Sing, O goddess, of the wrath of Achilles, son of Peleus, which brought countless woes upon the Greeks, and hurled many valiant heroes down to Hades, leaving their bodies as prey to dogs and birds—for such was the will of Zeus, ever since the quarrel began between Achilles and Agamemnon.

**The Wrath of Achilles**

For more than nine years the Greeks surrounded and attacked the city of Troy, but they could not break through the strong walls. They had been away from their homes for so long that they often needed food, clothes, and other supplies. They left one part of the army to watch the city, and with the other part went about and raided towns and cities.

Because of two maidens taken captive by the Greeks in these raids, a great quarrel began between Achilles and Agamemnon. One of the maidens was called Chryseis and the other Briseis.
Briseis had been given to Achilles, and Chryseis to Agamemnon.

The father of Chryseis was the priest Chryses, who was devoted to the god Apollo. Chryses was deeply saddened by the capture of his daughter. He brought gold and valuable gifts to King Agamemnon and, at a gathering of the Greek chiefs, he begged them to release her.

Many of the chiefs were moved to pity and willing to grant his request. But Agamemnon angrily refused.

“Go away, old man!” cried Agamemnon, “and don’t come back, or it will be the worse for you, even though you are a priest. As for your daughter, I will carry her back with me when I have taken Troy.”

Chryses left the Grecian camp. As he returned home in sorrow, he prayed to Apollo to punish the Greeks.

Apollo heard his prayer. The god was very angry that his priest should suffer such insults. And so Apollo sent a deadly plague upon the Grecian army.
With his silver bow, Apollo darted his terrible arrows among the Greeks. For nine days the arrows of death rained down upon the Greek army. On the tenth day of the plague, Achilles called an assembly. When the Greek chiefs had gathered, Achilles spoke to them.

“Many are slain by the arrows of death,” said Achilles. “Let us ask the soothsayers why Apollo is angry with us.”

Then the soothsayer Calchas stood up and said, “Achilles, I can say why the god is angry with us. But I fear I will anger King Agamemnon. Promise me your protection and I will say why this plague has come upon the Greeks.”

“Fear nothing, Calchas,” answered Achilles. “While I am alive, no one shall harm you, not even Agamemnon himself.”

Calchas spoke: “Apollo is angry because his priest has been dishonored by Agamemnon. There is only one way to appease the angry god. You must send the girl Chryseis back to her father, with many gifts to be offered to Apollo.”

**slain:** killed

**soothsayers:** persons who were believed to have the power of seeing into the future

**assembly:** a gathering to discuss problems and make decisions

**appease:** to make someone less angry, to calm someone
Agamemnon leaped up. “Prophet of evil!” he shouted at the soothsayer. “Never have you spoken anything good for me. And now you say I must give up the maiden. Since I do not want to see our people perish, I will do so. But I must have another prize.”

Achilles responded, “You are too greedy, King Agamemnon. How can we give you a prize since all the spoils have already been divided? Be satisfied and let the maiden go. When we have taken the strong city of Troy, we will make it up to you many times over.”

“For now,” said Agamemnon, “let the girl be sent back to her father, so that the anger of Apollo may be appeased. After that, if the Greeks give me a suitable prize, I will be content. But if not, I will take it from you, Achilles.”

Enraged, Achilles cried out, “Never was there a king so greedy of gain! The Trojans have done no wrong to me. I have been fighting them for your sake and your brother’s, while you sit in your tent at ease. But when the spoils are divided, you get the lion’s share. And now you say you will take the

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**perish**: die, be killed

**enraged**: filled with violent anger

**lion’s share**: the largest part
little that was given to me. I will not stay here to be shamed and robbed."

“Go, then,” said Agamemnon, “and take your ships and soldiers with you. I have other chiefs here who will honor me. But I will take the girl Briseis, who was given to you. If I have to, I will come and fetch her myself. For you must learn that I am in charge here.”

In fury, Achilles reached for his sword and said to himself, “Now I will **slay** this villain where he stands.” But at that moment the goddess Athena appeared behind him and caught him by his long yellow hair. She had been sent by Hera, queen of the gods, to calm Achilles. (Ever since the day on which Paris made his choice on Mount Ida, when he gave the apple “for the fairest” to Aphrodite, both Athena and Hera hated Troy, the city to which Paris belonged. And so they wished to avoid any **strife** among the Greek chiefs, which would prevent them from defeating Troy.)

Achilles was astonished to see the goddess Athena, who appeared to him alone and was invisible to all the rest. He instantly knew who she
was and said to her, “O goddess, have you come to see this villain die?”

“No,” said Athena. “I have come to calm your anger. You are dear to me, and to Queen Hera. Put away your sword. Say what you feel, but refrain from violence.”
Achilles put his sword back into its sheath, and the goddess swiftly returned to Olympus. Then Achilles addressed Agamemnon in bitter words: “Drunkard with the eyes of a dog and the heart of a deer, hear what I tell you now! One day, and soon, the Greeks will miss Achilles. When you see your people falling by the swords of the Trojans, you will be sorry that you have done this wrong to the bravest man in your army.”

Then wise old Nestor rose to speak. He urged the two chiefs to stop quarreling with each other. “King Agamemnon,” said Nestor, “do not take from Achilles the prize that the Greeks gave him. And you, Achilles, pay due respect to him who is here the king over all other kings of Greece.”

Then Agamemnon said, “The gods have made Achilles a great warrior, but he must learn that there is one here better than he.”

“You better than me!” cried Achilles. “What the Greek chiefs gave me, let them take away if

Many City-States: In ancient times, Greece was not a unified nation with a single leader but a group of independent city-states. Achilles and Agamemnon were equals in that they were both kings. But Agamemnon had been appointed the commander of the Greek forces that had joined together to fight against Troy.
they will. But if you, Agamemnon, lay your hands on anything that is my own, in that hour you will die.”

And so the assembly was broken up, with Agamemnon and Achilles still at odds. Immediately afterwards, the maiden Chryseis was taken back to her father. The anger of the god Apollo was appeased, and the plague ended.

Then Agamemnon proceeded to carry out his threat against Achilles. He called two of his officers and said to them, “Go to the tent of Achilles, and fetch the fair Briseis. And if he will not let her go, say that I will come with others to take her.”

So the officers went, but much against their will. They found Achilles sitting between his tent and his ship. And they stood in great fear and shame. But when he saw them he spoke kind words to them, though his heart was full of rage.

“Come near,” he said. “It is not your fault that you were sent on this errand.”

Then Achilles turned to his dear friend, Patroclus, and said, “Bring Briseis from her tent. And let these men be witnesses of how this tyrant
king has insulted me, so that they may remember it when he needs my help but shall not have it.”

So Patroclus brought Briseis to the officers. And she went with them, much against her will, and often looking back.

Thus began the quarrel that brought countless woes upon the Greeks, for Achilles vowed that he would no longer lead his Myrmidons to battle for a king who had so dishonored him.

**The Combat Between Menelaus and Paris**

Agamemnon met with the Greek chiefs, who soon called their armies to battle. Many brave warriors were there, but none that could compare with Achilles, who sat apart and refused to fight.

The leaders of Troy were also gathering their forces within the city. From their walls they had observed the movements of the Greeks, and Zeus had sent a messenger to tell them to get ready for battle.

On the plain before the city walls, the two great armies advanced. As the armies approached