Paris and Helen

*Paris and Menelaus prepared for battle to the death.* Both men armed at opposing sides of the forces. Into the no man’s land between the lines they strode, glances menacing, wild excitement seizing all who watched—the stallion-breaking Trojans and Argive men-at-arms. Striking a stand in the dueling-ground just cleared, they brandished spears at each other, tense with fury.

Suddenly Paris hurled. His spear’s long shadow flew, and the shaft hit Menelaus’ round shield, full center. Not pounding through, the brazen point bent back in the tough armor.

But his turn next: Menelaus, reared with a bronze lance and a prayer to Father Zeus:

“Zeus, king, give me revenge, he wronged me first! Illustrious Paris! Crush him under my hand! So even among the men to come, a man may shrink from wounding the host who showers him with kindness.”

Lunging at Paris, he grabbed his horsehair crest, swung him round, started to drag him into Argive lines. And now the braided chin-strap holding his helmet tight was gouging his soft throat—Paris was choking, strangling. Now he’d have hauled him off and won undying glory.

But Aphrodite, Zeus’s daughter quick to the mark, snapped the rawhide strap, cut from a bludgeoned ox, and the helmet came off empty in Menelaus’ fist. Whirling it round, the fighter sent it flying into his Argives, scrambling fast to retrieve it. Back at his man he sprang, enraged with brazen spear, mad for the kill. But Aphrodite snatched Paris away—easy work for a god, wrapped him in swirls of mist, and set him down in his bedroom filled with scent.

Then off she went herself to summon Helen And found her there on the steep, jutting tower with a troop of Trojan women clustered round her.
The goddess reached and tugged at her fragrant robe, whispering low, for all
the world like an old crone--the old weaver who, when they lived in
Lacedaemon, wove her fine woolens, and Helen held her dear.

Like her to the life, Immortal Love invited:

“Quickly -- Paris is calling for you, come back home! There he is in
the bedroom, the bed with inlaid rings. He’s glistening in all his beauty and
his robes! You’d never dream he’s come from fighting a man. You’d think
he’s off to a dance or slipped away from the dancing, stretching out at ease.”

“Not I! I’ll never go back again. It would be wrong -- disgraceful to
share that coward’s bed once more. The women of Troy would scorn me
down the years. Oh the torment! Never ending heartbreak!”

But Aphrodite rounded on her in fury:

“Don’t provoke me, wretched, headstrong girl! Or in my immortal rage
I may just toss you over--hate you as I adore you now, with a vengeance. I
might make you the butt of hard, withering hate from both sides at once--
Trojans and Achaeans. Then your fate can tread you down to dust!”

So she threatened, and Helen, the daughter of mighty Zeus, was
terrified. Shrouding herself in her glinting silver robes, she went along in
silence. None of her women saw her go. The goddess led the way.

And once they arrived at Paris’ sumptuous halls, the attendants briskly
turned to their own work as Helen in all her radiance climbed the steps to the
bedroom under the high, vaulting roof. There Aphrodite quickly brought her a
chair--the goddess herself with her everlasting smile--and set it down, face-to-
face with Paris.

And there Helen sat--Helen the child of Zeus whose shield is storm and
lightning--glancing away, lashing out at her husband:

“So, home from the wars! Oh I would to god you’d died there, brought
down by that great soldier, my husband long ago. And how you used to
boast--year in, year out--that you were the better man than fighting Menelaus,
in power, arm and spear! So why not go back now, hurl your challenge at
Menelaus dear to Ares? Fight it out together, man-to-man again? He just might impale you on his spear!”

But Paris replied at once to Helen’s challenge:

“No more, dear one. Don’t rake me with your taunts--myself and all my courage. This time, true, Menelaus has won the day, thanks to Athena. I’ll bring him down tomorrow. Even we Trojans have gods who battle on our side. But come, let’s go to bed; let’s lose ourselves in love! Never has longing for you overwhelmed me so. No, not even then, I tell you, that first time, when I swept you up from the lovely hills of Lacedaemon, sailed you off and away in the racing deep-sea ships. And we went and locked in love on Rocky Island. That was nothing to how I hunger for you now. Irresistible longing lays me low!”

He led the way to bed; his wife went with him.

And now, while the two made love in the large carved bed, Menelaus stalked like a wild beast, up and down the lines. Where could he catch a glimpse of magnificent Paris? Not a single Trojan, none of their famous allies could point out Paris to battle-hungry Menelaus--not that they would hide him out of friendship, even if someone saw him. All of them hated him like death, black death.

But marshal Agamemnon called out to the armies:

“Hear me now, you Trojans, Dardans, Trojan allies! Clearly victory goes to Menelaus, dear to Ares. You must surrender Helen and all her treasure with her. At once. And pay us reparations fair and fitting, a price to inspire generations still to come!”

So Atrides demanded. His armies roared assent.

As the Achaeans and Trojans wondered what was coming next, Hera--bent on Troy’s destruction--coaxed Zeus into breaking the temporary truce between the armies. So Zeus launched Athena, already poised for action. Down she went among the Trojan columns, seeking out the archer Pandarus.

Halting beside him, she let fly her challenge:
“Let me tempt you, you with your archer’s skills. Have you the daring to wing an arrow at Menelaus? Just think what thanks and what fame you’ll win in the eyes of all the Trojans. So Athena fired the fool’s heart inside him. Then Pandarus shot an arrow at Menelaus, a shaft of black pain. Though it struck him in the chest, it only grazed his flesh. But the action was enough to break the truce. While the expert healer, Mcahaon, tended to Menelaus’ wound, on the Trojan’s came, columns armed for assault, and again the Argives donned their gear, and roused their lust for war.

As a heavy surf assaults some roaring coast, so wave on wave they came--Achaean battalions, ceaseless, surging on to war.

At last, the armies clashed at one strategic point. They slammed their shields together. Pike scraped pike with the grappling strength of fighters armed in bronze. And their round shields pounded, boss on welded boss. And the sound 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.

Antilochus was the first to kill a Trojan captain. Antilochus thrust first, speared the horsehair crest helmet right at the ridge, and the bronze spear-point lodged in the man’s forehead, smashing through his skull and the dark came whirling down across his eyes.

And Telemonian Ajax struck Anthemion’s son--his life cut short so soon, brought down by the spear of lionhearted Ajax. At the first charge, he slashed his right nipple--clean throught the shoulder went the brazen point, and down in the dust he went like a lithe black poplar. So lay Anthemion’s son, Simeseus, cut down by the giant royal Ajax.

Antiphus hurled at him, but his sharp spear missed, and he hit Leucus instead, Odysseus’ loyal comrade, gouging his groin as the man hauled off a corpse. Enraged at his friend’s death, Odysseus sprang in fury. Helmed in fiery bronze, he plowed through the front, and charging the enemy, glaring left and right, he hurled his spear--a direct hit! Odysseus struck Democoon --Odysseus speared him. Straight though one temple and out the other punched the sharp bronze point, and the dark came swirling thick across his eyes. Down he crashed, armor clanging against his chest.
And the Trojan front shrank back--glorious Hector too--as the Argives yelled and dragged away the corpses. Pushing on, breakneck on.

But lord god Apollo, gazing down now from the heights of Pergamus, rose in outrage, crying down at the Trojans:

“Up and at them, you stallion breaking Trojans! Never give up you lust for war against these Argives. What are their bodies made of--rock or iron--to block your tearing bronze? Stab them! Slash their flesh! Achilles, the son of lovely sleek hared Thetis--the man’s not even fighting. No! He wallows in all his heartsick fury by the ships!”

So he cried far from the city’s heights--the awesome god Apollo.

But Zeus’ daughter, Athena spurred the Argives on--Athena first in glory, third born of the gods--whenever she saw some slacker hanging back as she hurtled through the onset.

And now, no man who waded into that work could scorn it any longer. Anyone still not speared or stabbed by tearing bronze, who whirled into the heart of all that slaughter--not even if great Athena led him by the hand, flicking away the weapons hailing down against him. That day, ranks of Trojans, ranks of Achaean fighters, sprawled there side by side, face down in the dust.

Then Pallas Athena granted Tideus’ son, Diomedes, strength and daring, so that the fighter would shine forth and tower over the Argives, and win himself great glory. Inspired by the goddess, Diomedes led the Achaeans in a Trojan rout. Down the plain he stormed like a stream in flood, a routing winter torrent sweeping away the dykes. The tight, piled dykes can’t hold it back any longer. Banks shoring the blooming vineyards can’t curb its course. A flash-flood bursts as the rains from Zeus pour down their power, acre on acre, the well dug work of farmers crumbling under it.

So under Tideus’ force, the Trojans columns panicked now. No standing their ground--massed and packed as they were. And the next moment, crowds of Trojans would have clambered back inside their city walls, terror-struck by the Argives primed for battle.
But Helenus, son of Priam, best of the seers who scan the flight of birds, came striding up to Hector calling out:

“Hector you go back to the city. Tell our mother to gather all of the older noble women together in grey-eyed Athena’s shrine; then offer her gifts if only she’ll hold Diomedes back from the holy city--that wild spearman, that invincible, headlong terror.”

So he urged. And Hector obeyed his brother.