

ILIAD III

By Homer

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. The air was as tense as before the thunder breaks, and high above the Olympian spectators readied themselves to intervene for their own favorites’ sakes.

Foremost came Achilles, like a blustering wind, weaving amongst the enemy, spreading panic and death. Countless times Achilles killed, and his chariot overran the dead until its shaft was blood-drenched. His frenzy took him to the banks of the River Scamander, and still he did not stop, tossing the bodies into the high piles in the river.

The deep-whirling waters rose up in anger, taking on mortal likeness and finding voice: “Achilles, you are greatest in strength, but also in violence. You have crammed my babbling waters with corpses and cut off my current to the sea. Go wreak your havoc elsewhere!”

“Scamander,” Achilles replied, “I shall not cease until I have penned the last of the Trojans inside the city walls and gone head to head to the death with Hector!”

Gargling blood, the angry river swelled and belched the dead out onto its banks. A gigantic wave rose up and the surge washed Achilles away, quite helpless.

Hera shouted to Hephaestus to stem its course, and the lame god threw down fire to burn the corpses and dry the plain. Only when the boiling river cried for mercy did the fire stop.

The battle raged on unabated. Old Priam watched from Troy’s tall tower, and his heart bled to see Achilles slaughtering his men. He caught a glimpse of his son Hector in the throng and called out to him: ‘Do not fight Achilles, for he is invincible!’ Hector’s thoughts strayed for a moment to his dear wife Andromache, and their son, still a baby, who had taken fright at his warrior’s helmet when he had kissed him goodbye. He wrestled his attention back to the task at hand. ‘I must kill Achilles,’ he thought to himself, ‘or at least stand and fight him like a man.’

Meanwhile the Greeks had reached the walls of the city, and the Trojans were desperately trying to get back inside for protection. But Hector remained at the gates, rooted to the spot for fear of the **indomitable** Achilles. Nor could he go inside, again for fear - that he be called a coward.

Then, through the dust cloud of battle, he saw him, striding purposefully nearer and nearer, the blazing armor so bright that it cast eerie flames of light. Hector panicked and started to run. Achilles ran after him, a hawk marking a dove. Three times they made the complete circle of Troy, and Trojans and Greeks fell quiet, watching. Eventually Hector stopped

running, as he knew he must, and with a deep breath turned to face his pursuer.

“Achilles, before we fight, let us vow, and may the immortals bear witness, that the victor honors the body of the fallen. Do you agree?”

“Hector, you dog, there can be no promises between us. Ready yourself to pay dearly for my dead comrades. Come, show us what you’re worth!”

Achilles threw his spear. Hector ducked and it nosed into the dirt, but Athena, hidden to all, gave it back to Achilles, who held it once more. Hector realized the gods were now sending him towards his death, but he would not go without a fight! He unsheathed his sword and attacked. Achilles deflected Hector’s blows with his great shield, and while they fought hand to hand he cast an eye over his enemy to seek out some vulnerable spot, unprotected by armor. He found it at the base of Hector’s neck, where the collarbone starts, and there, with his spear, he struck. Hector dropped down into the dust, and Achilles, keeping him pinned like a fish, vaunted over him. “You thought you were safe when you killed Patroclus, thinking it was me that you killed. Now I kill you, and the dogs and vultures will have your body while we give due honors to Patroclus.”

“I beg of you,” rasped Hector, “hand my body over to my poor parents, that they may bury me.”

His **supplications** left Achilles unmoved. When Hector’s spirit left him, Achilles stripped him of the remains of the armor that had been his own and that Patroclus had worn, and bound Hector’s corpse to his chariot. Speechless with horror, old Priam and the Trojans watched this outrageous sacrilege. Achilles drove his chariot three times around the city walls, Hector’s soulless body dragging behind him in the dust.

He continued thus for twelve days, desecrating Hector's body and driving it around the city walls for the Trojans to see. The gods were greatly displeased, and sent Thetis to tell Achilles that it was time to hand Hector's body to old Priam.

With the help of the gods, Priam journeyed at dead of night into the camp of the Greeks and found Achilles alone, mournful. The old man fell at Achilles' feet, clasped his knees and kissed his son and the sons of his people. The pain and courage of this old father touched Achilles' soul, melting his anger, and he lifted Priam up and set him to dine with him, agreeing to all the old man asked for the burial of his son. "We need eleven days to honor him as is fit," said the king.

"Then I will call eleven days' armistice, when you can do as you want to do."

When they loaded the body of Hector onto a cart, Priam was thankful to see that the gods had preserved it. Then king then left, quietly as he had come. As the dawn cast its rosy glow on the land, Troy opened its gates for the last time for her bravest child.

Achilles did not see his elderly father again, nor his homeland. As was prophesied, and as was the will of the gods who bring all things to accomplish-ment, he found his death on Troy's blood-drenched plain.

It was an arrow from the bow of Paris, contrived by Trojan-loving Apollo to fly with deadly accuracy, that killed him. It struck not his neck - nor some other obviously fatal target - but his heel. Apollo knew that this was the only vulnerable part of Achilles' body, the spot where his mother had held him as a baby when she dipped him into the waters of the Styx to grant him immortality. Though he died at Apollo's hand, the immortality that Achilles found was of a different kind, as his name and his story live on.

EPILOGUE

It was the will of the god that Troy should fall, and so it did, not by power or prowess, but by a feat of cunning from the resourceful Odysseus, who was in turn inspired by the goddess Athena.

He conceived an ingenious design which the men built for him - a giant wooden horse, hollow inside, and mounted on a moveable **plinth**. On its base, they inscribed the words:

To Athena - for a Safe Journey Home

And then this dismantled their camp and put to sea, leaving nothing on the beach but the horse.

The Trojans were exultant when they saw the fleet depart. The siege had ended! They wheeled the great horse into the city and planned a glorious celebration.

Only one of Apollo's priests was suspicious. "We should beware Greeks bearing gifts," he warned, "for they are sly, and would never quit Troy so easily after ten years' war."

But the people were too excited to listen, and they feasted late into the night.

When at last the Trojans slept soundly, full of wine and happiness, a trapdoor in the belly of the horse opened, and from a secret compartment inside emerged first a rope, then a soldier, then another and another. Thus, a small team of Greeks infiltrated the **citadel**, where they killed the sleeping guards and threw open the city gates, beyond which the entire Greek army was waiting, having returned from their hiding place beyond the headland.

Soon all of Troy was burning, and those who were not massacred were dragged away to slavery. Only a few survived the **carnage**, among them was Aeneas, whose search for a new home brought him to Italy, where, they say, he later founded Rome. But that is another story.