

ILIAD 1

Rage:

Sing, Goddess, Achilles' rage, Black and murderous, that cost the Greeks Incalculable pain, pitched countless souls Of heroes into Hades' dark, And left their bodies to rot as feasts For dogs and birds, as Zeus' will was done. Begin with the clash between Agamemnon— The Greek warlord—and godlike Achilles.

Which of the immortals set these two At each other's throats?

Apollo, Zeus' son and Leto's, offended By the warlord. Agamemnon had dishonored Chryses, Apollo's priest, so the god Struck the Greek camp with plague, And the soldiers were dying of it. Chryses Had come to the Greek beachhead camp Hauling a fortune for his daughter's ransom. Displaying Apollo's sacral ribbons On a golden staff, he made a formal plea To the entire Greek army, but especially The commanders, Atreus' two sons:

"Sons of Atreus and Greek heroes all: May the gods on Olympus grant you plunder Of Priam's city and a safe return home. But give me my daughter back and accept This ransom out of respect for Zeus' son, Lord Apollo, who deals death from afar."

A murmur rippled through the ranks: "Respect the priest and take the ransom." But Agamemnon was not pleased And dismissed Chryses with a rough speech:

"Don't let me ever catch you, old man, by these ships again, Skulking around now or sneaking back later. The god's staff and ribbons won't save you next time. The girl is mine, and she'll be an old woman in Argos Before I let her go, working the loom in my house And coming to my bed, far from her homeland. Now clear out of here before you make me angry!"

The old man was afraid and did as he was told. He walked in silence along the whispering surf line, And when he had gone some distance the priest Prayed to Lord Apollo, son of silken-haired Leto:

"Hear me, Silverbow, Protector of Chryse, Lord of Holy Cilla, Master of Tenedos, And Sminthian God of Plague! If ever I've built a temple that pleased you Or burnt fat thighbones of bulls and goats— Grant me this prayer: Let the Danaans pay for my tears with your arrows!"

Apollo heard his prayer and descended Olympus' crags Pulsing with fury, bow slung over one shoulder, The arrows rattling in their case on his back As the angry god moved like night down the mountain.

He settled near the ships and let loose an arrow. Reverberation from his silver bow hung in the air. He picked off the pack animals first, and the lean hounds, But then aimed his needle-tipped arrows at the men And shot until the death-fires crowded the beach.

Nine days the god's arrows rained death on the camp. On the tenth day Achilles called an assembly. Hera, the white-armed goddess, planted the thought in him Because she cared for the Greeks and it pained her To see them dying. When the troops had all mustered, Up stood the great runner Achilles, and said:

"Well, Agamemnon, it looks as if we'd better give up And sail home—assuming any of us are left alive— If we have to fight both the war and this plague. But why not consult some prophet or priest Or a dream interpreter, since dreams too come from Zeus, Who could

tell us why Apollo is so angry, If it's for a vow or a sacrifice he holds us at fault. Maybe he'd be willing to lift this plague from us If he savored the smoke from lambs and prime goats."

Achilles had his say and sat down. Then up rose Calchas, son of Thestor, bird-reader supreme, Who knew what is, what will be, and what has been. He had guided the Greek ships to Troy Through the prophetic power Apollo Had given him, and he spoke out now:

"Achilles, beloved of Zeus, you want me to tell you About the rage of Lord Apollo, the Arch-Destroyer. And I will tell you. But you have to promise me and swear You will support me and protect me in word and deed. I have a feeling I might offend a person of some authority Among the Greeks, and you know how it is when a king Is angry with an underling. He might swallow his temper For a day, but he holds it in his heart until later And it all comes out. Will you guarantee my security?"

Achilles, the great runner, responded: "Don't worry. Prophecy to the best of your knowledge. I swear by Apollo, to whom you pray when you reveal The gods' secrets to the Greeks, Calchas, that while I live And look upon this earth, no one will lay a hand On you here beside these hollow ships, no, not even Agamemnon, who boasts he is the best of the Achaeans."

And Calchas, the, perfect prophet, taking courage:

"The god finds no fault with vow or sacrifice. It is for his priest, whom Agamemnon dishonored And would not allow to ransom his daughter, That Apollo deals and will deal death from afar. He will not lift this foul plague from the Greeks Until we return the dancing-eyed girl to her father Unransomed, unbought, and make formal sacrifice On Chryse. Only then might we appease the god."

He finished speaking and sat down. Then up rose Atreus' son, the warlord Agamemnon, Furious, anger like twin black thunderheads seething In his lungs, and his eyes flickered with fire As he looked Calchas up and down, and said:

"You damn soothsayer! You've never given me a good omen yet. You take some kind of perverse pleasure in prophesying Doom, don't you? Not a single favorable omen ever! Nothing good ever happens! And now you stand here Uttering oracles before the Greeks, telling us That your great ballistic god is giving us all this trouble Because I was unwilling to accept the ransom For Chryses' daughter but preferred instead to keep her In my tent! And why shouldn't I? I like her better than My wife Clytemnestra. She's no worse than her When it comes to looks, body, mind, or ability. Still, I'll give her back, if that's what's best. I don't want to see the army destroyed like this. But I want another prize ready for me right away. I'm not going to be the only Greek without a prize, It wouldn't be right. And you all see where mine is going."

And Achilles, strong, swift, and godlike:

"And where do you think, son of Atreus, You greedy glory-hound, the magnanimous Greeks Are going to get another prize for you? Do you think we have some kind of stockpile in reserve? Every town in the area has been sacked and the stuff all divided. You want the men to count it all back and redistribute it? All right, you give the girl back to the god. The army Will repay you three and four times over—when and if Zeus allows us to rip Troy down to its foundations."

The warlord Agamemnon responded:

"You may be a good man in a fight, Achilles, And look like a god, but don't try to put one over on me— It won't work. So while you have your prize, You want me to sit tight and do without? Give the girl back, just like that? Now maybe If the army, in a generous spirit, voted me Some suitable prize of their own choice, something fair— But if it doesn't, I'll just go take something myself, Your prize perhaps, or Ajax's, or Odysseus', And whoever she belongs to, it'll stick in his throat.

But we can think about that later. Right now we launch A black ship on the bright salt water, get a crew aboard, Load on a hundred bulls, and have Chryseis board her too, My girl with her lovely cheeks. And we'll want a good man For captain, Ajax or Idomeneus or godlike Odysseus— Or maybe you, son of Peleus, our most formidable hero— To offer sacrifice and appease the Arch-Destroyer for us."

Achilles looked him up and down and said:

"You shameless, profiteering excuse for a commander! How are you going to get any Greek warrior To follow you into battle again? You know, I don't have any quarrel with the Trojans, They didn't do anything to me to make me Come over here and fight, didn't run off my cattle or horses Or ruin my farmland back home in Phthia, not with all The shadowy mountains and moaning seas between. It's for you, dogface, for your precious pleasure— And Menelaus' honor—that we came here, A fact you don't have the decency even to mention! And now you're threatening to take away the prize That I sweated for and the Greeks gave me. I never get a prize equal to yours when the army Captures one of the Trojan strongholds. No, I do all the dirty work with my own hands, And when the battle's over and we divide the loot You get the lion's share and I go back to the ships With some pitiful little thing, so worn out from fighting I don't have the strength left even to complain. Well, I'm going back to Phthia now. Far better To head home with my curved ships than stay here, Unhonored myself and piling up a fortune for you."

The warlord Agamemnon responded:

"Go ahead and desert, if that's what you want! I'm not going to beg you to stay. There are plenty of others Who will honor me, not least of all Zeus the Counselor. To me, you're the most hateful king under heaven, A born troublemaker. You actually like fighting and war. If you're all that strong, it's just a gift from some god. So why don't you go home with your ships and lord it over Your precious Myrmidons. I couldn't care less about you Or your famous temper. But I'll tell you this: Since Phoebus Apollo is taking away my Chryseis, Whom I'm sending back aboard ship with my friends, I'm coming to your hut and taking Briseis, Your own beautiful prize, so that you will see just how much Stronger I am than you, and the next person will wince At the thought of opposing me as an equal."

Achilles' chest was a rough knot of pain Twisting around his heart: should he Draw the sharp sword that hung by his thigh, Scatter the ranks and gut Agamemnon, Or control his temper, repress his rage? He was mulling it over, inching the great sword From its sheath, when out of the blue Athena came, sent by the white-armed goddess Hera, who loved and watched over both men. She stood behind Achilles and grabbed his sandy hair, Visible only to him: not another soul saw her. Awestruck, Achilles turned around, recognizing Pallas Athena at once—it was her eyes— And words flew from his mouth like winging birds:

"Daughter of Zeus! Why have you come here? To see Agamemnon's arrogance, no doubt. I'll tell you where I place my bets, Goddess: Sudden death for this outrageous behavior."

Athena's eyes glared through the sea's salt haze.

"I came to see if I could check this temper of yours, Sent from heaven by the white-armed goddess Hera, who loves and watches over both of you men. Now come on, drop this quarrel, don't draw your sword. Tell him off instead. And I'll tell you, Achilles, how things will be: You're going to get Three times as many magnificent gifts Because of his arrogance. Just listen to us and be patient."

Achilles, the great runner, responded:

"When you two speak, Goddess, a man has to listen No matter how angry. It's better that way. Obey the gods and they hear you when you pray."

With that he ground his heavy hand Onto the silver hilt and pushed the great sword Back into its sheath. Athena's speech Had been well-timed. She was on her way To Olympus by now, to the halls of Zeus And the other immortals, while Achilles Tore into Agamemnon again:

"You bloated drunk, With a dog's eyes and a rabbit's heart! You've never had the guts to buckle on armor in battle Or come out with the best fighting Greeks On any campaign! Afraid to look Death in the eye, Agamemnon? It's far more profitable To hang back in the army's rear—isn't it?— Confiscating prizes from any Greek who talks back And bleeding your people dry. There's not a real man Under your command, or this latest atrocity Would be your last, son of Atreus. Now get this straight. I swear a formal oath: By this scepter, which will never sprout leaf Or branch again since it was cut from its stock In the mountains, which will bloom no more Now that bronze has pared off leaf and bark, And which now the sons of the Greeks hold in their hands At council, upholding Zeus' laws— By this scepter I swear: When every last Greek desperately misses Achilles, Your remorse won't do any good then, When Hector the man-killer swats you down like flies. And you will eat your heart out Because you failed to honor the best Greek of all."

Those were his words, and he slammed the scepter, Studded with gold, to the ground and sat down.

Opposite him, Agamemnon fumed. Then Nestor Stood up, sweet-worded Nestor, the orator from Pylos With a voice high-toned and liquid as honey. He had seen two generations of men pass away In sandy Pylos and was now king in the third. He was full of good will in the speech he made:

"It's a sad day for Greece, a sad day. Priam and Priam's sons would be happy indeed, And the rest of the Trojans too, glad in their hearts, If they learned all this about you two fighting, Our two best men in council and in battle. Now you listen to me, both of you. You are both Younger than I am, and I've associated with men Better than you, and they didn't treat me lightly. I've never seen men like those, and never will, The likes of Peirithous and Dryas, a shepherd to his people, Caineus and Exadius and godlike Polyphemus, And Aegeus' son, Theseus, who could have passed for a god, The strongest men who ever lived on earth, the strongest, And they fought with the strongest, with wild things From the mountains, and beat the daylights out of them. I was their companion, although I came from Pylos, From the ends of the earth—they sent for me themselves. And I held my own fighting with them. You couldn't find A mortal on earth who could fight with them now. And when I talked in council, they took my advice. So should you two now: taking advice is a good thing. Agamemnon, for all your nobility, don't take his girl. Leave her be: the army originally gave her to him as a prize. Nor should you, son of Peleus, want to lock horns with a king. A scepter-holding king has honor beyond the rest of men, Power and glory given by Zeus himself. You are stronger, and it is a goddess who bore you. But he is more powerful, since he rules over more. Son of Atreus, cease your anger. And I appeal Personally to Achilles to control his temper, since he is, For all Greeks, a mighty bulwark in this evil war."

And Agamemnon, the warlord:

"Yes, old man, everything you've said is absolutely right. But this man wants to be ahead of everyone else, He wants to rule everyone, give orders to everyone, Lord it over everyone, and he's not going to get away with it. If the gods eternal made him a spearman, does that mean They gave him permission to be insolent as well?"

And Achilles, breaking in on him:

"Ha, and think of the names people would call me If I bowed and scraped every time you opened your mouth. Try that on somebody else, but not on me. I'll tell you this, and you can stick it in your gut: I'm not going to put up a fight on account of the girl. You, all of you, gave her and you can all take her back. But anything else of mine in my black sailing ship You keep your goddamn hands off, you hear? Try it. Let everybody here see how fast Your black blood boils up around my spear."

So it was a stand-off, their battle of words, And the assembly beside the Greek ships dissolved. Achilles went back to the huts by his ships With Patroclus and his men. Agamemnon had a fast ship Hauled down to the sea, picked twenty oarsmen, Loaded on a hundred bulls due to the god, and had Chryses' daughter, His fair-cheeked girl, go aboard also. Odysseus captained, And when they were all on board, the ship headed out to sea.

Onshore, Agamemnon ordered a purification. The troops scrubbed down and poured the filth Into the sea. Then they sacrificed to Apollo Oxen and goats by the hundreds on the barren shore. The smoky savor swirled up to the sky.

That was the order of the day. But Agamemnon Did not forget his spiteful threat against Achilles. He summoned Talthybius and Eurybates, Faithful retainers who served as his heralds:

"Go to the hut of Achilles, son of Peleus; Bring back the girl, fair-cheeked Briseis. If he won't give her up, I'll come myself With my men and take her—and freeze his heart cold."

It was not the sort of mission a herald would relish. The pair trailed along the barren seashore Until they came to the Myrmidons' ships and encampment. They found Achilles sitting outside his hut Beside his black ship. He was not glad to see them. They stood respectfully silent, in awe of this king, And it was Achilles who was moved to address them first:

"Welcome, heralds, the gods' messengers and men's. Come closer. You're not to blame, Agamemnon is, Who sent you here for the girl, Briseis.