morning, Hermes pays Circe a visit to tell her that a ship is coming to her island, but he withholds more details. When it arrives that afternoon, she can see that it is magnificent and, excitingly, contains mortals. A man steps onto the shore and makes his way to her.

Hermes's withholding information from Circe is an example of how their relationship isn't genuinely caring or affectionate. He can help her by giving her more details on what to expect but refuses to for his own amusement. Circe is again excited to see mortals; since discovering that she has a mortal's voice, she is likely excited to see the people with whom she shares this characteristic. She doesn't feel like she fits in with the other gods, so it is possible that she hopes to find connection elsewhere.

When the man arrives, Circe recognizes him at once—it is Daedalus. He greets her without fear, which Circe interprets as a sign that he is used to gods and witches. Daedalus tells her that Pasiphaë wants Circe to help her during labor. Circe asks why, and he says that she needs Circe's magic. Inwardly, Circe notes that Pasiphaë's request for her help is the only compliment she has from her sister. Daedalus adds that Helios is momentarily releasing Circe's exile for this. Circe is confused and wonders if it is a trap.

Circe has no reason to trust her family, given how badly they have treated her. She is nevertheless flattered that her sister requests her presence, as it shows that, for the first time, Pasiphaë believes that Circe has value. Circe's value lies in her power, which Pasiphaë apparently intends to use for her own benefit.

Daedalus adds that Pasiphaë requires that they travel through Scylla's strait, which Circe recognizes as her sister's cruel desire to bring Circe pain and guilt. Circe wants to refuse but thinks of the sailors who will lose their lives. Though she isn't sure if she can do anything to Scylla, she wants to at least try. As the sun sets, Circe imagines astronomers hoping for accurate calculations. She packs a bag and leaves, knowing that her "lion could take care of herself."

Circe's guilt over the deaths that she causes are what inspire her to try to kill Scylla. Her decision to undo her wickedness sets her apart from her family, who are referenced in Circe's recollection of the pitiful astronomers that her father enjoyed killing indirectly. Her decision to take matters into her own hands—as opposed to simply hoping that another god will kill the monster—demonstrates her independence and initiative. Her independence is also reflected in her reference to her female lion (an animal often associated with power and fierceness), whose gender associates her with Circe.

On the ship, Circe marvels at its artistry, particularly the beautiful figurehead, which is a young girl. Circe knows that Daedalus had created it and that the ship—so impressive yet sent to dangerous seas—is proof of Minos and Pasiphaë's power. The men of the ship begin to row. Circe examines their faces and is surprised to see that "each face was relentlessly distinct," with lines, **scars**, messy hair, and various ornamentation. Such variation shocks her.

Minos and Pasiphaë's using a ship's beauty to show off their power illustrates how, in the power-obsessed society of ancient Greece, people often use whatever means available to advertise their might. By sending a beautiful boat on a dangerous journey, Minos and Pasiphaë are implying that they have such an abundance of wealth and engineering talent that they can afford to be careless with what they have. Meanwhile, Circe is astonished at how unique all the mortal men on the boat are. She especially focuses on their scars, which symbolize how a person's struggles and failures—and how one grows from them—make them unique. Given Circe's shock at the variation of mortals, it is implied that gods are less varied, given that they are immortal and don't experience change and hardship in the same way that mortals do.

Daedalus approaches, and in reference to his being searched when they boarded, Circe asks why Pasiphaë is watching him. He tells her that she and Minos fear that he doesn't "appreciate their hospitality." When Circe says he could escape, Daedalus tells her that Pasiphaë is holding something hostage from him. He says nothing more, and Circe observes his **scarred** hands that he rests on the ship's rail.

Daedalus's being searched implies that he is imprisoned by Pasiphaë and Minos. Daedalus isn't escaping because he is unwilling to leave something behind—perhaps because he is afraid of the hostage's fate if he tries to leave—which shows that Pasiphaë is using fear to keep Daedalus in her control.

Seeing the deck's blood stains, Circe asks about Scylla and learns that the ship lost 12 men on the way over. Circe feels sick with guilt as Daedalus describes the monster. She tells him that Scylla is her fault, but he merely nods and says that Pasiphaë already told him. Circe is unsurprised at this. He asks if she can do anything against Scylla, and Circe says that she'll try.

Pasiphaë has told Daedalus that Scylla is Circe's fault to turn him against her. Pasiphaë has always been cruel to Circe, but it is likely that she has another motive: she wants to keep Daedalus under her control and doesn't want to risk him getting close to her powerful sister, which he is unlikely to do if he sees Circe as a villain. Daedalus is Pasiphaë's prisoner, so keeping him isolated from Circe and her powers is in Pasiphaë's best interest.

That night, the crew camps on land. Circe cannot sleep and wanders the shore while thinking of Scylla as she had once been, often flirting with Perses. Circe's thoughts turn to Daedalus, and what Pasiphaë has of his. At first, Circe thinks it may be a lover, perhaps one that her sister had deliberately sent to the man to catch him. But Circe finds that Daedalus doesn't seem like the type to be in a couple—he is alone.

Circe is sure that Pasiphaë uses love as a tool to keep people in her power, which reveals how the gods use emotional attachments as a weapon against those who love. Nothing is off-limits from them in their quest for more power. Additionally, it seems that many of the gods do not experience love, likely because they are too jaded or too obsessed with power to genuinely care about someone else. By heartlessly using a person's loved one as a pawn in their quest for power, the gods demonstrate how they lack empathy for others' pain.

Circe begins to panic about what to do with Scylla. She considers calling for Hermes and asking for help, but she knows that he would mock her later behind her back. Knowing he won't help—her struggle would amuse him—she thinks of other options and eliminates them. Helios wouldn't intervene, and Aeëtes, who would maybe help to show off his power, is too far away. Loneliness, her life-long companion, settles over her. Suddenly recalling Helios telling Glaucos the law of irreversibility—that no god can undo the action of another—she wonders whether she, as the one who had done the transformation, may reverse it. She begins listing potential herbs, concluding with moly.

Circe is again showing her tendency to rely on others when she faces challenges, but now she is aware that no one will come help her. The relationship between Hermes and Circe is devoid of true emotion—she knows that he would sooner watch her struggle than help her, just for his own amusement. Helios also wouldn't bother—he has shown many times that he doesn't care for his child. And Aeëtes is too far away, even though Circe considers that her power-hungry brother could be tempted to help her so long as it benefited him. She realizes that she is alone, as she has been for most of her life—which speaks to the fate of many women, particularly now that Circe's power has led to the gods exiling her. Because she is alone, she knows that she can only trust herself to undo her mistake.

The next day, the men are terrified. Circe gathers her courage to stay strong. She demands that Polydamas, the guard captain, give her his shirt and cloak. She sees him wanting to refuse, "jealous of his little power, to whom [she] [is] only a woman." She tells him that it will prevent his companions' deaths, which gets the crew's attention. The guard hands over the clothes.

In a society where one must use others or be used, those with only a little power often hold onto it fiercely, as they know how much they have to lose. Polydamas, as a man, occupies a higher position in the social hierarchy than women. He is hesitant to help Circe because he fears that aiding her will encourage her to rise above him, and he will do what it takes to keep women beneath him so that he feels like he has power.

Circe uses a paste to transform into Perses, telling Daedalus that Scylla had loved her brother. She orders the best men to the oars and demands that everyone put down their weapons, as they will only slow them down. Surprised at their obedience, she wonders if this is how life is for Perses.

Even though the men know that it is actually Circe disguised as Perses, they're far more willing to obey a male figure. While they are distrustful of a woman giving orders, they accept a male's position of power without question.

They reach the fog-shrouded strait. The men row as swiftly and quietly as they can. Suddenly, Scylla appears, her many heads stretching down from their cave. Just as Scylla is about to strike, Circe calls out for her. Using Perse's voice and speaking slowly to give the crew extra time to row, she says that she (as Perse) has found Scylla to ask for her vengeance against Circe and to give her a potion that will change her back. At first, Scylla appears to listen, but her attention swivels back to the men. One head comes near Circe, so she throws a potion at her and says the spell to turn her back into a nymph. Scylla screams and hits the ship. She rears back to strike again but misses—the boat is safely past.

The potion that Circe gives Scylla doesn't work. Scylla will thus remain a point of guilt for Circe, which will continue to inspire Circe's self-reflection and desire to change. In addition, this passage suggests that Scylla's mind is really gone (she has lost her consciousness as a nymph), meaning that her transformation has changed her personality along with her body. This could be due to Circe's magic, or it could have been a change that happened over time, in that the longer that Scylla was a monster, the more her mind changed to match her physical form.

As Scylla screams in the distance, Daedalus and the other men—battered from the encounter—fall to their knees, thanking Circe and offering sacrifices. But she can only think of Scylla's blank eyes and realizes that her hesitation had only been from surprise at seeing a god. Circe snaps at the men, calling them fools for thanking her when it was her selfishness that brought this monster to the world. As they tremble away from her, she wishes that the sun would burn her.

Circe feels guilty at the terror and death that she brought into the world by making Scylla a monster. She lets the regret gnaw at her, even wishing that she could be punished. While her guilt over her action sets her apart from her family—none of them have shown any regret over their cruel actions—her anger connects her to her father. She lashes out at the innocent men because she can, which demonstrates that she has vices that she picked up from her family that she still has to get rid of.

CHAPTER 10

Circe and the men keep sailing. Daedalus continues to be civil, but he no longer converses with Circe. Regretting her Helios-like outburst, Circe assumes that Daedalus is avoiding her because of it. They finally reach Crete and moor at the wealthy city of Knossos. Circe imagines Minos, king of the bustling port-city, collecting all the **gold** from the docks, inns, and brothels.

Judging from the wealthy city of Knossos, Circe is certain that Minos has a lot of power. As a king, he is benefiting off all the commerce going on in his city. In this way, he benefits from people being in need—whether that is their need to moor their ship, have lodging, or make money through sex work.

As soon as they land, Polydamas orders Daedalus and Circe to the palace. He leads them to Pasiphaë's rooms and knocks on the door. Just as Daedalus begins to apologize for what lies within, the door opens, and Pasiphaë calls for them. Struck by her sister's beauty, Circe is amazed at how Pasiphaë, in pain and horrifically bloated, still dominates the room, "leeching the world around her pale as mushrooms."

Even when Pasiphaë is vulnerable—she is in pain—she still commands the room with her beauty. As a woman, her sexuality and beauty are her tools to get and maintain power. She doesn't let go of this power at any time, which speaks to the ruthlessness of the world in which she lives. She feels that she can never let her guard drop but must always be ready to exert her dominance over others.

As she enters, Circe announces that 12 men died because of Pasiphaë's desire to torment Circe. Pasiphaë laughs at Circe's pain and taunts her, guessing how many people Scylla kills each year. When Circe threatens to leave, Pasiphaë tells her to cheer up, that she is going to give money to the families of the dead men. When Circe counters by saying that "**Gold** does not give back a life," Pasiphaë retorts that "the families would rather have the gold."

Pasiphaë does not have the empathy for mortals that Circe does. To her, the men's lives and deaths are at her disposal as tools that she can use to get what she wants. In this case, she wants Circe to feel like she is under her control. By indirectly causing men's deaths, Pasiphaë also underestimates their value to their families. Having come from a cruel family herself, it is likely that she does believe that the men's families would prefer wealth—which can be used to get power—than the lives of their loved ones.

Pasiphaë abruptly goes into labor. Circe orders all the attendants out, pleased at how quickly they obey. Screaming in pain, Pasiphaë demands that Circe, who knows nothing of childbirth, cut out the "thing." When Circe hesitates, Pasiphaë orders Daedalus to do the cutting and hints that it's his duty to do so. He steps forward and cuts without argument, Pasiphaë threatening him all the while.

Circe nevertheless enjoys the feeling of power, too, which is evident when she is pleased that the attendants obey her. In this way, she is not totally unlike Pasiphaë after all. Pasiphaë has plenty of control over Daedalus, who follows her orders without hesitation, likely because she has information or a hostage of some sort that keeps him indebted to her.

Once her belly is opened, Pasiphaë orders Circe to get the baby out. Circe looks warily at her sister's womb, but she reaches inside. Suddenly, she feels teeth clamping down on her fingers. She yanks upward, bringing with it a hooved and horned creature that she throws to the ground. Circe pins it by the throat, forcing it to open its mouth so she can rip her hand out. She has lost several fingers.

Circe is unsure what is in Pasiphaë's womb. There is no love between Pasiphaë and Circe, so Circe knows that her sister only wants Circe present so that she (Pasiphaë) can make use of Circe's power. Given this, Circe suspects that there is something different about the pregnancy that is going to require her magic.

Daedalus offers to kill the creature, but Pasiphaë demands that it live. He and Circe capture it in a blanket, and he stuffs it in a cage. Gasping from pain, Pasiphaë orders Circe to sew up her stomach, but she refuses to do so until Pasiphaë explains the source of the creature. Pasiphaë bitterly concedes and then orders Daedalus to explain. He announces that this is his fault, saying that he crafted a fake cow for Pasiphaë to hide in so she could get closer to a sacred bull. Pasiphaë interrupts that she had sex with the bull.

Pasiphaë's baby turns out to be a monstrous creature, which draws a similarity between Circe and Pasiphaë—both of them created monsters. The difference is that, even though Pasiphaë has the opportunity to kill it now, she refuses to. The reason why is not yet clear, but given Pasiphaë's obsession with power, it is likely that she wants to make use of the monster. The creation of the monster also implicates Daedalus, and Pasiphaë uses his participation to blame and guilt him, even though she is the one who wants to keep the monster alive. She uses his pain as a tool to keep him in her control.

As Circe sews up her sister, she says that Pasiphaë will be punished. But Pasiphaë laughs at this statement, saying that "gods love their monsters." After Pasiphaë's maids carry her to take a bath, Daedalus approaches to thank Circe, telling her that, had she not been there, he would have been the one who lost a hand. She kindly tells him that she is glad that he wasn't harmed—her fingers will grow back. Daedalus leaves to make a bigger cage, leaving Circe alone.

Pasiphaë confirms what Hermes previously told Circe: that the gods love monsters. The gods benefit from all the terror that monsters cause among mortals who, fearing for their lives, give the gods more offerings and homage in the hopes that the gods will use their power to help them. While Pasiphaë never once expresses gratitude for Circe's help, Daedalus approaches Circe to thank her for intervening in the birth, which resulted in her sustaining injuries while he was unharmed. Circe knows that Daedalus would be far more affected by the physical damage (as a god, her body heals quickly and perfectly), which is likely why Daedalus is so grateful—he has much more to lose. This could also explain, in part, Pasiphaë's ingratitude. As a god, she will live forever, so she is not in need of as much help as a mortal is.

Circe can't stop wondering why Pasiphaë had asked her, of all people, to attend the birth. But her horror at the existence of this new monster eclipses her confusion, and, deciding to try brewing an antidote, Circe seeks out her sister's workroom. She finds it and is disappointed to find only some sloppily harvested basic herbs. At that moment, Circe realizes that she is a much better witch than her sister.

Pasiphaë's messy workroom suggests that she, unlike Circe, is not willing to labor as much as Circe does in order to improve her skills. Her attitude is similar to many of the gods, whom Circe describes as loathing work. Because Circe is willing to put in the labor needed, she has the satisfaction of being the more accomplished witch. Circe shows her humanity as she decides to take it upon herself to find some kind of antidote for the monster. At this point, her experience with Scylla has taught her that no one else—certainly no other gods—will try to stop the monster's violence, so she decides to try to do so herself.

Circe exits the palace and heads to nearby Mount Dicte, where rare and unique herbs are rumored to grow. She reaches the mountain quickly and feels it humming with power. She collects several plants and seeds before washing herself in a pool. Recalling Helios's gift of prophecy, Circe decides to try to glimpse the bull-baby's future. She touches the water, asks for a vision, and, sure enough, watches a scene appear on its surface: a man kills the creature. Disheartened, Circe realizes that the monster has many gory years to live before it will be killed.

Circe experiments with her powers more and more. In this passage, she tests whether she has the ability to glimpse the future like her father and finds out that she does. Her parents, and the misogynist society she grew up in, raised her to believe that she, as a woman, has no power. But now that she has discovered that she does have some power—she can do magic—she has the confidence to test the limits of what she can do.

An idea forms in Circe's mind. She gathers more herbs, which she grounds to a paste and mixes with some water from the pool. The next day, she returns to the palace, outside of which she spots a young girl dancing in a courtyard. The girl approaches and introduces herself as her niece, Ariadne.

Even though the vision shows that Circe cannot kill the monster, she is still intent on doing something *to reduce the monster's violence. Her resolve reveals that she is dedicated to making the world a less cruel place. Even though she knows that her abilities are limited, she prefers to have some positive impact rather than doing nothing at all.*

When Circe tells Ariadne that she must speak with Daedalus, the young girl offers to take her to his workshop. When they arrive, Circe tells him that the monster will die, but not for many years. It wants human flesh, but she hopes that her spell will contain its appetite to just the harvest season of the year. Daedalus accepts the information with resolve and promises to finish the new cage soon. As they leave, Ariadne asks whether they were referring to her new brother.

Daedalus and Circe are similar in their resolve to reduce the potential harm that the monster will cause. While this demonstrates their compassion and desire to do right, the situation reveals their helplessness. Because Pasiphaë will not let them kill the monster, any change that Daedalus and Circe carry out will only mitigate the monster's violence without actually ending it. Their situation is representative of how an individual person's kindness cannot dismantle their society's hierarchy, which will exist as long as some people possess a disproportionate amount of power. Nonetheless, Daedalus and Circe's efforts will make a difference in some people's lives, even if it doesn't change everything, which shows that it is better to do what one can than to do nothing at all.

Accompanied by Ariadne, Circe stands before Pasiphaë and Minos, the latter of whom is old and ghastly. He demands to know what she has been doing and is furious to learn that she has only prepared a draught—he wants the monster to die. But Circe tells him that the monster cannot die yet, although she can restrict its hunger until its fate comes. Pasiphaë is delighted to know that her beastly son has a destiny and implies that Minos may be one of his victims.

Pasiphaë and Minos's marriage is clearly not a loving one. Pasiphaë's implying that her monster may kill Minos suggests that one of the reasons why she wants to keep the beast alive is to keep Minos afraid of her. In this way, their relationship is a competition for power.

Eyes blazing with hatred, Minos jabs a finger at Circe, exclaiming that the whole situation is the fault of Circe and her family. They cursed him with Pasiphaë, who torments him. Pasiphaë interrupts him, urging him to tell Circe of the deaths of the countless serving girls he has had sex with. As Minos continues to rant, Circe understands that her sister, who must have felt outperformed by her siblings, chose to breed a monster for power and fame.

In this passage, Circe realizes the reasons behind Pasiphaë's giving birth to a monster. Given how much Pasiphaë and Minos hate each other, it is likely that Pasiphaë wants to use the monster to keep Minos afraid of her and her power. Additionally, the monster will get plenty of attention from gods and mortals alike, which will make Pasiphaë famous. Just as Perse saw her children's powers as a way to attach herself to their fame, Pasiphaë is eager to use the fear and violence her son will cause as a means of gaining recognition. In this way, she is taking after her mother.

As Pasiphaë jeers at Minos, asking whether he thought the girls died from pleasure, Circe takes Ariadne with her as she leaves. They walk back to the courtyard, where Ariadne asks whether Circe's spell will make her brother more docile. Circe says that that is her hope. After a moment, Ariadne asks Circe to stay while she dances. As she watches, she realizes that while mortals win fame through practiced craft and talent, gods find it through destruction and the mortals' offerings that accompany it.

Ariadne seems to be a gentler and more sensitive person than her mother; she sees the monster as her brother instead of a beast or simply a tool to gain power. While Circe watches her dance, she realizes that Ariadne's morality encourages her to focus her energy on crafting a skill. With their finite lives and limited power, mortals have to become extremely talented in order to gain recognition from gods and historians alike. Because the gods' powers and perfection spare them from laboring, they do not know the accomplishment that comes with developing a craft or talent. Additionally, anything they create with their power is not impressive, as they use sheer power rather than skill. Therefore, when gods want attention, they get it through wreaking havoc on those who have less power than they do and are then prompted to give the gods offerings and homage.

CHAPTER 11

Circe is brought to her room, which is near the servants' wing of the palace. The next day, Daedalus visits her and brings her down to the underground corridors of the palace. As they walk, he tells her that the monster is named the Minotaur, which Circe recognizes as the king's attempt to associate himself with the glory that monsters inspire.

Like Pasiphaë, Minos uses the monster as an opportunity to gain fame for himself. He names the beast after himself so that people will associate the fear that the beast generates with Minos himself. Significantly, Minos, and not Pasiphaë, names the monster. Even though she is the one who created the beast, Minos likely wants to hide the fact that his wife has more power than he does.

Daedalus and Circe arrive at the cage that Daedalus has built. He acknowledges that it will not hold forever—the Minotaur is already ferociously strong—but it buys him time to plan the next step. Circe approaches the monster in its cage, which, to Circe's horror, is already littered with human bones. As it opens its mouth, Circe dumps her potion down its throat and speaks the spell. Immediately, the creature relaxes, already quieted. Watching it plod into its new cage, Circe knows that this monster, Pasiphaë's "ambition made flesh," will only know a life of hate and gore.

By making the Minotaur, Pasiphaë is not only responsible for all the deaths that the monster will cause, but also the miserable existence that the beast will live. In this way, Pasiphaë's grab for power leaves behind a trail of abuse.

As Daedalus and Circe climb upstairs to the main halls, she tells him that she will not attend the evening feast and that she looks forward to returning to her island. Daedalus invites her to dine with him, as he hopes to leave the dinner early. She agrees and meets him in his quarters that night. While there, Daedalus introduces his son Icarus to her. Seeing Daedalus's tenderness with the child, Circe knows that Pasiphaë must have immediately seen Daedalus's love for him.

In a society where everyone is seeking to gain power for themselves, anything, including love, can be a weakness that others exploit. Pasiphaë does just this—she knows that Daedalus loves his son so much that he will do anything to keep the boy safe. By keeping Icarus imprisoned in the castle, she effectively keeps Daedalus under her control. He will obey her every order to ensure his son's safety.

Circe enjoys the ease of her conversation with Daedalus. They talk of the similarities between their arts and lifestyle, and he expresses sympathy for the cruelty she suffers at Pasiphaë's hands. He then tells her that he plans to design a maze in the cellars of the palace for the Minotaur and jokes that he is sure Minos will think of a name that associates him with it.

Circe and Daedalus bond over their crafts. Circe is able to relate to Daedalus because she knows witchcraft and is therefore also conscious of the fulfillment that developing a talent brings. It is likely that their connection would not be as strong had she not developed a skill through hard work, something that she associates with mortals. In this way, their connection stems from mortal qualities.

After Daedalus gives Icarus a goodnight kiss, Circe comments that the boy is very happy. Daedalus agrees, but he bitterly adds that it won't last: "A **golden** cage is still a cage." As Circe asks Daedalus where he dreams to go, she gazes into his face, comforted by his sturdiness and resolve. She wants to invite him to Aiaia but knows that the island holds nothing for him.

Even though Daedalus and Icarus live in a castle and have some luxuries, they are still Pasiphaë's captives. Gold is associated with power throughout the story, and its use here points out that, while the palace's comforts may make it appear that Daedalus has some power, any semblance of control he feels is false. Pasiphaë can take it all away whenever she chooses. In this way, the "gold" of the cage—and the power in the situation—belongs to Pasiphaë, the owner of the cage, and not Daedalus, the imprisoned.

Circe returns to her room, mulling over her conversation with Daedalus. She is enraged on his behalf that Pasiphaë and Minos keep him imprisoned for their own glory. She recalls the love in Daedalus's eyes when he looked at Icarus and knows that Pasiphaë instantly saw this as a way to keep him under her control.

Pasiphaë and Minos want to keep Daedalus under their control so that they can profit off the things he creates. In their quest to accumulate more power, they are ruining not just Daedalus's life, but Icarus's too.

Circe analyzes her time in Crete and realizes just how much the Minotaur is a victory for Pasiphaë: Minos's humiliation, the subjugating terror of the Cretans, Daedalus's guilt and his obligation to help, and even Circe's obedience. Her fury mounting, Circe storms into Pasiphaë's bedroom and demands to know why she brought her to Crete.

Not only has Pasiphaë created a violent monster, but she is using it to create even more devastation than it would on its own. She will use it to keep Minos and her kingdom in fear of her power and will leverage Daedalus's guilt to pressure him into obedience. In this way, Circe and Pasiphaë are very different in their actions regarding the monsters that they created. Although Circe also made a monster (Scylla) for her own gain, she regrets her action and wants to undo it to prevent further harm.

Pasiphaë dodges Circe's question, enraging her even more. Circe exclaims that she deserves to know, after all her assistance with containing the Minotaur. After a pause, Pasiphaë tells Circe that she should know by now that obedience gets one nothing. She cites Circe's childhood, how fawning over Helios and cringing at his feet only encouraged him to abuse her more. Morality means nothing and being a god's favorite pretty mistress means nothing; "The only thing that makes them listen is power."

In this passage, Pasiphaë makes the point that, in a society where getting power is the top priority, morals are meaningless because "The only thing that makes [a god] listen is power." Because a person must use others or be abused, people are quick to exploit others' kindness. Pasiphaë picked up on this behavior in her father's halls, demonstrating how a person's family affects their development.

Pasiphaë goes on to say that, while everyone else was shocked that Circe ended up with powers, Pasiphaë wasn't. She knew that Circe, like her, hated the family, and this spiteful resilience is the source of their power. Circe is stunned to hear that her sister, who in Circe's mind represents their family's cruelty, hates them too. But she knows that what Pasiphaë says is true: "nymphs [are] allowed to work only through the power of others."

Circe is surprised that Pasiphaë hates their family, given that she's turned out to be exactly like them. At the same time, Circe's acknowledgment that nymphs can only get power through others explains, in part, why Pasiphaë turned out so cruel. As a woman, Pasiphaë has very little power and is therefore susceptible to abuse. In order to survive, Pasiphaë feels like she has no choice but to play by the rules set by her family and abuse people before they can abuse her.

Reeling from the revelation, Circe asks why Pasiphaë hadn't been friends with her and Aeëtes. Pasiphaë scoffs, telling Circe that Aeëtes only entertained her because of her ready praise. Circe asks about Perses, and Pasiphaë snaps that Circe is ignorant of all the things Pasiphaë had to do to keep his favor. When she was married off to Minos, Pasiphaë knew that she could handle him and has done so.

Pasiphaë goes on to explain how her interpersonal relationships are competitions for power. She reveals that her "friendship" with Perses was loveless, which suggests that the abuse she suffered at his hands made her even more unwilling to form attachments—she entered into her marriage with Minos seeking ways to control him. In this way, the abuse women suffer leads to their isolation.

Pasiphaë chose Circe, she says, because Circe is like Pasiphaë and can endure pain. Circe is horrified at this claim and rejects it, saying that she is not like Pasiphaë. Circe catches an expression of surprise on her sister's face before she insults Circe afresh. She calls her blind, ignorant of all that she (Pasiphaë) has had to do to maintain power and independence from Minos, who wants a breeder, not a queen. When Circe suggests that Helios would protect Pasiphaë from extreme abuse at Minos's hands, Pasiphaë sneers, saying that Helios cares about his alliance with Zeus more than his children, which is why Circe is in exile. Zeus is afraid of witchcraft and "wanted a sacrifice," which Helios happily provided. Pasiphaë then orders Circe to get out of her room.

Circe doesn't want to be like her sister, who represents their family's cruelty. This decision, along with her empathy and desire to undo the violence she caused by creating Scylla, sets her apart from her family. Pasiphaë doesn't take this rejection kindly, likely because she believes that Circe doesn't understand the abuse that she (Pasiphaë) has suffered. She unleashes her rage on Circe, pushing her away, which again shows how being abused and underestimated can lead women to self-isolate. Minos in particular makes Pasiphaë feel oppressed and limited in her role as a woman, as he only wants her to be a mother rather than a ruler in her own right. As a man in a misogynist society, he likely sees women as inferior; when a woman does have power, he sees it as a threat to his own. Similarly, Pasiphaë sneers at Circe's suggestion that Helios would protect her if need be, because Pasiphaë knows that their father cares only for his own power.

Circe numbly returns to her quarters, where she is surprised by Daedalus waiting outside her door. At first surprised by his boldness, she realizes that exceptional people must be daring. She welcomes him into her room, and they have sex.

Circe recognizes that creative people must be courageous, as the act of creating something new requires experimentation with the unknown. Daedalus is a famous inventor, so it is not surprising that he is bold enough to ask a goddess to become his lover. Because Circe associates creativity with mortals, this passage links mortality to courage.

As Circe and Daedalus lie together afterward, Circe realizes that she can feel the Minotaur shaking the palace foundations. After Circe tells Daedalus that the monster will eat about 15 people a month during harvest, Daedalus tells her that he can feel the heavy responsibility for the deaths. She traces the **scars** on his hands as he speaks. He asks how she handles her guilt over Scylla. Thinking of Prometheus, Circe repeats the Titan's words: "We bear it as best we can."

Circe and Daedalus form a genuine connection based on their shared guilt—Daedalus for his participation in creating the Minotaur, and Circe for making Scylla. This is Circe's first time being truly open with a lover—Hermes would use her weaknesses against her, and her divinity frightened Glaucos. Because these men didn't respect her, she never felt close with them. With Daedalus, however, she can be honest because he respects her and even understands her feelings of regret. In this way, their empathy for each other unites them. Furthermore, Daedalus's scars are a reminder of both his mortality and the fact that a person's failures, and their growth from them, is what makes them unique. The Minotaur will be like an emotional scar for him, in the same way that Scylla is for Circe.

For the next few days, Circe enjoys her nights with Daedalus and avoids Pasiphaë during the day. Finally, Minos allows her to leave. When she boards the ship, Daedalus sees her off and gives her two crates, which he says hold a gift he created. Even though Circe knew that they would be parted, she is nonetheless saddened as the ship pulls away. When Crete is out of site, she opens the crates, which contains cloth and a beautiful loom.

Minos's making Circe wait to leave Crete is a way for him to show off his power—he is making it clear that she is at his disposal. Daedalus and Circe continue to deepen their bond, even though Circe knows that the relationship will have to come to an end when she goes back into exile. Because the gods fear an unmarried and thus unsupervised woman having power, they isolate Circe physically. This physical isolation leads to her emotional isolation, as she is unable to form lasting, meaningful relationships with people.

Years later, Circe hears of Daedalus's escape. The craftsman made wings for himself and Icarus to fly away from Crete to Africa. But Icarus flew too close to the sun, melting the wax that held the wings together, and he fell to the earth and died. When Circe hears the tale from Hermes, she imagines Daedalus flying relentlessly forward, though crippled with grief. He dies soon after, but Circe never forgets him.

Pasiphaë's selfish imprisonment of Daedalus and Icarus meant that Icarus was never able to experience freedom. In this way, Icarus is the collateral damage in Pasiphaë's quest to accumulate and maintain power.

CHAPTER 12

Circe's trip back to Aiaia is uneventful and solitary—all of the crewmen avoid her and leave once they drop her off. She is glad to be home, but when she transplants the rare herbs from Mount Dicte, she suddenly feels the significance of her exile: if the plants die, she will never see them again. She does her best to reassimilate to her isolated island life: she sings, practices spells, and learns how to weave. But her mind returns to Daedalus's words: "A **golden** cage is still a cage."

The men of the ship's crew avoid and isolate Circe, likely because they distrust her and are afraid of her powers. When she reaches her island, her loneliness continues; even though she tries to find fulfillment in her work, she lacks meaningful connections with others. Her exile demonstrates how misogyny often results in powerful women experiencing alienation. Circe recalls Daedalus's words regarding the golden cage and realizes that she, like him, is a prisoner of the gods. Even though she feels like she may have power as a witch on her own, this power is an illusion—the gods are still in control of her, as they will not let her leave the island.

Alone on her island, Circe's thoughts return to her argument with Pasiphaë. In an imagined conversation, Circe declares that her first spell was inspired by love, but Pasiphaë declares that it was to spite Helios and the others who spurned her. Pasiphaë then tells her to consider Perse and how she manipulated those around her, only to have the gods forbid her from having children with Helios. Circe admits that her mother was clever, while Pasiphaë's voice rebukes her for rejecting Perse, hating her while crouching at Helios's feet and hoping for his attention.

In the imagined argument, Pasiphaë is arguing that Circe is just like the rest of the family: spiteful, vain, and cruel. Circe realizes that her intentions behind transforming Glaucos were not as pure and honorable as she had once made them out to be. Rather, she transformed him out of selfishness and spite. After all, she was willing to commit whatever evil was necessary to make Glaucos an immortal, which led to her making Scylla into a terrible monster. Pasiphaë implicitly accuses Circe of being sexist when, as a child, she spurned their mother in order to win their father's favor. This was likely because Circe believed that Helios, as a man, was inherently more important than Perse, a woman who nonetheless managed to eke out some power for herself.

Circe recalls Pasiphaë's surprise at Circe's refusal to say that they are similar. She then wonders what life would have been like had she known Pasiphaë's feelings, or if they grew up elsewhere; she wishes that they could have had an affectionate sisterly bond. Then she imagines Pasiphaë's insults and shouts her rejection of her to the wind.

Circe faces the reality that she does share many similarities with her family members. For a moment, she wonders whether she and Pasiphaë could have been close if their situation was different, but she knows that it is useless to dwell on such wishes—she can't change anything about the past. What matters is that Pasiphaë is malicious to her and always will be. Circe doesn't want to have anything to do with Pasiphaë and her family's cruelty, which she makes clear by verbally rejecting her in her imaginary conversation with her sister.

Hermes visits her again, but Circe finds that he is beginning to repulse her: some of his jokes disgust her, and she feels uncomfortable in his "perfect and **unscarred**" hands. He loves her fluctuating moods and keeps coming back with news and stories.

After her genuine connection with Daedalus, Circe is disappointed by Hermes. She specifically hates his "unscarred" hands, which represent to her how cold and unchanging he is. Daedalus's hands were badly scarred, and they were a constant reminder of his personal growth and his craft, both of which Circe related to. Hermes has no such scars; he is a god, so his body shows no changes, which also represents how he himself does not grow as a character. While Circe returns to Aiaia feeling different—she is more aware of her loneliness and guiltier over Scylla, and she now knows the feeling of a true emotional connection—Hermes has stayed the same. He still doesn't care for Circe, as he's still focused on his own amusement.

On one visit, Hermes tells Circe of the fall of the Minotaur. With Crete threatening rebellion after years of losing their youth to the monster, Minos ordered youths from Athens to be sacrificed in retaliation for his son's death. Since the alternative was war, the king of Athens agreed. One of his sons, Theseus, was chosen to be sacrificed.

Just as Circe suspected, Minos uses the Minotaur as a tool to intimidate people and maintain power. At first, Minos kept his kingdom under his control by feeding its youth to the Minotaur, likely using the beast to menace his subjects into obedience. When they began threatening to overthrow him, Minos sacrificed youths from Athens, another city. This way, his kingdom felt relief from the Minotaur, and Minos exerted his dominance over Athens. Minos had been planning on going to war against Athens, but the Minotaur let him save the money and resources that a war requires, all while getting Athens to submit to him anyway.

Ariadne fell in love with Theseus. Before he entered the Labyrinth (the lair that Daedalus had made for the Minotaur), she gave him a sword and taught him how to navigate his way. When Theseus killed the Minotaur, however, Ariadne still cried for its death; Hermes explains that she had loved the creature, even though it nearly killed her once.

Despite her wicked family, Ariadne remained compassionate, as evidenced by her helping Theseus despite her father's wishes. She was also sympathetic to the Minotaur, which emphasizes her benevolence—she was able to pity its fate, even though (or perhaps because) it was senselessly violent. Thus, Ariadne is as another example of someone who withstood the wickedness of her family and remained empathetic in spite of it.

Hermes proceeds with Ariadne's tale, which ends with her dying at the hands of Artemis, although he never understood why. When he sees Circe's grief at the girl's death, he teases her that she'll drown if she cries over every mortal's death. She orders him to leave and then wonders at the irony of how all mortals, even the most vivacious and inventive, will all fade to dust, while "every petty and useless god" exists forever.

Never needing to worry about his own mortality, Hermes has no empathy for mortals and is unconcerned by their deaths. Ancient as he is, he has watched a countless number of mortals die, and so he has presumably lost interest in them and their lives—there's no novelty in mortals dying. Circe, however, is distressed at Ariadne's death, particularly because it was brought about so heartlessly. Hermes doesn't even remember why Artemis killed Ariadne, which suggests that Artemis killed the girl for an insignificant and selfish reason. Artemis's careless destruction of a human life makes Circe think about the injustice of mortals dying despite the fact that they are livelier and more creative than gods, who are petty but exist forever. Again, Circe associates mortality with creativity and fulfillment, whereas gods are described as "useless."

Hermes continues to visit—Circe can't deny the company. One day, she asks for stories of Pasiphaë. After giving her some milder details, Hermes tells Circe his most grotesque story about Pasiphaë. Shortly after they married, Minos raped various serving girls in front of Pasiphaë. To get back at him, Pasiphaë cast a spell that turned his semen into poisonous reptiles, so that each girl was stung to death from within. Circe is so sickened by the grisly tale that after ordering Hermes away, she locks herself in her house and declares that she will shut out the other gods and their vengeful, wicked world forever.

Hermes's story is the final straw for Circe; after hearing it, Circe wants nothing more to do with the gods. The tale captures the gods' cruelty and petty power struggles. Minos probably raped the serving girls to display his power, likely to show Pasiphaë that she had no authority in their marriage while he, the man, could disgrace her. Pasiphaë retaliated by using her magic and killed the serving girls in a grotesquely violent way, all to show off her power and humiliate her husband. She had no concern for the women—she saw them merely as tools to use to exert dominance over her new husband. By killing the serving girls, who were already the victims of rape, Pasiphaë demonstrates the cruelty and carelessness of those seeking power—specifically, the gods, who are notoriously careless with mortals' lives. Meanwhile, Minos's raping of the serving girls shows how women are vulnerable to abuse at the hands of men in ancient Greece. They have very little power and are often exploited by the men around them. The story sickens Circe—repulsed by her family, she wants to distance herself from their wickedness.

CHAPTER 13

In spring, Circe is surprised to see another ship visit her shores. She walks to the beach and notes the fine clothes and weapons of the men on board. From the future, Circe considers the countless people who later claimed ancestry from the men on the ship. As Circe looks into the men's silent, anxious faces, she notices that the air around the ship smells foul.

In the future, people will probably say that they are related to the men on the ship because they want a share in their glory. Although Circe hasn't yet revealed who the men are, it is likely that they become famous, given that so many people want to share in their fame.

Two people disembark from the ship: a young man and, to Circe's astonishment, a woman. The woman speaks first, asking Circe for help and saying that they have committed foul sins in their flight from "great evil." Circe understand that they are asking for the rite of *katharsis*, the cleansing of evil. Tradition forbids her to ask why, so she welcomes them without question.

Circe is astonished to see a woman on the ship because ancient Greek society didn't often permit women to take part in heroic quests or daring adventures. Additionally, the woman isn't just a passenger on the ship; she is important enough to speak to Circe on behalf of the crew. Circe's shock at seeing a woman in a position of power is a testament to ancient Greece's misogyny, which often prevented women from controlling their own lives, let alone having authority over other people.

Circe leads the couple to her house, noticing that the woman, who keeps her face hidden, walks more steadily than the young man, even as he holds her as if to balance her. When they arrive in Circe's house, Circe performs the rite and feels the air clear.

The woman's sure steps are symbolic of how she is more confident and capable than her unsteady male companion. But even though she is more capable than the man walking with her, she allows him to hold her arm so that it appears that he is the dominant one of the two. This act suggests that she is willing to hide her true power and personality so that the man she is with doesn't feel inferior to her—she is protecting his ego by diminishing herself. This is an example of how, when a society is uncomfortable with women having power, powerful women often hide their true selves in order to fit in with society's expectations.

At last, the woman looks up and Circe realizes from her "golden look" that she must be a descendant of Helios. Circe is captivated by the woman who, although not classically beautiful, has "a fervency" that grabs one's attention. Circe learns that she is Medea, Aeëtes's daughter. Medea explains that she couldn't risk Circe's recognizing her, in case Aeëtes had told Circe ugly stories about her.

Medea's "golden look" signifies her power, which she inherited from her family. The "fervency" that Circe describes could be similar to the same intensity that Aeëtes has, which he directs to selfishly acquire the things that he wants.

Circe invites them to eat, and she watches Medea lovingly serve the young man before she serves herself. The man introduces himself as Jason, a prince of Iolcos, and launches into his tale of how he went to Aeëtes to win the sorcerer's **golden** fleece. Medea, her hand on Jason's, interrupts his story to emphasize how "No mortal, however valiant and brave" could pass the test crafted by Aeëtes, as it was a trick to kill challengers.

Medea is very in love with Jason. She tends to his needs before hers, which is clear not only in her diminishing herself so that he appears stronger, but also in her feeding him before she eats. She is debasing herself, possibly in the effort to make him love her, which suggests that she is aware that the men of ancient Greece do not appreciate powerful women. Jason's self-centered monologue suggests that he sees himself as the more important and interesting person in the room—he doesn't let Medea introduce herself further, instead taking over the conversation with his quest. Medea plays into Jason's egotism, boosting his ego by saying that no mortal—even one as brave as he—could pass Aeëtes's test.

When Circe assumes that they somehow cheated, Jason looks irritated, and Medea quickly assures Circe that Jason hadn't wanted help, but that she, frightened for him, begged Jason to let her assist him. Jason's indignance fades at this explanation. Medea then dismissively mentions that she possesses "some small [magic] skill[s]" and made "a simple draught" to protect Jason from harm. Circe is astounded that Medea, a mortal, has the powers and talent to make such a complex spell. Medea's timidity seems ridiculously inappropriate in light of her power.

Jason is very arrogant and interested in maintaining his reputation of a hero. He doesn't want Circe to think that he didn't complete the challenge fairly, which would suggest that he wasn't talented or strong or impressive enough to beat Aeëtes's test. Medea wants to protect his pride, which she does by telling Circe a story that makes Medea look weak and love-struck. By saying that she begged Jason to do as she suggested, it seems like he was helping her *instead of the other way around. This way, it appears that Jason has more power in the situation, even though it is actually Medea who, with her magical powers, passed Aeëtes's test. She, not Jason, is the reason why his quest succeeded.*


Jason leaps back into his story, which culminates in him escaping with the fleece and Medea, whom he suggests he rescued from her father. Circe can see that Jason already imagines himself telling the tale before a captivated audience; she also coolly notes that he never thanks Medea, "as if a demigoddess saving him at every turn was only his due." Medea adds that she and Jason married on the ship, so she will rule Iolcos with him. Jason is silent, his enthusiasm diminishing.

Jason is so arrogant that he never considers thanking Medea for helping him, even though it was her capabilities that got him the golden fleece. As a man in a misogynistic society, he doesn't expect women to be more powerful than he is. So, he eagerly accepts Medea's version of the tale, which understates her powers and keeps Jason looking like the hero. Medea's help and talent don't make Jason fall in love with her, as is clear when he looks uncomfortable at Medea saying that she will rule Iolcos with him. He wants the power and glory for himself and is uncomfortable at the prospect of being married to a woman who would outshine him.

Circe then asks them to explain their request for *katharsis*. Medea cautiously tells her of their attempt to outsail Aeëtes, who used his superior powers to catch up. When Aeëtes neared them, Medea saw his fury and knew that he would kill them. She then says that "A madness came over [her]," prompting her to dismember her little brother, whom she had brought on board as a potential bargaining piece. The boy was Aeëtes's favored son, so, as she threw his pieces into the sea, she knew that Aeëtes would collect the body parts to bury them properly. With Aeëtes thus slowed, Medea, Jason, and the crew escaped.

Aeëtes's chasing down his daughter over the fleece demonstrates how he prioritizes his pride and glory over his family. Given that he did stop to gather the pieces of his son's body, Aeëtes clearly prefers his son to his daughter, possibly because women are ranked as inferior to men in ancient Greece.


Jason looks sickened as Medea finishes the tale. She then fills his goblet of wine, and Circe sees her slip in a powder. Jason drinks it and promptly nods off. Medea justifies the drugging, saying that "It is too difficult for him." When Circe accuses Medea of lying about the madness, she confesses that she did indeed know what she was doing, although she adds that "some call lovers mad."

The fact that Medea was indeed lucid when killing her brother accentuates the cruelty of the act. She heartlessly killed her brother in order to guarantee her and Jason's escape, which demonstrates her selfishness and callousness toward others, including her own family. It also shows how people often end up using their power to harm others in order to keep themselves safe. Like many people who seek to maintain their power, Medea sees others as disposable tools that she can use to get what she wants. Jason is already perturbed by his wife and her powers, which is now even clearer when he considers the violence that she committed in order for them to escape. In a society that expects women to be submissive, Medea is an outsider, and the shock of a woman committing such a violent act appalls Jason, perhaps even more than it would if a man did it.

When Circe asks Medea whether she regrets her actions, she shrugs off the question, saying that her brother, as a soldier, "sacrificed himself." But Circe contradicts her: he didn't offer himself up—she murdered him. Medea tells Circe that the alternative would be to watch Aeëtes torture Jason and his crew to death, after which it would be her turn. Seeing Circe's disbelief, Medea goes on to describe how her father enslaved and tortured men, even siphoning away their minds so that they were "empty shell[s]."

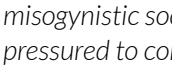
Medea's lack of remorse suggests that she has adopted some of her father's callousness; it also demonstrates how the cycle of power and abuse even traps people who hate it. Medea knows that her father is a violent man and disapproves of this, and yet she unflinchingly kills her little brother so that she can survive. Her fear of losing her life leads her to committing violent acts, just like her father.

Circe insists that Aeëtes wouldn't hurt his own child, which Medea sneers at. She tells Circe that Aeëtes despises her, all the more so since learning that she is also a witch. Aeëtes, she explains, was afraid that she would teach "his secrets" to another man.

Aeëtes—like his father, Helios—has little sentimental attachment to his children, particularly his daughters. Medea is sure that Aeëtes wouldn't hesitate to abuse and exploit her, which is exactly what Helios did with Circe, whom he exiled in order to protect his own power. Aeëtes also resents that his daughter is a witch—he distrusts her powers and fears that she may arm another man with magic, which he possessively calls his own.

Aeëtes's one hope for Medea was to trade her for poisons from another sorcerer. But the only other is Perses, who already has a wife "in chains." Remembering how her brothers hated each other growing up, Circe is shocked to learn that they are now friends, plotting war against the Olympians. When Circe asks whether Jason knows, Medea is emphatic that he cannot know, for "A man wants a wife like new grass, fresh and green." Circe inwardly thinks of how Jason is already pulling away from her.

Aeëtes, like Helios, sees his daughter as an object to trade to another man for his own personal gain, which demonstrates again how women's value is limited to sexuality and/or motherhood. Perses also treats women terribly—he imprisons his current wife, whom he presumably keeps for sexual exploitation. Medea's detailing of Aeëtes and Perses's treatment of women lays bare the violent abuse that women experience at the hands of men in a misogynistic society. Even women who have power often feel pressured to comply with the notion that women are weaker, which Medea suggests when she tells Circe that she cannot tell Jason of her past. Medea mirrors Circe's behavior with Glaucos; both of them know that the men they love are frightened of their power, so they reduce themselves to seem more acceptable to men.



Medea stands up and tells Circe that she and Jason must leave for Iolcos, where she anticipates being his queen. Circe senses Medea's desperation and asks whether Jason, to whom her past and powers will always be incomprehensible, truly loves her. Medea is certain that he does. After all, she says, they are married, and she will bear him heirs. But Circe warns her that she is blinded by her love, and that the people of Iolcos—each wanting the chance to marry a daughter to the hero—will unite in pressuring Jason to reject her.

Circe tries to make Medea see that Jason will not love her, both because he will never understand her and because he resents her superior power. Additionally, Circe is sure that the people of Iolcos will all want to share in Jason's glory, so they will try to get him to marry their daughters while pressuring him to leave Medea. This tactic shows how parents in ancient Greece often use their daughters as pawns, trying to marry them off for the family's benefit. Medea, however, refuses to listen to Circe's warning, hoping that her ability to bear children will keep Jason by her side. She is trying to be the woman that Jason wants—one who is powerless and whose value is limited to her sexuality.


Circe offers Medea an alternative: a life on Aiaia, where Circe will teach her. Medea is quiet for a moment, then asks about Jason. Circe urges her to leave him and embrace her identity as "A witch […] Who need answer to none but herself." Medea sneers, asking if that's how Circe sees herself. She mocks Circe further, calling her wretched, alone, and desperate for someone to brighten up her "childless days." No, Medea tells her, she will not stay in Aiaia.

Medea, likely wounded by Circe's words, decides to retaliate by insulting Circe. While Circe describes her life on the island as liberating—she can exercise her power and doesn't have to live in an oppressive, sexist society—Medea cruelly points out the repercussions of being a powerful woman: loneliness and isolation.

Wounded, Circe retaliates, telling Medea that Jason already despises and fears her. To Jason, Medea is only the means to an end. As soon as he has reached Iolcos, where the people will pressure him to expel "that foreign witch," he will abandon her. Medea is enraged but does not change her mind. As soon as Jason begins to wake, the two of them leave Aiaia.

Neither woman wants to give in to the other one's arguments, because doing so would admit weakness. Circe bluntly tells Medea that, because of her power, Jason will leave her. The implication is that Circe and Medea will have a similar fate, in that society will reject them both because they are powerful women.

Several hours later, Aeëtes's ship arrives. He calls out to Circe, who is thinking of how sweet he was a child. He orders her to hand over Medea, whom he knows stopped by. When Circe informs him that Medea has already left, he is furious. For a moment, Circe considers lying to Aeëtes and imagines that, if he thought that Medea had tricked Circe into letting her go, then she and Aeëtes could spend time together. But then Circe catches sight of Aeëtes's blank-faced boat crew, whose bodies show signs of torture. Realizing how far-gone Aeëtes is, she lets her dream of a reunion go. He threatens her, but she responds that he cannot harm her on her island. He is momentarily surprised, but then he sneers at her and sails away.

Circe longs to feel close to her brother again—but seeing the men that he tortured, she realizes that this is impossible. Circe has grown into a different, kinder person than her brother, who fits in with their father cruel father, Helios, and the other gods. Aeëtes clearly has no sympathy for Circe, which he makes clear by threatening her. He wants to exert dominance over his sister by punishing her. He is surprised when she informs him that she will not let him—he wasn't expecting her to push back on his demands, possibly because she never showed such strength when they were younger.

CHAPTER 14

Circe can't get Medea's words out of her mind and is haunted by her own loneliness. One day, Circe's napping is interrupted by a nymph who introduces herself as Alke. Alke announces that her father, a lesser river-god, has ordered her to serve Circe. Circe is dumbfounded until she remembers that lesser gods, always "clawing for any advantage," would see an association with Helios's daughter as distinguishing.

The gods are always scrambling for more power, which is exactly what Alke's father is doing by sending his daughter to serve Circe. He is unconcerned with his daughter's wishes, and he uses her as an opportunity to become distinguished among the other gods—he can claim closer association with Helios by having a daughter serve Helios's daughter.

Alke reveals that she was sentenced to serve Circe for a year as punishment for falling in love with a mortal. Circe assesses Alke and is pleased to see that she is not afraid of Circe's wolves and lions. Plus, to Circe, Alke's disobedience of her father is a point in her favor. So, Circe welcomes her.

Circe decides to welcome Alke because she shows some spunk, particularly by disobeying her father. Having been so lonely for so long, it is likely that Circe is hopeful that she and Alke can become friends. She is therefore excited that Alke shows characteristics that Circe sees in herself.

But Alke is a tedious companion: all she does is complain. Annoyed, Circe dismisses her, telling her that she lifts Alke's punishment. But Alke smugly responds that Circe has no power to overturn the gods' commands. Circe realizes that Alke, who readily accepts the authority of the gods as "natural," sees Circe as just another nymph. Although Circe's father is more powerful than Alke's, Circe is unmarried and therefore on a similar level as Alke. "So [Circe] [is] the one she would fight."

Alke has no desire to form a friendship with Circe. She is self-centered and either ignores or is unaware of Circe's goodwill. Frustrated, Circe tries to get rid of her, but Alke prioritizes the male gods' orders over Circe's. Circe realizes that, because she and Alke are both unmarried women, Alke sees Circe as having the same amount of power as she has. Instead of teaming up with Circe to resist the male gods' oppression of nymphs, Alke lashes out at Circe. Because Alke believes that she is on the same power level as Circe, Alke sees disobeying Circe as a fight that she is more likely to win.

Circe momentarily considers urging Alke to recognize that she is not the one Alke should rebel against, but then she realizes that Alke will never understand. Knowing what will make a difference, Circe orders Alke to leave her undisturbed or risk being transformed into a worm. Frightened, Alke avoids Circe for the rest of her sentence.

Circe knows that Alke will be unwilling to believe Circe, possibly because she assumes that Circe is trying to manipulate her like so many of the other gods do, which points to how the gods' jadedness prevents them from forming interpersonal connections. Circe decides to simply scare Alke away—she knows that fear is a very effective way to get people to obey her.


More divinities begin sending their daughters to Aiaia, much to Circe's dismay. She summons Hermes and demands that he tell Helios to order the nymphs from her island. Hermes returns with a message from Helios: delighted that lesser nymphs are serving his offspring, he will encourage the trend.

Helios isn't interested in how Circe feels about having her home infiltrated by a bunch of nymphs. He is only concerned about how the situation looks, which is that he and his family are so impressive and mighty that other gods serve them.

Alarmed at this turn of events, Circe begs Hermes to argue with Helios on her behalf. But Hermes is disgruntled at her seriousness. Instead, he suggests that she have sex with them and that, although nymphs always try to run, "they are terrible at getting away." Burning with rage, Circe orders him from her sight.

Hermes's refusal to help Circe indicates that their relationships was never a meaningful one. He only cares about his own amusement and gets annoyed when Circe expects anything more from him. As a god, it's likely that he receives plenty of prayer requests, so in this case, Circe isn't providing him with anything novel to keep him interested. Circe gets fed up with him after he makes a cruel joke about having sex with these nymphs—she doesn't think there is anything funny about objectifying and using other people in this way. Disgusted with his misogyny and lack of empathy, she dismisses him.

Aiaia continues to be occupied by nymphs, new ones replacing those that finish their sentences. To Circe, the nymphs' presence is a reminder that her power is subordinate to the power of others, from her father to the least of the river-lords. When she tries to comfort herself that at least she doesn't have to deal with exiled sons, she realizes her folly: boys are never punished.

Circe sees the nymphs' presence as a reminder that the other gods still rule over her, even if she is far away. Although Aiaia is her home, she doesn't even have the power to control who comes to stay on her island. Her realization that sons are never punished illustrates how men are allowed more liberties than women are in ancient Greece.

Circe sinks into despair; her work feels small and useless. One day, she wakes up to find that her lion, who has been her companion for over a hundred years, has died at last. Circe builds her lion a pyre and burns her on it. Afterward, she walks back into her house, feeling hollow and more alone than ever.

Circe's lion has long represented the feminine power and independence that Circe felt when she discovered her witchcraft. Its death thus symbolizes the crumbling of the illusion that Circe had about her own power in exile. Although Circe initially felt like her magic gave her control over herself and the beings around her, her power was only an illusion. Circe is still trapped on an island and is therefore still at the mercy of the gods' decisions, which is emphasized by the arrival of all the unwelcome nymphs. Significantly, the lion also dies after Circe has tried to kill Scylla but is unsuccessful, as well as after Circe's limited success in reducing the Minotaur's violence. Circe's power is not as boundless as she once felt it was. As a woman and a lesser divinity, Circe is still under the gods' control. Her good will doesn't rid the world of its evil, and her exile dooms her to a life of loneliness. With the death of her lion, her final companion, Circe is aware of her life's hollowness and feels powerless and unfulfilled.

Circe is singing in the house one morning when a voice asks if anyone is there. Surprised, Circe opens the door to see 20 mortal men. She drinks in their **scars** and wounds, which she finds delightful after "the smooth sameness of nymphs." One of them greets her and asks whether she, a goddess, will help him and his hungry crew. She smiles, glad to have something to fix, and invites them in.

Circe is delighted to see the mortals, particularly because she believes that she can actually do something tangible to help someone. After her failure to get rid of Scylla and her inability to rid herself of the nymphs, she hopes to at least fix the mortals' hunger and lessen their suffering. She is also happy to see people who aren't other nymphs, whom she sees as being very uniform in their behavior. In this way, she, like the other gods, is hungry for novelty.

After the men settle on the benches in her hall, Circe brings out plate after plate of food. The men gobble the food down, thanking her when she passes them. Circe's heart is warmed, and she thinks of how mortals value kindness and generosity because they know what it is to be vulnerable. Not wanting to share the moment with the nymphs, Circe shoos them away.

The men are grateful for Circe's hospitality in a way that the nymphs never were. Because mortals experience hunger, they know the relief of easing it. Nymphs, on the other hand, will survive regardless of whether or not Circe feeds them. Because they don't need anything, they don't know the feeling of gratitude when their needs are fulfilled.

When Circe refills the captain's cup with wine, he thanks her using the diminutive "sweet." She pauses—recalling how he had called her a goddess earlier—and then realizes that he must have meant it only as a general term. Remembering Hermes's words that her mortal voice will not inspire fear among men, she realizes that the men in her hall don't know that she is a goddess. Delighted at the freedom this offers her, she wonders how they think of her.

The captain used the term "goddess" not because he realizes that Circe is a divinity, but because it is a generic term of respect that he hoped would make her more willing to help them. Now that she is serving them, he uses a much less respectful term: "sweet." Such a term belittles her and suggests that he judges her to be inferior to him. Circe isn't alarmed at the change; she's actually excited, because now she can pretend to be a mortal. The novel has already shown that Circe prefers genuine connection to fearful obedience, so it is possible that she is excited to have a chance to get to know the mortals without them automatically fearing her because of her divinity.


The feasting tapers off, and Circe notices the men eyeing her tapestries and **golden** plates. She is charmed by their wonder after living with nymphs who are accustomed to such riches. The captain speaks again, asking when her husband will be home so that he can thank him. She laughs and tells him that she has no husband. The captain then asks after her father, whom she says lives far away. She kindly informs them that the house is hers, so their thanks should be directed toward her.

In ancient Greece, women so rarely had power of their own that there was almost always a "man-of-the-house," a patriarch who was the leader of the home. The men ask Circe whether lives with a husband or father because they do not expect that she would be independent and powerful enough to have a house of her own. Moreover, they don't thank Circe for the meal, even though she served them throughout their supper. This implies that they believe she, as a woman, is obligated to help and serve them.

The atmosphere immediately changes. Suddenly aware of the many male bodies, Circe goes back to her kitchen with the empty wine bowl. For caution's sake, she mixes one of her potions with the wine that she then brings to the men. They gulp it down.

Now that the men know that there is no male figure to fear, they feel that they are the ones in power. They went from being in need and therefore at someone's mercy to being more powerful than their host (or so they think). The shift in mood—from lighthearted to threatening—encourages Circe to use her powers, which the men certainly don't expect.

Aware of her voice in the quiet room, Circe asks for their names in return for the dinner she provided. The leader demands hers first. Unnerved by his brusqueness, she considers casting the potion's spell to send them to sleep. But she hesitates; even though many things have changed since her childhood, she still can't bring herself to speak out of turn.

Now that the men feel like they have power, they are eager to express it, ordering Circe to tell them her name before they respond to her question. Although she is getting more and more concerned with the captain's attitude, she can't bring herself to use her magic on them, possibly because her childhood taught her a fearful obedience of male authority.

Circe tells them her name, but no one responds. The men all get to their feet, and the captain steps forward. Even as he approaches, Circe finds herself thinking that she mustn't over-react, that something benign will happen, that Helios will intervene. She opens her mouth to ask a question, but at that moment, he throws her against a wall, pins her by her neck, and rips off her clothes. She can't speak with his arm on her throat, and as he rapes her, her one thought is that she is "only a nymph after all, for nothing is more common among [nymphs] than this."

The men don't really care about Circe's name—they just wanted her to obey a command. Circe doesn't take action for several reasons: on one hand, she fears that defending herself against the mortals would be over-reacting. Still concerned of what others think of her, Circe doesn't want to attract ridicule from any observing gods by showing fear when dealing with mortals. Circe's other main reason for inaction is that she is certain that Helios will protect her from any major harm. But Helios doesn't appear, and the captain rapes her, a brutal act that serves as an expression of his power. He subjects her to pain and trauma to demonstrate his dominance over her and over women. As the man rapes her, Circe realizes that, even with her magic, the men of ancient Greece will always see her as inferior and as an object to abuse.

Eventually the man steps back, and Circe can hear the other men clamoring for their turn. Before any of them approach, Circe feels her throat pop back into place. She no longer considers the sleep spell; the potion she mixed has another capability. She speaks the word of power, and the men begin to transform, their flesh and bones ripping and restitching until they are screaming pigs. That night, Circe kills them all.

To protect herself from any further attacks, Circe turns all the men into pigs. She then kills all the pigs, likely out of vengeance and as a way for her to feel like she's regained some form of control. In other words, she retaliates against their violent use of power with her own violent use of power.

CHAPTER 15

Circe scours the entire hall and scrubs herself clean, but nothing washes away the feeling of the captain's hands. She waits for Helios to come, sure that he will be enraged at either the abuse she just suffered or the fact that she killed so many men with magic. But he doesn't appear. Her thoughts turning toward her family, she is dully surprised that she wasn't raped sooner—many of her uncles used to grope her. She is certain that had one of them offered to pay her father for her, he would have accepted.

Circe is traumatized by the rape and scrubs herself in an effort to feel clean, but it doesn't help. She keeps expecting Helios to show up, but he never does, which shows how little he cares about his daughter. Circe is realizing that her father never had any interest in her well-being and only cares about his own power. In retrospect, she knows that Helios would have probably sold her to her uncles for them to sexually assault her, had he ever had the chance. The fact that Circe's uncles used to grope her also shows how men in ancient Greece are very cavalier in abusing the women in their lives.

More ships come bringing more men. Circe isn't sure what caused the change, but she wonders whether word got out that there is an island of unsupervised nymphs. Circe acknowledges that she could have cast a spell to disguise her island from mortal eyes, but she feels that it is too late: people know of Aiaia, and she will have men know that "the world is not as they think."

Circe believes that people are now coming to Aiaia because they hope to assault the nymphs who live there. Without any male figure on Aiaia to punish the attackers, the island appears (to the men) to be an unsupervised opportunity to take advantage of women. The men see women as inherently weaker than they are, so they don't fear any consequences for their actions. Circe decides to keep her island available for men to stop at so that she can disprove their notions that women are helpless objects that men can use for their own pleasure. Essentially, Circe wants to continue demonstrating her power to the men who would assault her, so that she can prove to them (and to herself) that she is not weak. Of course, even though she can transform some men, such individual transformations will not rid the world of the abuse that women suffer. In this way, Circe's magic is limited.

Very few groups of men go untouched by Circe's power. When she is sure of their honesty, she feeds them; ad if one of them catches her eye, she has sex with him, as though to prove to herself that she still owns her body. But the encounters always leave her feeling filthy and full of rage, anxious for when she can next transform men.

Circe occasionally has sex with a man to prove to herself that she still has power and control over her body, feelings that were torn away when the captain from the first ship raped her. But she doesn't enjoy the sex that she chooses to have, possibly because it doesn't lessen the trauma that she experienced, nor does it make her feel any more comfortable with men. Additionally, it is possible that the men she sleeps with aren't doing so consensually, as they may not feel comfortable turning her—a powerful witch—down. In this way, Circe would be guilty of participating in the same system of power imbalance and abuse.

Circe gets accustomed to the routine of the men's visits. She feeds them, bringing more food when they demand it. After the feasting, their eyes stray greedily to her fine furnishings. Then the leader—there is always a leader—asks if she really is alone. When she confirms her solitude, the man, assured now that no male relative will track him down for vengeance, strides forward. This is her favorite moment, when the men expect fear but she shows none. She speaks the word of power, and the men transform into pigs; she always saves the leader for last.

The men never assume that Circe is the head of the house; they are always expecting a male presence. And as soon as they find out that she is alone, they move to attack her. To them, a woman without a man is weak and vulnerable, and therefore available for them to abuse. Their desire to assault women is rooted in their desire to display and exercise power over someone else. It is for this reason that Circe loves the moment when they are surprised that she doesn't show any fear—their expectations are flipped, as she is actually the one with power. She likely saves the leader for last so that he can experience the most fear.

After the men are all swine, Circe confines them to a pen. When she walks past them, she thinks she can see the apologies in their eyes. But she knows that they are only sorry that they misjudged her and are paying the consequences for their assumptions. Once in a while, a pig escapes and casts himself from a cliff into the sea. Had it been a man, Circe muses, she might have felt sorry.

Circe's trauma deadens her empathy for others. She wants the men to feel afraid and she has no pity for them when they die. The men, having broken Circe's trust, have made her isolate herself further from the joy of genuine interpersonal connections.

At one point, an unidentified man asks Circe why she chose pigs as the form of transformation. She considers the question, knowing that it is tied to the moment when she the captain pinned her, and she was unable to speak. She thinks of how the men must feel in their new pig bodies: humiliatingly clumsy, covered in muck, and yearning for their hands. She often tells the pigs to find the advantages in their new form, like their sturdiness or their clever minds behind dull faces. They never seem to appreciate her speech, and she inwardly concludes that "men make terrible pigs." To the man, she simply says that he will have to live without knowing why. Then she acknowledges that she is ahead of the narrative.

Circe turns the men into pigs so that they feel helpless and humiliated, though she implies that "men make terrible pigs" because they are not clever like pigs are. Most of men's strength, she suggests, lies in their hands, which they use to control others by force. As pigs, they do not have the physical dexterity or power that they are accustomed to, which Circe is sure is an extra point of pain for the men. Additionally, given Circe's previous descriptions of their greed, it is likely that she also chose pigs because they are often associated with gluttony and filth.

Another ship arrives, but the sailors wait three days before they come to her door. When Circe greets them, she sees that they are a ragged group. The routine plays itself out, although now Circe turns the men into pigs before any of them have the time to step toward her. Just as Circe and her nymphs are rearranging the hall, one of her nymphs informs her that another, grizzled man is approaching her house.

At this point, Circe is so disillusioned that she turns the men into pigs before they even do anything wrong. She, like so many of her family members, perpetuates the cycle of violence and abuse, pitilessly transforming the men simply to show off her own power. She uses her power to make other people suffer so that she can feel in control, which is exactly what her family members do. For example, this is what Pasiphaë did with her magic when she turned Minos's semen into poisonous creatures that killed the girls he raped in front of her. By transforming all the men who arrive on her island, Circe also further isolates herself. In this way, men's attacks on women lead to their alienation.

When the grizzled man arrives at Circe's house, he informs her that his crew has recently sought out her aid, and that he hopes to do the same. Circe smiles and welcomes him. She brings him wine and food as usual, and she is surprised to see that his gaze falls on the upended chairs in the hall, and not on her furnishings. As she sits down with him at the fireplace, he admires her loom. Circe is shocked; not a single one of the countless men she has greeted has ever mentioned Daedalus's loom. The man continues to praise the design, mentioning that his wife is a talented weaver, and he would love a picture of it to bring back to her. The mention of his wife is equally jarring to Circe; none of the former men mentioned one.

The man is clever to draw Circe into conversation. This both gives him more time to strategize and also shows off his charming character, which may dissuade Circe from being so quick to thoughtlessly transform him. By mentioning his wife in a loving way, he also communicates that he has respect for a woman, something that none of the earlier men have expressed.

The grizzled man continues to speak warmly of his wife, at one point mentioning that she runs their home like a "regent." Hearing this word, Circe knows that he is not just a pirate or an average sailor. The man begins to speak of his crew, how they are in shabby shape after ten years of war. Circe asks what the war was about, and he lists of several vices, such as hubris, vanity, and power. Circe jokes that the war's causes sound like the reasons for the dramas of the gods. The man laughs, adding that she, as a goddess, may say such things, but he must thank the gods who aided him instead.

The man is aware that Circe is a goddess, which suggests that someone informed him of Circe's identity prior to his arrival. Following the man's description, the quest for power was a major cause for the extremely long and brutal war, which is more evidence of how power leads to violence and cruelty.

As the conversation continues, Circe sees that the grizzled man is a clever conversationalist who often makes jokes at his own expense. Yet as they talk, Circe notes that the man still hasn't sipped the spiked wine. When she points out that he must not like her wine, he asks after his crew, wondering aloud where they could be. Locking eyes with the man, Circe realizes that he has not been tricked.

Most of the people that Circe has met are so proud and intent on appearing powerful that they would never talk poorly of themselves, even as a joke. The man, however, frequently makes jokes at his own expense, which demonstrates his cleverness. His charisma disarms people and make him seem less threatening, which he can use to his advantage. Circe is intrigued by the man—he is quite novel to her.

At last, Circe tells the grizzled man that although he has been wise to not drink the wine, she is still the more powerful of the two. He does not show fear but tells her he wishes for them to settle things peacefully. Hearing the hum that she often feels when among her magical herbs, she asks the man whether he carries moly, and he says yes. Thinking of how familiar Hermes is with Circe's island, she realizes that Hermes must have given some of the flowers to the man. Remembering the prophecy Hermes had told her long ago, Circe tells the man that she believes that he is Odysseus, to which he responds that she is Circe.

As Hermes mentioned to Circe years ago, Odysseus is descended from Hermes. Hermes's helpful involvement in Odysseus's life likely has nothing to do with their being family, since that doesn't usually inspire kindness in gods. It's more likely that Hermes wants to help Odysseus in his endeavors so that if Odysseus achieves glory, then Hermes (as his ancestor) can claim some of that fame for his own.

Circe is thrilled to hear Odysseus say her name and she tells him that very few men knew who she is. Odysseus replies that "Most men […] are fools." Circe then tells Odysseus that they are at a stalemate: he has moly, and she has his men. She suggests a test, which piques Odysseus interest—she can see that he likes challenges. Attracted to him and his wit, she implies that they will find trust by having sex. Odysseus responds that sex would require him to part with the moly, leaving him vulnerable to attack. He proposes that she swear an oath to not hurt him, which she does.

Circe has been feeling alone for so long that she is delighted to hear someone call her by her name, a simple act that nonetheless makes her feel acknowledged. Additionally, Odysseus intrigues her, so she proposes that they have sex to find trust. This is a significant offer, given that a man's sexual violation of Circe is what broke her trust in men. Her deal with Odysseus has the symbolic implication that by sleeping with Odysseus—a man she respects and enjoys—on her own terms, she is rebuilding her ability to trust men.

CHAPTER 16

Looking back from the future, Circe thinks of how the famous song describing her meeting with Odysseus portrays her as weak and bested by Odysseus's guile. She isn't surprised; poets often reduce women's power in their stories.

Circe criticizes how history and literature often portray women as weak and easily outsmarted by men. In a society that chooses to believe that women are inferior to men, people falsely document events to reduce women's importance.

After Circe and Odysseus have sex, Odysseus describes how grueling his trip from Troy has been—they have encountered cannibals, storms, and a cyclops, and endured the fury of various gods. He adds that Athena, who was his supporter throughout the war, has now abandoned him because he didn't prayed to her before sailing away from Troy, since he was anxious to get home.

The gods treat humans as tools for their own personal gain or amusement. Multiple gods have used and mistreated Odysseus for their own purposes, not caring that their actions make his life miserable. Even Athena, who is supposed to be Odysseus's patron, mistreats him, probably so that he will be all the more grateful for her (and therefore give her more attention and offerings) when she decides to help him again. It is as Hermes described previously: gods prefer that humans are miserable, so that humans feel the gods' power more acutely.


Circe can see Odysseus's exhaustion plain on his face. Feeling her old desire to help those who are broken, Circe tells Odysseus that he can rest on her island for the evening. He is visibly relieved, but when she brings him to the feasting hall, he refuses to eat until his men are transformed back to their old selves. She leads him to the pig pen, where she turns the animals back into his crewmen.

Odysseus is the first man to treat Circe with dignity since the man raped her, and his kindness has a significant effect on her. Odysseus's treating Circe with respect has rekindled her empathy and her desire to fix problems, which suggests that respect is a key factor in forming genuine connections and inspiring people to help others. In particular, Odysseus's respect is what allows Circe to feel more whole—she feels her old desire to do good deeds, which make her feel more fulfilled—and less inclined to be violent.

Now joined by his men, Odysseus feasts joyfully. After the dinner, the men troop off to sleep, but Odysseus joins Circe at her fire for conversation. She impresses him by informing him that her loom had been made by Daedalus, whom Odysseus always admired as a child. After a few tales of the war, including Achilles and his downfall after the death of his lover, Odysseus begs Circe for more help: he and his fatigued men need more rest on her island. Inwardly rejoicing at more time with Odysseus, she grants them the month he requests.

Circe and Odysseus strengthen their bond through engaging conversation, even finding common ground on their admiration for Daedalus. By telling Circe about his experiences, Odysseus shows that he admires her companionship and trusts her with his stories. By asking for her assistance, he also recognizes her power (a rare gesture among the men in the novel), which shows that he respects her abilities. The more respect that Odysseus shows Circe, the more that she is inclined to help him and his men, which again shows how respect is a necessary part of connecting with others.

For the next several weeks, Circe relishes Odysseus's company. They dine together and, later, have sex, during which she loves running her hands over his battle **scars**. When they lie together afterward, Odysseus spins tales of the war.

Circe enjoys having Odysseus's companionship and conversation. Her admiration for Odysseus demonstrates her capability and longing for genuine connection, something that is not often found among the gods. Her exile—and her prior abuse at the hands of men—means that finding such a connection is extremely rare. In this way, Odysseus is perhaps a novelty to her; this is what intrigues her, much like the other gods are intrigued by new people and things.

One night, Odysseus tells Circe that the people who really win wars aren't the heroes or the generals. The winners are the men who can unite the men to work together, even if that means committing brutalities, from beating mutineers to abandoning ailing men whose wounds destroy other soldiers' morale. One should be practical, Odysseus explains, before one is honorable. Circe thinks of how some men might have balked at Odysseus's ruthlessness, but she knows that all heroes, such as Jason, commit horrible deeds.

Circe is not alarmed that Odysseus is so casual in admitting his readiness to commit violent acts, which suggests that the cruelty that she has witnessed throughout her long existence has jaded her. Additionally, she has engaged in the ruthlessness of the world by turning all men (whether guilty or innocent) into pigs. At this point in the book, she accepts that the world is a wicked place, and that brutality is necessary to survive.


The days pass, and Circe marvels at mortals' persistence and resilience. Odysseus often complains of various pains, and she does her best to soothe them, once even offering to use her magic to remove his **scars**. But he declines, asking her "how would [he] know [him]self" if his scars were gone. Circe is inwardly pleased at this decision; Odysseus's scars indicate that he is a man of many stories.

This passage draws a connection between scars and a person's history and identity. Odysseus's scars indicate what he's been through and how he's grown into the person that he is now. He even says that he wouldn't recognize himself without his scars, which suggests that a person's identity is formed by how they respond to and grow from their experiences.

Circe considers telling Odysseus a bit about her own past, but she worries that doing so would expose her weaknesses. Sometimes, she wonders what her body would look like if it **scarred** like a mortal's: missing fingers, charred skin, countless knife cuts from harvesting herbs. Circe remembers Aeëtes's words regarding Scylla from long ago, that ugly nymphs are "a stain upon the face of the world." Brushing aside her thoughts of scars, she embraces her identity as a witch without a past.

Circe, as a goddess, doesn't scar—she doesn't get to see how her prior failures affect her body, even though she knows that they affect her character. She momentarily considers telling Odysseus about her past but is worried that revealing her mistakes would make her ugly and undesirable to Odysseus, which reveals how society only values women for their sexuality and not for their character. Additionally, Circe doesn't fully trust Odysseus; she knows that he's a wily man who would nevertheless use her weaknesses for his own advantage, regardless of the kindness he's shown her. Her prior experiences with men have taught her that they will use women to get what they want. In this way, her jadedness as an immortal prevents her from developing a deep and fulfilling relationship.


Over the weeks, Circe learns that Odysseus is short-tempered and occasionally strikes out at his men. Circe is calm with him, drawing out his stories, which always end with him telling her of Ithaca, his home. When the month is nearing its end, Odysseus asks for an extension of time so that the men can stay the winter and leave in the spring. Circe is again secretly overjoyed, but she does her best to hide it, and she agrees to their continued stay.

While a compelling leader, Odysseus is a restless, violent man who lets his anger get the best of him. Circe knows how to keep him calm, but this also means that she likely hides any frustrations from him. Her catering to his moods in this way suggests an imbalance in their relationship, one that prevents Circe from really being herself with Odysseus.

Circe and Odysseus continue to grow closer, with Odysseus telling her of his past and complaining about his unruly men, and Circe asking him to do chores around the house. She knows that he will leave for home and that such an adventurous and cunning man—particularly a mortal—will never be content with an isolated and domestic life. But still, she weaves herself closer to him, preparing his favorite meals and asking his advice.

Circe longs to keep Odysseus with her, but she knows that he must leave at some point. Not only does he have a wife and a home away from Aiaia, but he is also a mortal, which means that he will die. Whatever relationship she builds with him must end at some point, but the joy that Circe feels in the present overrides her sadness about the future.

Although Circe tries to ignore the fact that Odysseus is married, she at last asks about his wife. He launches into an adoration of his wife, Penelope, whom he calls faithful and clever. Circe is stung to still hear so much love in his voice and realizes that all their time together has not changed his feelings for his wife. Thinking over their time together, Circe also notes that it is likely that Odysseus, so accustomed to war and its challenges, is using his stay with Circe as a kind of practice for domestic life.

Circe is jealous of Odysseus's love for Penelope, which makes clear that even after all the attention and care Circe has spent on Odysseus, his love for his wife is unchanged. Odysseus's unmoved love for another woman demonstrates how Circe is limited in her ability to change the world in which she lives, particularly when it comes to trying to change people's emotions or behavior. She loves Odysseus and secretly hopes that he will want to stay with her and make her happy in her exile—but she cannot change his mind, which demonstrates how trying to create change through other people is often ineffective. Additionally, Circe knowingly sleeping with a married man and trying to keep him for her own illustrates her selfishness and egotism, traits that are common in her family.

When winter comes, the men stay in the hall, where Odysseus tells them glorious tales of the war with Troy. They glow at these stories, whispering among themselves about how they once fought beside and against the great heroes of the war. Afterward, Odysseus laughs at them, mocking how they delude themselves into thinking that they had personally stood against warriors such as Hector, the greatest of the Trojans; even Odysseus himself wouldn't have dared.

Odysseus doesn't have much empathy for his men, as he makes clear in his taunting them. Mocking other men as stupid seems to be one of his ways of distinguishing himself. Odysseus's greatest asset is his intelligence, and he uses it ruthlessly to establish his dominance over others, whether through deceiving them or mocking them. In this way, Odysseus is an eager participant in the race for power, always seeking ways to outsmart others.

Circe asks Odysseus for more of Hector's story, so he tells her of how, after the Greeks won the war and killed Hector, one of the Greeks soldiers brutally murdered Hector's young son. Odysseus goes on to say that the murder was unavoidable, for sons must avenge their fathers' deaths. He even says that the thought comforts him that if he died, his son Telemachus would hunt down the murderers.

A vengeful murder is a way of showing power, as it demonstrates that a family is still strong after the death of the patriarch. Odysseus accepts these murders as natural and good, which shows how invested he is in shows of power.

When Circe asks Odysseus to describe Telemachus, he lingers on the boy's sweetness, telling her of all the characteristics that he can remember. Circe is surprised at all his memories of Telemachus, thinking how Odysseus knows more about his son from one year than Helios does of Circe for all eternity. He pauses, then tells Circe of how he still hopes to "leave some mark" on his son, who is now already a teenager. Ruminating on how fast mortals' lives pass them by, Circe imagines the young Telemachus grieving daily for his father, hoping that he may return. Lying in the dark with Odysseus, Circe suddenly wonders whether there might be "a living breath" still within her.

Odysseus wants to have an effect on his son and a hand in his development. Raising their children to be like them is a way for mortals to live on past their own deaths, which may encourage mortals to be more loving and involved parents than the gods are. Apart from wanting to have an effect on his son, Odysseus doesn't speak of using his son as a self-serving tool, an approach that's common among the gods. Odysseus's love for Telemachus inspires Circe, and her wondering if she has "a living breath" within her suggests that she is considering having a child to enrich her life.

CHAPTER 17

As spring approaches and the time for Odysseus's departure comes near, Circe imagines pleading with him to stay until the end of summer. But she believes that her request would disappoint him, for "**Golden** witches are not supposed to beg." So, she shows off her island to him and makes each day as glorious as possible. She can sense his hesitation, as do his men, who begin to pressure Odysseus to set sail.

Circe hasn't shown any of her weaknesses to Odysseus, so she is certain that he sees her as perfectly sufficient and independent, which would prove that she is powerful. In this way, Odysseus's interpretation of her power restricts who she can be and the feelings she can express. He knows her to be a "Golden witch," which is to say a powerful woman. Circe believes that he would see her expressing her emotions as a weakness—after all, she hasn't shared any of her most private thoughts and stories with him.

One night, Apollo visits Circe with a prophecy regarding Odysseus. Receiving the prophecy is not a pleasant experience: Apollo gags her by sending a rush of air down her throat. The vision that comes to Circe shows two scenes: one of Odysseus back on Ithaca, and the other of him visiting an old man, whom she knows to be Teiresias, in the house of the dead.

Apollo doesn't have the courtesy to ask Circe whether she is willing to receive his prophecy—he simply forces her to bear it, which reveals his entitlement and lack of empathy. He thinks only of accomplishing his own needs and never considers that the people he uses as tools may feel taken advantage of.

Circe stuffs her mouth with moly and the vision recedes. Furious at being used as a bearer of a prophecy, she exclaims that Apollo's actions will bring war from Helios. But he shrugs off her threat, nonchalantly saying that Helios was the one who had suggested Circe as a vessel for one of Apollo's prophecies. She should be honored, he says. When he leaves, Circe lies on the ground, feeling enraged and embarrassed at yet again being a pawn for the gods.

Apollo is so self-centered that he thinks Circe should be honored that he is using her. An extremely powerful god, he likely doesn't know how unpleasant it is to receive a prophecy; even if he did, it is unlikely that he would care. As the god of prophecy, he presumably uses people in this manner often and doesn't consider how each individual feels about being forced to receive his prophecies. Circe is furious that another god is using her as a tool. It's also embarrassing because it demonstrates that she has less power than so many other gods. Even on her island, the gods will still mistreat her.

Circe is miserable, as she knows from the prophecy that Odysseus will indeed return to Ithaca. That evening, Odysseus kneels before Circe and tells her that he must leave Aiaia. Circe is irritated at his sudden formalities, but she nonetheless tells him that he is free to do as he wishes, reminding him that she is "a host, not a jailer." He thanks her.

Circe prefers to receive love over fear-based homage. When Odysseus kneels in front of her, he implies that he fears her, stressing the power imbalance between the two of them. He doesn't see her as an equal, which makes Circe upset. Additionally, her negative reaction to Odysseus's kneeling illustrates that she resents her divinity in that it prevents people from treating her as an equal, which isolates her and prevents her from forming deep connections.

Circe then tells Odysseus of the prophecy, that he must visit Teiresias in the underworld before he makes it home. Odysseus pales at this instruction and despairingly asks whether the gods' games will ever end. A wave of sympathy washes over Circe. She then tells him how to get to the underworld and how he must pour sheep's blood into a pit to summon the spirits, among whom will be the prophet Teiresias. Odysseus grimly accepts her guidance.

Circe is sympathetic toward Odysseus's despair because she also knows what it feels like to be a pawn for the gods. Circe's empathy allows her to put aside her anger at Odysseus's leaving her. Instead of unleashing her fury on him, she kindly helps him plan his journey to the underworld. Her reaction to Odysseus's leaving her is very different from her reaction when Glaucos left her for Scylla. Instead of vowing to do evil to keep Odysseus by her side (as she did in her situation with Glaucos), she sets aside her selfish desires to help him. Her decision to be benevolent shows how she has grown over the course of the story. Instead of selfishly imprisoning him for her own desires—like Pasiphaë did with Daedalus, though she desired power rather than love—Circe proves that she is unlike her cruel family.

Odysseus is too anxious to sleep. At sunrise, Circe walks outside with him, only to find the dead body of Elpenor, one of Odysseus's men. He has fallen from the roof, where he liked to sleep. Odysseus stonily accepts the man's death as a sign that "The Fates [have] him in their yoke again." Circe tells him to leave for the underworld now and return later to Aiaia to perform funeral rights for Elpenor. He and his men leave that day.

On Aiaia, Odysseus has been able to live a generally carefree life without the gods' interference. With one of his men dying on the day he is leaving Aiaia, he realizes that he is leaving the sanctuary from the gods' abuse that the island somewhat affords. He is a victim of the gods, who carelessly use him. His life means nothing to them, apart from what they can gain from it.

Circe spends the day preparing Elpenor's body for his funeral and then harvesting herbs. As she works, she wonders how she will behave once Odysseus is gone for good. Her heart hurts at the thought of losing him, but she knows that she will not go mad as storied lovers do—she has known all along that, as a god, any mortal lover will leave her.

Circe is resigned to Odysseus's leaving. Even though it hurts to see him go, she knows that he, a mortal, is destined to leave her. Her immortal life destines her to loneliness, as all her relationships with mortals have to end. Having already loved and lost in the past, her feelings are not as strong as they used to be. This shows how immortal life wears gods down, making them emotionally numb.

Circe pictures Odysseus among the dead. She had given him a vial to fill with the blood that the ghosts touched—she knows that their presence will give the blood power. Thinking of how this insensitive request would be something that her brothers would order, she regrets having asked it. She observes her boxed herbs, her eyes resting on her silphium, a plant that, up until this last month, she has consumed monthly since she first had sex with Hermes.

Circe's request that Odysseus fill a vial with blood for her reveals some selfishness. When she reflects on it, she realizes how callous the action was and how it makes her like her brothers—and she regrets it, which demonstrates the importance of self-reflection in personal growth. When looking over her herbs, she spots silphium, an herb that the ancient Greeks used as a contraceptive. The implication is that Circe has been using silphium to prevent pregnancy up until her final month with Odysseus, which suggests that she has been trying to conceive a child with him. By doing so, she is taking her future into her own hands, choosing to have a child so that she no longer feels purposeless and alone on her island. She wants connection with others and makes the decision to have a child to achieve this goal. However, she has also been deceiving Odysseus in the process.

When Odysseus and his men return, Circe and her nymphs greet them with a feast. The men are pale from their encounter with the dead, but the food revives them. As the sun sets, Circe pulls Odysseus aside to tell her about the visit. He grimly tells her of seeing his old war companions, whose spirits now haunt the underworld and envy his life. Teiresias has given him another prophecy, he continues bitterly: Ithaca will be occupied by other men when he returns, and he will "die of the sea" while on land.

The gods are not letting Odysseus live his life free of their demands and expectations. He follows their instructions to go to the underworld only to receive more prophecies of what they expect from him.

Teiresias also informed Odysseus that he will stop at Thrinakia, the island with Helios's sacred cows, on the way home. Circe is chilled by this news, knowing that Helios will kill them if any of Odysseus's men hurt the cows. She urges him to not set foot on the shore, because if they see the cows, Odysseus and his men will be tempted to slaughter them.

Circe knows that Helios values his perfect cows far more than any mortal lives. If the men kill his cows, Helios will take it as an attack on his power and destroy the men.

Circe plots out the rest of Odysseus's trip, telling him what dangers her will face. She avoids mentioning the worst peril until the end: he will have to face Scylla. Circe feels the weighty responsibility of yet more deaths at Scylla's jaws. Odysseus wearily thanks her for the advice.

Circe has never let go of her regret over Scylla's transformation. Significantly, she doesn't try to dismiss her guilt or rationalize her action. She knows that what she did was wrong and wishes to undo it, which sets her apart from her family and signifies her personal growth from callous to caring.

Circe, Odysseus, his men, and the island nymphs give Elpenor his proper funeral, after which Odysseus and his men pack their ship. As they prepare to leave, Circe ruminates on the **scars** of the brilliant-minded Odysseus, and how "he let [her] pretend that [she] had none."

Odysseus's scars represent his flaws and his history. While Circe got to know Odysseus intimately, she never felt comfortable enough to be vulnerable with him and show him her faults. She let him believe (and pretend herself) that she is wholly powerful, without weaknesses. Hiding her flaws reduces her personality and prevents a deeper relationship, but it also protects her from manipulation or his disappointment.

CHAPTER 18

As soon as Odysseus departs, Circe is overcome by sickness. Her nymphs recoil in shock—a goddess's pregnancy is always lovely. Circe orders her nymphs to leave her island, saying that "This is for [her]." They indeed flee—perhaps, Circe thinks, because their fathers were worried their daughters might follow suit and also become pregnant by a mortal.

Circe is insistent on her independence and wants to raise the child herself, without risking anyone else ruining things. People have disappointed her many times in the past—and many of her attempts to persuade people to help her have failed—so, her decision to isolate herself from others could be her way of making sure that she has control over her situation. She can trust herself to achieve her goals, and she isn't willing to trust anyone else.

Circe's sickness is unrelenting. Knowing that she will be unable to defend herself from passing pirates, she casts an illusory spell over her island to make it look inhospitable. But even as she writhes in pain, she is comforted by the purpose growing within her. She can sense that her child is a boy and, as he grows, she becomes increasingly aware of his fragile mortality. But her excitement surpasses her fear, and she imagines the richness that her son will bring to her life. Even as she remembers Odysseus's wishes for more children, she declares that the child is for her alone.

Circe has been longing for purpose and companionship, which she believes she will get by having a child of her own. She chose to have a child for herself alone, which shows how she is taking initiative to get the life that she wants as.

Circe's labor is pure agony. As the hours drag on, she begins to fear that her son will die before he is born. She tries to summon Eileithyia, the goddess of childbirth, but the goddess does not come. Remembering with a chill that Eileithyia could be held back by another god, Circe realizes that a divinity may be preventing the birth. Emboldened by outrage, Circe performs a cesarean delivery on herself. The operation is successful, and she pulls out her screaming son. Relieved and ecstatic at his cries, she holds him close, telling him that they "do not need anyone." She names him Telegonus.

The fact that someone is trying to kill Circe's son suggests that some god has plans that they selfishly prioritize over an infant human's life. Circe tries to summon another goddess to help, but the divinity doesn't come, which demonstrates again that Circe cannot rely on others for help. But she doesn't wait for any other help. She takes initiative by performing a cesarean delivery on herself to birth her child, showing her independence once again.

Motherhood is like a battle for Circe. Telegonus incessantly screams for her, needing food, a new diaper, or sleep. Once, while trying to rock a screaming Telegonus to sleep, Circe bitterly exclaims that at least his cries mean he isn't dead. She immediately reprimands herself, and her thoughts are swamped with the many ways that mortals died. Seeing a cut on his cheek, she is paralyzed by the fear that someone may kill him. At this moment, she realizes that Telegonus is her own vulnerability. After a lifetime of persisting through various heartbreaks, she knows that Telegonus, whom she loves desperately and would do anything to protect, is at last "the thing the gods could use" to break her.

Telegonus's mortality makes Circe aware of how vulnerable mortals are. As a goddess, she never had to worry about death or the fragility of the human body. Telegonus, however, makes her aware of mortality's weaknesses. Because she loves Telegonus so much, she shares in mortals' anxieties over death, which no other god—apart from Prometheus—has expressed. Circe is aware of another way Telegonus brings weakness into her life: he is what the gods can use to control her. Because she would do anything to protect him, the gods could threaten Telegonus's safety to make Circe obey them. The gods have shown themselves to be selfless and uncaring toward others' pain, so Circe knows that they would not hesitate to harm an infant child to achieve their own goals to gain more power.

Telegonus grows and his screaming ceases. But as he learns to sit, grab, and crawl, Circe becomes aware of all the many things—from the fire to her knives—that could hurt him. Indeed, there are so many near-accidents that Circe at last grasps that the god that had prevented Eileithyia from coming may be trying to strike again. Needing to know if her son's life is in danger, Circe visits a seeing pool on her island. When a vision confirms that a god is trying to kill Telegonus, she pleadingly asks who it is, but she gets no response. With mounting panic, she recalls that only the most powerful gods can avoid her vision.

Circe's worst fears are realized: a god is indeed trying to kill her son. She doesn't know why, but a god's involvement implies that Telegonus somehow threatens a god's plans or desires. Again, the gods show no mercy or compassion for mortals, whose mortality and vulnerability they do not empathize with.

That night, after surrounding a sleeping Telegonus with her protective wolves and lions, Circe demands that the god responsible for the attacks on her son step forward. After Circe's accusation that the god is too cowardly to show themselves, Athena steps out of the shadows. Athena is sharp, her voice heartless. She demands that Circe hand over her child, adding that there is no changing what Athena wishes to happen.

Athena only shows herself when Circe insults her courage. Prior to that, she had no intention of obeying Circe's demands—to obey Circe would imply that Circe has power over Athena. Athena tells Circe that she cannot change her (Athena's) mind, which is another way that Athena means to show Circe that she's powerless.

Circe trembles, terrified, but refuses. Athena commands again that Circe give her Telegonus, promising that the child's death will be quick. Knowing that "there [is] no mercy among gods," Circe is suddenly struck by how Athena, one of the most powerful gods, is *asking* Circe for the infant. Armed with this realization, Circe then tells Athena that she suspects that, given that Telegonus is still living, Athena is somehow prevented from directly murdering the boy. The flash in Athena's eyes confirms Circe's suspicion.

The fact that Athena is asking Circe for Telegonus—instead of simply killing him outright—implies that Athena cannot *harm the child. After all, as Circe says "there [is] no mercy among the gods," who would sooner take what they want than ask for it.*

Athena raises her spear and tells Circe that, although she may not be able to kill Telemachus, she can do as she wishes to Circe. Circe is chilled by the implication but responds that such a move would anger Helios and the other Titans, who may attack Olympus in retaliation. Athena tells Circe that she knows her threats are empty, but she nonetheless hesitates.

While Circe may know that Helios wouldn't intervene on her behalf, she hopes to scare Athena from harming her, which would leave Telegonus vulnerable to Athena's attacks. But Circe's threat that Helios will retaliate with war makes Athena pause, which demonstrates how fear can be used to gain control. By making Athena afraid of the consequences of her actions, Circe keeps herself safe from the goddess's attacks.

Circe asks why Athena so desperately wants Telegonus dead, but the Olympian refuses to give her an answer. Her voice softening, Athena tells Circe that it is better for the boy to die before he grows older and Circe becomes more attached. She offers a trade: if Circe hands over Telegonus, Athena will send another man to Circe so that she may bear another son, one that Athena would bless throughout his life. Circe looks into Athena's smiling face. Despite her softened voice, Circe knows that Athena is not speaking from love; this is all a ploy, and it hinges on the belief that children can be substituted.

In ancient Greek mythology, Athena was one of the virgin goddesses. Given this, Athena will never know what it means to have and love a child, which could partially explain her total lack of empathy for Circe. Having never had a child herself, Athena couldn't possibly know the attachment a mother can have with her child, so she doesn't hesitate to demand that Circe let her son die. Athena's lack of empathy is also evident in her suggestion to exchange Telegonus with another son. Mortals are so meaningless to her that she believes that she can substitute Telegonus with a different child, and Circe would never notice the difference. The implication is that Athena sees most mortals as all being the same, possibly because she has seen so many of them live and die during her existence that they blend together.

At last, Circe speaks, criticizing Athena for thinking that Circe is "a mare to be bred at [her] whim." She again refuses to hand over her child. Instantly, Athena's gentle manner evaporates. She snarls that she will kill Telegonus one day, and that Circe cannot always protect her son. Athena disappears as Circe calls out that Athena does not know her power.

Circe is insulted at Athena's heartless suggestion that she just have another child at Athena's convenience, as it implies that Athena has the right to control Circe's reproduction. When Circe doesn't obey Athena, she is defying the gods and their power. She refuses to let Athena commit an act of senseless violence, which represents how Circe is refusing to continue taking part in the gods' cycle of power and abuse. Even though Athena promised her glory and power through a different son, Circe declines; to her, glory isn't worth losing her son for. Her decision distinguishes her from her mother, who was obsessed with having children for the purpose of gaining power through them. By denying Athena, she also ensures her independent future in raising Telegonus—Athena will certainly not allow others to help her.


CHAPTER 19

Circe is overwhelmed with terror for what will happen to Telegonus. She wracks her brain to think of some spell to protect him, keeping the boy tied to her at all times. At last, she thinks of a plan. Gods, except those that rule the dead, are not allowed to step into the underworld. Circe begins to work with the blood that Odysseus collected from his visit with the dead.

Circe uses the power that she has to protect Telegonus. Significantly, she doesn't ask anyone for help. At this point in the story, Circe has learned that it is usually ineffective to trust other people to help her.

The two potions Circe creates are complicated: one of them contains the blood from the underworld, and the other contains bits of all parts of the island. She is exhausted but is at last ready to cast the spells. She pours the blood-based draught onto the highest peak of Aiaia and speaks the words of power to create a protective layer of "living death," which Athena will be unable to penetrate. The other spell binds the whole island to Telegonus, so that it—and all the creatures and plants on it—will protect the boy if he is threatened.

While Circe's previous act of defying the gods—transforming Glaucos and Scylla using forbidden magic—was done out of selfishness, disobeying Athena is done out of love for her son. Additionally, when she was determined to keep Glaucos for herself, she was ready to commit evil deeds, which she did eventually do when she transformed Scylla into a man-eating monster. Now, however, she commits no evil or violent acts in protecting Telemachus. The difference in her approach demonstrates how she is determined to no longer add to the cruelty of the world in which she lives. Although she cannot stop all the violence of the world, it is in her power to refuse to contribute to it.

Circe waits for some response from Athena, but none comes. She is exhausted from the work. Plus, the spells need renewing every month, which means that her work is never finished. But Circe will do whatever it takes to protect her son. Feeling relieved at last, she joyfully tells Telegonus that they are safe at last.

The fact that Circe has to continually renew her spells is representative of how her work as a mother, and as someone dedicated to standing against evil, is never done. Her commitment to protecting her son is also a testament of her love for him. None of the other immortal parents have shown such love for their children, possibly because they knew that their children would continue to exist, with or without help. Circe's love for her son and her understanding of mortality set her apart from her immortal family.


Looking back, Circe calls herself a fool. Telegonus is an impossibly restless child, and Circe spends her days trying to catch and calm him. The only thing that brings him peace is the sea. He is always most difficult when Circe is hurriedly working to renew to the protective spells. It is during one such period when Telegonus has a particularly wild screaming fit. In a moment of fury, Circe brews a sleeping draught, something she had forbidden herself to do, as it is too reminiscent of something Aeëtes would do.

Even though Circe had forbidden herself from using magic on her son to calm him, she lets her anger get the better of her. Both her fury and her willingness to use magic to control her son show that, in some ways, she is still similar to her family. Her fury reflects Helios's terrible temper, and her sleeping draft is reminiscent of how Aeëtes used magic to wipe away men's minds and control them. Even though Circe makes constant efforts to confront her family's vices—like their cruelty and selfishness—she is still not rid of them.

Circe gives Telegonus the potion and then, as he continues screaming, says the word of power. He drops to the floor, his eyes revealing his panic. Horrified at what she has done, she breaks the spell. Telegonus crawls away from her in fear, causing Circe to weep with shame. She apologizes profusely until Telegonus lets her hold him.

Circe immediately regrets giving Telegonus the draught. She doesn't want her son to be terrified of her; she has always preferred receiving love instead of fear. Her instant guilt and undoing of the spell show how Circe realizes her fault more readily than in the past. She doesn't want to be like her family, using power to control or abuse others.

That night, when Telegonus is asleep, Circe desperately asks the slumbering boy why he is so wild. At her question, she envisions Helios's halls and remembers how she had wanted to run about, shake her father from his work, and learn all there is to know. She, of course, never did, as she knew that Helios would scorch her. Looking down at her son, it dawns on her that Telegonus is not afraid of being punished for his curiosity.

Circe realizes that the reason why Telegonus is bolder than she was as a child is because he isn't afraid of his parent, the way Circe was afraid of Helios. Because she raises him with love instead of fear, he knows that he can explore and test boundaries without being afraid of punishment. By treating Telegonus with kindness and patience—even though it is difficult and requires self-discipline—Circe sets herself apart from her family.

Years pass, and at last, Telegonus calms. He is a sweet boy, happiest when he is by the sea. As he grows older, he begins to make up imaginative stories with clear morals about the value of bravery and integrity. Circe cherishes Telegonus's innocence and how he sees the world as a simple place of right and wrong. She knows that Telegonus's worldview is unrealistic, but she doesn't want to ruin it for him.

Telegonus hasn't grown up knowing that the world is a vicious place—he hasn't witnessed gods squabbling for power and the violence that these conflicts leave behind. Because Circe brought him up lovingly and without fear, he is ignorant of how the world of the novel is structured on a hierarchy of power that is maintained through fear.

One evening, Circe decides to answer Telegonus's questions about his father. Although he has asked many times before, it is not until now that she is ready to tell him. When Telegonus asks whether Circe thinks that Odysseus is still alive, she confirms that she believes he is (she guesses he is about 60 years old). Telegonus presses her to tell more stories of his father. As she tells him the tales that Odysseus had told her long ago, she finds herself altering them to make them less brutal, realizing that her impression of Odysseus has since changed.

Circe doesn't want to ruin Telegonus's innocence by telling him the truth of Odysseus's brutality. In fact, in the face of Telegonus's naïveté, Circe finds herself *questioning Odysseus's character. It is perhaps because Telegonus is so pure that Odysseus's acts seem so brutal now, and Circe—determined to keep her son safe and sweet—wishes for the world to be as safe and wholesome as Telegonus assumes it to be.*

The few times that Circe does tell a tale in all its brutality, Telegonus, upset, tells her that she must have gotten it wrong, believing that Odysseus must be honorable through and through. Sometimes, Circe wonders how she would tell Telegonus her own stories. But he never questions her about her past and only ever clamors for more stories of his father.

Telegonus is more interested in his father than he is in Circe. Although one might assume that this is because Telegonus is adopting ancient Greece's sexist ideas, the truth is that he is isolated from society, as he is alone with Circe on Aiaia. It is likely that he is so much more curious about Odysseus because Odysseus is new to him. While Circe is a familiar figure, Odysseus is distant and mysterious to Telegonus, which is what makes him interesting.

One day in fall, Telegonus spots a floundering ship near their island. He begs Circe to lift the spell so that they can help them, insisting that the men onboard would be thankful for any aid. Circe hesitates, darkly thinking how "men in most need hate most to be grateful, and will strike at you just to feel whole again." He continues to pressure her, so she at last relents, under the condition he stay in his room until the men have drunk their wine.

While Telegonus is eager to help people in need, Circe is less willing. She knows firsthand that men are not always grateful for the help that they receive—the man who raped her had accepted her help only moments prior. Given her experiences warding off men's attacks, she believes that men resent needing help, especially from those who they believe to be inferior to them, as it makes them look and feel weak. Therefore, they are often eager to show off their power in other ways, so they look for ways to exercise their dominance. In Circe's case, the men she helped were anxious to abuse her to prove to themselves that they were still dominant over women, whom they saw as inferior to them.


Circe quickly mixes the same old potion to combine with the wine. When the men come, she wants nothing more than to cast them out—but, aware of Telegonus's silent presence in the other room, she welcomes them to her hall. After the men eat, the captain, his eyes hungry, rises toward her, asking whom to thank her for the meal.

Circe is cautious and expects the men to attack her, just as they did before. Sure enough, she sees the captain acting in the same way that the man who raped her did. Notably, the man never thanks Circe for the meal, not expecting that she, a woman, would be the head of the house.

At that moment, Telegonus, who is 15 at the time, steps into the hall. He confidently announces that they have the goddess Circe, Helios's daughter, as their host. He introduces himself as Circe's son and welcomes them. The captain kneels at Circe's feet. Telegonus tells the man to stand and then sits among the ship's crew to eat with them. Circe watches with astonishment as the men, eyes filled with admiration, gather around Telegonus, eager for his attention. The men stay on the island for three days, all the while seeking out advice from Telegonus as they fix their boat.

While the men appeared to be ready to assault Circe, they instantly respect Telegonus, which demonstrates the misogyny of ancient Greece. Simply put, men readily respect other men while they are generally quick to abuse women. Even though Telegonus is young and uneducated about boats, they accept his direction and advice simply because he's male.

For the following months after the boat's departure, Telegonus spends most of his time by the beach and away from Circe, at one point asking if he can have a cave to himself. She allows him, knowing that all young people need secrets. On his 16th birthday, he brings her down to the cave, inside of which is a boat of his own creation. Circe is impressed, until Telegonus accidentally lets slip that Hermes has been helping him build it. Furious, she demands to know everything the god has told him.

Because Odysseus is descended from Hermes, Telegonus is also related to the god. But his helping Telegonus is unlikely to be simply out of kindness; given that Hermes has never done a selfless act throughout the entirety of the story, it is likely that his helping Telegonus will somehow serve him. Hermes's intervention shows that the gods do sometimes take interest in specific mortals, although it is almost always for their own benefit.


Telegonus reveals his intention to sail to Ithaca to meet Odysseus. He informs Circe that Hermes has promised to help him. She scoffs at that and warns him that Hermes is a liar and trickster. Telegonus tries to reassure her, saying that he is bringing his bow and has been learning how to use a spear. He gestures toward the makeshift spear that he has constructed from a stick and a kitchen knife.

Circe knows that Hermes is not to be trusted; if he is trying to help Telegonus leave Aiaia, it is because he hopes that his descendent will do some great deed that will reflect well on him. Meanwhile, Telegonus shows his innocence by assuming that his bow and spear will help him in the face of Athena's wrath. Telegonus still doesn't understand that the gods are brutal and unforgiving of those who threaten to disrupt their power.


Fury flooding through her, Circe sharply tells Telegonus that he cannot be sure that Odysseus, let alone Telemachus, will welcome him—he is a bastard son, after all. She reminds her son that Athena still wants him dead. When Telegonus still does not back down, Circe tells him she forbids him from leaving and threatens to burn his boat.

Circe realizes that even if Athena doesn't kill him, Odysseus or Telemachus might. Telemachus, as Odysseus's rightful heir, may be especially unwelcoming to Telegonus. He may view Telegonus as a threat who will try to take away Telemachus's chance at ruling Ithaca after Odysseus's death. Having grown up with such an innocent view of the world, Telegonus doesn't understand Circe's fears.

That night, Telegonus prepares to sleep outside to show his defiance. On his way out, Circe tells him that he has to acknowledge the threat that Athena poses. He snaps, ranting that fearing the gods is the only thing Circe cares about while he longs to freely live his life, like so many fearless, happy people around the earth. He exclaims that she has never let him live and that, even if he dies, he will accept that price if it means getting to see life beyond the island. Gripped by rage, Circe threatens him to drug him so that he will never leave. To Circe's satisfaction, Telegonus looks afraid at last. He runs out the door.

While Circe is right that Athena does pose a constant threat, Telegonus makes the argument that a life lived in fear is not worth living, a philosophy that Circe herself embodies. After all, she defied Athena because she knew that she would rather keep her son than obey the gods out of fear. Just as she has decided to live life as independently as her exile allows, Telegonus is seeking his own freedom. His struggle for independence enrages Circe, which shows that she still has Helios's anger when she is disobeyed. To keep control over Telegonus's, she makes him afraid, threatening to wipe away his mind, an act that Aeëtes committed. Her reaction shows that she is still resistant to letting go of her power, even if she is using it to keep her son safe.



Thinking of Telegonus's childhood, Circe sees that her wish for him to grow up unafraid has come true. Now, she wonders whether she should have told him more of the cruelty of the world. Perhaps, she thinks, she should have made him observe every process of her protective spell work, so that he would know the labor she has put into keeping him alive. But Telegonus has always wanted to leave—he has always loved the sea. Knowing she will do anything to keep him safe, she starts crafting a plan.

At first, Circe wishes that she had made Telegonus realize the cruelty of the world and the work that she put into keeping him safe, all so that he would realize how indebted he is to her. This thought is reminiscent of Tethys's suggestion to Circe at the beginning of the story, that she should make Glaucos sacrifice something in order to make sure that he appreciates her help. This is a transactional approach to giving that takes away the generosity behind the act of helping someone. But Circe is able to put aside these thoughts, demonstrating again that she is overcoming her family's selfishness through reflection.

CHAPTER 20

Circe wakes Telemachus to tell him that she will help him leave for his journey, so long as he agrees to several restrictions. Overjoyed, he agrees to follow whatever rules she decides. To start, she has him help her make a potion with which they will protect his ship. After telling him to stay on the ship until he can speak directly with Odysseus, she then goes over his route with him and advises him how to behave with Penelope and Telemachus, warning him to be on his guard. He confidently tells her not to worry.

Circe's decision to not just let Telemachus go, but also to help him on his way, shows that she is not giving into selfishness, which she has struggled with previously. She puts his desires above hers, demonstrating her capacity for empathy, an emotion unfamiliar to her family. Compassion isn't easy for her to exercise, but she has learned it through acknowledging her faults and wanting to be kinder than selfish family. Additionally, Circe's realization that she cannot convince Telemachus to remain on Aiaia to keep him safe is representative of how trying to change people's minds is often ineffective. Knowing this, she takes action to keep him safe by doing what she can (magic) while letting him pursue his goals.

The last thing to complete before Telegonus leaves is a task that Circe saves for herself. Stepping into the ocean, she uses her naiad power to slide into Oceanos, the river that runs around the world and travels beneath the deepest part of the ocean. She and Aeëtes had gone to this deep part of the ocean together to see Trygon, an ancient and powerful sea creature with a poisonous tail. Its stinger could kill a mortal instantly and doom a god to eternal pain. Circe recalls how Aeëtes's eyes flashed at the sight of the tail, marveling at what a weapon it could be.

Aeëtes is always looking for ways to accumulate more power—so, when he saw the creature Trygon, he instantly considered how it could serve his purposes. Aeëtes's greediness for the tail demonstrates how, in a society that is obsessed with power, people don't hesitate to use the beings around them as tools to gain more power.

Circe knows that she is breaking her exile by going to Trygon. She hopes that the night will prevent any gods from seeing, but it is still a risk. She travels through the water until she reaches the deepest part of the ocean. When she arrives, she calls out to Trygon, challenging him.

Visiting Trygon is the first time that Circe has dared to break her exile—by doing so, she is disobeying the gods. Instead of seeking help from someone else, she takes matters into her own hands to directly achieve what she wants, which is a way to protect her son. Her initiative in breaking her exile suggests that she knows that the most effective way to achieve change is to do it herself.

When Circe sees Trygon swimming toward her, she shrinks away. He is huge, a great winged creature. His voice speaking in her mind, he asks why she has come. She tells him that she seeks to claim his stinger, with which she hopes to protect her son from Athena. He tells her that it is impossible—many people have come to take his tail, including Aeëtes, but none of them could. She presses on, insisting there must be some way. At last, he tells her that the stinger is hers if she first experiences its poison and that, when she no longer has need for it, that she must throw it back into the ocean so that he may claim it again.

Trygon will only give his tail to someone who is willing to sacrifice themselves for it. The implication is that anyone who agrees to suffer for the tail likely has a selfless goal in mind, given that people who care only for themselves would not agree to doom themselves to eternal torment. Trygon's terms have turned away everyone else who has come to visit him, which suggests that those who have come to get his tail have all been selfish.

Circe inwardly shrivels at the thought of eternal pain, but she forces herself to think of Telegonus. She tells Trygon that she agrees to his conditions. She walks across the ocean floor to him, her legs trembling. Envisioning her son's face, she reaches for the stinger, but Trygon has whipped it away from her. He tells her that the fact that she would have touched the poison is enough. Circe is confused and suddenly reluctant, but Trygon presses her to follow through on her demand, telling her how to cut the stinger off. She does so, and the sight of Trygon's **golden** blood feels like a curse. She watches the blood trail behind him as he swims away.

Circe loves her son so much that she is willing to be tortured for eternity, which shows that she is willing to sacrifice herself in order to protect someone else. Trygon recognizes Circe's selflessness and decides to give Circe his tail without her needing to experience the poison. The implication is that, because Circe understands the meaning of sacrifice, she will not take his sacrifice lightly in turn. Circe does indeed appreciate the weight of Trygon's sacrifice, even becoming reluctant to cut the stinger off. She would have fought Trygon for his tail because she is used to defending herself against people who want to harm her. By offering her his tail, Trygon makes Circe understand the selfishness of causing someone else pain in order to achieve one's own goals. When she cuts off his tail, he bleeds gold, symbolizing how he is losing his power for her, which is a great sacrifice in a world where power is the most prized thing a person can have. Circe feels cursed as she watches him bleed because she knows that she is weakening this creature for her own benefit—she is participating in the cycle of power and abuse, committing a bloody act for her own gain (even if her goal is to help someone else).

When Circe returns to Aiaia, she swaps the blade on Telegonus's spear with the poisonous stinger, over which she places a moly-infused sheath. When she tells her son that his spear now holds the tail of Trygon, he is awestruck and stoops to bow. But she makes him rise, telling him that such formalities don't suit either of them. After breakfast, she sends him on his way, watching his ship until it disappears from view.

Circe has shown many times throughout the story that she dislikes when people bow to her, as the gesture reminds her of the distance between herself and the mortals that she loves and cares about. This distance consists of the imbalance of power, which inspires fear in mortals and prevents them from treating her as an equal—and equality and respect are fundamental in creating the genuine connections that Circe yearns for. Circe is unlike many of the other gods, as she prefers to be loved rather than feared.

CHAPTER 21

Circe anxiously paces the shore of Aiaia, wondering all the while where Telegonus is. She wants to believe that his meeting with Odysseus, Penelope, and Telemachus will go well, but she can't help but feel that this is fantasy. She crosses her island, its many changes making her life feel all the more static. Now that Telegonus is gone, she realizes that no matter if he survives Athena's murderous attempts, she will nevertheless have to watch him die slowly.

Circe has seen enough cruelty in the world to make her doubt that Telegonus's meeting with Odysseus and his family will go well. Her experiences have taught her that people are quick to exploit others in order to get ahead, so she is worried that this will happen to Telegonus. As she walks over Aiaia, all the changes of the plants and animals make her feel out of touch with the cycles of life—growing, aging, and dying. As a goddess, her body will never undergo any of these changes. Her love for the changing plant and animal life on Aiaia is intertwined with resentment for her divinity, which implies that Circe's immortality prevents her from really being alive, like the plants and animals of her island are. Although she has personally developed throughout the story, she feels trapped knowing that neither her body nor her situation (she is in eternal exile) will change. Additionally, because she will live forever, she is doomed to watch Telegonus die and leave her.

One night, Telegonus's favorite wolf Arcturos wakes Circe with her howling. Looking out to the horizon, Circe sees Telegonus's ship. Circe rushes to the beach, wondering why he is back so soon. She runs into him in the woods and, seeing the grief in his face, demands that he tell her what is wrong. Telegonus tells Circe that he arrived when Odysseus was away from home. When Odysseus returned, he stormed at Telegonus, raging at him to get off his lands. Telegonus tried to tell Odysseus that he was his son, but he didn't listen. When Odysseus lunged for the spear, the sheath slipped, and Odysseus cut himself on the stinger. Horrified, Circe realizes that Telegonus's killing of Odysseus is why Athena had so desperately wanted the boy dead.

Accustomed to the violence and greediness of the world, Odysseus assumed that Telegonus was a threat, probably thinking that Telegonus was trying to rob him or otherwise undermine his rule. Odysseus attacked Telegonus to (in his mind) maintain his control over his land and belongings. Because Odysseus lunged for the spear, it is likely that he intended to kill Telegonus in his effort to maintain his power, even though Telegonus was never threatening him. Odysseus's actions show how, in a society built on power, fear, and violence, people are quick to assert their dominance over others, even misinterpreting friendliness as a threat. Circe realizes now that Athena wanted to kill Telegonus because Odysseus is one of her favorite mortals, which demonstrates her callousness toward mortals—she was quick to try to kill an infant just so she could keep someone she prefers alive.

Telegonus weeps, mourning the death of his father. Circe also grieves, thinking of her time with Odysseus. His sobs slowing, Telegonus then tells Circe that Telemachus and Penelope are in the boat. Reeling, Circe demands to know why. Telegonus explains that they asked to come and said that they needed help. Circe exclaims that Telemachus will try to kill Telegonus, in vengeance for Odysseus's death. But Telegonus shakes his head, saying that they are brothers. His statement makes Circe think of Ariadne's affection for the Minotaur. Realizing that there is no changing Telegonus's mind and taking comfort in her own strength, she agrees to meet them.

Telegonus betrays his innocence by assuming that Telemachus won't hurt him because they are brothers. Having had a sheltered childhood away from the rest of the world, he does not realize that ancient Greek society is obsessed with power and that family ties are meaningless to those who seek to obtain power by any means. Telegonus's naïveté makes Circe think of Ariadne, who loved the Minotaur as her brother, even though it was dangerous and even attacked her at one point. Although Circe wants to make Telegonus see the risk in bringing Telemachus and Penelope to Aiaia, she knows at this point that trying to change someone's mind is often futile. The most effective way to protect her child is to use her power to do so, instead of trying to convince him to keep himself safe.

Circe and Telegonus lead Penelope and Telemachus up from the beach to the house, where Circe feeds them. The conversation is courteous but tense, with Telegonus being overly attentive, his guilt obvious. After Circe sends Telemachus and Penelope to bed, she holds her weary son until he falls asleep. She then tucks him in and has Arcturos keep watch at the foot of the bed.

Telegonus's guilt and overly attentive behavior set him apart from many other characters who have caused deaths. Instead of placing the blame on someone else (including Odysseus), Telegonus assumes all guilt, which suggests that being raised away from the power struggles of the rest of society has made him empathetic and kindhearted. By raising her son to be kind, Circe contributes to making the world a less violent place. She doesn't dismantle the whole structure of power and abuse, but she mitigates the world's cruelty in the ways that she can.

When Circe steps back into the dining hall, she sees Telemachus waiting there. She walks to her fire, feeling her power pulsing through her. When she tells him that she knows that he plans to kill Telegonus to avenge Odysseus, Telemachus contradicts her, saying that he doesn't blame her son. Odysseus had been hostile in his later years, he explains, and died by his own hand; to blame Telegonus would be wrong.

Circe is comforted by her power; she knows that she is capable of protecting her son and herself, as this is exactly what she has been doing for years. Her confidence in her abilities has increased since she defied Athena, a rejection of the gods' power over her which represents her independence from them—she no longer seeks their aid. Since being so isolated, she has learned that, while she is generally unable to influence other people to be less cruel, she can still make a difference by attending to what is in her control. For example, while she couldn't convince Athena to not try to kill her son, she was able to use her magic to make Aiaia a safe haven for Telegonus.

But Circe does not relax. She asks Telemachus why he left Ithaca, when he can now be king. He responds that, because he has showed no intention of avenging Odysseus's death, Ithaca is not a safe place for him. He did not even weep at the funeral, for he never knew his father to be the glorious man others had described. Intrigued, Circe asks him to explain.

Telemachus's acceptance that Odysseus, and not Telegonus, was at fault for Odysseus's death suggests that he is not interested in using his father's death as an excuse for attacking Telegonus. As Odysseus's son, Telegonus could try to claim the throne of Ithaca, but Telemachus is not interested in trying to protect his power. In fact, Telemachus isn't interested in having power at all, as he reveals that he has no wish to become king. Circe doesn't know why Telemachus is turning down his chance to participate in the cycle of power and violence, but his decision to do so sets him apart from many of the novel's other power-hungry characters.

Telemachus begins his tale with the years following the Trojan war. When Odysseus didn't return, suitors flocked to their halls, wanting to marry Penelope. Angrily, he describes how the suitors wouldn't honor their requests for them to leave—the men knew that a woman and her young son were powerless.

Presuming that Odysseus, the patriarch of the home, was dead, suitors tried their chance at getting power by vying for Penelope, the queen of Ithaca. They hoped to marry Penelope so that they could become king, which demonstrates both the power-hungry society of ancient Greece and the fact that the ancient Greeks primarily valued women for what a man could gain from marrying them (like a kingdom). The men knew that Penelope, as a woman, was quite powerless and that Telemachus was too young to pose a threat. Unafraid of punishment, they felt free to exploit Penelope and Telemachus, harassing Penelope and staying in their halls, where they drained their resources.


But when Odysseus finally did return, he killed them all. When the suitors' fathers came to demand some amends for their sons' murders, Odysseus refused and began to kill them, too. But Athena intervened and ordered that the feud end. The following day, the fathers of Odysseus's soldiers came to ask about the whereabouts of their sons. All of Odysseus's soldiers, however, are dead, the last of them killed by Helios after they ate his cattle. Upon learning this, the fathers then requested that Odysseus at least give them their sons' loot from fighting Troy. But Odysseus didn't have any of the treasure—it had all been lost at sea on the journey home. The fathers visited Odysseus time after time, until he began beating them and insulting their sons.

Odysseus showed no mercy to the people who tried to usurp his place. He killed all the suitors and even began attacking the suitors' fathers, probably to discourage anyone else from attempting to take his power from him. By killing the suitors and some of their fathers, Odysseus used fear as a way to control others and protect his power. Athena stopped the bloodshed, although it is likely that she did this not out of concern for the men Odysseus was going to kill, but because she wanted to salvage Odysseus's reputation for her own sake. As Odysseus's patron, Athena gained glory through his deeds, as his accomplishments reflected on her. Athena is an example of a god who does take interest in a mortal; but even though she may have helped Odysseus, her actions always benefitted her, too. Even after Athena stopped the killings, Odysseus was still intent on punishing anyone who confronted him. He guarded his power jealously and lashed out whenever anyone tried to question it.

Even though the soldiers' fathers avoided Odysseus after his violent outburst, Odysseus became paranoid. Telemachus admits that he should have intervened then, but he hoped that Odysseus would calm. When Circe asks what Penelope thought, Telemachus coldly responds that no one can guess Penelope's thoughts. He had once been close with his mother, but that changed when Odysseus came home from war, full of rage and easily angered. Penelope never tried to stop Odysseus's senseless violence and didn't intervene when Odysseus exiled Telemachus, whom he called a coward and a traitor when he refused to believe his conspiracies.

Telemachus's inaction demonstrates that it is often ineffective to hope that people will change in the way that one wants them to. In order to actually make a difference in any particular situation, like Odysseus's violence and paranoia, a person has to act. Telemachus's waiting for Odysseus to change into a calmer person was futile. While Telemachus doesn't give a reason for Odysseus's paranoia, it could be because Odysseus had seen so much cruelty in the world that he assumed that he believed everyone was out to get him. Sadly, the story has supported Odysseus's fears: people will stop at nothing to get power when living in a society where one must use others or be abused.

Odysseus began to go on monthly raids, which churned up wild rumors: that he had married again, that he had another child, and that he ruled another kingdom. Penelope still never confronted Odysseus, and Telemachus, sick of his father's wrath and his mother's inaction, moved to the countryside. Then Telegonus came, and Odysseus died.

Penelope's inaction, like Telemachus's had deadly consequences. Because she never tried to confront or contain Odysseus, he never stopped spiraling into deeper paranoia and violence, which resulted in the unchecked aggression that led to his death.

Circe is moved by the story and reminds Telemachus that he is "not [his] blood," but Telemachus rebuffs her sympathetic words. He tells her that he is indeed a coward, since he should have intervened when Odysseus proved himself to be unstable. He confesses his guilt for following Odysseus's orders to not only kill the suitors, but also the enslaved girls who had slept with them, no matter that, as slaves, they never had any choice. Their deaths, he said, will haunt him forever. On that note, he goes to bed.

Circe tells Telemachus that he is "not [his] blood" to remind him that he is not defined by his family. This means that just because Odysseus is his father, Telemachus shouldn't worry that he is going to turn out to be violent and callous like him. Additionally, it implies that he shouldn't feel guilty for Odysseus's actions. But Telemachus rejects Circe's sympathetic words because he does *feel guilty and* does *see himself as a villain. Having gone along with Odysseus's orders, Telemachus contributed to the careless violence of the world. He feels particularly guilty for killing the enslaved girls whom Odysseus ordered to be killed in spite of their innocence. Odysseus wanted to make an example of their deaths, showing people what happens when people dare try to usurp his power. These girls were already victims, as they had been raped by the suitors who saw them as objects, which speaks to the misogyny of ancient Greece. Telemachus did as Odysseus said and killed the women, and he feels terribly guilty for it. He keeps this guilt close to him, like Circe does with her guilt regarding Scylla, possibly to remind himself of his capacity for cruelty. His guilt and regret motivate him to be less like Odysseus.*

Circe paces the beach, thinking of Odysseus and the ruthlessness that Telemachus described. She remembers a conversation they once had in which she told him that, when turning men to pigs, she never thought of whether there were some with good hearts; they were in her house, and that was enough. Odysseus had smiled and agreed. In retrospect, Circe knows that she had been boasting, feeling powerful in her brutality.

Circe realizes that bragging about her callousness was to show off her power. Traumatized by the rape that she endured, Circe lashed out at the men who arrived on her island so that she could feel in control again, and so that she could prove to men (and herself) that women are not weak. But by carelessly turning all men (regardless of guilt or innocence) into pigs, Circe was contributing to society's system of power and abuse. In retrospect, she sees how heartless she was and regrets her actions.

While Circe believes that Telemachus is not a threat, she has not made up her mind about Penelope. Circe returns to the house for breakfast, where she meets Telegonus, still grey with grief. She tells him that she agrees that Telemachus is not dangerous and suggests that he spend the afternoon with him.

Telemachus's regret and guilt have convinced Circe that he is not trying to cause any more harm for the sake of power and revenge. This suggests that reflecting on one's past actions is an important part of personal growth.

In her room, Circe considers the poison spear, which is leaning against her wall. She thinks of returning it, but she hesitates—she may need it yet. Someone knocks at her door, which she opens to reveal Penelope. Penelope thanks her for her hospitality, both now and many years ago, when Circe hosted Odysseus. She says that he had spoken favorably of Circe and had also told her of Daedalus's loom. Circe is surprised at how much Penelope knows about her, but then she admits that she knows a lot about Penelope, too.

Penelope may be telling Circe all that Odysseus told her as a way to exert dominance over Circe. Essentially, by explaining to Circe that Odysseus told her everything about Circe, Penelope can show that she and Odysseus were so close that he even told her about his infidelity. In some ways, this makes Odysseus's relationship with Circe sound like an unimportant experience in his life—whereas he chose to return to Penelope and spend the rest of his life with her. Making herself seem superior in this way doesn't give Penelope any practical power, but as a woman in ancient Greece, it is likely that she doesn't have any other claim to power that would affect Circe.

Penelope eyes the spear on the wall and mentions that Telegonus told her and Telemachus of both the spear with Trygon's tail and of the many spells protecting the island, magic that can keep out even gods. When Circe confirms that this is all true, Penelope tells her that Circe is lucky to have such powers. After a pause, Penelope then asks whether Circe has a black cloak for her to wear to symbolize her mourning for Odysseus. Circe tells her no, that she doesn't have one, but that Penelope is welcome to weave one at Daedalus's loom.

Penelope expresses jealousy of Circe's magical powers. As a woman in ancient Greece, Penelope doesn't have much power or control. To her, then, Circe's abilities to keep out gods and obtain powerful weapons are enviable.

CHAPTER 22

Penelope is a masterful weaver. When Telemachus and Telegonus enter, Telegonus rushes to the loom to praise her skill. Circe watches Telemachus stiffen and turn away. After lunch, while Circe and Telegonus walk together, Circe suddenly realizes that she still doesn't know why Penelope and Telemachus decided to come to Aiaia. She abruptly asks Telegonus whose idea it was, and he reveals that although he had suggested going to Sparta (where Penelope has family), Penelope asked to come to Aiaia for "a little time." Although Circe pushes for more explanation, Telegonus doesn't recall anything else.

Telegonus still feels extremely guilty for having indirectly caused Odysseus's death, and he tries to make up for it by being overly attentive to his guests. Meanwhile, Circe realizes that Penelope distracted her from getting an answer as to why she and Telemachus came to Aiaia. This suggests that Circe may have underestimated Penelope's cleverness. In this way, Circe has internalized ancient Greece's expectations that women aren't particularly skilled; she didn't predict that Penelope would outwit her.

That evening, after Penelope and Telegonus go to bed, Telemachus asks Circe to tell him whatever stories of Odysseus she has. So she begins, telling him of all the tales of Odysseus that she knows. She doesn't shy from the brutal or gory details, and neither does Telemachus, who listens attentively.

Telemachus, unlike Telegonus, is not naïve of the world's cruelty. Where Telegonus only wanted to believe that Odysseus was a perfect hero, Telemachus wants to know and confront his father's wickedness. He wants to learn what his father did so that he can be less like him.

The last story that Circe tells is Odysseus's encounter with the cyclops Polyphemus, whose cave Odysseus and his men got trapped in. Odysseus managed to outwit the monster, blinding him and escaping the cave with his men. Yet just as they got to their ship, Odysseus called back to Polyphemus, shouting to take credit for his own trickery. Armed with this information, Polyphemus asked his father, Poseidon, to unleash his wrath on Odysseus and his crew.

Odysseus's encounter with the cyclops demonstrates his selfishness and narcissism. By giving the cyclops his name so that he could take credit for his cleverness, Odysseus jeopardized his men's journey home. In other words, he prioritized getting fame over protecting his men. This is another example of how, in a society that is obsessed with accumulating power, people become careless with others' lives when they have something to gain.

After a moment, Telemachus passionately derides Odysseus's pride, saying that "he made life for others a misery" in order to win glory for himself. Circe then tells Telemachus of when Odysseus visited the underworld. There, Odysseus had spoken to Achilles who warned him of his proud ways. Achilles said that he himself wished that he had chosen a life of peace and the joy that comes with it. Telemachus is angered that Circe would suggest that this is what he must wait for: an apology from his father when they are both spirits.

Achilles's comment to Odysseus suggests that a life spent chasing power and glory is an empty and joyless one—it is more fulfilling to live a peaceful life in obscurity than it is to spread violence in order to become famous. Telemachus becomes angry with Circe when she suggests that he wait to find peace with Odysseus when they are both spirits. His impatience suggests that he is tired of waiting for a situation to right itself—he knows that inaction never brings about change. While his father's death means that Telemachus cannot speak with him in order to come to peace with his father's cruelty and carelessness, perhaps Telemachus can still take action to find peace for himself.


Telemachus is about to go to bed when Circe asks why he came to Ithaca. After a moment, he tells her that Penelope suggested it, but he does not know her reasons. As he heads back to his room, Circe suddenly remembers how Penelope had asked about the spell over the island, wanting confirmation that it can keep out gods. Circe burns with rage, but she decides to wait for morning to speak with Penelope.

Circe realizes the reason behind Penelope's coming here: she wants protection from the gods. Circe is furious because whatever divinity Penelope is avoiding is now directing their attention and wrath on Aiaia, which puts Circe and Telegonus in danger. This illustrates that Penelope is prioritizing her and her son's safety over Circe's and Telegonus's, another example of how people in the world of the novel exploit each other.

At breakfast the next day, Circe sends Telegonus and Telemachus to fix the sty. Once alone with Penelope, Circe demands to know which god Penelope is trying to outrun, exclaiming that, by coming to Aiaia, she puts Circe and Telegonus in danger as well. When Penelope doesn't answer the question, Circe threatens to use her magic. At this, Penelope confirms Circe's suspicions, but she adds that it is only just that she endangers Circe, since Circe is responsible for Odysseus's death.

Circe threatens Penelope into explaining herself, which demonstrates how people in power use fear in order to control those who have less. Unlike Telemachus, Penelope does think that someone other than Odysseus is to blame for his death: Circe. Given that Circe didn't actually have a hand in Odysseus's death, it is possible that Penelope is simply blaming Circe because she is jealous of Circe's relationship with her husband. Now, she seeks to punish Circe for the pain that Penelope undoubtedly felt over her husband's infidelity. Penelope's plan to come to Aiaia demonstrates her cleverness; because she has no power to fight a god, she exploits Circe's power. Now that she has made Circe complicit in her defying of a god, Circe may feel obliged to continue keeping the god at bay, lest that god unleash their anger on Circe and Telegonus, too.

Circe reminds Penelope that, while on Aiaia, she is at Circe's mercy, and that if she wishes to stay, she must tell Circe everything. So, Penelope does, starting with Odysseus's return after the war. Unlike Telemachus, who believes that the war had ruined his father, Penelope says that it only revealed Odysseus's true self: a schemer, a warrior, and a commander. Returning to domestic life was painful for him because he was away from his real passion—war. On top of this, Athena frequently visited Odysseus, urging him to seek out more adventures. Circe understands that Athena would never let her favorite man fade into obscurity.

Circe threatens Penelope into speaking again, once more demonstrating how fear can be used as a tool to manipulate people. Athena's provoking Odysseus demonstrates how she never really cared about his life—she was only ever interested in what Odysseus could provide for her, such as achieving glory in her name. In a way, she contributed to Odysseus's downfall, as her pressing him to act destroyed his marriage and even lead to his paranoia. Athena is a good example of how, when the gods do happen to take interest in a specific mortal, it is always for their own benefit—they don't actually care about mortals' well-being.

Penelope fears that Athena aims to make Telemachus her newest hero. But Penelope is not ready to lose her son to the whims of the gods, especially not now when she needs so desperately to repair her relationship with him. It is for this reason that she seeks more time from Circe, who relents and promises that they can wait out the winter season on Aiaia.

Penelope has already lost Odysseus to the gods and refuses to lose Telemachus to them as well. Her life is a good example of the gods' callousness toward mortals. Athena doesn't care about all the emotional pain that she is causing Penelope by trying to drag Odysseus and Telemachus into schemes that will bring her (Athena) glory. Circe takes pity on Penelope and agrees to let her stay, probably because she knows how Penelope feels: Circe also resents the gods and how they use their power selfishly, often destroying others' lives in their grabs for more power.

CHAPTER 23

That afternoon, Penelope offers to teach Telegonus to swim, an opportunity that thrills him. When Telemachus and Circe are alone, he approaches her, telling her he wants to be useful. He provides a list of potential tasks, which amuses Circe. They begin trimming the sheep together, and soon they are laughing and conversing easily.

Telemachus is very down-to-earth—he goes out of his way to find small manual tasks to do, simply because it feels rewarding to him. His actions suggest that he is very different from his restless and power-hungry father, from whom he hopes to distance himself, since he feels so guilty for the violence that Odysseus caused. But he also enjoys the labor that mortals do, implying that hard work and problem-solving are perhaps more rewarding than sheer power.

After dinner, Telemachus amuses Telegonus by telling him tales of various heros. Circe admires Telemachus's face and the serious way he tells stories. Suddenly she interrupts to ask whether Telemachus knows anything of Pasiphaë, to which he responds that the Minotaur's mother is always in Theseus's story. Circe then mentions that she was present at the birth of the Minotaur, a revelation that shocks Telegonus. He wonders aloud why she never told him more, to which she replies that he never asked.

While Telegonus was always been interested in learning about Odysseus, he never asked Circe about her past. She is a familiar figure to him, and he never realized that she could have her own stories. This could be due to how women are rarely ever the stars in the ancient Greek myths that Telegonus knows, which suggests that he may have internalized ancient Greece's sexism. Even the fact that the Minotaur is framed as Theseus's story, with Pasiphaë—the maker of the Minotaur—only featuring in it as the beast's mother, points to how women often get reduced in the telling of stories. They appear less important and less powerful than they really were.

Telegonus pushes her to tell more of her past, asking whether she knows anything of the other monsters, including Scylla. At the name of the nymph, Circe chills, sickened by her past. She abruptly leaves the table, leaving the two men confused.

Despite the hundreds of years that have passed since Circe turned Scylla into a monster, her guilt over the transformation is still raw—she cannot separate herself from this cruel act. Her regret over Scylla has led her to reflect on her past to examine the ways in which she contributed to the world's violence, particularly the violence caused by her immortal family. Yet it is by reflecting on what she did wrong that Circe becomes resolved to be kinder and more selfless.

The following day, Penelope sits at Circe's loom to continue weaving. After a moment's hesitation, Circe brings her herbs to the hall to speak with Penelope while working on her craft. They speak pleasantly of their children until Penelope asks to watch Circe work. When Circe mentions that her mortal niece was a witch, Penelope asks whether she is speaking of Medea.

Both Penelope and Circe have a craft: for Penelope, it is weaving, and for Circe, it is witchcraft. Just as Circe bonded with Daedalus over his craftsmanship, so does she connect with Penelope over their respective crafts. Given these connections, it is clear that Circe values the act of acquiring a skill through labor (something common among mortals but uncommon among gods), and she connects most with people who share this love. To Circe, hard work is enriching, particularly because one grows and improves through laboring. It is also possible that one of the reasons why Circe finds gods vapid is because they do not work and therefore do not know the satisfaction or personal growth that comes with it.

Circe requests that Penelope tell what she knows of Medea, and Penelope obliges. She tells Circe how Jason, scared of his wife's magic, abandoned Medea and their two children for another woman. Medea sent the new bride poisoned gifts that burned the woman alive. To ensure that Jason would never have their children, Medea killed both children, too, before fleeing to Colchis. Circe thinks of how Medea was unable to escape the evil that Aeëtes had bred around her. Penelope asks how a mortal becomes a witch, to which Circe responds that she has "come to believe it is mostly will."

Circe's prediction that Jason would leave Medea for a less powerful woman was indeed accurate. His fear of powerful women resulted in Medea's isolation, demonstrating how misogynistic attitudes make women more likely to alienate themselves from society out of self-preservation. Medea's brutal retaliation signifies how she became very similar to her father, Aeëtes. She had denounced Aeëtes's evil, and yet she shows his same selfishness and disregard for the people around him. Just as Aeëtes chased down Medea with the intent to kill her, Medea shows a lack of love for her family, killing her own children just to spite Jason. Circe suggests that Medea became like Aeëtes because his evil is what she knew, implying that Medea unconsciously learned from her father that using cruelty is how a person survives in ancient Greece.

The days pass, and the two families grow closer. Penelope and Circe continue to work and converse together, and each afternoon Circe and Telemachus work on a household chore. Even Telegonus's mood improves, especially after Circe tells him of Odysseus's violent rage. The only tension that remains is between Telemachus and Penelope, who still do not speak.

Circe's deepening friendship with Penelope and her connection with Telemachus are both rooted in a mutual appreciation of work, which again shows that Circe values labor.

Circe is increasingly charmed by Telemachus's steadiness, patience, and quiet dignity. One day while working side by side, she asks whether he would want to return to Ithaca and become king. She encouragingly tells him that he would make an excellent ruler, but he declines, saying that Ithaca is too haunted with bad memories of his father.

Circe becomes attracted to Telemachus while they work together. She is drawn to his steadiness and patience, qualities that are evident as he labors, which again demonstrates the value of manual work. Not only does Telemachus's patience set him apart from his restless father, but he also has no desire for power and glory, which he demonstrates by turning down his opportunity to become king of Ithaca. His father's violence disgusted him so much that he refuses to follow in his footsteps and become king. He is not interested in continuing the cycle of power and violence that Odysseus spread.

At this, Circe wonders aloud whether it is hard for him to spend so much time with Telegonus, when he so closely resembles Odysseus. Telemachus laughs, telling her that Telegonus is blessed to look like her. Their gazes meet, and Circe finds that her mouth waters. She enjoys the slow, comforting feeling that she gets around Telemachus, but she knows that she cannot be with him—not only has she already had sex with his father, but Athena has claimed him.

Circe is falling in love with Telemachus but hesitates from making a move, particularly because she knows that they wouldn't have any chance at a future together because he is a mortal. In addition, he is already a pawn in another god's scheme, which shows another way in which their differences as an immortal and a mortal keep them apart.

One day, breakfast is interrupted by a knock at the door. Everyone is startled—the protections prevent most gods from stepping foot on the island. Circe opens the door to find Hermes. He tells Telemachus that Athena has requested to speak with him, and he orders Circe to remove her spells. Circe rejects the command, until Hermes communicates that Athena has sworn not to harm Telegonus. Hearing this, Circe relents, but she tells Hermes that Athena will have to wait until Circe is able to lift the spell, which she tells Hermes will take three days. Hermes leaves, and Penelope turns to her son and asks him to walk with her.

Circe's magic has been effective in keeping Athena out, but it hasn't changed Athena's selfishness or her callousness toward mortals, which speaks to the limitations of Circe's power. She cannot convince other people to not be cruel, but she can make a difference by using her power to protect people directly.

CHAPTER 24

As Penelope takes Telemachus to the beach to tell him of Athena's plan, Telegonus asks Circe why she can't just use moly to stop the protective spell. When Circe reminds him that she can end the spells whenever she so chooses, Telegonus frowns and asks whether Athena will be upset when she finds out that Circe is making her wait an extra three days. Aghast at his innocence, Circe tells him that she won't tell Athena anything. With the gods, one needs to "keep [one's] tricks close or [one] will lose everything." With Circe buying them extra time, Penelope and Telemachus get more time to talk.

Circe lied to Hermes about needing three days in order to generously give Penelope and Telemachus more time to repair their relationship. This action shows that Circe knows she cannot change Athena's selfish plan to use Telemachus as a tool to achieve her own goals, but she can make a difference with helping Penelope and Telemachus find peace. She does what is in her power to make a bad situation better. Meanwhile, Telegonus shows his naïveté. He prioritizes honesty and doesn't realize that sometimes one must lie in order to survive, because people in a power-obsessed will exploit others' weaknesses for their own gain. Circe knows this, and she keeps the details of her powers secret from the gods. Part of her powers' strength is that the gods do not know what she can and cannot do. If they did, they would use this knowledge to their advantage and to Circe's detriment, proving once again the gods' selfishness and insatiable hunger for power.


That evening, Circe goes out into the forest, where she finds Telemachus brooding. After he thanks her for delaying Athena's arrival, Circe asks if he feels ready. He brusquely asks if one can ever know what to expect with gods, a statement that feels cutting to Circe. In the darkness, Circe feels their prior connection fading, which she reminds herself she always knew was coming.

Telemachus expresses his resentment over how the gods use their power to heartlessly control the lives of mortals. As a mortal, he can never be sure how that gods will change his life. His comment feels like an insult to Circe, who resents her immortality because it connects her to the gods and their cruelty. She feels like Telemachus is pushing her away, and she tries to remind herself that she knew all along that she and Telemachus could never be together. Her immortality assures that she will continue existing while he dies—in this way, her immortality is a barrier to forming a deeper connection with him.

Over the next few days, Circe doesn't speak to either Penelope or Telemachus, who are spending their days together. On the day of Athena's arrival, Circe, climbs to the highest peak of Aiaia and breaks the protective spell at last. Circe then hurriedly joins Penelope, Telemachus, and Telegonus back in the hall, where they wait for Athena's arrival, Circe grasping the poison spear.

Circe wants to keep the spear by her side in case Athena tries to harm her, Telegonus, or her guests in some way. Although Athena has greater supernatural powers, Circe hopes to keep her afraid of the poison spear, illustrating how fear can be used to maintain power and control.

Athena appears. She tells Telemachus that a new empire is being founded in the west and that she will lead him to greatness in this new city. But Telemachus refuses, saying that he has no desire to build empires. Athena is enraged and warns that by turning her down, he will be doomed to "a life of obscurity." Telemachus calmly replies that this is the life he chooses.

Telemachus's refusal of Athena illustrates his dedication to not being like his violent and power-hungry father, Odysseus. Plagued by guilt for his complicity in Odysseus's violence, he has spent many years wishing that he'd acted differently. Now that he is given another chance to follow his father's footsteps, he turns it down; he chooses to have a quiet life, sacrificing his chance at glory.

Athena turns scornfully from Telemachus and addresses Telegonus instead. Horrified, Circe calls out to her son, telling him to stay silent. When Athena cuts in, furious that Circe is trying to thwart her again, Circe tries to persuade the goddess that she doesn't want the murderer of Odysseus. But Athena shrugs off Circe's argument, saying that Odysseus failed himself and died at his own hand.

Athena's blaming Odysseus for his own death demonstrates her lack of concern for mortals. Even though she took special interest in Odysseus, she never actually cared about his happiness or quality of life. She only ever wanted him to amuse her with his intelligence and to bring her glory.

Telegonus speaks up a last. He tells Circe that he wants to go west to the growing city. Circe feels an encroaching despair, but she knows that her son will never stop desiring to leave Aiaia. As soon as she tells him that he must decide his fate, Telegonus is overjoyed, and Athena tells him that he must leave that afternoon.

Circe realizes that all her attempts to keep Athena at bay have only prolonged the inevitable: that Telegonus will leave her. Telegonus has always wanted to leave Aiaia, from his childhood fixation on the sea to his journey to Ithaca. All of her magic and protections were able to keep him alive, but none of them could change his mind to make him want to stay with her. Although she was able to have temporary company and form a lasting relationship with someone by having a child, she cannot rely on Telegonus to fill her loneliness and bring richness her life, implying that it is often ineffective (particularly in the long term) to rely on other people.

Putting on a brave face so that Telegonus will not see her grief, Circe helps her son pack. When he asks whether she is angry, she denies it. She knows that she has never been angry, just scared, since "He was what the gods could use against [her]."

Circe realizes that all the anger she unleashed on Telegonus was because she was scared of losing him. She used fear to make Telegonus obey her, in order to keep him safe. She was afraid of losing her control over him, and so she used fear to keep it, just like so many other characters in the story.

Telemachus interrupts their packing to give Telegonus the bow that had once belonged to Odysseus. As her son marvels at the gift, Circe considers the differences between the two men: her young and eager son, and a "man who chose to be no one." Just as Athena had instructed, a ship comes at noon to collect Telegonus. After a final embrace, Circe watches her son sail away.

By contrasting Telemachus and Telegonus, Circe highlights the significance of Telemachus's decision to give up fame, adventure, and power. In a society where power and dominance are dearly prized, to turn it down is a notable sacrifice. By giving up his chance at glory, Telemachus demonstrates his refusal to participate in the cycle of power and abuse that causes harm to so many. His action sets him apart from his power-hungry father, Odysseus, and illustrates how a person can disrupt systematic violence by giving up the advantages that they inherent (for Telemachus, these are patronage from Athena, power, and fame).


Without Telegonus, Circe feels her life shrink before her once again. Pacing across her island, she feels the eternity of her immortality—she is doomed to the same monotony forever. She considers how, even if she were close to Penelope and Telemachus, it wouldn't matter, for their presence would only be a blip in her life. After all the mortals of her life pass away, she will be left only with other gods—the Olympians, the Titans, her father. Then, an idea rising in her mind, she calls out for Helios.

Circe sinks into despair regarding her immortality. Because she will live forever, she is doomed to watch all the mortals she loves die. Faced with this realization, Circe feels like all connections with mortals are meaningless—why bother caring about someone when you know that they will leave you? Many other gods have mirrored this attitude throughout the story, which suggests that because their immortality makes them jaded and indifferent to the people they meet, they rarely form emotionally fulfilling connections. Without significant relationships, the lives of gods are much less rich than the lives of mortals.

CHAPTER 25

Helios appears. Circe asks for her exile to end and, when he refuses, she requests that he argue on her behalf to Zeus. To strengthen her case, she threatens him with going to Zeus herself and telling him that she spoke to Prometheus when he was being punished. This would reflect poorly on Helios, who will be held responsible for his daughter's actions. She adds that she will also expose the Titans' treasonous whispers that she heard when living in the halls of the gods.

Circe overcomes her paralyzing feelings of indifference and calls on Helios to demand that he release her from her exile, a bold move that speaks to Circe's initiative: she knows that no one will willingly free her from her exile so, if she wants freedom, she has to get it herself. To secure this freedom, she threatens Helios, using fear in order to make him comply. She even leverages ancient Greece's misogynistic attitudes, telling Helios that she will tarnish his reputation by telling Zeus of her rebellious behavior in helping Prometheus, which would make it seem like Helios isn't powerful enough to control his daughter. Ancient Greek society deemed women as weaker than men, so Circe's rebelling would make it seem like Helios wasn't strong enough to keep her in check.

Furious that she dare defy him, Helios declares that he could end her with his power. But Circe does not stop. Instead, she warns him that, while he knows of some of her exceptional deeds (like defending herself against Athena and getting Trygon's tail), he has no idea of the extent of her powers. She dares him to "find out." After a pause, Helios agrees to end her exile, but he tells her he will never help her again. She agrees, and before he departs, she tells him to no longer claim her as his child.

Circe tells Helios of her accomplishments to make him too afraid to challenge her, demonstrating how fear can be used to maintain power. Circe, who has already been distancing herself from her family by exercising compassion and avoiding violence, tells her father to no longer consider her his child. In doing so, she is symbolically cutting ties with her family.

Thinking of Trygon's tail, Circe suddenly knows what she next wishes to do. She finds Penelope in the hall and tells her that, while she is leaving Aiaia, Penelope is welcome to stay. Slowly, Penelope tells her that she does indeed want to remain on the island. Circe then leads Penelope to her herbs, pointing out which ones cast illusions and which ones are sleeping potions, should she encounter ruthless visitors. Smiling, Penelope reminds Circe that she has "some experience in handling unwelcome guests."

Both Penelope and Circe have experienced harassment at the hands of men, which speaks to the misogyny of ancient Greece. Women generally aren't treated with respect and dignity, which Penelope and Circe know from first-hand attacks. Therefore, when Circe points out the potion to use for protection in case violent men visit Aiaia's shores, Penelope expresses cynical understanding—she has also developed tactics for keeping men at bay, which highlights how men's attacks on women lead to women isolating themselves out of self-preservation.

Circe heads down to Telegonus's old boat and is shocked to see the improvements that Telemachus has made, particularly the boat's beautiful lion-shaped figurehead. As she stands admiring it, Telemachus surprises her from the shadows. He tells her that he heard her conversation with Helios, and so he knows that she is leaving. Her eyes averted, Circe tells him that he is welcome to stay or go. After a pause, Telemachus tells her that he has been angry at her for having thought he would leave with Athena. He sharply reminds her that he is different from both Odysseus and Telegonus.

The boat is a testament to Telemachus's excellent craftmanship, a skill that has attracted Circe to him since the beginnings of their acquaintanceship. Telemachus has been upset that Circe assumed that he would follow Athena's orders. Given his distaste for his father—which Circe knows about—Telemachus is hurt that Circe expected that he would follow in Odysseus's footsteps.

Her hand on the lion-shaped figurehead, Circe asks if he always makes gifts for those who anger him, to which Telemachus responds "No [...] Only you." She then confesses her own anger as well—she had thought he had been impatient to leave Aiaia. After he implies that he wishes to be wherever she goes, she tells him that they leave tomorrow morning.

Telemachus shows his love for Circe by creating a beautiful work of art, specifically a lion-shaped figurehead. The gift is a monument to Circe's appreciation of labor and craftsmanship—two acts that she associates with mortals and with fulfillment. Moreover, the figurehead is in the shape of a lion, which calls to mind Circe's pet lion, an animal that represented her power and independence. The lion died after Circe realized the illusion of her freedom and the limitations of her power. Now that she is truly free—having secured for herself an end to her exile—and has a better understanding of her power, the lion has returned in a different form.

The next day, they leave Aiaia and head to Scylla's straits. On the way there, they catch 12 fish, which Circe transforms into rams. On the largest one, she ties a pot containing a potion. Telemachus's hand is on the rudder, and Circe grasps her poison spear. As they approach Scylla, Circe turns Telemachus invisible.

Scylla represents Circe's participation in her family's careless violence and in the world's brutal cycle of power and abuse. Her guilt over making this monster are what motivate her to undo her mistake. She never lets her regret lessen; it only gets stronger, to the point that her first move upon getting freedom is to rid the world of Scylla.

Scylla strikes the boat as soon as they come into range. She grabs six of the rams in her first dive, and then the other six in her next attack. Circe waits to hear the sound of the clay pot smashing in Scylla's teeth, but she hears nothing. In the pot is a potion that Circe made last night by using the poison from Trygon's tail. When Scylla swivels her heads again to the boat, Circe cries out to her, announcing that it is she, Circe, and that she has come to end the terror that she created.

This passage again illustrates how killing Scylla symbolizes Circe's ending her complicity in the gods' thoughtless abuse of mortals. No one else took on the task of killing Scylla, which speaks to how it is usually ineffective to wait for change to happen. Scylla will only be killed if Circe does it herself—and although killing Scylla won't put an end to all of the gods' violence, Circe at least ends her role in it.

Scylla is not listening, but has instead noticed Telemachus, despite Circe's enchantment. As she weaves over them, Circe begins to panic, suddenly unsure whether the potion will work. Terrified for Telemachus's life, Circe steps between him and the monster and brandishes the poison spear. But all of a sudden, Scylla begins to choke. Her body begins to slide from its cave and her heads begin to snap at each other. Circe sets aside the spear and joins Telemachus in rowing fiercely away from the falling monster. Her body hits the water, and its wave washes over the deck, taking with it Trygon's spear and their food. As they exit the straits, Circe looks back at Scylla, who is now stone.

When Trygon gave Circe his tail, he instructed her to return it when she no longer needed it. The washing overboard of Trygon's tail thus suggests that its purpose in Circe's life is complete now that she used his sacrifice to make the world a less violent place, demonstrating that she took his words (to make a world that she is more satisfied with) to heart.

Circe and Telemachus row until they reach land. There, the two of them rest. Circe feels relief, freed from the burden of causing countless deaths. Facing the sea, she imagines Trygon's tail floating downward to its owner. She walks back to where Telemachus sleeps and observes his calloused fingers. When his eyes open, Circe tells him the truth about Scylla.

Circe is relieved because she has ended her role in contributing to the world's violence. By killing Scylla, she also shows how she has grown away from her family, whose wickedness she despises. Now that she feels at peace with her place in the world, she tells Telemachus her past. She is ready to love him and be loved in return, which can only happen if she knows that he loves and respects for who she is, flaws and all.

When Telemachus tries to comfort Circe, she sharply asks that he not try to mitigate her guilt when what she did was wrong, just as she would not dare to do so with him and the girls he killed at Odysseus's request. When he tells her that she is wise, Circe contradicts him, saying that she had been a fool many times, her past littered with mistakes that no one should have to hear. Telemachus quietly meets her gaze and tells her that he wants to hear them. Pushing aside the many fears that had kept her back before—Athena, Odysseus, his mortality—Circe reaches for him.

Both Circe and Telemachus know the value of their guilt: it motivated them to confront their flaws and act against the world's cruelty. Without self-reflection on their past crimes, neither of them would have changed or known why it was important to be confront the vices that they inherited from their families. Circe is at first hesitant to tell Telemachus about her past, likely because she worries that he will be disgusted by her—particularly since ancient Greek society expects women to be weak and uncomplicated. But Telemachus wants to know her past, demonstrating how he respects her as an equal. After all, he has terrible crimes in his past too, and he doesn't expect her to be different. Overcoming her fears, including her anxieties around his mortality, Circe lets herself fall in love with Telemachus and be fully honest with him, showing how respect and equality allow women to find fulfillment.

CHAPTER 26

Circe and Telemachus stay on the shore for three days. They have sex and harvest food, and she tells him her past. For some stories, like with Prometheus and Daedalus, Circe loves being able to bring them to life. Other stories, however, are grisly, and she has to bite back her anger. When she does so, Telemachus reminds her that "we are not our blood."

Circe is at last being respected for who she is, including her flaws. When Circe gets upset at the gods and her own cruel actions, Telemachus reminds her that she is not doomed to be like them. In fact, she has taken many drastic steps to separate herself from her family and their brutality.

On the third day, Telemachus and Circe sail toward Crete. The voyage is easy and pleasant. Wherever they land, they make camp and sometimes engage with the people who live nearby, Telemachus repairing their boats and Circe giving them remedies. Together, they dream of the places they will visit. At night, they lie together, Circe learning all of Telemachus's lines and creases. But though they are close, Circe feels the barrier of her immortality.

Telemachus and Circe both do what they can to alleviate the world's problems. Although they know that they cannot dismantle the systems of abuses that terrorize so many, they can do what is in their power to make the world a kinder place. Each night, Circe gets to know Telemachus better, which is represented in her learning the marks on his body. Yet Circe finds that she still feels separate from him—she is immortal, so she will have to watch him die while she lives on forever.

At last, they find Circe's old shore. She walks along it, remembering where she and Aeëtes used to talk and seeing where she brought Glaucos to transform him. They walk toward the flowers on that hill and, panicked, Circe orders Telemachus to avoid the flowers. But then she realizes her foolishness: "He was himself already" and would not be changed. She harvests some of them, and then they sail back to Aiaia.

With Circe going back to the shore where she first found the magic flowers, the story emphasizes how much she has transformed throughout the course of the book. She is no longer a powerless and dejected nymph crushed by a sense of purposeless and loneliness. She has transformed herself—through hard work and self-reflection—into a powerful witch who has found fulfillment through the many forms of love she has found as a mother, a friend, and a lover. Significantly, she is not trying to change anyone else with these flowers. She seeks only to change herself, which shows how she has switched her focus from trying to create change through others to creating change herself. She has no desire for Telemachus to be anything other than what he is: an honest, straightforward, and loving mortal.

As they near Aiaia, Circe tells Telemachus of the first group of men that she turned into pigs, saying that she had been afraid to tell him before in case it would be a barrier between them. Now, however, she simply wants him to know the truth. He holds her hand, and she can feel his pulse. When he speaks, he asks her if he can accompany her forever.

The last story that Circe tells Telemachus is about her sexual assault trauma. It is an extremely intimate part of her past, one that holds a lot of pain. While in the past, Circe hesitated to tell people of her pain because she knew they'd exploit it as a weakness, Telemachus responds only with more love. This again demonstrates how much he respects and genuinely cares for her.

When they reach Aiaia, Penelope greets them. Circe walks the island and into her house, feeling the sweetness of her old home. She realizes that she is saying goodbye; something is going to happen tonight. During dinner, Circe asks Penelope how, when they had argued about Penelope's coming to Aiaia, she had known that kneeling before Circe would shame her. Penelope tells her that it was something Odysseus said, that Circe hated her divinity. After a pause, Circe asks Penelope, whose fingers are stained green, how she enjoys witchcraft. She smiles and tells her that it is indeed a mix of "Will and work." After telling Penelope that she is leaving Aiaia for good, Circe asks whether Penelope would like to remain as the new witch of the island. Penelope accepts.

One of the reasons why Circe hates her divinity is that it separates her from others—people treat her with deference and fear instead of treating her as an equal . She prioritizes genuine connection over fear and homage, a preference that sets her apart from the other power-hungry gods. Meanwhile, Penelope has become a witch while Circe is away. Witchcraft, as Penelope says, requires "Will and work," which speaks to how mortals must labor in order to achieve their goals and obtain power. Given that mortals are more accustomed to labor than gods are, witchcraft is perhaps better suited for mortals anyway. Additionally, Penelope's teaching herself witchcraft indicates her desire to have power; as a woman in ancient Greece, she has very little power of her own. Now that she has the opportunity to acquire some, she puts in the necessary effort.

Penelope asks Circe whether Telemachus plans to accompany her. Circe replies that she believes he will, but that she still has one task to do beforehand. After dinner, Circe tells Telemachus that she is unsure whether her spell will work, for it is possible that divinity cannot be shed. If it fails, he says, they will try again.

In this passage, Circe reveals that she is trying to become a mortal. Shedding her immortality will be the final step of her transformation, one that will formally remove her from her family and bring her the joys of mortality. Telemachus shows his love for her by informing her that he will stay with her regardless of the outcome, and that he will support her as she tries to achieve her goal. Unlike so many other male characters in the book, Telemachus supports the powerful women in his life.

CHAPTER 27

Circe kneels on a bank and squeezes some flowers over the bowl, so that the sap drops out. Frightened, Circe thinks of how the flowers made Scylla a monster and made Glaucos a worse man than he had been. She wonders whether a monster lives within her, too. Or maybe it doesn't. She envisions all her dreams: she and Telemachus traveling together, him fixing ships and her healing fevers, both "tak[ing] pleasure in the simple mending of the world."

Aware that the previous recipients of the flowers became more monstrous versions of themselves, Circe is worried that she, too, will become something wicked—after all, she has committed some atrocious acts in the past. But she realizes that those acts do not define her. She has grown since then, already transformed into the compassionate woman she is now. She simply wants the mortality to match. She imagines her future with Telemachus, detailed in such a way as to suggest that this is indeed what comes to pass. With her mortality, she plans on "mending […] the world" in the simple ways that she and Telemachus are able to do. While they are unable to completely dismantle the cycle of power and abuse that plagues the world of the novel, they can take action to improve it in the ways that they can.

Circe imagines Telemachus asking her for children and promising to be with her throughout. Penelope will remain on Aiaia, and Circe, Telemachus, and the two daughters that they will have will visit. As for Telegonus, they will visit him in his city where he rules justly.

With Telemachus's unending support, Circe never feels alone. His respect for her and equal treatment of her effectively ends her isolation.

And when she looks into the mirror, Circe will see her age on her face and her skin will show her **scars**. She will feel the fragility of her life and the lives of Telemachus and their children. When she fears the malice and carelessness of the gods above them, she will use her power to create something anew. But when she still feels afraid, Telemachus will come to her and comfort her, telling her that "it will be all right." Although that doesn't change her life's precariousness, it will remind her that she is still here, feeling the force of being alive, and so she will be comforted.

Circe is excited for her body to age and for it to bear scars. To Circe, scars are the physical record of one's mistakes and failures, which are what make a person unique. It is through trying and failing that a person grows, so in this way, scars are also associated with change. Circe longs for her body—which remained unmarked during her time as a goddess—to reflect how she has transformed over the years. As a mortal, she will at last be able to experience this. Of course, mortality comes with its disadvantages—namely, Circe feels anxious about her and her loved ones' fragility, and how the gods can ruin their lives at any instant. But even so, Circe prefers to be a mortal, knowing that her eventual death makes her life more precious—she is forced to savor every moment of it.

Circe looks at the stars and feels her divinity ready to slide away. Although she had once thought that the gods are "the opposite of death," she now realizes that "they are more dead than anything" because they never grow or change. Ready at last and longing for mortality, she raises the bowl to her lips and drinks.

According to Circe, growth is necessary for life. Circe sees the gods as "more dead than anything" because they rarely experience this growth. Devoid of compassion, they care only for themselves and the power they can gain to dominate others. Born with divine power, the gods rarely experience failure and therefore don't improve themselves. Jaded by their eternal existence, the gods are apathetic to those around them and are unable to form genuine connections. Given this, Circe chooses to give up her immortality and give herself the more meaningful mortal life that she wants.


HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Thompson, Annie. "*Circe*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 30 Apr 2021. Web. 30 Apr 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Thompson, Annie. "*Circe*." LitCharts LLC, April 30, 2021. Retrieved April 30, 2021. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/circe.

To cite any of the quotes from *Circe* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Miller, Madeline. Circe. Back Bay Books. 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Miller, Madeline. Circe. New York: Back Bay Books. 2020.