



THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING
AUTHOR OF *THE SONG OF ACHILLES*

CIRCE

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NOVEL

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Chapter One

WHEN I WAS BORN, the name for what I was did not exist. They called me nymph, assuming I would be like my mother and aunts and thousand cousins. Least of the lesser goddesses, our powers were so modest they could scarcely ensure our eternities. We spoke to fish and nurtured flowers, coaxed drops from the clouds or salt from the waves. That word, *nymph*, paced out the length and breadth of our futures. In our language, it means not just goddess, but *bride*.

My mother was one of them, a naiad, guardian of fountains and streams. She caught my father's eye when he came to visit the halls of her own father, Oceanos. Helios and Oceanos were often at each other's tables in those days. They were cousins, and equal in age, though they did not look it. My father glowed bright as just-forged bronze, while Oceanos had been born with rheumy eyes and a white beard to his lap. Yet they were both Titans, and preferred each other's company to those new-squeaking gods upon Olympus who had not seen the making of the world.

Oceanos' palace was a great wonder, set deep in the earth's rock. Its high-arched halls were gilded, the stone floors smoothed by centuries of divine feet. Through every room ran the faint sound of Oceanos' river, source of the world's fresh waters, so dark you could not tell where it ended and the rock-bed began. On its banks grew grass and soft gray flowers, and also the unnumbered children of Oceanos, naiads and nymphs and river-gods. Otter-sleek, laughing, their faces bright against the dusky air, they passed golden goblets among themselves and wrestled, playing games of love. In their

midst, outshining all that lily beauty, sat my mother.

Her hair was a warm brown, each strand so lustrous it seemed lit from within. She would have felt my father's gaze, hot as gusts from a bonfire. I see her arrange her dress so it drapes just so over her shoulders. I see her dab her fingers, glinting, in the water. I have seen her do a thousand such tricks a thousand times. My father always fell for them. He believed the world's natural order was to please him.

"Who is that?" my father said to Oceanos.

Oceanos had many golden-eyed grandchildren from my father already, and was glad to think of more. "My daughter Perse. She is yours if you want her."

The next day, my father found her by her fountain-pool in the upper world. It was a beautiful place, crowded with fat-headed narcissus, woven over with oak branches. There was no muck, no slimy frogs, only clean, round stones giving way to grass. Even my father, who cared nothing for the subtleties of nymph arts, admired it.

My mother knew he was coming. Frail she was, but crafty, with a mind like a spike-toothed eel. She saw where the path to power lay for such as her, and it was not in bastards and riverbank tumbles. When he stood before her, arrayed in his glory, she laughed at him. *Lie with you? Why should I?*

My father, of course, might have taken what he wanted. But Helios flattered himself that all women went eager to his bed, slave girls and divinities alike. His altars smoked with the proof, offerings from big-bellied mothers and happy by-blows.

"It is marriage," she said to him, "or nothing. And if it is marriage, be sure: you may have what girls you like in the field, but you will bring none home, for only I will hold sway in your halls."

Conditions, constraint. These were novelties to my father, and gods love nothing more than novelty. "A bargain," he said, and gave her a necklace to seal it, one of his own making, strung with beads of rarest amber. Later, when I was born, he gave her a second strand, and another for each of my three siblings. I do not know which she treasured more: the luminous

beads themselves or the envy of her sisters when she wore them. I think she would have gone right on collecting them into eternity until they hung from her neck like a yoke on an ox if the high gods had not stopped her. By then they had learned what the four of us were. You may have other children, they told her, only not with him. But other husbands did not give amber beads. It was the only time I ever saw her weep.

At my birth, an aunt—I will spare you her name because my tale is full of aunts—washed and wrapped me. Another tended to my mother, painting the red back on her lips, brushing her hair with ivory combs. A third went to the door to admit my father.

“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. He placed his hand on my head in blessing.

“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.

My father considered, fingering the wisps of my hair, examining my eyes and the cut of my cheeks.

“A prince, I think.”

“A prince?” my mother said. “You do not mean a mortal?”

The revulsion was plain on her face. Once when I was young I asked what mortals looked like. My father said, “You may say they are shaped like us, but only as the worm is shaped like the whale.”

My mother had been simpler: *like savage bags of rotten flesh.*

“Surely she will marry a son of Zeus,” my mother insisted. She had already begun imagining herself at feasts upon Olympus, sitting at Queen Hera’s right hand.

“No. Her hair is streaked like a lynx. And her chin. There is a sharpness to it that is less than pleasing.”

My mother did not argue further. Like everyone, she knew the stories of Helios’ temper when he was crossed. *However gold he shines, do not forget his fire.*

She stood. Her belly was gone, her waist reknitted, her cheeks fresh and virgin-rosey. All our kind recover quickly, but she was faster still, one of the daughters of Oceanos, who shoot their babes like roe.

“Come,” she said. “Let us make a better one.”

I grew quickly. My infancy was the work of hours, my toddlerhood a few moments beyond that. An aunt stayed on hoping to curry favor with my mother and named me *Hawk*, Circe, for my yellow eyes, and the strange, thin sound of my crying. But when she realized that my mother no more noticed her service than the ground at her feet, she vanished.

“Mother,” I said, “Aunt is gone.”

My mother didn’t answer. My father had already departed for his chariot in the sky, and she was winding her hair with flowers, preparing to leave through the secret ways of water, to join her sisters on their grassy riverbanks. I might have followed, but then I would have had to sit all day at my aunts’ feet while they gossiped of things I did not care for and could not understand. So I stayed.

My father’s halls were dark and silent. His palace was a neighbor to Oceanos’, buried in the earth’s rock, and its walls were made of polished obsidian. Why not? They could have been anything in the world, blood-red marble from Egypt or balsam from Araby, my father had only to wish it so. But he liked the way the obsidian reflected his light, the way its slick surfaces caught fire as he passed. Of course, he did not consider how black it would be when he was gone. My father has never been able to imagine the world without himself in it.

I could do what I liked at those times: light a torch and run to see the dark flames follow me. Lie on the smooth earth floor and wear small holes in its surface with my fingers. There were no grubs or worms, though I didn't know to miss them. Nothing lived in those halls, except for us.

When my father returned at night, the ground rippled like the flank of a horse, and the holes I had made smoothed themselves over. A moment later my mother returned, smelling of flowers. She ran to greet him, and he let her hang from his neck, accepted wine, went to his great silver chair. I followed at his heels. *Welcome home, Father, welcome home.*

While he drank his wine, he played draughts. No one was allowed to play with him. He placed the stone counters, spun the board, and placed them again. My mother drenched her voice in honey. "Will you not come to bed, my love?" She turned before him slowly, showing the lushness of her figure as if she were roasting on a spit. Most often he would leave his game then, but sometimes he did not, and those were my favorite times, for my mother would go, slamming the myrrh-wood door behind her.

At my father's feet, the whole world was made of gold. The light came from everywhere at once, his yellow skin, his lambent eyes, the bronze flashing of his hair. His flesh was hot as a brazier, and I pressed as close as he would let me, like a lizard to noontime rocks. My aunt had said that some of the lesser gods could scarcely bear to look at him, but I was his daughter and blood, and I stared at his face so long that when I looked away it was pressed upon my vision still, glowing from the floors, the shining walls and inlaid tables, even my own skin.

"What would happen," I said, "if a mortal saw you in your fullest glory?"

"He would be burned to ash in a second."

"What if a mortal saw me?"

My father smiled. I listened to the draught pieces moving, the familiar rasp of marble against wood. "The mortal would count himself fortunate."

"I would not burn him?"

"Of course not," he said.

"But my eyes are like yours."

“No,” he said. “Look.” His gaze fell upon a log at the fireplace’s side. It glowed, then flamed, then fell as ash to the ground. “And that is the least of my powers. Can you do as much?”

All night I stared at those logs. I could not.

My sister was born, and my brother soon after that. I cannot say how long it was exactly. Divine days fall like water from a cataract, and I had not learned yet the mortal trick of counting them. You’d think my father would have taught us better, for he, after all, knows every sunrise. But even he used to call my brother and sister twins. Certainly, from the moment of my brother’s birth, they were entwined like minks. My father blessed them both with one hand. “You,” he said to my luminous sister Pasiphaë. “You will marry an eternal son of Zeus.” He used his prophecy voice, the one that spoke of future certainties. My mother glowed to hear it, thinking of the robes she would wear to Zeus’ feasts.

“And you,” he said to my brother, in his regular voice, resonant, clear as a summer’s morning. “Every son reflects upon his mother.” My mother was pleased with this, and took it as permission to name him. She called him Perses, for herself.

The two of them were clever and quickly saw how things stood. They loved to sneer at me behind their ermine paws. *Her eyes are yellow as piss. Her voice is screechy as an owl. She is called Hawk, but she should be called Goat for her ugliness.*

Those were their earliest attempts at barbs, still dull, but day by day they sharpened. I learned to avoid them, and they soon found better sport among the infant naiads and river-lords in Oceanos’ halls. When my mother went to her sisters, they followed and established dominion over all our pliant cousins, hypnotized like minnows before the pike’s mouth. They had a hundred tormenting games that they devised. Come, Melia, they coaxed. It is the Olympian fashion to cut off your hair to the nape of your neck. How will

you ever catch a husband if you don't let us do it? When Melia saw herself shorn like a hedgehog and cried, they would laugh till the caverns echoed.

I left them to it. I preferred my father's quiet halls and spent every second I could at my father's feet. One day, perhaps as a reward, he offered to take me with him to visit his sacred herd of cows. This was a great honor, for it meant I might ride in his golden chariot and see the animals that were the envy of all the gods, fifty pure-white heifers that delighted his eye on his daily path over the earth. I leaned over the chariot's jeweled side, watching in wonder at the earth passing beneath: the rich green of forests, the jagged mountains, and the wide out-flung blue of the ocean. I looked for mortals, but we were too high up to see them.

The herd lived on the grassy island of Thrinakia with two of my half-sisters as caretakers. When we arrived these sisters ran at once to my father and hung from his neck, exclaiming. Of all my father's beautiful children, they were among the most beautiful, with skin and hair like molten gold. Lampetia and Phaethousa, their names were. *Radiant* and *Shining*.

"And who is this you have brought with you?"

"She must be one of Perse's children, look at her eyes."

"Of course!" Lampetia—I thought it was Lampetia—stroked my hair. "Darling, your eyes are nothing to worry about. Nothing at all. Your mother is very beautiful, but she has never been strong."

"My eyes are like yours," I said.

"How sweet! No, darling, ours are bright as fire, and our hair like sun on the water."

"You're clever to keep yours in a braid," Phaethousa said. "The brown streaking does not look so bad then. It is a shame you cannot hide your voice the same way."

"She could never speak again. That would work, would it not, sister?"

"So it would." They smiled. "Shall we go to see the cows?"

I had never seen a cow before, of any kind, but it did not matter: the animals were so obviously beautiful that I needed no comparison. Their coats were pure as lily petals and their eyes gentle and long-lashed. Their

horns had been gilded—that was my sisters’ doing—and when they bent to crop the grass, their necks dipped like dancers. In the sunset light, their backs gleamed glossy-soft.

“Oh!” I said. “May I touch one?”

“No,” my father said.

“Shall we tell you their names? That is White-face, and that is Bright-eyes, and that Darling. There is Lovely Girl and Pretty and Golden-horn and Gleaming. There is Darling and there is—”

“You named Darling already,” I said. “You said that one was Darling.” I pointed to the first cow, peacefully chewing.

My sisters looked at each other, then at my father, a single golden glance. But he was gazing at his cows in abstracted glory.

“You must be mistaken,” they said. “This one we just said is Darling. And this one is Star-bright and this one Flashing and—”

My father said, “What is this? A scab upon Pretty?”

Immediately my sisters were falling over themselves. “What scab? Oh, it cannot be! Oh, wicked Pretty, to have hurt yourself. Oh, wicked thing, that hurt you!”

I leaned close to see. It was a very small scab, smaller than my smallest fingernail, but my father was frowning. “You will fix it by tomorrow.”

My sisters bobbed their heads, *of course, of course. We are so sorry.*

We stepped again into the chariot and my father took up the silver-tipped reins. My sisters pressed a last few kisses to his hands, then the horses leapt, swinging us through the sky. The first constellations were already peeping through the dimming light.

I remembered how my father had once told me that on earth there were men called astronomers whose task it was to keep track of his rising and setting. They were held in highest esteem among mortals, kept in palaces as counselors of kings, but sometimes my father lingered over one thing or another and threw their calculations into despair. Then those astronomers were hauled before the kings they served and killed as frauds. My father had smiled when he told me. It was what they deserved, he said. Helios the Sun

was bound to no will but his own, and none might say what he would do.

“Father,” I said that day, “are we late enough to kill astronomers?”

“We are,” he answered, shaking the jingling reins. The horses surged forward, and the world blurred beneath us, the shadows of night smoking from the sea’s edge. I did not look. There was a twisting feeling in my chest, like cloth being wrung dry. I was thinking of those astronomers. I imagined them, low as worms, sagging and bent. Please, they cried, on bony knees, it wasn’t our fault, the sun itself was late.

The sun is never late, the kings answered from their thrones. It is blasphemy to say so, you must die! And so the axes fell and chopped those pleading men in two.

“Father,” I said, “I feel strange.”

“You are hungry,” he said. “It is past time for the feast. Your sisters should be ashamed of themselves for delaying us.”

I ate well at dinner, yet the feeling lingered. I must have had an odd look on my face, for Perses and Pasiphaë began to snicker from their couch. “Did you swallow a frog?”

“No,” I said.

This only made them laugh harder, rubbing their draped limbs on each other like snakes polishing their scales. My sister said, “And how were our father’s golden heifers?”

“Beautiful.”

Perses laughed. “She doesn’t know! Have you ever heard of anyone so stupid?”

“Never,” my sister said.

I shouldn’t have asked, but I was still drifting in my thoughts, seeing those severed bodies sprawled on marble floors. “What don’t I know?”

My sister’s perfect mink face. “That he fucks them, of course. That’s how he makes new ones. He turns into a bull and sires their calves, then cooks the ones that get old. That’s why everyone thinks they are immortal.”

“He does not.”

They howled, pointing at my reddened cheeks. The sound drew my

mother. She loved my siblings' japes.

"We're telling Circe about the cows," my brother told her. "She didn't know."

My mother's laughter, silver as a fountain down its rocks. "Stupid Circe."

Such were my years then. I would like to say that all the while I waited to break out, but the truth is, I'm afraid I might have floated on, believing those dull miseries were all there was, until the end of days.