

The Iliad II

By The ancient poet - Homer

The war dragged on, neither side able to gain a decisive advantage. The balance of favor would tip one way as a particular god helped their favorite, but then the gods on the opposing side would ensure that the victory was not pressed home. Both on the battlefield and in the heavens, things had reached an **impasse**. After nearly ten years of being besieged the fortress walls of Troy remained impregnable, but still the Greeks did not leave.

One night, Agamemnon gathered his dejected men around him and asked them if they wanted to **concede**. Diomedes stood up and spoke: “Zeus gave you kingly stature, Agamemnon, but you appear to have lost your kingly valor. If you miss your home, then you know the way back. But we shall stay here and fight.” The men applauded.

Then the wise old king Nestor spoke. Was it not time to apologize to Achilles for insulting him, he suggested, and beg the young hero to fight once more? Agamemnon saw that he must end their quarrel, and sent wily-tongued Odysseus to bring Achilles rich gifts and an apology. But proud Achilles refused, and for once Odysseus’ diplomacy failed.

Meanwhile in the heavens, Zeus did not forget his promise to the Thetis. He now granted the Trojans the upper hand, so that the Greeks might suffer until they begged for the return of Achilles. The Trojans fought hard and won much ground, advancing right up to the Greek ships. Fighting on, they broke through the Greek defenses and set the first ship alight.

Achilles' dear friend Patroclus saw how the battle had turned. "If the rout of the Greeks leaves *you* cold," he admonished Achilles, "at least let *me* go and fight. I shall wear your armor. Everyone will believe that it is *you*. The Greeks will take heart and the Trojans will take the flight."

The clangor of the battle and the stench of the burning ship moved Achilles. "Very well, go," he said to Patroclus, "but as soon as the tide turns in our favor, be sure to return. Let the others take the fighting to the plain, lest some immortal such as Trojan-loving Apollo is lying in wait to crush you."

So Patroclus donned Achilles' shining armor and mounted his chariot. Then with a rallying cry, he wheeled into battle, the men following like a pack of hungry wolves.

Cold sweat beaded the brows of the Trojans, and they turned tail for Troy, believing that Achilles had returned. And Patroclus was indeed like glorious Achilles - countless enemies falling by his sword, among them Sarpedon, son of Zeus. A rain of red spattered the field as Zeus, the king of the gods, cried a blood-curdling **lament**.

Intoxicated by victory however, Patroclus forgot the counsel of Achilles to return, and harried the enemy all the way to the walls of Troy. Again, the god Apollo intervened against the Greeks. Three times Patroclus advanced against the **citadel**, and three times Apollo blocked him. "It is not fated for you, Patroclus, to capture Troy," warned the god in anger. "Nor is it the fate of Achilles, who is by far your better!"

Apollo then found Hector, and put it to him that if he killed this great warrior he would be glorified amongst the Trojans. In a passion, Hector called to his charioteer, and rushed to seek out the warrior thought by all to be Achilles (but in truth Patroclus) that he might let loose his fury upon him.

Patroclus, from his chariot, saw Hector coming. He hurled a rock, which struck the driver and flung him face-down dead on the ground. “What agile drivers the Trojans are!” mocked Patroclus. “See how gracefully he fell, as if he popped overboard to go after oysters!”

Mad with anger, Hector leapt on him, and they fought furiously atop the body of the poor dead charioteer. The gods now decided that Patroclus should meet his fate. Apollo, shrouded in mist, loomed down and struck the helmet from Patroclus’ head, so that it shattered into pieces in the dust. His spear splintered as he held it, and his shield and breastplate fell away.

Patroclus stood bewildered by the unseen godly force, and in that uncanny moment a Trojan threw his javelin and speared him. Hector then rushed forward and plunged his sword deep into Patroclus’s body.

With the light fading from his dying eyes, Patroclus turned them upon Hector, using his last breath to prophesy the other’s death: “Remember these words, Hector. Very little life remains for you on earth. Death and destiny stand close by, and by Achilles’ sword you shall fall!”

A messenger spoke: “Alas, Achilles, I bring bad **tidings** - what would I give that they were not true! Patroclus is dead, and they are dragging his naked corpse in the dust, for Hector stripped him of your armor.”

Achilles’ soul blackened with the news. His mother heard his heart-rending **lament**, and hurried to console him. “What makes you cry so bitterly, my son? Has Zeus broken his promise that the Greeks should suffer until they honor you once more?”

“Oh, Mother, Zeus has fulfilled his word only too well. But how can it please me now that I have lost my dearest companion? I cannot rest until I kill Hector and avenge Patroclus’s blood.”

Thetis tried to dissuade Achilles, because she knew that the Fates had decreed that Hector's death would soon be followed by that of her son. But there was no changing his mind. He asked that she bring him new armor so that he may fight. "You shall not have it by dawn's first light," promised Thetis.

No sooner had she gone than another immortal, the wind-footed Iris, appeared at his shoulder, sent in secret by Hera. "Rise up great Achilles!" she urged. "Battle rages for the body of Patroclus. Hector is bent on cutting off Patroclus's head to set it on a stake! Do not allow such a disgrace! You cannot fight without armor. But come, stand on the ramparts; the very sight of you will petrify them!"

So Achilles stood on the ramparts, high above the fighting, and Athena saw to it that he was transfigured, god-like, striking terror into the hearts of the Trojans and winning time for the Greeks to reclaim the defiled body of their friend.

As the Greeks mourned Patroclus's body, far away in the heavens Thetis arrived at the dwelling of Hephaestus, the crippled god of fire, who was sweating as he labored at his anvil. When Hephaestus saw Thetis, his heart rejoiced, for it was she who had saved his life when his mother Hera, ashamed of his lameness, had cast him down to the ocean to die.

Thetis now requested that the favor be returned, and asked Hephaestus to **forge** new armor for her stricken son Achilles, who had but little time to live.

The blacksmith set twenty sets of **bellows** to fan his **foundry** fire. Into the fire he threw copper and tin, silver and gold, then took up his tools and started to work. He crafted the most exquisite armor ever seen, and a formidable shield on which was engraved all of heaven and earth, and all of

humanity - men at war, but also men living in peace, tilling the land and happy, all encircled by the great ocean at the shield's edge. Just before dawn, Hephaestus's work was done, and Thetis, hawk-like, flew down to Achilles and dropped before him the fire-god's gift.

Achilles then called council, and the Greeks came, a sorry sight. Odysseus, Diomedes, Agamemnon with a great spear-wound. Even the greatest heroes were limping. "Let us leave behind what has previously separated us," Achilles declared, "and fight together!"

"But Achilles, it was fate and Zeus that blinded me and bade me do you wrong," said Agamemnon. "Now with **covetous** treasures I honor you, and return to you the girl Briseis, whom I have not touched."

They sacrificed a bull to the gods, and as they ate to nourish their bodies for what lay ahead their helmets and shields glittered in the morning sun like a sparkling sea. None shone, though, like the armor of Achilles, which set forth a thousand rays of light.

Achilles mounted his chariot, and his driver harnessed the stallions. "Now, my **steeds**," he instructed, "keep your master safe, for he has many Trojans to kill. Do not leave me out on the plain like poor Patroclus."

Being immortal and able to speak, the horses answered. "Fear not, we shall keep you safe, brave-hearted Achilles! But know that your own dreadful hour draws near, and we can do nothing about it, even though we are faster than the wind."

"Do not speak to me of my death," Achilles replied. "I know it is my fate to die here, far from home. But Hector must see **Hades** before me!"

He let out a deafening cry and wheeled battle, his armor blazing sparks of light as he sped across the plain. The earth shook as the two armies drove forth, each toward the other.