



MYTHOPOUCH

RETELLING

THE ILIAD

The complete retelling

All seven volumes

A modern educational version for readers aged 15 and up

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PART ONE: THE QUARREL

CHAPTER 1: THE WRATH OF ACHILLES

The plague came first. Not with trumpet blasts or the war-cry of charging warriors, but with fever, with lesions blooming on sun-browned skin, with men burning alive from within while the physicians could only watch. For nine days it raged through the Greek camp on the Trojan shore, and every morning brought fresh pyres. The Greeks called themselves Achaeans (ah-KEE-ans) in those days, a vast coalition of princes and their followers, drawn from every corner of the rocky Greek mainland, from its scattered islands. They had come to win back Helen (HEL-en), the most beautiful woman in the world, stolen from her husband by a Trojan prince. Nine years they had been here now. Nine years of siege, of raids on nearby towns, of stalemate. And now this: arrows from a god.

Because that is what it was. Never doubt it. Apollo (ah-POL-oh), the far-shooter, lord of the silver bow, had sent it.

The cause was a priest named Chryses (KRY-sees), who came walking down the beach one burning afternoon, his white robes stained with travel, his arms outstretched in supplication. In one hand he carried the golden sceptre of Apollo wreathed with olive, the sign that he served the god. His daughter Chryseis (kry-SAY-is), a girl of striking beauty, was held captive in the tent of Agamemnon (ag-ah-MEM-non), the high king of Mycenae and commander of all the Greek forces. Chryses had brought ransom enough to buy a small kingdom, gold and treasure heaped upon a donkey cart. He begged for her return.

The assembled warriors murmured sympathy. They knew what it meant to lose someone. But Agamemnon sat on his folding chair beneath his striped canopy and looked at the old man as one might look at a mosquito. "Don't let me find you near these ships again, priest. The girl stays with me. She'll grow old weaving in my house at Argos."

Chryses said nothing. He walked away, down to the water's edge where the surf hissed against the sand, and he lifted his arms to the sky and prayed. A father begging for his child. The oldest prayer there is, and the most terrible.

Apollo heard him. The god came down from Olympus like a thunderclap wrapped in silence, his bow across his shoulder, his quiver rattling with the soft deadly music of plague-arrows. For nine days he shot them into the camp. Mules and dogs first, then men. The pyres burned without ceasing.

On the tenth day, Achilles (ah-KILL-eez) had seen enough.

He was the greatest warrior the Greeks had ever produced, and he knew it. Son of the mortal king Peleus (PEL-ee-us) and the sea-goddess Thetis (THET-is), swift-footed Achilles led a fierce contingent called the Myrmidons (MUR-mi-dons), men of Phthia who followed him with absolute devotion. He was young, perhaps twenty, and he burned with a fire that made other men seem made of candle wax. When he called the assembly, they came.

"We are dying," he said, standing before them all. His voice carried that strange quality that some men have, where authority and passion meet so perfectly that even enemies want to listen. "War and plague together. We need a prophet, a seer, someone who can tell us what vow we've broken, what sacrifice we've forgotten. Why is Apollo angry?"

A man rose from the crowd: Calchas (KAL-kas), son of Thestor, the most respected prophet among them. But Calchas looked afraid. He glanced at Agamemnon, then back at Achilles.

"Swear you'll protect me," Calchas said. "Because what I say will enrage a powerful man. And kings remember insults long after they've swallowed their pride."

Achilles didn't hesitate. "Speak. While I live, not a man here will lay a hand on you. Not even Agamemnon himself."

So Calchas spoke. "It is not a broken vow. It is not a missed sacrifice. Apollo rages because Agamemnon dishonoured his priest. The god will not lift this plague until Chryseis is returned to

her father without ransom, and a proper hecatomb is offered at Chryse."

The silence that followed was the most dangerous kind, the silence before lightning strikes.

Agamemnon rose. His face darkened like a sea before a storm. "Seer of evil," he growled. "You never prophesy anything pleasant for me, do you? Very well. The girl goes back. I won't have my army dying for a slave. But mark me" - and here his eyes swept the assembled kings, "I will not be the only man here without a prize. The Achaeans must find me another, or I will come and take one myself. Yours, Achilles. Or Ajax's. Or Odysseus's (oh-DIS-ee-us). And whoever I take from will have to swallow that insult."

Achilles laughed, but there was no warmth in it. "You greedy, shortsighted fool. How exactly are we to find you another prize? Everything we took has been distributed. We cannot undo the awards that were made. Give the girl back to appease the god. When Troy falls, if it falls, you will be repaid three times over."

"Don't patronize me, son of Peleus. I know your game. You keep your prize while I lose mine?"

"It's not your prize! The sons of the Achaeans gave her to you. I had no quarrel with the Trojans when I came here. They never raided my cattle, never touched my harvests in Phthia. I followed you, you thick-headed ox, to help you and your brother Menelaus (men-

eh-LAY-us) reclaim his honour. And now you threaten to rob me of what I earned with my own spear?"

Agamemnon stepped forward. "I will take your Briseis (bree-SAY-is), yes. Your prize. I will come to your tent and carry her off, so you learn how much stronger I am than you."

Something broke in Achilles then. His hand flew to the great sword at his hip, and he was drawing it, was about to leap across the space between them and strike the high king dead on the sand before all the Greeks - when Athena (ah-THEE-nah) descended.

No one else saw her. Only Achilles felt her hand seize his golden hair, felt her divine grip like cool fire, and he turned and saw her terrible grey eyes blazing. The goddess of wisdom and war, daughter of Zeus, stood between him and murder.

"Stop," she said. Not a request. "Hera sent me. She loves you both. Sheathe your sword and speak your anger instead. Swear at him. Heap words on him. The gods honour honest rage. But do not strike. I promise you - promise you, Achilles, that you will receive gifts three times as splendid for this insult, if you hold back now."

Achilles breathed like a man who has run a long race. "Goddess, I must obey. The gods' commands are not suggestions."

He thrust the sword back into its scabbard. But his voice, when it came again, was soaked in venom and prophecy.

"You wine-soaked dog," he spat at Agamemnon. "You heart of a deer. You never lead the charge yourself, never risk your skin in ambush. You hide behind the lines and steal prizes from better men. I swear by this sceptre," he seized the carved staff and shook it, "that the day will come when

you will need me. When Hector is killing your men by the dozen, when fire licks at the hulls of your ships, you will beg for Achilles and Achilles will not come. The Greeks will look for me and find only an empty tent. In that hour, son of Atreus, remember this day. Remember how you chose your pride over your survival."

He dashed the sceptre to the ground and sat down hard.

Old Nestor (NES-tor), the ancient king of Pylos, tried to mend what had broken. He had ruled through two generations of men; he had fought alongside giants of legend now turned to dust. He spoke honeyed words of compromise, appealing to both men's honour. But Agamemnon was past listening, and Achilles was past caring. The assembly dissolved like salt in rain.

Agamemnon kept his threat. He sent his heralds, the ever-reliable Talthylus and Eurybates, to Achilles's tent. They went reluctantly, poor men, for they loved Achilles and knew this duty would poison that love. They found him sitting outside his shelter, the Myrmidon ships drawn up behind him, and his face was terrible to look upon.

"Not your fault," Achilles said quietly. "I know who sent you. Patroclus, bring her out."

Patroclus (pah-TROH-klus), Achilles's closest companion, the gentlest of the Myrmidons, went into the tent and emerged with Briseis. She walked between them like someone walking to her own funeral. Achilles had won her when he sacked the city of Lyncus, and in the months since, a kind of understanding had grown between them, not love, exactly, not in the way poets sing of it, but something rarer: dignity between captive and captor. He had treated her as a person. Now she was to become Agamemnon's property, and both of them knew what that meant.

"Let the gods witness this," Achilles said to the heralds. "When the Trojans are at your ships, when the fire climbs the masts, do not come to me. Agamemnon's pride has bought you all a war without your best warrior."

Briseis went with the heralds, not looking back. And Achilles - the greatest fighter in Greece, the man who would be remembered as long as Greek was spoken, walked alone down to the sea.

He found a hollow place where the dunes met the shore, where the salt wind carried the sound of his weeping out across the water so no man would hear it. His mother heard.

Thetis rose from the grey waves like mist taking shape, her immortal form wrapped in a shimmer that was neither water nor light. She sat beside him on the sand and stroked his hair as she had when he was a child, when he had scraped his knee or lost at games.

"Tell me," she said.

And he told her. The whole wretched business: Chryses, the plague, the assembly, Agamemnon's threat, the taking of Briseis. "You gave me a short life, Mother, but you might at least have made it glorious. Instead I am dishonoured by a man who never risked what I risk."

Thetis wept. Goddesses weep differently from mortals; her tears fell like pearls dissolving into the surf, but the grief was the same. "This should not be your lot, my son. Your life is brief enough without this sorrow. I will go to Zeus (zoose) on Olympus. I saved him once, when the other gods

tried to bind him. I called Briareus, the hundred-handed one, and Zeus owes me a debt. I will make him pay it now. I will ask him to give victory to the Trojans, to drive the Greeks back to their ships, to let them suffer until they learn what it costs to insult my son."

Zeus, the father of gods and men, had gone to a feast among the Ethiopians, Thetis explained. He would return in twelve days. Then she would go to him.

"Stay by your ships," she told Achilles. "Nurse your anger. Do not fight. Let the Greeks feel your absence like a missing limb."

She kissed his forehead and descended into the sea, and Achilles sat alone on the shore, watching the waves roll in from a world that no longer needed him.

MYTHOLOGY NOTE

The first word of Homer's Iliad in the original Greek is *menis*, "wrath" or "rage." The entire poem is about a single emotion and its consequences, making it one of the most focused narratives ever composed. The Greeks believed that *menis* was not ordinary anger but a sacred, justified fury that demanded recognition. Achilles's wrath is simultaneously his greatest strength and his most terrible flaw, a paradox that drives every event in the poem.

Leader	City/Region	Approximate Ships	Notable Quality
Agamemnon	Mycenae & Corinth	100	Supreme commander;

greatest numbers

Achilles	Phthia (Myrmidons)	50	Greatest warrior;
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withdrew from battle

Menelaus	Sparta (Lacedaemon)	60	The wronged husband;
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Helen was his wife

Odysseus	Ithaca	12	Cleverest of the Greeks;
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peerless strategist

Ajax the Great	Salamis	12	Strongest warrior after
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Achilles

Diomedes	Argos & Tiryns	80	Fierce fighter; favoured
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by Athena

Nestor	Pylos	90	Oldest and wisest
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counsellor

Idomeneus	Crete	80	Famed spearman; led 100
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Cretan cities

FOOTNOTES

Captive women in Bronze Age warfare: Women taken in raids were considered legitimate prizes of war (geras in Greek), but they were not merely property. They served as household workers, weavers, and sometimes concubines. The loss of Briseis wounds Achilles not because he is in love with her (though he may be) but because she represents his timê, his honour, status, and recognised worth among his peers.

The sceptre: The staff Achilles dashes to the ground was a symbol of divine authority, passed down from Zeus through a chain of mortal kings. When Achilles swears by it and foretells the Greeks' suffering, he speaks with the weight of cosmic justice behind him. His oath will come true almost to the letter.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Achilles faces a choice between killing Agamemnon and obeying Athena. What does his decision reveal about his character? Is he still acting out of rage, or has wisdom already begun to temper it?

Agamemnon claims he is "the foremost" of the Greeks and therefore deserves the greatest prize. Is his logic sound, or is it self-serving? How does a leader earn respect - through rank, or through action?

Thetis promises to ask Zeus to make the Trojans win. Do you think it is fair for the Greek soldiers, most of whom had nothing to do with the quarrel, to suffer for Agamemnon's actions? When is collective punishment justified, if ever?

CHAPTER 2: THE DREAM AND THE CATALOGUE

The gods had been feasting. For twelve days Zeus, king of gods and men, had sat at a banquet among the Ethiopians - a recurring obligation even for the supreme ruler of Olympus - and the other immortals had attended him. Now they returned. Zeus settled himself on the highest peak of Olympus, and his thoughts turned, as they always did sooner or later, to the drama unfolding on the plains of Troy.

He had made a promise. Thetis, the silver-footed sea goddess, had knelt before him and clasped his knees. She reminded him of the debt he owed her - how she had summoned the hundred-handed Briareus to save him when the other gods had tried to bind him in chains. Now she asked for repayment. "Honour my son," she had said. "Let the Trojans win until the Greeks give Achilles his due."

Zeus had bowed his great dark head in assent, and that nod shook Olympus to its foundations. Now he had to make good on it.

But Zeus was subtle. He did not simply command the Trojan army forward. Instead, he called one of the strangest servants in his divine household: the Spirit of False Dream, a creature who wore the shape of any man but spoke with honeyed lies. "Go to Agamemnon," Zeus commanded. "Take the form of Nestor (NES-tor), the old king he trusts most. Tell him the gods are united. Tell him he will take Troy today."

The dream drifted down through the clouds like a leaf falling upward, and found Agamemnon sleeping in his great tent. It hovered over the king's head and spoke with Nestor's own voice: "You sleep, son of Atreus? You should not sleep. I come from Zeus himself. Arm your host. Today Troy falls. The gods are of one mind, and woe to the Trojans."

Agamemnon woke with the words still ringing in his ears. He sat up in the dark, his heart hammering, and believed every word. Poor fool. He was about to play exactly the role Zeus had written for him.

Before dawn, Agamemnon called his council of elders to Nestor's ship. He told them about the dream, and the old men listened with grave faces. "If anyone else had told us this dream," Nestor said carefully, "I would call it false. But the king himself saw it. Therefore we must arm."

But Agamemnon had a curious idea. Before the great battle, he would test his army. He would tell them to flee.

It was a shrewd plan born of supreme arrogance. Agamemnon believed that his men would refuse to leave, would rally around him and declare their undying loyalty. He was wrong about this, as he was wrong about so many things involving other people's hearts.

The heralds went through the camp crying "Assembly!" and the Achaeans came swarming like bees from a cave - thousands upon thousands of men, foot soldiers and charioteers, armour-makers and cooks, all the vast apparatus of a siege army that had been camped on the same beach for nine years. They filled the shore from one end to the other. When Agamemnon stood before them holding the sceptre of his ancestors, the very earth seemed to hold its breath.

"My friends," he said, and there was a tremor in his voice that some mistook for emotion. "Zeus has deceived me. He promised me Troy, and now he tells me to go home in disgrace. Nine years we have been here. Our timbers rot. Our wives wait. Let us sail while we still can."

The effect was not what he expected. A roar went up - not a roar of protest, but of joy. The army surged towards the ships like a wave breaking. Men who had endured nine years of stalemate, of raids and counter-raids, of watching comrades die for a woman's face they had never seen, now stampeded for the beach. They hauled at their ships, they cleared the channels, they began knocking away the props that held the vessels upright on the sand. Dust rose in a cloud that blotted out the morning sun.

In that moment, Troy was nearly saved. The Greeks were about to leave.

Hera (HEER-ah), queen of the gods and implacable enemy of Troy, looked down from Olympus and saw what was happening. "Athena (ah-THEE-nah)," she snapped, "the Achaeans are running! Go down there. Stop them."

The grey-eyed goddess plummeted from Olympus like a falling star and found Odysseus (oh-DIS-ee-us) standing apart from the chaos, his cloak wrapped around his shoulders, watching the mob with a face like a winter sea. He had not moved towards the ships. Odysseus was never one to act on first impulse.

"Are you really letting them go?" Athena asked him. "After all these dead? After Helen? Go through that crowd. Speak to every man. Kings you persuade with reason. Common soldiers you force with whatever authority you have. Just stop this rout."

Odysseus knew the goddess's voice. He threw off his cloak, ran to Agamemnon's tent, seized the royal sceptre, and waded into the crowd.

What followed was a masterclass in leadership. When Odysseus found a king or a captain making for the ships, he spoke to him gently, reasonably. "Sir, this flight is unworthy of you. You don't know the full plan. The king was testing us. Stay at your post, or you'll face his displeasure - and the displeasure of kings is not a light thing." But when he found a common soldier shouting and pushing, Odysseus simply raised the golden sceptre and brought it down across the man's back. No debate. No democracy. This was the Bronze Age, and authority spoke through wood and gold.

Then there was Thersites (ther-SY-teez).

Thersites was the ugliest man at Troy. Bandy-legged, lame in one foot, with shoulders that hunched over his chest and a pointed bald head. He was also a troublemaker, a professional complainer, a man who would contradict the sunrise if someone else announced it. He hated authority and loved an audience. Now, with the army in chaos, he saw his moment.

"So this is our great king!" Thersites shrieked, his voice carrying across the beach. "His tents are stuffed with bronze and women, and he wants more! We're dying out here, and he plays games with us! Why don't we just sail home and leave him to stew in his own glory? Achilles is a better man, and look how Agamemnon treated him!"

The crowd laughed nervously. Some agreed. And Odysseus walked straight up to Thersites and fixed him with a stare that could have frozen wine.

"Check your tongue," Odysseus said quietly. It was somehow more terrifying than a shout. "Another word and I strip you naked and whip you back to your tent while everyone watches." He raised the sceptre and brought it down across Thersites's shoulders with a crack that echoed. Thersites sat down hard, tears streaming down his ugly face, and the army laughed - not cruelly, but with the relief of watching someone else take the punishment they had all feared.

Then Odysseus spoke to them all. And this is worth remembering, because it shows why he was called "the equal of Zeus in counsel."

"We are ashamed before the world," he said, his voice carrying to the farthest ships, "and we should be. We came here swearing oaths, and now we run like children or widowed women. Yes, nine years is a long time. Yes, you miss your wives. But Calchas's prophecy at Aulis - remember? The serpent and the sparrows?"

They remembered. At the port of Aulis, where the fleet had gathered, a serpent had crawled from beneath an altar and devoured eight baby sparrows and their mother, nine birds in all.

Then the god turned the serpent to stone. Calchas had interpreted it: nine years of war, and Troy would fall in the tenth. They were in the tenth year now. The prophecy was about to be fulfilled.

The army turned. Slowly, grumbling, ashamed of their panic, they returned to the assembly ground. Old Nestor rose and proposed that Agamemnon organize the troops by tribes and clans, so each group would know its place on the battlefield and fight alongside brothers and cousins. Agamemnon agreed. Sacrifices were made. Prayers went up to Zeus, who accepted the smoke and the fat and the devotion - and had no intention of answering them favorably.

What followed was the great muster. The poet Homer, who sang this story for the first time, paused here to name them all. The Catalogue of Ships, as scholars call it, is a strange and wonderful thing: a long, meticulous list of every Greek contingent, its commander, its homeland, its number of ships. It reads like a military roster crossed with a love letter to Greece itself.

We need not name every captain of every vessel. But know this: the army that assembled on the plain of the Scamander that morning was vast beyond reckoning. Diomedes (dy-oh- MEE-deez) of Argos brought eighty ships, his armour blazing. Great Ajax (AY-jaks) of Salamis, second only to Achilles in sheer fighting power, stood with his twelve ships beside the Athenians. Idomeneus (ee-doh-MEN-yoos) of Crete, the fierce spearman, commanded eighty more. Nestor of Pylos brought ninety ships, and his voice was worth an extra hundred. Agamemnon himself led the largest contingent: a hundred ships from Mycenae and the surrounding lands, his breastplate gleaming, his helmet crowned with gold. They massed on the plain like a forest of bronze and ash-wood spears.

And where were the Myrmidons? Nowhere. Achilles's fifty ships sat silent on the beach, his men practicing discus-throwing and archery, their chariots under cover, their horses munching lotus and wild celery. Their king had sworn not to fight, and they would not fight without him.

MYTHOLOGY NOTE

The Catalogue of Ships (lines 484 - 760 of Book II) is one of the most debated passages in the Iliad. For centuries scholars dismissed it as a later addition, but modern archaeology has revealed something extraordinary: many of the towns and cities named in the catalogue were real Bronze Age settlements known only from excavation. Some historians believe the catalogue preserves genuine military records from the Mycenaean period, passed down through centuries of oral tradition before Homer gave them their final form. The list includes contingents from approximately 160 Greek towns organized into 29 regional groups.

Contingent	Leader	Ships	Region
Mycenae, Corinth	Agamemnon	100	Argolid
Pylos	Nestor	90	Messenia
Argos, Tiryns	Diomedes	80	Argolid
Crete	Idomeneus	80	Crete
Lacedaemon (Sparta)	Menelaus	60	Laconia

Contingent	Leader	Ships	Region
Phthia	Achilles	50	Thessaly (WITHDRAWN)
Boeotia	Various	50	Boeotia
Athens	Menestheus	50	Attica
Euboea	Elephenor	50	Euboea
Aetolia	Thoas	40	Aetolia
Ithaca, Cephallenia	Odysseus	12	Ionian Isles
Salamis	Ajax the Great	12	Saronic Gulf

Across the plain, the Trojans assembled to meet them. Iris (EYE-ris), the fleet-footed messenger goddess, came to Priam (PRY-am) in the guise of his son Polites and warned him that the Greek host was advancing in unprecedented force. Hector (HEK-tor), eldest son of Priam and Troy's greatest defender, organized his father's forces with cool precision. The Trojans themselves were fewer, but they had allies: the Dardanians under noble Aeneas (ee-NEE-as), son of Aphrodite (af-roh-DY-tee); the Lycians led by Sarpedon (sar-PEE-don) and Glaucus (GLAW-kus), princes from a distant land; Thracians, Paeonians, Ciconians, Paphlagonians, Mysians, Phrygians, Meonians, and Carians. A rainbow coalition of peoples drawn from across Anatolia and the eastern Mediterranean, all bound to Priam's cause.

The two armies faced each other across the dusty plain, and the space between them narrowed to a spear's throw. Somewhere above, Zeus watched. Thetis's debt was about to be called in. And the greatest war in human memory was about to resume - without its greatest warrior.

FOOTNOTES

The false dream: Zeus's use of a deceptive dream to manipulate Agamemnon raises profound questions about divine justice in the Iliad. The Greeks believed dreams could be genuine messages from gods or deceitful spirits. Agamemnon's willingness to "test" his army by telling them to flee reveals a dangerous blend of arrogance and insecurity in his leadership.

Thersites: The only common soldier given a speaking role in the Iliad, Thersites represents a rare glimpse of lower-class perspective in an aristocratic poem. His complaints about Agamemnon are entirely justified, yet Homer presents his beating as comic relief. Some modern readers find this scene uncomfortable, and scholars continue to debate whether Homer intended Thersites as a villain, a victim, or something more complicated.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Zeus uses deception to achieve his promise to Thetis. Is it ever right to lie to keep a promise? What does this scene suggest about divine morality in the Iliad?

Odysseus uses two different approaches to restore order: gentle persuasion for kings, physical force for common soldiers. Is this fair leadership, or does it reveal the limits of Bronze Age values? How should a leader treat people differently, if at all?

The army nearly deserts after nine years of war. What keeps soldiers fighting in a long conflict? What might make you give up, and what might make you stay?

CHAPTER 3: PARIS AND MENELAUS

The armies came together like wild fowl screaming across the sky, like cranes arguing with the wind as they fly south before winter. The Trojans advanced with noise and fury, their allies shouting in a dozen languages. The Greeks moved in silence, shoulder to shoulder, each man determined not to be the one who let his neighbor down. Between them, the plain of the Scamander narrowed to a killing ground.

Then Paris (PAR-is), also called Alexandros (al-ig-ZAN-dros), prince of Troy and the man who had started all this, stepped forward.

He was beautiful. You must understand this about Paris. He wore a leopard skin draped across his shoulders, and his bow and sword hung at his hip. In his hands he carried two bronze-tipped spears. His hair curled like a sculptor's ideal, and his face was the kind that made people forgive him before he opened his mouth. He had used that face to steal another man's wife. Now he brandished his spears and challenged the bravest of the Achaeans to face him in single combat.

Menelaus (men-eh-LAY-us) saw him and felt something shift in his chest. Nine years of rage compressed into a single moment of pure, hunting joy. He sprang from his chariot before his driver could stop him, armour clanking, sword swinging at his hip. Here. Finally. The man who had destroyed his life, standing in the open like a gift.

Paris saw him coming and his courage drained out through his sandals.

He did not retreat gracefully. He melted backward into the Trojan ranks like a man who has rounded a corner and met a snake sunning itself on the path. His face went pale. His hands shook. All that beauty, and not a drop of bravery behind it.

Then Hector (HEK-tor) spoke, and his voice was a blade.

"Paris. Evil-hearted Paris. Fair to look at, woman-mad, false of tongue. I wish you had died unwed before you ever sailed for Greece. Better that than this disgrace. The Achaeans must be laughing at us, sending a pretty face to fight their battles when that pretty face has neither wit nor courage. You took Helen (HEL-en) from a nation of warriors. You brought sorrow on your father, your city, your whole country. And now you cannot face

the man whose wife you stole? Where is your lyre now? Where are your love-tricks and your curling hair? They won't help you when you're food for worms."

The Greeks within earshot heard this and stared. Even the enemy thought Paris was a coward.

Paris straightened. Hector's scorn had found the one place it could still sting. "Your rebuke is just, brother," he said, his voice steadier than his hands. "But do not mock the gifts the gods have given me. Golden Aphrodite (af-roh-DY-tee) made me beautiful - should I disdain what a goddess bestowed? If you want me to fight Menelaus, let both armies witness it. Let him and me duel for Helen and all her treasure. The winner takes her home. The rest swear a binding oath of peace."

Hector was surprised. For once, Paris had said something sensible.

He walked between the armies, holding his spear by the middle to keep both sides back, and announced the terms. The Trojans sat down at his word. Agamemnon (ag-ah-MEM- non) shouted to the Greeks to hold their arrows. A strange hush fell over the battlefield, the silence of thousands of men who have just realized they might not have to die today.

Menelaus spoke next, and his voice carried a weight Paris's never could. "Let it end here. Let him who dies, die, and let the rest make peace. Bring two lambs for sacrifice: a white ram for the sun, a black ewe for the earth, and a third for Zeus himself. I will not trust a young Trojan's oath. Let old Priam (PRY-am) come down and swear the covenant himself, for old men look before and after, and his sons are as flighty as swallows."

Both armies cheered. Hope, that most dangerous of feelings, flickered alive on the plain. Chariots were backed into the ranks. Armour came off. Men who had been preparing to kill each other sat down on the dusty ground and stared across the gap in wonder.

While messengers ran to fetch Priam and the sacrificial animals, a goddess was busy elsewhere.

Iris (EYE-ris), messenger of the Olympians, came to Helen in the guise of her sister-in-law Laodice, the fairest of Priam's daughters. She found Helen in her chamber, working at an enormous loom, weaving a great cloth of purple linen on which she had embroidered the very battles being fought for her sake. Imagine that. The woman at the centre of the war, recording it in thread and dye, making art from the death she had caused.

"Come," Iris said. "The armies have stopped fighting. Paris and Menelaus are going to duel for you. You should watch from the wall."

Helen wrapped herself in a shimmering veil, the kind of veil that catches light like water, and went through the streets of Troy. She moved like a mourner at her own funeral, her eyes downcast, and the Trojan women who saw her whispered among themselves. Was she worth it?

Was any woman worth ten years of death? She heard them, or imagined she did, and her cheeks burned.

On the great tower above the Scaean (SKAY-an) Gates, Priam waited with Antenor (AN-te- nor), his oldest counsellor. The old king looked at Helen, and his expression softened. He did not hate her. Perhaps he should have. She was the reason his sons were dying. But Priam had lived long enough to understand that gods, not mortals, steer the great currents of history.

"Sit here, child," he said, and patted the stone bench beside him. "Look out there. Tell me who they are."

Helen looked across the plain at the Greek host, and she named them for him.

"That one there," she said, pointing to a broad-shouldered giant, "is Agamemnon, king of men. You can tell by how the others make way for him. He was my brother-in-law once, and a good host. He and his brother. I treated them shamefully, though they never deserved it."

She pointed to a compact, watchful man standing slightly apart from the others. "That is Odysseus (oh-DIS-ee-us). You'd never pick him out in a crowd, would you? But he's the most dangerous man

over there. Give him a problem and a night to think, and he'll find a way through it. He came from Ithaca to fight for me, leaving a wife and a baby son. I wish - " she stopped. "I wish many things."

"And that enormous one?" Priam asked.

"Ajax (AY-jaks), son of Telamon. The Great Ajax, they call him. He carries a shield like a tower wall. When he speaks, it takes him a while to find the words, but when he finds them they go straight to the heart."

She named others: Idomeneus (ee-doh-MEN-yoos) of Crete, with his flashing armour; the two Ajaxes side by side; Nestor, whom she could not see clearly but knew by the way the younger warriors gathered around him for advice.

"Where is Achilles?" Priam asked.

Helen paused. "He is not there. A quarrel with Agamemnon. He sits in his tent and will not fight. He is the greatest of them all, old king. If he ever returns to battle, pray for your city."

Priam looked at her with ancient, watery eyes. "You are not to blame for this war, child. The gods are. Come, my attendants say the duel is about to begin. Let us go down and witness it."

MYTHOLOGY NOTE

Helen's parentage is itself divine: Zeus took the form of a swan and lay with Leda (LEE-dah), a mortal queen, and Helen was born from that union. Some versions say she hatched from an egg. Her beauty was therefore literally supernatural, not merely

exceptional by human standards but a quality that transcended normal perception. Paris had awarded Aphrodite the prize of "fairest goddess" in exchange for Helen as his bride, a choice known as the Judgment of Paris that set in motion the entire Trojan War. Whether Helen went willingly with Paris or was abducted remains ambiguous even in the ancient sources.

The armies had cleared a space in the centre of the plain. Priam came down from the city in his chariot, too old to walk that distance, and the sacrifice was made. Lambs were killed, their blood poured into wine bowls. Both sides prayed to Zeus to witness the oath and destroy whichever nation broke it.

Paris and Menelaus armed themselves in the open space. Paris wore his brother Lycaon's armour, bronze fitted with leather straps. Menelaus clad himself in the full panoply of a Greek king, his breastplate and greaves gleaming, his helmet topped with a horsehair crest that made him seem a foot taller. They faced each other across the dust.

It was not a contest. It was a demonstration.

Paris threw first. His spear struck Menelaus's shield squarely, and bounced off, the bronze point failing to penetrate the layered oxhide and metal. Menelaus advanced, grim as winter, and cast his own spear. It punched through Paris's shield, through the breastplate beneath, and would have killed him outright had Paris not twisted at the last moment. The spear tore through his tunic along his side, drawing blood but missing the vital organs.

Menelaus closed with his sword. He swung a blow that should have split Paris's helmet in two, and the sword shattered on the bronze like a stick of kindling. Bad bronze, or divine intervention, or both. Menelaus did not hesitate. He threw down the broken hilt, seized Paris by the crest of his helmet, and dragged him towards the Greek lines.

The helmet strap tightened around Paris's throat. He was being strangled, dragged by his own armour, his feet scrabbling in the dust. Menelaus hauled him like a fisherman hauling a net, and the Greeks began to cheer. It was over. It was finished. Nine years of war about to end with one man throttled in his own helmet.

Then Aphrodite acted.

The goddess of love had made a promise once, in a shepherd's grove on Mount Ida. Paris had chosen her as the fairest goddess, and she had promised him Helen as his reward. She was not about to let her champion die in the dirt. With a snap that no one heard, she broke the leather chin-strap of Paris's helmet. The empty casque came away in Menelaus's hands, and Paris - released, gasping, disappeared into a thick mist that no wind had summoned and no eye could penetrate.

Aphrodite had snatched him.

She set him down in his own bedchamber, deep within Priam's palace, the air thick with perfume and the scent of clean linen. He was trembling, pale, half-dead from strangulation. The goddess smoothed his hair, arranged his robes, and made him beautiful again. Then she went to Helen on the wall.

"Go to him," Aphrodite said, her voice carrying an edge of steel beneath the honey. "He is in your chamber, waiting. He has just come from the duel."

Helen knew. She had seen the mist, understood what it meant. "Don't make me do this," she whispered. "He is a coward. He would have died if you hadn't saved him. Take me to a Greek ship. Let Menelaus have me back. I am ashamed."

The goddess's face changed. Love became something harder, something that compelled rather than invited. "Go," she said, and there was no refusing it.

Helen went. She found Paris in their chamber, fresh from his bath, looking beautiful and ashamed and alive. He smiled at her. "The duel was interrupted," he said, as if that explained everything. "The gods will settle it tomorrow."

Helen looked at him and felt the strange, conflicted thing that her heart had become. "You should be dead," she said. But she sat beside him on the bed.

Outside, on the plain, Menelaus stood with the empty helmet in his hands, roaring his fury to the sky. He had won. Everyone had seen it. And Paris was gone, stolen by a goddess, and the peace that had been so close now dissolved like morning mist.

Agamemnon's voice rose above the confusion: "The Trojans have broken the truce! The oaths are shattered! They have stolen my brother's victory!"

The armies began to arm themselves. The war would go on.

FOOTNOTES

The oath ceremony: The formal truce between Greeks and Trojans represents a ritualized form of conflict resolution common in Bronze Age warfare. By swearing on sacrificed animals and invoking Zeus as witness, both sides appealed to the divine order of the cosmos. The violation of such oaths was considered among the gravest offenses against the gods. In the Iliad, the Trojans technically do not break the oath. Aphrodite's divine intervention circumvents it, yet the effect is the same: peace is denied, and thousands more will die because a goddess chose vanity over justice.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Hector calls Paris "evil-hearted" and shames him into fighting, yet Paris survives only through divine rescue. What does this contrast between Hector's virtue and Paris's cowardice suggest about the world of the Iliad? Does virtue always triumph?

Priam treats Helen with kindness rather than blame. Is this wisdom or weakness? How should a leader respond to someone who has brought disaster to their people?

Aphrodite saves Paris because she owes him a debt from the Judgment of Paris. Should divine beings be bound by such personal promises when keeping them means more human suffering? What would you have done in her place?

CHAPTER 4: THE BREAKING OF THE TRUCE

Zeus sat on his golden throne and brooded.

From the heights of Olympus, the king of gods could see the plain of Troy spread out like a game board. The armies had drawn back after the duel. Menelaus had won, everyone had seen it, and Paris had vanished in a goddess's mist. Peace was possible. A single word from Zeus, and the whole bloody affair might end.

He turned to his wife Hera and his daughter Athena, and he made a mistake. He taunted them.

"Menelaus has two good friends among the goddesses," he said, his thunderous voice deceptively mild. "Hera of Argos and Athena of the bright eyes. Yet here they sit, doing nothing, while Aphrodite snatches Paris from death. Shall we make peace, then? Let Menelaus take Helen home. Let Troy stand."

Hera's eyes flashed. You must understand something about Hera: she was Zeus's wife and his equal in pride, and she had not spent nine years watching Greeks die just to let Troy survive. Paris had insulted her once, in a shepherd's grove on Mount Ida, choosing Aphrodite as the fairest goddess. Hera did not forgive insults. Not in nine years. Not in nine centuries.

"My trouble, then, goes for nothing?" she said, and the air around her crackled with power. "The sweat I have sweated, the horses I have exhausted rallying men against Priam and his children? Do as you will, husband. But not all the gods will approve."

They argued, as they always argued, with the weight of eternity behind every word. In the end, Zeus yielded. Not because he agreed, but because some battles with Hera were not worth fighting. He told Athena what he had told Hera he would tell her: go down to the battlefield and contrive matters so that the Trojans break the truce first.

Athena needed no encouragement. She was already gone, a shooting star across the sky, a sign that made both armies pause and wonder.

She found Pandarus (PAN-dar-us) among the Trojan ranks, the son of Lycaon, a man famous throughout Lycia for his bowmanship. He stood with his followers from the banks of the Aesopus, checking his arrows, unaware that a goddess had taken the form of Laodocus, son of Antenor, and was walking towards him with murder in her heart.

"Brave son of Lycaon," Athena said, her voice warm with false admiration, "will you do as I tell you? Send an arrow at Menelaus and you will win honour from all the Trojans. Prince Paris will reward you handsomely if he sees Menelaus mount his funeral pyre. Take careful aim, pray to Apollo, and strike."

Pandarus was a fool for glory. He unstrapped his bow without a second thought. It was a magnificent weapon, made from the horns of a wild ibex he had killed himself, sixteen palms long, tipped with gold. He chose a fresh arrow, one that had never been shot, laid it on the string, and prayed to Lycian Apollo. Then he drew, the bow arching into a half-circle, and let fly.

The arrow sang over the space between the armies, invisible to all but the gods.

And Athena (ah-THEE-nah), who had put Pandarus up to this, who wanted the war to resume, who wanted Troy destroyed - Athena caught that arrow. She turned it with a flick of immortal fingers, as a mother brushes a fly from her sleeping child's cheek. She guided it not to Menelaus's heart, not to his throat, but to the one place where his armour was thickest: the golden buckles of his war-belt, where layered bronze and leather and oxhide would absorb the blow.

Even so, the arrow punched through belt and breastplate and the inner guard beneath, grazing the skin at the last. Blood welled up and stained Menelaus's thigh crimson.

Agamemnon saw it and cried out. He ran to his brother, and for a moment the king of men was simply a man afraid he had lost his brother. "I have been the death of you," he groaned, clasping Menelaus's hand. "The Trojans have trampled on their oaths. They have wounded you."

Menelaus took heart when he saw the barbs of the arrow still outside the wound. "It is not mortal," he said. "My belt stayed it."

Agamemnon called for Machaon (mah-KAY-on), son of Asclepius, the greatest physician in the Greek host. Machaon came quickly, drew the arrow out with practiced hands, undid the belts, wiped away the blood, and applied soothing herbs that Chiron the centaur had once given to his father. The wound closed. Menelaus would live.

But the peace was dead.

MYTHOLOGY NOTE

Divine intervention in the Iliad is not merely supernatural decoration. The gods represent forces that the ancient Greeks saw operating in human life: Athena stands for strategic wisdom and tactical cunning, Aphrodite for passion and desire, Ares

for the chaos of bloodshed, Apollo for plague and poetic inspiration. When Athena deceives Pandarus, Homer is showing us that wisdom and strategy can be ruthless. The gods do not intervene from some remote heaven. They walk among the armies, take sides, feel pain, and carry grudges. This theological framework, in which divine and human actions intertwine so completely, is one of the Iliad's most distinctive features. Modern readers sometimes dismiss the gods as mere literary devices, but for Homer and his audience they were as real as the battle dust.

Agamemnon strode through the Greek ranks like a man possessed. To those who were eager for battle he spoke words of fire: "Father Zeus will be no helper of liars. The Trojans broke their oaths. They shall be food for vultures." To those who hesitated, who held back, his tongue was a whip: "Cowardly miserable creatures. Have you no shame? Would you wait until the Trojans reach our ships?"

He found Idomeneus of Crete arming his men, and praised him. He found the two Ajaxes with their dark mass of shield-bearing warriors, and expressed his joy. He found old Nestor, the honey-tongued prince of Pylos, arranging chariots in the front rank with foot soldiers behind, the cowards driven into the middle where they could not flee. "Would that your limbs were as supple as your judgment," Agamemnon said, and Nestor smiled the weary smile of old soldiers everywhere.

When he came to Odysseus and the Athenians, he found them standing still, waiting. Agamemnon's temper flared. "Son of Peteos, and you other, steeped in cunning - why do you cower here?"

Odysseus glared at him. "Son of Atreus, what are you talking about? When the fighting starts, you will see the father of Telemachus in the front ranks. You are talking idly."

Agamemnon saw that Odysseus was angry, and he smiled. "Noble son of Laertes, excellent in counsel. I have neither fault to find nor orders to give you."

Then he found Diomedes (dy-oh-MEE-deez), son of Tydeus, standing by his chariot with Sthenelus beside him. "Why do you cower here?" Agamemnon demanded. "Your father was a lion. He came once to Mycenae as a guest and challenged fifty Cadmeans to single combat. But you? You can talk more glibly than he ever fought."

Sthenelus started to answer hotly, but Diomedes silenced him with a look. "It is not wrong that Agamemnon urge us forward," he said quietly. "The glory will be his if we take the city, and his the shame if we fail." He sprang from his chariot. His armour rang like a bell, and he strode towards the battle line.

The armies came together like two seas in a storm, like tides meeting in a narrow strait where the water boils and thrashes against the rocks.

Shield crashed on shield. Spear crossed spear. The war-cry rose to heaven, a sound that made the very air shiver, and the earth ran red with blood. Men who had eaten breakfast that morning beside their friends now struck at strangers with all the fury their arms could summon. Antilochus killed Echeolus. Ajax the Great struck down Simoeisus, a young man cut off before he could repay his parents for raising him. Odysseus, enraged by the death of his comrade Leucus, speared Democoon through both temples. The Trojan ranks wavered.

But Apollo (ah-POL-oh) watched from the heights of Pergamus, the great citadel of Troy, and his voice rolled across the battlefield like thunder rolling down from mountain peaks: "Trojans, rush on the foe. Their skins are not stone nor iron that you should do them no harm. Achilles does not fight. He nurses his anger at the ships, and without him you need not fear."

The god's words put new courage into the Trojans, and the battle swayed back. Diodes fell, struck by a jagged stone that crushed his ankle, then finished with a spear through his belly. His slayer, Peirous, fell in turn to Thoas of Aetolia. The two corpses lay side by side, Greek and Trojan, equal at last in death.

Through it all the gods moved unseen. Athena urged the Greeks forward whenever they faltered. Apollo steadied the Trojan line. Hera and Athena watched from above, waiting for their moment.

God / Goddess	Side	Reason for Support
Athena	Greeks	Wisdom and strategy favour the

Greek cause; she hates Paris for his
judgment

Hera	Greeks	Queen of marriage; her honour
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was insulted when Paris chose
Aphrodite

Poseidon	Greeks	God of the sea; the Greeks are his
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people by lineage

Apollo	Trojans	Protector of Troy; his temple
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stands in the city

Aphrodite	Trojans	Paris awarded her the prize of
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"fairest goddess"; she owes him
Helen

Ares	Trojans	God of war thrives on chaos; drawn
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to Troy's desperate defence

Artemis	Trojans	Sister of Apollo; defender of the
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city

Zeus	Initially Trojan	Bound by his promise to Thetis to
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let Trojans win until Achilles is

honoured

The fighting raged until darkness gathered on the plain and both armies, exhausted, drew back to their lines. The truce was well and truly broken. Hundreds who had woken that morning alive

were now being stripped of their armour on the blood-soaked ground. And for what? Because one goddess whispered to one archer, and one king could not resist a taunt.

FOOTNOTES

Pandarus's bow: The ibex-horn bow described by Homer represents a real type of weapon from the Bronze Age. Composite bows made from horn, wood, and sinew were the most powerful ranged weapons of their era, capable of punching through bronze armour at close range. Pandarus's weapon is described with such care because it represents a genuine technological marvel of the period.

The theomachy theme: The divine conflict on Olympus mirrors human politics in the most direct way. Zeus's grudging concession to Hera establishes a pattern that will recur throughout the Iliad: the king of gods bound by promises and family pressure, unable to simply impose his will. Some scholars see in this a sophisticated early exploration of how even supreme power operates within constraints.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Athena deliberately deceives Pandarus into breaking the truce, knowing thousands will die as a result. Is she justified? Can wisdom ever be truly wise if it relies on lies?

Agamemnon rallies his troops by praising the brave and shaming the hesitant. Is this effective leadership or manipulative cruelty? What makes a leader worthy of following in wartime?

The gods take sides in this war for personal reasons - grudges, promises, vanity. If divine beings act from such motives, what hope do humans have of understanding why terrible things happen to them?

CHAPTER 5: THE ARISTEIA OF DIOMEDES

The battle had woken something in Diomedes.

Athena (ah-THEE-nah), grey-eyed goddess of war and wisdom, looked down from Olympus and chose her champion. She poured strength into his limbs like wine into a cup. She made fire flare

from his shield and helmet, a blaze visible across the entire field, the kind of light that sailors see on clear summer nights when the stars burn brightest. She whispered to his heart: Go. Excel them all. Cover yourself in glory.

This was an *aristeia* - that untranslatable Greek word for a hero's greatest day, the moment when a mortal is lifted by divine power to something beyond mortal limits. Diomedes, son of Tydeus, would this day fight like a god.

He strode into the thick of the Trojans like a winter torrent that bursts its banks. No dyke can hold it, no wall of fruitful vineyards can stand against it. The Trojan phalanxes broke before him, and many though they were, they dared not face his onslaught.

Two sons of Dares, a Trojan priest of Hephaestus, came at him in their chariot. Phegeus threw first and missed. Diomedes's spear struck Phegeus through the breast and he fell from the chariot. Idaeus, the brother, sprang down and fled rather than share that fate. Hephaestus wrapped him in darkness to spare the old priest the grief of losing both sons in one hour.

Diomedes moved through the Trojan ranks like a force of nature. He killed Xanthus and Thoon, the two beloved sons of Phaenops, an old man worn out with age who would never see his sons come home. He killed Echemmon and Chromius, sons of Priam, hurling them from their chariot like a lion seizing a heifer. He gave their horses to his comrades and pressed forward, always forward.

Then Pandarus saw him coming.

The same Pandarus who had shot Menelaus, whose foolish heart had been swayed by Athena's deception, now watched this blazing figure tear through the Trojan lines. Pandarus had another arrow ready. He drew, aimed at the fire-lit form of Diomedes, and let fly.

The arrow struck true. It punched through the shoulder-piece of Diomedes's cuirass, and blood welled up dark against the bronze.

"Trojans!" Pandarus shouted. "Come on! The bravest of the Achaeans is wounded! He will not hold out long!"

But the arrow had not killed him. Diomedes made his way back to Sthenelus, his charioteer, and had the shaft drawn out. Blood spouted from the wound, and Diomedes prayed. "Hear me, daughter of Zeus. If ever you loved my father, stand by me now. Grant me to kill the man who wounded me."

Athena heard. She came to him and laid her hand on his shoulder, and he felt his pain vanish and his strength redouble. But she gave him something more. She opened his eyes.

"I have withdrawn the veil from your sight," she said. "From this day, you will know gods and mortals apart. If any god comes against you, do not fight. But if Aphrodite enters the battle, strike her. She is not a warrior goddess. She will bleed."

Diomedes returned to the fight three times fiercer than before. He was a lion that a shepherd has wounded, a lion that has leaped the sheepfold wall and cares nothing for spears or shouts. He killed Astynous and Abas. He killed Polyidus and his brother, sons of the dream-reader

Eurydamas, who would never read dreams again. Where he walked, Trojans fell.

And Pandarus was waiting.

The archer had seen that his arrow had failed. He found Aeneas (ee-NEE-as), prince of Troy, son of the lovely Aphrodite and the mortal Anchises, and proposed they attack Diomedes together in Aeneas's chariot.

They drove at him full speed. Pandarus shouted: "My arrow failed, but my spear will not!" He threw. The spear struck Diomedes's shield but Athena turned it aside. Diomedes answered with a cast of his own, and Athena guided the spear through Pandarus's nose, through his white teeth, through the root of his tongue. The archer who had broken the truce, who had ended any hope of peace, fell dead in the dust. All his fine promises of glory ended in a single heartbeat.

Aeneas leaped from the chariot with shield and spear to protect the body, but Diomedes seized a stone, a stone so huge that two modern men could not lift it, and heaved it aloft with ease. The stone struck Aeneas on the hip, crushing the cup-bone joint, tearing sinews, bringing darkness to his eyes. He fell to his knees.

And then Aphrodite acted.

The goddess of love had no business on a battlefield. She was not Athena, not a warrior. She was softness and desire and the trembling heart. But Aeneas was her son, her favourite, born from her union with the herdsman Anchises, and she could not let him die. She threw her white arms around his body and covered him with her garment to shield him from the spears.

Diomedes remembered what Athena had told him. He ran at the goddess with his spear, and he struck her in the delicate flesh of her hand. The bronze point tore through the ambrosial robe that the Graces had woven, piercing the skin between wrist and palm.

Immortal blood flowed. It was not red like human blood. It was ichor, the golden fluid that courses in divine veins, for gods do not eat bread or drink wine. They are not made of mortal stuff.

Aphrodite screamed. The sound of it echoed across the battlefield, across the plain, up to Olympus itself. She let Aeneas fall, and Apollo caught him in a cloud of darkness, whisking him to safety in his temple on Pergamus. Aphrodite fled, wounded and weeping, to find her brother Ares and borrow his chariot horses to carry her home.

On Olympus, she collapsed into her mother Dione's arms. The older goddess comforted her, wiped the ichor from her wrist, and reminded her that gods suffer at mortal hands sometimes. Hera and Athena watched from nearby and exchanged smiles. Athena could not resist a jab: "The Cyprian goddess must have been persuading some Greek woman to follow her Trojan lover, and scratched her hand on a golden brooch pin."

Zeus called Aphrodite to him. "My child," he said, his voice carrying the authority of storms, "war has not been given to you. Attend to your delightful duties of love, and leave the fighting to Mars and Minerva."

But Diomedes was not finished.

MYTHOLOGY NOTE

The *aristeia* is one of the Iliad's most important narrative devices. Derived from the Greek word *aristos* ("best"), it describes a hero's peak moment of excellence in battle, usually with divine support. Diomedes's *aristeia* in Book V is the first major one in the poem, establishing the pattern that will be repeated by Agamemnon, Hector, Patroclus, and finally Achilles himself. The *aristeia* is not mere killing. It represents a temporary transcendence, a mortal lifted by divine power to something approaching godlike status. Yet Homer is always careful to remind us that even at his greatest, the hero remains mortal and vulnerable. Diomedes wounds two gods, but he cannot kill them, and he must eventually yield to Ares's greater power.

Ares, the god of war (AY-reez in Greek), heard Apollo's call and entered the battle in the likeness of Acamas, a Thracian chieftain. Wherever he walked, the Trojans found new courage. He stood beside Hector, filling the Greeks with terror, and together they drove the Achaeans back.

Diomedes saw him coming and felt fear for the first time that day. "My friends," he said to his men, "we must give ground. Some god is ever by Hector's side. Ares himself walks among the Trojans in mortal guise. We cannot fight gods."

The Greeks retreated, but they did not turn their backs. They gave ground slowly, faces still towards the enemy, shields locked, like wolves before a larger pack. Hector killed Menesthes and Anchialus, two Greek heroes in one chariot. Ajax the Great struck down Amphius but could not strip his armour, so thick were the Trojan spears falling around him. The battle swayed like a ship in a storm, now this way, now that.

Sarpedon, the Lycian prince and son of Zeus, rebuked Hector fiercely: "Where is your prowess now? You used to say you could hold Troy alone with your brothers. I see them cowering like hounds before a lion. It is we, your allies, who bear the brunt. I have left my wife and infant son far away in Lycia, yet I stand and fight. You look on without even bidding your men stand firm."

Hector burned at the words. He sprang from his chariot and went among the Trojans, brandishing his spears, raising the terrible cry of battle. The lines rallied. The killing resumed.

Hera saw the Greeks falling and turned to Athena. "We promised Menelaus he would sack Troy. Let us stop Ares's murderous rampage."

The two goddesses prepared for war. Hera harnessed her gold-bedizened steeds. Athena threw off her embroidered robe and donned the shirt of Zeus himself, set her tasseled aegis on her shoulders with the Gorgon's head blazing upon it, and took up her spear that quells the ranks of heroes who displease her. They drove through the gates of heaven, which opened of their own accord, and descended to Troy like doves in their eagerness.

They found Diomedes by his chariot, wiping the blood from his wound.

"Son of Tydeus," Athena said, and her voice was not gentle, "your father was a little man, but he could fight. I told him once to feast in peace at Thebes, and instead he challenged fifty youths to contest and beat them all. I helped him then, and I help you now. Fear neither Ares nor any other immortal. Drive straight at the god of war and smite him. He is a raging madman, villain incarnate. He promised to help us Greeks and instead fights for the Trojans."

She caught hold of Sthenelus and lifted him off the chariot, then mounted herself beside Diomedes. The oaken axle groaned under the weight of goddess and hero. She took the whip and reins and drove straight at Ares.

The war god did not see her. Athena had donned the helmet of Hades, which renders the wearer invisible even to immortal eyes. Ares saw only Diomedes and threw his bronze spear at the hero's chest. Athena caught it in her hand and turned it aside as if it were a twig.

Diomedes threw his spear, and Athena drove it home into the pit of Ares's stomach, where his war-belt crossed. The bronze tore through fair flesh and came out again, and Ares roared.

The sound of it was like nine or ten thousand men shouting in the thick of battle. It was like mountains falling into the sea. Every man on the field, Greek and Trojan, froze in terror at that cry. Ares, the god of war himself, ascended into the heavens in a dark cloud, fleeing the battlefield he had dominated moments before.

He reached Olympus and threw himself before Zeus, showing the immortal blood that flowed from his wound. "Father, are you not angered? The gods suffer cruelly at one another's hands while helping mortals. See how Athena incites Diomedes to vent his rage on us immortals. First Aphrodite, then me."

Zeus looked at him with disgust. "Do not come whining here, Sir Facing-bothways. I hate you worst of all the gods. You are ever fighting and making mischief. Still, you are my son. I cannot let you suffer."

He summoned Paeon, the divine healer, who spread pain-killing herbs on the wound, and Ares was whole again in an instant. But the lesson was learned. Ares did not return to the field that day.

Hera and Athena, their work done, flew back to Olympus. And Diomedes, the mortal who had wounded two gods in a single day, found that his fire had dimmed. The aristeia was ending. He was a hero again, not something more. But what a day it had been.

Hero	City / Region	Parentage	Special Trait
Achilles	Phthia	Peleus (mortal) + Thetis	Greatest warrior;
(sea goddess)	invulnerable except for		

his heel

Diomedes	Argos / Tiryns	Tydeus (mortal, "lion-	Athena's chosen
hearted")	champion; wounds two		

gods in one day

Odysseus	Ithaca	Laertes + Anticleia	Cleverest Greek; master
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of strategy and speech

Ajax the Great	Salamis	Telamon (king)	Strongest after Achilles;
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carries a tower-like shield

Agamemnon	Mycenae	Atreus	Commander of all
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Greeks; greatest king by
rank

Menelaus	Sparta	Atreus	Husband of Helen; the
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wronged man the war
was fought for

Idomeneus	Crete	Deucalion	Veteran warrior;
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respected by all for his
steadfastness

Nestor	Pylos	Neleus	Oldest Greek leader;
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voice of experience and
counsel

FOOTNOTES

The Diomedes legend after Troy: Diomedes was one of the few Greek heroes who had a successful return home after the war. Unlike Agamemnon (murdered by his wife) or Odysseus (wandered ten years), Diomedes arrived safely in Argos. Later Greek tradition made him a cult figure in Italy, where he was worshipped as a divine hero. His aristeia in Book V remained the most famous moment of his career: the mortal who stabbed Love and War in a single afternoon.

Ares in Greek culture: Unlike Athena, who represented strategic warfare, Ares embodied the chaos, bloodlust, and brutality of combat. The Greeks were ambivalent about him. They acknowledged his power, but they did not love him. In myth he is frequently humiliated: trapped by Hephaestus in an adulterous net, defeated by heroes like Diomedes, mocked by his fellow gods. Athena's victory over Ares in Book V is a statement about what kind of warfare the Greeks admired: disciplined, strategic, and purposeful rather than mere savagery.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Diomedes wounds two gods in one day, yet he needs Athena's help to do it. Is his aristeia truly his own achievement, or is it Athena's? What does Homer seem to believe about the relationship between human effort and divine assistance?

Aphrodite enters battle only to save her son, not to fight. What does her vulnerability tell us about the limits of love as a force in the world of the Iliad?

The aristeia is a temporary state - the hero is elevated and then returns to mortality. What does this pattern suggest about how the ancient Greeks understood greatness? Can any human achievement last?

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PART TWO: THE BATTLE JOINED

CHAPTER 6: HECTOR IN TROY

The battle raged on, but something had shifted.

Diomedes still blazed across the field, yet his fire was cooling. The Trojans, reeling from the god of war's defeat, found their footing again under Hector (HEK-tor). He was everywhere at once: spear flashing, voice raised in the terrible war-cry, holding the line where others would have broken.

In the lull between clashes, two warriors stepped forward from opposite armies. Diomedes, son of Tydeus, and Glaucus (GLOW-kus), son of Hippolochus, a Lycian prince fighting for Troy. They met in the open space between the hosts, and Diomedes called out: "Who are you? I have never seen you before, but you are daring beyond all others. I will not fight a god. But if you are mortal, come and meet your fate."

Glaucus looked at him and something in the young Greek's face reminded him of old stories. "Son of Tydeus," he said, "why ask my lineage? Men come and go as leaves on the trees. The wind sheds those of autumn, but when spring returns the forest buds afresh. Even so with the generations of mankind. But since you ask, I am of the line of Bellerophon, who slew the Chimaera and tamed the flying horse Pegasus."

Diomedes planted his spear in the ground. "Then you are a friend of my father's house. Great Oeneus once entertained Bellerophon for twenty days, and they exchanged gifts. We are guest-friends by ancient ties. Let us not raise spears against each other. There are plenty of Trojans I can kill, and plenty of Greeks you can fight."

They clasped hands and pledged friendship. Then, in a moment that has puzzled readers for three thousand years, they exchanged armour. Glaucus gave his golden armour, worth a hundred oxen, for Diomedes's bronze, worth nine. Zeus, Homer tells us, had taken Glaucus's wits. But perhaps there is something else here: a recognition that even in war, there are older bonds than the ones that divide us.

Meanwhile, the prophet Helenus (HEL-en-us), son of Priam and the wisest augur among the Trojans, went to Hector and Aeneas (ee-NEE-as). "You are the two mainstays of Troy," he said. "Rally the men at the gates while I hold the line. Then, Hector, go into the city. Tell our mother Hecuba to gather the matrons at Athena's temple. Let her lay the largest, fairest robe on the goddess's knees and promise twelve yearling heifers if Athena will have pity on the city - and keep Diomedes from our gates."

Hector did not hesitate. He sprang from his chariot and went among the host, brandishing his spears, urging the men to stand firm. "Trojans and allies, be men while I go to the city and bid our wives pray to the gods."

He went through the Scaean (SKAY-an) Gates, and the women of Troy came running. Wives, daughters, mothers - they crowded around him asking after their men. Hector told them to pray, and many wept as they heard the news he carried.

He reached his father's palace first. Priam (PRY-am)'s house was vast, with fifty bedchambers for his sons and twelve for his daughters, all of hewn stone. His mother Hecuba (heh-KYOO-bah) came to him with her daughter Laodice, the fairest of her girls.

"My son," Hecuba said, taking his hand, "why have you left the battle? Are the Achaeans pressing you hard? Let me bring you wine to offer to Zeus."

"No wine, Mother," Hector said gently. "I dare not pray with unwashed hands, splattered with blood and filth. Get the matrons together. Go to Athena's temple with offerings. Lay your fairest robe on the goddess's knees and promise twelve heifers if she will pity the town and keep Diomedes from our walls. I must find Paris."

Hecuba did as he asked. She called her waiting-women, gathered the matrons throughout the city, and went to her storeroom. There she found the most beautiful robe she owned, embroidered by Sidonian women, glittering like a star. She took it and led the women to Athena's temple on the citadel. Theano, daughter of Cisseus and wife of Antenor, opened the doors - she was priestess of the goddess. The women lifted their hands and prayed: "Holy Athena, break the spear of Diomedes. Lay him low before the Scaean gates. We will sacrifice twelve heifers in your temple if you will have pity on our wives and little ones."

Athena heard them. Athena did not grant their prayer.

MYTHOLOGY NOTE

The scene of the Trojan women praying to Athena is one of the most ironically poignant moments in the Iliad. The Trojans worship Athena in their city and bring their finest robe to her temple, yet in this war she has chosen the Greek side, and no number of heifers, no quality of robes, can change that. Homer's point is devastating: the gods are not fair. They take sides for reasons that have nothing to do with justice. Troy will fall not because its people are wicked but because the cosmic dice have already been thrown. This theme - that the innocent suffer while the guilty prosper, that prayer goes unanswered and sacrifice unheeded - runs through the entire poem and gives it much of its tragic weight.

While the women prayed, Hector went to Paris's house. He found his brother in his chamber, busy with his armour, his shield and breastplate gleaming, handling his curved bow. And there sat Helen (HEL-en) with her women, setting them their tasks.

Hector's spear was eleven cubits long, its bronze point gleaming, fastened to the shaft with a ring of gold. He looked at his brother and felt the old anger rise.

"You do ill to nurse this grievance," he said, and his voice was controlled but cold. "The people perish fighting around our city, and you sit here handling your bow. Up, then, or the city will be in flames."

Paris answered without shame. "Hector, your rebuke is just. I am not lingering here from ill-will. I was grieving, but Helen was urging me to battle even now. I will go. Wait while I arm myself, or go first and I will follow."

Helen spoke to Hector, and her voice held a world of sorrow. "Brother-in-law, to my abhorred self, would that a whirlwind had swept me away on the day I was born. But the gods devised these evils. Would that I had been wife to a better man, one who could feel dishonor. This fellow was never to be depended upon, and he will reap what he has sown. Come in and rest. You bear the brunt of the toil that my hateful self has caused."

"Do not ask me to sit, Helen," Hector said. "I cannot stay. The Trojans miss me when I am not among them. Urge your husband to make haste. I must go home first. I must see my wife and my

little son. I do not know whether I shall ever return to them, or whether the gods will cause me to fall by the hands of the Achaeans."

He left them. Paris would arm himself soon enough, his beautiful face set with determination that would last until the next battle tested it. But Hector had more important business.

He went to his own house, but Andromache (an-DROM-ah-kee) was not there.

"Where is she?" Hector asked the housekeeper.

"Hector, she went to the wall. She heard the Trojans were hard pressed and the Achaeans in great force. She went in frenzied haste, and the nurse went with her carrying the child."

Hector ran. Through the streets of Troy he went, past the houses and workshops, past the temples and the market squares, down to the great wall where the city faced the plain. He passed through the Scaean Gates and there she was, running towards him, his wife, with the nurse behind her carrying their son.

Astyanax (ah-STY-ah-naks), whose name means "lord of the city," for his father was Troy's chief guardian. Hector had named him Scamandrius after the river, but the people had given him the name that expressed what he meant to them. He was a mere babe, lovely as a star. The nurse carried him in her arms.

Hector smiled when he saw the boy, but he did not speak. Andromache stood before him weeping, taking his hand in hers.

"Dear husband," she said, and her voice was breaking, "your valor will bring you to destruction. Think of your infant son. Think of me, who will soon be your widow. The Achaeans will set upon you and kill you. It would be better for me to lie dead and buried than to live without you. I have no father. Achilles slew him when he sacked Thebe. I had seven brothers, and he killed them all on the same day. My mother - he brought her here with the spoil, and freed her for a ransom, but Artemis struck her down in your father's house. You are father and mother and brother to me, dear husband. Have mercy. Stay here on the wall. Make not your child fatherless."

She was not pleading for herself alone. She was pleading for every wife who has ever watched her husband walk towards a war that will consume him. Her words have echoed across three thousand years because they are the words of love facing its greatest enemy: duty.

Hector looked at her, and his heart was torn. "Wife," he said, "I too have thought upon all this. But with what face could I look upon the Trojans, men or women, if I shirked battle like a coward? I know nothing save to fight in the forefront and win renown for my father and myself. I know the day will come when Troy is destroyed, when Priam and his people perish. I grieve for none of it - not for Hecuba, not for Priam, not for my brothers - as I grieve for you. When that day comes, some Achaean will bear you away weeping, to work the loom in Argos at another woman's bidding, to fetch water from foreign springs. And someone who sees you will say, 'She was wife to Hector, the greatest of the Trojans.' And your tears will break forth anew. May I lie dead before I hear that cry."

He stretched his arms towards Astyanax. The boy cried and burrowed into his nurse's bosom, terrified at the sight of his father's armour, at the horsehair plume that nodded fiercely from his helmet. He did not know his father in that terrible guise.

Hector laughed. Andromache laughed through her tears. Hector took off his helmet and laid it on the ground, the bronze gleaming in the sun. He took his son in his arms, kissed him, and dandled him, praying aloud: "Zeus, grant that this child may be even as I am, chief among the Trojans. Let him be strong. Let him rule Ilium with his might. May men say of him as he comes from battle, 'The son is far better than the father.' May his mother's heart be glad."

He laid the child again in Andromache's arms. She took him to her bosom, smiling through her tears, and Hector's heart yearned towards her. He caressed her fondly.

"My own wife, do not take these things too bitterly to heart. No one can hurry me down to death before my time. But if a man's hour is come, be he brave or coward, there is no escape. Go now, within the house. Attend to your loom and your distaff. War is man's matter, and mine above all others who were born in Troy."

He took up his helmet from the ground. Andromache went back to her house, weeping bitterly, looking back at him again and again. When she reached home, she found her maidens within,

and bade them join in her lament. They mourned Hector in his own house while he was still alive, for they did not believe they would ever see him return from battle.

And Hector? Hector walked back through the Scaean Gates and onto the plain, where Paris met him in his gleaming armour, looking for all the world like a warrior. The brothers walked together towards the Greek lines, towards the dust and the shouting and the never-ending war.

Name	Relationship to Hector	Role in Troy
Priam	Father	King of Troy; old, dignified, grief-

worn

Hecuba	Mother	Queen; leads the women in prayer
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to Athena

Paris (Alexandros)	Brother	Cause of the war; beautiful but
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unreliable

Helen	Sister-in-law	"The face that launched a
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thousand ships"; self-aware and

sorrowful

Andromache	Wife	Daughter of Eetion; devoted
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mother; voice of civilian suffering

Astyanax	Son	"Lord of the city"; the future Troy
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will never have

Helenus	Brother	Prophet; advises Hector to seek
---------	---------	---------------------------------

divine aid

Cassandra	Sister	Prophetess cursed never to be
-----------	--------	-------------------------------

believed (not seen in this scene)

Laodice	Sister	Fairest of Priam's daughters
Antenor	Family counsellor	Husband of Theano; voice of

diplomatic reason

FOOTNOTES

Andromache's name and heritage: Her name means "man-fighter" or "she who battles like a man," an ironic name for a woman who wants nothing more than peace. Her father Eetion ruled in Thebe under Mount Placus; Achilles sacked his city early in the war, killed Eetion and Andromache's seven brothers, and took her as a captive. Hector married her, and their union represents the possibility of happiness even in the shadow of destruction. The Greeks later killed Astyanax by throwing him from the walls of Troy, ensuring that Hector's line would not survive.

The walls of Troy in archaeology: The archaeological site of Hisarlik in modern Turkey has revealed multiple layers of settlement. The walls associated with "Troy VI" (c. 1300 BCE) are impressive stone fortifications that match Homer's descriptions. The "weak point" near the fig-tree where Andromache suggests placing troops corresponds to an actual less-defended section in the archaeological remains. Homer may have been preserving genuine topographical knowledge passed down through centuries of oral tradition.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Hector tells Andromache that he cannot stay behind the walls because his honour demands he fight in the forefront. But he also admits he believes Troy will fall. Is his choice noble or futile? What would you have done in his place?

Astyanax cries at his father's helmet and laughs when it is removed. What does this moment reveal about the conflict between Hector's two roles - as a father and as a warrior? Can one person be both fully?

The Trojan women's prayer to Athena goes unanswered. Have you ever prayed or hoped for something that did not come? How did you make sense of that silence?

CHAPTER 7: AJAX STANDS ALONE

Hector had walked back from the city with Paris at his side, and the Trojans greeted them like sailors greeting a wind after dead calm. Here were their princes, their champions, the two poles around which Trojan hope turned. Paris looked the part, at least: his armour gleamed, his bow was strung, his face was beautiful enough to make you forget what he had cost them all.

But beauty does not win wars. Paris killed his man, Menesthius (men-ES-thee-us), son of the mace-wielder Areithous. Hector struck down Eioneus (eye-oh-NEE-us) with a spear to the neck. Glaucus (GLOW-kus) the Lycian felled another. Still, the Greeks pressed hard, and the battle might have raged until dark had not the gods decided otherwise.

Athena (ah-THEE-nah) came down from Olympus like a shooting star, and Apollo (ah-POL- oh) rose to meet her from the citadel of Pergamus. They stood together beneath the great oak tree, and Apollo spoke first.

"Daughter of Zeus, why have you left Olympus? Have you no pity for the Trojans? Let us halt this day's fighting. Let Hector challenge the best of the Greeks to single combat. Let us see who answers."

Athena agreed. And Helenus (HEL-en-us), Priam's prophetic son, felt the gods' purpose settle in his mind like a stone dropping to the bottom of a clear pool. He went to Hector.

"Brother, I have heard the voice of the immortals. Bid both armies sit, and challenge the best of the Achaeans to meet you man to man. Your hour has not yet come."

Hector's eyes blazed. He strode between the hosts, grasped his spear by the middle, and raised it high. The Trojans sat. Agamemnon (ag-ah-MEM-non) bade the Greeks do the same. And in that stillness (that strange, breath-held stillness of ten thousand men sitting in silence on a field of death) Hector spoke.

"Hear me, Trojans and Achaeans. Zeus has brought our oaths to nothing. He foreshadows ill for both sides until one of us is destroyed. Let the best among you come forward to fight me, alone.

If your champion kills me, let him strip my armour and take it to his ships. But give my body back to Troy, that my people may burn me with honour. And if I kill him, I will hang his armour in the temple of Apollo. But his body I will return, that the Achaeans may give him proper rites. Let our fame live after us."

Silence.

Not the silence of indifference. The silence of fear. The Greek chieftains looked at one another, and no one rose. It was one thing to fight in the press of battle, with comrades at your side and a god's own luck guiding your spear. It was quite another to face Hector, alone, with all the host watching.

Menelaus (men-uh-LAY-us) stood up. His face was dark with shame and fury. "Vain braggarts!" he cried. "Women, not men! What stain upon us if no one faces him! I will go myself."

He began to arm. And he would have died (Hector was far the better warrior) had not Agamemnon caught him by the hand.

"Brother, are you mad?" Agamemnon's voice was urgent, rough with love. "Be patient. Do not fight a man so much stronger than yourself. Even Achilles shrank from meeting Hector. Sit down. The Achaeans will send another."

Menelaus yielded, though it cost him. His squires stripped the armour from his shoulders.

Then old Nestor (NES-tor) rose. The Pylians (PYE-lee-ans) called him the master of the truest counsel, but now his counsel was a goad. He looked at the assembled kings with eyes that had seen ninety winters.

"How it would grieve old Peleus to hear of you quailing before Hector. I remember when the Arcadians gathered against us by the river Celadon, and their champion Ereuthalion (eh-roo-thah-LEE-on) came forward in the armour of the mace-man Areithous. The young men trembled. But I was young then too, and I faced him. Athena gave me victory, and he fell like a tower." Nestor's voice hardened. "Would I were young again. But you, foremost among the host, have none of you any stomach for fighting Hector?"

Nine men rose.

Agamemnon. Diomedes (dye-oh-MEE-deez). The two Ajaxes: Ajax the Great (AY-jaks), son of Telamon, and Ajax the Lesser (AY-jaks), son of Oileus. Idomeneus (eye-DOM-eh-noos). Meriones (meh-RYE-oh-neeze). Eurypylus (yoo-RIP-ih-lus). Thoas (THOH-as). And Odysseus (oh-DIS-ee-us).

"Cast lots," Nestor said. "May the best man win."

Each man marked his token and dropped it into Agamemnon's helmet. Nestor shook it. The lot fell out. The herald bore it around the circle, left to right, and when he reached Ajax (AY-jaks), son of Telamon, the giant warrior held out his hand.

He knew his own mark. He threw it to the ground and laughed, a sound like boulders rolling downhill. "The lot is mine! I rejoice in it. I will vanquish Hector. Pray, all of you. Pray to Zeus that I may win great glory."

They prayed. And Ajax armed.

His shield was a wonder: seven layers of bull's hide, each from a full-fed steer, with an eighth layer of bronze across the front. Tychius (TIK-ee-us), the greatest leather-worker in Greece, had spent a year making it. When Ajax moved, the shield covered him from chin to ankle. He looked less like a man than like a walking fortress.

He strode out to meet Hector, and the Greeks cheered, and the Trojans felt their hearts beat faster.

"Hector, you will learn what kind of champions the Danaans have, even without Achilles. He sulks by his ships, but we are many who can face you. Begin!"

Hector did not flinch. "Noble Ajax, do not treat me like a puny boy or a woman. I have been long used to battle. I can turn my shield left or right. I can charge among chariots. But I will not take you

off guard. I will smite you openly if I can."

He threw first. His spear struck Ajax's shield and drove through six of the seven hide layers, stopping at the seventh. The bronze point quivered a hand's breadth from the giant's chest.

Ajax threw next. His spear punched through Hector's shield, through the cuirass beneath, and grazed Hector's side as he twisted away. Blood welled, but Hector did not fall.

They closed like lions. Like boars in winter. Hector struck the centre of Ajax's shield and the bronze point turned. Ajax drove his spear through Hector's shield and staggered him, gashing his neck. The blood poured now, soaking Hector's collar, but he seized a stone from the earth (huge, jagged) and hurled it at Ajax's shield. The bronze boss rang like a bell.

Ajax found a larger stone. He swung it overhead and cast it with all his monstrous strength. It broke Hector's shield inward and threw him backward, the rim crushing against his chest. He would have fallen, would have been lost, but Apollo (ever the protector of Troy) raised him up.

They drew their swords. But before steel could meet steel, two heralds stepped between them: Talthylus (tal-thy-BEE-us) for the Greeks, Idaeus (eye-DEE-us) for the Trojans. Wise men, respected, bearing the staff of office that made them sacred.

"My sons, fight no longer. You are both valiant, and both dear to Zeus. But night is falling, and night commands even warriors to rest."

Ajax lowered his sword. "Let Hector say it. He issued the challenge."

Hector, breathing hard, blood drying on his neck, smiled. "Ajax, heaven has given you stature, strength, and judgment. You excel with the spear. Let us cease for today. We will fight again until heaven decides between us. Night falls. And let us exchange gifts, so men will say we fought with might but parted as friends."

He gave Ajax a silver-studded sword with its belt of purple leather. Ajax gave Hector a war-belt dyed with royal purple. They clasped hands, and the watching thousands breathed again.

There is something here that catches at the heart. They had tried to kill each other. They had hurled stones heavy enough to crush a man's ribs, driven spears meant to spill guts on the sand. And yet, when darkness intervened, they could recognise in each other the same courage, the same devotion to honour. War makes monsters of men. But occasionally, just occasionally, it reveals their nobility too.

MYTHOLOGY NOTE

The duel between Hector and Ajax is one of the most celebrated set-piece confrontations in the Iliad, and it has captured the imagination of artists for millennia. In Greek vase painting, the two warriors are often shown facing each other with monumental shields, emphasizing their equality as the greatest fighters on each side after Achilles. The exchange of gifts is remarkable. Homer presents it without irony, as a natural gesture between aristocratic warriors who share a common code. The sword Hector gives Ajax will later play a tragic role: it is with this very sword that Ajax will kill himself after Achilles's armour is awarded to Odysseus rather than to him, an event dramatized in Sophocles's play Ajax.

That evening, Nestor rose in Agamemnon's council with a new proposal.

"Too many of our comrades have died. Tomorrow, let us gather our dead and burn them. And then, let us build a wall. A high wall, with gates for our chariots, and a deep trench beyond it. Let us protect our ships while we still can."

The Greeks shouted their approval. They worked through the twilight and into the night, raising an earthwork that would shelter their fleet: a desperate measure born of desperate times.

Meanwhile, in Troy, the council met on the citadel, and Antenor (AN-teh-nor) rose to speak the unspeakable. "Let us give up Helen and all her treasure to the sons of Atreus. We are fighting in violation of our oaths, and we shall not prosper until we do as I say."

A cold silence followed. Then Paris stood up.

"Antenor, your words are not to my liking. I will not give up the woman. But the treasure I brought from Argos, I will restore it, and add more of my own."

Old Priam (PRY-am) rose last. The king looked older than Nestor, older than the walls themselves. "So be it. At daybreak, let our herald go to the ships and propose a truce to burn the dead. Then we will fight again, until heaven decides."

Idaeus went in the morning. The Greeks agreed to the truce. Diomedes muttered that even a child could see Troy's doom was near, but Agamemnon overruled him. For one day, the enemies gathered their dead side by side, washed the blood from cold limbs, built pyres, and wept.

The Greeks worked on. By sunset, their wall rose from the plain: earth and timber, a palisade with stakes, a trench deep enough to break a chariot's axle. They made gates for their horses to pass through, and they stood back and looked at their work with the desperate pride of men who know it may be all that stands between them and destruction.

On Olympus, Poseidon (poh-SYE-don) noticed. "Father Zeus, what mortal will ever honour the gods again? The Achaeans have built a wall without offering hecatombs to us. Its fame will eclipse the wall that Apollo and I built for Laomedon (lay-OM-eh-don), Priam's father."

Zeus smiled, a smile that was not entirely kind. "Do not trouble yourself, shaker of earth. When the Achaeans have gone home, you may shatter their wall and wash it into the sea. Let them have their moment."

The gods, as ever, were playing a longer game than the mortals below.

FOOTNOTES

Ajax's shield and the archaeology of warfare: The famous "tower shield" described in the Iliad (seven layers of bullhide faced with bronze) matches archaeological finds from Mycenaean Greece. Full-body shields of this type are depicted in frescoes at Mycenae and Tiryns, carried by warriors in processions. These shields were clearly defensive equipment meant for stationary fighters rather than mobile skirmishers, which fits Ajax's fighting style perfectly: he plants himself like a wall and lets the enemy come to him. The description of his shield may preserve genuine Bronze Age

military technology, passed down through centuries of oral tradition.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Hector and Ajax exchange gifts after trying to kill each other. What does this tell you about the warrior code of the Bronze Age? Can you imagine modern enemies doing something similar?

Antenor suggests giving Helen back, but Paris refuses. The Trojans choose to keep fighting rather than surrender the cause of the war. Is this honourable or foolish?

The Greeks build a wall to protect their ships because they can no longer rely on Achilles. What does this physical wall symbolize about the psychological state of the army?

CHAPTER 8: THE TIDE TURNS

Dawn came in her saffron robe, and Zeus (Zyoos) called the gods to council on the highest peak of Olympus. He sat on his golden throne, and the mountain trembled beneath his weight. His voice was thunder itself.

"Hear me, all you gods and goddesses. Let none of you cross me. If I see anyone helping Trojans or Danaans, I will hurl that god to Tartarus, as far beneath Hades as heaven is above the earth. The gates there are iron. The floor is bronze. You will learn who is mightiest among us. Try me if you doubt it. Hang a golden chain from heaven, and all of you pull together, gods and goddesses. You will not drag me down. But if I choose to pull, I will lift the earth and sea together and bind the chain around Olympus and leave you all dangling in the sky."

The gods held their peace. They were frightened.

Athena alone dared answer. "Father, we know your might is beyond question. But we grieve for the Danaans, who are perishing. We will refrain from fighting, as you command. But may we still counsel them?"

Zeus smiled at his grey-eyed daughter. "Take heart, Triton-born. I am not truly angry with you."

Then he did something terrible. He yoked his horses (their hooves were bronze, their manes gold), took up his golden whip, and drove his chariot to Mount Ida (EYE-dah). There, on the crest above Troy, he sat in glory and watched. And when the armies met on the plain below, when shield struck shield and the earth ran red, the father of gods and men lifted his golden scales.

In one pan he placed the fate of the Trojans. In the other, the fate of the Greeks.

He held the balance by the middle and lifted it. The pan of the Greeks sank down, down, down, until it rested on the earth. The pan of the Trojans rose towards heaven.

Then Zeus thundered. A bolt of lightning seared from Ida to the plain, and the Greeks felt their knees go weak. It is one thing to face mortal men. It is another to feel the king of gods himself weighing your doom and finding you wanting.

The rout began slowly, then all at once.

Idomeneus (eye-DOM-eh-noos) turned. Agamemnon (ag-ah-MEM-non) turned. Even the two Ajaxes gave ground. Only old Nestor (NES-tor) held firm, and that not from courage but because one of his horses had been struck by an arrow from Paris (PAIR-is). The shaft had pierced the beast's head where the mane grows from the skull, the deadliest spot. The horse reared, screaming, and tangled the traces.

Nestor hacked at the leather with his sword, but Hector (HEK-tor) bore down on him, his chariot wheels throwing up dust, his spear leveled at the old man's chest.

In that moment, Diomedes (dye-oh-MEE-deez) shouted across the chaos. "Odysseus! Where are you flying to? Turn back! Help me defend Nestor!"

But Odysseus did not hear, or pretended not to. He pressed on towards the ships, and Diomedes (cursing, praying, calling on all his father's spirit) flung himself alone into the press. He took his stand before Nestor's horses, and the old man (who knew a lifeline when he saw one) climbed onto Diomedes's chariot. They lashed the steeds of Tros towards Hector.

Diomedes threw. His spear missed Hector but struck his charioteer Eniopeus (en-ee-OH- pew-us) full in the chest. The man pitched headlong from the car, and the horses swerved. Hector's grief was fierce but brief. He found another driver, Archeptolemus (ar-kep-TOL- eh-mus), and pressed forward again.

It would have ended there. The Greeks would have been penned in Troy like sheep in a fold, had not Zeus hurled a thunderbolt that struck the earth directly in front of Diomedes's horses. The flare of burning brimstone blinded them. The horses reared, shying back from the fire, and the reins dropped from Nestor's hands.

"Turn!" Nestor cried. "The hand of Zeus is against us! Today he gives victory to Hector. Tomorrow, if it pleases him, he may give it to us. No man can thwart the purpose of Zeus."

Diomedes turned. Three times he hesitated, looking back at Hector. Three times Zeus thundered from Ida. And Diomedes, the great Diomedes who had wounded gods, fled.

Hector's voice rose above the din. "Son of Tydeus! The Greeks honoured you! They gave you the best cuts of meat, the fullest cups of wine! Now they will despise you. You are no better than a woman!"

The taunt burned. But Diomedes kept driving towards the ships.

Hector raged across the plain like a hound that has cornered a lion. He killed the hindmost Greeks as they ran, and his eyes blazed like those of Gorgo (GOR-goh) or bloody Ares himself. The Trojans drove the Greeks through their own trench, past their own stakes, and the Achaeans fell back to their ships with the desperation of men who know the sea is at their backs.

But Agamemnon was not finished. The high king went among the ships carrying a great purple cloak, and he took his stand by Odysseus's hull (midmost of the fleet, where his voice would carry farthest). He shouted to the Greeks, and his voice was raw with anguish.

"Argives! Shame on you! Where are the boasts we made in Lemnos, eating beef and filling our cups? You vowed each of you would stand against a hundred men. Now you cannot stand against one. Against Hector! He will burn our ships! Father Zeus, did you ever ruin a great king so utterly?"

He wept. And Zeus, looking down from Ida, pitied him.

The father of gods sent an eagle, most unfailing of birds, with a young fawn in its talons. The eagle dropped the fawn by the altar where the Greeks sacrificed to Zeus. When they saw it, they knew the omen came from heaven. They fought more fiercely. It was not hope, exactly. It was the knowledge that someone, somewhere, had not forgotten them.

Then Teucer (TYOO-ser) came into his own. The bastard son of Telamon, half-brother to Ajax, was the finest archer in the Greek host. He took his place beneath Ajax's great shield, peering round its edge, and every arrow he loosed found its mark. Orsilochus fell. Then Ormenus. Then Ophelestes, Daetor, Chromius, and Lycophontes. Then Amopaon and Melanippus.

Agamemnon saw him and exulted. "Teucer! Son of Telamon! Shoot on! Cover your father with glory! If Zeus grants us Troy, you shall have the next best honour after my own: a tripod, horses with their chariot, or a woman to warm your bed."

But Teucer could not hit Hector. Twice he aimed at the Trojan prince. Twice Apollo turned the arrow aside. The first time, the shaft struck Gorgythion (gor-GITH-ee-on), Priam's son, in the breast, and his head bowed like a garden poppy weighed down by spring rain. The second time, it killed Hector's new charioteer, Archeptolemus.

Hector's grief turned to fury. He leaped from his chariot, seized a boulder, and ran at Teucer. The stone struck Teucer where the collarbone meets the neck, a deadly place. The sinew of his arm snapped. The bow dropped from his hand, and Teucer fell to his knees, groaning.

Ajax shielded his brother while squires bore him to the ships. And with Teucer gone, the Greek defence cracked.

On Olympus, Hera (HEER-ah) and Athena (ah-THEE-nah) could bear it no longer.

"Shall we take no thought for the dying Danaans?" Hera cried. "See how they perish before the onset of one man!"

Athena's grey eyes flashed. "Would that Hector might die by Achaean hands. But my father is mad with spleen. Still, let us arm ourselves. Let us see if Hector will be glad to meet us."

They harnessed their gold-bridled steeds. But Zeus saw them from Ida, and he sent Iris (EYE-ris), his swift-winged messenger, to intercept them.

"Turn back," Iris said. "The son of Saturn forbids you. He will lame your horses. He will hurl you from your chariot and break it to pieces. It will take ten years to heal the wounds his lightning inflicts. He is less angry with Hera, for she always contradicts him. But you, grey-eyed goddess, will you raise your spear against your father?"

They turned. The Hours unyoked their horses, and the two goddesses sat down on their golden thrones, fuming. When Zeus returned to Olympus, neither would speak to him.

"Are you angry because I prevented you from helping your dear friends the Trojans?" he asked, and there was mockery in his voice. "Be glad I did not strike you with lightning."

"Tomorrow," Hera said through gritted teeth, "we will not fight. We will only counsel."

"Tomorrow," Zeus replied, "you will see me destroy the Argives. Hector will not cease until he rouses Achilles himself, fighting at the ships about the body of Patroclus. This is decreed. I care not for your displeasure. You are the greatest vixen living."

The sun sank into Oceanus. Darkness, blessed darkness, fell upon the Greeks.

MYTHOLOGY NOTE

The image of Zeus weighing human fates on golden scales is one of the most haunting visual symbols in the Iliad. It appears again before the final duel between Achilles and Hector. But what does it mean? Some scholars see the scales as representing an external, objective fate that even Zeus cannot override - he measures what has already been decided. Others interpret the scene more psychologically: Zeus is not discovering fate but accepting it, performing his own grief in advance. The scale is a kind of divine therapy, a way for the king of gods to process what he cannot change. In either reading, the symbol captures something profound about the poem's worldview: the gods are not all-powerful, and even they must bow to forces beyond their control.

Hector led the Trojans back from the ships and held council on the open ground near the river. He grasped his great spear (eleven cubits long, its bronze point gleaming, its ring of gold catching the last light) and spoke.

"Trojans, Dardanians, allies. I thought I would destroy the ships today, but darkness saved them. Now, obey the night. Feed your horses. Bring sheep and cattle from the city, and wine, and wood for watchfires whose flare may reach heaven. The Achaeans may try to flee by night. We must not let them board their ships unscathed. Let the heralds command the old men and boys

to watch the city walls. Let the women light fires in their houses, lest the town be entered by surprise."

He paused, and his voice rose with terrible certainty. "At daybreak, we arm ourselves. We will know then whether Diomedes can drive me back, or whether I will slay him and many others. Would I were as sure of being immortal as I am that this day will bring evil to the Argives."

They shouted their approval. They took their sweating horses from the chariots, made them fast, brought sheep and wine and corn. They offered hecatombs to the gods, but the gods did not accept them. The immortals still hated Troy, whatever Zeus's temporary favour might suggest.

And so the Trojans sat through the night on the plain, between the Greek ships and the river Xanthus (ZAN-thus). A thousand campfires burned. In the glow of each, fifty men sat with their weapons, and the horses waited beside their chariots, champing oats and barley, waiting for dawn.

The stars shone clear. The moon was bright. Not a breath of air stirred. Every peak and glade stood sharp in the radiance that broke from the serene of heaven. The watchfires of Troy blazed against the dark, and the heart of any shepherd who looked down from the hills would have quailed at the

sight: an army of fire, an enemy that would not sleep, a siege that had become, at last, a war of annihilation.

Name	Role	Parentage	Fate
Hector	Champion of Troy	Son of Priam and Hecuba	Will be slain by Achilles
Paris (Alexandros)	Prince; cause of war	Son of Priam and Hecuba	Will kill Achilles and then

die

Aeneas	Trojan noble; survivor	Son of Anchises and	Will survive; ancestor of
Aphrodite	Romans		
Sarpedon	Leader of Lycians	Son of Zeus and	Will die at Patroclus's
Laodamia	hands		
Glaucus	Lycian prince	Son of Hippolochus	Will survive the war
Antenor	Trojan elder; wise	No special parentage	Will survive; advocate of
counsel	peace		
Cebriones	Hector's charioteer	Son of Priam (illegitimate)	Will die in battle

FOOTNOTES

Zeus's golden scales: The image of Zeus weighing the fates of mortals on a balance is one of the most powerful visual symbols in the Iliad. It appears again in Book 22, before the duel between Achilles and Hector. In ancient Near Eastern mythology (including the Hittite and Mesopotamian traditions that influenced Greek epic), the balance or scale was associated with divine judgment and the weighing of souls. The Egyptian Book of the Dead features the "Weighing of the Heart" ceremony, where the deceased's heart is weighed against the feather of Ma'at (truth). Homer's scales may reflect this broader Bronze Age

Mediterranean symbolism, adapted to a Greek context where even Zeus cannot overrule the fate he measures.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Zeus forbids the gods from intervening, yet he weighs the fates and sends omens. Is he being fair, or is he simply disguising his own preference for the Trojans? Can a ruler ever truly be neutral?

Diomedes, the great hero of Book 5, is forced to retreat. How does his humiliation affect your understanding of heroism in the Iliad? Is a hero still a hero when he flees?

The Trojans camp on the plain for the first time, between the Greek ships and their own city. What does this shift in geography tell you about how the balance of power has changed?

CHAPTER 9: THE EMBASSY TO ACHILLES

Panic had taken the Greeks by the throat.

They sat in council on the shore, and Agamemnon (ag-ah-MEM-non) wept. The king of golden Mycenae sat before his captains with tears running down his face. His voice broke.

"My friends, Zeus promised me I would sack Troy. He has played me false. Let us sail home, for we cannot take this city."

Silence. Then Diomedes (dye-oh-MEE-deez) rose, young and fierce.

"Son of Atreus, your folly is plain. If you wish to go, go. But the rest of us stay until we have sacked Troy. Sthenelus and I will fight on, even if the others leave."

The Greeks roared. Agamemnon stared, and something like shame flickered in his eyes.

Old Nestor (NES-tor) rose. "Son of Tydeus, your prowess is beyond question, but you have not seen the whole matter. Let us eat, set our guards, and counsel. Son of Atreus, prepare a feast. The foe has lit his watchfires hard by our ships."

They did as he said. The sentinels went out under Thrasymedes (thras-ih-MEE-deez), Nestor's son, and six other captains. Seven hundred youths took their places between the trench and the wall, lit their fires, and waited.

In Agamemnon's quarters, the leaders gathered for the private council that would decide everything. They ate. They drank. And then Nestor spoke the words no one else dared speak.

"Son of Atreus, I will begin with you and end with you, for you are king. From the hour when you angered Achilles by taking Briseis (brye-SEE-is) from his tent, against my

judgment, you have walked the wrong path. You dishonoured a hero whom heaven itself had honoured. Now let us think how we may appease him, with presents and fair speeches."

Agamemnon bowed his head. "You rebuke my folly justly. I was wrong. I own it. I was blinded with passion. Therefore I will make amends."

He looked around the circle, and his voice grew thick with the weight of what he was about to offer.

"I will give Achilles seven tripods that have never touched a fire. Ten talents of gold. Twenty iron cauldrons. Twelve strong horses that have won races and carried off prizes. I will give him seven workwomen of Lesbos, surpassing in beauty. I will give him back Briseis, and I swear a great oath: I never touched her. Not once. I never went to her bed.

"And if the gods grant us Troy, Achilles may load his ship with gold and bronze. He may take twenty Trojan women, the loveliest after Helen. And when we reach Argos, he shall be my son-in-law. I will show him honour equal to my own son Orestes. He may choose any of my three daughters, without gifts of wooing, and I will add a dowry such as no man has ever given. I will give him seven cities, all near the sea, rich in cattle and sheep. The people will honour him as a god.

"All this I will do. Let him yield. Only Hades is utterly unyielding, and he is the most hateful of gods to mankind."

Nestor nodded. "The gifts are great. Let us send chosen messengers to his tent without delay. Let Phoenix (FEE-niks) lead the way. Let Ajax and Odysseus follow. And let heralds go with them."

They prayed to Zeus, and the embassy set out into the night.

MYTHOLOGY NOTE

The embassy scene is universally regarded as the dramatic and psychological centerpiece of the Iliad. Three speakers, three distinct arguments, three failures. What makes the scene extraordinary is not that Achilles refuses (we know he will), but how each refusal reveals a different facet of his character. Odysseus speaks to his self-interest and fails because Achilles has moved beyond self-interest. Phoenix speaks to his heart and fails because Achilles's heart is walled behind his pride. Ajax speaks to his honour among friends and almost succeeds, because friendship is the one value Achilles still holds sacred. The structure of the scene, with its threefold progression from head to heart to honour, has influenced countless later works, from medieval romance to Shakespearean tragedy.

They walked along the shore and prayed to Poseidon that the son of Peleus might listen. They found Achilles (ah-KILL-eez) in his tent, playing a lyre (silver-crossbarred, taken when he sacked Eetion (ee-TEE-on)'s city) and singing the deeds of heroes. Patroclus (pah-TROH-klus) sat opposite him, saying nothing, waiting.

Achilles sprang up, lyre in hand. "Welcome! You must come on great business, you who are still dearest to me of all the Achaeans."

He led them in, bade them sit on purple rugs, and told Patroclus to mix the wine strong. They roasted meat: a sheep's loin, a goat's loin, the chine of a fat hog. Patroclus tended the fire. Automedon (aw-TOM-eh-don) held the meat while Achilles carved. They ate. They drank. Then Odysseus filled his cup and pledged Achilles.

Then he began.

Odysseus spoke first.

"Achilles, we have eaten well in your tent and in Agamemnon's, but our thoughts are not on food. We face disaster. The Trojans have camped hard by our ships. They have lit watchfires throughout their host. Hector rages like a maniac, confident that Zeus is with him. He vows to burn our ships and slaughter us in the smoke. I fear the gods will make good his boasting.

"Your father Peleus, when he sent you to Agamemnon, charged you to check your temper. He said the better part was goodwill. You have forgotten his words. Even now, be appeased. Agamemnon offers you great amends."

And Odysseus listed them all: the tripods, the gold, the cauldrons, the horses, the women, Briseis returned unviolated, the Trojan women, the daughter in marriage, the seven cities. He did not forget a single item. He appealed to pity: the Achaeans would honour Achilles as a god. He added the final lure: "You might even kill Hector. He will come within your reach."

Odysseus's argument was perfect. It was calculated. It appealed to interest, to honour, to fear, to hope. It was exactly the speech a prudent man would give. And it failed completely.

Achilles's response was ice and fire together.

"Odysseus, noble son of Laertes, I hate the man who hides one thought while speaking another. I will say exactly what I mean. I will not be appeased. I have no thanks for all my fighting. The coward and the hero are held in equal honour. I have taken twelve cities by ship and eleven round about Troy. I gave all the spoil to Agamemnon. He stayed by his ships, took the lion's share, and gave me little. And from me alone he took my prize, the woman I delighted in.

"Let him keep her. Why must the Argives fight the Trojans? Was it not for Helen? Are the sons of Atreus the only men who love their women? I loved Briseis with my whole heart. He took her from me. He deceived me.

"As for his gifts, I loathe them. He may offer me all the wealth of Egyptian Thebes and it will not move me. Not until I have been avenged for this bitter wrong.

"My mother tells me I have two fates. If I stay and fight, I die young, but my name lives forever. If I go home, I live long, but my name dies with me. To the rest of you, I say: go home. You will not take Troy. I will sacrifice tomorrow, draw my ships into the water, and be gone."

His voice softened towards Phoenix. "Phoenix, old friend, you may stay if you wish. But the others must take my answer to the princes of the Achaeans."

Then Phoenix spoke.

The old man burst into tears. "Achilles, if you are minded to return, how can I remain here without you? Your father Peleus sent me with you when you were nothing but a boy. He charged me to make you excellent in speech and action. I had the making of you. I loved you with all my heart. You would not eat until I set you on my knees and held the wine-cup to your lips. I had no son of my own. I made a son of you.

"Battle with your pride, Achilles. Beat it. Even the gods can be appeased. Prayers are the daughters of great Zeus, halt and wrinkled, who follow in the footsteps of sin. Sin is fierce and fleet, but prayers come hobbling after, healing what sin has wounded. If a man has pity on them, they bless him. If he denies them, they pray to Zeus that he fall into sin.

"I will tell you a story. The Curetes (kyoo-REE-teez) and the Aetolians (ee-TOH-lee-ans) were fighting around Calydon (KAL-ih-don). Oeneus (EE-nyooss) had offended Artemis, and she sent a monstrous boar against his lands. Meleager (meh-LEH-ah-ger), his son, gathered hunters and killed it. But Artemis set the peoples fighting over the boar's hide.

"So long as Meleager fought, the Curetes could not prevail. But he grew angry with his mother (she had cursed him for killing her brother) and stayed at home with his wife Cleopatra (klee-oh-PAT-rah), whom men called Alcyone (al-SYE-oh-nee) because her mother mourned like the halcyon bird. The elders begged him to return. They offered him fifty plough-gates of fertile land. His father implored him. His comrades prayed. He refused them all. Until the enemy was burning the city, battering at his very doors, and his wife reminded him of the horrors of a captured town: the men slain, the women taken, the children led away. Then his heart was touched. He saved the city. But they gave him nothing of the rewards they had promised.

"Do not be like Meleager, my son. Take the gifts now, while they are offered. When the ships are burning, it will be too late."

This was not diplomacy. This was a father begging a son not to throw his life away on pride.

Achilles heard him out. When the old man finished, Achilles's voice was gentler than it had been with Odysseus, but no less final.

"Phoenix, old friend and father, I do not need Agamemnon's honour. I have honour from Zeus himself, and it will abide with me while I have breath. Do not weep and lament for the son of Atreus. If you love Agamemnon so well, you may lose my love for his. You should help me trouble those who trouble me. Stay here. Share my kingdom. You are king as much as I am. But do not ask me to forgive Agamemnon. Not for all his gifts. Not for all his daughters."

He nodded to Patroclus, who began preparing a bed for Phoenix. The embassy was over.

Then Ajax spoke.

The great son of Telamon had sat in silence through the other speeches, his massive frame radiating barely contained frustration. Now he looked at Odysseus and jerked his head towards the door. Then he turned to Achilles.

"Achilles, we must go, and take our unwelcome answer to the Danaans who wait for it. But I will speak plainly before I go. When a man's brother or son has been slain, he will accept a fine by way of amends from the killer. The wrongdoer pays, and the matter is settled. He remains at peace among his own people. But you, Achilles, the gods have put a wicked, unforgiving spirit in your heart. All this is about one single girl, and we now offer you seven of the best, and much else besides. Be of a more gracious mind. Respect the hospitality of your own roof. We are messengers from the host, and we are nearest and dearest to you of all the Achaeans."

Ajax's argument was the simplest and, in its way, the most profound. He did not speak of gifts or glory. He spoke of friendship. Of the bonds between men who have eaten together, fought together, bled together. He appealed not to Achilles's pride or his pocket but to his heart.

And something shifted.

"Ajax, son of Telamon," Achilles said, and his voice was different now, "you have spoken much to my liking. But my blood boils when I remember how the son of Atreus treated me like a vile tramp in front of all the Argives. Go, then, and deliver my message. I will have no concern with fighting until Hector, son of Priam, reaches the tents of the Myrmidons and flings fire upon their ships. For all his lust of battle, I think he will be held in check when he comes to my own tent and ship."

It was still a refusal. But in that last sentence, a door had opened. Just a crack. Just enough to let in a thin blade of light.

They rose. They made their drink-offerings. And they walked back along the shore, Odysseus leading, towards the camp that waited in despair for their answer.

Speaker	Argument Used	Achilles's Response
Odysseus	Lists all gifts; appeals to pity for	Cold rejection: "I hate deceit";
Greeks; warns of Hector; quotes	rejects all gifts; announces plan to	
Peleus's advice	sail home	
Phoenix	Emotional appeal as a second	Softer tone but firm: "I do not need
father; the Meleager and Cleopatra	Agamemnon's honour"; offers to	
parable; prayers can appease gods	share kingdom	
Ajax	Blunt appeal to friendship and	Acknowledges Ajax spoke "to my
custom; even murderers accept	liking"; draws a line: will fight only	
compensation; respect your guests	when Hector reaches his ships	

FOOTNOTES

The Meleager parallel: Phoenix's long story of Meleager and Cleopatra is a carefully constructed mirror of Achilles's own situation. Meleager withdraws from battle because of a grievance with his family; his city suffers; his wife persuades him to return, but too late to claim the promised rewards. Scholars have debated for centuries whether Achilles recognizes himself in the parallel. Homer's point seems to be that even the clearest warning, delivered with the deepest love, cannot change a man who has committed himself to his pride. Achilles hears the story and rejects its meaning. But the seed is planted, and it will bear terrible fruit when Patroclus (Achilles's own "Cleopatra," the one he loves most) goes to battle in his place.

The catalogue of gifts: Agamemnon's offer to Achilles represents a staggering amount of wealth by Bronze Age standards. The seven cities alone would make Achilles one of the wealthiest men in Greece. The offer of a daughter in marriage with no bride-price required is a public humiliation for Agamemnon, who would normally expect substantial gifts. In the world of Homeric epic, such an offer represents the absolute limit of what a king can give. That Achilles rejects it tells us something profound: for him, the insult has become more valuable than any compensation. His honour is no longer negotiable.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Odysseus lists every gift but never apologizes. Phoenix weeps but still asks Achilles to yield. Ajax appeals to friendship. Which argument do you find most persuasive, and why?

Achilles says he will fight only when Hector reaches his own ships. Is this a genuine condition, or is he simply trying to save face after refusing three times?

Phoenix tells the story of Meleager to warn Achilles that waiting too long will cost him everything. But Achilles has already foreseen that if he stays, he will die young. Is his choice to refuse the gifts an act of pride, wisdom, or something else entirely?

CHAPTER 10: DOLON AND THE NIGHT RAID

Sleep had abandoned Agamemnon (ag-ah-MEM-non).

The High King lay in his tent, staring into the dark, listening to the thousand sounds of a camp at rest. Somewhere a horse whickered. A sentry coughed. But these were Greek sounds, behind him. Before him, across the plain, the Trojan watchfires burned like a second constellation on earth, brighter and closer than they had ever been. Hector had driven them to the very edge of the sea.

Agamemnon groaned. He twisted. He sat up, pulled on his tunic, and slung a lion's skin across his shoulders. If sleep would not come, he would walk. Perhaps movement would quiet the dread that gnawed at his heart.

He had not gone ten paces before a figure emerged from the shadows.

"Brother?"

Menelaus (men-uh-LAY-us) stood there, fully armed, his face drawn with worry. "I saw you rise. I could not sleep either. The Trojans are too near."

Agamemnon seized his brother's hand. "I am going to Nestor. He may be old, but his mind is sharper than any sword. Go rouse Ajax and Idomeneus. Have them meet us at the watchfire beyond the trench."

Menelaus nodded and melted into the darkness.

Nestor was not sleeping either. The old king of Pylos sat up the moment Agamemnon's shadow crossed his tent flap.

"Who goes there?" Nestor's voice was steel wrapped in age. "Name yourself, or meet my spear."

"It is I. Agamemnon. The king who cannot rest."

Nestor rose, buckling on his armour with the practiced ease of a man who had done so for sixty years. "The gods are troubling your spirit, son of Atreus. Come. Let us wake others. The night is dangerous when the enemy sits on your doorstep."

They walked among the sleeping ships, and Nestor stopped at one tent in particular. "Ulysses," he called softly. Then louder: "Odysseus (oh-DISS-ee-us)! Wake, man. The Achaeans need your cunning."

Odysseus emerged, rubbing his eyes, reaching immediately for his shield. "Nestor. What hour is it?"

"The hour before the wolf hunts," Nestor said. "Come."

They found Diomedes (dye-oh-MEE-deez) already half-armoured, sleeping on an ox-hide with his shield for a pillow and his spear standing upright beside him. His hand found the spear before his eyes were fully open. The young king of Argos was always ready.

"Old man," Diomedes said with a weary smile, "your heart is iron. You never rest."

"I rest when I am dead," Nestor replied. "For now, walk with me."

They gathered the others - the two Ajaxes, Meriones (meh-RYE-oh-neeze), Thrasymedes (thras-ih-MEE-deez) - and walked beyond the trench to where the sentries kept their fires. The guards snapped to attention, ashamed to be found drowsy by their elders. Nestor praised them and urged them on. Then the leaders sat in a circle on the cold ground, and the old man spoke.

"My friends, I will ask a question. Is there any man here brave enough, and foolish enough, to slip into the Trojan camp and learn their plans? Do they mean to stay by our ships, or withdraw to their walls? If someone could bring back that knowledge, his fame would be as high as heaven. Every captain would give him a black ewe and her lamb, and he would be honoured at every feast for the rest of his life."

Silence.

The darkness seemed to press closer. The Trojan fires flickered in the distance, close enough to smell the woodsmoke. To walk into that darkness alone would be to walk into the mouth of a lion.

Then Diomedes spoke.

"I will go. But not alone. Two men are better than one in the dark. One sees what the other misses. One fights while the other thinks."

Several voices rose at once. The two Ajaxes offered. Meriones offered. Menelaus offered.

But Diomedes looked at Odysseus. "If I may choose my companion, I choose the cleverest man in Greece. Pallas Athena loves him, and his wits are sharper than any blade. We would pass through fire together."

Odysseus smiled, though there was no humor in it. "The night wanes. Two-thirds of it is spent, and only the third remains. Let us arm ourselves and be gone, or dawn will find us still talking."

They dressed for shadows. Thrasymedes gave Diomedes a sword and a plain helmet of bull's hide; nothing that would catch the light. Meriones found Odysseus a bow and a leather cap lined with felt and studded with boar's teeth, dark and irregular. They looked like men who belonged to the night.

Before they set out, Athena sent them a sign. A heron cried to their right, close enough to hear but hidden by the darkness. Odysseus prayed: "Daughter of Zeus, be with us now as you were with my father in Thebes. We give you glory for what we are about to do."

Then they walked, two lions prowling among the dead.

But the Greeks were not the only ones awake.

Hector (HEK-tor) too had called a council, and he too had offered a prize for a dangerous mission. "Who will go to the Greek ships and tell me their plans? Are they guarded as before, or are they preparing to flee? The reward is great: the chariot and horses of Achilles himself, the finest team that ever drew a warrior to battle."

The Trojans held their peace. The mission was suicide, and they knew it.

Then one man stepped forward.

His name was Dolon (DOH-lon), son of Eumedes (yoo-MEE-deez), the herald. He was wealthy but ugly, a fast runner, and an only son among five sisters. Perhaps he craved glory. Perhaps he simply wanted the horses. Whatever the reason, he volunteered.

"I will go, Hector. But swear your oath first. Swear on your sceptre that no other Trojan shall mount those horses. They will be mine alone."

Hector raised his sceptre. "I swear by Zeus that the horses of Achilles shall be yours, and yours alone."

The oath was empty before the words left his lips, though Dolon did not know it. He hung his bow across his back, pulled on a wolf-skin, and set a ferret-skin cap on his head. Then he took up his javelin and loped into the dark, a man already marked for death.

Odysseus saw him first.

"There," he whispered to Diomedes, pressing himself flat among the corpses of the day's fighting. "A single man. Moving fast."

"Spy or scavenger?"

"Does it matter? We take him either way."

They let Dolon pass them, then rose and followed like hounds after a hare. Dolon heard the footsteps and stopped, turning with relief on his face. He thought they were Trojans, come to recall him.

He realized his mistake when he saw their armour.

Dolon ran. But Athena poured strength into Diomedes's legs, and the young king gained with every stride. When they were a spear's throw from the Greek outposts, Diomedes cried, "Stop or I throw!"

He threw deliberately wide, the spear passing over Dolon's right shoulder and burying itself in the dust. Dolon froze. His teeth chattered. His face went the colour of ash.

They seized him.

"Take me alive!" Dolon shrieked. "My father is rich: gold, bronze, iron. He will pay anything!"

"Calm yourself," Odysseus said, and his voice was almost gentle. "Tell us why you are here, and tell the truth. Did Hector send you?"

Dolon talked. He talked as drowning men grasp at straws. He told them everything. Hector and the Trojan council met by the tomb of Ilus. The guards were only Trojan sentinels; the allied troops slept unguarded. The Thracians, newly arrived, camped apart at the far end, with their king Rhesus (REE-sus), son of Eioneus.

"Rhesus," Dolon breathed, and even in his terror, awe crept into his voice. "His horses are whiter than snow and faster than the wind. His chariot is worked with silver and gold. He brought armour fit for a god; no mortal should wear it. If you could take those horses..."

"Where does he sleep?" Diomedes asked.

"At the edge of the camp, beyond the Thracian lines. But you promised. You said I would not be harmed."

Odysseus looked at Diomedes. Diomedes looked back.

"You gave us good information," Diomedes said quietly. "But if we let you go, you will return to the Trojans and tell them everything. You will come back to the ships as a spy or as an enemy. This is the only way."

Dolon reached for Diomedes's knees, begging. But the sword was already moving. It caught him at the neck, and his head rolled in the dust while he was still speaking.

They took his wolf-skin, his bow, his ferret cap, his spear. Odysseus hung them on a tamarisk tree as an offering to Athena, marking the place with reeds so they could find it on their return.

Then they walked on, through the dead and the sleeping, towards the Thracian camp.

Rhesus's men lay in three neat rows, their armour beside them, their horses tethered to their chariots. In the centre, on a bed of fleeces, slept the king himself, breathing hard, his magnificent armour stacked nearby. No sentinels. No guards. The Thracians had trusted the darkness.

Odysseus pointed. Diomedes understood.

What followed was not battle. It was slaughter.

Diomedes moved among the sleeping men like death itself, silent and methodical. Twelve Thracians died before they could open their eyes. Thirteen, when he reached Rhesus and drove his spear through the king's heart as he woke, confused and gasping. An evil dream, the son of Oeneus had sent it, hovered over Rhesus's head that night, and it became real.

Meanwhile Odysseus worked at the horses. He untied them, knotted them together, and struck them with his bow; he had forgotten the whip. They moved, reluctantly at first, then faster.

Diomedes paused, looking at the armour. Too heavy to carry. Too magnificent to leave. But Athena whispered in his mind: Go. Now.

He mounted. Odysseus struck the horses again, and they flew towards the ships, their white coats ghostly in the starlight.

Behind them, Apollo woke Hippocoon, a Thracian captain, who found the bodies and raised the alarm. The Trojan camp erupted. But by then the thieves were gone, racing across the plain with their prize.

Nestor heard them first. "Horses," he said, raising his head from where he sat with the council. "I hear horses coming fast."

The others tensed, reaching for weapons.

"No," Nestor said, and a rare smile crossed his weathered face. "Those are Greek horses. Or rather, horses being driven by Greeks."

Diomedes and Odysseus reined in beside the trench, their faces flushed with exertion and triumph. The white horses of Rhesus tossed their heads, snorting, their coats gleaming like moonlight made flesh.

"Athena was with us," Odysseus said simply. "We have much to tell."

They washed in the sea, scrubbing the blood and sweat from their bodies. They anointed themselves with oil and sat down among their comrades, accepting wine and meat. As they ate, they told their story: Dolon's greed, his betrayal, Rhesus's death, the horses.

The Greek captains listened in wonder. For one night, in the endless grinding misery of this war, they had won something beautiful and clean.

But dawn was coming. And with the dawn, Hector would wake to learn what the darkness had taken from him.

MYTHOLOGY NOTE

The Dolon episode (Book 10 of the Iliad) is sometimes called the "Doloneia" by scholars, and its authenticity has been debated since ancient times. Some believe it was added to the poem later, perhaps by a different poet who wanted to include a thrilling spy-adventure. Whether or not Homer wrote it himself, the episode brilliantly contrasts the raw heroism of Diomedes with the cold cunning of Odysseus - a pairing that would later inspire countless adventure stories. The white horses of Rhesus were said to be so magnificent that Achilles's own steeds, Balius and Xanthus, would have been challenged by them.

FOOTNOTES

The night raid as Bronze Age warfare: Night operations were rare in ancient warfare because darkness made command and control nearly impossible. Most Bronze Age battles were daytime affairs, fought in plain sight. The Dolon episode is remarkable precisely because it breaks this convention, and because it shows how intelligence-gathering (knowing enemy dispositions) could be more valuable than killing men. The Thracians' unguarded camp reflects a real tactical reality: allied troops far from home, newly arrived, and overconfident in their proximity to the main force.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Diomedes and Odysseus make a deadly team: one the warrior, one the thinker. How does each man's strength complement the other's weakness? Which role would you rather play in such a mission?

Dolon gives them accurate information and begs for his life. They kill him anyway. Is this a necessary act of war, or does it cross a moral line? What would have happened if they had spared him?

Hector swears an oath he cannot keep (giving Dolon Achilles's horses), and Dolon believes it. What does this scene tell us about the difference between Hector's leadership and, say, Nestor's?

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PART THREE: THE GREAT DAY

CHAPTER 11: THE BATTLE AT THE WALL

Eris (AIR-iss) arrived with the dawn.

The goddess of discord, grey-faced and grinning, took her stand on the black hull of Odysseus's ship, middlemost of the fleet, and raised a cry that split the morning like a bronze axe through pine. Her voice carried to the tents of Ajax at one end and to Achilles's silent camp at the other. It was not a human sound. It was the shriek of shields breaking, of mothers screaming, of cities burning. It made the Greeks reach for their spears with a desperate courage, as if each man had decided he would rather die here than run home to be called a coward.

Agamemnon heard it and knew his time had come. He armed himself in splendor: greaves of silver, a breastplate of ten layers of dark cyanus and twelve of gold, a sword with golden bosses, a shield blazoned with the Gorgon's head and the writhing snake. Two spears in his hand, and the gleam of his armour shot upward like flame.

Zeus thundered from Ida in answer. The omens were terrible. Dew fell red as blood.

For a morning, Agamemnon was unstoppable.

He killed Bienor, a Trojan captain, and his charioteer Oileus. He killed Isus and Antiphus, two sons of Priam, tearing the life from them as a lion tears fawns from a hind. He killed Pisander and Hippolochus, sons of the man who had once urged the Trojans to murder Menelaus and Odysseus when they came as envoys. Their pleas for ransom died on their lips. Agamemnon remembered. Agamemnon did not forgive.

The Greeks followed him, and the Trojan line bent, then broke. Hector himself was swept back, his shield ringing with blows, his voice lost in the din. The Greeks pressed forward, past the tomb of old Ilus, past the wild fig tree, towards the very walls of Troy.

But on the heights of Ida, Zeus sat with his thunderbolt in hand.

He called Iris (EYE-riss), his messenger, and his words were cold with fate. "Go to Hector. Tell him this: while Agamemnon rages at the front, hold back. Let others bear the shock. But when Agamemnon is wounded and quits the field, then I will give Hector strength to slay until he reaches the ships."

Iris sped down like a falling star and found Hector by his chariot. She spoke the word of Zeus, and Hector's face changed. He had been waiting for a sign. Now he had one.

It happened as Zeus had said.

Coon, eldest son of Antenor, saw Agamemnon kill his brother Iphidamas, and grief made him reckless. He crept unseen to the High King and drove his spear through Agamemnon's arm below the elbow. The bronze point punched through muscle and sinew, and blood poured down the king's fingers.

Agamemnon's war cry became a roar of pain. Still he fought on. He killed Coon as the Trojan tried to drag his brother's body away. But the wound would not stop bleeding. When the blood dried and the pain turned sharp as childbirth, Agamemnon's charioteer turned the horses towards the ships. The High King was leaving the field.

Hector saw it. His voice rose above the battle like a war horn.

"Trojans! Lycians! Dardanians! Their best man has left them! Zeus has given us this day! Forward! To the ships!"

He plunged into the fight like a tempest lashing the sea. The Trojans rallied, and the Greeks, who had been winning moments before, found themselves giving ground. Asaeus fell. Autonous fell. Opites fell. Hector killed them all, and more, and the plain ran dark with Greek blood.

Then came the worst hour.

Odysseus, seeing the disaster, cried out to Diomedes: "Son of Tydeus, what has happened to us? Stand by me, or we are shamed forever!"

"I stand," Diomedes answered. But his voice was hollow, for he knew what Zeus had decreed.

They fought together, the two lions of Greece, and for a time they held. But Paris (PAR-iss), crouching behind a pillar on the battlefield, drew his bow and shot Diomedes through the right foot. The arrow pinned itself in the earth beneath him, and Paris laughed.

"You are wounded!" he called. "The lion has a thorn in his paw!"

Diomedes's answer was defiant, but the wound was real. Under cover of Odysseus's shield, he pulled the arrow free with a grunt of agony and limped towards his chariot. The second greatest warrior of Greece was leaving the field.

Now Odysseus stood alone.

The Trojans closed around him like jackals around a wounded stag. He killed Deiopites, Thoon, Ennomus, Chersidamas. He killed Socus, who struck him through the shield and wounded his side. Odysseus pulled the spear from his own flesh, blood welling between his fingers, and still he fought, calling for help with all the strength left in his lungs.

Ajax heard him. Menelaus heard him. They came running, shields raised, and the Trojans scattered before them like birds before a hawk. Menelaus took Odysseus by the hand and led

him, bleeding and swaying, towards the ships. Ajax covered their retreat, killing as he went, a one-man wall of bronze.

But the gods were not finished.

Paris, still lurking with his bow, shot Eurypylus (yoo-RIP-ih-lus) in the thigh as the Greek hero came to Ajax's aid. Eurypylus dragged himself from the field, shouting for his comrades to defend Ajax, who now stood alone against the storm.

Then Paris struck again, this time wounding Machaon (mah-KAY-on), the healer, son of Asclepius. Machaon was worth more than any other man in the army, for he could cut out arrows and spread healing herbs that stopped the black blood. Nestor, seeing this, swept his chariot through the fighting, lifted Machaon into it, and drove for the ships with his mares foaming white.

Achilles, watching from the stern of his ship, saw Nestor pass. He called to Patroclus, and Patroclus came running. But that is another part of the story, and we will tell it in its time.

MYTHOLOGY NOTE

The wounding of the Greek leaders in Book 11 is one of the most carefully structured sequences in the Iliad. Agamemnon (the king) falls first, then Diomedes (the greatest warrior after Achilles), then Odysseus (the wisest), then Machaon (the healer). Each wound is progressively more dangerous to the Greek cause, and each withdrawal leaves a gap that cannot be filled. Homer understood something that modern military writers would rediscover thousands of years later: wars are not won by killing enemy soldiers, but by removing the leaders who make an army function. When the healers themselves need healing, the cause is lost.

Hector did not pause. The wall was before him, and beyond it, the ships.

He called the Trojans to him, and they came in five battalions. Polydamas (pol-ih-DAM-ass), Hector's most trusted counsellor, advised wisely: leave the horses at the trench, attack on foot. The trench was too wide for chariots, the stakes too sharp. Hector agreed, and the Trojans dismounted, forming themselves for the assault.

But as they tried to cross, an omen appeared. A great eagle flew over them, clutching a blood-red snake, still writhing. The snake twisted and struck the eagle on the breast, and the bird, crying in pain, dropped its prey into the midst of the Trojan host and flew away.

Polydamas turned pale. "Hector, I know you rebuke me when I speak against your will, but hear me. That eagle was Troy, and the snake was Greece. We will not succeed. Even if we break through, many of us will die at the ships and never return home."

Hector's eyes blazed. "Polydamas, I despise your reading. One omen matters: that a man should fight for his country. If you will not fight, my spear will find you first."

He turned and led the charge himself. The Trojans stormed the wall, tearing at the breastworks, uprooting the buttresses, hammering at the gates. The two Ajaxes walked the ramparts, urging the Greeks on, their voices hoarse with shouting. Stones fell like winter snow, crushing helmets, shattering shields.

Then Zeus sent Sarpedon (sar-PEE-don), king of Lycia, against the wall.

Sarpedon was a son of Zeus, and he looked like one. Before him he held a great shield of hammered bronze, lined with ox-hide and riveted with gold. Two spears in his hands, he came on like a lion who has not eaten in days, who will break into a fenced homestead rather than starve.

He turned to Glaucus (GLAW-kus), his companion and prince of Lycia. "Glaucus, why do we hold the highest place in Lycia? Why do men honour us at table, give us the choicest portions, keep our cups brimming? Because we fight. Because we stand in the forefront. If we could live forever, I would not press forward. But death in ten thousand shapes hangs over every man. No one can escape it. So let us go forward, and win glory, or yield it to another."

Glaucus answered nothing. He only raised his shield and followed.

They charged the wall where Menestheus (men-ESS-thyoos) of Athens commanded. The Athenian looked along the rampart for help and found Ajax, son of Telamon, with Teucer his

brother. "Ajax!" he shouted. "The Lycians are upon us! If ever you were going to fight, fight now!"

Ajax came, and Teucer with him, and Pandion carrying Teucer's bow. The battle for the wall became a struggle of inches, of breath, of pure will. Ajax killed Epicles with a stone so large that no modern man could lift it with two hands, crushing his helmet and the skull beneath. Teucer shot an arrow that struck Glaucus in the shoulder, and the Lycian prince slipped down from the wall, covertly, ashamed that anyone might see him wounded.

Sarpedon saw his friend fall, and grief drove him to fury. He seized the battlement with his bare hands and tore it loose, stone and timber together, opening a gap through which many men might pass.

Ajax and Teucer turned on him. Teucer's arrow struck the strap of Sarpedon's shield; Ajax's spear punched through the bronze but did not reach the flesh beneath. Zeus would not let his son die, not yet. But Sarpedon fell back, bleeding, gasping, and the Lycians surged around him to cover his retreat.

Still the wall held. Barely.

Then Hector acted.

He found a stone at the gate, thick at one end and pointed at the other, so massive that two strong men of this age could barely lift it onto a wagon. But Zeus made it light in Hector's hands. He raised it as a shepherd lifts a fleece, one-handed, and drove it at the centre of the double gate.

The sound was like thunder.

The hinges shattered. The crossbars snapped. The doors flew open, one inward, one outward, broken by the sheer force of the blow.

Hector leaped through.

His face was dark as night itself. Bronze blazed about his body. Two spears in his hands, his eyes burned with a fire that was not human. He turned and shouted to the Trojans behind him, and they poured through the breach after him, scaling the walls, flooding through the gate, and the Greeks fled towards their ships in terror.

No god could have withstood Hector in that moment. He was not a man. He was the storm of war itself, made flesh and bronze, and he had broken through.

Greek Leader	Wounded By	Nature of Wound	Who Helped Them
Agamemnon	Coon (Antenor's son)	Spear through the arm	His charioteer; withdrew

to ships

Diomedes	Paris (Alexandros)	Arrow through the right	Odysseus (shielded him);
foot	withdrew to ships		
Odysseus	Socus (son of Hippasus)	Spear through shield and	Menelaus and Ajax; led
side	from the field		

Diomedes	Paris (Alexandros)	Arrow through the right	Odysseus (shielded him);
Eurypylus	Paris (Alexandros)	Arrow in the thigh	Retreated under cover of

comrades

Machaon	Paris (Alexandros)	Arrow in the right	Nestor (carried him away
shoulder	in his chariot)		

FOOTNOTES

The wounding sequence: The progressive disabling of the Greek leadership in Book 11 follows a deliberate pattern. Agamemnon (command) falls first. Diomedes (offense) falls second. Odysseus (cunning) falls third. Machaon (medicine) falls fourth. Each loss compounds the others, until only Ajax (defence) remains standing. This is not coincidence; it is Homer's understanding of how armies collapse. When leadership, offense, strategy, and medicine are all removed, only raw defensive will remains, and even that cannot hold forever.

Hector's stone: The boulder Hector throws to shatter the gate is described as so heavy that "two of the best men in a town, as men now are, could hardly raise it." This is one of several passages in the Iliad where Homer suggests that the heroes of the Trojan War generation were physically mightier than the men of his own day. This "race of heroes"

motif reflects a common belief in ancient Greece that the world had declined from an age of gold and bronze to the lesser age of iron in which Homer himself lived.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Agamemnon fights brilliantly until he is wounded, then withdraws. Diomedes mocks Paris even while limping away. Odysseus bleeds but refuses to retreat until help arrives. Which kind of courage do you admire most: Agamemnon's force, Diomedes's defiance, or Odysseus's stubborn endurance?

Sarpedon tells Glaucus that they fight because mortality demands it: "death in ten thousand shapes hangs over every man." Is this a good reason to risk your life in battle? Does Sarpedon's speech make you more or less sympathetic to the warrior's code?

Hector ignores Polydamas's warning about the eagle omen and threatens to kill him. Moments later, Hector breaks through the wall in his greatest triumph. Was Polydamas wrong to speak, or was Hector wrong to ignore him? What does this tell us about leadership in crisis?

CHAPTER 12: PATROCLUS TO THE RESCUE

Patroclus (pah-TROH-klus) could not bear it any longer.

From the entrance of Achilles's tent, he watched the Greeks streaming back towards the ships, their armour draggled with dust, their faces grey with defeat. He heard the shouting at the wall, the crash of stones, the war cry of Hector rising above all other sounds like a wolf's howl above the wind. He had been Achilles's companion since boyhood, had shared every meal and every

sorrow, but this was the hardest thing he had ever endured: to watch good men die and do nothing.

He was running an errand for Achilles when he found Eurypylus (yoo-RIP-ih-lus).

The Greek captain was limping between the ships, one hand pressed to his thigh, blood black and thick between his fingers. Sweat poured down his face. Every step was a separate act of will. Yet his mind was clear, and when he saw Patroclus, he grasped him like a drowning man.

"Patroclus," he gasped. "There is no hope. The princes are all wounded. Diomedes, Odysseus, Agamemnon. Eurypylus hit. Machaon hit. The Trojans are at the wall. Save me. Take me to your ship. Cut out the arrow. Wash the blood away. You have the herbs that Achilles learned from Chiron. Use them."

Patroclus looked towards Nestor's ships, where Achilles had sent him to learn who the wounded man was that Nestor carried. Then he looked at Eurypylus, whose legs were buckling beneath him.

"I was sent on an errand," he said. "But I will not leave you like this."

He put his arm around Eurypylus's waist and half-carried, half-dragged him to the nearest shelter. A servant spread ox-hides on the ground. Patroclus laid the wounded man down and looked at the wound: a ragged tear in the thigh where Paris's arrow had punched through, the flesh purple and swollen around the entry point. He took out his knife, its blade catching the light from the entrance, and cut the bronze arrowhead free. Eurypylus bit down on a leather strap and made no sound, though his whole body went rigid with the pain of it.

Patroclus washed the black blood away with warm water, again and again, until the wound ran clean and pink. Then he crushed the bitter herb between his palms, releasing its sharp scent, and pressed it to the torn flesh. The herb was one Chiron the centaur had taught Achilles, and Achilles had taught Patroclus. It killed pain on contact. The wound dried. The bleeding stopped.

Eurypylus's breathing slowed. His eyes, which had been wide with agony, softened into something like rest.

"The Greeks needed you as a healer long ago," he murmured. "But we need you more as a fighter now."

Patroclus said nothing. He knew.

When Eurypylus was stable, Patroclus continued on his errand.

He found Nestor (NES-tor) in his tent, seated with Machaon (mah-KAY-on), the wounded healer. A woman named Hecamede (hek-AM-eh-dee), whom Nestor had taken as a prize from Tenedos, was mixing them a restorative drink of Pramnian wine, grated goat's cheese, and barley meal. She moved like a goddess among the old man's treasures: the bronze cups, the tables with cyanus feet, the drinking vessel studded with golden doves that Nestor had brought from home and which no other man could lift when full.

When Nestor saw Patroclus in the doorway, he sprang up.

"Come in! Sit! Eat with us!"

"I cannot stay," Patroclus said. "Achilles sent me to learn who you carried from the field. I see now that it is Machaon. I must return."

Nestor's face changed. The warmth drained from it, replaced by something harder and sadder.

"Why does Achilles care now?" the old man asked. "He has ignored our suffering. He has let our best men fall. Diomedes lies wounded. Odysseus bleeds. Agamemnon's arm is pierced through. Eurypylus took an arrow in the thigh. Machaon sits here beside me, and the physician Podalirius is wounded too. Our healers need healing. Our fighters cannot fight. And Achilles asks who it was I carried away?"

Patroclus stood silent, ashamed without knowing precisely why.

"I am old, Patroclus. Older than you can imagine. I have seen three generations of men grow up and die in Pylos. But there was a time when I was young, and the gods gave me strength that I have not felt in fifty years."

Nestor's voice grew distant, carrying itself back across the decades.

"There was a cattle raid, a quarrel between Pylos and Elis. I was a young man, but my father Neleus would not let me arm. He hid my horses. He said I was too young for war. But Athena gave me strength even without armour. I fought on foot among the horsemen, and I was the first to kill my man: Mulius, the son-in-law of King Augeas. I took his chariot and drove it into the enemy ranks. Fifty chariots I captured that day, Patroclus. Fifty pairs of men bit the dust before my spear. I would have killed the Moliones too, sons of Actor, but Poseidon hid them in mist and bore them away."

He paused, his eyes bright with the memory of glory.

"Such was I, once. But Achilles keeps all his strength for himself. He will rue it. The host is being cut to pieces around him."

Then Nestor leaned forward, and his voice dropped to something almost intimate, almost conspiratorial.

"Do you remember, Patroclus, the day your father Menoetius (men-EE-shus) sent you to Agamemnon? Odysseus and I were in the house of Peleus that day, recruiting for the war. We found your father and you, and Achilles, and the old knight Peleus in the courtyard, sacrificing to Zeus. You were busy cutting up the heifer. After we had eaten, your father took you aside. I heard what he said."

Patroclus went very still.

"My son," Menoetius said, "Achilles is nobler born than you, and stronger. But you are older. Counsel him wisely. Guide him. He will follow your advice, if you give it with love." That is what your father charged you with, Patroclus. To be the voice of reason to Achilles's passion. Have you forgotten?"

Patroclus's eyes were wet.

"Even now," Nestor continued, pressing gently but relentlessly, "go to him. Speak to him. Perhaps heaven will help you move his heart. If he fears some oracle from his mother, then let him send you. Let you go into battle wearing his armour. Let the Myrmidons follow you. The Trojans would think you were Achilles himself. The Greeks would have time to breathe. You are fresh. The enemy is tired. You could drive them back from the ships."

The seed was planted. It was a terrible seed, and it would grow into the darkest flower in all of Greek poetry. But Patroclus did not know that yet. He only knew that Nestor's words had awakened something in him that had been sleeping for too long: the desire to act.

"I must go," Patroclus whispered.

And he ran.

The journey back was worse than the journey out.

He ran along the line of ships, and everywhere he looked, he saw the wreck of the Greek army. Wounded men were being carried past him on makeshift stretchers of shields and cloaks, their groans barely human. Dead men were being dragged from the field by their heels, stripped of armour they no longer needed. Soldiers sat on the ground with blank faces, too exhausted to weep, staring at their own hands as if wondering how those hands had failed them. The wall still stood in places, but the Trojans were pouring through the breach that Hector had made, and the sound of hand-to-hand fighting came from somewhere near the ships themselves. A man Patroclus did not recognise ran past him, screaming words that made no sense, his eyes fixed on something no one else could see.

He passed the place where Odysseus's ships were drawn up, the assembly ground where captains had once debated in orderly council, the altars to the gods where sacrifices had been offered with confidence and hope. Everything seemed fragile now, as if the whole Greek expedition might collapse into the sea before nightfall, as if the ten years of war had been for nothing.

And then he reached Achilles's tent.

The Myrmidons were there, the finest fighters in Greece, and they were doing nothing. Some sat sharpening swords that did not need sharpening, the rhythmic scrape of stone on bronze the only sound they made. Others dined for small prizes, betting copper rings and ivory knucklebones, though their hearts were not in it. Most simply stared at the ground, listening to the battle rage beyond the wall and knowing they should be in it. Younger men looked to their elders, waiting for an order that did not come. Veterans who had stormed walls and broken ranks sat with their spears across their knees, their faces closed and bitter. Their captain had withdrawn, and so they withdrew with him, bound by a loyalty that was now their prison. They were the army of the absent man, and their absence from the fight was a wound the Greeks could not staunch.

Patroclus found Achilles beside the cooking fire, a strange and terrible stillness about him. Automedon (aw-TOM-eh-don) held a spit of meat. Alcimus (AL-sih-mus) tended the coals. Achilles looked up when Patroclus entered, and his face changed instantly.

"You are weeping," Achilles said.

Patroclus had not realized it until that moment, but tears were streaming down his face. He tried to speak and could not. He had meant to deliver Nestor's message, to relay what he had seen and heard, to make a reasoned argument. But the sight of the camp, the memory of Eurypylus's wound, Nestor's words about his father, the idle Myrmidons, the distant screaming, all of it rose up in his throat and choked him.

"Patroclus." Achilles's voice was sharp now, worried. "What has happened? Are they weeping because of me? Has someone died? Tell me."

And Patroclus, weeping, made his plea.

"Achilles, greatest of the Greeks, do not be angry with me. The Greeks are in agony. Our best men are wounded: Diomedes, Odysseus, Agamemnon, Eurypylus, Machaon. The Trojans are at the ships. Hector has broken through the wall. He will burn the fleet, and we will all die here. I saw Eurypylus bleeding by the hull of your own ship, and I carried him to shelter. I cut the arrow from his thigh myself. He told me there is no hope left. None. If you will not fight, if some oracle holds you back, then at least let me go. Give me your armour. Let me lead the Myrmidons. Let the Trojans think it is you. Even a feint would save them."

He fell silent, breathing hard, tears on his cheeks, waiting for an answer that would decide everything.

MYTHOLOGY NOTE

The relationship between Achilles and Patroclus is the emotional centre of the Iliad, and it has been interpreted in many ways across the centuries. In Homer's version, they are clearly "the dearest of friends," but later Greek writers, including Plato, described them as lovers. The exact nature of their bond matters less than its depth: each man defines himself through the other. Achilles without Patroclus is rage without restraint; Patroclus without Achilles is compassion without protection. When Patroclus begs to borrow the armour, he is stepping across an invisible line from helper to replacement, from companion to sacrifice.

FOOTNOTES

Chiron's herbs: The healing herbs that Patroclus uses on Eurypylus represent one of the most detailed medical passages in the Iliad. Bronze Age Greek medicine combined practical wound care (washing, bandaging, poultices) with knowledge inherited from the centaur Chiron, who was the legendary tutor of both Achilles and Asclepius (Machaon's father). The specific herb described, likely a kind of yarrow or achillea, was known in the ancient world for its styptic (blood-stopping) and analgesic properties. Archaeological evidence from Mycenaean sites confirms that wound treatment using herbal remedies was practiced in Bronze Age Greece.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Nestor's speech to Patroclus is one of the most influential conversations in Western literature. Is Nestor genuinely trying to help, or is he manipulative? Does it matter whether his intentions are good if the result is disaster?

Patroclus weeps openly while begging Achilles to let him fight. In ancient Greek culture, weeping was not seen as unmanly. What does Patroclus's tears tell us about his character? Is he motivated by compassion, by duty to his father, or by something else?

Achilles has drawn a line: he will fight only when Hector reaches his ships. In this chapter, Hector has broken through the wall. Does Achilles's condition justify his continued refusal? At what point does pride become cruelty?

CHAPTER 13: SARPEDON FALLS

Achilles (ah-KILL-eez) looked at his friend, really looked at him, and saw a grief that mirrored his own.

Patroclus stood weeping in the firelight, tears cutting clean tracks through the dust on his face, his hands trembling. He had begged to wear Achilles's armour. He had begged to lead the Myrmidons. Behind him, through the open flap of the tent, the glow of actual fire was rising from the Greek ships. Hector had done what Agamemnon's bribes, Odysseus's cunning, Phoenix's stories, and Ajax's blunt honesty could not: he had brought the war to Achilles's doorstep.

"Patroclus," Achilles said slowly, "you are not yourself. Or perhaps you are more yourself than you have ever been. I do not know which it is."

He rose. The great chest that Thetis (THEE-tis) had given him, silver-footed, filled with shirts and cloaks and rugs, stood against the wall of the tent. From it Achilles drew the armour that his divine mother had commissioned. The breastplate, richly inlaid with gold and tin. The greaves fitted with silver clasps. The bronze sword on its baldric. The massive shield that covered a man from chin to ankle. And the helmet, horse-hair crest nodding like a living thing.

"Put these on," Achilles said.

Patroclus's hands moved with a terrible eagerness. The greaves clasped around his calves. The breastplate settled on his shoulders; it was made for Achilles's broader frame, but it fit well enough. The sword hung at his hip. The helmet transformed his face into something godlike and remote. When he lifted the shield, he became a figure from legend: Achilles in all but the

spear, and that Achilles kept for himself. The ashen shaft from Mount Pelion, cut by Chiron the centaur. No other man could wield it.

"Listen to me." Achilles gripped his friend's shoulders, hard enough to leave marks. "Drive the Trojans from the ships. That is all. Burn their fire out. Give the Greeks room to breathe. Then come back. Even if Zeus himself offers you Troy on a platter, turn around and come back. Do not press on towards the city. Do not fight the Trojans on the open plain. Apollo loves them, and he will strike you down without warning. Do not make me regret this."

Patroclus met his eyes through the eyeholes of the divine helmet. "I hear you."

But the gods were already listening, and Zeus, who hears all prayers, granted only half of Achilles's plea.

Automedon (aw-TOM-eh-don) yoked the horses: Xanthus (ZAN-thus) and Balius (BAL-ee- us), the immortal steeds born from the west wind and the harpy Podarge, swift as thought itself. Beside them in the traces went mortal Pedasus (PED-a-sus), a horse of blood and bone who could somehow keep pace with divine stock. Fifty ships Achilles had brought to Troy, fifty men in each, and now all five companies of the Myrmidons (MER-mi-dons) surged forward with a roar.

Patroclus mounted the chariot, and Automedon took the reins. The Myrmidons poured from their camp like hornets whose nest had been struck: furious, swarming, and irresistible. They had sat idle for too long, sharpening swords that did not need sharpening, listening to the sounds of battle while their captain sulked. Now they had purpose, and they had a leader who looked like the greatest warrior alive.

The Trojans saw the armour first. The flash of divine bronze in the late afternoon sun. The horse-hair crest cutting through the smoke. They saw the shield that no mortal smith could make, and they heard the battle cry of fifty hardened killers at full charge. And they did what any army would do when confronted with a legend they thought had abandoned the field.

They broke.

It was Pyraechmes (py-REK-meez) who fell first, leader of the Paeonians (pee-OH-nee-ans), a captain from the broad river Axius. Patroclus's spear caught him in the right shoulder, spinning him from his chariot like a child's toy. His men scattered, leaderless, and the fire that Hector had set at Protesilaus's (proh-teh-si-LAY-us) ship guttered and died under a rain of sand and sea water.

The Greeks took their first full breath in hours.

Patroclus drove on. Areilycus went down, thigh pierced clean through. Menelaus (men-eh-LAY-us) killed Thoas. Antilochus (an-TIL-oh-kus), Nestor's son, drove his spear through

Atymnius's throat, and when the boy's brother Maris rushed to avenge him, Thrasymedes (thras-ih-MEE-deez) struck him down in turn. The two sons of Amisodorus, who had once raised the monstrous Chimaera (ky-MEER-a), fell side by side. Peneleos killed Lycon with such force that his head hung from his neck by nothing but skin. Meriones (meh-RYE-oh- neez) caught Acamas mounting his chariot and drove a spear through his shoulder.

The Trojans streamed back from the ships in a mob of terror, chariots tangling, horses screaming, men trampling their own comrades in their desperation to escape the apparition that wore Achilles's face.

But one man did not run.

Sarpedon (sar-PEE-don) was the son of Zeus. That is the first thing you must understand about him. He was born from the king of gods and a mortal woman named Laodamia, and he ruled Lycia (LISH-ee-a), a kingdom far to the east across the wine-dark sea. He had crossed that sea to fight for Troy, not because he loved Paris or admired Hector, but because of something older and more binding: the sacred ties of guest-friendship, xenia, that bound kings to one another across generations.

He watched the Trojans streaming past him in rout, and his heart burned with shame.

"Glaucus!" he called to his companion. "Why do we hold the place of honour in Lycia? Why do men serve us the finest cuts and keep our cups full? Why do they look at us as if we were gods? Because we stand in front of them when the spears fly. That is the bargain. If we could live forever, I would not press you forward now. But no man escapes death: not the shepherd, not the king, not the son of Zeus himself. Come. Let us give them something to sing about."

Glaucus heard him. The two Lycian princes stepped forward together, and their warriors closed around them in a wall of bronze.

On Mount Ida, Zeus saw his son preparing to face the man who wore Achilles's armour. And the king of gods wept tears of blood.

"Hera," he said to his wife, "Sarpedon will die today. Patroclus will kill him. I am in two minds: snatch him from the field and set him down alive in Lycia, or let him fall in glory."

Hera's voice was gentle, gentler than it usually was when she spoke of Trojans. "My husband, you know the law. If you save Sarpedon, every god will want to save his mortal son. There are half-gods fighting all across this plain. You cannot save them all. Let him fall. Let him have his glory. Then send Sleep and Death to bear him home to Lycia, where his brothers will bury him with honour."

Zeus bowed his immortal head. A rain of blood fell upon the Trojan plain, the tears of a father who could not save his child.

MYTHOLOGY NOTE

The death of Sarpedon is one of the most moving scenes in the Iliad because it shows Zeus at his most human. Even the king of gods must bow to fate, moira, the iron law that governs all beings, mortal and divine alike. Sarpedon's speech to Glaucus about why they fight is justly famous: it captures the Bronze Age warrior ethic in its purest form. Honour (timê) is not given freely; it must be earned through courage in the face of certain death. The image of Sleep and Death bearing Sarpedon's body home to Lycia became one of the most powerful motifs in Greek art, appearing on countless vases and later inspiring the poet Shelley's famous line: "Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"

Sarpedon and Patroclus met like eagles on a mountain crag, screaming and tearing.

Sarpedon cast first, but missed Patroclus, but struck mortal Pedasus in the shoulder. The horse screamed and fell in the dust, his life pouring out through the wound. Automedon slashed the traces with a single flashing stroke, and the immortal horses righted themselves, wild but unharmed.

Sarpedon cast again, and missed again, the spear passing over Patroclus's left shoulder.

Then Patroclus threw. The spear flew true. It struck Sarpedon where the midriff wraps the beating heart, and the son of Zeus fell like an oak that woodsmen have laid their axes to: slowly, heavily, with a sound like thunder. He clutched at the bloodied dust and called out one last time to Glaucus:

"Fight for me. Save my armour. My name must not be dishonoured."

Then darkness covered his eyes.

Glaucus was already wounded, an arrow from Teucer had torn his shoulder earlier, during the assault on the wall. He could barely lift his arm. But when he saw Sarpedon fall, something broke open in him. He prayed to Apollo (ah-POL-oh), far-shooter, god of healing and plague alike.

"Heal me," he begged. "Give me strength to fight for Sarpedon's body."

Apollo heard. The pain drained from Glaucus's shoulder. The black blood ceased to flow. He strode among the Lycian captains, rousing them to battle, then ran to Hector himself.

"Sarpedon is fallen!" he cried. "The bulwark of Lycia is gone, and the Myrmidons will strip him if you do not come. Where are the allies who have bled for your city? Will you let them die unavenged?"

Hector needed no second urging. He called his Trojans to the fight, and the battle over Sarpedon's body became a storm of bronze. Hector killed Epeigeus (eh-PY-jee-us), a

Myrmidon who had fled his own city after killing a kinsman and taken refuge with Peleus; a stone to the head as he tried to seize Sarpedon's corpse. Patroclus avenged him with a stone of his own, crushing Sthenelaus (sthen-eh-LAY-us) where his neck met his spine.

The fighting seesawed back and forth. But Zeus, watching from Ida, had already decided how this day would end. First he made Hector turn faint-hearted and retreat. The Trojans fell back. The Greeks stripped Sarpedon's armour and would have taken the body too, but Zeus sent Apollo to retrieve his son. The god washed Sarpedon in the river, anointed him with ambrosia, wrapped him in immortal garments, and handed him to Sleep and Death, twin brothers with wings like dark birds, who carried him gently home across the sea to Lycia.

He would never see Troy again. But he would be buried among his own people, with a pillar and a mound that sailors would point to for generations.

Meanwhile, the battle raged on. And Patroclus, brave, gentle, impulsive Patroclus, forgot Achilles's warning.

Hero	Divine Parent	Mortal Parent	Side
Achilles	Thetis (sea goddess)	Peleus (king of Phthia)	Greek
Sarpedon	Zeus (king of gods)	Laodamia	Trojan ally
Aeneas	Aphrodite (goddess of	Anchises	Trojan

love)

Helen	Zeus (in swan form)	Leda	Trojan (by marriage)
Diomedes	Athena (indirectly; divine	Tydeus	Greek

protection)

Automedon	(none)	(none)	Greek
Glaucus	(none)	Hippolochus	Trojan ally
Patroclus	(none)	Menoetius	Greek

Three times Patroclus charged the Trojan lines. Three times he killed nine men in each rush: twenty-seven fathers, brothers, sons in the space of a few desperate minutes. The Trojans broke and ran, and Patroclus pursued them with a fury that was not entirely his own. Zeus had put that fire in his heart, just as he would later take it away.

He was heading for the walls of Troy itself. He had forgotten everything: the warnings, the limits, the promise he made to the man who loved him most in all the world. He was no longer playing Achilles's part. He believed he was Achilles, invincible, unstoppable, a force of nature rather than a mortal man.

This is what the Greeks called hubris, not mere pride, but the fatal overreaching that forgets a man's proper place. The gods do not forgive it.

And on the walls of Troy, Apollo waited.

FOOTNOTES

The Myrmidon host: Achilles commanded fifty ships, each with fifty oarsmen, making his personal force approximately 2,500 men, a substantial army within the larger Greek coalition. The Myrmidons were legendary for their loyalty and discipline, said to have been transformed from ants (*myrmex* in Greek) into men by Zeus to populate the kingdom of Aeacus, Achilles's grandfather. Their name has entered English as "myrmidon," meaning a faithful follower who executes orders without question.

Sarpedon and Bronze Age Lycia: Sarpedon's kingdom of Lycia, in what is now southwestern Turkey, was a real historical entity that appears in Hittite records as Lukka. The Lycians were among Troy's most important allies, and archaeological evidence suggests they were a significant sea power in the Late Bronze Age. Sarpedon's burial, with a mound and pillar, reflects actual Lycian funerary practices, which involved raising distinctive pillar-tombs that can still be seen in the region today.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Achilles warns Patroclus three times not to go too far. Patroclus agrees each time. What causes him to forget these warnings in the heat of battle: divine influence, his own nature, or the desperation of the moment?

Zeus weeps blood for his son Sarpedon but does not save him. What does this tell us about the rules that even gods must follow? Is fate (*moira*) a comfort or a cruelty?

Sarpedon says that princes must fight because they receive the best portions at table. Is this a fair bargain: glory in exchange for a shorter life? Would you accept it?

CHAPTER 14: PATROCLUS'S LAST HOUR

Patroclus (pah-TROH-klus) had become something more than mortal. Or that is what he believed.

He drove the Trojans back from the ships with the fury of a storm wind that strips the oaks bare. Adrestus fell before him. Autonus, Echeclus, Perimus son of Megas, Epistor, Melanippus. They went down like wheat before the scythe. Elusus, Mulus, Pylartes. Nine names. Nine households that would weep that night. The Myrmidons followed him with a courage they had not felt in weeks, and the Greeks, watching from the ships, found their voices again. The tide had turned. The impossible had happened.

Patroclus pressed forward. The walls of Troy rose before him, stone and timber, the great Scaean (SKEE-an) Gates looming like the entrance to the underworld itself. He charged at an angle of the wall. Once. Twice. A third time. And each time, a figure met him on the battlements: a young warrior, shining, beautiful, terrible, who struck his shield with hands that were not human hands.

The fourth time, the god spoke.

"Draw back, Patroclus." Apollo's (ah-POL-oh) voice was the sound of a bowstring drawn to breaking. "It is not your fate to sack this city. Not yours. Not Achilles's. No Greek will enter through these gates while I stand watch. Go back."

Patroclus stumbled away, dazzled, and for a moment, the briefest moment, reason returned to him. He should retreat. He had saved the ships. That was what Achilles had asked. That was all.

But reason did not last.

MYTHOLOGY NOTE

Patroclus's fatal charge towards Troy's walls represents one of the oldest and most important concepts in Greek thought: hubris, the overreaching pride that leads a mortal to forget his proper place. The Greeks did not see hubris as simple arrogance; it was a cosmic crime, a disruption of the natural order that demanded divine punishment. Patroclus is not punished for being bad; he is punished for being too good, for too long. His aristeia, his moment of supreme glory, becomes the very instrument of his destruction. This paradox lies at the heart of Greek tragedy.

Meanwhile, inside the Scaean Gates, Hector (HEK-tor) hesitated. His horses stamped and fretted. He could hear the battle turning outside: the Greek war cry swelling, the Trojan shouts thinning and breaking. He was weighing whether to order a retreat inside the walls or to charge out again when Apollo came to him. The god wore the shape of Asius (AH-see-us), Hector's uncle, brother of Hecuba (HEK-yoo-ba).

"Why have you stopped fighting?" the false Asius demanded. "Drive straight at Patroclus. Apollo himself will grant you victory over him."

Hector needed no more. He signaled Cebriones (seh-bree-OH-nee-z), his bastard half-brother, to take the reins, and the chariot burst from the gates like a thunderbolt.

Patroclus saw Hector coming. He stood his ground beside the corpse of a Trojan he had already killed. Cebriones, as it happened, struck by a stone from Patroclus's own hand, tumbling from Hector's chariot like a diver. Patroclus had made a bitter jest about it: "Look how gracefully he

dives. If we were at sea, he could earn his keep bringing up oysters."

Now that jest seemed to belong to another lifetime.

The two men, Hector of Troy and Patroclus of Opus, fought over Cebriones's body like lions over a stag. Back and forth they surged, neither giving ground, while around them the battle raged in all its confusion of dust and screams and clashing bronze. Spears flew in both directions. Stones cracked against shields with a sound like splitting wood. A Lycian captain went down beside Patroclus, then a Greek from Ormenius (or-MEE-nee-us), then two more Trojans whose names were lost in the uproar. Patroclus called to the two Ajaxes,

and they came like towers walking, clearing a space around him with their great shields. Hector rallied his Trojans, pressing forward with a fury that matched Patroclus's own. Men fell on every side, and the air was so thick with dust that a man could not see his own shield.

Patroclus killed three times nine men in his fury: twenty-seven in that single charge. He was magnificent. He was doomed.

The gods had given him power beyond his nature, and now they were preparing to take it back.

For Zeus had already decided. The cloud-gatherer, watching from Ida, weighed the fates in his mind. Patroclus would die. But first he would drive the Trojans back, kill more of them, terrify them with the memory of this day. Then Apollo would strike. Then a mortal man would finish the work.

It was always the way with the gods. They prepared the victim. A human hand delivered the blow.

The sun was descending towards the western sea when it happened.

Patroclus had just killed his ninth man of the third wave. He was exhausted. Divine fire or no, he was still a man inside that god-made armour, and his limbs were heavy, his mouth dry, his vision beginning to blur at the edges. He turned to rally the Myrmidons for another push.

He did not see Apollo come up behind him.

The god was shrouded in darkness, so no mortal could have seen him. He struck Patroclus between the shoulders with the flat of his divine hand. The blow did not pierce. It did not need to. Patroclus's eyes filled with light and dizziness. His legs went numb. The world spun.

Then Apollo tore the helmet from Patroclus's head. That divine helmet, forged by Hephaestus (heh-FES-tus) for Achilles, which had never known defeat. It went rolling under the feet of the fighting men, its horse-hair plume trampled into blood and dust. The breastplate next: the clasps came undone beneath Apollo's fingers. The shield fell. The sword belt parted. Piece by piece, the god stripped away the protection of the forge, until Patroclus stood bare, dazed, unarmed, his ordinary tunic soaked with sweat and dust.

The great spear of Pelion, which he could not wield properly, snapped in his hands.

He tried to stumble back towards his own lines. But Euphorbus (yoo-FOR-bus) was waiting.

Euphorbus, son of Panthous, was the finest spearman of his generation. He had already unhorsed twenty men that day. He saw Patroclus staggering, defenseless, and he struck from behind, and

drove his spear into Patroclus's back between the shoulder blades, where the spine meets the ribs. Patroclus reeled. The wound was terrible. He collapsed against the shoulder of a comrade, fighting for breath, fighting for balance, knowing with a sudden cold clarity that his time had come. And then Hector was upon him.

Hector saw the wounded man. He saw the armour, Achilles's armour, lying scattered on the ground. He understood in an instant what had happened, what trick the Greeks had played, and fury seized him. He drove his spear into Patroclus's belly.

Patroclus fell.

The great battle paused. Men on both sides stopped, as if a god had frozen them in place. The Myrmidons watched their leader, their beloved leader, sink to the bloody earth. The Trojans could not believe it. This man who had driven them like sheep, who had killed Sarpedon and thirty more, who had seemed invincible. He fell like any other man. The armour had been a lie. The god inside it was just a mortal after all.

Hector stood over him, one foot on his chest, wrenching the spear free.

"Patroclus," he said, and there was no cruelty in his voice, only the hard satisfaction of a man who has won a desperate fight. "You thought you would sack our city. You thought you would take our women captive. Fool. Hector defends them. Hector and his horses. You should have listened to Achilles when he told you not to come back without my blood on your hands."

Patroclus's breath came in shallow gasps. Blood bubbled at his lips. But his mind was clear, clearer than it had been since he first put on the armour. He looked up at Hector, and in that gaze there was no fear. Only pity.

"Boast while you can, Hector." His voice was barely a whisper, but it carried. "Zeus and Apollo gave you this victory. They stripped me and handed me to you. Twenty men like you could not have beaten me otherwise."

He paused, gathering the last of his strength. The light was fading from the edges of his vision. But he had words left, and they were words that would haunt Hector for the rest of his short life.

"Hear my prophecy, son of Priam. Your own death stands at your shoulder. You will not live to see the leaves fall. Achilles will kill you. He will kill you here, on this plain, and you will die knowing that you brought it on yourself the moment you struck me down."

Hector's face went pale. But he mastered himself.

"Perhaps," he said. "But I will have my glory first."

He stripped the armour from Patroclus's body: the greaves, the breastplate, the sword. The armour that Thetis had given to Peleus, that Peleus had given to Achilles, that Achilles had given to his dearest friend. Hector put it on there, in the middle of the battlefield, while men watched from both sides. It fit him. The gods made it fit.

He turned to pursue Automedon, to kill Achilles's charioteer as well, but the immortal horses, Xanthus and Balius, bore their driver away with a speed no mortal steeds could match.

Patroclus lay alone on the plain. Around him, the battle began again, the Greeks and Trojans surging back and forth over the ground where he had fallen, as if the earth itself were fighting to claim him. Menelaus (men-eh-LAY-us), yellow-haired, was the first to reach the body. He stood over it like a cow lowing over her first calf, his round shield held before him, his spear ready to kill any man who approached. But the Trojan onslaught was ferocious. Hector, wearing Achilles's stolen armour, seemed to have doubled in strength and fury.

Hector seized Patroclus by the feet and tried to drag him towards the Trojan lines, screaming to his men to help him strip the corpse. The two Ajaxes beat him back with a storm of spears. Three times Hector grabbed the body. Three times the Greeks drove him away. Each time Hector retreated, he returned with more Trojans at his back, more desperate to claim the prize. Each time the Greeks threw him back, they lost good men doing it.

But the armour was gone. Hector wore it now. And that, in the end, was what mattered most. The man who had worn it lay naked on the earth, his tunic torn, his body exposed to the sky he would never see again. And somewhere, on a headland by the sea, a mother felt her heart break before she knew why.

Victim	Location of Wound	Circumstance
Pyraechmes (Ch. 13)	Right shoulder	First kill; routed the Paeonians
Areilycus	Thigh	Turning to flee
Atymnius	Throat	Killed by Antilochus; Maris avenged
Maris	Shoulder	Avenging his brother
Thrasymedes's kill	(n/a)	Brother of Atymnius
Pronous	Chest	Exposed above shield rim
Thestor son of Enops	Jaw	Speared while dazed in chariot
Erylaus	Head	Crushed with a stone
Erymas, Amphoterus, Epaltes	(n/a)	Named victims in the rout
Tlepolemus, Echius	(n/a)	Killed in the press
Pyris, Ipheus, Euippus	(n/a)	Lycian warriors
Polymelus son of Argeas	(n/a)	Cut off from the city
Sarpedon	Heart	The great duel; son of Zeus
Thrasydemus	Belly	Sarpedon's squire
Epeigeus	Head	Hector's stone; avenging Sarpedon
Sthenelaus	Neck	Stone-crushed by Patroclus
Cebriones	Forehead	Hector's charioteer; stone strike
Adrestus, Autonous	(n/a)	First of the third wave
Echeclus, Perimus	(n/a)	Sons of Megas
Epistor, Melanippus	(n/a)	Trojan allies
Elasus, Mulius, Pylartes	(n/a)	Final named kills

FOOTNOTES

The stripping of armour in Homeric warfare: To take a dead man's armour was the highest form of honour in Bronze Age combat. A warrior's panoply: breastplate, greaves, helmet, shield, and weapons, represented not only his wealth but his identity. When Hector strips Patroclus, he is claiming more than metal; he is claiming symbolic victory over Achilles himself. This practice was so central to heroic culture that the Greek word for "spoils" (geras) is the same word used for the honour-prize that started the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon.

Euphorbus and the multiple causes of death: Homer assigns Patroclus's death to three agents: Apollo (divine), Euphorbus (the first wound), and Hector (the killing blow). This is not poetic excess. It reflects the Greek understanding that significant events have multiple causes, both divine and human. Patroclus himself acknowledges this hierarchy in his dying words: "Fate and the son of Leto have overpowered me, and among mortal men Euphorbus; you are yourself third only in the killing of me." No single person bears full blame, yet all share in it.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Patroclus dies with a prophecy on his lips rather than a curse. Why does he warn Hector instead of simply condemning him? What does this tell us about Patroclus's character, even in his final moments?

Apollo strips Patroclus's armour piece by piece before any mortal touches him. What does this detail suggest about the role of the gods in human affairs? Are the gods unfair, or are they simply enforcing cosmic rules?

Hector puts on Achilles's armour in the middle of the battlefield. Is this an act of triumph, or does it carry an element of foreboding? What does it mean to wear another man's identity?

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CHAPTER 15: THE NEWS

Antilochus (an-TIL-oh-kus) ran as he had never run before.

The son of Nestor flew across the plain like a man chased by the Erinyes (eh-RIN-ee-eez), the Furies who tear at the guilty with their burning whips. He ran past the wounded being carried from the field. Past the dust clouds where the Greeks and Trojans still struggled over Patroclus's body. Past the very shadow of Hector, who was pressing forward with Achilles's armour gleaming on his shoulders, terrible and triumphant.

Antilochus did not stop for any of it. He had a message that would break a man's heart, and he had to deliver it before that heart broke in ignorance.

Achilles was waiting by his ships. He had been watching, not fighting, for he had no armour now, but watching with the terrible foresight that grief grants. He saw the Greeks falling back again. He saw a commotion around Patroclus's chariot, a swirling mass of fighters that did not move as it should. He saw Automedon return without his companion, the immortal horses foaming, their eyes wild with distress.

"Something has happened," Achilles said aloud, though there was no one to hear him. "My mother warned me. The bravest of the Myrmidons, she said, would fall while I still lived. I sent him out. I sent him."

He knew before Antilochus reached him. That is the worst kind of knowing, the kind that arrives before the words do, that settles into the bones like winter.

Antilochus found him standing between the hulls of the beached ships, staring towards the battle with an expression that belonged to a statue rather than a living man. The young runner stopped, gasping, his hands on his knees, his chest heaving. Tears were already streaming down his face.

"Achilles," he managed.

"Say it."

"Patroclus has fallen." The words came out as barely more than breath. "They are fighting over his body. Hector. Hector has your armour."

The world stopped.

Achilles did not cry out. Not at first. He stood utterly still, as if the news had frozen him from the inside. Then, slowly, as if performing an action he had rehearsed in a dream, he sank to his

knees. He reached out both hands and scooped up the black dust of the Trojan plain, the same dust that Patroclus had clutched as he died. He poured it over his head. Again and again, handful after handful, until his beautiful face was a mask of filth, until his golden hair was grey with ash, until the fine tunic his mother had woven for him was stained beyond redemption.

Then he lay down, full length in the dirt, and screamed.

It was not a sound that a human throat should make. The captive women, Briseis (brye-EE- sis) among them, rushed from their tents at the sound, and when they saw Achilles, they began to wail. They beat their breasts with their fists. They tore their hair. They had lost their own homes, their own families, their own cities, and they knew what this grief meant. It meant that the world had ended for someone else now too. It meant that the war had claimed its most precious victim yet.

Antilochus stood over Achilles, weeping, holding both his hands, afraid that the greatest warrior in Greece might draw his own knife and open his throat right there in the dust. He had never seen Achilles weep. He had seen him angry, cold, laughing, singing. But never this. Never broken. It was like watching a mountain crumble into the sea, like watching the sun go dark at noon. The young man from Pylos, Nestor's son, felt his own heart crack under the weight of what he had just delivered.

Thetis heard her son's cry from the bottom of the sea.

She was sitting in her father's crystal cave, surrounded by her sisters, the Nereids (NEER- ee-ids): Glauce, Thalia, Cymodoce, Nesaia, Speo, Halie, Cymothoe, and all the rest, fifty daughters of Nereus the old man of the sea. They had been combing their hair and singing, as immortal beings do when they have nothing better to occupy them. But the sound that came across the waves stopped every voice.

"My son," Thetis whispered.

She rose. Her sisters rose with her. They formed a procession, gleaming, terrible, and beautiful beyond mortal bearing, and the sea opened before them like a curtain. The waves drew back from their path as if afraid to touch them. The salt spray rose in clouds around their silver feet. The sun, sinking towards the western horizon, caught their hair and turned it into threads of gold and copper and palest green, the colours of the sea itself. They did not speak. There was nothing to say that the whole ocean did not already know. They walked across the dry sand where the waves had pulled back to let them pass, up the beach where the Greek ships lay, past the hulls and the ropes and the idle oars. The Myrmidons saw them coming and fell back, for no man can look upon a

sea-goddess in her full power without his heart failing him.

Thetis found Achilles where he had fallen, still in the dust, still clutching handfuls of earth, Antilochus standing helpless beside him.

She knelt. She touched his head, that head she had held when he was a baby, burning her own fingers against the fire that would have made him immortal, choosing instead the love of a mortal life.

"My child," she said. "Why do you weep?"

Achilles looked up at her. His eyes were red-rimmed, swollen, almost unrecognizable. "He is dead, Mother. Patroclus is dead. Hector killed him and took my armour. The armour you gave me. He stripped it from Patroclus's body and left him naked on the plain."

He drew a shuddering breath.

"I would die here and now. I could not save him. I sat here by my ships while he fought for me, wore my face, died in my place. What am I now? A burden on the earth. I have brought no saving to anyone: not to Patroclus, not to the Greeks who begged me, not to myself."

Thetis wept. Sea-goddess though she was, mother of the mightiest warrior who ever lived, she wept.

"Then your death is near," she said softly. "For your own death awaits you full soon after Hector's."

This was the moment. The moment the whole Iliad has been building towards. The choice that Achilles made not once but twice: first when he withdrew from battle, and now again, when everything he loved had been taken from him.

"I know," Achilles said. His voice had changed. It was not the voice of the man who had lain screaming in the dust. Something had settled in him, something hard and cold and final.

"I know that my death follows Hector's. I have always known it. You told me myself: if I stay here and fight at Troy, I will win undying glory but I will never return home. If I sail back to Phthia, I will live a long life, grow old, have children, die in my bed, and no one will remember my name."

He stood up. The dust fell from him in streams. He was naked in his tunic, unarmed, unarmored, but in that moment he looked more terrifying than he ever had in the full panoply of war.

"I choose glory. What use is a long life to me now? My friend is dead. The person I loved most in the world is lying on the plain while the Greeks and Trojans tear at his body like dogs over a carcass. I will kill Hector. I will kill every Trojan who stands between me and him. I will make their wives tear their cheeks with grief. I will make them understand what they have taken from me."

He raised his face to the sky, and the sound that came from him was not grief anymore. It was rage: pure, undiluted, and absolute. He screamed his fury across the plain, and the Trojans, who

had been pressing forward to seize Patroclus's body, heard it and faltered. Hector himself checked his advance. For the first time that day, doubt touched his heart.

MYTHOLOGY NOTE

Achilles's choice between a long life and glory is the central philosophical question of the Iliad. It is not simply about whether to fight or flee. It is about what makes a human life meaningful. Is it longevity, comfort, and safety? Or is it the courage to act, to risk everything, to be remembered? Achilles answers this question twice: first when he withdraws from battle (choosing honour over fighting), and again when he chooses to re- enter the war knowing it will kill him. In both cases, he chooses meaning over mere survival. This idea, that a short life of significance outweighs a long life of obscurity, became one of the defining themes of Western literature, echoed from the Greek tragedians through Shakespeare to modern writers. The Greek word for it is *kleos aphthiton*: undying fame.

Thetis laid her hand on his shoulder. "Wait, my son. Do not go into the press of battle until you see me return. Your armour is in Hector's hands. I will go to Olympus. I will ask Hephaestus (heh-FES-tus), the lame god, the smith, the artist whose works are wonders, to forge you new armour. Armour that will make all who see it know that a god has blessed you. Armour fit for the last campaign of Achilles."

Achilles nodded. He was past arguing, past reasoning. He would wait because his mother asked it, and because even in his rage, he knew that fighting without armour was suicide, and he did not want suicide. He wanted murder. He wanted Hector's blood. He wanted to look into Hector's eyes as the light went out of them.

Thetis turned to her sisters. "Go back to the sea. Tell Father what has happened. I go to Olympus."

They embraced her, these silver daughters of the ocean, and retreated down the beach. The waves closed over them with a sound like a sigh.

Thetis walked alone towards the mountain of the gods.

Back on the plain, the battle for Patroclus's body raged into the dusk. Menelaus (men-eh- LAY-us) and Ajax (AY-jaks) the Great held the Trojans at bay while the other Greeks dragged the corpse towards the ships. It was the strangest of combats; neither side truly fighting to win, both fighting simply so that the dead man might rest with honour. Hector seized Patroclus by the feet three times. Three times the Ajaxes drove him back. The corpse was lifted onto a litter, and the Greeks carried it through the lines while Achilles's Myrmidons stood weeping on either side, escorting their fallen captain home.

But Achilles did not go to the body. Not yet. He stood by his ships, wrapped in a darkness deeper than any mortal sorrow, and waited for his mother to return with the armour of his vengeance.

He had made his choice. He would be dead within the month. But before he died, he would teach the world what it meant to take everything from a man who already had nothing left to lose.

FOOTNOTES

Thetis and the Nereids in Greek art: The scene of Thetis rising from the sea with her sisters became one of the most popular subjects in Greek vase painting. The Nereids were typically depicted as beautiful young women riding dolphins or sea-horses, often carrying the armour of Achilles. These images captured the Greek imagination because they represented the intersection of the mortal

and divine worlds: a mother crossing the boundary between her element and her son's, bringing divine aid to a human battlefield. The "Nereid Monument" from Lycia (c. 390 BCE), now in the British Museum, shows this theme in spectacular sculptural form.

The Choice of Achilles in later philosophy: Achilles's famous choice became a touchstone for ancient Greek ethical thought. In Plato's Symposium, it is cited as the supreme example of noble love. Achilles chooses death to avenge Patroclus. Aristotle, in the Nicomachean Ethics, uses it to illustrate the concept of megalopsychia (greatness of soul): the willingness to sacrifice everything for honour and friendship. The Stoics saw in it an example of accepting fate with courage. For Homer himself, the choice is neither praised nor condemned. It is simply presented in all its terrible weight, and the reader must decide what to make of it.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Achilles learns of Patroclus's death and immediately chooses to die himself. Is this courage or despair? Can a choice motivated by grief still be a noble one?

Thetis offers Achilles new armour from Hephaestus, but she cannot save his life. Why does Homer have the gods help Achilles with material things while withholding the one thing he truly needs? What does this say about divine power and its limits?

Achilles says he will force his soul into subjection and go to fight. The Greek word for this is philopsychia, love of one's own soul or life. He is overcoming his instinct for self-preservation. Have you ever had to overcome your own fear to do what you believed was right? What helped you make that choice?

CHAPTER 16: THE SHIELD OF ACHILLES

Thetis (THEE-tis) rose from the grey sea like a falcon launching from a cliff. She flew (not walked, not swam, but flew) across the distance between the salt waves and the snow-capped peaks of Olympus, the home of the gods. Her sisters, the Nereids, had returned to their father's caves. She travelled alone, a silver mother on a desperate errand, racing against the death of her son.

She knew where to find him. Not in the golden palaces where Zeus held court, nor in the gardens where Aphrodite laughed with her attendants. She found him where he always was: at his forge, with the fire and the hammer, making things that no mortal hand could equal.

Hephaestus (heh-FES-tus), the lame god, the smith, the wonder-worker. His bronze house stood on Olympus, built by his own hands: bronze walls, bronze doors, golden handmaids who moved like living women but were made of metal, gifted with thought and voice and strength. Inside, the heat of twenty bellows filled the air with a breath like the inside of a star. Hephaestus was sweating at his anvil when his wife, Charis (KAH-ris), came to tell him that Thetis had arrived.

"Thetis?" Hephaestus set down his hammer. His leg, thin and twisted, the leg that had made his mother Hera cast him from Olympus in disgust, twitched as he turned. "Thetis of the silver feet? The sea-goddess?"

"The same," said Charis.

Hephaestus wiped his hands on his leather apron. A smile spread across his soot-blackened face. "Then I must welcome her as she deserves. For she was kind to me when no one else was."

He remembered it as if it had happened yesterday, though centuries had passed.

He had been a baby, beautiful in every way except for the deformity of his leg. Hera, queen of the gods, his own mother, could not bear imperfection. She had seized him by the ankle and flung him from Olympus. Down he fell, tumbling through the sky for a full day and night, until he crashed onto the island of Lemnos. The impact shattered his leg. He would never walk properly again.

But he had been found. Thetis and Eurynome (yoo-RIN-oh-mee), daughter of the encircling Ocean, had taken him into their cave beneath the sea. For nine years he had lived with them, hidden from Hera's gaze. Nine years of safety, of learning his craft, of turning bronze and silver and gold into objects of such beauty that even the sea-nymphs wept to look at them. Brooches, spiral armlets, cups, and chains. Hephaestus had made them all, his small hands moving with a genius that needed no perfect legs to achieve.

Thetis had saved him. And now she needed saving in return, or as close to saving as a goddess could come. She needed armour for a son who was doomed.

"Thetis," Hephaestus said, limping towards her on his thin, strong legs, leaning on his staff. He took her hands in his. "Silver-footed goddess, welcome. You do not visit often, but when you do, it is always for love of someone. Tell me what you need, and if it can be done, I will do it."

Thetis wept. She was not ashamed of it. Immortal though she was, she was still a mother, and mothers weep when their children walk towards death.

"Hephaestus," she said, "is there any goddess on Olympus whom Zeus has tried with more sorrow than me? He made me marry a mortal man, Peleus, and now my mortal son, Achilles (ah-KILL-eez), stands at the edge of his own destruction. He has lost his armour. His friend is dead, and the Trojan Hector wears it. He goes to fight knowing he will die. I cannot stop him. But I can give him armour that will make the world remember him."

She looked into the smith's eyes. "Will you forge him a shield? A breastplate? A helmet? Greaves? Will you make him armour that will amaze every eye that sees it?"

Hephaestus did not hesitate. "Take heart, goddess. If I could hide him from death, I would. But I cannot hide a man from his fate. What I can do is give him armour that will make his enemies tremble and his friends weep with pride. Come. Sit with Charis. I will work."

He turned to his forge. Twenty bellows breathed life into the fire. They roared like living things: some blasting fierce heat, some gentle, all answering to his will. He threw copper into the flames, and tin, and silver, and gold. The metals melted, flowing together like water, like light, like the stuff of which stars are made.

First, the shield. Not a simple circle of bronze. No, this would be something that had never existed before and would never exist again. Hephaestus worked in five layers, hammering and folding, heating and cooling, each strike of his divine hammer precise as a heartbeat. He bound the rim with a triple circuit of gleaming metal. He crafted a baldric of silver to hang it from.

And then - the miracle.

Hephaestus did not merely decorate the shield. He put a world upon it. A living, breathing, moving world in bronze and gold and silver and dark enamel. Anyone who looked upon it would see not just a weapon, but the whole of human life: its sorrows and its joys, its wars and its peace, everything that men fight for and everything they dream of.

Imagine the earth itself spread across the face of the shield - the sky above, the sea below, the sun at his blazing work, the moon full and pale, the constellations glittering in their places: the Pleiades (PLEE-ah-deez), the Hyades (HYE-ah-deez), huge Orion with his belt, and the Great Bear (the Wain) that never dips below the horizon but turns eternally, watching Orion chase forever across the sky.

And then, the cities. Two of them, side by side, each telling a different story about what it means to be human.

The first city was at peace. Inside its walls, a wedding was in progress. Young men led brides from their chambers by torchlight, the processions winding through the streets while flutes played and lyres sang, and the women stood in their doorways watching, smiling, remembering their own wedding days. The wedding hymn rose into the air, that ancient cry of Hymen! Hymen! that celebrates the joining of two lives.

But peace does not mean the absence of conflict. In the assembly place, two men argued over a blood-price. One had killed another's brother. He had offered compensation. The brother said it was not enough. They stood before the elders, who sat in a solemn circle on polished stones, each holding the staff of a herald. One after another, the old men rose and gave judgment. The crowd cheered or murmured dissent. Two bars of gold waited on a table as reward for whichever elder spoke the truest, fairest word. Law, not violence. Justice, not vengeance. This was what peace looked like: messy, human, imperfect, but held together by the willingness to talk rather than kill.

The second city was at war. Around its walls, two armies camped in gleaming armour, one side defending, one side besieging. The besiegers could not agree whether to sack the city or accept half its treasure and depart. While they argued in council, the defenders slipped out in ambush. By a river where cattle came to drink, they hid and waited. When the herds arrived with their shepherds playing pipes, unsuspecting, the ambushers struck. They seized the cattle and killed the herdsmen.

The alarm reached the besiegers' council. They sprang to their horses, rode to the river, and battle erupted. Bronze clashed on bronze. Spears flew. In the midst of it all, Hephaestus carved Strife (Eris) and Riot and dark Fate, a dreadful figure dragging three dead men behind her, one wounded, one dying, one already gone, her robes soaked in blood. The figures seemed to move, to breathe, to live out their tragedy over and over again for all eternity.

And still Hephaestus worked. Beyond the cities, he laid down a field being ploughed. Teams of oxen moved back and forth, turning the dark earth in long furrows. Each time they reached the end of the field, a servant met them with a cup of wine. The ploughmen drank and turned their oxen again. The ground behind them was dark and ready, the ground before them golden and waiting. It

was the cycle of the year, the patient labour that outlasts every war.

Next to it, a harvest. Reapers with sharp sickles cut the corn in straight swathes. Binders followed, gathering the sheaves. Boys collected the fallen grain. Three binders worked together, their rhythm practiced and ancient. Under an oak tree, servants prepared a feast. A great ox had

been sacrificed, and they were cutting it up while women made barley porridge for the laborers' meal. The landowner stood nearby, watching it all, and he was glad.

Then a vineyard, heavy with grapes. The vines climbed silver poles. A ditch of dark metal ran around it, fenced with tin. Youths and maidens carried the fruit in woven baskets, laughing, their faces bright with the pleasure of abundance. Among them walked a boy singing the Linus song, his voice clear and sweet, his lyre ringing out across the vintage.

Then cattle: cows of gold and tin, lowing as they moved from the yard to pasture by the river's reeds. Four shepherds walked with them, golden figures with nine swift dogs. But trouble came: two lions had seized a bellowing bull and were tearing at him while the dogs barked and the herdsman shouted, none daring to come close. Nature, red in tooth and claw, even in a world of gold.

Then sheep, in a mountain valley, with huts and sheepfolds and shepherds playing their pipes.

Then a dancing ground, like the one Daedalus (DED-ah-lus) built for Ariadne (ar-ee-AD-nee) in Crete. Young men and women danced with their hands on each other's wrists, the girls in fine linen, the boys in woven shirts lightly oiled. They wore garlands. They moved in a ring, their feet flashing, now in a circle like a potter testing his wheel, now in lines weaving in and out. A singer played the lyre, and two tumblers flipped and spun through the crowd. Joy, pure and simple, the kind that comes after the harvest is in and the wine is made and the world seems, for one evening, at peace.

And around the outermost rim of the shield, the great river Oceanus (oh-SHEE-ah-nus), the river that encircles the entire world, flowing endlessly, the boundary of everything that is.

When it was done, Hephaestus made the rest: a breastplate that shone brighter than fire, a helmet close-fitted to the brow with a golden plume, greaves of beaten tin. He set everything before Thetis, and she looked at the shield, at the world upon it, at the life and death and labour and joy captured in metal, and she wept again, not from sorrow this time, but from wonder.

"Thank you," she said. "He will carry the world with him when he goes to meet his fate."

Hephaestus bowed his head. "A small repayment for a great debt. Go, goddess. Dawn comes. Your son waits."

Thetis gathered the armour in her arms. She rose from Olympus like a falcon, and the gleaming shield caught the first light of the coming sun. From far below, if any mortal had been watching, it would have looked like a second star falling upward, racing towards Troy and the last day of Achilles's mortal life.

MYTHOLOGY NOTE

The description of the Shield of Achilles, known as an ekphrasis, a detailed verbal description of a visual work of art, is the most famous passage of its kind

in all of Western literature. It is also deeply symbolic. The shield contains the whole world: cities at peace and war, farming and harvest, vineyards and dancing. By placing this cosmos on Achilles's shield, Homer suggests that the warrior carries the entire human world with him into battle, and that war, for all its fury, is only one part of human life. The shield has inspired countless artists and writers, from Virgil (who created a similar shield for Aeneas in the Aeneid) to W.H. Auden, whose 1952 poem "The Shield of Achilles" reimagines it as a desolate, modern scene. Archaeologists have noted that the scenes reflect real Bronze Age activities: ploughing with oxen, harvesting with sickles, and communal dancing were all part of Mycenaean Greek life around 1200 BCE.

FOOTNOTES

Hephaestus's origin story: Homer's version of Hephaestus being cast from Olympus by Hera for his lameness became the standard account, though other traditions exist. In some versions, it was Zeus who threw him down after Hephaestus sided with Hera in a divine quarrel. The myth reflects a harsh ancient attitude towards physical disability, and also its triumph: Hephaestus becomes the most skilled of all artisans, proving that worth is not measured by physical perfection. His forge was believed to be located beneath volcanic Mount Etna in Sicily, and the Greeks genuinely explained volcanic eruptions as Hephaestus at his work.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

The shield contains both war and peace, suffering and joy. Why do you think Hephaestus (and Homer) chose to include scenes of peaceful life (weddings, farming, dancing) on the armour of a warrior going to his death? What does this say about what Achilles is fighting for, or what he has lost?

Hephaestus forges the armour out of gratitude to Thetis for saving him as a child. How does this backstory change your understanding of the gift? Is the armour a payment of a debt, an act of friendship, or something more?

The city at peace resolves its dispute through law and discussion, while the city at war resolves its through violence. Which city do you think Homer favors? What clues in the description help you decide?

CHAPTER 17: THE BODY OF PATROCLUS

Menelaus (men-eh-LAY-us) stood over the body like a lion standing over its kill.

The king of Sparta had fought his way through the chaos to reach Patroclus, and now he would not leave him. Patroclus lay in the dust, stripped of Achilles's divine armour, his skin already pale where the life had drained out of it. The battle raged around him like a storm, but Menelaus

planted himself firm, his round shield before him, his spear raised, daring any Trojan to come close.

He was not alone in wanting the body. Euphorbus (yoo-FOR-bus) son of Panthous saw it too. Euphorbus had been the first to wound Patroclus, before Hector struck the killing blow. He wanted the glory of dragging the body away. He approached Menelaus with caution but not with sense.

"Son of Atreus," he called out. "Draw back. Leave the body. I was the first of all the Trojans to drive my spear into Patroclus. Let me have the glory I deserve, or I will kill you where you stand."

Menelaus almost laughed. Almost. "Boasting is an ugly thing, young man. The leopard is not bolder than the lion, nor the boar more fierce, yet even the proudest beast falls to the hunter. Your brother Hyperenor learned that when he made light of me. He never walked home to his wife. Neither will you."

Euphorbus did not listen. He threw his spear. It struck Menelaus's shield but could not pierce it. Menelaus took aim, prayed to Zeus, and hurled his own weapon. The spear caught Euphorbus at the base of his throat and drove clean through. The young Trojan fell, his beautiful hair, bound with bands of silver and gold, spilling into the dust. He died far from home, another life thrown away for the glory of touching what Hector had already claimed.

But there was no time to strip the armour. Hector was coming.

Apollo (ah-POL-loh) had whispered in Hector's ear, disguised as a mortal soldier, warning him that Menelaus was defending the body and had just killed the finest of the young Trojans. Hector's face darkened with grief. He charged through the ranks like a flame, wearing Achilles's stolen armour, shining terrible and wrong.

Menelaus saw him coming and made a hard choice. He could not face Hector alone, not with the divine fire of Achilles's armour gleaming on the Trojan's shoulders. He retreated, but not far. He found Ajax (AY-jaks) the Great, Telamon's son, the strongest of the Greeks after Achilles.

"Ajax," he said. "Patroclus lies dead, and the Trojans are tearing at his body. Hector has the armour. Help me."

Ajax needed no further urging. He came like a wall of bronze, his massive shield before him, and planted himself over Patroclus. Hector, who had seized Patroclus by the feet and was dragging him towards the Trojan lines, let go and fell back. Even Hector would not face Ajax alone.

For a moment, there was a strange stillness in the storm. Ajax stood over Patroclus as a lion stands over its cubs. Beside him, Menelaus held the other side. The two of them formed a fortress of flesh and bronze.

Then Glaucus (GLAW-kus) son of Hippolochus, captain of the Lycians, looked at Hector with contempt.

"Hector," he said, his voice cutting through the din, "you make a fine show, but where is your courage when it matters? You abandoned Sarpedon's body to the dogs and the Greeks. He was your guest and your comrade, and you would not even defend his corpse. Why should the Lycians fight for you anymore? Why should any of us? If you had any courage, we would drag Patroclus into Troy right now. Achilles's armour for Sarpedon's body, a fair trade. But you dared not stand against Ajax."

Hector's face burned. He could not let the accusation stand. "Glaucus," he said, "you misread me. I fear no man and no battle. But Zeus's will is stronger than ours. He gives victory and takes it away. Watch me now, and see if I play the coward."

He turned and ran after the Trojans who were carrying Achilles's armour to the city. He found them, stripped off his own armour, and put on the divine armour that Hephaestus had made for Peleus, that Peleus had given to Achilles, that Achilles had lent to Patroclus. It fit him too well. He seemed, for a moment, like Achilles himself - but Achilles seen in a dark mirror, wrong, stolen, doomed.

Zeus looked down from Ida and shook his head. "Poor fool," he murmured. "You arm yourself in the armour of a hero, and you never think that this armour will not see Troy again. You killed his comrade, but it was not yours to take. I give you power now, yes - but death walks beside you."

Then Ares (AIR-eez), the god of war, entered Hector. His body filled with terrible strength. He rallied the Trojans and their allies with a great shout, promising half the spoils to whoever dragged Patroclus's body away from Ajax.

The Trojans charged.

The fight that followed was one of the fiercest in the entire war. It was not about territory or honour or even victory. It was about a dead man's dignity.

Ajax gave the Greeks their orders: hold together. Do not break formation. Stand by the body. They formed a ring of shields around Patroclus, their spears pointing outward like the quills of a porcupine. The Trojans came at them in wave after wave. Hector hurled himself against the wall of bronze again and again. Three times he seized Patroclus by the feet. Three times the Ajaxes beat him back.

Automedon (aw-TOM-eh-don), Patroclus's charioteer, fought like a man possessed by grief. The immortal horses, Xanthus (ZAN-thus) and Balius (BAL-ee-us), wept for their fallen driver, tears streaming from their great dark eyes, their manes wet with sorrow. Zeus looked at them and pitied them. "Why did I give you to a mortal man?" he asked. "You are

ageless and immortal, yet you share in the sorrows of men. Very well. I will give you strength."

He breathed power into the horses, and they charged into battle with Automedon at their reins. Automedon killed Aretus (ah-REE-tus) with a spear through the shield, but he could not fight and drive alone. Alcimedon (al-sih-MEE-don) saw his struggle and leaped onto the chariot to take the reins, freeing Automedon to fight.

The battle wore on through the afternoon. The Greeks and Trojans tugged at Patroclus's body as men tug at a great ox-hide, stretching it between them, neither side giving ground. The dust rose so thick that the sun itself seemed dimmed over the place where the fighting was thickest. Ajax shouted for help, and the Greeks answered. Idomeneus (eye-dom-eh-NOOS) came, and Meriones (meh-RYE-oh-nee-z), and the two Ajaxes - the Great and the Lesser - stood shoulder to shoulder.

Athena came down from Olympus, sent by Zeus who had changed his mind. The Greeks needed to keep Patroclus's body, if only so that Achilles might bury his friend. She took the form of old

Phoenix (FEE-niks), Achilles's tutor, and spoke to Menelaus.

"It would be shame beyond bearing," she said, "if the dogs of Troy tore the comrade of Achilles while you stood by. Fight, Menelaus. Fight as you have never fought."

Menelaus, not knowing it was a goddess, answered with his heart: "If Athena would give me strength, I would defend him to the end."

Athena was pleased. She filled his limbs with fire. He hurled his spear and killed Podes (POH-deez), one of Hector's closest companions, a rich and valiant man. Hector's grief answered Menelaus's rage, and the battle grew still more terrible.

And then the miracle happened.

Iris (EYE-ris), the rainbow messenger, flew to Achilles at the ships. She came secretly, sent by Hera without Zeus's knowledge. She found him standing by his hulls, staring at the battle in an agony of helplessness.

"Up, son of Peleus," she said. "Your friend's body is being torn apart out there. The Greeks defend him, but they cannot hold forever. Hector means to cut off his head and fix it on the stakes of the wall. Show yourself. You need no armour for that."

"How can I go?" Achilles said. "I have no armour. My mother forbade me to fight until she returns."

"Go as you are," Iris said. "Show yourself at the trench. Let the Trojans see you. Let them hear you. That alone will be enough."

She was gone before he could argue.

Achilles did not stop to think. He strode towards the trench, past the wall, beyond the Greek lines, out onto the plain where the battle raged. And Athena, watching from above, wrapped her aegis (EE-jis) around his shoulders - that terrible goat-skin cloak bordered with tassels, sign of divine protection. She crowned his head with a golden cloud, and from that cloud she kindled a flame, a blaze of light that shot up towards heaven.

Imagine a city on an island, far out at sea, under siege. All day its people fight, and at sunset they light signal fires on the heights, blazing warnings for any ship that might bring rescue. That was the light above Achilles's head. It pierced the dust and the gloom. It shone across the battlefield like the coming of a god.

He did not throw a spear. He did not swing a sword. He simply stood at the trench and shouted.

Three times he cried out. His voice was like a trumpet sounding the alarm when the enemy is at the gates. Athena added her own voice, spreading terror among the Trojans that no mortal courage could withstand. The horses shied and turned their chariots. The drivers went pale. Twelve of the finest Trojan champions fell beneath the wheels of their own vehicles, crushed by the panic that swept through them.

The Trojans broke. They ran. And in the confusion, the Greeks lifted Patroclus onto a litter and bore him towards the ships, the Myrmidons weeping on every side.

The sun set at last. Hera sent the reluctant sun-god down into Ocean's waves, and darkness covered the land. The Trojans camped on the plain, but fear sat among them like a guest at their fires. In the Greek camp, the Myrmidons laid Patroclus's body on a bier and covered him with a linen cloth and a white robe. Achilles stood beside him, weeping, his hand on his friend's cold breast.

He had shown himself. He had driven the Trojans back with nothing but his voice and the goddess's fire. But he had not saved Patroclus. Nothing could do that now. The armour Hephaestus was forging would arrive with the dawn. And then the world would see what Achilles could do when he had nothing left to lose.

MYTHOLOGY NOTE

The scene of Achilles going unarmed into battle is unique in the Iliad. He does not fight - he simply appears, and his presence alone is enough to rout the enemy. This reflects a powerful idea in Homeric poetry: the hero's presence (parousia) has a military value independent of his physical fighting. When Achilles withdraws, the Greeks lose not just his spear arm but the very idea of him, the terror he inspires. Modern psychologists have compared this to "presence leadership" - the ability of certain individuals to change the dynamics of a group simply by being there. Athena's aegis and

the divine flame above Achilles's head transform this into divine theater: the gods use Achilles's mere appearance as a weapon.

FOOTNOTES

Fighting over the dead in Homeric warfare: The battle for Patroclus's body reflects a real and serious concern in Bronze Age warfare. The proper treatment of the dead was sacred - to deny burial was to insult the gods themselves. Homeric heroes fight as fiercely to recover a body as they do to win a city. This obsession with burial may reflect the genuine anxiety of a warrior culture: a soldier needs to know that if he falls, his comrades will bring him home. Archaeological evidence from Mycenaean Greece (c. 1600 - 1100 BCE) shows elaborate burial rituals for warriors, including weapon burials and funerary feasts, suggesting that the heroes of the Iliad are practicing an authentically ancient custom.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Achilles goes into battle without weapons, and the Trojans flee from him anyway. What does this tell you about the nature of courage and fear in the Iliad? Can a person's presence alone be a weapon?

The Greeks and Trojans fight not for land or treasure, but for the right to bury a dead man. Why do you think Homer devotes so much attention to this struggle? What does it reveal about what these warriors value most?

Glaucus rebukes Hector for abandoning Sarpedon's body, yet Hector himself is the one who stripped Patroclus. How does Hector justify his actions to himself? Do you think he believes his own justification?

CHAPTER 18: ACHILLES RETURNS

Dawn rose in saffron robes from the streams of Oceanus, and Thetis (THEE-tis) came with the light.

She found her son where she had left him: fallen over the body of Patroclus, weeping as if his tears might wash the death away. Around him, the Myrmidons (MUR-mi-donz) stood in silent ranks, waiting for their captain to become himself again. The armour she carried blazed in the morning sun. It rang against itself as she set it down, a sound like the earth cracking open to reveal treasure buried since the beginning of time.

"My son," Thetis said. She took his hand. "We must let him lie. It is heaven's will. But here is what heaven can give you: armour fit for a god. No mortal has ever borne such work upon his shoulders."

Achilles looked at the armour. The shield caught the dawn and threw it back, multiplied, transformed. He saw the cities, the ploughing, the harvest, the dancers, the Ocean running around the rim. He saw the whole world in bronze, and for a moment his grief found a shape it could wear into battle.

"Mother," he said, "it is beyond words. I will arm. But I fear for him." He looked down at Patroclus. "I fear the flies will come. I fear his wounds will rot."

Thetis laid her hand on Patroclus's cold brow. "Do not fear. I will keep him as he is. A year could pass, and his flesh would be sounder than the day he fell. Now call the Greeks to assembly. Tell them your anger is ended. Go and fight."

She dropped ambrosia and nectar into Patroclus's wounds. Then she was gone, rising towards Olympus like mist burning off the sea.

Achilles walked out onto the shore and gave a cry that brought every Greek running.

They came from the ships, from the cookfires, from the wounded tents. They came limping and whole, young and old, those who had fought yesterday and those who had never drawn a sword. Even the helmsmen and stewards came, because Achilles (ah-KILL-eez) had called, and no one, not even the gods themselves, could ignore that voice.

He stood before them, transformed by grief into something that was no longer quite human. His eyes gleamed with a light that seemed to come from somewhere beyond a man's soul.

"Son of Atreus," he said, turning to Agamemnon (ag-ah-MEM-non), who stood among the kings, his arm still bandaged from Coon's spear. "It would have been better for both of us if Artemis's arrow had struck Briseis down the day I took her, rather than let our quarrel cost so many Greek lives. But that is past. My anger is ended. I have forced my soul into subjection. I will go out against the Trojans, and may they learn what it means to face me when I have nothing left to lose."

The Greeks shouted. They cheered. They had waited for this moment since the day Agamemnon took Briseis, and now, at last, their greatest warrior stood before them again.

Agamemnon rose. He did not go to the centre of the assembly; his wounds still pained him. But he spoke with the full weight of command.

"Danaans," he said, "it is right to listen when a man speaks, and wrong to interrupt him. Achilles, I will speak to you directly, and let all the Greeks hear. Often my men have upbraided me for what I did. But I was not myself. Zeus and Fate and the Erinyes (eh-RIN- ee-eez) struck me mad. On the day I took Briseis from your tent, I was blinded.

"Even the gods can be blinded. Zeus himself was once fooled by Hera. She beguiled him on the day when Alcmena was to bring forth mighty Heracles. Zeus swore a great oath that the child born that day would rule over all his lineage. Hera, crafty as ever, hurried the birth of Eurystheus, a weakling, but born before Heracles, and delayed the birth of the hero. Zeus had sworn, and he was bound. Heracles was doomed to serve that worthless king, all because Zeus had been blinded. And when he realized what Hera had done, he seized Ate (AH-tay), the spirit of Folly, by the hair, and flung her down from Olympus. She fell to earth, and she walks among men to this day, tangling our feet when we think ourselves most wise.

"So it was with me. Ate blinded me. I took your prize. I was wrong. And now I will make amends: all that was promised, and more. Let us not delay. The gifts will be brought now, before your eyes."

Odysseus (oh-DIS-see-us) stepped forward, ever the practical man. "Achilles, send the men to eat first. No man can fight all day on an empty belly. Battle, once begun, will not be brief. Let them take bread and wine, and then let Agamemnon bring the gifts and swear his oath."

Achilles shook his head. "Odysseus, I honour your wisdom, but I cannot eat. Patroclus lies in my tent, hacked and torn, his comrades mourning around him. While he is there, I can think of nothing but blood and slaughter. The sons of Greece may eat when the sun goes down, if any of us are still alive."

Odysseus pressed him, but Achilles would not yield. So the princes went to Agamemnon's tent and brought the gifts: seven tripods, twenty bronze cauldrons, twelve horses, seven women skilled in crafts, and Briseis (brye-EE-sis). Talthibius (tal-thi-BEE-us) found a boar for sacrifice. Agamemnon swore a great oath before all the Greeks, calling Zeus and Earth and Sun and the Erinyes to witness, that he had never touched Briseis, never lain with her, never treated her as anything but what she was: a prize kept inviolate.

He cut the boar's throat. Talthibius whirled the body into the sea for the fishes.

Then Briseis saw Patroclus.

They brought her past the body on the litter, and something broke inside her.

She had seen her husband cut down before the walls of her city. She had seen her three brothers die on the same day. She had been torn from her home, led away as a prize of war, passed from hand to hand like a cup or a bracelet. She had learned to be silent, to endure, to survive by making herself small.

But Patroclus had been kind to her.

She flung herself onto his body, tearing at her breast, her neck, her beautiful face with her own nails. She wept as a goddess weeps: not the tidy weeping of a slave afraid of punishment, but the raw, uncontrollable grief of someone who has lost the only person who ever treated her like a human being.

"Patroclus!" she cried. "My prince! When I left this tent, you were alive! You were kind to me!"

The Greeks stood silent, watching. Even the hardest veterans turned their faces away.

"You told me not to weep," Briseis went on, her voice cracking. "When Achilles killed my husband and sacked our city, you said: 'Do not cry, Briseis. I will speak to Achilles. I will make him marry you. We will have a wedding feast among the Myrmidons, and you will be his wife in Phthia.' You promised me a life. You promised me something to hope for. And now you are dead, and I have nothing again."

She laid her head on his cold chest. The women around her wept too, but as Homer tells us, each wept for her own sorrows. Briseis wept for Patroclus. She wept for herself. She wept for every woman in every war who has ever watched her world burn while men decided what prize she would become.

MYTHOLOGY NOTE

Briseis's lament for Patroclus is one of the most extraordinary passages in the Iliad because it gives voice to someone who is usually silent: a captive woman. The epic is overwhelmingly a poem about male warriors, their honour, their rage, their glory. Briseis breaks through that wall. She speaks not as a plot device, not as a symbol of Achilles's honour, but as a person. She remembers specific kindnesses. She names her losses: husband, brothers, home, hope. Modern scholars have called this passage a radical moment of empathy in ancient literature. When Homer has a powerless slave woman speak with more emotional truth than any king, he is making a quiet but devastating point: the real cost of war is paid by those who have no voice in starting it.

The elders tried to persuade Achilles to eat. Phoenix (FEE-niks), old and wise; Nestor (NES-tor), full of counsel; Idomeneus (eye-dom-eh-NOOS), lord of Crete; they all came to him with soft words. He refused them all.

"I cannot," he said. "Not while he lies there. Not while Hector still breathes."

Zeus looked down from Olympus and pitied him. "Athena," he said, "my child, look at him. He sits desolate while the others eat. Go. Drop nectar and ambrosia into his breast, so he will not hunger in battle."

Athena needed no urging. She darted down like a falcon, invisible to all, and stood beside Achilles where he sat brooding. She poured nectar and ambrosia, the food of the gods, into his chest. He felt a warmth spread through him, a strength that no mortal meal could give. He did

not know what had happened. But his limbs felt light, and the terrible emptiness of his grief filled, for a moment, with divine fire.

Athena returned to Olympus. And the Greeks armed themselves for war.

Achilles put on the armour of Hephaestus.

First the greaves, fitted with silver ankle-clasps. Then the breastplate, brighter than fire. Then the sword with its silver studs, slung across his shoulders. Then the shield, that great wondrous shield containing the world, and it shone with a light like the moon seen from a ship at sea, like a fire burning on a mountain to guide lost sailors home. Then the helmet, close-fitted to his brow, the golden plume waving above it like the crest of a burning star.

The armour seemed to lift him. He moved in it freely, as if it were weightless, as if it had been made not just for his body but for his soul.

He took up his father's spear, the great ash spear from Mount Pelion that Chiron (KYE-ron) the centaur had given to Peleus. No other Greek could wield it. It was heavier than any mortal weapon, balanced for a man who was more than mortal now.

Automedon and Alcimius (AL-si-mus) harnessed the immortal horses, Xanthus (ZAN-thus) and Balius (BAL-ee-us). Achilles mounted the chariot, and the horses felt him there: not Patroclus, not Automedon, but the true master returned. They stamped their hooves and shook their manes, eager for the wind of their own speed.

Achilles spoke to them: "Xanthus, Balius, bring your driver back safely this time. Do not leave him dead on the plain as you left Patroclus."

Then Xanthus did something terrible. The horse bowed his head until his mane touched the ground, and words came from his mouth, given by Hera, who can grant such gifts when she chooses.

"Dread Achilles," the horse said, "this time we will save you. But the day of your death is near. It is not our fault. It is heaven and stern fate that will destroy you. We can run as fast as the west wind, but no horse can outrun destiny."

The Erinyes stopped Xanthus's speech. Even a god-given voice cannot speak too much of fate.

Achilles answered in great sadness: "I know it, Xanthus. I know I will fall far from home. But I will not stay my hand until I have given the Trojans their fill of fighting."

He raised his spear. The Myrmidons cheered. The Greeks cheered. The whole army moved forward, rank after rank, and the earth shook beneath their feet. Achilles shone in the

fore, resplendent as the sun-god Hyperion (hy-PEER-ee-on), and the Trojans on the plain looked up and saw him coming, and their hearts failed them.

The greatest warrior in the world was coming to war. And he was not coming to win. He was coming to die magnificently.

FOOTNOTES

Briseis in the Iliad and beyond: Briseis is referred to in the Iliad simply as "the daughter of Briseus" or "the woman." She does not even have a personal name in Homer's text; "Briseis" means "woman of Briseus" (her father). Yet Homer gives her one of the most emotionally powerful

speeches in the entire poem. This contrast between her namelessness and her eloquence has fascinated readers for millennia. In later Greek tragedy, particularly Euripides, captive women became a major theme. Modern retellings of the Trojan War, from *The Trojan Women* to contemporary novels, have increasingly centred the voices of women like Briseis, recognizing that their stories are not peripheral to the war but central to understanding its true cost.

Ate (Folly) in Greek thought: Agamemnon's excuse for his behavior, that he was blinded by Ate, the divine spirit of destructive folly, is both a genuine theological concept and a political strategy. The Greeks believed that certain kinds of disastrous error were literally supernatural: a god-sent madness that made a person choose the worst possible course of action while believing it was wise. But Agamemnon is also doing something shrewd: by blaming Ate, he acknowledges wrongdoing without fully accepting personal responsibility. The story of Zeus and Heracles that he tells serves the same purpose; even the king of gods was fooled. Ancient audiences would have recognised the mix of genuine remorse and self-justification in Agamemnon's speech.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Briseis speaks of Patroclus as the only person who was kind to her after her city fell. What does this tell us about Patroclus's character? How does his treatment of Briseis contrast with how Agamemnon treats captives?

Agamemnon blames "Ate" (Folly) for his actions rather than taking full responsibility himself. Do you think Achilles accepts this apology? Why or why not? What clues in the text help you decide?

Xanthus the horse prophesies Achilles's death, and Achilles responds not with fear but with determination. How has Achilles changed since the beginning of the *Iliad*? Is he a different person now, or simply the same person stripped of everything that once mattered to him?

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VOLUME V: THE RAGE OF ACHILLES

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PART FIVE: THE RAGE OF ACHILLES

CHAPTER 19: THE RIVER RUNS RED

The battle began, and Achilles (ah-KILL-eez) was no longer a man. He was a force of nature with a spear in his hand, grief and rage compressed into human shape. Where he walked, Trojans fell. Where he turned, men ran. The plain that had swallowed so many Greek lives over so many months now demanded Trojan blood in return, and Achilles was its willing instrument.

Zeus had given the gods permission to enter the fray. Hera (HEER-uh), Athena (ah-THEE- nuh), Poseidon (poh-SYE-dun), Hermes (HUR-meez), and Hephaestus (heh-FES-tus) sided with the Greeks. Ares (AIR-eez), Apollo (uh-POL-oh), Artemis (AR-teh-mis), Leto (LEE-toh), and Aphrodite (af-roh-DYE-tee) stood with Troy. The earth itself trembled at the discord. Even Hades, lord of the dead, felt fear: the pounding above his head threatened to crack the world open and expose his dark kingdom to unwanted light.

But Achilles cared nothing for the gods' quarrels. He had one name on his lips, one face in his mind: Hector. Until he found him, every Trojan who crossed his path would pay the debt of Patroclus's death in advance.

Apollo sought out Aeneas (ee-NEE-us) and put courage into his heart. The prince strode out to meet Achilles, and for a moment the whole battle seemed to hold its breath.

"Aeneas," Achilles called, "do you hope to rule Troy if you kill me? Have you forgotten how I chased you down Mount Ida once before?"

"I remember your words as well as you do," Aeneas answered. "We are both sons of divine mothers. But the tongue is not the spear. Let us see which of us the gods favour today."

He cast his spear. It struck the shield of Hephaestus and drove through two layers of bronze before the inner gold stopped it. Achilles threw in turn, and his spear punched clean through the rim of

Aeneas's shield. Achilles drew his sword and sprang forward.

But Poseidon was watching. Aeneas was not fated to die today. The god veiled Achilles's eyes in mist, lifted Aeneas from the earth, and set him down far behind the lines among the Cauconians.

"Foolish man," Poseidon told him. "Never face Achilles again. When Achilles is dead, then you may fight among the foremost."

When the mist cleared, Achilles found his spear at his feet and his enemy gone. He did not waste time wondering. He turned back to the battle and opened the floodgates of slaughter.

What followed was not war. It was harvest.

Iphition, son of Otrynteus, fell first, his skull split by the Pelian spear. Demoleon, Antenor's brave son, took a spear through the temple. Hippiodamas died as he leaped from his chariot, bellowing like a bull dragged to sacrifice. Polydorus, Priam's youngest son, sprinted through the front ranks until Achilles's spear found the golden clasps of his belt and pierced him through.

When Hector (HEK-tor) saw his brother fall, something broke inside him. He charged at Achilles, his spear raised, his heart screaming for vengeance.

Achilles saw him coming and laughed - not a sound of joy, but the wild, broken laugh of a man who has lost everything.

"Here he is! The man who killed my friend!"

Hector cast his spear. Athena breathed on it and turned it aside. It fell harmless at his feet. Achilles sprang at him, but Apollo caught Hector up and hid him in darkness. Thrice Achilles struck at empty air. Thrice his spear found nothing.

"Hound!" he shouted. "Apollo saves you again! But I will find you. I swear it on the soul of Patroclus."

He turned his fury on whoever remained. Dryops died at his feet. Laogonus and Dardanus were thrown from their chariot. Tros clasped Achilles's knees and begged for mercy. Achilles drove his sword home. Mulius, Echeclus, Deucalion, Rhigmus, Areithous - the names piled up like kindling. The plain ran dark. The chariot wheels churned through blood and dust. The axle of Achilles's car was spattered. His hands were red to the wrists.

MYTHOLOGY NOTE

The Greeks had a word for what Achilles does here: *aristeia*, meaning "the best moment" - a warrior's peak performance in battle, when he seems more than human. But Homer gives us three very different *aristeiai* in the Iliad. Diomedes's in Book 5 is thrilling: he wounds two gods and survives. Patroclus's is tragic: we watch him rise and fall in the same breath. Achilles's is terrifying. The same poet who makes us cheer for Diomedes makes us recoil from Achilles. This is the Iliad's moral complexity at its sharpest: the greatest warrior is not the greatest man.

The Trojans broke and ran towards the river.

Half fled across the plain towards the city. The other half found themselves driven into the Scamander (skuh-MAN-dur), the broad river that flowed across the Trojan plain. The gods called it Xanthus (ZAN-thus), "the golden," but there was nothing golden about it now. The water churned with men and horses, with shields and bodies, with desperate cries.

Achilles left his spear on the bank and waded in with his sword alone. He did not fight. He reaped. The Trojans huddled under the banks like fish fleeing a dolphin, but there was no escape. When his arm tired of killing, he dragged twelve young men alive from the water. They would die on Patroclus's pyre. Even mercy, in Achilles's hands, had become a weapon of revenge.

Then he saw Lycaon (lye-KAY-on).

Lycaon was Priam's son, another of Hector's brothers. Achilles had captured him once before, eleven days past, in the vineyards outside Troy. He had sold him as a slave to Lemnos for a hundred oxen. A guest-friend had ransomed him, and Lycaon had made his way home through suffering and stealth, arriving back at Troy only to find the Greeks still at the gates.

Twelve days of freedom. That was all heaven had granted him.

Now he floundered in the river, unarmed, his helmet and shield cast aside. He saw Achilles and his heart failed. But instinct drove him forward. He caught Achilles by the knees, the universal gesture of the suppliant, the posture that even enemies were bound by sacred custom to respect.

"Achilles," he gasped, "have mercy. I ate bread in your tent when you took me prisoner. You sold me for a hundred oxen, and I paid three times that to win my freedom. It has been only twelve days. My mother bore two sons, and you have already killed my brother Polydorus. Do not make her childless."

He looked up into Achilles's eyes, searching for the man he had once known - the man who had accepted his ransom, who had fed him, who had treated him like a human being.

That man was gone.

Achilles looked down at Lycaon as if examining an insect. When he spoke, his voice was flat, emptied of all warmth.

"Idiot. Do not speak to me of ransom. Before Patroclus fell, I sold my captives alive. I was human then. But now - " He paused, as if the word itself had become strange to him. "Now not one Trojan shall live. Not one. Least of all a son of Priam."

Lycaon's hands fell from Achilles's knees. He held them out, empty, defenseless.

"Patroclus fell," Achilles went on, "and he was a better man than you will ever be. I too am greater than you, and yet death waits for me as well. Do you think you deserve to live when the best of us lies dead?"

Lycaon said nothing. What was there to say? He closed his eyes.

Achilles struck. He caught the young prince by the foot and flung him into the river, where the current carried him away, spinning slowly in the reddened water.

"Lie there among the fishes," Achilles called after him. "Your mother will not lay you on a bier. The river will bear you to the sea. So perish every Trojan, until I have paid the full price for Patroclus."

But the river was listening.

Scamander had had enough.

The river god rose from his waters, his voice booming across the battlefield. "Achilles! Even if you are mightier than all men, you are also the most ruthless! My waters are choked with corpses. I cannot find a channel to the sea. Drive your Trojans onto the plain and kill them there - but stop filling my stream with the dead."

"I will not stop, Scamander," Achilles answered, "not until I have driven them into their city and faced Hector. That is my fate."

He sprang back into the water, killing still. The river god roared. A great wave rose up, higher than a city wall, and crashed down upon Achilles. He grasped at an elm tree; it tore from the earth by its roots. He stumbled, fell, struggled to his feet as the water dragged at his legs. Another wave came. The river was trying to drown him.

"Father Zeus!" Achilles cried. "Is there no god who will pity me? Must I die like a swineherd's boy, swept away in a flood? I thought I would fall beneath the walls of Troy, killed by a hero's hand - not washed away like refuse!"

Poseidon and Athena heard him. They came in the shape of two mortal men and took his hands.

"Do not fear," Poseidon said. "We are gods, sent by Zeus to stand with you. It is not your fate to drown. Hear our counsel: do not stop fighting until you have penned the Trojans within their walls and killed Hector. Then return to the ships. We promise you victory."

They vanished. But Scamander was not finished. He called to his brother river Simois (SIM- oh-is): "Help me! Unite your waters with mine! This man will sack the city if we do not stop him!"

Another wave rose, higher than the last, foaming with blood and corpses. It towered over Achilles, ready to bury him.

Then Hera called to her son. "Hephaestus! The river attacks your favourite! Burn him!"

Fire burst from the plain. Hephaestus kindled a blaze that swept across the battlefield, drying the floodwaters, burning the dead where they lay. It caught the trees: elm, willow, tamarisk, lotus - all blazing like torches. The eels and fishes leaped and died in the boiling water. Scamander himself began to steam.

"Hephaestus!" the river god cried. "No god can stand against your flames! I yield! Let Achilles drive the Trojans from my banks!"

Hera heard the river's surrender. "Enough, my son. We should not burn an immortal god for the sake of mortals."

Hephaestus quenched his flames. Scamander sank back into his bed, scalded and humbled. The waters ran clear again, though the banks still smoked.

But where gods clash, nothing ends quietly.

Ares charged at Athena, his spear leveled. "Vixen! You set Diomedes on me once, and wounded me yourself. Now pay for it!"

He struck her aegis. Athena staggered back, seized a boulder that two men could not have lifted, and brought it down on Ares's neck. The god of war fell flat on his back, covering nine rods of ground, his armour clattering around him like dropped pans. Athena laughed. "Fool. Have you still not learned how much stronger I am?"

Aphrodite led the groaning Ares away. Athena pursued her, struck her on the breast, and sent her sprawling in the dust beside her lover. The two Trojan gods lay tangled together in the dirt, while the grey-eyed goddess stood over them triumphant.

Poseidon challenged Apollo. "Why do we hold back? Let us fight!"

Apollo shook his head. "I will not raise my hand against my uncle. There is no honour in battling you for the sake of miserable mortals who bloom like leaves and fall."

Artemis mocked him for his cowardice, but Hera heard her. The queen of gods seized the huntress by both wrists, took her own bow from her shoulders, and beat her about the ears with it. Artemis squirmed and writhed like a dove escaping a falcon, her arrows scattering in the dust, weeping as she fled towards Olympus.

Hermes would not even consider fighting Leto. "It is madness," he said, "to come to blows with one of Zeus's wives."

Zeus watched it all from his throne, and he laughed. The gods fighting each other like children in a schoolyard! But even his laughter could not drown out the sound of Achilles's voice, rising from the battlefield below, calling for more Trojans to kill.

The greatest warrior in the world was still not satisfied. He had slaughtered a riverful of men. He had burned a god. And still he wanted more.

Victim	Identity	Notable Detail
Iphition	Son of Otrynteus	Skull split by Pelian spear
Demoleon	Son of Antenor	Spear through the temple
Hippodamas	Trojan warrior	Fell like a sacrificial bull
Polydorus	Youngest son of Priam	Killed despite father's prohibition
Dryops	Son of Priam	Slew at his feet
Tros	Young Trojan	Begged for mercy; killed pleading
Mulius	Ally/fighter	Spear through both ears
Deucalion	Trojan champion	Head severed, helmet and all
Rhigmus	Thracian prince	Belly wound in chariot
Lycaon	Son of Priam	Begged for mercy; flung into river
Asteropaeus	Paeonian prince, son of a river god	Dual spears; killed after struggle

FOOTNOTES

The river Scamander in history and archaeology: The Scamander, modern Karamenderes, was the principal river of the Trojan plain. Excavations at Troy (Hisarlik) have confirmed that the ancient coastline and riverbeds were significantly different from today's; in Homer's era, the Scamander flowed much closer to the city than it does now. The river battle in Book 21 combines genuine topography with mythological imagination in a way that has fascinated geographers and literary scholars for generations.

Supplication (hiketeia) in Greek culture: When Lycaon clasps Achilles's knees, he performs hiketeia, the ritual of supplication sacred in ancient Greece. To refuse a suppliant was not merely cruel; it was an offense against Zeus himself. Achilles's rejection is therefore not just a character moment - it is a theological transgression. He has placed his private grief above the laws that bind even enemies together. This is the moment when Achilles crosses a line from hero to something more frightening: a man who recognizes no law but his own rage.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Achilles kills Lycaon even though Lycaon reminds him of their past connection and clasps his knees in supplication. What has changed in Achilles since the beginning of the poem? Would the Achilles of Chapter 1 have done this?

The river Scamander rises against Achilles because his slaughter has become excessive even by the standards of war. What does it mean when nature itself rebels against a human being?

The gods' battle is almost slapstick - Athena knocking Ares down with a rock, Hera beating Artemis with her own bow. Why does Homer include this comic scene right after

the darkest moment of Achilles's rampage? What effect does the contrast have on you as a reader?

CHAPTER 20: THE GODS THEMSELVES FIGHT

Zeus sat on his throne and laughed.

He watched Athena knock Ares flat with a boulder. He watched Hera beat Artemis with her own bow. He watched Aphrodite sprawl in the dust, her divine robes filthy, her hair tangled with grime. The king of gods threw back his head and roared with amusement. The halls of Olympus shook with it.

Was this not absurd? Immortal beings, eternal and all powerful, squabbling in the dirt like children fighting over a toy. They had chosen sides in a human war, and now they were punching each other over it. Zeus found the whole thing magnificent.

But laughter, like battle, cannot last forever. Zeus grew tired of the spectacle. He sent Iris, his swift-footed messenger, to call them all back.

"Enough," he said when they stood before him, some nursing bruised pride, others wearing smug grins. "Return to Olympus. No more fighting among yourselves. Apollo, go to Troy. Protect the city

until Achilles's fury has run its course. The rest of you - stay here. I will not have my family brawling like fishwives while the world watches."

The gods obeyed. Even those who longed to rejoin the fray knew better than to defy Zeus when he spoke in that tone. They drifted back to their golden palaces. Athena polished her aegis. Ares limped to his healing couch. Artemis wept on her father's knee while Hera smiled from across the hall. Aphrodite straightened her robes and tried to pretend she had not been humiliated.

Order was restored on Olympus. What happened on earth was another matter.

Achilles (ah-KILL-eez) stood on the riverbank, alone. The fire of Hephaestus had died. The waters of Scamander ran clear once more. The Trojans who had not drowned were fleeing across the plain towards their city, and he let them go. His mind had room for only one thing now.

Hector.

He mounted his chariot. Automedon shook the reins. The immortal horses, Xanthus and Balios, knew their master's mind before he spoke it. They flew across the plain like storm winds racing over wheat, and the Greeks who saw them pass cheered and followed.

But Apollo was already moving.

The god slipped through the Scaean (SKAY-an) Gates as the Trojans poured inside, and found Agenor (ah-JEN-or), son of Antenor, valiant and noble. He put courage into the man's heart and stood beside him, veiled in darkness, lending him strength.

Agenor watched Achilles come on like a falling star, blazing across the plain, and his heart quailed. He thought of running. He thought of hiding in the woods of Ida, of washing the sweat from his body in the river and slipping back into the city at dusk. But pride held him where he was.

"If I flee," he told himself, "Achilles will catch me anyway. And what will they say of me then? Agenor the coward, who ran from the man who killed his friends? No. Better to stand. His flesh can be pierced. He is mortal, whatever the gods have given him."

He stepped out from the shadow of the wall and cast his spear.

It struck Achilles on the leg, below the knee. The greave of new-wrought tin rang like a bell, but the spear glanced off, turned by the divine gift. Achilles snarled and sprang at him.

Apollo intervened. He caught Agenor up in a thick mist and sent him walking into the city, untouched and unseen. Then the god did something clever, something only Apollo would think of. He took Agenor's shape, Agenor's voice, Agenor's very gait, and ran from Achilles across the plain.

Achilles gave chase. He had waited so long, killed so many, burned a river. And now, at last, he had a Trojan prince in his sights, fleeing before him. He poured everything into the pursuit. His legs, divinely swift, ate up the ground. His eyes saw nothing but the shape ahead of him.

He did not see the real Trojans streaming through the Scaean Gates behind him. He did not see Priam on the wall, ordering the great doors thrown wide, then commanding them sealed the moment the last of his people were safe. He did not see the city close itself like a fist.

He saw only Apollo's phantom, always just out of reach.

Apollo ran easily. He could have outdistanced Achilles without effort. But he did not. He stayed close enough to keep hope alive, far enough to keep capture impossible. He led Achilles towards the deep waters of the Scamander, away from the walls, away from the gates, away from Hector.

At last, when the city was secure and the last Trojan safe inside, Apollo stopped. He turned. The shape of Agenor fell away like a discarded cloak, and the god stood revealed in all his radiant beauty - tall, luminous, terrible in his calm.

"Why do you pursue me, son of Peleus?" Apollo asked. "You are a mortal, and I am immortal. Have you not yet learned the difference? You cannot kill what death cannot touch."

Achilles pulled up short, his chest heaving, his hands shaking with spent fury. The realization crashed over him like cold water. He had been tricked. The Trojans were inside the walls. Hector was behind stone and timber. And he stood in the middle of an empty field, chasing a god who had been playing with him.

"You have robbed me of glory, Far-Darter!" he shouted. "You drew me away while they escaped! I would have had them. I would have had him!"

Apollo made no answer. He simply vanished, returning to the walls of Troy to stand guard over the city he loved. Achilles was left standing in the dust, alone with his rage and the sound of his own breathing.

He turned back towards the city. The plain was empty. The battle was over. The sun hung low, painting the walls of Troy in shades of gold and blood. And there, before the Scaean Gates, a single figure waited.

Inside the city, Priam (PRYE-am) had watched it all from the highest tower. He had seen his people stream through the gates like water through a broken dam - exhausted, thirsty, terrified. He had ordered the gates kept open until the last man was inside, knowing that every moment they stood ajar was a moment Achilles might force his way through.

"Close them," he had commanded when the plain was clear. "Bar them. Seal them tight."

Now he looked down and saw Hector standing alone before the walls, his shield propped against a tower, his spear in his hand, facing the plain where Achilles walked like death itself.

The old king's heart broke in his chest. He rushed along the wall to the gate tower, his attendants following, weeping.

"Hector!" he cried, his voice cracking. "My son! Do not face that man alone! He is mightier than you. The gods favour him, and he has the armour of Hephaestus on his shoulders. Come inside the walls. Live to defend your city another day. Think of your mother. Think of your wife. Think of your child!"

He tore at his grey hair. He stretched his arms towards his son across the distance that separated them, an old man begging a younger one to be wise.

"I have lost so many sons," Priam went on, his voice breaking. "Lycaon and Polydorus, I know now they are dead. Do not make me bury another. An old man's death is the most pitiable thing in the world: dogs at the gates, strangers in the house, everything he built undone. But a young man's death - at least that has honour. Do not rob me of your life, Hector. Come inside. Please."

Beside him, Hecuba (heh-KYOO-buh) wept. She bared her breast before the watching soldiers, the breast that had nursed him, and held it out towards the son who would not look at her.

"Hector!" she cried. "My son! Honour this breast that fed you. Have pity on me. If you die out there, who will mourn me when I am old? Who will bury me? The dogs will eat you at the Greek ships, and I will never wash your body or lay you on the pyre. Do not make me childless. Do not make your wife a widow. Come inside."

Her voice carried across the space between them, raw with love and terror. Every Trojan on the wall heard her. Every Trojan wept with her.

But Hector did not move.

He stood with his shield against the tower and his spear in his hand, and he watched Achilles coming closer with every heartbeat. The figure on the plain grew larger, shining in the dying light, burning like a star fallen to earth.

Hector's heart beat fast. But his feet did not turn towards the gate.

Inside, the city held its breath. The Trojans who had fled from the plain now pressed against the walls, peering through gaps, watching their champion stand alone against the man who had slaughtered a river. The women clutched their children. The old men shook their heads. The soldiers gripped their spears and wished they were outside with him, and were glad they were not.

Achilles walked on. He was in no hurry now. The quarry had stopped running. The fox had gone to ground, and only one hound remained outside the hole.

He could see Hector clearly now. He could see the familiar armour. It was his armour, the armour Patroclus had worn, the armour Hector had stripped from his friend's dead body. The sight of it stoked the furnace of his rage to white heat.

"There you are," Achilles whispered to himself. "There you are at last."

MYTHOLOGY NOTE

The divine battle in Book 21, what scholars call the theomachy, is one of the strangest and most delightful passages in the Iliad. After twenty books of bloodshed and horror, Homer suddenly gives us divine slapstick: Athena knocks Ares unconscious with a rock, Hera beats Artemis with her own bow, Aphrodite sprawls in the dirt. Why? Greek epic had a tradition of *xenia* - the sacred duty of hospitality - and the gods were expected to maintain decorum even towards their enemies. But here, all pretense of divine dignity collapses. Some readers find the scene jarring. Others see it as Homer's genius: after showing us the worst of human nature in Achilles's slaughter, he shows us the gods at their most childish, and the contrast is devastating. If even immortals behave

like squabbling children, what hope is there for mortals? And yet the comedy also provides relief - a moment to breathe before the greatest tragedy in Western literature unfolds.

FOOTNOTES

Divine deception in the Iliad: Apollo's trick, leading Achilles away by taking Agenor's shape, is one of several instances in the Iliad where gods deceive mortals through disguise. Athena does it constantly, appearing as old friends, relatives, or strangers to nudge heroes towards their fate. Apollo's deception here is unusual because it serves not to advance Achilles's doom but to delay it. The god is buying time for the Trojans, not fulfilling destiny. This distinction matters: in the Iliad, divine deception can be either an instrument of fate or a temporary reprieve from it. Apollo's trick is the latter. He knows he cannot save Hector forever. He is simply postponing the inevitable.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

The gods' battle is comic and almost petty. They squabble, they hit each other, they cry. Why do you think Homer shows the gods behaving this way? Does it make them more relatable, or does it diminish them in your eyes?

Apollo deceives Achilles to save the Trojans, and Achilles is furious when he realizes he's been tricked. Have you ever been so focused on one goal that you failed to see what was really happening around you? What did you learn from that experience?

Priam and Hecuba beg Hector to come inside, using every argument they can think of: duty to his parents, love for his wife, care for his child. Hector stays outside anyway. Is he being brave, foolish, or both? What would you have done in his place?

CHAPTER 21: THE DEATH OF HECTOR

Hector (HEK-tor) stood alone.

The Scaean (SKAY-an) Gates were closed behind him. The great bars of oak and bronze had slid into place, sealing him out of the city he had spent his life defending. Inside, his father wept on the wall. Inside, his mother tore at her hair. Inside, his wife waited at her loom, unaware that the world was about to end.

Hector leaned his shield against a jutting tower and watched Achilles (ah-KILL-eez) come.

The Greek champion walked across the plain like a figure from a nightmare. The armour of Hephaestus caught the late sun and threw it back in blinding bronze and gold. The Pelian spear swung easy at his side.

Hector's mouth went dry. His heart hammered against his ribs. He thought of running inside, of hammering on the gates. He thought of Polydamas (pol-ee-DAM-as), who had urged him to retreat, and heard the accusations: Hector ruined us by his pride. Hector thought he could face Achilles. Hector was wrong.

He thought of laying down his arms, offering to return Helen and all her treasure. But he knew with a certainty like lead that Achilles would not listen. There was no treaty with a man who had

burned a river.

"Better to fight him," Hector said to himself, "and die gloriously. Or better still: to kill him, and save my city."

But his feet would not move. And Achilles kept coming.

Fear seized Hector like a hand around his throat.

He turned and ran. Not towards the gates - he could not bear the shame - but along the wagon road beneath the wall, past the wild fig tree, past the two springs where Trojan women had washed their clothes in peacetime. He passed them without seeing them, because death was at his heels.

Achilles ran after him. The gap narrowed with every stride. Hector tried to cut towards the city, hoping for arrows from the walls, but Achilles headed him off, herding him away from the gates. Three times they circled the city, their feet raising dust that hung in the air like a veil. The Trojans watched in silence. The Greeks held their breath.

On Olympus, Zeus took out his golden scales. In one pan: the doom of Achilles. In the other: the doom of Hector. The pan of Hector sank towards the house of Hades like a stone through deep water.

Apollo, who had lent Hector speed, withdrew. He turned his face away. He had done what he could.

Then Athena descended.

She came not in her own form, but wearing the face of Deiphobus (dee-IF-oh-bus), Hector's brother, the one he trusted most among Priam's sons. She ran up beside him, breathing hard as if she too had run from the gates.

"Brother," she said, "I could not stay inside. Father begged me. Mother begged me. But I came. Let us stand together."

Hector's heart leaped. He was not alone.

He stopped running. He turned to face Achilles, who approached with spear lowered, eyes burning.

"Son of Peleus," Hector called out, and his voice was steady again, though his hands trembled. "I will run from you no longer. But let us swear a covenant before we fight. If Zeus grants me the victory, I will not desecrate your body. I will strip your armour, yes, but I will give your corpse to the Greeks for proper burial. Promise me the same."

Achilles stopped ten paces away. He looked at Hector as if he had spoken in a language he did not understand.

"Covenants?" he said softly. Then louder: "There are no covenants between lions and men. Between wolves and sheep. You killed Patroclus. You stripped his armour. You wore it. And now you stand in my armour and ask me for mercy?"

He drew back his spear. "Fight, Hector. Fight with everything you have. It will not be enough."

Round	Action	Result
1	Hector hurls his spear at Achilles	Athena deflects it; the spear falls

harmless at Hector's feet

2	Hector calls to Deiphobus for a second spear	No one answers; he realizes
3	Hector charges with his sword, resolved to die fighting	Achilles holds his ground, reading Hector's movements
4	Achilles hurls the Pelian spear at Hector's throat	The spear pierces the only gap in the armour; Hector falls

Hector knew he had no second spear. He had thrown his only one. He turned to Deiphobus, hand outstretched. "Brother! Your spear!"

Silence.

He looked again. The figure beside him was gone. Where Deiphobus had stood, there was only empty air and settling dust.

"The gods have lured me to my destruction," Hector whispered. "Athena. It was Athena all along. She took my brother's face and led me here like a lamb to the knife."

He looked up at Achilles, and for a moment, something like peace entered his eyes. "My doom has come," he said. "Let me not die without a struggle. Let me do some great thing that men will remember."

He drew his sword. The blade caught the light as he charged, gathering himself like an eagle diving from the clouds towards a lamb far below. He leaped at Achilles with everything he had left: all his love for Troy, all his fear for Andromache, all his pride as Priam's son, as the city's shield, as the man who had held the walls against the Greeks for nine long years.

Achilles watched him come. He had studied Hector's armour - his armour, the armour Patroclus had worn - and he knew every joint, every clasp, every weak point. He knew the throat, where the collar- bones met and the neck curved down into the shoulders. The one place the bronze did not cover.

He threw the Pelian spear.

It flew straight and true, and it struck Hector in the throat. The point punched through flesh and stopped before severing the windpipe. Hector fell headlong, his sword spinning from his hand, and the dust rose around him like a shroud.

He lay on his back in the dirt, blood bubbling at his lips, and stared up at the sky.

Achilles stood over him.

"Hector," he said, and the name was a curse. "You thought you could kill my friend and go unpunished. You stripped his armour. You strutted in it. Fool. I was always mightier than Patroclus. And now I have laid you low. The Greeks will bury him with honour. The dogs and vultures will have you."

Hector tried to speak. The blood in his throat choked him, but he forced the words out, one by one.

"By your life... and knees... and by your parents. Do not let the dogs... devour me at the ships. Take the treasure... my father will give you. Send my body home... that the Trojans may burn me... as I deserve."

Achilles knelt beside him. His face was inches from Hector's, and what Hector saw in those eyes was not victory. It was the absence of everything human.

"Dog," Achilles whispered. "Do not speak to me of knees or parents. Would that I could cut your flesh to pieces and eat it raw for what you have done. Nothing will save you. Not ten times your weight in gold. Not twenty. Your mother will never lay you out. The dogs will eat you."

Hector looked at him. The light was fading from his eyes, but he found the strength for one last breath.

"I know you now," he said. "I know what you are. I bring you no curse. But remember: Paris and Apollo... will slay you... at the Scaean Gates."

The shrouds of death enfolded him. His soul flew down to the house of Hades, lamenting its fate, leaving youth and strength behind.

Achilles knelt a moment longer. Then he rose, drew his spear from the body, and began stripping the armour from Hector's shoulders. The other Greeks ran up, and each one thrust his

spear into the dead man's flesh, saying: "Easier to handle him now than when he was throwing fire at our ships."

When Achilles had stripped the last piece of bronze, he did something that would haunt him. He pierced the tendons behind Hector's ankles, threaded rawhide thongs through the slits, and bound the body to his chariot, head dragging in the dust.

He lashed his horses forward. Xanthus and Balius leaped. The chariot surged across the plain, and Hector's dark hair spread in the dirt, and the head that Andromache had kissed a thousand times bounced and rolled across the ground he had died to defend.

The Trojans on the wall watched. They did not look away.

Inside the city, someone began a dirge. Then others joined, until the whole of Troy seemed to be one throat of grief. Priam groveled in the courtyard filth, begging his servants to let him go to the ships. Hecuba's cry rose above the rest, a sound not human, coming from somewhere deeper than language.

But Andromache (an-DROM-uh-kee) heard nothing yet.

She was at her loom in the inner room of the house, weaving a double purple cloth and embroidering it with flowers. She had told her maids to set a tripod on the fire, so that Hector would have warm water for his bath when he returned from battle. She imagined him walking through the door, tired but smiling, taking little Astyanax (a-STY-uh-naks) in his arms, telling her the Greeks had been driven back again.

Then the cry came from the wall. Not a battle cry. Something else.

The shuttle fell from her hands.

"Two of you," she said to her maids, and her voice sounded strange in her own ears, "come with me. I need to see what has happened. I heard Hecuba's voice. Something is wrong."

She stood. Her legs would not hold her. She fell, then rose again, and ran from the house like a woman possessed, her women following after. She pushed through the crowds on the wall, past sisters-in-law she did not see, past soldiers who reached out to steady her and could not catch her.

She reached the battlements and looked out.

She saw a chariot racing across the plain. She saw two immortal horses, their manes flying. She saw a body bound behind them, bouncing in the dust, leaving a trail in the dirt.

She saw Hector's hair.

The world went black. She fell backward into the arms of her women, the darkness of unconsciousness swallowing her whole. When she came to, she tore the headdress from her hair, the veil that golden Aphrodite had given her on her wedding day, the frontlet and net with its plaited band. She flung them all from the wall and screamed.

"Hector! Hector!"

The name echoed off the stones.

"We were born to share one fate, you in Priam's house and I in Thebes under wooded Placus, my father Eetion's home. Would that he had never begotten me. You are going to the house of Hades, under the secret places of the earth, and you leave me a sorrowing widow in your house. Our child is still an infant. You can do nothing for him now, nor he for you. Even if he escapes this war, his life will be labour and sorrow. Others will seize his lands. The day that orphans a child severs him from his own kind. He will go about with his head bowed, his cheeks wet with tears, plucking one man by the cloak and another by the shirt, begging for pity. Some may hold out a cup to him for a moment. But then one whose parents still live will drive him away with blows and angry words: 'Out with you! You have no father here!' And the child will go crying back to his widowed mother. He, Astyanax, who used to sit on his father's knees and eat only the choicest morsels, who slept on a soft couch in his nurse's arms, knowing neither want nor care. Now his life will be full of hardship."

She stopped, gasping for breath, her face wet with tears.

"The worms will eat you at the ships, far from your parents, after the dogs have had their fill. You will lie naked, though in your house there is fine clothing made by women's hands. I will burn it all. It is no use to you now. You can never wear it again. And so I will give you what honour I can, though it is nothing against the dishonor of your death."

The women around her wept with her. But as Homer tells us, each woman wept for her own sorrows. They wept for husbands dead and brothers missing and sons who would not come home. Andromache wept for Hector. She wept for Astyanax. She wept for the life she had been promised and would never have.

The sun set over Troy. The chariot reached the Greek ships. And on the plain where Hector had fallen, where his blood had darkened the soil, the wind stirred the dust and carried it away, and nothing marked the place where the noblest man in Troy had died.

MYTHOLOGY NOTE

Hector's death in Book 22 is the climax not only of the Iliad but of one of the oldest and most powerful narrative traditions in Western literature: the tragic duel. Two champions, one noble, one mightier; divine deception; a fallen hero's dying words; the desecration of the body; the widow's lament. This structure became the template for countless tragedies in Greek drama, in Roman epic, and down through the Renaissance to

our own day. Shakespeare's *Henry V* borrows it. Milton's *Samson Agonistes* echoes it. But Homer did it first, and Homer did it with a simplicity that no later writer has ever quite matched. Hector does not die cursing. He does not die defiant. He dies knowing he has been betrayed by a god, knowing his wife will be a slave, knowing his son will be an orphan - and still he charges. That is the Iliad's definition of heroism: not winning, not even surviving, but choosing to fight when every other choice has been taken away.

FOOTNOTES

Hector's name and its meaning: The name Hector (Hektor) derives from the Greek verb *ekhein*, "to hold" or "to possess." In a very real sense, Hector's name is his function: he is the holder of Troy, the one who keeps the city together through the force of his own defence. When he dies, the city's hold on survival effectively dies with him. No other character in the Iliad has a name so perfectly matched to his role. Ancient audiences would have heard this resonance every time someone called out to him.

Andromache's lament and the tradition of tragedy: Andromache's speech over Hector's body is the direct ancestor of the *kommos*, the lament chorus that became a defining feature of Greek tragedy. Euripides, writing three centuries after Homer, would make Andromache the protagonist of his own play *Andromache*, and her lament scene in the Iliad was clearly his model. The structure - the widow's shock, the prophecy of the child's suffering, the burning of the clothes, the contrast between past happiness and future grief - appears again and again in Greek and Roman funeral literature. Homer invented the template. Every tragic heroine who followed walked in Andromache's footsteps.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Athena deceives Hector by taking his brother's shape, leading him to believe he is not alone. When Hector discovers the truth, he says "The gods have lured me to my destruction" but still charges at Achilles. Is his decision to fight brave, or has despair simply replaced hope? Can a choice be heroic if it leads only to death?

Achilles refuses every request Hector makes, even the most basic: to return his body to his family for burial. Why has Achilles become so merciless? Is his rage justified, or has it consumed the man Patroclus loved?

Andromache imagines Astyanax's future in heartbreaking detail: the other children driving him away, his life of begging and sorrow. How does this vision of a child's suffering affect your understanding of the war? Who are the real victims of the Trojan War?

CHAPTER 22: THE FUNERAL OF PATROCLUS

Achilles (ah-KILL-eez) could not sleep.

After Hector had been killed and the Greeks returned to the ships, Achilles kept the Myrmidons together to mourn Patroclus. Three times they drove their chariots sorrowfully around Patroclus's body. Hector's corpse lay nearby in the dust, but Patroclus had not yet received the funeral rites his spirit required.

That night Achilles lay grieving by the shore. As he slept, Patroclus's ghost came to him in a dream, hovering over his head like breath on winter air. "You sleep, and have forgotten me," the spirit said. "Bury me with all speed, that I may pass the gates of Hades. The ghosts drive me away. I wander desolate by the wide gates of the house of the dead." The spirit paused, and its voice softened. "Give me your hand, Achilles. Never again will we sit apart and take sweet counsel among the living. When you too come to the house of Hades, let our bones lie together in the golden urn your mother gave you." Achilles had reached for him, but his arms closed on nothing. The ghost vanished like smoke, gibbering as it went, and Achilles woke with tears already on his face. He sat up in the darkness, his heart pounding, and called out to the Myrmidons around him. "Even in death he came to me. Even there he remembers our friendship."

It was time to build the pyre.

The Greeks came in their thousands, carrying axes and ropes, led by Meriones (mer-ee-OH- neez), squire to Idomeneus (eye-DOM-eh-nee-us). They climbed the slopes of Mount Ida and laid their axes to the roots of ancient oaks. The trees came crashing down, a sound like thunder rolling across the plain. They split the trunks, bound them behind mules, and hauled them to the beach where Achilles waited. The pile grew until it was a hundred feet in every direction, a small city of wood, and the Greeks stood around it in a great circle, their faces orange with reflected firelight.

When the pyre was ready, the Myrmidons brought Patroclus's body. They covered him with locks of their own hair, cut short and thrown upon his corpse. Achilles stood last with the long yellow lock he had grown for the river Spercheius, a vow to his father never to be fulfilled. "I will not see my home again," he said, and laid the lock in his friend's dead hands.

Then he did something that made the oldest Greeks turn away.

He took twelve Trojan captives (sons of noble houses, some barely older than boys) and cut their throats upon the pyre. He did it without ceremony, without prayer, his face empty of everything except the rage that had swallowed him whole. The Greeks watched in silence. They had seen Achilles brave. They had seen him terrible. They had never seen him monstrous.

MYTHOLOGY NOTE

Homer's original audience would have understood the sacrifice of captives at a funeral as a horrifying but recognizable act of extreme grief. In Bronze Age warrior culture, the death of a great man was sometimes "paid for" with the lives of others. But Homer does not present this uncritically. Achilles's killing of the twelve captives is the moment where his grief crosses into inhumanity, the very quality he accused Hector of lacking. The poet wants us to feel the shock of it. When Euripides wrote his play *Hecuba* four centuries later, he made the sacrifice of Polyxena at Achilles's tomb its central horror, suggesting that Greek audiences continued to wrestle with this scene long after Homer's time.

The pyre would not light. Achilles prayed to the winds Boreas (BOR-ee-as) and Zephyrus (ZEF-er-us), and swift-footed Iris (EYE-ris) carried his prayer to them. They came howling across the sea, and the flames roared up so high they seemed to touch the sky. All night the winds blew, and all night Achilles stood by the pyre with a golden cup in his hands, pouring wine onto the ground and calling Patroclus's name until the earth was drenched. As a father mourns when he burns the bones of his son, so Achilles mourned, pacing round the bier with groans that rose from somewhere deeper than his chest.

At dawn, they gathered the whitened bones from the ashes and placed them in a golden urn, cushioned in two layers of fat. They covered the urn with a linen cloth and carried it inside Achilles's tent. Then they heaped earth over the place where the fire had burned, raising a mound that would grow higher in years to come. Achilles stood before it and made a promise. "When I too am dead, let them lay my bones beside yours, Patroclus. Not even in the house of Hades will I be parted from you." The Greeks who heard him wept. They knew his death was coming soon.

But grief, however deep, cannot burn forever. The Greeks needed to remember they were alive.

So Achilles brought out prizes from his ships: cauldrons, tripods, horses, mules, oxen, women skilled in crafts, and bars of iron. He stood before the assembled army and announced the funeral games in honour of Patroclus. The crowd stirred. For the first time in days, someone laughed. Someone else made a wager. The business of living had begun again.

Event	Winner	Notable Moment
Chariot Race	Diomedes (dy-oh-MEE-deez)	Athena smashed Eumelus (yoo-

MEE-lus)'s chariot; Antilochus (an-

TIL-oh-kus) nearly caused a riot

with his reckless driving

Boxing	Epeius (eh-PAY-us)	Knocked Euryalus (yoo-RYE-a-lus)
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out cold with a single blow to the
jaw

Wrestling	Ajax and Odysseus	Declared a draw after neither could
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throw the other

Footrace	Odysseus	Athena tripped Ajax Oileus (oh-IL-
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ee-us) in cow dung; the army
roared with laughter

Armed Combat	Diomedes	Fought Ajax the Great to a
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standstill; Achilles stopped the
match

Archery	Meriones	Shot a dove through the wing after
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Teucer (TYOO-ser) only severed its
tether

Spear-Throwing	Agamemnon	Won by default - Achilles declared
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no one could beat him

The chariot race was the main event. Five drivers lined up: Eumelus son of Admetus (ad- MEE-tus), Diomedes, Menelaus (men-eh-LAY-us), Antilochus son of Nestor (NES-tor), and Meriones. Achilles's own horses stood weeping on the sidelines. Their driver was dead, and they would not race for anyone else.

At the signal, the horses surged forward. Eumelus took an early lead, his mares flying across the plain. But Athena had taken an interest. When Apollo made Diomedes drop his whip, Athena returned it and breathed fresh strength into his Trojan stallions. Then, in a flash of divine spite, she shattered Eumelus's chariot yoke. The mares veered in opposite directions. Eumelus was thrown, his elbows and mouth torn, his chariot splintered.

Diomedes swept past to victory, his horses stepping high, his chariot inlaid with gold and tin gleaming in the sun.

But the real drama was behind him. Antilochus, driving slower horses but possessed of more nerve than sense, had been listening to his father's advice. Nestor had told him: skill beats speed. When the road narrowed where winter rains had worn a groove, Antilochus saw his chance. He cut inside Menelaus, forcing him to rein back or risk a collision.

"You reckless fool!" Menelaus shouted. "The road's too narrow!"

Antilochus pretended not to hear. He took second place by a trick, and when Menelaus came in barely a horse-length behind, the Spartan king was furious. He confronted Antilochus before the whole army, demanding he swear he had not fouled him deliberately. Antilochus, young, charming, and impossible to stay angry at, apologized with such grace that Menelaus found himself giving back the prize mare he had claimed. "Your good father and your brother have had infinite trouble on my behalf," Menelaus said, half-smiling despite himself. "I yield to your entreaty."

The fifth prize, a two-handled urn, went unclaimed. Achilles gave it to Nestor, who accepted it with a speech about his youth that lasted long enough for several people to sit down. "In those days," Nestor said, and the younger men smiled at each other, "I was eminent among heroes."

The boxing was short and brutal. Epeius, the same Epeius who would one day build the Trojan Horse, announced that he would break the bones of anyone who faced him. Only

Euryalus was foolish enough to try. Epeius hit him on the jaw, and Euryalus went down like a fish flipped onto a shore. His friends dragged him from the ring, spitting blood and seeing double.

The wrestling matched Ajax the Great against Odysseus. They gripped each other like roof-beams in a storm, their backs cracking, sweat pouring from them in streams. Ajax lifted Odysseus clear of the ground, but Odysseus (never forgetting his cunning) kicked Ajax behind the knee and brought him down. They fell together, covered in dust, and Achilles declared it a draw. Each took an equal prize.

The footrace was pure comedy. Ajax Oileus led until the final stretch, when Athena, answering Odysseus's prayer, made him slip on a pile of cow dung left from the morning's sacrifices. He went down face-first, his mouth filled with what no runner wishes to encounter, and the army's laughter echoed across the plain. Odysseus took the silver mixing-bowl. Ajax took the ox and stood spitting, while Antilochus, ever the diplomat, complimented his elders and earned an extra half-talent of gold from Achilles.

The archery contest pitted Teucer against Meriones. A pigeon was tied by the foot to the top of a ship's mast. Teucer shot first and severed the string, setting the bird free. It was a magnificent shot, but not what the contest required. Meriones, who had had his arrow ready while Teucer aimed, snatched the bow, prayed to Apollo, and sent his shaft through the dove's wing as it circled upward. The bird fell dead at his feet. He collected ten double-edged axes and the army's applause.

For the spear-throwing, Agamemnon stepped forward alongside Meriones. But Achilles stopped them. "Son of Atreus, we know how far you excel all others. Take the cauldron. Give the spear to Meriones." It was flattery, and everyone knew it, and Agamemnon accepted it with the easy smile of a man who has been given a prize he did not have to earn.

The games ended as the sun touched the western sea. The Greeks dispersed to their ships, still arguing about the chariot race, still laughing about Ajax and the cow dung, still alive with the noise of human fellowship. Somewhere in the crowd, old Phoenix had fallen asleep during Nestor's

speech and had to be woken by his neighbors. Two men who had quarreled over a wager were bought drinks by a third man who thought the whole thing hilarious. The Myrmidons, who had been silent since Patroclus's death, were heard singing again.

Achilles watched them go. For a few hours, he had almost felt like himself again. He remembered the young prince who had once competed for sport, who had once laughed at Nestor's speeches, who had once had a friend sitting beside him sharing a cup of wine and talking nonsense about home. The grief was still there, a stone in his chest that would never dissolve. But for a moment, he had been among the living. He had heard laughter and

remembered that it existed. He had seen young men argue over a prize and remembered that some competitions end without death.

Then the last voices faded. The plain grew quiet. The sun slipped below the sea, and the first stars pricked the darkening sky.

Achilles turned back to his tent. And there, laid on the ground outside, was Hector's body. Still fresh. Still whole, because Apollo would not let it decay. Still bound for dragging.

Achilles looked at it for a long moment. Something flickered in his eyes, something that might have been doubt. Then it was gone, swallowed by the familiar darkness.

He called for his chariot.

The games had been a moment of light. But the darkness in Achilles was not finished yet.

FOOTNOTES

The funeral games in historical context: Athletic contests at funerals were a well- established tradition in ancient Greece, persisting from the Bronze Age right through to classical times. The Iliad's games in Book 23 became the literary template for all such scenes. Virgil imitated them in the Aeneid when describing the funeral games for Anchises, and they influenced the tradition of Olympic-style competition as a form of memorial. The mixture of solemnity and comedy (Ajax slipping in cow dung, Nestor's endless speech) is characteristically Homeric: grief and laughter sit side by side, as they do in real life.

Achilles and the Trojan captives: The sacrifice of the twelve Trojan prisoners is one of the most debated passages in the Iliad. Some scholars argue it represents an older, darker layer of Bronze Age tradition that Homer included but did not endorse. Others note that it is carefully positioned to show us what Achilles has become: the same man who once showed mercy to the captive Briseis (BRYE-sis) now kills prisoners without thought. The narrative does not ask us to approve. It asks us to witness what unending rage does to a human soul.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

The funeral games are full of quarrels, tricks, and laughter - ordinary human behavior in the midst of extraordinary grief. Why do you think Homer includes so much comedy and competition in this scene? What does it tell us about how people cope with loss?

Achilles's sacrifice of the twelve Trojan captives is presented as the moment where his grief becomes monstrous. Does Achilles still deserve our sympathy after this act? Can you understand why he does it while still recognizing it as wrong?

Antilochus uses a reckless trick to pass Menelaus in the chariot race, then apologizes so gracefully that Menelaus gives back the prize. What does this scene say about honour, competition, and the art of the apology?

CHAPTER 23: TWELVE DAYS OF DESECRATION

Twelve times the sun rose over the Greek ships, and twelve times Achilles (ah-KILL-eez) yoked his immortal horses and dragged Hector (HEK-tor)'s body around the tomb of Patroclus. Three circles each dawn, the heels cutting troughs in the dust, and each day Achilles returned to his tent a little more hollow, a little less human.

But the body would not decay.

Apollo (ah-POL-oh) had stretched his golden aegis over Hector's corpse like a shield against the world. He anointed the dead man's flesh with ambrosial oil of roses, and sent a dark cloud from heaven to earth so the sun could not parch the skin. Where Achilles dragged him through stones and thorns, Apollo smoothed the way. Where dust should have crusted the wounds, the god washed them clean. It was as if Hector lay sleeping beneath a sheet of gold, untouched by time, untouched by rage.

The gods watched from Olympus, and their patience frayed.

On the twelfth morning, Apollo stood among them and spoke with unaccustomed fire. "You ought to be ashamed," he said. "Did not Hector burn thigh-bones of heifers and unblemished goats on your altars? Did he not honour you all his life? And now you let his body be desecrated because you fear one angry man?"

He turned to address them all, his voice ringing through the golden hall. "Achilles has flung aside all pity. He is like a lion that springs upon flocks and gorges without measure. A man may lose a son, a brother, yet when he has mourned, he lets the dead lie. Achilles drags a noble man behind his chariot. It is not right. It is not worthy of a hero."

Hera (HEER-ah) rose to her feet, her eyes hard as flint. "This would be well, O lord of the silver bow, if you gave equal honour to Hector and to Achilles. But Hector was mortal. He suckled at a woman's breast. Achilles is the son of a goddess, Thetis (THEE-tis), whom I myself reared and raised. I married her to Peleus (PEE-lee-us). You feasted at their wedding yourself. Do not now pretend that all men are equal in our eyes. They never have been."

The hall fell silent. This was the old argument, the one that had started the war.

Then Zeus (ZEEWS) spoke. His voice was not loud, but it carried the weight of thunder. "Enough. Their honour shall not be equal. Hector was mortal, Achilles is half-divine. But of

all who dwelt in Troy, Hector was dearest to us. His offerings never failed. Never was my altar stinted of its dues. I will permit the body to be ransomed."

He looked around at the assembled gods. Apollo nodded, satisfied. Hera turned away, her lips pressed thin. The other gods murmured among themselves, some agreeing, some dissenting, all of them aware that something was shifting. A decision had been made on Olympus. What remained was to make it real on earth.

Zeus's gaze settled on Iris, fleet as the wind, who stood waiting at the threshold. "Go, Iris. Find Thetis in her sea-cave and bring her to me. And then go to Priam in Troy. Tell him he is to come to the ships of the Achaeans, alone but for a single servant to drive his wagon. Tell him he need not fear death. We will send Hermes (HER-meez) to guide him through the enemy camp."

God	Position	Argument
Apollo	For returning the body	Hector was pious and honoured

the gods; Achilles has become
savage and pitiless

Hera	Against returning the body	Achilles is her ward through Thetis;
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Hector was merely mortal

Zeus	Decides in favour of ransom	Hector was dearest of all Trojans,
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but Achilles must be commanded
through Thetis

Athena	Silent (supports Achilles)	Her deception of Hector led to his
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death; she does not speak against
her mother Hera

Hermes	Neutral (assigned as guide)	Will escort Priam safely through
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the Greek lines regardless of divine
politics

MYTHOLOGY NOTE

The divine council in Book 24 is the last of several such assemblies in the Iliad, and it reveals how profoundly the gods have been divided by the war. Apollo's passionate defence of Hector is striking because Apollo himself helped engineer Hector's death. He withdrew his protection at the crucial moment. But the god draws a sharp distinction between killing a man in fair battle and desecrating his corpse. For Apollo, the second act is worse than the first. Hera's counter-argument is equally revealing: she does not deny that Hector was noble, only that his nobility matters as much as Achilles's divine blood. The Iliad never pretends that the gods are fair. It only shows us what happens when immortal favour is granted and withdrawn.

Iris found Thetis sitting in her sea-cave, surrounded by her sister Nereids, weeping for her son who was doomed to die young. "Rise, Thetis," Iris said. "Zeus commands your presence."

Thetis rose. She wrapped her darkest veil around her shoulders, the colour of deep water at midnight, and followed Iris up through the waves to Olympus. Athena gave up her seat. Hera placed a golden cup in her hand and spoke words of comfort. Then Zeus told her his plan.

"Go to your son," the king of gods said. "Tell him the gods are angry. Tell him I myself am angriest of all. He is to accept a ransom from Priam and give up the body."

Thetis found Achilles sitting outside his tent, staring at the sea. His face was gaunt. He had not eaten properly in days, and his eyes had the hollow look of a man who has stared too long into something that stares back. She sat beside him and took his hand, the same hand that had killed Hector, the same hand that dragged a dead man's body each dawn, and she told him what Zeus commanded.

Achilles listened. For a long moment he said nothing. The waves broke on the shore, and the gulls cried overhead, and somewhere in the camp a man was laughing at a joke. The sound of laughter seemed strange to Achilles, as if it came from a language he had once known but forgotten.

"So be it," he said at last. "If Olympian Zeus commands it, I will obey. Let Priam bring his ransom. Let him bear the body away."

It was the first time in twelve days that anything like reason had entered his voice.

Meanwhile, Iris reached Troy.

She found Priam (PRYE-am) in his courtyard, surrounded by sons who sat with their clothes wet from tears. The old king was wrapped in a filthy mantle, his head and neck still crusted with the mire he had groveled in when Hector died. He looked like a ruined thing, a man who had already died but forgotten to lie down.

Iris approached him softly. "Take heart, Priam. I bring no evil tidings. Zeus pities you. He commands you to go to the ships of the Achaeans and ransom your son. Take gifts that will satisfy Achilles. Go alone, with only a servant to drive your wagon. You need not fear death. Hermes will escort you, and Achilles will not harm a suppliant. It is the sacred law."

Then she was gone, a shimmer of light across the stones.

Priam stood slowly. For the first time in twelve days, something moved in his eyes besides grief. Purpose.

He called to his sons to ready a mule-wagon. Then he went down to his cedar-wood store-room, where his treasures lay in chests of polished bronze. Hecuba (heh-KYOO-bah) found him there, counting out gold into a leather bag.

"Husband," she said, and her voice cracked. "What has become of your judgment? You are famous for wisdom. Strangers praise it, your own people depend on it. How can you go alone to the ships? If Achilles sees you, he will know neither respect nor pity. He has slain so many of your sons. What makes you think he will spare the father?"

She gripped his arm. "Let us weep Hector here, in our own house. The threads of fate were spun for him at birth. Dogs will eat his flesh far from his parents. This we know. Do not make yourself another corpse for the Greeks to desecrate."

Priam looked at her. He was old, older than the war, older than many of the walls of Troy. But in that moment, something harder than age settled in his face. "Wife," he said gently, "do not stay me. Do not be a bird of ill omen in my house. If a mortal man had told me to go, I would have called him false. But I heard the goddess herself. I saw her face. I will go."

He turned back to his treasure. Twelve robes of finest weave. Twelve cloaks. Twelve rugs. Twelve mantles. An equal number of shirts. Ten talents of gold. Two burnished tripods. Four cauldrons. And a beautiful Thracian cup, given to him on an embassy years ago, so precious he had never drunk from it.

He would give it all. Every last piece. For one more look at his son. For one chance to hold Hector's body and weep over it as a father should.

He drove his sons and the servants from the courtyard with his staff, cursing them for gawping while he suffered. Then he called his remaining sons by name: Helenus (HEL-eh- nus), Paris, Agathon (AG-a-thon), Pammon (PAM-on), Antiphonus (an-TIF-oh-nus), Polites (poh-LYE-teez), Deiphobus (dee-IF-oh-bus), Hippothous (hip-OH-thoh-us), Dius (DYE-us), and rebuked them for living while Hector lay dead. "Worthless sons," he cried, though his voice was more sorrow than anger. "Would that you had all been killed at the ships rather than Hector."

They loaded the wagon in silence. The mules stood patient, strong beasts from Mysia, gifts from a kingdom that no longer existed. Priam's own horses were yoked to his chariot, animals he had bred himself, fed with his own hands.

Hecuba came to them one last time. She carried a golden goblet of wine. "Make an offering to Zeus before you go," she said. "Pray for the sign of the eagle. If he sends his bird on your right hand, you will know he watches over you. If not, I would not have you go to the ships of the Argives."

Priam took the cup. He washed his hands in clean water, lifted his face to the sky, and prayed. "Father Zeus, who rules from Ida, grant that I may be received kindly in the tents of Achilles. Send your swift messenger upon my right hand, the bird of omen dearest to you, that I may trust it as I go forth."

Zeus heard him.

From beyond the clouds, an eagle came. The great dusky hunter, the black eagle with wings spread wide as a rich man's chamber door, flew over the city on their right hand. When Priam saw it, his heart lifted like a bird itself.

He mounted his chariot. Idaeus (eye-DEE-us), his herald, took the reins of the mule-wagon. They drove out through the echoing gatehouse, past sons and sons-in-law who followed them, wailing as if for a funeral.

When they reached the plain, the family turned back. Priam and Idaeus went on alone.

Behind them, Troy faded into darkness. Ahead lay the Greek camp, the ships, and the man who had killed fifty of Priam's sons.

The old king lashed his horses forward.

FOOTNOTES

The eagle omen and divine signs in Greek culture: Priam's prayer for a sign from Zeus reflects one of the deepest practices in ancient Greek religion: divination by bird signs. An eagle appearing on the right hand was the most favorable omen possible, because the right side was associated with good fortune and the eagle was Zeus's own bird. Priam does not ask Zeus to guarantee his safety. Even he knows that no god can override Achilles's will entirely. He asks only for reassurance enough to take the next step. That is the most courage any human being can have: not certainty, but enough hope to keep moving.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Apollo defends Hector passionately despite having withdrawn his protection during the duel. Why does the god distinguish between killing Hector in battle and desecrating his body? What does this say about the difference between war and cruelty?

Priam gathers his kingdom's most precious treasures to ransom a dead body. Is this wise, or is it desperation? What would you be willing to sacrifice for the chance to mourn someone you loved properly?

Hecuba begs Priam not to go, offering logical reasons why the journey is suicidal. Priam goes anyway because a goddess told him to. When should we trust divine guidance, or any authority, over our own judgment?

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PART SIX: THE TAMING OF ACHILLES

CHAPTER 24: PRIAM'S JOURNEY

The sun went down like a dying ember behind the walls of Troy, and Priam (PRYE-am) drove his horses into darkness.

No torch lit his way. No stars pierced the thick veil of cloud that hung over the plain. The old king could hear his own breathing, shallow and quick, and the creak of the wagon behind him where Idaeus (eye-DEE-us) guided the mules laden with treasure. The sound of the wheels seemed loud enough to wake the dead. Worse, it might wake the Greeks.

They passed the great tomb of Ilius (IL-ee-us), founder of the city, its stone pale in the gloom. They drove on, past the ridges where Hector had once stood alone against the Greek army, past the scarred earth where the Trojans had camped before their defeats. Every shadow concealed a threat. Every rustle of wind through the dry grass might be a sentinel's call, a spear being lowered, a bowstring pulled taut.

Priam was eighty years old. He had fifty sons once. Now he drove alone through the camp of the men who had killed them.

He thought of turning back. The thought came to him not as a coward's thought but as a father's: he had other sons still living in Troy, sons who were not Hector but who were still his blood. If he died tonight, they would lose a father as well as a brother. The city would lose its king at the moment it needed him most. And yet Hector's body lay at the ships, unburied, denied even the simple dignity of returning to dust. Priam could not bear it. A king must protect his city, but a father must bury his son. Tonight, he chose to be a father.

When they reached the river, they stopped to let the horses and mules drink. The water was black, moving slowly, carrying the reflection of no moon. Idaeus was bending to fill a skin when he froze. He squinted into the darkness beyond the bank.

"My king," he whispered. "There is a man."

Priam's heart stopped. Then it hammered against his ribs so hard he thought it might crack them. He saw the figure now: young, upright, moving towards them with the easy stride of someone who had every right to be there. A Greek. A soldier. Perhaps a sentry who had slipped his post, or a raider prowling for spoils.

"We should run," Idaeus breathed.

Priam did not run. He could not. His old legs would not carry him fast enough, and the wagon was too heavy. He sat frozen on his chariot, his hand trembling on the reins, and waited for the blade or the arrow that would end him.

The young man approached. He was beautiful in the way that only the young can be: smooth-faced, bright-eyed, with the down of first beard just showing on his chin. He wore a traveler's cloak pinned at the shoulder, and his movements were fluid as water. He stopped beside the chariot and took Priam's hand in his own.

"Father," he said, and his voice was warm as summer air, "where are you driving your mules and horses through the dead of night, when other men are asleep? Are you not afraid of the fierce Achaeans? If one of them saw you bearing so much treasure, what do you think would happen? You are no longer young, and your companion is too old to defend you."

He paused, still holding Priam's hand. "But do not fear. I will do you no harm. I will defend you from anyone else, for you remind me of my own father."

Priam looked into that young face, and something in him loosened. Not trust exactly, but the first cousin of trust: the willingness to hope. "You are kind, my son," he said. "Some god has sent you to meet me. Your face is good, and your judgment excellent. Your parents must be blessed."

The young man smiled. "Tell me, sir. Are you taking this treasure to safety among foreign people? Or are you leaving Troy now that your bravest son has fallen?"

At the mention of Hector, Priam's voice thickened. He gripped the rim of his chariot to steady himself. "Who are you, friend? Who are your parents, that you speak so truly of my unhappy son?"

"I have seen him many times in battle," the young man said easily. "When he drove the Argives to their ships, we stood and marvelled. I am a Myrmidon (MER-mi-don), a squire to Achilles (ah-KILL-eez). My father is Polyctor (pol-IK-tor), a rich man about as old as you, with seven sons. I drew the lot to sail here."

Priam seized on this. "If you are truly Achilles's squire, tell me the truth. Is my son still at the ships? Or has he..." He could not say the words. "Has Achilles given him to his hounds?"

"Neither hounds nor vultures have touched him," the young man said gently. "Twelve days he has lain there, and his flesh is not wasted. Apollo has kept him fresh as dew, his wounds closed, his

blood washed away. The gods loved your son, sir. They have taken care of him."

Priam wept. He could not help it. The tears ran down the grooves of his aged face and fell onto the hand that still held the young man's. "Accept this cup," he said, fumbling for the beautiful Thracian chalice. "Guard me, and guide me to Achilles's tent."

The young man shook his head, laughing softly. "You tempt me, old sir, but I will not take gifts behind Achilles's back. I fear him too much. But as your guide, I will go with you to Argos (AR-gos) itself. No one shall attack you while I am with you."

He sprang onto the chariot, took the whip and reins, and breathed new life into the horses. They moved forward with a will that surprised Priam, as if youth itself were contagious, as if the driver's energy had flowed into their old bones.

They reached the Greek wall.

Priam had seen it from Troy's battlements a thousand times. A rough thing of earth and timber, a trench before it, stakes pointing outward. He had watched Greek soldiers march through its gates, had seen their watch-fires burning along its length. Now he was on the wrong side of it, and every instinct screamed at him to turn back.

But the sentries on guard were eating their supper, and the young man did something strange. He raised a slender wand he carried, ivory and tipped with gold, and touched the air. The sentries' heads drooped. One by one, they slumped against the wall, their bread falling from their hands, their wine cups tipping onto the earth. They did not collapse. They simply slept, deeply and immediately, as if the god of sleep himself had breathed in their faces.

The young man drew back the heavy bolt of the gate. It took three men to move it, Priam knew. This boy moved it alone. He guided the wagon through, closed it behind them, and led the horses on.

Past the wall. Past the ditch. Through the maze of tents and cook-fires and sleeping men. Priam could hear snoring, could smell the residue of wine and roasted meat, could see the shapes of warriors rolled in their cloaks. Any one of them might wake. Any one of them might recognise the Trojan king and raise the alarm.

But no one woke. No one saw. The darkness itself seemed to fold around them like a cloak.

They came at last to a large enclosure fenced with close-set pine stakes. Within stood a house built of hewn timber, roofed with coarse grass from the plain. Priam knew this place. He had heard reports from spies. This was the house the Myrmidons had built for their king, the man who had killed his son.

The young man drew the wagon to a halt. He handed the reins back to Idaeus, then sprang down and stood before Priam. And in that moment, something changed.

The air around him seemed to shimmer, like heat rising from summer stone. His form grew taller, brighter. A faint radiance, the colour of dawn on water, played about his shoulders. Priam found himself looking not at a young squire but at something else entirely: a god, golden-sandaled, with

eyes that held the speed of thought.

"Sir," said Hermes (HER-meez), the slayer of Argus, guide of souls, messenger of Olympus, "it is I, immortal Hermes. My father Zeus sent me to conduct you. I will leave you now, for it would anger Achilles to see a god befriending mortals so openly. Go within. Embrace his knees. Beseech him by his father, his mother, his son. That is how you may move him."

He was gone before Priam could speak. A streak of light rose towards the stars, leaving nothing behind but the faint scent of something sweet and otherworldly, like crushed herbs on a mountainside.

Priam and Idaeus looked at each other. The wagon stood in the middle of the Greek camp, surrounded by fifty thousand sleeping enemies, and the god who had guided them had departed. For a moment, the old king felt the full weight of his isolation. He was alone. Truly alone. No god held his hand now. No divine power shielded him from the eyes of the enemy.

And yet Hermes had brought him this far. The gate was open. The path was clear. If the gods had meant him to turn back, they would not have delivered him to the very door of his enemy's house.

Priam sat alone on his chariot. Idaeus wept silently beside the mules. The Greek camp surrounded them, fifty thousand men who would tear them apart if they knew who had come among them.

The old king climbed down. His joints ached. His heart hammered. He walked to the gate of the compound, found the single pine bolt that secured it, and drew it back. It moved easily, as if some god had loosened it for him.

He entered the courtyard. He crossed to the door of the house.

Inside, Achilles sat with two companions: Automedon (aw-TOM-eh-don) and Alcimus (AL-si-mus), his squires. They had just finished eating. The table still stood before them, littered with the bones of their meal, and the smell of roasted lamb hung in the air. They did not see Priam at first. The old man moved like a ghost, like a shadow of grief given human form, stepping silently across the floor of packed earth.

Then he was there, standing before Achilles, and the two squires started to their feet with a cry.

But Priam did not look at them. He looked only at Achilles. He saw the face that had launched a thousand ships' worth of destruction, the broad shoulders that had borne divine armour, the eyes that had burned with a rage hot enough to scorch the earth. And he saw the hands. They were still stained, those hands, still marked with the dirt of the plain and the blood of the man they had killed. Those hands had held a spear through his son's throat.

Those hands.

Priam knelt. He clasped Achilles's knees. And he kissed the hands that had killed his son.

The hands that had dragged Hector's body through the dust. The hands that had built the pyre. The hands that had held Patroclus while he wept.

Those hands.

Priam kissed them.

MYTHOLOGY NOTE

Priam's journey to Achilles's tent is the most dangerous passage in the entire Iliad, not because of monsters or battles, but because of what it represents. An old man voluntarily places himself in the power of his worst enemy. This act, called *hiketeia* (supplication) in Greek culture, was considered sacred. Once a suppliant touched your knees, you were religiously and morally bound to hear them out. But Homer goes further than custom requires. Priam does not merely supplicate. He embraces the very hands that killed Hector. That kiss is the moral turning point of the poem. It transforms Achilles not through divine command, not through military force, but through the power of shared humanity. When a grieving father kisses the hands of his son's killer, something breaks open that no sword could ever touch.

FOOTNOTES

Hermes as psychopomp and guide: Hermes's role in escorting Priam reflects one of his oldest divine functions. In Greek religion, Hermes was psychopomp, literally "soul-guide," the deity who conducted souls to the underworld. But he was also the protector of travelers, thieves, and anyone who moved between boundaries. His disguise as a young man is characteristic: Hermes was the god of deception as well as truth, of crossing lines as well as drawing them. That he should guide a father to reclaim his dead son's body is fitting in ways that Homer's original audience would have recognised immediately. Hermes does not simply protect Priam's body. He guides him across the border between life and death, between enemy and friend, between rage and forgiveness.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Hermes disguises himself as a young man rather than revealing his divinity immediately. Why do gods in the Iliad so often appear in disguise? What does Priam's willingness to trust a stranger tell us about the nature of hope?

Priam kisses the hands that killed his son, the most shocking and powerful gesture in the entire poem. What does this act mean? Is it submission, or is it something stronger? What would it take for you to embrace the person who had destroyed what you loved most?

The Greek camp sleeps while Priam walks through it unseen. The sentries do not wake, the soldiers do not stir. Is this divine protection, or does it symbolize something about how grief and love can move unseen through a world of violence?

CHAPTER 25: THE MEETING OF ENEMIES

The old man's lips touched the hands that had killed his son, and the world held its breath.

For a long moment, neither man moved. Priam (PRYE-am) knelt at Achilles's (ah-KILL-eez) feet, his white head bowed, his mouth pressed against the knuckles that had held the spear through Hector's throat. The tent was silent. Even the wind outside seemed to stop. Achilles stared down at the crown of Priam's head, at the thin white hair matted with dust from the road, and felt something shift inside him. Not a decision. Not a thought. Something deeper. Something that had been wound tight as a bowstring since the moment he heard that Patroclus was dead.

"Think of your father," Priam said, and his voice was barely more than a whisper, cracked with age and grief. "Think of Peleus (PEL-ee-us), who is such a one as I am, on the sad threshold of old age. Perhaps his neighbours harass him now, and there is none to keep war and ruin from him. Yet when he hears that you are still alive, he is glad. His days are full of hope that he will see his dear son come home."

He paused, and his shoulders shook. "But I. I am the wretched one. I had the bravest sons in all Troy, and there is not one of them left. I had fifty sons when the Achaeans came here. Nineteen from a single womb. The others born to me by the women of my household. The greater part of them, fierce Ares has laid low. And Hector... Hector, who was the guardian of the city and ourselves - him you have lately slain."

Priam raised his face. His cheeks were wet, his eyes red-rimmed, but there was no hatred in them. Only a grief so vast it had swallowed fear itself. "Therefore I am come to the ships of the Achaeans to ransom his body from you with a great ransom. Fear the wrath of heaven, Achilles. Think on your own father, and have compassion upon me, who am more pitiable still. I have steeled myself as no man on earth has ever steeled himself before me. I have kissed the hand of the man who slew my son."

Achilles heard the words, and something broke.

It was not dramatic. There was no cry, no sudden collapse. But the hardness that had been his only armour since Patroclus fell - that diamond shell of rage that had let him slaughter rivers full of men, that had let him drag a noble corpse through the dust day after day, cracked. Just a hairline fracture at first. Then wider. Then open.

He looked at Priam, and he saw not the king of Troy, not the enemy, not the father of the man he had killed. He saw a father. He saw Peleus. He saw himself, sitting by the sea, weeping for a dead friend while his own father grew old alone across the water.

And Achilles wept.

He wept as he had not wept since the first night, when the news came and he lay in the dust screaming. But these were different tears. They came not from the hot fountain of rage, but from a deeper well. He wept for Peleus, his father, whom he would never see again. He wept for Patroclus, whose body lay cold in its golden urn while his spirit wandered at the gates of Hades, waiting. And he wept for Priam, kneeling at his feet, an old man who had crossed a battlefield in the dark to kiss the hands of his son's killer.

The two of them wept together, and the sound of it filled the tent. Automedon (aw-TOM- eh-don) and Alcimus (AL-si-mus) looked at each other and said nothing. There are moments when even the closest companions must simply stand aside and let grief have its way.

MYTHOLOGY NOTE

The weeping of Achilles is the emotional and moral climax not only of the Iliad, but of all Western literature that follows it. This is the moment when the greatest warrior in the world, a man who has been defined entirely by his capacity for destruction, discovers his capacity for compassion. Homer structures the scene with extraordinary care. Achilles does not weep for Hector, his enemy. He weeps first for Peleus, then for Patroclus, then for Priam. The circle widens with each wave of grief: from his own father, to his lost friend, to the grieving father before him. By the time the weeping subsides, Achilles has moved from self to other, from rage to pity, from isolation to shared humanity. It is one of the most carefully constructed scenes of emotional transformation ever written.

When the tears finally subsided, Achilles took Priam's hand and lifted him gently. He guided the old man to a seat and stepped back, wiping his face with the back of his arm. For a moment, he stood there, collecting himself, and when he spoke, his voice was steady but changed. The hard edge was gone. In its place was the sound of a man who had been through something and come out the other side.

"You must be hungry," Achilles said.

It was an absurd thing to say. Priam had just kissed the hands that killed Hector. They had wept together until the tent rang with it. And now: you must be hungry. But that is how grief works. It does not resolve neatly. It simply makes room for the ordinary facts of living. The body needs bread. The throat needs wine. Even Niobe, Achilles would later say, even Niobe remembered to eat.

Priam shook his head. "Bid me not be seated while Hector is still lying uncared for in your tents. Accept the ransom I have brought, and give him to me at once, that I may look upon him."

Achilles held up a hand. "Do not vex me, sir. I am already minded to give up the body. My mother came to me from Zeus with that command. I know, too, that some god brought you here - no mortal man could have passed our guards unseen. So let us wait until dawn. For now, let us eat."

He went to the door of the tent and called his servants. They came running, wide-eyed at the sight of the Trojan king seated in their master's house, but they knew better than to question. Achilles gave orders: wash the body, anoint it, wrap it in clean robes. But do it out of sight, where Priam could not see. He knew, with the practical wisdom of a man who had spent too much time with grief, that the sight of Hector's wounds would break the old man's composure and set them both weeping again.

The servants took Hector's body away. Achilles stood at the door of the tent and watched them go. Then he turned back inside and did something he had not done in twelve days: he prepared a meal as a host prepares a meal, with care and attention, as if the world were normal.

He killed a sheep himself, one of the silvery-white ones his men kept. He watched them skin it and cut the meat, watched them spit the pieces and roast them over the fire. Automedon brought bread in baskets. Alcimus poured wine. And when it was ready, Achilles set the food before Priam with his own hands.

This was *xenia* (guest-friendship), the oldest and most sacred bond in the Greek world. Once you broke bread with a man, he was under your protection. The same Zeus who hurled thunderbolts was also Zeus *Xenios*, the protector of guests. To harm a man who had eaten at your table was to insult the god himself.

And so, in the strangest dining room in all of literature, two enemies shared a meal. Achilles, who had dragged Hector's body through the dust that very morning. Priam, whose city Achilles had sworn to burn. They ate in silence at first, then in quiet conversation, and with each bite, the distance between them shrank. Not to friendship - that would be too much, too fast, an insult to the dead. But to something rarer. To recognition.

They spoke of Niobe, whom Achilles mentioned as they ate. "Even lovely Niobe had to think about eating, though her twelve children were all slain in her house. Apollo killed the sons with arrows, and Artemis slew the daughters, because Niobe had vaunted herself against their mother Leto. Nine days they lay weltering, and there was none to bury them. But on the tenth day, the gods buried them, and Niobe took food, being worn out with weeping. They say she still lives among the rocks of Mount Sipylus, turned to stone, nursing her sorrows. So you and I, old

sir, will eat. You can weep for your dear son later, when you bear him back to Troy. And you will weep. Many a tear will he cost you."

After the meal, Priam asked for rest. He had not slept since Hector died. His eyes were bruised with exhaustion, his hands trembling.

Achilles ordered beds made up in the gatehouse, with good red rugs and woollen cloaks. "You will lie outside," he said, not unkindly, "lest one of the commanders come to advise with me and see you here in the darkness. Word might reach Agamemnon, and then there would be delay."

Priam nodded. He understood. In war, even mercy required discretion.

"Tell me truly," Achilles said, "for how many days will you celebrate the funeral rites? I will hold the army back for that long."

"Nine days we will mourn him in my house," Priam answered. "On the tenth we will bury him. On the eleventh we will build his mound. On the twelfth, if we must, we will fight again."

"It shall be as you say," Achilles said. "I will stay our fighting for all of those days."

He laid his hand on Priam's wrist, a gesture of promise, and the old man allowed himself to be led to his bed. Idaeus was already there, waiting, his own face slack with relief and weariness. Achilles returned to his inner room, where Briseis (BRYE-sis) lay waiting. He stretched out beside her, but he did not touch her. His mind was far away, wandering the borderlands between wakefulness and sleep, where Patroclus's ghost sometimes walked.

All through the camp, the Greeks slept. All through the city, the Trojans slept. The gods themselves slept, for once, leaving the world to mortals. All except Hermes (HER-meez).

The god hovered over Priam's sleeping form and spoke into his dream: "Sir, now that Achilles has spared your life, you seem to have no fear of sleeping among your foes. But think - if Agamemnon

and the others knew you were here, how much ransom do you think your sons would have to pay? Get up. It is time to go."

Priam woke with a start. He shook Idaeus awake, and together they crept out into the grey light of earliest dawn. Hermes was waiting. He had already yoked the horses and mules, already loaded Hector's body onto the wagon, already cleared a path through the sleeping camp. He helped Priam onto his chariot, took the reins himself, and drove them forward with that same supernatural speed that had brought them in.

No guard stirred. No sentry called out. The camp might as well have been enchanted, which, in a sense, it was. They passed the wall, crossed the trench, reached the ford of the river Scamander (skuh-MAN-der) as the first true light of dawn touched the eastern sky.

There Hermes paused. "I will leave you now, King Priam. I have brought you safely through the host of your enemies. The road to Troy is clear. Go, and bury your son."

He was gone in a streak of light, leaving Priam and Idaeus alone on the Trojan plain with the body of Hector on the wagon behind them. The old man took the reins himself. He did not look back. He drove towards the walls of Troy, and as the sun rose, the city came into view, and with it, the beginning of the end.

FOOTNOTES

Xenia (the sacred bond of guest-friendship): In Bronze Age Greek culture, xenia was far more than mere hospitality. It was a religious obligation protected by Zeus himself, who bore the title Xenios - protector of guests and strangers. When two men shared a meal, they entered into a sacred bond that transcended all other loyalties, even war. This is why Achilles must feed Priam before sending him away, and why the meal scene is not a digression but the moral completion of the supplication. By sharing bread and wine, Achilles and Priam become, in the eyes of the gods, host and guest - and therefore no longer merely enemies. Archaeological evidence from Mycenaean Greece suggests that elaborate guest-gifts and hospitality rituals were central to aristocratic life, and Homer treats these customs with the utmost seriousness.

The two urns of Zeus: Achilles's speech about the two urns on Zeus's floor: one filled with evil gifts, one with good. This reflects one of the oldest and most widespread ideas in Greek thought: that human suffering is distributed unevenly and arbitrarily by divine will. A similar concept appears in Near Eastern literature, including the Hebrew Bible's idea of the righteous sufferer. The image would profoundly influence later Greek tragedy, where the question of why the good suffer and the wicked prosper becomes a central obsession. When Achilles tells Priam that Peleus too received evil from the gods despite his blessings, he is not offering empty comfort. He is acknowledging that suffering binds them together across the gulf of enmity. Both men have lost what they loved most to the caprice of fate.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Achilles weeps first for Peleus, then for Patroclus, then for Priam. Why does Homer structure the scene in this order? What does each wave of grief represent in Achilles's emotional journey?

After the most emotionally intense scene in the poem, Achilles says, "You must be hungry," and prepares a meal. Why does Homer include this ordinary moment? What does it tell us about grief, and about what it means to return to human connection after rage has consumed everything?

Priam kisses the hands that killed Hector - an act of radical humility that transforms Achilles. Can hatred ever truly be overcome without one side making themselves vulnerable? Is Priam's act a surrender, or is it the bravest thing anyone does in the entire Iliad?

CHAPTER 26: THE RETURN OF HECTOR

The walls of Troy were gold with dawn when Cassandra (kah-SAN-drah) saw them coming.

She stood on the heights of Pergamus (PER-gah-mus), the citadel's highest tower, her hair unbound and wild in the early light. Cassandra was Priam's daughter, a prophetess cursed by Apollo (ah-POL-oh) - he had given her the gift of true vision, then twisted it so that no one would ever believe her. She had foreseen all of this: Hector's death, Achilles's rage, the city's fall. She had screamed warnings until her throat bled, and Troy had ignored her. Now she saw her father's chariot crossing the plain, and the body on the wagon behind it, and her cry split the morning like a spear.

"Come, Trojans!" she shrieked, her voice carrying across the rooftops. "Come look on Hector! If ever you rejoiced to see him coming alive from battle, look now on him who was the glory of our city and all our people!"

At the gates, the wagon stopped. Priam (PRYE-am) sat upright, exhausted but dignified, and spoke to the crowd that had already begun to gather. "Make way for the mules. Let us bring him home. Afterward, you shall have your fill of weeping."

They parted like water. The wagon rolled through the Scaean Gates (SEE-an), past the stone lions that had watched over Troy for centuries, and into the streets of the city. And there, at the first turning, Andromache (an-DROM-ah-kee) saw it. She had been walking towards the gates, drawn by some terrible instinct, and now she stood frozen as the wagon passed her. She did not scream. She did not faint. She simply walked to the wagon and laid her hands on Hector's head.

His body had been washed. Achilles's servants had done their work well. The wounds were cleaned, the dust washed away, the limbs arranged with care. Apollo's protection had kept him whole through twelve days of desecration, and now he looked almost as he had in life, except for the stillness. That stillness. Hector had never been still.

"Husband," Andromache said, and the word came out soft, almost tender, as if she were waking him from sleep. "You have died young, and left me a widow in your house. Our son is still a child, and I fear he will not reach manhood. Before he can grow, our city will fall, for you who watched over it are no more. You were its saviour, the guardian of our wives and children."

She reached down and touched his cheek. "You did not stretch forth your arms to embrace me as you lay dying. You did not speak words that I might have held in my heart forever." Her voice cracked, but she forced herself on. "The child - you and I are the unhappy parents of him, and he is still a mere infant. Now that you are gone, you can do nothing for him, nor he for you. Even if he

escapes the horrors of this war, his life will be labour and sorrow. Others will seize his lands. The day that robs a child of his parents severs him from his own kind. He will go about destitute, plucking one by the cloak and another by the shirt. Some child whose parents are alive will drive him from the table with blows and angry words. 'Out with you,' he will say. 'You have no father here.' And the boy will go crying back to his widowed mother: Astyanax (ah-STY-ah-naks), who used to sit upon his father's knees and have none but the choicest morsels set before him."

She wept, and the women around her wept with her. Andromache had lost her father, her brothers, her city, all before she married Hector. He was all she had left, and now she held his cold head in her hands and spoke to him as if he could still hear.

MYTHOLOGY NOTE

The three laments for Hector are one of the most carefully structured sequences in the Iliad. Each woman speaks from a different relationship and mourns a different Hector. Andromache laments the husband and father, focusing on what his death means for her son's future. Her grief is practical, prophetic, rooted in the real consequences of loss. Hecuba laments the son, focusing on what the gods owed him and how Achilles denied him dignity. Her grief is maternal, fierce, protective even in defeat. Helen laments the friend, the one decent man in a family that has treated her with contempt. Her grief is personal, quiet, almost ashamed. Together, the three laments form a complete portrait of Hector's character and the full scope of what Troy has lost. This technique, called ring composition by scholars, shows Hector from three angles, giving the reader a fuller picture than any single speech could provide.

Hecuba (heh-KYOO-bah) pushed through the crowd. The old queen moved like a woman made of broken stone, her face grey, her eyes sunken. She had buried children before. She had watched Priam father fifty sons and seen most of them fall. But Hector was different. Hector was the one who had made it all bearable.

"Hector," she said, her voice trembling but clear, "dearest to me of all my children. So long as you were alive, the gods loved you well. Even in death they have not forgotten you. When Achilles took my other sons, he would sell them beyond the seas: to Samos, or Imbrus (IM-brus), or rugged Lemnos (LEM-nos). But you he dragged round his comrade's tomb, again and again, as if that could bring the dead back to life. Yet here you lie, fresh as dew, as if Apollo himself had struck you down with his painless shafts."

She looked up at Priam, who sat motionless on the wagon. "Bring him inside," she said. "Bring my son home."

They bore the body into the palace and laid it on a bed. Minstrels came and sat around it, striking the chords of the dirge, and the women joined in the sad music. And then a third woman stepped forward, and her presence changed the tone of the grief entirely.

Helen (HEL-en) stood at the foot of the bed, and she did not weep as the others had wept. She was the most beautiful woman in the world, the face that had launched a thousand ships, and she had watched this war unfold from behind Troy's walls for ten years. She was also, in many ways, the loneliest person in the city.

"Hector," she said, "dearest of all my brothers-in-law. I am wife to Paris, who brought me here, and I wish every day that I had died before he did so. Twenty years have come and gone since I left my home and came from over the sea. In all that time, I never heard one word of insult from you. Not one unkindness. When your brothers or sisters chided me, when your brothers' wives spoke cruelly, when even my mother-in-law turned her face away. You would rebuke them with words of gentleness. You were the only one in this whole city who was kind to me."

Her tears fell on Hector's covered feet. "And now there is no one else in Troy who is kind to me. All shrink and shudder as they pass me in the street. My tears flow both for you and for my unhappy self. What will become of me when this city falls?"

It was perhaps the quietest of the three laments, but in its own way, the most devastating. Helen mourned not a husband, not a son, but a friend: the one person in Troy who had seen her as a human being rather than a prize, a curse, or a symbol. With Hector gone, she had no one.

Speaker	Relationship to Hector	What She Mourns
Andromache	Wife and mother of his child	The protector; the father of

Astyanax; the guardian of Troy's future. She fears for her son's orphaning and the city's fall.

Hecuba	Mother	The son; the one the gods loved;
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the last and best of her fifty children. She grieves the desecration of his body and the cruelty of his killer.

Helen	Sister-in-law and friend	The only kind man in Troy; her one
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protector in a hostile city. She grieves the loss of human decency, and her own isolation.

After the laments, Priam addressed the people. "Bring wood to the city," he commanded. "Do not fear ambush. Achilles gave me his word: no Greek will attack us until the twelfth day."

The Trojans went out in parties, yoking oxen and mules, hauling timber down from the slopes of Mount Ida (EYE-dah) and gathering it in great heaps before the gates. For nine days, the sound of axes and the creak of wagons filled the air. For nine days, Hector lay in state in Priam's palace while Troy mourned him as they had mourned no one else, not even the brothers and sons who had fallen before him. Nine days of dirges. Nine days of women singing the old songs of grief. Nine

days of silence from the Greek camp across the plain.

On the morning of the tenth day, they bore Hector out. The Trojans assembled in their thousands, and the body was laid upon the summit of the pyre. Priam himself struck the first spark, though his hands shook so badly that his sons had to help him. The flames caught, rising gold and red into the autumn sky, and the city of Troy watched its greatest son burn.

All day the pyre burned, consuming the wood and the body it held. The Trojans stood around it in a great circle, not speaking, not weeping anymore - they had wept themselves dry, only watching. Priam stood at the front, Hecuba on one side, Andromache on the other, Helen a little apart from the rest. When the flames began to die, they poured wine over the embers to quench them, and the hissing steam rose like a final breath.

On the eleventh day, when the pyre had cooled, Hector's brothers and closest comrades gathered the white bones. They handled them gently, separating them from the ashes, wrapping them in soft robes of purple cloth. These they placed in a golden urn, Priam's own, a treasure from the royal store. The urn they laid in a grave lined with stone. They covered it with large rocks set close together, building a barrow in haste, always looking towards the Greek camp, always expecting the attack that Achilles had promised to hold back.

But the Greeks did not come.

When the barrow was finished, the Trojans returned to the city and held a great feast in Priam's house. It was not a celebration. No one sang or danced - but it was the necessary completion of the rite. The dead had been honoured. The body had been returned to the earth. Hector, who had protected Troy through ten years of war, was laid to rest in the soil of the city he had loved.

FOOTNOTES

Cassandra and the tragedy of prophetic knowledge: Cassandra's brief appearance at Hector's return is one of the most poignant moments in the Iliad. Cursed by Apollo to speak true prophecies that no one would believe, she embodies the agony of seeing clearly in a world that prefers blindness. Her mad cries from the walls, which will continue throughout the fall of Troy, becoming the template for the tragic prophetess in Western literature. Aeschylus would later make her the centerpiece of Agamemnon, and her character has resonated through two and a half millennia as a symbol of truth-tellers

ignored by those in power. In this scene, Homer gives her only a few lines, but they are enough to remind us that Troy's destruction was not only foreseen but foretold, and that the city's tragedy was, in part, a tragedy of deafness.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

The three women each mourn a different Hector: husband, son, friend. Which of the three laments speaks to you most powerfully, and why? What does each lament reveal about the speaker as much as about Hector?

Helen says Hector was the only person in Troy who was kind to her. After ten years and a war caused by her presence, why might Hector have treated her with decency when his own family did not? What does this tell us about his character?

The Greeks do not attack during the funeral. Achilles keeps his word. Is this the final proof that he has truly changed. That the man who dragged a corpse through the dust has become someone capable of honouring his enemy? What does keeping one's word to an enemy say about a person's character?

CHAPTER 27: THE TAMING OF ACHILLES

Sing, goddess, of the anger of Achilles. That is how we began.

Not with Helen's beauty, though it launched a thousand ships. Not with the wooden horse, though it would bring the city down. Not even with the war itself, though ten years of blood and fire stretched behind and before. Homer chose to begin with anger: *menis* in Greek, a word that means something far more terrible than ordinary rage. It is divine wrath. Cosmic fury. The kind of anger that shakes the foundations of the world.

And now, twenty-seven chapters later, that anger has been transformed into something so different that the word itself barely recognises it.

Think of where we found Achilles (ah-KILL-eez) at the beginning. A young man in his prime, the greatest warrior of his age, dishonoured by a king who took what was rightfully his. His response was to withdraw, to sulk, to let the world burn until the world recognised his worth. He asked his mother to make the Greeks suffer, and she did. He watched from the beach as his comrades fell, and he felt justified. His anger was clean, righteous, focused on a single point: Agamemnon had wronged him, and Agamemnon must pay.

That anger would have burned itself out eventually. Most anger does. What happened instead was far worse, and far more important. Patroclus died.

But the path from the first anger to the final grief was longer and more winding than a simple summary suggests. Between Achilles's withdrawal and his return, the Iliad gives us the full texture of human experience in wartime. We have seen Briseis (BRYE-sis), whose few words spoken over Patroclus's body reminded us that captive women have their own stories of loss. We have seen the Embassy, when three of Greece's greatest men offered Achilles everything he had demanded and he refused them still, his pride hardened into something that no gift could soften. We have seen Hector with his family, knowing he would die and choosing to fight anyway, not for glory but for love. Homer did not rush to the moral climax. He earned it, scene by scene, grief by grief, until the weight of all that suffering made the final moment of mercy feel not like a plot twist, but like a necessity.

The death of Patroclus did not simply deepen Achilles's rage. It changed its quality entirely. The clean, focused anger at Agamemnon became something wild and indiscriminate: a rage against the whole world, against Troy, against the river itself, against the very fact of death. Achilles became death's apprentice, slaughtering until the Scamander (skuh-MAN-der) ran red, dragging a

corpse through the dust, sacrificing prisoners on a funeral pyre. He had chosen long life without glory over short life with honour, and now, with Patroclus gone, he had nothing left to lose. He would be glorious, yes, but at the cost of everything that made glory worth having.

And then - Priam.

An old man, kneeling. Kissing the hands that killed his son. Speaking of Peleus, Achilles's own father, growing old across the sea. In that moment, Achilles did not stop being angry. He did not forget Patroclus. He did not forgive Hector, exactly. Forgiveness is too simple a word for what passes between them. What happened was something rarer and more human. Achilles recognised himself in his enemy's father. He saw that Priam's grief was his grief, that the old man's love for Hector was the same love he bore for Patroclus, that suffering does not respect the boundaries we draw between friend and foe.

He wept. And in weeping, he became whole again.

This is what the Iliad is about. Not the Trojan War. The war is merely the setting, the vast stage on which human beings play out their small, tremendous dramas. The poem is about wrath, yes, but it is about what wrath costs, and what can replace it. It is about honour, but it asks us whether honour without compassion is anything more than vanity. It is about mortality. Every character in the poem lives under the shadow of death, from the lowliest spearman to Hector (HEK-tor), from Andromache to Achilles himself, and it asks what we ought to do with the brief, precious time we are given.

Consider Achilles's choice again. Thetis offered him two fates: a long, obscure life, or a short, brilliant one. He chose brilliance. And for most of the poem, that choice looks like a trap: the

choice of a young man who does not yet understand that glory is empty without love. But by the end, something has changed. Achilles has not renounced his choice. He still knows he will die at Troy, that his doom follows hard on Hector's. What he has discovered is that glory and compassion are not opposites. The greatest thing a human being can do is not to kill brilliantly, but to feel deeply, and to let that feeling move them towards mercy.

When Achilles returns Hector's body, he is not being a good sport. He is not doing the decent thing. He is acting from a recognition so profound that it redefines everything he has been. The man who began the poem by withdrawing from humanity because his pride was wounded ends it by embracing his enemy's father because their shared grief is more important than their shared war.

MYTHOLOGY NOTE

Why Does the Iliad End Here?

The Iliad covers roughly fifty-one days out of a ten-year war, and it ends not with the fall of Troy, not with Achilles's death, but with the funeral of Hector. Why?

Homer is telling a story about wrath and its transformation. The poem's first word is *menis*, wrath, and everything that follows is the working-out of that wrath through rage, grief, and finally mercy.

Once Achilles returns Hector's body, the arc is complete. The anger that began the poem has been tamed. To continue would be to tell a different story: the story of Achilles's death and the fall of Troy, which belongs to other poems in the Epic Cycle.

There is a deeper reason too. Ending with Hector's funeral gives the poem a moral symmetry. The greatest Greek warrior and the greatest Trojan warrior are bound together not by mutual admiration but by shared suffering. Hector dies because Achilles loved Patroclus. Achilles weeps because Priam loved Hector. The chain of grief and compassion links them across the gulf of enmity, and the poem chooses to honour that connection rather than pursue the war to its violent conclusion. In choosing to end here, Homer tells us that human connection matters more than conquest, and that the transformation of a single soul is worth more than the fall of a city.

What, then, does it mean to be a hero? The Bronze Age answer was simple: a hero is the strongest, the fastest, the bravest. A hero kills his enemies and wins treasure and makes his name immortal in song. Achilles was raised on this code. He believed it with his whole heart, which is why Agamemnon's insult wounded him so deeply. It threatened not just his status but his very identity.

But the Iliad quietly dismantles this code and rebuilds it. By the end, we have seen that Hector: steady, loving, duty-bound Hector, is as much a hero as Achilles, perhaps more so, because he fights not for glory but for love of his city and his family. We have seen that Odysseus's cunning, Diomedes (dye-oh-MEE-deez)'s courage, Ajax (AY-jaks)'s strength, all

are forms of heroism, but none is complete without the quality Achilles discovers in his tent that night: the courage to be vulnerable, to weep, to recognise the enemy's humanity as equal to one's own.

The ancient Greeks had a word for this: *sophrosyne*, often translated as moderation or self-control, but meaning something closer to wisdom of the heart. It is the quality of knowing oneself, of understanding one's place in the larger human story, of recognising that the sufferings of others are as real and as important as one's own. Achilles does not arrive at this wisdom easily. He arrives at it through the most painful experience a human being can endure: the death of the person he loved most, and even then, it takes an old man's kiss on his murderer's hands to break through the wall he has built around his heart.

But he does arrive. And that arrival is the point.

The story ends where it began, and yet everything is different. Achilles still sits by the sea, still waits for his own death, still knows that the war will grind on without Hector to protect Troy. But the rage that consumed him, the *menis* that drove the first line of the poem, has been answered by something stronger. Not love, exactly. Not peace. Something harder-won and more durable: understanding.

He understands now what it costs to be human. He understands that every death on the battlefield represents a father weeping, a wife widowed, a child orphaned. He understands that honour without compassion is barbarism, that glory without love is hollow, and that the only answer to the terrible unfairness of mortality is to treat each other with mercy while we still can.

The Iliad does not promise that this understanding will save Troy, or save Achilles, or save any of us. The city will still fall. Achilles will still die young. The unfairness of the world will continue unabated. But for a moment, one luminous moment in an old king's tent, over bread and wine, while enemies wept together, rage became grief, and grief became compassion, and a man who had lost everything found something worth keeping.

The rage is over. Achilles is whole again. And the story - his story - is complete.

FOOTNOTES

The Iliad and the Epic Cycle: The Iliad is only one poem about the Trojan War, though it is by far the greatest. In antiquity, it was part of a larger collection called the Epic Cycle, which included the Cypria (the war's origins), the Aethiopis (Achilles's death and the arrival of the Amazons), the Little Iliad (the wooden horse), and the Sack of Troy (the city's fall). These other poems survive only in fragments and summaries, but they tell us that ancient audiences knew the full story: Achilles would die at the Scaean Gates, struck by Paris's arrow guided by Apollo. Troy would fall to the wooden horse. Andromache would become Neoptolemus's slave. The Greeks would scatter across the seas on their journeys home. Homer knew all of this too. He chose to end where he ended because the story he

wanted to tell was not about the destruction of Troy. It was about the transformation of a single human heart, and that story was finished the moment Achilles lifted Priam's hand and said, "Let us eat."

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

The Iliad opens with wrath and closes with compassion. Has Achilles truly changed, or has he simply exhausted his capacity for rage? What evidence from the text supports your view?

The poem ends not with the fall of Troy or Achilles's death, but with Hector's funeral. Do you agree with Homer's choice? Why might the funeral of an enemy soldier be a more fitting ending than the triumph of the Greek army?

Achilles discovers that compassion, not strength, is the highest form of heroism. Is this a message that still resonates today? Can you think of a moment in your own life, or in recent history, when showing compassion required more courage than using force?

CHAPTER 28: THE TROJAN WAR IN CONTEXT

The Iliad is vast, but it is also narrow. In twenty-four books of poetry, Homer covers roughly fifty-one days out of a ten-year war. He does not tell us how the war began. He does not tell us how it ended. He gives us the quarrel of two proud men, the death of one noble warrior, and the grief that follows. In doing so, he gives us everything that matters.

But you deserve to know the rest of the story.

Because the Greeks who first listened to this poem around a winter fire already knew it. They knew what came before and what came after, and that knowledge shaped how they heard every

line. When Homer describes Achilles (ah-KILL-eez) weeping with Priam, his audience knew that Achilles himself would soon be dead, that his divine armour would spark a bitter feud between Odysseus and Ajax, and that the greatest warrior of the age would leave behind nothing but a name and a handful of songs. When Andromache speaks of her fears for Astyanax (ah-STY-ah-naks), the listeners already knew her son would not survive the fall of Troy. Homer counted on that knowledge. It is what makes his silences so powerful.

So let us step back and see the whole canvas: the events that led to the war, the years the Iliad skips over, and the catastrophe that followed after Homer fell silent.

It began with a wedding, as so many disasters do.

Peleus (PEL-ee-us), a mortal king, married Thetis (THET-is), an immortal sea-goddess. All the gods were invited. All except one. Eris (AIR-is), the goddess of discord, took her

revenge by rolling a golden apple into the banquet hall. Inscribed upon it were the words: For the fairest.

Three goddesses claimed it: Hera (HEER-ah), queen of Olympus; Athena (ah-THEE-nah), goddess of wisdom; and Aphrodite (af-roh-DY-tee), goddess of love. They asked Zeus to judge between them, but Zeus was nobody's fool. He knew that choosing any one of them would earn him two enemies for life. Instead, he directed them to a young Trojan prince named Paris (PA-ris), also called Alexandros (ah-leks-AN-dros), who was tending sheep on the slopes of Mount Ida. Paris was handsome but not wise, and the goddesses knew it. Each offered him a bribe.

Hera offered him power: the rule of all Asia. Athena offered him wisdom, the mind of a great strategist. Aphrodite offered him the most beautiful woman in the world.

Paris chose the woman. That was the judgment of Paris, and it would cost Troy everything.

The most beautiful woman in the world was Helen (HEL-en), daughter of Zeus and a mortal woman named Leda. She was married to Menelaus (men-eh-LAY-us), king of Sparta, and theirs was not some political arrangement. He genuinely loved her, and she had made her peace with a life of comfort and respect.

But Aphrodite kept her promise. When Paris visited Sparta as a guest, Helen looked at this handsome young prince from the east, and something in her stirred. Perhaps it was love. Perhaps it was boredom. Perhaps it was the goddess working through her, as gods so often did. However it happened, Helen sailed away with Paris, taking with her a fortune in treasure and leaving behind a husband who would burn the world to get her back.

Menelaus was not merely a wronged husband. He was a king with powerful allies, and those allies were bound by the most sacred oath in Greek mythology.

Years earlier, when Helen had been a girl of marriageable age, every prince in Greece had wanted her. Her mortal father, Tyndareus (tin-DAY-rus), had faced a problem: how do you choose one suitor without making enemies of the other forty? The solution was brilliant and terrible. He made them all swear a solemn oath, the oath of Tyndareus, binding them to defend the chosen husband's rights should anyone ever try to steal Helen away. Every man who had competed for

her hand was now honour-bound to help Menelaus reclaim her.

This is why the Trojan War was not a simple family feud. It was a coalition of the entire Greek world, the greatest army ever assembled in the ancient world.

Gathering that army took time. Menelaus and his brother Agamemnon (ag-ah-MEM-non) sent messengers to every corner of Greece. Some heroes came eagerly. Others had to be

tricked or coaxed. Odysseus (oh-DIS-ee-us), king of Ithaca, tried to pretend he was mad, ploughing a field with an ox and an ass yoked together, sowing salt instead of seed. But the wily recruiter Palamedes placed Odysseus's infant son in the plough's path, and Odysseus swerved to avoid him, proving his sanity. He went to Troy against his better judgment, and he would not return home for twenty years.

Achilles was even harder to find. His mother Thetis knew he was fated to die young at Troy, so she disguised him as a girl and hid him among the daughters of King Lycomedes, on the island of Scyros. Odysseus found him by laying out gifts among the women: jeweller and fine cloth mixed with a shield and spear. When a trumpet sounded its war-call, Achilles reached for the weapons without thinking. His disguise fell away. He could not hide what he was, any more than a wolf can hide among sheep.

A thousand ships. That was the number the poets gave, and whether it was exact or merely poetic, it captured the imagination of the ancient world. From Mycenae and Pylos, from Ithaca and Salamis, from Crete and Rhodes and the scattered islands of the Aegean, the warriors came. They left behind farms, wives, children, and ageing parents. Some would never see Greek soil again. Most did not know why they were really going, or what it would cost them. They knew only that honour demanded it, and in the Bronze Age, honour was everything.

The war lasted ten years.

The Iliad concentrates on a few weeks near the end, but those final days were built on nearly a decade of grinding stalemate. The Greeks raided nearby towns for supplies and plunder. Troops sickened and died. Heroes grew old in their armour. The Trojans, safe behind their massive walls, endured siege after siege, sortie after sortie. Both sides buried their dead and waited for something to break.

During those ten years, deeds were done that never made it into Homer's poem. Achilles led raids that ravaged the Trojan countryside. He captured Briseis at Lynessus and Chryseis at Thebe. He fought the Amazon queen Penthesilea when she came to aid the Trojans, and the legend says he wept when he killed her, seeing her beauty in the moment of death. He killed the Ethiopian prince Memnon, who fought with divine armour forged by Hephaestus. Paris was wounded and healed. Helen repented and stayed. Hector grew from a promising prince into the city's indispensable defender.

The Greeks offered to end the war if the Trojans would return Helen and her treasure. The Trojans, dominated by Paris's faction, refused. Helen's own position grew more complicated with every passing year. She was not a prisoner. She was a queen in Troy, treated with respect by Priam and Hecuba, and she had grown fond of her Trojan family. But she also knew that the war was her

fault, and that knowledge poisoned every meal and every night's sleep.

The Iliad ends with Hector's funeral, but the war continued for several more weeks or months. What happened next was told in poems now lost to us: the Aethiopis, the Little Iliad, and the Sack of Ilium, fragments and summaries that scholars have painstakingly reconstructed.

Achilles did not survive the war. Paris, still a capable archer despite his many flaws, shot him in his one vulnerable spot, the heel, where Thetis had held him when she dipped him in the River Styx as an infant, trying to make him immortal. Some versions say Apollo guided the arrow. Some say Paris could never have made the shot alone. However it happened, the greatest warrior of the age fell, and the Greeks mourned him with an intensity that suggests they knew they had lost more than a soldier. They had lost the best part of themselves.

His divine armour was awarded to Odysseus, not to Ajax (AY-jaks) the Great, who had been Achilles's closest rival in bravery. Ajax went mad with grief and rage, slaughtered a flock of sheep in a hallucinatory frenzy, and fell on his own sword. The man who had been the Greeks' strongest defender died alone in a field of blood and wool, killed not by an enemy but by the cruelty of a contest he should have won.

Odysseus, meanwhile, had been thinking.

Troy's walls were impregnable. The Greeks could not breach them, and the Trojans would not come out and fight fairly. After ten years, the army was homesick, exhausted, and running out of options. So Odysseus proposed a trick. He had the Greeks build a giant wooden horse, hollow inside, large enough to hide a squad of warriors within its belly. The Greeks then burned their camp and sailed away, or seemed to. They hid their fleet behind a nearby island.

One man, Sinon (SY-non), stayed behind. He pretended to be a deserter and told the Trojans that the horse was an offering to Athena, meant to ensure the Greeks' safe voyage home. He advised them to bring it inside the city to gain the goddess's favour. One Trojan priest, Laocoön, saw through the ruse. "I fear Greeks even when they bring gifts," he cried, and hurled a spear at the horse's flank. But Athena, or Poseidon depending on the version, sent sea serpents to strangle Laocoön and his sons. The Trojans took this as a sign that the priest had offended the gods. They dragged the horse through their gates and celebrated. They believed themselves delivered.

That night, while Troy slept, Sinon released the warriors from the horse's belly. They opened the city gates. The Greek army, which had sailed back under cover of darkness, poured into the city.

The fall of Troy was not a battle. It was a massacre.

What followed was the night of fire and slaughter that every Trojan had feared for ten years. Priam was killed at his own altar by Neoptolemus, Achilles's son, in an act of shocking sacrilege. Hecuba was enslaved. Andromache became Neoptolemus's prize, her son Astyanax thrown from the walls to ensure that no male heir of Hector survived. The men were killed. The women

were divided among the victors as slaves. The city burned until its famous walls were nothing but blackened stubs above a plain of ash.

Helen survived. Menelaus, it is said, raised his sword to kill her and could not bring himself to strike. Her beauty, or his memory of who she had been, or simply the exhaustion of ten years of war. Something stayed his hand. They reconciled, after a fashion, and made their way back to Sparta together. Whether Helen was a victim of divine manipulation or a willing agent of destruction, whether Menelaus was a fool or a man who understood that love and blame cannot always be separated. These are questions the Greeks debated for centuries, and they debate them still.

The returns were perhaps the hardest part.

Not all the Greeks made it home. Agamemnon sailed back to Mycenae with Cassandra, the Trojan princess he had taken as a slave, only to be murdered in his bathtub by his wife Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus. The war that had begun with the theft of one man's wife ended, for the Greek commander, with the vengeance of his own. His son Orestes would later kill his mother to avenge the murder, setting off one of the most famous blood-feuds in all of literature.

Menelaus and Helen wandered for years before reaching Sparta. Their voyage took them to Egypt and Cyprus, through storms sent by an angry Poseidon, through divine interventions and mortal mistakes. By the time they returned, the world they had known was gone.

Odysseus fared worst of all. His journey home to Ithaca lasted another ten years: encounters with Cyclopes and sorceresses, shipwrecks and divine curses, tests of wit and endurance that became the subject of Homer's second great poem, the *Odyssey*. He returned to find his house overrun by suitors demanding his wife Penelope's hand, his son grown to manhood without a father. He slew the suitors, reclaimed his kingdom, and lived (if living is the word) into a weary old age.

The Trojan War, from first gathering to last return, consumed roughly thirty years of Greek life. An entire generation grew up, fought, and died on the plains of Troy, and those who survived often wished they had not. The gold they won turned to ash in their hands. The glory they sought proved hollow. The city they destroyed became, in memory, something almost sacred, a warning of what happens when pride, desire, and the will of gods collide with human lives.

MYTHOLOGY NOTE

The Epic Cycle

The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are the only two complete epic poems about the Trojan War that survive from antiquity. But in the archaic period, they were part of a larger collection called the Epic Cycle - a series of narrative poems that covered the entire war from

beginning to end. The *Cypria* told of the war's origins and the gathering of the fleet. The *Aethiopis* described Penthesilea's arrival, Memnon's battle, and Achilles's death. The *Little Iliad* covered the contest for Achilles's armour, Ajax's madness, and the building of the wooden horse. The *Sack of Ilium* narrated the fall of Troy itself. The *Nostoi* told of the heroes' returns. Only fragments survive - quotations and summaries preserved by later writers. But these lost poems shaped Greek culture profoundly. The tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides drew heavily on them. Roman poets like Virgil retold their stories. The fact that only Homer's two poems survive is partly a quirk

of literary history, partly a testament to their overwhelming quality: later generations simply preferred them.

Year	Event	Source Epic
~5 years before the war	The Judgment of Paris	Cypria
~2 years before the war	Paris abducts Helen from Sparta	Cypria
Year 1	Greek fleet gathers at Aulis;	Cypria

sacrifice of Iphigenia; departure for

Troy

Year 1	Achilles raids Mysia (mistaken for	Cypria
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Troy); Telephus wounded and

healed

Year 2	Fleet re-gathers; Philoctetes	Cypria
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abandoned on Lemnos

Years 2 - 9	Siege of Troy; raids on Trojan allies;	Iliad references
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deaths of Greek and Trojan heroes

Year 10, Weeks 1 - 49	The events of the Iliad: quarrel,	Iliad
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battle, Patroclus's death, Hector's

death, return of body

Year 10, after the Iliad	Penthesilea and Memnon killed;	Aethiopis
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Achilles dies at the Scaean Gates

Year 10, after Achilles's death	Contest for the armour; Ajax's	Little Iliad
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madness and suicide

Year 10, final days	The wooden horse; the fall of Troy;	Little Iliad, Sack of Ilium
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night of fire and slaughter

Immediately after	Division of spoils; sacrifice of	Sack of Ilium
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Polyxena at Achilles's grave

Years 10 - 20	The returns: Agamemnon	Nostoi, Odyssey
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murdered; Menelaus wanders;

Odysseus lost at sea

FOOTNOTES

The sacrifice of Iphigenia: Before the fleet could sail, the Greeks were becalmed at Aulis by the wrath of Artemis. Calchas prophesied that only the sacrifice of Agamemnon's daughter Iphigenia would appease the goddess. Agamemnon consented, and the winds blew again. This act of filial murder would haunt him forever, giving Clytemnestra her justification for the murder that awaited him at Mycenae. The story became one of the most powerful in Greek tragedy, a chilling reminder that the Trojan War began with the blood of an innocent girl.

Philoctetes: The greatest archer in the Greek army was abandoned on the island of Lemnos after a snake bite left him with a festering, foul-smelling wound. He spent ten years alone in a cave, nourished by birds he shot with his divine bow. According to the Little Iliad, Troy could not fall without Philoctetes and his bow - a prophecy that forced the Greeks to return and retrieve him. His story of abandonment and reluctant return is one of the most moving in the cycle, and Sophocles made it the subject of one of his greatest plays.

The oath of Tyndareus: This oath was a brilliant political solution to a dangerous problem, but it also had devastating consequences. Every man who swore it was bound by the most sacred obligation in Greek culture - an oath witnessed by the gods. To break it meant exile and divine punishment. To keep it meant leaving home and family for a war fought over another man's marriage. The oath trapped an entire generation, and its coercive power raises uncomfortable questions about honour, obligation, and the way societies push individuals towards destruction in the name of shared values.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

The Trojan War lasted ten years, yet the Iliad focuses on just a few weeks near the end. Why do you think Homer chose this narrow window? What does concentrating on a small slice of the war allow him to explore that a broader narrative might miss?

Many heroes in the Epic Cycle - Ajax, Agamemnon, Achilles - die not in glorious battle but through betrayal, madness, or ambush. What does this pattern suggest about the Greeks' attitude towards war and its supposed glory?

The oath of Tyndareus bound dozens of men to defend Helen's marriage, leading to a decade of war. When does a promise become a trap? Are there promises or obligations in your own life that have caused more harm than good?

CHAPTER 29: AFTERWORD

We come to the end. Twenty-nine chapters, roughly sixty thousand words, and a poem nearly three thousand years old. I hope you have found in these pages what I have always found in Homer: not a dusty classic to be admired from a distance, but a living, breathing story that speaks to us across the millennia with an urgency that feels almost uncomfortable.

Because the Iliad should not still work this well. It was composed in a language nobody speaks, in a culture that practiced slavery and human sacrifice. Poets believed the gods intervened personally in human affairs. Its values are not our values. Its world is not our world. And yet, and yet, when Achilles weeps with Priam, when Andromache begs Hector to stay, when Patroclus goes into battle knowing he will not return, something inside us recognises these people. They are us. They have always been us.

That is the mystery of great art: it transcends every barrier of time and culture and lands in the human heart with the force of recognition.

The Iliad matters today for reasons Homer could never have imagined and surely never intended. We live in an age that has seen more war than any other, measured by the number of conflicts if not always by their scale. We have weapons that could reduce Troy to radioactive glass in half an hour. We have built institutions to prevent war and failed, again and again, to use them wisely. And in the middle of all this, Homer's ancient poem asks a question that has only grown more pressing: What does it actually mean to be a hero?

The Bronze Age answer was simple enough. A hero was strong. A hero was brave. A hero won glory in battle and made his name immortal in song. Achilles believed this with his whole heart, and for most of the poem, so do we. He is magnificent in battle. He is terrifying. He is everything a warrior society admires.

But Homer is too honest a storyteller to leave it there. He shows us what that kind of heroism costs, not abstractly, in the faces of the people left behind. He shows us Briseis mourning Patroclus, a man who had shown her kindness in a world that offered her none. He shows us Hector holding his son, knowing he will never watch the boy grow up. He shows us Priam, an old man reduced to begging for a corpse, and Achilles, the greatest killer of his age, weeping with him over bread and wine. The poem does not condemn warfare - it is too deeply embedded in a warrior culture for that - but it forces us to see it whole, to count the cost as well as the glory, and to wonder whether the cost is ever truly worth it.

If the Iliad has a message for our times, it is this: compassion is not weakness. Mercy is not surrender. The strongest thing a human being can do is not to kill an enemy but to recognise the enemy's humanity and act accordingly. Achilles does not learn this from a god or a philosopher. He learns it from grief, from the hardest experience a person can endure, and from an old man's courage in kissing the hands that killed his son. That this lesson should come from a Bronze Age war poem is one of the ironies that make literature worth reading.

You have probably encountered the Iliad before now, even if you did not realise it. Brad Pitt played Achilles in Wolfgang Petersen's 2004 film *Troy*, which took considerable liberties with the plot but captured something essential about the character's charisma and fatalism. The Coen Brothers' *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* is a loose retelling of the *Odyssey*. Madeline Miller's novel *The Song of Achilles*, which focuses on the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus, has introduced a new generation of readers to Homer's world. Video games like *Hades* and *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* draw heavily on Greek myth. The Marvel superhero tradition, with its flawed heroes and cosmic conflicts, owes more to Homer than most comic book writers would admit.

This is not accidental. The Iliad invented so many of the storytelling techniques we now take for granted - the in medias res opening, the flashback, the extended simile, the divine machinery that comments on human action, the hero whose greatest battle is with himself. Every epic story you have ever read or watched, from Star Wars to The Lord of the Rings to Game of Thrones, carries Homer's DNA. You cannot escape him. You would not want to.

If this retelling has made you curious about the original, I am delighted. Reading Homer in translation is one of the great experiences available to any reader, and the good news is that you have excellent options.

Robert Fagles's translation, published in 1990, is vigorous, contemporary, and thrilling to read aloud. His Achilles sounds like a real person, not a marble statue, and his verse captures the speed and muscular energy of Homer's Greek better than almost any competitor.

Caroline Alexander's 2015 translation is the first by a woman to be published in English, and it brings a fresh perspective to the poem's emotional dynamics. Her rendering of the battle scenes is crisp and clear, and her treatment of the poem's women - Briseis, Andromache, Helen - feels particularly nuanced.

Robert Fitzgerald's 1974 translation remains a classic for good reason: its language is elevated without being stiff, musical without being ornate. If you want to feel like you are reading something timeless, Fitzgerald delivers.

Emily Wilson, whose translation of the Odyssey made history as the first English version by a woman, is currently working on an Iliad. When it appears, it will almost certainly become the standard against which all others are measured. Wilson has a gift for making ancient Greek feel urgently contemporary without sacrificing its strangeness.

If you want to explore Greek mythology more broadly, I recommend Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*, first published in 1942 and still the best introduction available. Her prose is clear, her enthusiasm infectious, and her knowledge encyclopedic. Stephen Fry's *Mythos and Heroes* retell the myths with wit and warmth, making them accessible without dumbing them down. Natalie Haynes, particularly in *A Thousand Ships* and *The Children of Jocasta*, offers brilliant feminist retellings that centre the women Homer pushes to the margins.

Writing this retelling has been one of the great joys of my life as a storyteller. I have lived with these characters for months - their quarrels and triumphs, their griefs and transformations - and I find I do not want to leave them. That is the effect Homer has. He makes you care about people who lived and died in imagination three millennia ago as if they were your own friends and family.

I owe thanks to the long line of scholars, translators, and teachers who kept this poem alive across thirty centuries. Without them, there would be no text to retell. I owe thanks to the

archaeologists who excavated Troy and Mycenae and proved that these stories were grounded in real history - Heinrich Schliemann with all his flaws, and the generations of careful scientists who followed him. I owe thanks to every teacher who ever stood in front of a classroom of sceptical students and convinced them that a poem in ancient Greek about a long-forgotten war might

actually have something to say to them.

Most of all, I owe thanks to you, the reader. You have come with me from the plague-arrows of Apollo to the weeping of two enemies over a shared meal. You watched Achilles transform from a proud young man into something harder and stranger and finally - at the last - into someone capable of mercy. You have seen Hector fall, and Troy mourn, and a body returned to its father because grief proved stronger than rage.

The Iliad will outlast us all. It will be read when every nation represented in this book has changed beyond recognition, when new wars have come and gone, when the concerns that preoccupy us now seem as distant as the Bronze Age seems to us. It will survive because it tells the truth about what it means to be human: our capacity for destruction, our need for connection, and our stubborn, inexhaustible ability to find moments of grace in the middle of catastrophe.

Go now and read the original. Or don't. Simply carry these stories with you. When you face a choice between hardness and compassion, remember Priam kneeling. When you lose someone you love, remember Achilles by the sea. When you watch the news and wonder what heroism looks like in a world without bronze armour and chariots, remember Hector removing his helmet so his son would not be afraid.

The war at Troy ended long ago. The story never does.

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APPENDIX

CHAPTER 30: PRONUNCIATION GUIDE TO GREEK NAMES

Greek names can look intimidating on the page, but they are far less fearsome once you know how to say them. In this guide, stressed syllables appear in capital letters. Most Greek names place the accent on one of the later syllables, giving them a musical lift that English speakers sometimes find surprising. Where a character has both a Greek name and an epithet or alternative name, both are included.

Name	Pronunciation	Role in the Iliad
Achaeans	ah-KEE-ans	The collective name for the Greek

forces at Troy

Achilles	ah-KILL-eez	Greatest Greek warrior; son of
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Peleus and Thetis; protagonist

Adrestus	ah-DRES-tus	Trojan warrior killed by Patroclus
Aeneas	ee-NEE-as	Trojan prince; son of Aphrodite

and Anchises; second only to

Hector

Aethiopis	ee-thee-OH-pis	Lost epic about Achilles's death
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and the Amazons' arrival

Agamemnon	ag-ah-MEM-non	King of Mycenae; supreme
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commander of the Greek forces

Agelaus	ah-jeh-LAY-us	Trojan warrior
Agenor	ah-JEN-or	Trojan warrior; Apollo disguises

himself as Agenor to deceive

Achilles

Ajax the Great (Telaon)	AY-jaks	Strongest Greek warrior after
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Achilles; son of Telaon

Ajax the Lesser (Oileus)	AY-jaks	Swift Greek fighter; son of Oileus
Alcimedon	al-SIM-eh-don	Myrmidon warrior; charioteer
Alcmaon	al-KEE-mon	Greek warrior
Amphimachus	am-FIM-ah-kus	Greek warrior
Andromache	an-DROM-ah-kee	Wife of Hector; daughter of Eetion
Antenor	an-TEE-nor	Trojan elder; advises returning

Helen

Antilochus	an-TIL-oh-kus	Son of Nestor; dear friend of
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Achilles

Aphrodite	af-roh-DY-tee	Goddess of love; supports the
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Trojans

Apollo	ah-POL-oh	God of archery, music, plague, and
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prophecy; supports the Trojans

Arcesilaus	ar-ses-i-LAY-us	Greek warrior
Ares	AIR-eez	God of war; supports the Trojans
Argos	AR-gos	Major Greek city; home of

Diomedes

Artemis	AR-teh-mis	Goddess of the hunt; supports the
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Trojans

Asius	AS-ee-us	Trojan leader allied with Hector
Astyanax	ah-STY-ah-naks	Infant son of Hector and

Andromache

Athena	ah-THÉE-nah	Goddess of wisdom and war;
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supports the Greeks

Automedon	aw-TOM-eh-don	Achilles's charioteer
Balius	BAL-ee-us	One of Achilles's immortal horses
Boreas	BOR-ee-as	North wind; summoned to fan

Patroclus's funeral pyre

Briseis	bree-SAY-is	Captive woman taken from Achilles
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by Agamemnon

Calchas	KAL-kas	Greek prophet; reveals Apollo's
----------------	----------------	--

demand

Cassandra	kah-SAN-drah	Daughter of Priam; cursed with
------------------	---------------------	---------------------------------------

true prophecies no one believes

Cebriones	se-BRY-oh-nee-z	Hector's charioteer
Charis	KAR-is	Wife of Hephaestus
Chryseis	kry-SAY-is	Daughter of Chryses; captive of

Agamemnon

Chryses	KRY-sees	Priest of Apollo; begs for his
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daughter's return

Clonius	KLOH-nee-us	Greek warrior
Clytemnestra	kly-tem-NES-trah	Wife of Agamemnon; murders him

upon his return

Cypria	SIP-ree-ah	Lost epic about the origins of the
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Trojan War

Deiphobus	dee-IF-oh-bus	Trojan prince; brother of Hector
Diomedes	dye-oh-MEE-deez	King of Argos; fierce Greek warrior

favoured by Athena

Dione	dye-OH-nee	Mother of Aphrodite
Dolon	DOH-lon	Trojan spy sent into the Greek

camp

Echion	eh-KY-on	Greek warrior
Eris	AIR-is	Goddess of discord; starts the

Trojan War with a golden apple

Ethiopia	ee-THEE-oh-pee-ah	Land of the rising sun; home of
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Memnon

Eumedes	yoo-MEE-deez	Father of Dolon
Euphorbus	yoo-FOR-bus	Trojan warrior who first wounds

Patroclus

Eurypylus	yoo-RIP-i-lus	Greek warrior wounded by Paris
Eurybates	yoo-RIB-ah-teez	Greek herald; messenger of

Agamemnon

Glaucus	GLAW-kus	Lycian warrior; friend of Sarpedon
Hades	HAY-deez	God of the underworld
Hephaestus	heh-FES-tus	God of fire and the forge; supports

the Greeks

Hera	HEER-ah	Queen of the gods; supports the
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Greeks

Hector	HEK-tor	Greatest Trojan warrior; son of
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Priam and Hecuba

Hecuba	HEK-yoo-bah	Queen of Troy; wife of Priam
Helen	HEL-en	Wife of Menelaus; cause of the war
Hermes	HER-meez	Messenger god; guides Priam to

Achilles's camp

Hippocoon	hip-oh-KOH-on	Greek warrior
Homer	HOH-mer	Blind poet; traditionally credited

with composing the Iliad

Idaeus	eye-DEE-us	Trojan herald; accompanies Priam
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to the Greek camp

Idomeneus	eye-DOM-eh-noos	King of Crete; Greek warrior
Iliad	IL-ee-ad	Epic poem by Homer about the

Trojan War

Iphigenia	if-ih-jeh-NY-ah	Daughter of Agamemnon; her sacrifice at Aulis belongs to later Trojan War tradition and is not narrated in the Iliad
Iris	EYE-ris	Messenger goddess; servant of the

gods

Laertes	lay-ER-teez	Father of Odysseus
Leto	LEE-toh	Mother of Apollo and Artemis
Little Iliad	-	Lost epic about the wooden horse

and Achilles's armour

Lycaon	LY-kay-on	Son of Priam; captured and killed
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by Achilles

Lycomedes	ly-koh-MEE-deez	King of Scyros; hid Achilles among
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his daughters

Machaon	mah-KAY-on	Greek healer; son of Asclepius
Meges	MEE-jeez	Greek warrior
Memnon	MEM-non	Ethiopian prince; killed by Achilles
Menelaus	men-eh-LAY-us	King of Sparta; husband of Helen
Menoetius	meh-NEE-shus	Father of Patroclus
Mentes	MEN-teez	King of the Taphians
Meriones	meh-RY-oh-neeZ	Cretan warrior; comrade of

Idomeneus

Myrmidons	MUR-mi-dons	Achilles's elite troops from Phthia
Nestor	NES-tor	King of Pylos; oldest and wisest

Greek counsellor

Niobe	NY-oh-bee	Queen whose children were killed
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by Apollo and Artemis

Nostoi	NOS-toy	Lost epic about the Greek heroes'
---------------	----------------	--

returns home

Odysseus	oh-DIS-ee-us	King of Ithaca; cleverest of the
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Greeks

Orestes	oh-RES-teez	Son of Agamemnon; kills
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Clytemnestra to avenge his father

Palamedes	pal-ah-MEE-deez	Greek hero who exposed
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Odysseus's feigned madness

Pandarus	PAN-dah-rus	Trojan archer who breaks the truce
Patroclus	pah-TROH-klus	Achilles's closest companion
Peleus	PEL-ee-us	Mortal king; father of Achilles
Penelope	peh-NEL-oh-pee	Wife of Odysseus
Penthesilea	pen-thes-il-AY-ah	Queen of the Amazons; killed by

Achilles

Philoctetes	fil-ok-TEE-teez	Greatest Greek archer; abandoned
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on Lemnos

Phoenix	FEE-niks	Old tutor of Achilles; member of
----------------	-----------------	---

the Embassy

Podalirius	poh-dah-LIR-ee-us	Greek healer; brother of Machaon
Polydamas	pol-ee-DAM-as	Trojan warrior; wise counsellor to

Hector

Polyxena	pol-iks-EN-ah	Daughter of Priam; sacrificed at
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Achilles's grave

Poseidon	poh-SY-don	God of the sea; supports the
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Greeks

Priam	PRY-am	King of Troy; father of Hector and
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Paris

Prothoenor	proh-thoh-EE-nor	Greek warrior
Rhesus	REE-sus	Thracian king with magnificent

white horses

Sack of Ilium	-	Lost epic about the fall of Troy
Salamis	SAL-ah-mis	Island home of Ajax the Great

Sack of Ilium	-	Lost epic about the fall of Troy
Sarpedon	sar-PEE-don	Lycian prince; son of Zeus; killed by

Patroclus

Scamander	skuh-MAN-der	River near Troy; also its river god
Scyros	SKY-ros	Island connected with Achilles in later tradition; the hiding story is not narrated in the Iliad
Sinon	SY-non	Greek spy who convinced the

Trojans to accept the wooden
horse

Simois	SIM-oh-is	River near Troy
Sparta	SPAR-tah	City of Menelaus in Lacedaemon
Sthenelus	STHEN-eh-lus	Charioteer and comrade of

Diomedes

Talthybius	tal-THIB-ee-us	Greek herald; messenger of
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Agamemnon

Teucer	TOO-ser	Greek archer; half-brother of Ajax
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the Great

Thebes (in Mysia)	THEEBZ	City sacked by Achilles; home of
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Eetion

Chryse	KRY-see	Sacred place of Apollo; home of Chryses and Chryseis
Thetis	THET-is	Sea goddess; mother of Achilles
Thoas	THOH-as	Greek warrior; king of the

Aetolians

Thrasymedes	thras-i-MEE-deez	Son of Nestor
Troy	TROY	City in northwest Anatolia; also

called Ilium

Tyndareus	tin-DAY-rus	Father of Helen and Clytemnestra
Xanthus	ZAN-thus	One of Achilles's immortal horses;

also the name of the river

Scamander

Zephyrus	ZEF-ih-rus	West wind; summoned to fan
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Patroclus's funeral pyre

Zeus	ZOOS	King of the gods
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CHAPTER 31: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS BY CHAPTER

This chapter gathers discussion questions for all twenty-nine narrative chapters. They range from simple comprehension checks to analytical prompts and personal reflections. Use them in reading groups, classrooms, or simply as a way to deepen your engagement with the text.

CHAPTER 1: THE WRATH OF ACHILLES

Achilles faces a choice between killing Agamemnon and obeying Athena. What does his decision reveal about his character? Is he still acting out of rage, or has wisdom already begun to temper it?

Agamemnon claims he is "the foremost" of the Greeks and therefore deserves the greatest prize. Is his logic sound, or is it self-serving? How does a leader earn respect - through rank, or through action?

Thetis promises to ask Zeus to make the Trojans win. Do you think it is fair for the Greek soldiers, most of whom had nothing to do with the quarrel, to suffer for Agamemnon's actions?

CHAPTER 2: THE DREAM AND THE CATALOGUE

Zeus sends a false dream to Agamemnon promising victory. Why do the gods deceive mortals in the Iliad? What does this say about the relationship between humans and the divine in the poem?

Thersites speaks out against Agamemnon and is beaten for it. Is Thersites a truth-teller punished for honesty, or a troublemaker who gets what he deserves? How do societies today control dissent?

The Catalogue of Ships lists hundreds of names and places most readers have never heard of. Why did Homer include it? What effect does it have on your reading experience?

CHAPTER 3: PARIS AND MENELAUS

Paris proposes a duel to settle the war, then nearly dies and has to be rescued by Aphrodite. What does this tell us about his character? Can a coward also be a romantic hero?

Helen identifies the Greek heroes for Priam, speaking of them with something like nostalgia. How does she feel about Menelaus? About Paris? About her own role in the war?

Aphrodite forces Helen to return to Paris. How much free will does Helen actually have? To what extent are the mortals in the Iliad puppets of the gods?

CHAPTER 4: THE BREAKING OF THE TRUCE

Athena deliberately tricks Pandarus into shooting Menelaus, knowing it will restart the war. Why would a goddess who supports wisdom act so destructively?

The truce was solemnly sworn by both sides. Does breaking it have consequences beyond the immediate resumption of fighting? What does oath-breaking mean in the Iliad's world?

Agamemnon rallies the troops by praising some men and shaming others. Is this an effective leadership strategy? How do modern leaders motivate people under pressure?

CHAPTER 5: THE ARISTEIA OF DIOMEDES

Diomedes wounds two gods in a single day - Aphrodite and Ares. What does this extraordinary feat suggest about the boundary between mortal and divine in the Iliad?

Athena opens Diomedes's eyes so he can distinguish gods from mortals. Is this a gift or a burden? Would you want to see the world as Diomedes does?

Aphrodite rescues Paris and Aeneas, while Athena drives Diomedes's spear. Do the gods have favourites, or do they support principles? What determines which side a god takes?

CHAPTER 6: HECTOR IN TROY

Andromache begs Hector to stay inside the walls, arguing that his duty is to his family. Hector replies that his duty is to Troy. Which argument is stronger? Can duty to country and duty to family ever be reconciled?

Astyanax cries at his father's helmet, and Hector removes it. What does this small moment reveal about Hector as a father? About the gap between a warrior's world and a child's?

The Trojan women pray to Athena, but the goddess does not grant their prayer. Why not? What does it mean when prayers go unanswered?

CHAPTER 7: AJAX STANDS ALONE

Hector and Ajax fight to a draw and exchange gifts afterward. How does this code of warrior honour compare to modern ideas of sportsmanship? Can enemies respect each other?

Nestor proposes building a defensive wall - a practical solution from the oldest warrior present. Why do the Greeks listen to him? What does Nestor represent in the poem?

Antenor suggests returning Helen; Paris refuses. If you were a Trojan citizen, how would you feel about Paris's decision? Should the city's survival come before one man's happiness?

CHAPTER 8: THE TIDE TURNS

Zeus weighs the fates of the two armies on his golden scales. What does this image suggest about how the Greeks understood destiny? Is fate predetermined, or can it be influenced?

Hera and Athena try to intervene, but Iris stops them on Zeus's orders. Why do the gods have hierarchy and politics just like mortals?

The Greeks retreat behind their newly built wall. How does the mood of this chapter differ from the battle chapters that came before? What does defeat feel like in the Iliad?

CHAPTER 9: THE EMBASSY TO ACHILLES

Odysseus, Phoenix, and Ajax each use a different argument to persuade Achilles. Which argument is the most effective, and why does Achilles still refuse?

Phoenix tells the story of Meleager, who also withdrew from battle in anger. Why does a parallel story fail where direct pleading also failed? What would it take to change Achilles's mind?

Achilles says he will fight only when Hector reaches his own ships. Is this pride, despair, or a calculated threat? What is really driving his refusal?

CHAPTER 10: DOLON AND THE NIGHT RAID

Diomedes and Odysseus capture Dolon, extract information, and then kill him despite his cooperation. Was killing him necessary? What does this say about how the Greeks viewed enemy combatants?

Dolon demands Achilles's horses as his reward before the mission. How does greed blind him to the danger he is in? Can you think of real-world parallels?

The night raid is one of the most suspenseful sequences in the poem. How does Homer create tension without the spectacle of open battle?

CHAPTER 11: THE BATTLE AT THE WALL

The Greek leaders fall one by one - Agamemnon, Diomedes, Odysseus, Eurypylus, Machaon - each wounded and removed from battle. How does the progressive collapse of leadership affect the army's morale?

Polydamas reads an omen and advises caution; Hector scorns him and attacks. When is it wise to trust omens and superstition? When is courage actually recklessness?

Hector breaks through the wall and reaches the ships. What does this moment mean for the Greeks? For the Trojans? For the narrative as a whole?

CHAPTER 12: PATROCLUS TO THE RESCUE

Patroclus first goes to Nestor on Achilles's errand, then meets the wounded Eurypylus on his return and stops to treat him. Why does Homer place the medical scene after Nestor's appeal? What does it tell us about Patroclus's character?

Nestor tells a long story about his youth. Why does he do this instead of simply making his request? How does storytelling function as persuasion in the Iliad?

Patroclus weeps and begs Achilles to let him fight in his armour. Is Patroclus being brave or foolish? What would you have done in his position?

CHAPTER 13: SARPEDON FALLS

Zeus weeps blood over the death of his son Sarpedon but does not prevent it. What does this tell us about fate and the limits of divine power in the Iliad?

Sarpedon delivers a famous speech about why they fight: for honour and glory. Do you agree with his reasoning? Why do people risk their lives for abstract ideals?

Patroclus forgets Achilles's warning and presses towards Troy's walls. Is this hubris, compassion, or something else? What drives him to overreach?

CHAPTER 14: PATROCLUS'S LAST HOUR

Patroclus kills twenty-seven men in a single charge before Apollo, Euphorbus, and Hector bring him down. Is this a hero's death or a cautionary tale about overconfidence?

Hector puts on Achilles's stolen armour. What does this act symbolise? How does wearing another man's identity change Hector?

Patroclus prophesies Hector's death with his last breath. How does knowing his own doom affect Hector's actions in the chapters that follow?

CHAPTER 15: THE NEWS

Achilles collapses in grief when he hears of Patroclus's death. How does this grief differ from his earlier anger at Agamemnon? Is grief a transformation of rage, or its opposite?

Achilles chooses glory and vengeance, accepting that his own death follows Hector's. Would you make the same choice? What would it take for you to accept death willingly?

The captive women, including Briseis, wail with Achilles. What does this shared grief across the boundary of captor and captive suggest about human solidarity in suffering?

CHAPTER 16: THE SHIELD OF ACHILLES

The shield depicts two cities - one at peace, one at war. Why does Homer contrast them? What is he saying about the possibilities of human society?

Hephaestus includes scenes of farming, dancing, and law courts alongside battlefields. What does this say about what a complete human life looks like?

The shield is the most famous ekphrasis (extended description of an object) in Western literature. Why do you think it has had such lasting influence?

CHAPTER 17: THE BODY OF PATROCLUS

The Greeks and Trojans fight over Patroclus's body as if the corpse itself had power. Why is recovering the dead so important in the Iliad? What does it mean to treat the dead with honour?

Achilles shows himself unarmed, crowned with divine fire, and the Trojans flee in terror. Is this a heroic moment or a terrifying one? Where is the line between hero and monster?

Iris urges Achilles to appear even without armour. Why do the gods take such an active role in this battle? What would have happened without their intervention?

CHAPTER 18: ACHILLES RETURNS

Agamemnon blames Ate (Folly) for his actions. Is this a genuine apology or an evasion of responsibility? Can a person be driven to bad decisions by forces beyond their control?

Briseis sees Patroclus's body and delivers her lament. Why is her voice important here? What does she reveal about Patroclus that no one else could?

Xanthus the horse prophesies Achilles's death. How do animals function in the Iliad? What does it mean when even horses know the future?

CHAPTER 19: THE RIVER RUNS RED

Achilles kills Lycaon, who begs for mercy and reminds Achilles they once shared a meal. Is this the act of a man consumed by grief or a man who has lost his humanity entirely?

The river Scamander itself rises against Achilles. What does it mean when nature rebels against a human being? What has Achilles done to deserve this?

Hephaestus burns the river with divine fire. Is this overkill, or is the situation so extreme that only divine intervention can resolve it?

CHAPTER 20: THE GODS THEMSELVES FIGHT

The gods brawl like rowdy children - Athena defeats Ares, Hera beats Artemis, Poseidon challenges Apollo. Why does Homer include this divine comedy amid such human tragedy?

Apollo refuses to fight Poseidon on the grounds that they are brothers. Is this genuine principle, or is he simply avoiding conflict? What does this say about divine ethics?

Hermes declines to fight Leto, saying he is not foolish enough to strike the consort of Zeus. Is this wisdom or cowardice? How do people navigate power dynamics in your own experience?

CHAPTER 21: THE DEATH OF HECTOR

Athena deceives Hector by appearing as his brother Deiphobus. Is this a fair tactic in war? Are there limits to what is acceptable even in combat?

Hector proposes a covenant about treating the dead with respect; Achilles refuses. What has changed in Achilles since he fought honourably against Hector earlier in the poem?

Andromache's lament is one of the most moving passages in literature. Why does Homer give her the last word on Hector's death? What does her grief represent that Achilles's rage does not?

CHAPTER 22: THE FUNERAL OF PATROCLUS

Achilles drags Hector's body around Patroclus's tomb daily. Is this the behaviour of a grieving friend or a disturbed mind? How do we grieve those we love?

The funeral games include quarrels over prizes, just like the original quarrel that started the poem. Has anything really changed? Is the cycle of conflict inevitable?

Achilles sacrifices twelve Trojan captives on Patroclus's pyre. The poem presents this critically. How should we judge historical figures who commit atrocities? Can great people do terrible things?

CHAPTER 23: TWELVE DAYS OF DESECRATION

Apollo protects Hector's body from corruption. Why does the god care about a dead man's corpse? What does bodily integrity mean in the Iliad's world?

The gods debate in council, and Hera argues against returning Hector's body. Is she being cruel, or does she have a legitimate grievance? Can justice and mercy conflict?

Zeus overrules the other gods and decides Priam shall ransom his son. What does this tell us about Zeus's role in the poem? Is he a just ruler or a capricious one?

CHAPTER 24: PRIAM'S JOURNEY

Hermes disguises himself as a young Myrmidon to guide Priam. Why does he not reveal himself immediately? What does the disguise add to the scene?

Priam drives through enemy territory in the dead of night. What does this journey represent? What would you risk for someone you love?

Hermes puts the Greek sentries to sleep. Is this divine assistance or divine interference? Should Priam have made the journey alone?

CHAPTER 25: THE MEETING OF ENEMIES

Priam kisses the hands that killed his son. What kind of courage does this require? Is it braver to kill or to forgive?

Achilles weeps - for Peleus, for Patroclus, for Priam. Why does weeping transform him? What is it about shared grief that dissolves hatred?

The shared meal (xenia) between enemies is one of the most famous scenes in literature. Why does breaking bread together have such symbolic power across cultures?

CHAPTER 26: THE RETURN OF HECTOR

Cassandra sees Priam returning and cries out, but no one believes her. Why are truth-tellers so often ignored? Have you experienced this in your own life?

The three laments - Andromache's, Hecuba's, and Helen's - each capture a different side of Hector. Which lament moved you most, and why?

The funeral takes eleven days, with feasting and mourning. How does this ritual help the community process grief? What rituals does your culture have for death?

CHAPTER 27: THE TAMING OF ACHILLES

The Iliad opens with wrath and closes with compassion. Has Achilles truly changed, or has he simply exhausted his capacity for rage?

The poem ends not with the fall of Troy or Achilles's death, but with Hector's funeral. Do you agree with Homer's choice? Why might the funeral of an enemy be more fitting than the triumph of the Greek army?

Achilles discovers that compassion, not strength, is the highest form of heroism. Is this a message that still resonates today?

CHAPTER 28: THE TROJAN WAR IN CONTEXT

The Iliad covers roughly fifty-one days out of a ten-year war. Why do you think Homer chose this narrow window? What does concentrating on a small slice allow him to explore?

Many heroes in the Epic Cycle die not in glorious battle but through betrayal, madness, or ambush. What does this suggest about the Greeks' attitude towards war and its supposed glory?

The oath of Tyndareus bound dozens of men to defend Helen's marriage. When does a promise become a trap?

CHAPTER 29: AFTERWORD

The afterword argues that compassion is not weakness and mercy is not surrender. Do you agree? Can you think of a moment when showing compassion required more courage than using force?

The Iliad has influenced storytelling for three thousand years. What modern books, films, or games do you see Homer's DNA in?

The author says that great art "transcends every barrier of time and culture." Do you agree? Can you think of a work of art from a very different time or place that still spoke to you?

CHAPTER 32: CHARACTER REFERENCE TABLES

The following tables provide quick-reference guides to the major figures in the Iliad. Use them to refresh your memory, settle disputes about parentage, or simply marvel at how many names Homer managed to fit into one poem.

TABLE 1: GREEK HEROES

Name	City / Region	Parentage	Key Trait	Fate in the Epic
Achilles	Phthia (Myrmidons)	Peleus (mortal) +	Greatest warrior;	Killed by Paris and
Thetis (goddess)	swift-footed;	Apollo after		
consumed by rage	Hector's death			

and grief

Agamemnon	Mycenae	Atreus (mortal) +	Supreme	Murdered by
Aerope	commander; proud	Clytemnestra upon		
and insecure	his return home			
Ajax the Great	Salamis	Telamon (mortal) +	Strongest warrior	Commits suicide
(Telamon)	Periboea	after Achilles;	after losing the	
straightforward	contest for			
and honourable	Achilles's armour			
Ajax the Lesser	Locris	Oileus (mortal)	Swift and bold;	Survives the war
(Oileus)	lesser in stature	but angers Athena		
than his namesake	and drowns at sea			
Antilochus	Pylos	Nestor (mortal) +	Brave and devoted;	Killed by Memnon
Eurydice	youngest of the	defending his		
princes	father			
Automedon	Phthia (Myrmidons)	Diores (mortal)	Achilles's	Survives; fights at
charioteer; loyal	the funeral games			

and capable

Calchas	-	Thestor (mortal)	Prophet; advisor to	Survives; his
the Greeks	prophecies guide			

the army

Diomedes	Argos	Tydeus (mortal) +	Fierce fighter;	Survives the war;
Deipyle	wounds two gods in	returns to rule		
one day	Argos			
Epeius	-	Panopeus (mortal)	Unskilled in battle;	Survives; credited
builds the wooden	with constructing			
horse	the Trojan Horse			
Eurypylus	Thessaly	Euaemon (mortal)	Greek warrior;	Healed by
wounded in battle	Patroclus; survives			

the war

Idomeneus	Crete	Deucalion (mortal)	Cretan king; bold	Survives; returns to
spearman	Crete			
Machaon	Thessaly	Asclepius (divine) +	Healer; son of the	Wounded by Paris;
Epione	god of medicine	healed under		

Nestor's care

Menelaus	Sparta	Atreus (mortal) +	Wronged husband	Survives; reconciles
Aerope	of Helen	with Helen and		

returns to Sparta

Meriones	Crete	Molus (mortal)	Idomeneus's	Survives the war
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comrade; skilled

spearman

Nestor	Pylos	Neleus (mortal) +	Oldest and wisest	Survives; returns to
Chloris	counsellor; fond of	Pylos to rule		

stories

Odysseus	Ithaca	Laertes (mortal) +	Cleverest of the	Survives; wanders
Anticleia	Greeks; master	ten years before		
strategist	reaching home			
Patroclus	Opus	Menoetius (mortal)	Gentle companion	Struck first by Apollo,
+ Sthenele	of Achilles; skilled	wounded by Euphorbus,		
healer	then killed by Hector			
Phoenix	-	Amyntor (mortal)	Old tutor of	Survives; remains
Achilles; member of	with Achilles			

the Embassy

Podalirius	Thessaly	Asclepius (divine) +	Healer; Machaon's	Survives the war
Epione	brother			
Sthenelus	Argos	Capaneus (mortal)	Charioteer and	Survives the war

comrade of

Diomedes

Teucer	Salamis	Telamon (mortal) +	Greatest Greek	Survives; fights at
Hesione	archer; half-brother	the funeral games		

of Ajax

Thrasymedes	Pylos	Nestor (mortal)	Son of Nestor;	Survives the war
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young warrior

TABLE 2: TROJAN HEROES

Name	Role	Parentage	Key Trait	Fate in the Epic
Aeneas	Trojan prince;	Anchises (mortal) +	Noble and pious;	Saved by Poseidon
leader of the	Aphrodite	destined to survive	and Aphrodite;	
Dardanians	(goddess)	escapes Troy's fall		
Cebriones	Hector's charioteer	Priam (mortal) + a	Illegitimate son of	Killed by Patroclus
concubine	Priam; skilled driver	with a stone		
Deiphobus	Trojan prince;	Priam (mortal) +	Brave fighter;	Killed during the
warrior	Hecuba	Hector's brother	fall of Troy	
Dolon	Trojan spy	Eumedes (mortal)	Greedy and foolish	Killed by Diomedes

and Odysseus

Glaucus	Lycian warrior;	Hippolochus	Noble; exchanges	Survives; fights on
Sarpedon's	(mortal)	armour with	after Sarpedon's	
comrade	Diomedes	death		
Hector	Greatest Trojan	Priam (mortal) +	Noble, dutiful,	Killed by Achilles;
warrior	Hecuba	loving father and	body desecrated	
husband	then returned			
Helenus	Trojan prince; seer	Priam (mortal) +	Prophet; advises	Survives the war
Hecuba	Hector			
Lycaon	Trojan prince; son	Priam (mortal) +	Captured and	Killed by Achilles
of Priam	Laothoe	enslaved once	despite his pleas	

before; begs for

mercy

Pandarus	Trojan archer	Lycaon (mortal)	Foolish and easily	Killed by Diomedes
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manipulated

Paris (Alexandros)	Trojan prince;	Priam (mortal) +	Handsome but	Survives the Iliad;
abductor of Helen	Hecuba	weak; skilled archer	later kills Achilles	
Polydamas	Trojan warrior and	Panthous (mortal)	Prudent and wise;	Fate not stated in the
advisor	counsels caution	Iliad		
Rhesus	Thracian king	Eioneus (mortal)	King with	Killed by Diomedes
magnificent white	in a night raid			

horses

Sarpedon	Lycian prince	Zeus (god) +	Noble warrior; son	Killed by Patroclus;
Laodamia	of the king of gods	body carried home		

by Sleep and Death

TABLE 3: GODS AND THEIR SIDES

Name	Domain	Supports	Why They Chose That
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Side

Zeus	King of the gods	Neutral (favours Trojans	Bound by fate; balances
briefly for Thetis)	divine politics; ultimately		

maintains cosmic order

Hera	Queen of the gods;	Greeks	Paris judged against her
marriage	in the beauty contest; she		

hates Troy

Athena	Wisdom and war	Greeks	Paris judged against her;
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she favours Odysseus

and Diomedes

Poseidon	Sea and earthquakes	Greeks	Laomedon (Priam's
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father) cheated him of

payment for building

Troy's walls

Apollo	Archery, music, plague,	Trojans	Protects his priest
prophecy	Chryses; favours Hector		

and Paris; guides the

arrow that kills Achilles

Aphrodite	Love and beauty	Trojans	Paris chose her as the
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fairest; she protects Paris

and Aeneas

Ares	War	Trojans	Aphrodite's lover;
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generally supports the
Trojan side

Hephaestus	Fire and the forge	Greeks	Helps Thetis by forging Achilles's new armour and answers Hera's call against Scamander; in Iliad Book 18 his wife is Charis, not Aphrodite
Hermes	Messenger; travellers	Neutral	Serves Zeus as messenger

and guide; escorts Priam
safely to and from Achilles's camp

Artemis	Hunt and the moon	Trojans	Twin sister of Apollo;
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supports the Trojan side

Iris	Messenger goddess	Neutral	Serves all gods equally;
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delivers divine messages

Thetis	Sea goddess	Greeks (Achilles	Mother of Achilles;
specifically)	advocates for her son		

with Zeus

TABLE 4: THE WOMEN

Name	Role	Key Moment	What She Represents
Andromache	Wife of Hector; mother of	Begs Hector to stay;	The cost of war on
Astyanax	delivers the most	families; love and loss;	
devastating lament in the	the fate of civilians		

poem

Briseis	Captive of Achilles; taken	Her lament over	The voice of captive
by Agamemnon	Patroclus's body; her	women; dignity in	
brief speech reveals her	suffering; the human cost		
humanity	of the warrior code		
Cassandra	Daughter of Priam;	Sees Priam returning	The curse of knowledge;
prophetess	with Hector's body; cries	the ignored voice of	
out but is not believed	truth; Troy's doomed		

insight

Chryseis	Daughter of Chryses;	Her return sparks the	The objectification of
captive of Agamemnon	quarrel between Achilles	women as prizes; the	
and Agamemnon	spark that ignites the		

poem's conflict

Hecuba	Queen of Troy; wife of	Her lament for Hector;	Maternal grief; the
Priam	begs Priam not to go to	devastation of a queen	
the Greek camp	reduced to beggary		
Helen	Wife of Menelaus; cause	Identifies Greek heroes	The complexity of blame;
of the war	for Priam; laments	beauty as burden; the	
Hector's death	woman who exists in the		

spaces between choices

Thetis	Sea goddess; mother of	Begs Zeus to honour	Divine motherhood; the
Achilles	Achilles; brings divine	agony of watching a	
armour from Hephaestus	mortal child die;		

immortal grief

The anger has passed. The fires have gone out. Troy still stands - for now. And somewhere on the plain of Ilium, a young man who was once the greatest warrior in the world sits quietly in his tent, thinking not of glory, but of his father, and of a father he once made weep.

ABOUT THIS RETELLING

This modern retelling of Homer's Iliad aims to make the greatest war story ever told accessible to readers aged fifteen and up. The original epic poem, composed around 750 BCE, tells the story of a few weeks in the tenth year of the Trojan War - focusing not on the fall of the city, but on the rage of one man, and the terrible price he pays for it.

Every narrative chapter includes pronunciation guides for Greek names, scholarly footnotes, mythology notes, and discussion questions - so that readers can not only enjoy the story but also understand its place in the history of human thought.

The Iliad is not just a story about war. It is a story about what war does to us - about grief, pride, love, mercy, and what it truly means to be a hero. It is as relevant today as it was three thousand years ago. Perhaps more so.

Further Reading

Homer, The Iliad (translated by Robert Fagles, Penguin Classics)

Homer, The Iliad (translated by Caroline Alexander, Ecco)

Stephen Fry, Mythos: The Greek Myths Retold

Edith Hamilton, Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes

Madeline Miller, The Song of Achilles

Pat Barker, The Silence of the Girls

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