

Scene: (Early in the book) Homeros is recalling a time eleven years ago when Mysian pirates from across the sea raided Homeros' home, the island of Chios.

Chapter 3

The Mysian Raid: Eleven Years Ago



MNEMOSYNE

“You maked funny noises,” Calliope told her mother and father. She had just come in from playing outside.

Eriphyle’s cheeks blushed petal pink. Homeros didn’t know whether he should blush too or laugh.

Alekto was right behind her five-year-old sister, her mouth turned down in disapproval. “It’s a game grown-ups play,” she told her little sister.”

“Oh,” replied the girl. “Can you teach me, Momma?”

Eriphyle snatched the girl up in her arms, kissed her cheek, and spun in a circle. “For a fact, bairn, thou be-est a zany.” She hugged the girl and planted another kiss.

“Rhapsode, are you there?” The question was accompanied by an urgent knocking on the outside door.

Homeros jumped up and strode to the door. When he opened it, there stood the hunchback goat herder, and behind him three others: Vardos the rhapsode; the newly chosen Village Leader; and a peasant farmer named Phereklos. Except for Vardos, they were all armed.

“Mysians!” said Phereklos, pale and trembling and on the edge of tears. “They’ve took my wife and daughter. I were out plowin’.”

“They’ve got Amatheï’a too,” said Vardos.

“Do you know where they landed?” asked Homeros.

“Clymene’s Cove,” said the hunchback.

“How many?”

“I snuck in and saw their ship,” said the hunchback. “It’s a thirty-oars. We have to assume it’s fully crewed.”

Homeros ran his fingers through his tangle of hair. “They must have left a ship-guard?”

“Eight men,” said the hunchback.

“And we’re five,” said Homeros, nodding to himself and thinking. “We’ll need more men. Many more men. Vardos, since you’re not armed, go alert the countryside. Don’t wait to assemble a battle host, just tell each man to grab a weapon and go immediately to the north side of Clymene’s Cove.” After a moment he added, “Better tell Thersites about Amatheï’a.” Vardos nodded and left.

Homerus pursed his lips and watched him go. “It’ll be half a day before he can assemble more than a dozen or two. Farmers and herders. Most of them probably don’t even own a sword or spear.” He shook his head.

The hunchback spoke gravely. “Rhapsode, I’ve heard you’re a man blest by the gods with craft. What do you suggest?”

“I suggest we act damn quickly. We need to make them abandon their raid, so they don’t take more captives.”

“Husband?” said Eriphyle. She pulled her two daughters to her.

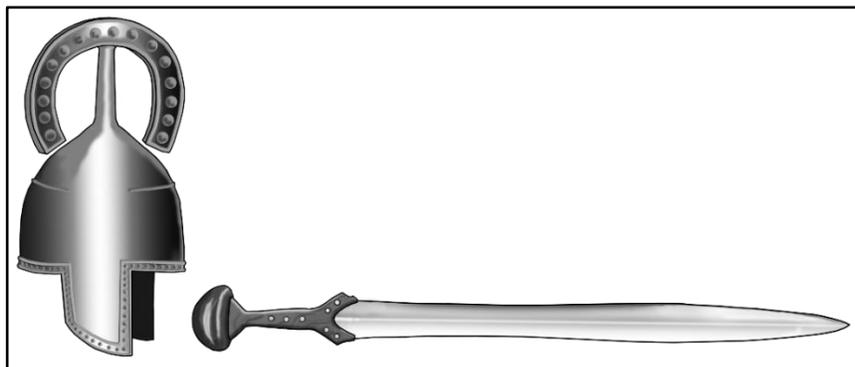
Homerus tried to comfort her. “I promise you, Sweet, I won’t leave till you and the girls are well hidden in the woods. But you know I have to go.” Homerus lifted Alekto and kissed her forehead. “Hide-and-seek time. You and your sister are going to be quiet as mice and protect your mother.”

“Who’s going to seek?” asked Calliope.

“Very bad men you don’t want to find you.” He set Alekto down and fetched his helmet and spear.



The Village Leader’s panoply was costly and designed for skirmishing. Buckled around his torso was a leather corslet of middling thickness. Augmenting that was a four-ply leather shield with Medusa painted on the front to terrify the enemy. His helmet was of bronze and forged in the Illyrian style: semi-conical, with a nearly full-circle bronze crest adorning the crown to make him appear taller. The bottom of the helmet curved down into points that protected the ears and neck. His weapon was a long, stout bronze slashing sword with a stiff ridge running down the middle and flared at the end to add hitting power. The hilt was of polished ash, the pommel of bronze.



By contrast, Homerus bore a thrusting spear an arm’s length longer than a man’s height. Heavy and unwieldy, it was more suitable for the battle line than for one-on-one combat, where dexterity was needed. But it was the only weapon he owned. His shield was likewise intended for the battle line, thick and

wooden, with an unadorned leather covering. It was too heavy for the task—he left it behind. His helmet, though, was lightweight, made of multiple layers of wide strips of leather tapering gradually to the crown, making it look a bit like a beehive.

Phereklos and the hunchback had neither helmet nor shield nor corslet. The farmer bore a rusty iron short-sword designed for thrusting rather than slashing. The goatherd bore two javelins, the tools of his trade.

Homeros and his three companions circled around to the north and approached Clymene’s Cove from the far side, treading warily through the underbrush. When the foliage gave way to sand, they halted and gazed down the shore to where the Mysian vessel was drawn up on the beach five hundred paces away.

Homeros spoke quietly to the others. “We have to make them abort the raid, but prevent them from putting to sea and taking the women with them. Is anyone a strong swimmer?”

He got blank looks.

“Then it’s me.” He’d brought along his house-knife, a large, sturdy iron blade with a sharp point. “I’ll circle around from the sea side and try to sneak up and open her seams. Then I’ll return here. She’ll settle quietly. They probably won’t even notice.”

“It’s going to be damned cold,” said the hunchback.

There was nothing Homeros could do about that. “Lie in wait. If they spot me before I get there, I’ll have to turn back. They dare not leave the ship unguarded, so they’ll probably send two or three men to follow me along the shore. They’ll figure they’ll slay me when I can swim no further. When I get back here, I’ll splash around to draw their attention. With their eyes on me, they’ll blunder right into you hiding in the brush. Dispatch them, then I’ll come ashore. Clear?”

They nodded.

Holding out both hands palms-up, Homeros lowered his head. “Bless me, Father Zeus.”

Stepping out of his ankle boots and leaving his woolen *chitoniskos* pinned on the sides, he grasped the hem of the skirt with both hands and pulled it over his head, then dropped it among the brush.

“Tell my family I love them all.”

Stooping low so he wouldn’t be seen, he waded naked out into the Aegean, then bent his knees and lowered himself into the water, so he wouldn’t make a splash.



As he breast-stroked south, parallel to shore and a hundred paces out, the cold sea drew out his body heat as if he were buried in snow. But it drew out his fear just as effectively: He was so cold he could think of nothing else.

From out of a slate gray sky, with swift scudding charcoal clouds, a moderate south wind blew. It raised a shin-high swell that he had to swim against. At first, he tried raising his head out of the water as each swell passed but soon found that it took less energy to duck his head under, then breathe in the

trough when the swell passed. But with his head in the water, it drained away his body heat even faster. It was a choice between freezing and exhaustion.

Either choice would result in the same outcome.

The Mysian ship's prow was drawn up on the beach. Two-thirds of its length protruded into the water. As you left the shore, the sea bottom dropped off precipitously here, so the Mysians had placed dual anchor stones off the port and starboard sides of the stern to secure the ship.

When Homeros was even with the ship's stern, he turned right toward shore. Only now was he able to forget the cold and think about the Mysians on guard. With just his forehead, eyes, and nose above the surface, he scanned the beach and saw no one. But that didn't mean they weren't there.

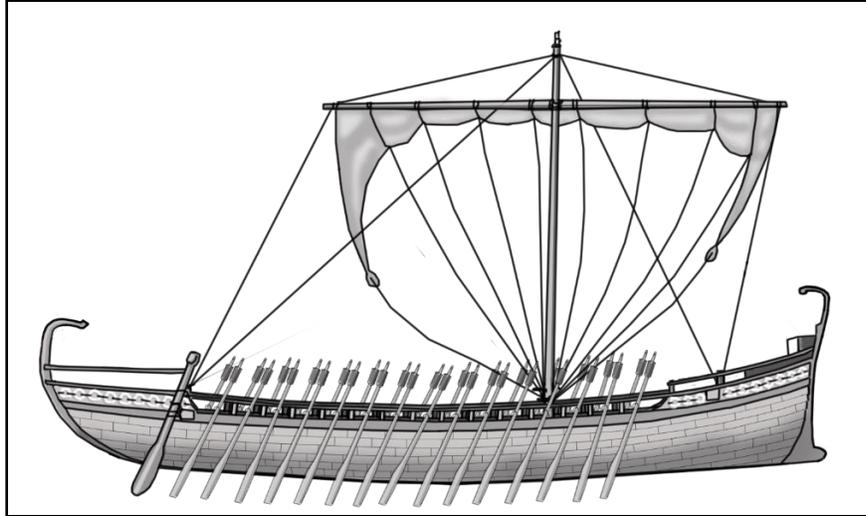
Very quickly he realized he'd blundered. The swell from the south was pushing him back toward his starting point. At the current rate, he'd end up dozens of paces north of the stern, plainly in view. Mentally cursing, he angled a little to the south. If he estimated it correctly, the swell would nudge him rightward, back to the ship.

For the moment, luck was with him. As he neared shore, the swell was slowed by the shallows and bent westward toward the beach in rising waves. They'd propel him landward, and the sound of the breakers would mask his sabotage.

Fearing discovery, as he silently breast-stroked he darted his eyes back and forth along the shoreline but still saw no one. The Mysians knew that a swimmer would have to be mad to attempt a seaward approach this early in spring.

Five paces from the stern he swiveled his legs down toward the bottom; but the seabed sloped so steeply that he was still in chest-high water. All the easier to remain hidden; but the sea would continue to rob him of body heat.

In spite of the two anchor stones, the waves kept bumping the stern northward in a never-ending series of tiny thrusts that made the ship seem like a living thing tugging at its leash. As the hull planks and rigging groaned rhythmically with the rise and fall of the waves, Homeros flexed his knees one-at-a-time, rotated his head and shoulders, and bent and unbent his fingers, trying to get the blood flowing again. His movements were herky-jerky, and his feet were starting to sting.



As the hunchback said, the warship was a thirty-oars, built for speed: long and low and sleek, some thirty paces long by six wide. As with Hellene ships, the stern of this Mysian vessel tapered to a point and rose high out of the water. This was to the rhapsode's advantage. When viewed from near the bow, the full midship-width of the hull would conceal him back there under the narrower stern.

Starting on the starboard side, he drew his house-knife from its leather wrapping, which was held in place by a belt of hemp; then he reached down below the surface with his left hand. When he found a seam between planks, he carefully dug the knife point into it and pried out as much caulking as he could. Soon he could tell by the depth of the blade that he'd penetrated all the way through the hull. When he tried to extract the blade, it jammed, and he had to give a good solid tug. Bits of hemp and wax caulking floated to the surface.

Noiselessly he ducked under the stern and moved to the port side.

Here Homeros had to make a choice: turn his back to the beach and again wield the knife with his right hand; or face the beach and awkwardly wield it with his left. It occurred to him that it didn't matter either way: facing the beach or not facing it, if he was discovered, he was a dead man. But he quailed at the thought of being struck unawares. He wielded the knife in his left hand.