Book 12: The Sirens, Scylla, and Charybdis

When Odysseus’s men return to Circe’s island for further instructions, she warns Odysseus of the dangers that await him—the forces that will try to prevent him from returning home.

“ ‘Listen with care to this now, and a god will arm your mind. Square in your ship’s path are Sirens, crying beauty to bewitch men coasting by; woe to the innocent who hears that sound! He will not see his lady nor his children in joy, crowding about him, home from sea; the Sirens will sing his mind away on their sweet meadow lolling. There are bones of dead men rotting in a pile beside them and flayed skins shrivel around the spot. Steer wide; keep well to seaward; plug your oarsmen’s ears with beeswax kneaded soft; none of the rest should hear that song. But if you wish to listen, let the men tie you in the lugger, hand and foot, back to the mast, lashed to the mast, so you may hear those harpies’ [monstrous winged women greedy for victims] thrilling voices; shout as you will, begging to be untied, your crew must only twist more line around you and keep their stroke up, till the singers fade….’”

The next danger lies between two headlands with tall cliffs. Circe continues:

“ ‘…That is the den of Scylla, where she yaps abominably, a newborn whelp’s [puppy’s] cry, though she is huge and monstrous. God or man, no one could look on her in joy. Her legs— and there are twelve—are like great tentacles, unjointed, and upon her serpent necks are borne six heads like nightmares of ferocity, with triple serried [compact] rows of fangs and deep gullets of black death. Half her length, she sways her heads in the air, outside her horrid cleft, hunting the sea around that promontory for dolphins, dogfish, or what bigger game thundering Amphitrite [wife of Poseidon] feeds in thousands. And no ship’s company can claim to have passed her without loss and grief; she takes, from every ship, one man for every gullet.

The Ithacans set off, but Odysseus never reveals to them Circe’s last prophecy—that he will be the only survivor of their long journey. Odysseus is still speaking to Alcinous’s court:

“The crew being now silent before me, I addressed them, sore at heart: ‘Dear friends, more than one man, or two, should know those things Circe foresaw for us and shared with me, so let me tell her forecast: then we die with our eyes open, if we are going to die, or know what death we baffle if we can. Sirens weaving a haunting song over the sea we are to shun, she said, and their green shore all sweet with clover; yet she urged that I alone should listen to their song. Therefore you are to tie me up, tight as a splint, erect along the mast, lashed to the mast, and if I shout and beg to be untied, take more turns of the rope to muffle me.’

I rather dwell on this part of the forecast, while our good ship made time, bound outward down the wind for the stranger island of Sirens. Then all at once the wind fell, and a calm came over all the sea, as though some power lulled the swell.
The crew were on their feet briskly, to furl the sail, and stow it; then, each in place, they poised the smooth oar blades and sent the white foam scudding by. I carved a massive cake of beeswax into bits and rolled them in my hands until they softened—no long task, for a burning heat came down from Helios, lord of high noon. Going forward I carried wax along the line, and laid it thick on their ears. They tied me up, then, plumb [vertically] amidships, back to the mast, lashed to the mast, and took themselves again to rowing. Soon, as we came smartly within hailing distance, the two Sirens, noting our fast ship off their point, made ready, and they sang….

The lovely voices in ardor appealing over the water made me crave to listen, and I tried to say ‘Untie me!’ to the crew, jerking my brows; but they bent steady to the oars. Then Perimedes got to his feet, he and Eurylochus, and passed more line about, to hold me still. So all rowed on, until the Sirens dropped under the sea rim, and their singing dwindled away. My faithful company rested on their oars now, peeling off the wax that I had laid thick on their ears; then set me free. But scarcely had that island faded in blue air than I saw smoke and white water, with sound of waves in tumult—

Well, I walked up and down from bow to stern, trying to put heart into them, standing over every oarsman, saying gently, ‘Friends, have we never been in danger before this? More fearsome, is it now, than when the Cyclops penned us in his cave? What power he had! Did I not keep my nerve, and use my wits to find a way out for us? Now I say by hook or crook this peril too shall be something that we remember. Heads up, lads! We must obey the orders as I give them. Get the oarshafts in your hands, and lay back hard on your benches; hit these breaking seas.

Zeus help us pull away before we founder.
You at the tiller, listen, and take in all that I say—the rudders are your duty; keep her out of the combers [waves] and the smoke; steer for that headland; watch the drift, or we fetch up in the smoother [turbulence], and you drown us.’

That was all, and it brought them round to action. But as I sent them on toward Scylla, I told them nothing, as they could do nothing. They would have dropped their oars again, in panic, to roll for cover under the decking. Circe’s bidding against arms had slipped my mind, so I tied on my cuirass [armor] and took up two heavy spears, then made my way along to the foredeck—thinking to see her first from there, the monster of the gray rock, harboring torment for my friends. I strained my eyes upon that cliffside veiled in clouds, but nowhere could I catch sight of her.

And all this time, in travail [agonize, pain], sobbing, gaining on the current, we rowed into the straight—Scylla to port and on our starboard beam Charybdis, dire gorge [throat and jaws] of the salt sea tide. By heaven! When she vomited, all the sea was like a cauldron seething over intense fire, when the mixture suddenly heaves and rises. The shot spume soared to the landside heights, and fell like rain. But when she swallowed the sea water down, we saw the funnel of the maelstrom, heard the rock bellowing all around, and dark sand raged on the bottom far below. My men all blanched [grew pale] against the gloom, our eyes were fixed upon that yawning mouth in fear of being devoured.

Then Scylla made her strike, whisking six of my best men from the ship. I happened to glance aft of ship and oarsmen and caught sight of their arms and legs, dangling high overhead. Voices came down to me in anguish, calling my name for the last time.

A man surf-casting on a point of rock for bass or mackerel, whipping his long rod to drop the sinker and the bait far out, will hook a fish and rip it from the surface to dangle wriggling through the air: so too these men were borne aloft in spasms toward the cliff.
She ate them as they shrieked there, in her den, in the dire grapple [fight], reaching still for me—and deathly pity ran me through at that sight—far the worst I ever suffered, questing the passes of the strange sea.

We rowed on. The rocks were now behind; Charybdis, too, and Scylla dropped stern. Then we were coasting the noble island of the god, where grazed those cattle with wide brows, and bouteous flocks of Helios, lord of noon, who rides high heaven.

From the black ship, far still at sea, I heard the lowing of the cattle winding home and sheep bleating; and heard, too, in my heart the words of the blind Teiresias of Thebes and Circe of Aeae: both forbade me the island of the world’s delight, the Sun....."

Because they are dying of starvation, Odysseus's men disobey his orders, and shortly after they land, they eat the sacred cattle of the sun god, Helios. When they set sail again, they are punished by death—a thunderbolt from Zeus destroys their boat and all the men drown. Only Odysseus survives. He makes his way to Calypso’s island, where we met him originally in Book 5. Odysseus the storyteller has brought us up to date. He can now rest.
### Questions for Books 5-8:

#### Book 5:
1. Who does Zeus send to persuade Calypso to release Odysseus?
2. What does Calypso offer Odysseus if he would agree to stay?
3. Why is Poseidon angry with Odysseus?

#### Book 6:
1. What does Nausicaa ask her parents permission to do?
2. Why were Nausicaa and her maids so surprised and scared of Odysseus?
3. What decision does Odysseus have to make about how he will first greet or approach the princess?
4. Why does Nausicaa want Odysseus to travel behind her with the servant maids as they return to town?

#### Book 7:
1. What does Alcinous promise the stranger (Odysseus)?

#### Book 8:
1. Who does Alcinous call on to sing for the feast?
2. What does Alcinous see the stranger do during the song that tips him off to his identity?
3. What does Odysseus request of Demodocus?
4. When Odysseus reveals his identity, he also tells the guests how long he has been trying to get home since the end of the war in Troy. How long has it been?

### Questions for Books 9-12:

#### Book 9:
1. What did eating the lotus flower do to Odysseus’s men?
2. What name does Odysseus give the Cyclops when he first asks?
3. What part of the Cyclops’ body does Odysseus injure?
4. What big mistake does Odysseus make that allows the Cyclops to curse him?

#### Book 10:
1. How does Odysseus’s crew unleash the fury of the winds?
2. What does Circe offer the men that turns them into pigs?
3. What does Hermes give Odysseus to help him resist the spell?

#### Book 11:
1. Why did Odysseus’s mother die?
2. What must the ghosts do to be able to communicate with Odysseus in the Land of the Dead?

#### Book 12:
1. What does Circe tell Odysseus to do in order to resist the Sirens?
2. Why does Odysseus decide not to tell his men about Scylla in advance?
3. How many heads does Scylla have?
4. What do the men do that causes Zeus to kill them?