



MYTHOPOUCH

RETELLING

THE ILIAD

The Battle Joined

Volume II of seven - Part Two

A modern educational version for readers aged 15 and up

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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
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divine aid

Cassandra	Sister	Prophetess cursed never to be
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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: Talthymbius (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 dowder 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

Speaker	Argument Used	Achilles's Response
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-nee-z), 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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