

RANSOM – a summary



PART I

In the tenth year of the Trojan War, Achilles—a demigod and the greatest of all the Greek warriors—stands brooding on the shores of the sea. He thinks about his mother, a sea goddess, and his son Neoptolemus, whom he has not seen since leaving for war. Most of all, however, he thinks about his friend and adoptive brother Patroclus, who grew up with Achilles after being exiled for inadvertently killing a playmate. Patroclus has recently died, in part as a result of Achilles’s own actions. Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek army, had taken a slave-girl from Achilles, and Achilles in turn refused to fight, angered by both the loss of the girl and the insult of Agamemnon taking her. Eventually, however, he agreed to let Patroclus wear his armor and lead his men in his place, resulting in Patroclus’s death at the hands of the Trojan prince Hector. Enraged, Achilles sought out and killed Hector, who prophesied with his dying breath that Achilles would soon die as well. Achilles then tied Hector’s body to his chariot and dragged it back to the Greek camp. His revenge, however, has not been satisfying, in part because the gods have protected Hector’s corpse from Achilles’s attempts at mutilation.

As Part 1 draws to a close, Achilles returns from the beach and has his grooms prepare his horses. He lashes Hector’s body—once again miraculously healed—to his chariot and drives around Patroclus’s burial mound, hoping to finally satisfy his grief. His actions only leave him feeling empty, however, and he falls asleep wishing vaguely for an event that might rouse him from his current state of living death.

PART II

Within the walls of Troy, King Priam is thinking much the same thing. Eleven days of mourning for his son Hector have done nothing to dampen his grief, in part because it encompasses so much: the loss of his son has brought home to Priam the terrible fate that all of Troy is facing. Even as Priam thinks about the futility of his life and reign, however, he senses a presence in the room. He turns and sees the goddess

Iris, who tells him that the deaths of Priam's children and the likely fall of Troy itself are not the "mockery" of the gods or fate, but in part the result of "chance" Iris then disappears, but Priam experiences a vision in her wake: himself and a driver seated on a mule-drawn cart that is carrying a covered load.

Priam, excited, goes to find his wife Hecuba, who remains distraught over Hector's death. Priam consoles her and reveals his vision, along with his intention to make it a reality by taking a cartload of treasure to Achilles as ransom for Hector's body. Hecuba is appalled by her husband's suggestion and offers various objections: that Achilles won't accept the offer, that Priam will be killed, and—above all—that Priam's royal status prohibits him from lowering himself by appealing to his son's killer as an ordinary man might. Priam, however, feels that this is the main advantage of his plan, and argues that speaking to Achilles on a human level will allow both of them to sidestep the normal rules of fate and status. He further explains that he has never felt entirely at home in his role as king, in part because he was nearly sold into slavery as a child; when Heracles sacked Troy during the reign of Priam's father, Laomedon, Priam escaped only because his sister asked for him as her "gift." As Priam describes it, the brush with slavery was a brutal reminder that everything about his life as king is conditional rather than guaranteed. Hecuba, still worried, asks Priam to postpone making any decisions until after he has spoken to his children and advisors.

Priam duly explains his plan to his sons and counsellors, who echo Hecuba's concerns, arguing that Priam has an obligation to remain aloof and awe-inspiring as a king. Priam, however, again reiterates that he is a man as well as a king, and subject to pain and death like everyone else. That being the case, he wants to do something "new and unheard of" before meeting his fate.

Seeing that it is useless to argue, Priam's sons begin to assemble the ransom and prepare a cart. Initially, however, they bring him his usual horse-pulled chariot, along with his herald Idaeus. Priam angrily scolds them for remaining enmeshed in ceremony and convention, and sends them to find an ordinary carter. They return with Somax, whose pretty mule (Beauty) has caught their eye. Despite feeling somewhat overwhelmed, Somax agrees to take Priam to the Greek camp, and later that afternoon, the citizens of Troy watch in confusion as the two men drive out of the city.

PART III

As Part 3 opens, evening is falling and Somax and Priam have stopped to rest. Somax pities Priam and encourages him to join him on the banks of the River Scamander, where they dip their feet in the water and eat griddlecakes. As Somax chatters about the way his daughter-in-law makes the cakes, Priam finds himself intrigued and charmed by the "unnecessary" details of the world around him. He asks Somax to talk more about his family, and Somax explains that he only has one grandchild left—a daughter who currently has a fever. He once had two grown sons, but both died in accidents. Priam, once again, is struck by the personal nature of the man's stories.

As the pair get underway again, they come across a young man who appears to be a Greek soldier, but who will in fact turn out to be the god Hermes. He tells Priam that

Achilles has sent him as an escort, and though both Priam and Somax are somewhat wary of his claims and cocky demeanor, they accept his help. After the trio ford the river, Priam realizes who Hermes is, and the god confirms he has come to guide them to Achilles's hut. Priam takes courage from the idea that the gods have blessed his mission, and as Part 3 closes, the group reaches the Greek camp.

PART VI

Meanwhile, Achilles is sitting in his hut watching his men eat and feeling resentful of the new squire, Automedon, who has taken Patroclus's place. Sensing the presence of a god, Achilles turns in the hopes of seeing Patroclus's ghost. Instead, however, he sees an old man whom he initially mistakes for his father Peleus, and falls on his knees before the visitor. Priam is disconcerted by this but explains who he is and why he has come—a story Achilles confirms with Somax. After sending Somax away to have a meal, Achilles listens as Priam pleads with him as a father, appealing to Achilles's relationships with both Peleus and Neoptolemus. Achilles is touched—all the more so when he has a vision of Neoptolemus killing Priam some time after his own death—and agrees to Priam's request.

As Priam rests, Achilles goes to retrieve Hector's body, which is again unblemished. Achilles, however, is no longer angry, and in fact feels a kind of solidarity with Hector. He watches as women wash and prepare the body, and he calmly anticipates his own impending death, before waking Priam. Over a meal, the two men agree to an eleven-day truce for Hector's funeral. Finally, Priam prepares to leave, and Achilles tells him to call on him for help when Troy falls. Priam wonders aloud whether Achilles will himself be alive by then, and the two share a kind of grim joke about their ultimate fates.

As Priam and Somax return to Troy, they pass burial mounds and a burned village, stopping only once so that Priam can weep in private over his son's body. Despite his grief, however, Priam feels rejuvenated by the journey and what he has accomplished. Back in the Greek camp, Achilles likewise feels that a burden has been lifted from him.

As Achilles trains, the narrative briefly flashes forward to the fall of Troy.

Neoptolemus, highly conscious of his father's fame, seeks out Priam in order to avenge Achilles's death. He finds and kills him, but the moment does not go as he had planned it, and for the rest of his life, he is haunted by the "shame" of it. Back in the present moment, however, Priam and Somax continue to make their way toward the city. Somax thinks about returning to his family, anticipating the stories he will be able to tell.

PART V

The narrative once more skips forward, this time long past the fall of Troy to an era when those still living in the region will find it hard to believe that such a wealthy civilization ever existed there. Somax, moreover, has a reputation as a teller of tall-tales, so his grandchildren and great-grandchildren do not lend much credence to his story about conveying Priam to Achilles's hut. Instead, they talk about how he once had an extraordinarily beautiful mule named Beauty.