

Madeline Miller

Circe

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-rosy. 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.