



MYTHOPOUCH

RETELLING

THE ILIAD

The Quarrel

Volume I of seven - Part One

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 Talthylbius 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 Lynessus, 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. Bandylegged, 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
Phthia	Achilles	50	Thessaly (WITHDRAWN)
Boeotia	Various	50	Boeotia
Athens	Menestheus	50	Attica
Euboea	Elephenor	50	Euboea
Aetolia	Thoas	40	Aetolia

Contingent	Leader	Ships	Region
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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