Fiction Excerpt 2: Excerpts from Homer’s *Iliad*

In the epic poem *the Iliad*, Homer tells the story of the Trojan War. He starts the story in the middle, nine years into the fighting between the warriors of Greece and the soldiers of Troy. The story “The Judgment of Paris” tells how the war began.

**The Judgment of Paris**

King Priam and Queen Hecuba ruled the city of Troy. While she was pregnant, Hecuba dreamed that her baby would cause the destruction of the royal family and of Troy. So when the baby boy was born, Priam gave his son to a shepherd and told the shepherd to abandon the baby on a mountain.

The shepherd did as he was told. When he returned to the mountain a few days later, he found the baby was still alive. So he kept it and raised it as his own. He called the boy Paris.

Paris grew up, got married, and lived as a shepherd, just like his adoptive father. He was strong and handsome. He did not know he was the king’s son. He lived happily until the day he became involved in an argument among three goddesses.

The argument began because Eris, the goddess of discord, was not invited to a wedding feast. She had been purposely excluded because of her history of causing disagreements, and she wanted revenge.

Eris wrote “For the fairest” on a golden apple and threw it onto the table at the wedding feast. Every goddess at the feast claimed the apple as her own. Eventually, the competition was narrowed down to three: Hera, the queen of the gods; Athena, the goddess of wisdom; and Aphrodite (/əf*ro*die*ti/*), the goddess of love. The king of the gods, Zeus, was called to choose the fairest from among these three.

Zeus knew that no matter which goddess he chose, the others would be angry. So, he asked young Paris to make the choice.

The three goddesses tried to bribe Paris. Hera promised him great wealth and power. Athena promised wisdom and success in battle. Then Aphrodite whispered to him, “Choose me, and I will give you the most beautiful woman in the world as your wife.”

Paris, forgetting he already had a wife, chose Aphrodite.
From that point on, Aphrodite helped Paris. When Paris competed in athletic games in Troy, he took first place in every contest, thanks to the strength and speed that Aphrodite gave him.

When people in Troy noticed how much Paris resembled their king and queen, the old shepherd was brought before Priam and Hecuba. He told them how he had saved and raised their baby. The king and queen, forgetting why the baby had been sent away in the first place, welcomed Paris back into their family.

Prince Paris was eager now for Aphrodite to keep her promise. The most beautiful woman in the world lived in Greece. Her name was Helen, and she was married to King Menelaus (/men*uh*lay*uss/) of Sparta. Paris sailed to Sparta, where King Menelaus greeted him as a friend.

When Menelaus left on a hunting trip, he invited Paris to stay in Sparta. Paris did, and Aphrodite made sure Helen fell in love with the Trojan prince.

Paris convinced Helen to return with him to Troy. They brought much of Menelaus’s gold and treasures with them, and they were welcomed with open arms by King Priam and Queen Hecuba. Others, such as Paris’s brother Hector, were not so welcoming. Hector begged that Helen return to Sparta, but she stayed in Troy.

Many years before Helen and Menelaus had married, Helen’s father had made the Greek kings promise that if anything happened to Helen, they would all work together to save her. After Paris carried Helen off, Agamemnon—the brother of Menelaus—called on the kings to keep their promise. The Greek kings assembled their armies and set off for Troy. The Trojan War had begun.

**The Quarrel Between Agamemnon and Achilles**

The Trojans were prepared for the Greek invasion. When the Greeks landed on beaches near Troy, Paris’s brother Hector led the Trojan army out from the walled city and onto the open plains to meet them.

The two armies fought a fierce battle, swinging swords and axes, shooting bows and arrows, and throwing sharp javelins. The soil turned red with blood.

The Trojans could not keep up the fight against the vast Greek force. They retreated behind the walls of their city for safety.
The Greeks then laid siege to Troy. For nine years, they tried to break through the walls but failed. They began to run out of food and other supplies, so they sent some of their troops to attack nearby cities. These raiding parties returned with supplies and captives, which were divided among the Greek leaders in accordance with tradition. Greek kings measured their greatness by who and how much they captured in battle.

In one of these raids, two young women were taken captive. Two of Greece’s heroes—King Agamemnon and a warrior named Achilles (/uh*kill*eez/)—soon quarreled over these two women.

Achilles was the greatest of Greece’s warriors, the leader of fighters known as the Myrmidons. He wore impenetrable armor that was a gift from the god Zeus. He drove a chariot drawn by immortal horses. Of all Greece’s warriors, the Trojans feared him the most.

One of the captured women, whose name was Chryseis, was given to Agamemnon. The other, named Briseis, was given to Achilles. The warrior grew to care for the young woman.

Chryseis’s father, a priest, came to beg for his daughter’s release. He offered Agamemnon valuables in exchange for his daughter’s freedom, but Agamemnon scoffed. “Go away, old man. Your daughter is going home with me after I capture Troy.”

Chryseis’s father prayed to the god Apollo for help. For the next nine days, Apollo, the sun god, attacked the Greek camp, shooting arrows from his chariot in the sky, killing animals and men. So many died that the funeral pyres burned constantly. Achilles called together the Greek leaders. They needed a plan of action.

A soothsayer announced, “Apollo is angry because Agamemnon was disrespectful of one of his priests. Agamemnon must return Chryseis to her father, and we must make a sacrifice to Apollo. That is the only way to win his forgiveness.”

Agamemnon was enraged. “Who are you to tell me what to do? You have never said anything that would help me. But I would not have our army destroyed, so I will give up the girl. But I must be given another prize in her place.”

“There is no prize left to give you,” Achilles said. “The treasures have all been distributed, and we cannot ask our colleagues to give up their shares. Release the young woman, and we will give you extra shares when we take Troy.”
“Absolutely not.” Agamemnon pointed at Achilles. “Why should you keep your prize while I lose mine? If the council will not give me a replacement, I will take your share, or someone else’s.”

“What kind of leader are you?” Achilles yelled. “How can the Greeks follow someone so greedy and selfish? You’re worse than the Trojans. They have done me no harm. They have not insulted me. I fight them because of a promise to your brother. But you? You hide in your tent. You take the largest share of the spoils and claim it’s not enough. You want my little portion, too. Well, you will disrespect me no longer. I am leaving, and I am taking the Myrmidons with me.”

“Fine,” Agamemnon snapped. “Go. But I will still take Briseis for myself.”

Achilles reached for his sword, but stopped when a hand pulled his hair. He turned around and saw the goddess Athena.

“Achilles,” she said. “You alone can see me, so listen well. Put away your sword. You are precious to me and my queen, Hera. So is Agamemnon. Speak your anger with words, not weapons.” Then she vanished.

Achilles knew better than to disobey a god. He spun to face Agamemnon. “Listen carefully, you dishonorable thief. You will regret your actions here today. One day, thousands will die by Hector’s hand, and I—your greatest warrior—will do nothing. You will beg for me to come back, but still I will do nothing. The blood of those thousands rests at your feet.”

Achilles marched back to his tent. Agamemnon’s messengers followed and took young Briseis away. The Greeks were left to fight the Trojans without their hero.

Hector and Andromache

Even without Achilles, the Greeks were able to drive the Trojans back into their walled city one more time. Hector called on the gods to help the Trojans in battle, and he asked his people to offer their own prayers and sacrifices.

Then Hector went home to see his wife and baby son. His wife, Andromache (/an*drom*uh*key/), cried upon seeing her husband. “Hector, do not return to battle. You are the bravest of warriors, but your bravery will be the end of you. Think of us. I cannot live without you. Do not make me a widow. Do not make your child an orphan. Please.”
“I am a prince of Troy,” Hector told her gently. “I cannot hide from battle. That would bring shame on my father and on all Trojans. But I do worry about you. I worry the Greeks will capture you and enslave you, that they will treat the wife of brave Hector as nothing more than a trophy.”

Then he took his son in his arms and kissed the boy’s forehead. Hector closed his eyes. “Great god Zeus, grant favor to this child. Let him grow to be a great prince of Troy. Help him grow to be a greater, braver warrior than his father.”

Then he gave his son back to the weeping Andromache. “Do not worry, my wife. It does not matter if I’m brave or cowardly. Fate will decide whether I live or die. I cannot escape that. No man can.”

With that, he said his farewells and returned to battle.

**The Combat Between Menelaus and Paris**

Hector led the Trojan army across the plains to meet Agamemnon and the Greeks. The Trojans shouted and pounded their shields as they marched. The Greeks stood silent and determined.

Then Paris ran ahead of the Trojan forces. He wore a sword. He carried brass-tipped spears and a bow. A panther’s skin hung from his shoulders. “Greeks!” he called. “Send me your greatest warrior, so that I may defeat him one on one.”

Menelaus jumped out of his chariot and ran to confront Paris. Finally, he would have revenge on the man who had stolen his wife.

Panicked by the sight of Menelaus, Paris sped back behind the Trojan lines. “What is wrong with you, my brother?” Hector asked. “You are brave enough to kidnap Helen but not brave enough to face her husband?”

Paris hung his head. “You are right,” he said. Then he straightened. “I must fight Menelaus alone. Whoever wins will keep Helen. If he wins, you must let him take her without a fight. If I win, she stays and becomes a princess of Troy.”

Hector presented these terms to the Greeks. Menelaus agreed. “Let single combat settle our dispute,” he responded. “Fate will decide the winner and Helen’s future.”

Both sides cheered the possibility of a quick end to what had become a long war.
The battle began with Paris throwing his javelin at Menelaus, who deflected it with his shield. Menelaus thrust his spear at Paris, piercing the Trojan’s shield. Paris twisted away to avoid being stabbed. Menelaus attacked again, this time hitting Paris’s head with his sword and breaking the blade. Furious, Menelaus grabbed Paris by the helmet and dragged him like a blanket toward the Greek lines.

But Aphrodite would not let her favorite be taken. Unseen to all, she unsnapped Paris’s helmet strap, leaving Menelaus holding only the helmet and not the Trojan prince. Then she hid Paris in a swirl of mist and carried him back inside Troy.

The Greeks claimed Paris’s disappearance as a victory and called for Helen’s return. On Mount Olympus, home of the Greek gods, Athena and Hera had other plans. Still angry about being denied the golden apple, they wanted the war to continue. They wanted Troy to become a pile of rubble.

So Athena whispered in the ear of a Trojan soldier, “There is no greater honor than killing an enemy’s king. Be a hero. Aim true and destroy Menelaus.”

The soldier drew his bow and let an arrow fly. His aim was true. The arrow would have killed Menelaus, but Athena redirected it so the Greek king was injured instead. The goddess did not really want the Greek king dead. She only wanted to restart the battle.

She got her wish. The Greeks and Trojans locked horns again. The war was restarted.