

*Scene: (The very beginning of the book.) Homer is on his deathbed after being brutally attacked.*

## Chapter 1

*He had no name, no home. No past or future. The present was oblivion, except for a dream in which he could not understand the speech of his own dream figures.*

*In the dream, a man clung to a log, except that sometimes it was the mast of a ship. On shore, the woman in his poem pleaded. But it may have been his wife, not the woman in his poem. Though he could hear her words, they were meaningless to him.*

For a moment he opened his eye, but it might have been someone else's. It was day.

The eye closed. The man let go of the log and sank back into oblivion.

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The eye opened. He knew it was his. It was night.

The faces of his two nameless daughters emerged from opposite edges of the small honey-colored hemisphere cast by an oil lamp. The backs of their heads merged into the surrounding darkness. They were speaking. He could hear them. But their words were some language other than Hellene.

Opening its dripping maw, its breath foul with the stench of rotting flesh, iron-toothed Eurynomos gripped the top of his head with an agony so great that it blotted out all else. But in moments, blessed oblivion came, and he sank back into the night.

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*The bat-winged creature plunged a flaming dagger of ice into his head. Her two sisters gnawed at his hands, trying to break his grip on the mast.*

He awoke. It was day. Atlas had set the world down on his head, splitting it at the seams. He felt clotted fragments of his brain oozing out his ears and pooling in a steaming soup on the bed.

“How does our patient fare?” asked the ancient healer. “I understand he met with an accident. The injury is to the head?”

“Yes. The left side,” said the younger daughter. “He must have fallen from the Cliff of the Oceanids. We're not certain.”

“Have you prayed to them?”

The older daughter answered. “Yes. Several times.”

“And to Asklepios,” added the younger daughter.

The healer nodded to himself. “He fell into the sea, I assume?”

“If it was onto the beach,” replied the older daughter, “he’d be dead, wouldn’t he.”

The ancient healer scratched his cheek, then rubbed his beard thoughtfully. “If he fell into the sea, it’s vital that you pray to Poseidon as well.”

“Anyone else?” asked the older daughter. “Nyx? Momus? Mnemosyne?”

Her sarcasm wasn’t lost on the healer. “By all means, Priestess, pray to your patron Dionysus as well. One never knows which god might help.” The old man chose to address the younger daughter. “You’ve bound the injury, naturally?” The distance from his chair to the bed exceeded the capacity of what little sight he had left.

“Yes, we did,” said the younger daughter.

“Was the skull opened?”

“No.”

“You’ve done well,” said the old man. “There’s nothing more to do but wait. Continue with your prayers.”

“Will he live?” asked the older daughter.

“It rests on the god’s knees. It’s been three days and more, and he’s still among the living. That’s a favorable sign.”

The younger daughter stifled a sob. Perhaps it was because the black-bearded man was ogling her. “It was fortunate that your relation happened to be on hand to attend the funeral,” he told the girl. “Pity he couldn’t stay to attend your father’s.” The black-bearded man turned to leave; then, as if remembering something, he added, “If he survives, send me word, and I’ll return.”

Lying in bed, he grieved for his daughters. Wolves had lacerated their faces and ripped their hair out by the roots.

He drifted into an insentience that was deeper than sleep.

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*“Why did you slaughter us?” asked the men and women of Ismaros. Their eyes accused him. “We never did you harm.”*

*He let go of the log and swam ashore. Nausicaa and her friends frolicked on the beach, tossing a ball around. They were naked and ripe with the taut flesh of youth. Then it wasn't Nausicaa but his wife Eriphyle; and they weren't on the beach but on the side of a mountain, in the midst of madness, making love in broad daylight in a place often frequented by others.*

*As he thrust into her, "You're not Odysseus," she said. "You're my husband."*

*"How can you tell?" he asked. "Is it because my leg doesn't bear the scar from the saw-toothed boar?"*

*"No. It's because you're not beyond all other men in mind."*

Homeros awoke.

## Chapter 2

His eyelids fluttered like the moth's wings, and when he opened his eye he had no thought but of the searing fire in his brain. But after a moment Homeros recognized his sleeping room. His bed. His garment chest.

Moist-eyed, Calliope was enveloped in her older sister's arms. Alekto flexed her jaw. In the face of heartbreak, she had always been stalwart.

*They're in mourning*, thought Homeros. *They've scratched their cheeks and sheared their side locks.*

*I'm dead.*

He moaned.

Startled, they turned and stared at him, open-mouthed. "Father?" said Calliope.

Homeros reached up and touched the left side of his head just above the temple. He asked why his head was bandaged.

But what came out of his mouth was: "Helmet ... helmet tunic."

His daughters gaped.

*No, that's not what I meant*, he thought. He asked them how his head had been injured.

"Pun-ish. Stone."

Alekto and Calliope exchanged glances. "Father?" said Calliope again. Homeros could hear the fear and uncertainty in her voice.

He tried again. "Top ... top shoulders? Cloak?"

Alekto remained motionless and stared, like a crane sizing up a fox from afar. Calliope strode to his bedside and kneeled. Taking his hand in the two of hers, she kissed it and asked, "Father, can you hear me?"

Tied in knots, his tongue wouldn't do as his mind commanded. His inability to say what he wanted to say mystified him, and he let out a confused whimper.

His head was agony, his mind gone from him. For the first time he felt the pain in his left thigh and realized that it too was bandaged.

Trying to recall how he got here—in his house, in his bed—he could not. Nor could he remember the night before, nor the previous day, nor the day before that, nor the day before that. There was nothing in his head.

He felt absolutely, completely alone, a floater adrift in the middle of the sea. From horizon to horizon, no human. No ship. Nothing.

He began to shake. “Ah!” The horror crept into him that he was a poet without words. “Ahhh!” A rhapsode with neither a calling nor a future. “Ahhhhhhh!” The gods had driven him mad.

His cries came louder and faster. “Ahhhhhhhh! Ahhhhhhhhh! Ahhhhhhhhh!” He couldn’t stop them.

“I’ll fetch the healer,” said Alekto.