



MYTHOPOUCH

RETELLING

THE ILIAD

The Day Of Sorrow

Volume IV of seven - Part Four

A modern educational version for readers aged 15 and up

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PART FOUR: THE DAY OF SORROW

CHAPTER 15: THE NEWS

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

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

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

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

wild with distress.

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

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

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

"Achilles," he managed.

"Say it."

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

The world stopped.

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

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

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

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

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

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

She was sitting in her father's crystal cave, surrounded by her sisters, the Nereids (NEER- ee-ids): Glauce, Thalia, Cymodoce, Nesaia, Speo, Halie, Cymothoe, and all the rest, fifty daughters of

Nereus the old man of the sea. They had been combing their hair and singing, as immortal beings do when they have nothing better to occupy them. But the sound that came across the waves stopped every voice.

"My son," Thetis whispered.

She rose. Her sisters rose with her. They formed a procession, gleaming, terrible, and beautiful beyond mortal bearing, and the sea opened before them like a curtain. The waves drew back from their path as if afraid to touch them. The salt spray rose in clouds around their silver feet. The sun, sinking towards the western horizon, caught their hair and turned it into threads of gold and copper and palest green, the colours of the sea itself. They did not speak. There was nothing to say that the whole ocean did not already know. They walked across the dry sand where the waves had pulled back to let them pass, up the beach where the Greek ships lay, past the hulls and the ropes and the idle oars. The Myrmidons saw them coming and fell back, for no man can look upon a sea-goddess in her full power without his heart failing him.

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

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

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

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

He drew a shuddering breath.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He raised his face to the sky, and the sound that came from him was not grief anymore. It was rage: pure, undiluted, and absolute. He screamed his fury across the plain, and the Trojans, who had been pressing forward to seize Patroclus's body, heard it and faltered. Hector himself checked his advance. For the first time that day, doubt touched his heart.

MYTHOLOGY NOTE

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

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

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

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

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

Thetis walked alone towards the mountain of the gods.

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

their fallen captain home.

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

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

FOOTNOTES

Thetis and the Nereids in Greek art: The scene of Thetis rising from the sea with her sisters became one of the most popular subjects in Greek vase painting. The Nereids were typically depicted as beautiful young women riding dolphins or sea-horses, often carrying the armour of Achilles. These images captured the Greek imagination because they represented the intersection of the mortal and divine worlds: a mother crossing the boundary between her element and her son's, bringing divine aid to a human battlefield. The "Nereid Monument" from Lycia (c. 390 BCE), now in the British Museum, shows this theme in spectacular sculptural form.

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

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

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

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

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

CHAPTER 16: THE SHIELD OF ACHILLES

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

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

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

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

"The same," said Charis.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And then - the miracle.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

MYTHOLOGY NOTE

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

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

FOOTNOTES

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

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

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

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

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

CHAPTER 17: THE BODY OF PATROCLUS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then Glaucus (GLAW-kus) son of Hippolochus, captain of the Lycians, looked at Hector with contempt.

"Hector," he said, his voice cutting through the din, "you make a fine show, but where is your courage when it matters? You abandoned Sarpedon's body to the dogs and the Greeks. He was your guest and your comrade, and you would not even defend his corpse. Why should the Lycians fight for you anymore? Why should any of us? If you had any courage, we would drag Patroclus into Troy right now. Achilles's armour for Sarpedon's body, a fair trade. But you dared not stand against Ajax."

Hector's face burned. He could not let the accusation stand. "Glaucus," he said, "you misread me. I fear no man and no battle. But Zeus's will is stronger than ours. He gives victory and takes it away. Watch me now, and see if I play the coward."

He turned and ran after the Trojans who were carrying Achilles's armour to the city. He found them, stripped off his own armour, and put on the divine armour that Hephaestus had made for Peleus, that Peleus had given to Achilles, that Achilles had lent to Patroclus. It fit him too well. He seemed, for a moment, like Achilles himself - but Achilles seen in a dark mirror, wrong, stolen, doomed.

Zeus looked down from Ida and shook his head. "Poor fool," he murmured. "You arm yourself in the armour of a hero, and you never think that this armour will not see Troy again. You killed his comrade, but it was not yours to take. I give you power now, yes - but death walks beside you."

Then Ares (AIR-eez), the god of war, entered Hector. His body filled with terrible strength. He rallied the Trojans and their allies with a great shout, promising half the spoils to whoever dragged Patroclus's body away from Ajax.

The Trojans charged.

The fight that followed was one of the fiercest in the entire war. It was not about territory or honour or even victory. It was about a dead man's dignity.

Ajax gave the Greeks their orders: hold together. Do not break formation. Stand by the body. They formed a ring of shields around Patroclus, their spears pointing outward like the quills of a porcupine. The Trojans came at them in wave after wave. Hector hurled himself against the wall of bronze again and again. Three times he seized Patroclus by the feet. Three times the Ajaxes beat him back.

Automedon (aw-TOM-eh-don), Patroclus's charioteer, fought like a man possessed by grief. The immortal horses, Xanthus (ZAN-thus) and Balaus (BAL-ee-us), wept for their fallen driver, tears

streaming from their great dark eyes, their manes wet with sorrow. Zeus looked at them and pitied them. "Why did I give you to a mortal man?" he asked. "You are

ageless and immortal, yet you share in the sorrows of men. Very well. I will give you strength."

He breathed power into the horses, and they charged into battle with Automedon at their reins. Automedon killed Aretus (ah-REE-tus) with a spear through the shield, but he could not fight and drive alone. Alcimedon (al-sih-MEE-don) saw his struggle and leaped onto the chariot to take the reins, freeing Automedon to fight.

The battle wore on through the afternoon. The Greeks and Trojans tugged at Patroclus's body as men tug at a great ox-hide, stretching it between them, neither side giving ground. The dust rose so thick that the sun itself seemed dimmed over the place where the fighting was thickest. Ajax shouted for help, and the Greeks answered. Idomeneus (eye-dom-eh-NOOS) came, and Meriones (meh-RYE-oh-neeze), and the two Ajaxes - the Great and the Lesser - stood shoulder to shoulder.

Athena came down from Olympus, sent by Zeus who had changed his mind. The Greeks needed to keep Patroclus's body, if only so that Achilles might bury his friend. She took the form of old Phoenix (FEE-niks), Achilles's tutor, and spoke to Menelaus.

"It would be shame beyond bearing," she said, "if the dogs of Troy tore the comrade of Achilles while you stood by. Fight, Menelaus. Fight as you have never fought."

Menelaus, not knowing it was a goddess, answered with his heart: "If Athena would give me strength, I would defend him to the end."

Athena was pleased. She filled his limbs with fire. He hurled his spear and killed Podes (POH-deez), one of Hector's closest companions, a rich and valiant man. Hector's grief answered Menelaus's rage, and the battle grew still more terrible.

And then the miracle happened.

Iris (EYE-ris), the rainbow messenger, flew to Achilles at the ships. She came secretly, sent by Hera without Zeus's knowledge. She found him standing by his hulls, staring at the battle in an agony of helplessness.

"Up, son of Peleus," she said. "Your friend's body is being torn apart out there. The Greeks defend him, but they cannot hold forever. Hector means to cut off his head and fix it on the stakes of the wall. Show yourself. You need no armour for that."

"How can I go?" Achilles said. "I have no armour. My mother forbade me to fight until she returns."

"Go as you are," Iris said. "Show yourself at the trench. Let the Trojans see you. Let them hear you. That alone will be enough."

She was gone before he could argue.

Achilles did not stop to think. He strode towards the trench, past the wall, beyond the Greek lines, out onto the plain where the battle raged. And Athena, watching from above, wrapped her aegis (EE-jis) around his shoulders - that terrible goat-skin cloak bordered with tassels, sign of divine

protection. She crowned his head with a golden cloud, and from that cloud she kindled a flame, a blaze of light that shot up towards heaven.

Imagine a city on an island, far out at sea, under siege. All day its people fight, and at sunset they light signal fires on the heights, blazing warnings for any ship that might bring rescue. That was the light above Achilles's head. It pierced the dust and the gloom. It shone across the battlefield like the coming of a god.

He did not throw a spear. He did not swing a sword. He simply stood at the trench and shouted.

Three times he cried out. His voice was like a trumpet sounding the alarm when the enemy is at the gates. Athena added her own voice, spreading terror among the Trojans that no mortal courage could withstand. The horses shied and turned their chariots. The drivers went pale. Twelve of the finest Trojan champions fell beneath the wheels of their own vehicles, crushed by the panic that swept through them.

The Trojans broke. They ran. And in the confusion, the Greeks lifted Patroclus onto a litter and bore him towards the ships, the Myrmidons weeping on every side.

The sun set at last. Hera sent the reluctant sun-god down into Ocean's waves, and darkness covered the land. The Trojans camped on the plain, but fear sat among them like a guest at their fires. In the Greek camp, the Myrmidons laid Patroclus's body on a bier and covered him with a linen cloth and a white robe. Achilles stood beside him, weeping, his hand on his friend's cold breast.

He had shown himself. He had driven the Trojans back with nothing but his voice and the goddess's fire. But he had not saved Patroclus. Nothing could do that now. The armour Hephaestus was forging would arrive with the dawn. And then the world would see what Achilles could do when he had nothing left to lose.

MYTHOLOGY NOTE

The scene of Achilles going unarmed into battle is unique in the Iliad. He does not fight - he simply appears, and his presence alone is enough to rout the enemy. This reflects a powerful idea in Homeric poetry: the hero's presence (parousia) has a military value independent of his physical fighting. When Achilles withdraws, the Greeks lose not just his spear arm but the very idea of him, the terror he inspires. Modern psychologists have compared this to "presence leadership" - the ability of certain individuals to change the dynamics of a group simply by being there. Athena's aegis and

the divine flame above Achilles's head transform this into divine theater: the gods use Achilles's mere appearance as a weapon.

FOOTNOTES

Fighting over the dead in Homeric warfare: The battle for Patroclus's body reflects a real and serious concern in Bronze Age warfare. The proper treatment of the dead was sacred - to deny burial was to insult the gods themselves. Homeric heroes fight as fiercely to recover a body as they do to win a city. This obsession with burial may reflect the genuine anxiety of a warrior culture: a

soldier needs to know that if he falls, his comrades will bring him home. Archaeological evidence from Mycenaean Greece (c. 1600 - 1100 BCE) shows elaborate burial rituals for warriors, including weapon burials and funerary feasts, suggesting that the heroes of the Iliad are practicing an authentically ancient custom.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Achilles goes into battle without weapons, and the Trojans flee from him anyway. What does this tell you about the nature of courage and fear in the Iliad? Can a person's presence alone be a weapon?

The Greeks and Trojans fight not for land or treasure, but for the right to bury a dead man. Why do you think Homer devotes so much attention to this struggle? What does it reveal about what these warriors value most?

Glaucus rebukes Hector for abandoning Sarpedon's body, yet Hector himself is the one who stripped Patroclus. How does Hector justify his actions to himself? Do you think he believes his own justification?

CHAPTER 18: ACHILLES RETURNS

Dawn rose in saffron robes from the streams of Oceanus, and Thetis (THEE-tis) came with the light.

She found her son where she had left him: fallen over the body of Patroclus, weeping as if his tears might wash the death away. Around him, the Myrmidons (MUR-mi-donz) stood in silent ranks, waiting for their captain to become himself again. The armour she carried blazed in the morning sun. It rang against itself as she set it down, a sound like the earth cracking open to reveal treasure buried since the beginning of time.

"My son," Thetis said. She took his hand. "We must let him lie. It is heaven's will. But here is what heaven can give you: armour fit for a god. No mortal has ever borne such work upon his shoulders."

Achilles looked at the armour. The shield caught the dawn and threw it back, multiplied, transformed. He saw the cities, the ploughing, the harvest, the dancers, the Ocean running around the rim. He saw the whole world in bronze, and for a moment his grief found a shape it could wear into battle.

"Mother," he said, "it is beyond words. I will arm. But I fear for him." He looked down at Patroclus. "I fear the flies will come. I fear his wounds will rot."

Thetis laid her hand on Patroclus's cold brow. "Do not fear. I will keep him as he is. A year could pass, and his flesh would be sounder than the day he fell. Now call the Greeks to assembly. Tell them your anger is ended. Go and fight."

She dropped ambrosia and nectar into Patroclus's wounds. Then she was gone, rising towards Olympus like mist burning off the sea.

Achilles walked out onto the shore and gave a cry that brought every Greek running.

They came from the ships, from the cookfires, from the wounded tents. They came limping and whole, young and old, those who had fought yesterday and those who had never drawn a sword. Even the helmsmen and stewards came, because Achilles (ah-KILL-eez) had called, and no one, not even the gods themselves, could ignore that voice.

He stood before them, transformed by grief into something that was no longer quite human. His eyes gleamed with a light that seemed to come from somewhere beyond a man's soul.

"Son of Atreus," he said, turning to Agamemnon (ag-ah-MEM-non), who stood among the kings, his arm still bandaged from Coon's spear. "It would have been better for both of us if Artemis's arrow had struck Briseis down the day I took her, rather than let our quarrel cost so many Greek lives. But that is past. My anger is ended. I have forced my soul into subjection. I will go out against the Trojans, and may they learn what it means to face me when I have nothing left to lose."

The Greeks shouted. They cheered. They had waited for this moment since the day Agamemnon took Briseis, and now, at last, their greatest warrior stood before them again.

Agamemnon rose. He did not go to the centre of the assembly; his wounds still pained him. But he spoke with the full weight of command.

"Danaans," he said, "it is right to listen when a man speaks, and wrong to interrupt him. Achilles, I will speak to you directly, and let all the Greeks hear. Often my men have upbraided me for what I did. But I was not myself. Zeus and Fate and the Erinyes (eh-RIN- ee-eez) struck me mad. On the day I took Briseis from your tent, I was blinded.

"Even the gods can be blinded. Zeus himself was once fooled by Hera. She beguiled him on the day when Alcmena was to bring forth mighty Heracles. Zeus swore a great oath that the child born that day would rule over all his lineage. Hera, crafty as ever, hurried the birth of Eurystheus, a weakling, but born before Heracles, and delayed the birth of the hero. Zeus had sworn, and he was bound. Heracles was doomed to serve that worthless king, all because Zeus had been blinded. And when he realized what Hera had done, he seized Ate (AH-tay), the spirit of Folly, by the hair, and flung her down from Olympus. She fell to earth, and she walks among men to this day, tangling our feet when we think ourselves most wise.

"So it was with me. Ate blinded me. I took your prize. I was wrong. And now I will make amends: all that was promised, and more. Let us not delay. The gifts will be brought now, before your eyes."

Odysseus (oh-DIS-see-us) stepped forward, ever the practical man. "Achilles, send the men to eat first. No man can fight all day on an empty belly. Battle, once begun, will not be brief. Let them take bread and wine, and then let Agamemnon bring the gifts and swear his oath."

Achilles shook his head. "Odysseus, I honour your wisdom, but I cannot eat. Patroclus lies in my tent, hacked and torn, his comrades mourning around him. While he is there, I can think of nothing but blood and slaughter. The sons of Greece may eat when the sun goes down, if any of us are still alive."

Odysseus pressed him, but Achilles would not yield. So the princes went to Agamemnon's tent and brought the gifts: seven tripods, twenty bronze cauldrons, twelve horses, seven women skilled in crafts, and Briseis (brye-EE-sis). Talthybius (tal-thi-BEE-us) found a boar for sacrifice. Agamemnon swore a great oath before all the Greeks, calling Zeus and Earth and Sun and the Erinyes to witness, that he had never touched Briseis, never lain with her, never treated her as anything but what she was: a prize kept inviolate.

He cut the boar's throat. Talthybius whirled the body into the sea for the fishes.

Then Briseis saw Patroclus.

They brought her past the body on the litter, and something broke inside her.

She had seen her husband cut down before the walls of her city. She had seen her three brothers die on the same day. She had been torn from her home, led away as a prize of war, passed from hand to hand like a cup or a bracelet. She had learned to be silent, to endure, to survive by making herself small.

But Patroclus had been kind to her.

She flung herself onto his body, tearing at her breast, her neck, her beautiful face with her own nails. She wept as a goddess weeps: not the tidy weeping of a slave afraid of punishment, but the raw, uncontrollable grief of someone who has lost the only person who ever treated her like a human being.

"Patroclus!" she cried. "My prince! When I left this tent, you were alive! You were kind to me!"

The Greeks stood silent, watching. Even the hardest veterans turned their faces away.

"You told me not to weep," Briseis went on, her voice cracking. "When Achilles killed my husband and sacked our city, you said: 'Do not cry, Briseis. I will speak to Achilles. I will make him marry you. We will have a wedding feast among the Myrmidons, and you will be his wife in Phthia.' You promised me a life. You promised me something to hope for. And now you are dead, and I have nothing again."

She laid her head on his cold chest. The women around her wept too, but as Homer tells us, each wept for her own sorrows. Briseis wept for Patroclus. She wept for herself. She wept for every woman in every war who has ever watched her world burn while men decided what prize she would become.

MYTHOLOGY NOTE

Briseis's lament for Patroclus is one of the most extraordinary passages in the Iliad because it gives voice to someone who is usually silent: a captive woman. The epic is overwhelmingly a poem about male warriors, their honour, their rage, their glory. Briseis breaks through that wall. She speaks not as a plot device, not as a symbol of Achilles's honour, but as a person. She remembers specific kindnesses. She names her losses: husband, brothers, home, hope. Modern scholars have called this passage a radical moment of empathy in ancient literature. When Homer has a powerless slave woman speak with more emotional truth than any king, he is making a quiet but devastating point: the real cost of war is paid by those who have no voice in starting it.

The elders tried to persuade Achilles to eat. Phoenix (FEE-niks), old and wise; Nestor (NES-tor), full of counsel; Idomeneus (eye-dom-eh-NOOS), lord of Crete; they all came to him with soft words. He refused them all.

"I cannot," he said. "Not while he lies there. Not while Hector still breathes."

Zeus looked down from Olympus and pitied him. "Athena," he said, "my child, look at him. He sits desolate while the others eat. Go. Drop nectar and ambrosia into his breast, so he will not hunger in battle."

Athena needed no urging. She darted down like a falcon, invisible to all, and stood beside Achilles where he sat brooding. She poured nectar and ambrosia, the food of the gods, into his chest. He felt a warmth spread through him, a strength that no mortal meal could give. He did

not know what had happened. But his limbs felt light, and the terrible emptiness of his grief filled, for a moment, with divine fire.

Athena returned to Olympus. And the Greeks armed themselves for war.

Achilles put on the armour of Hephaestus.

First the greaves, fitted with silver ankle-clasps. Then the breastplate, brighter than fire. Then the sword with its silver studs, slung across his shoulders. Then the shield, that great wondrous shield containing the world, and it shone with a light like the moon seen from a ship at sea, like a fire burning on a mountain to guide lost sailors home. Then the helmet, close-fitted to his brow, the golden plume waving above it like the crest of a burning star.

The armour seemed to lift him. He moved in it freely, as if it were weightless, as if it had been made not just for his body but for his soul.

He took up his father's spear, the great ash spear from Mount Pelion that Chiron (KYE-ron) the centaur had given to Peleus. No other Greek could wield it. It was heavier than any mortal weapon, balanced for a man who was more than mortal now.

Automedon and Alcimus (AL-si-mus) harnessed the immortal horses, Xanthus (ZAN-thus) and Balius (BAL-ee-us). Achilles mounted the chariot, and the horses felt him there: not Patroclus, not Automedon, but the true master returned. They stamped their hooves and shook their manes, eager for the wind of their own speed.

Achilles spoke to them: "Xanthus, Balius, bring your driver back safely this time. Do not leave him dead on the plain as you left Patroclus."

Then Xanthus did something terrible. The horse bowed his head until his mane touched the ground, and words came from his mouth, given by Hera, who can grant such gifts when she chooses.

"Dread Achilles," the horse said, "this time we will save you. But the day of your death is near. It is not our fault. It is heaven and stern fate that will destroy you. We can run as fast as the west wind, but no horse can outrun destiny."

The Erinyes stopped Xanthus's speech. Even a god-given voice cannot speak too much of fate.

Achilles answered in great sadness: "I know it, Xanthus. I know I will fall far from home. But I will not stay my hand until I have given the Trojans their fill of fighting."

He raised his spear. The Myrmidons cheered. The Greeks cheered. The whole army moved forward, rank after rank, and the earth shook beneath their feet. Achilles shone in the

fore, resplendent as the sun-god Hyperion (hy-PEER-ee-on), and the Trojans on the plain looked up and saw him coming, and their hearts failed them.

The greatest warrior in the world was coming to war. And he was not coming to win. He was coming to die magnificently.

FOOTNOTES

Briseis in the Iliad and beyond: Briseis is referred to in the Iliad simply as "the daughter of Briseus" or "the woman." She does not even have a personal name in Homer's text; "Briseis" means "woman of Briseus" (her father). Yet Homer gives her one of the most emotionally powerful speeches in the entire poem. This contrast between her namelessness and her eloquence has fascinated readers for millennia. In later Greek tragedy, particularly Euripides, captive women became a major theme. Modern retellings of the Trojan War, from *The Trojan Women* to contemporary novels, have increasingly centred the voices of women like Briseis, recognizing that their stories are not peripheral to the war but central to understanding its true cost.

Ate (Folly) in Greek thought: Agamemnon's excuse for his behavior, that he was blinded by Ate, the divine spirit of destructive folly, is both a genuine theological concept and a political strategy. The Greeks believed that certain kinds of disastrous error were literally supernatural: a god-sent madness that made a person choose the worst possible course of action while believing it was wise. But Agamemnon is also doing something shrewd: by blaming Ate, he acknowledges wrongdoing without fully accepting personal responsibility. The story of Zeus and Heracles that he tells serves the same purpose; even the king of gods was fooled. Ancient audiences would have recognised the mix of genuine remorse and self-justification in Agamemnon's speech.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Briseis speaks of Patroclus as the only person who was kind to her after her city fell. What does this tell us about Patroclus's character? How does his treatment of Briseis contrast with how

Agamemnon treats captives?

Agamemnon blames "Ate" (Folly) for his actions rather than taking full responsibility himself. Do you think Achilles accepts this apology? Why or why not? What clues in the text help you decide?

Xanthus the horse prophesies Achilles's death, and Achilles responds not with fear but with determination. How has Achilles changed since the beginning of the Iliad? Is he a different person now, or simply the same person stripped of everything that once mattered to him?

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