Hera and Zeus

Vaunting, aflash in arms, Hector swept through the gates with his brother Paris keeping pace beside him—both men bent on combat. On they fought like wind when a god sends down some welcome blast to sailors desperate for it, worked to death at the polished oars, beating the heavy seas, their arms slack with the the labor — so welcome that brace of men appeared to the Trojans, desperate for their captains.

Rampaging Trojans! On they fought till night came on at last. Now both sides yielded to night, and all withdrew from the fighting — the Trojans back within the walls of their city, the Achaeans back to their beaked ships.

The next day, the Trojans and Achaeans agreed to a daylong truce and buried their dead. Then, taking the sound advice of Nestor, the Achaeans quickly built a quickly looming rampart — a landward wall to protect the ships and troops, with gateways to open a path for driving chariots through. And just outside the wall, the men dug an enormous trench, broad and deep, and drove sharp stakes to guard it.

When dawn came the next morning, Zeus was determined to fulfill his promise to Thetis to hand the Trojans victory while Achilles raged apart.

As the two armies clashed at one strategic point, the thunder of struggle roared and rocked the earth — screams of men and cries of triumph breaking in one breath. Fighters killing, fighters killed. And the ground streamed blood. Then, father Zeus held out his sacred golden scales. In them he placed two fates of death that lays men low — one for the Trojan horsemen, one for the Argives armed in bronze. And gripping the beam midhaft, the father raised it high, and down went Achaea’s day of doom — Achaea’s fate — as the Trojan’s fate went lifting towards the sky.

Now Hector led the Trojans in an Argive rout. All day long, they drove the Achaeans back across the Scamander plain, forcing them to take refuge behind the wall that protected all the ships.
Now down in the ocean sank the fiery light of day, drawing the dark night across the grain-giving earth. For the men of Troy, the day went down against their will. But not the Argives. What a blessing! How they prayed for nightfall coming on across their lines.

And Hector, confident of victory the next day, ordered the Trojans to make their camp across the Scamander plain, in full view of the Achaeans. The Trojans quickly brought out rations from the city, heaped the firewood high, and up from the plain the wind swept smoke, the sweetness and the savors swirling up the skies.

Now Dawn rose up from bed, bringing light to immortal gods and mortal men. King Agamemnon, in his hour of glory, spurred the Achaeans into battle. At first, they achieved success, pushing the Trojans back to the city walls. But suddenly, Agamemnon took a wound, and Hector — seeing him speeding off the lines — took the offensive, rallying the Trojans on, pushing the Argives back. First, Diomedes, then Odysseus, then the brave warrior Euripolus were wounded, and all withdrew from battle.

But hordes of men fought on, the Achaean and Trojan infantry going hand to hand. The war, the deafening crash of battle, blazed around the strong-built wall, and rampart timbers thundered under the heavy blows as Argive fighters, beaten down by the lash of Zeus, were rolled back, pinned to their beaked ships in dread of Hector, that invincible, headlong terror. But now the Argives closed ranks, packed tight behind the wall, and a desperate battle flared between both armies. Everywhere, rocks, ramparts, breastworks swam with the blood of Trojans, Argives—both sides. But still the Trojans could not rout the Argives.

At last Zeus gave Hector the greater glory — the first to storm the wall. And now Hector grappled a huge boulder made light by Zeus, raised it up, and hurled it against the wall’s powerful gates. The boulder crashed through, and Hector leapt in after.

Whirling round, he cried to his Trojans: “The wall! Storm the wall!”

They rushed to obey him, some swarming over the top at once, others streaming in through the sturdy gateways, Argives scattering back in terror —
— back by the hollow hulls, the uproar rising. No way out! No end!

But once Zeus had driven Hector and Hector’s Trojans hard against the ships, he left both armies there and went to rest on the craggy slopes of Mount Ida, turning his shining eyes toward the north. He never dreamed that a single deathless god would go to war for Troy’s or Achaea’s forces now. But Poseidon, the mighty god of earthquakes, was not blind. He piddled the Argives broken down by Trojan troops, and his churning outrage rose against the Father. Off he strode to the Achaean’s vast encampment, where the Trojans stormed like flames. He rallied the defenders now, planting enormous martial power in each Achaean’s heart to urge the battle on, to fight and never flinch.

Now Hera poised on her golden throne looked down, stationed high at her post aloft Olympus’ peak. At once, she saw the sea lord blustering strong in the war where men win glory — her own brother and husband’s brother, too. And her heart raced with joy. But then she saw great Zeus at rest on the ridge, and the craggy heights of Ida gushing cold springs, and her heart filled with loathing. What could she do, Queen Hera wondered, her eyes glowing wide? How could she outmaneuver Zeus the mastermind — this Zeus with his battle-shield of storm and thunder? At last one strategy struck her mind as best: she would dress in all her glory and go to Ida. Perhaps the old desire would overwhelm the king to lie by her naked body and make immortal love and she might drift an oblivious, soft warm sleep across his eyes and numb that seething brain.

So off she went to her room, the chamber her loving son Hephaestus built her, hanging the doors from the doorposts snug and tight, locked with a secret bolt no other god could draw. She slipped in, closing the polished doors behind her. The ambrosia first. Hera cleansed her enticing body of any blemish; then applied a deep olive rub, the breathtaking, redolent oil she kept beside her. One stir of the scent in the bronze-floored halls of Zeus and a perfumed cloud would drift from heaven down to earth. Kneading her skin with this to a soft glow and combing her hair, she twisted her braids with expert hands, and sleek, luxurious, shining down from her deathless head they fell, cascading. Then back over her brow she draped her headdress, fine fresh veils for Hera the queen of gods, their pale, glimmering sheen like a rising sun. And under her smooth feet she fastened supple sandals.
Now, dazzling in all her rich regalia, head to foot, out of her room she strode and beckoned Aphrodite away from the other gods and whispered:

”Dear child, would you do me a favor . . . whatever I might ask? Or would you refuse me — always fuming against me because I defend the Argives, you the Trojans?”

Aphrodite the daughter of Zeus replied at once:

“Hera, queen of the skies, daughter of mighty Cronus, tell me what’s on your mind. I am eager to do it, whatever I can do, whatever can be done.”

Quick with treachery, noble Hera answered:

“Give me love. Give me ‘Longing’ now — the powers you use to overwhelm all gods and mortal men! I am off to the ends of the fruitful, teeming earth to visit Ocean — fountainhead of the gods — and Mother Tethys, who nourished me in the halls and reared me well. I go to visit them and dissolve their endless feud. How long they have held back from each other now — from making love — since anger struck their hearts. But if words of mine could lure them back to love—back to bed—to lock in one another’s arms once more, they would call me their honored loving friend forever.

Aphrodite, smiling her everlasting smile, replied:

“Impossible — worse, it’s wrong to deny your warm request, since you are the one who lies in the arms of mighty Zeus.”

With that, she loosed from her breasts the breastband, pierced and alluring, with every kind of enchantment woven though it. There is the heat of love, the pulsing rush of longing, the lover’s whisper, irresistible. Magic to make the sanest man go mad. And thrusting it into Hera’s outstretched hands, she breathed her name in a throbbing, rising voice:

“Here now, take this band, put it between your breasts—ravishing openwork—and the world lies in its weaving! You won’t return, I know, with your mission unfulfilled — whatever your eager heart desires to do.”
Hera broke into smiles now, her eyes wide. With a smile, she tucked the band between her breasts. And Aphrodite, the daughter of Zeus, went home. But Hera sped in a flash from Mount Olympus’ peak, and crossing Pieria’s coast and lovely Emathia rushed on, over the Thracian rider’s snowy ridges, sweeping the highest summits, feet never touching the earth. And east of Athos, skimmed the billowing foaming sea she touched down on Lemnos imperial Thoas’ city.

Quick on her feet, she scaled Gargaron peak, the highest crest of Ida. And Zeus spotted her now — Zeus who gathers the breasting clouds. And at one glance the lust came swirling over him, making his heart race, fast as the first time, all unknown to their parents, they rolled in bed, they locked and surged with love.

He rose before her now. He savored her name:

“Hera, where are you rushing? What wild desire brings you here from Olympus? Where are the chariot team and car you always ride?”

And filled with guile the noble Hera answered,

“I am off to the ends of the fruitful, teeming earth to visit Ocean, fountainhead of the gods, and Mother Tethys, who nourished me in their halls and reared me well. I go to visit them and resolve their endless feud. How long they have held back from each other now, from making love, since anger struck their hearts. My team stands at the foot of Ida with all her springs. They wait to bear me over the good dry land and sea. But now it is you — you I have come to visit, Zeus — speeding here from the heights of Mount Olympus, afraid you’ll flare in anger against me later if I should go in secret toward the halls of the deep, flowing ocean.”

“Why hurry, Hera?” Zeus who gathered the breasting clouds replied, “That is a journey you can make tomorrow. Now come, let’s go to bed, let’s lose ourselves in love! Never has such a lust for goddess or mortal women flooded my pounding heart and overwhelmed me so. Irresistible longing lays me low.”

Teeming with treachery, noble Hera led him on:
“Dread majesty, son of Cronus, what are you saying? You are eager for bed now, burning to make love here on Ida’s heights for all the world to see? What if one of the deathless gods observes us sleeping together? Yes! And runs off to the rest and points us out to all? I have no desire to rise from a bed like that and steal back home to your own high halls. Think of the shocking scandal there would be! But if you’re on fire, overflowing with passion, there’s always your own bedroom. Hephaestus built it—your own dear son. And the doors fit snug and tight. There we can go to bed at once, since love is now your pleasure!”

And Zeus who gathered the breasting clouds assured her:

“Hera, nothing to fear, no god or man will see us. I will wrap us round a golden cloud so dense, not even the sun’s rays, the sharpest eyes in the world, will pierce the mist and glimpse us making love!”

With that, the son of Cronus caught his wife in his arms, and under them now the holy earth burst with fresh green grass, crocus, and hyacinth, clover soaked with dew, so thick and soft it lifted their bodies off the hard packed ground. Folded deep in that bed they lay; and round them wrapped a marvelous cloud of gold, and glistening showers of dew rained down around them both.

And so, deep in peace, the Father slept on Gargaron Peak, conquered by sleep and strong assaults of love, his wife locked in his arms.

The soothing god of sleep went rushing off to the ships at once, telling Poiseidon how Hera had seduced great Zeus to lose himself in love. And now the Achaeans, led by Poseidon, pushed the Trojans back across the wall and sent them fleeing away in panic.

At that moment, Zeus awoke on the heights of Mount Ida and saw the Achaeans slaughtering, and the Trojans scattering left and right. Furious, he forbade Hera and the other immortal gods to save the Argive force till Thetis’s request had been fulfilled. Then he ordered Poseidon out of battle—the blue haired god of the sea. Into the surf he dove, and the Achaean heroes missed him sorely. At that very instant, storming Zeus dispatched Apollo, commanding him to turn the tide of battle. And now the Trojans sent the Argives scrambling back over the wall to their waiting beached ships.
Now down in the ocean sank the fiery light of day, drawing the dark night across the grain-giving earth. For the men of Troy, the day went down against their will. But not the Argives. What a blessing! How they prayed for nightfall coming on across their lines.

And Hector, confident of victory the next day, ordered the Trojans to make their camp across the Scamander plain, in full view of the Achaeans. The Trojans quickly brought out rations from the city, heaped the firewood high, and up from the plain the wind swept smoke, the sweetness and the savors swirling up the skies.

And so their spirits soared as they took positions down the passage ways of battle all night long. And the watch-fires blazed among them. A thousand fires were burning there on the plain, and beside each fire sat fifty fighting men, poised in the leaping blaze. And champing oats and glistening barley—stationed by their chariots—war stallions waited for Dawn to mount her glowing throne.

So the Trojans held their watch that night—but not the Achaeans. God sent panic seized them, comrade of bloodcurdling Rout. All their best were struck by grief too much to bear.

Distraught with the rising anguish, Atreus’ son went ranging back and forth, commanding heralds to sound out loud and clear and call the men to muster. They grouped on the meeting grounds, morale broken. Lord Marshal Agamemnon rose up in their midst, streaming tears like a dark spring running down some desolate rock face, its shaded currents flowing.

So, with a deep groan, the king addressed his armies:

“Friends, lords of the Argives, all my captains! Cronus’ son has entangled me in madness, blinding ruin. Zeus is a harsh, cruel god. He vowed to me long ago — he bowed his head — that I should never embark for home till I had brought the walls of the Ilium crashing down. But now I see, he only plotted brutal treachery. So come, follow my orders. Obey me, all you Argives. Cut and run! Sail home to the fatherland we love! We’ll never take the broad streets of Troy!”