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Opening extract from

The Iliad

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SHIP-GATHERING

When Menelaus returned from hunting and found his queen fled with the Trojan prince, the black grief and the red rage came upon him, and he sent word of the wrong done to him and a furious call for aid to his brother, black-bearded Agamemnon who was High King over all the other kings of Greece.

And from golden Mycenae of the Lion Gate where Agamemnon sat in his great hall, the call went out for men and ships. To ancient Nestor of Pylos, to Thisbe where the wild doves croon, to rocky Pytho, to Ajax the mighty, Lord of Salamis, and Diomedes of the Loud War Cry whose land was Argos of the many horses, to the cunning Odysseus among the harsh hills of Ithaca, even far south to Idomeneus of Crete, and many more.

And from Crete and Argos and Ithaca, from the mainland and the islands, the black ships put to sea, as the kings gathered their men from the fields and the fishing and took up bows and spears for the keeping of their oath, to fetch back Helen of the Fair Cheeks and take vengeance upon Troy, whose prince had carried her away.

Agamemnon waited for them with his own ships in the harbour of Aulis; and when they had gathered to him there, the great fleet sailed for Troy.

But one of the war-leaders who should have been with them was lacking, and this was the way of it. Before ever Paris was born, Thetis of the Silver Feet had given a son to King Peleus, and they called him Achilles. The gods had promised that if she dipped the babe in the Styx, which is one of the rivers of the underworld, the sacred water would proof him against death in battle. So, gladly she did as she was bidden, but dipping him headfirst in the dark and bitter flood, she held on to him by one foot. Thus her fingers, pressed about his heel, kept the waters from reaching that one spot. By the time she understood what she had done it was too late, for the thing could not be done again; so ever after she was afraid for her son, always afraid.

When he was old enough his father sent him to Thessaly, with an older boy, Patroclus, for his companion, to Chiron, the wisest of all the Centaurs. And with the other boy, Chiron taught him to ride (on his own back) and trained him in all the warrior skills of sword and spear and bow, and in making the music of the lyre, until the time came for him to return to his father's court.

But when the High King's summons went out and the black ships were launched for war, his mother sent him secretly to the Isle of Scyros, begging King Lycomedes to have him dressed as a maiden and hidden among his own daughters, so that he might be safe.

How it came about that Achilles agreed to this, no one knows. Maybe she cast some kind of spell on him, for love's sake. But there he remained among the princesses, while the ships gathered in the world outside.

But Thetis' loving plan failed after all, for, following the sea-ways eastward, part of the fleet put in to take on fresh water at Scyros where the whisper was abroad that Prince Achilles was concealed.

King Lycomedes welcomed the warriors but denied all knowledge of the young prince. The leaders were desperate to find him, for Calchas, chief among the soothsayers who sailed with them, had said that they would not take Troy without him. Then Odysseus, who was not called the Resourceful for nothing, blackened his beard and eyebrows and put on the dress of a trader, turning his hair up under a seaman's red cap, and with a staff in one hand and a huge pack on his back went up to the palace.

When the girls heard that there was a trader in the palace forecourt, out from the women's quarters they all came running, Achilles among them, veiled like the rest, to see him undo his pack. And when he had done so, each of them chose what she liked best: a wreath of gold, a necklace of amber, a pair of turquoise earrings blue as the sky, a skirt of embroidered scarlet silk, until they came to the bottom of the pack. And at the bottom of the pack lay a great sword of bronze, the hilt studded with golden nails. Then the last of the girls, still closely veiled, who had held back as though waiting all the while, swooped forward and caught it up, as one well-used to the handling of such weapons. And at the familiar feel of it, the spell that his mother had set upon him dissolved away.

"This for me!" said Prince Achilles, pulling off his veil.

Then the kings and chieftains of the fleet greeted and rejoiced over him. They stripped off his girl's garments and dressed him in kilt and cloak as befitted a warrior, with his new sword slung at his side; and they sent him back to his father's court to claim the ships and the fighting men that were his by right, that he might add them to the fleet.

His mother wept over him, saying, "I had hoped to keep you safe for the love I bear you. But now it must be for you to choose. If you bide here with me, you shall live long and happy. If you go forth now with the fighting men, you will make for yourself a name that shall last while men tell stories round the fire, even to the ending of the world. But you will not live to see the first grey hair in your beard, and you will come home no more to your father's hall."

"Short life and long fame for me," said Achilles, fingering his sword.

So his father gave him fifty ships, fully manned, and Patroclus to go with him for his friend and sword-companion. And his mother, weeping still, armed him in his father's armour; glorious war-gear which Hephaestus, the smith of the gods, had made for him.

And he sailed to join the black ships on their way to Troy.

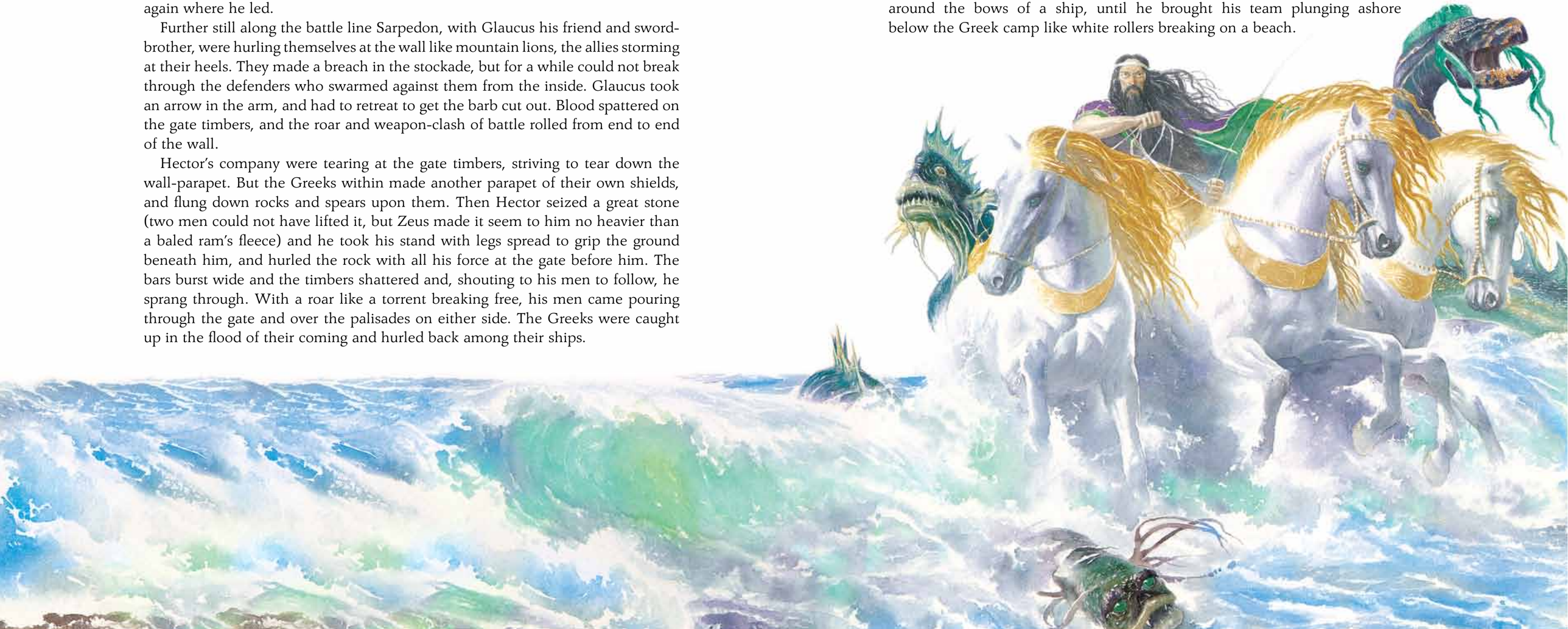


Further along the wall, before another gate, Hector's company, who should have been foremost in the attack, were hesitating. An eagle, the bird of Zeus, flying over, had dropped a live snake, red as blood, into their midst; this they took for an evil omen. Some even thought that they should call off the attack for that day. But Hector told them, "One omen is best of all – to fight for your country!" This put new heart in them, so that they raised the war shout and thrust forward again where he led.

Further still along the battle line Sarpedon, with Glaucus his friend and sword-brother, were hurling themselves at the wall like mountain lions, the allies storming at their heels. They made a breach in the stockade, but for a while could not break through the defenders who swarmed against them from the inside. Glaucus took an arrow in the arm, and had to retreat to get the barb cut out. Blood spattered on the gate timbers, and the roar and weapon-clash of battle rolled from end to end of the wall.

Hector's company were tearing at the gate timbers, striving to tear down the wall-parapet. But the Greeks within made another parapet of their own shields, and flung down rocks and spears upon them. Then Hector seized a great stone (two men could not have lifted it, but Zeus made it seem to him no heavier than a baled ram's fleece) and he took his stand with legs spread to grip the ground beneath him, and hurled the rock with all his force at the gate before him. The bars burst wide and the timbers shattered and, shouting to his men to follow, he sprang through. With a roar like a torrent breaking free, his men came pouring through the gate and over the palisades on either side. The Greeks were caught up in the flood of their coming and hurled back among their ships.

Then Zeus, having brought the Trojans into the heart of the Greek camp, left the desperate battle swirling under the very sterns of the black galleys, and turned his thoughts elsewhere. But blue-haired Poseidon, lord of the oceans and the earthquake, was looking that way and saw the desperate state of the Greeks. And he harnessed his wind-swift horses to his chariot, and came driving up from his palace beneath the waves, huge sea monsters sporting about him like dolphins around the bows of a ship, until he brought his team plunging ashore below the Greek camp like white rollers breaking on a beach.





WARRIOR WOMEN

Meanwhile, Paris was guiding the Amazons into Troy.

The Amazons were a tribe of women warriors who lived far away in the lands watered by the river Thermodon. In battle they were the equals of the strongest men, and some said that they were daughters of Ares, the god of war.

Penthesilea, their young queen, had accidentally slain her sister Hippolyta out hunting when a spear she had thrown at a deer struck her instead. And in her bitter sorrow, for she loved her sister deeply, Penthesilea could find no sweetness left in life, and had no wish but to die also. But it must be gloriously and in battle. So she and the maidens of her bodyguard had left the forests and wide streams of their own country and come riding to join the defenders of Troy.

Led by Paris, who knew better than anyone else the forest tracks and the high hill passes, they reached the city without a blow struck on the way. Odysseus had kept his promise of silence to Helen of the Fair Cheeks, and so there was no band of Greeks waiting in ambush for their coming.

The people of Troy came swarming to greet them when they rode in, astonished to see them riding on horseback, which was the custom of their country, instead of driving in chariots in the usual way. They thronged about Penthesilea, who shone among her maidens like the moon among stars, tossing up spears in greeting, throwing flowers beneath her horse's hooves, kissing her feet.

Priam held a great feast for her coming, and gave her golden cups and fine embroidered garments and a sword with a silver hilt.

And she held up the sword and swore that with it she would slay Achilles. But when Andromache heard of the vow she said within herself, "Unhappy girl! If Hector could not do that thing, what chance have you? And the piled earth lies over Hector."

Next morning, Penthesilea rose from sleep and put on her bright armour, her new sword at her side. She took her spears and her strong shield, and mounted her white warhorse, and with her twelve maidens beside her, and Hector's brothers and kindred, she set herself at the head of the Trojan war-host and rode out wind-swift toward the Greek camp and the black ships on the distant shoreline.

And the Greeks, seeing her come as they drew up their own battle lines, asked each other, "Who is this that leads the Trojans as Hector used to lead them? Surely it is some god who rides at the head of the charioteers!"

So the plain of Troy ran red as though with poppies, as it had done so many times before, and the warrior maidens took a heavy toll of the best and bravest of the Greeks. But before the sun was past its height half of them lay slain; and then grief and rage came upon their queen. She hurled herself upon the chariots, mad to avenge her bodyguard, driving the warriors as a lioness drives cattle among the hills, and shouting as she rode, "This is the day you pay for the sorrows of Priam! Diomedes! Achilles! Ajax! You who men say are the bravest of your breed, come out now to meet my spears!"

Again and again she charged at the head of Priam's household, the few who remained of her bodyguard still about her, and the chariots that followed her lurching and rocking over the bodies of the slain. Like a lightning flash among storm clouds she went, now here, now there, and the Greeks were yet again hurled back across their ditch, and men were among them with firebrands to burn the black ships as on the day of the battle-rage of Hector.

Achilles and Ajax had not heard the start of the fighting, for they had been away from the camp on a raid of their own, but, returning just as Penthesilea and the Trojans crossed the ditch, they flung themselves into the struggle to drive them back from the ships. Ajax paid no heed to the Amazons but rushed upon the men of Troy, while Achilles charged against Penthesilea and slew the last five maidens of her bodyguard.

And she, seeing her dearest maidens dead, rode straight for the two Greek champions.

She flung her spear at Achilles, but it fell back blunted from his great shield. She flung a second at Ajax, crying, "I am the daughter of the god of war, feel now my spear!" But his armour also withstood her spear point, and he and Achilles laughed out loud.

And laughing still, Achilles raised the great spear that none but he could handle, and even as her hand flew to her sword-hilt, he drove it down through the worked bronze and deep into her breast so that the red blood fountained as he dragged out the blade. Then, with shortened spear, he stabbed her white horse, so that both came down together, dying in the same fall.

Penthesilea lay in the churned dust, like a young poplar tree that the wind has overthrown. Her helmet had fallen off, and the Greeks who gathered round marvelled to see her so young and so fair to look upon, with her bright hair spilled about her. And the heart of Achilles who had killed her was pierced with grief and pity, and he wept over her, now that she was dead.

The Greeks, in pity also, did not go after the Trojans, who were again falling back, nor did they strip the armour from the queen and her spear-maidens, but laid them each on a bier and sent them back in peace to Priam.

And Priam, who last night had made a feast for them, had their bodies burned on a tall pyre and their ashes put into golden caskets, and buried them in the grave-mound of one of Troy's long-dead kings.

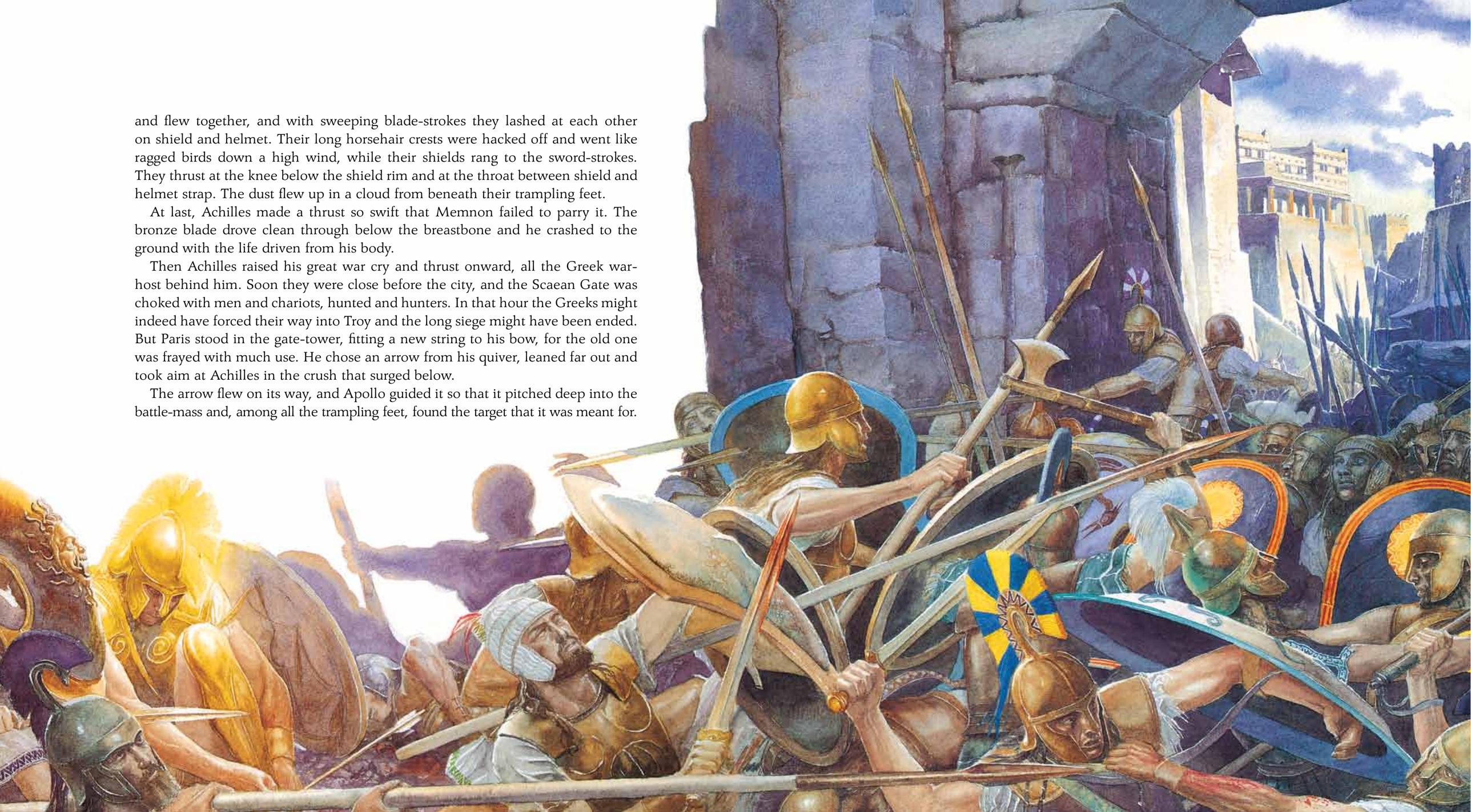


and flew together, and with sweeping blade-strokes they lashed at each other on shield and helmet. Their long horsehair crests were hacked off and went like ragged birds down a high wind, while their shields rang to the sword-strokes. They thrust at the knee below the shield rim and at the throat between shield and helmet strap. The dust flew up in a cloud from beneath their trampling feet.

At last, Achilles made a thrust so swift that Memnon failed to parry it. The bronze blade drove clean through below the breastbone and he crashed to the ground with the life driven from his body.

Then Achilles raised his great war cry and thrust onward, all the Greek war-host behind him. Soon they were close before the city, and the Scaean Gate was choked with men and chariots, hunted and hunters. In that hour the Greeks might indeed have forced their way into Troy and the long siege might have been ended. But Paris stood in the gate-tower, fitting a new string to his bow, for the old one was frayed with much use. He chose an arrow from his quiver, leaned far out and took aim at Achilles in the crush that surged below.

The arrow flew on its way, and Apollo guided it so that it pitched deep into the battle-mass and, among all the trampling feet, found the target that it was meant for.



It struck into Achilles' ankle in the unprotected place below the leg-guard, the place where his mother Thetis had held him when she dipped her babe in the river Styx. The one spot that the water had not touched and so could let death in.

He stumbled and fell, but rose again and wheeled round, shouting, "What coward has smitten me from afar? Let him come close and meet me with spear and sword!" And he dragged the arrow from the wound, letting loose a gush of blood.

There was blood everywhere. Darkness swam before his eyes. He staggered onward, striking blindly until his strength failed him and he came to a gasping halt, leaning on his spear. He gave a great hoarse shout. "Dogs of Troy! Dying though I am, you shall not escape my spears!" But with the words scarce out, he fell forward in the gateway, his armour clashing about him.

The Trojans stood and watched as hunters watch a dying lion, not daring to go near until the last breath is out of him. And so Hector's own dying words came true, that Achilles should meet his own death at the hands of Paris, in the Scaean Gate.

Then the Trojans in the gateway rushed forward to capture the body of Achilles in its glorious armour, while the Greeks struggled to bear it off to their camp for burial. Round his body the fight roared to and fro; men of both armies mingling together so thick that the archers on the ramparts dared not shoot for fear of slaying their own kind. At last Odysseus, though he was wounded in the knee, caught Achilles' wrists and heaved the body upon his back, and so went stumbling toward thc ships. Ajax and his warriors followed behind to guard them, turning and charging into the midst of the Trojans whenever they came too near.

So, slowly, and fighting every step of the way, they carried dead Achilles back across the plain through the bodies of the slain to the black ships.

To his own hall they brought him, and there the women, Briseis first among them all, washed the blood and battle filth from his body, and laid him on a bier, spreading a white mantle over him. And they wept for him, lamenting and singing the death songs. And those who were left of the Greek leaders cut locks of their long hair for him, as he had cut his own for his friend Patroclus so short a time before.

Then up from the sea came his mother, Thetis of the Silver Feet, with all her maidens. They rose from the crystal chambers in the depth of the waters, moving up like the waves on a summer day, and their sweet sad singing echoed all along the shore. Then fear struck at the Greeks and they would have fled; but old Nestor steadied them, saying, "No need for fear. It is his mother with her sea maidens come to look upon her dead son." And they stood firm once more.

And Thetis and the sea nymphs came and stood round him, and added their own sweet singing to the lamenting of the mortal women.

The Greeks built a great stack of wood and laid Achilles on it, with sacrificed oxen and jars of oil and wine and honey, and set fire to the whole. And when the pyre was burned out they gathered the white ashes of the hero, and mingled them with the ashes of Patroclus in the same two-handed golden cup brought out from his tomb. And over them they raised the grave-mound yet higher than it had been before, and set up a tall marker stone on its crest, that men passing by on land or out at sea would see it and remember who lay there.

Then they held the funeral games for him: chariot races and foot races, boxing and wrestling, as they had held them for Patroclus. And to all the winners Thetis gave rich and honourable prizes. Lastly, when the games were ended, she brought out her son's bright and splendid armour that Hephaestus had wrought for him and, laying it at the foot of the grave-mound, she said, "Let these arms be claimed as prize by the best and bravest of the warriors, by the one or the other of those two who saved Achilles' body out ofthe hands of the Trojans."

And so saying, she turned from them all and went back to the sea, and her sea maidens with her.





THE FALL OF TROY

All day the people rejoiced, singing and dancing in the streets, decking their temples with branches of oak and myrtle in readiness for a sacred festival next day. And when all was done and darkness fell, they went to their own places and lay down to sleep.

By then, covered by the quiet darkness before moonrise, the fleet was returning from Tenedos as swiftly as the rowers could send their ships through the water. And crouched close in the airless space within the horse's belly, Odysseus and his fellows waited with straining ears and breath in check, while high on the temple wall Sinon strained his eyes seaward for the signal from the High King's ship, to tell him that the fleet was close in shore and the time had come to let out the hidden warriors. And all around, Troy lay quiet in sleep.

At last the signal came: a red blink of fire, far over in the darkness out to sea. Sinon's heart stumbled within him and began to race. He dropped from the wall and made his way to where the great horse stood, its shape blotted against the sky that was silvering towards moonrise. Standing beneath it, he cried out once, like a shore bird but not quite like a shore bird, to those listening within.

Then Epeius drew back the pine-wood bars, and a trapdoor fell open in the horse's side. A rope came spooling down from it, and one by one the warriors, Menelaus and Odysseus and Diomedes and the rest, came dropping to the ground.

They stole down like armed shadows from the high place to the city gates. They slew the gate guards and flung open the broad gates to their fellow Greeks swarming up towards them. Then terror came upon sleeping Troy. The dark tide of warriors poured through and became a river of flame, as men kindled torches at the guardhouse fires and ran to burn the houses of the city.

Men, half-waking and half-armed, straggled out to meet them and were cut down. The night was full of the screams of women and children. The air grew thick with the sounds of battle, and fire went roaring through the city as it goes through a cornfield when a high wind is blowing.

But Odysseus had no part in all this. Indeed no man had seen him since the war-band came out from the horse's belly.

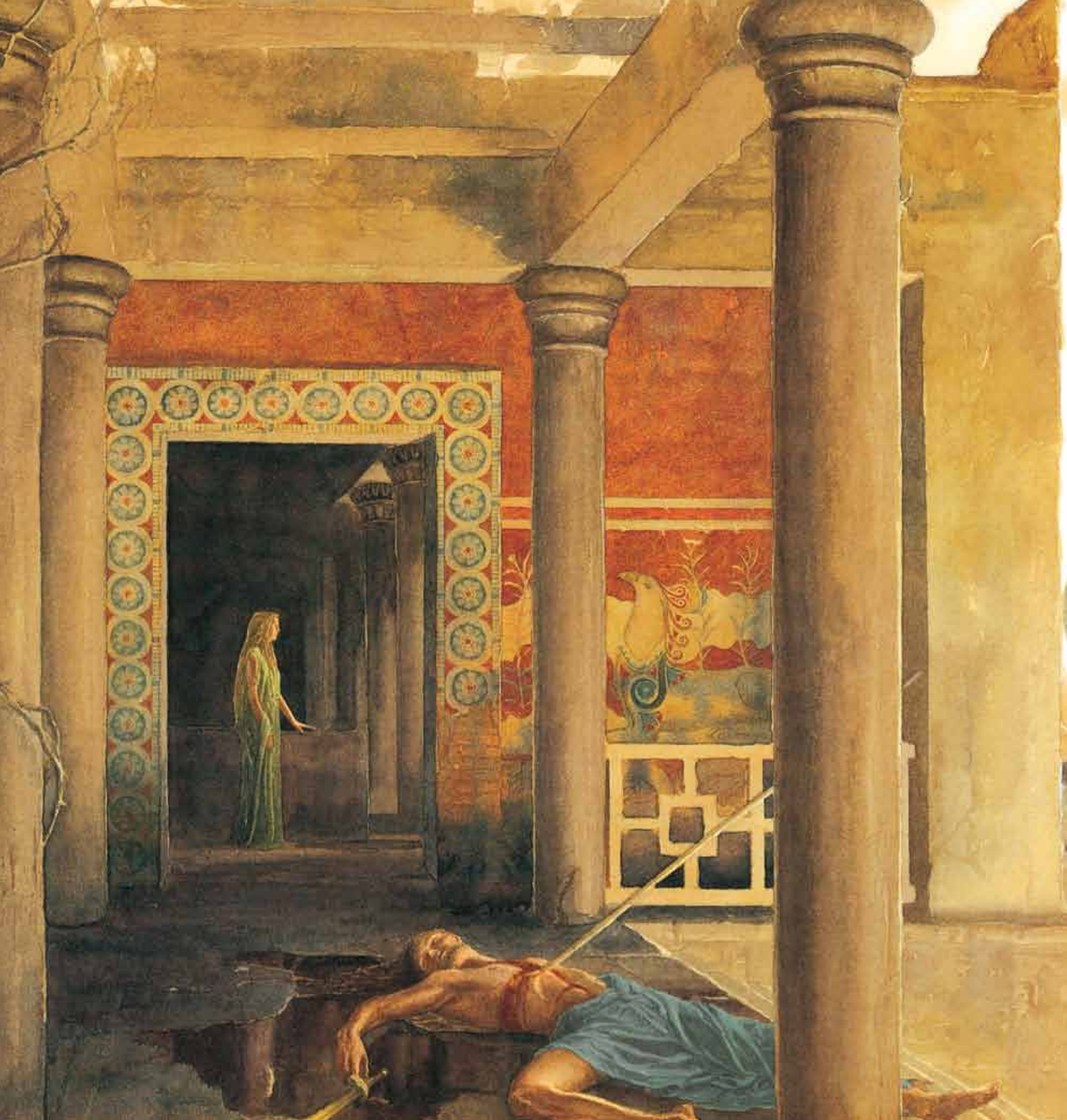
Diomedes, with Automedon and a growing band at his heels, had found the king's palace and overcome the guards in the outer court. They were flinging firebrands up on to the roofs, where defenders were tearing up the heavy coloured roof-tiles to hurl down upon them. Guarding their heads under their shields, they charged the main doors with war-axes and gilded beams torn from lesser buildings. The door-leaves burst open, tearing the bronze-sheathed hinge-posts from their sockets, and the men spilled through into the courts and chambers and colonnades beyond, cutting down the guards who stood against them.

No bolts or bars nor desperate courage of drawn swords could hold them back. They stormed up one passageway and down another, until they came at last to an inner court where stood an altar to the gods of the home, with an ancient bay tree bending over it as though to shield it from the fiery sky. And there the queen and the princesses had gathered, clinging about the twisted trunk like doves that have swooped to shelter from a storm. But there was no refuge for them, nor for Priam the aged king himself, who knelt praying to the gods before the altar.

A young warrior, drunk with fire and killing, seized him by his long white hair and dragged him backwards on the altar steps, and drove his sword through the old man's body so that his life-blood fouled the sanctuary where he had so often made offerings to the gods.

And they bound the royal women, despite all their screams and struggling, and dragged them captive away.





All through the city was fire and killing and the crashing down of walls and roofs as, after ten years' siege, mighty Troy was put to the sword.

But Helen had not been with the rest of the royal women, and Menelaus had gone striding off through the palace courts where rags of burning timbers fell from the sky, seeking the house of Deiphobus, for he guessed that, with no other of the king's sons still living, that was where she would be.

He knew when he had found the right house, for in the entrance he came upon Deiphobus lying sprawled in his armour, the spear that had killed him standing upright in his breast. A chain of crimson footprints that started in the pool of his blood led on through the portico and into the darkness of the hall beyond.