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Following his father's funeral, Menelaus had sailed home from Crete. No Helen waited to welcome him. His trusted guest was gone as well. In a fury he stormed through the looted palace, astounded at Paris' treachery. Then he remembered the oath.

Years back, when Helen had reached marriageable age, a flock of suitors had descended on Sparta. Many were kings and princes. All were drunk with desire, so dangerously so that her father had feared that the one he chose would be murdered by the others. To keep their swords sheathed, he'd proposed an oath: each suitor would swear to defend Helen's husband against any man who tried to steal her away. Since all had hoped to gain this protection, each of them had taken the oath. He'd then given Helen to the wealthiest of her wooers, Menelaus.

Enraged to picture her now with Paris, Menelaus sped north to the city of Mycenae. He burst forth with the news to his brother Agamemnon, the High King, most powerful of all the Greek rulers, and reminded him of the suitors' pledge. Agamemnon, married to Helen's sister, listened to the tale in shock. At once he sent heralds to all the former suitors, calling them to make good their oaths. Each would contribute soldiers or ships, making up a vast army and fleet. Though its walls were towering and thick, Troy would be taken, he vowed, and Helen with it.



Most of the suitors were quick to join the cause. King Diomedes of Argos, King Idomeneus of Crete, mighty Ajax, Prince Palamedes—all agreed to fight for Menelaus. Others were less enthusiastic.

Odysseus, king of Ithaca, schemed to escape his oath altogether. Palamedes, sent to recruit Odysseus, found him feigning insanity, plowing the sand at the shore with an ox and donkey and sowing salt in the furrows. Knowing the king's reputation for cunning, Palamedes set Odysseus' infant son directly before the ox's hooves. At once Odysseus reigned in his team, disproving his madness and revealing his ruse. He gave himself up to Palamedes and loaded his ships with soldiers.

While they journeyed from Ithaca, the Trojan priest Calchas traveled to Greece to consult an oracle, who instructed him to join the Greek forces. He did so, foretelling that they'd never take Troy unless they enlisted a prince named Achilles. This prince was the son of the sea goddess Thetis, whose wedding had been ruined by the golden apple. As her husband was human, not an immortal god, she'd sought to defend the child against death by dipping him into the protecting waters of the river Styx, forgetting that the heel she'd held him by had remained dry. Being partly divine, Achilles had grown to manhood in a matter of months.

Terrified at learning her son was needed by the Greeks, Thetis sent him to hide on the island of Scyros. There Achilles lived in the palace, disguised as a woman at his mother's insistence. And there Odysseus, sent by Agamemnon, finally found him. Disguised as well, as a peddler, Odysseus opened his trunk and displayed his wares. The palace women fingered his jewelry and fabrics. One, however, reached at once for the bronze sword he'd included. Odysseus grabbed him and tugged off his dress. The following day, eager for battle, Achilles sailed off to war.



A thousand ships, from every corner of Greece, gathered at Aulis for the invasion. Though Agamemnon promised his soldiers success, he knew that Troy would not be easily taken. Solemnly, he sacrificed one hundred fine bulls to almighty Zeus, beseeching him to favor the Greeks. From one hundred fires the scent of roasting meat, beloved by the gods, rose toward the heavens. The following morning the fleet set sail.