



Heroes of Troy by Neil Richards. Part 2

So, King Menelaus comes home grinning from ear to ear and all raring to give his beloved Helen a big hello – and what he gets is me standing there with one of those good-news bad-news moments. Bad news your majesty – your beloved Helen is gone. And good news – we know who took her. Not surprisingly, my light-hearted way of easing him into the idea doesn't go down too well. In the end it could have been worse – he only kicks me round the room twice and he stops short of killing me, which cheers me up no end.

After that he smoulders for a while. And then it goes very cold. Soon he's drawing up war plans faster than the scribes can write. Now here's the interesting bit: before he married Helen, half the kings in Greece were after her hand. And when Helen's dad decided Menelaus was the lucky guy, he made all the other losers sign a pact that they'd help the old fella out if anyone should run off with the bride. So Menelaus doesn't waste any time calling in the promises...

First out of the traps is King Agamemnon, Menelaus's brother. Now Agamemnon's pretty much top dog in the whole of Greece when it comes to military stuff so it's obvious he's going to take charge of the whole show. Menelaus assigns me to work with him. Soon we've got the army sorted and on the road and we all head off to this big old port called Aulis – which, if you're going to attack Troy is about the best place to start.



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As the months roll by more and more armies march in from all over Greece and we are beginning to look like one serious invasion force. Then Agamemnon comes in with a real downer. He calls a big meeting and he says: fantastic, brilliant, we've got a cracking army, job done lads, but - we're a wee bit light on Heroes. And everyone starts going, oh aye, you're right, you're not wrong there, we'll never take Troy without some Heroes.

Now, as we all know, Heroes are half-god half-man, and if you're involved in anything that's ever been prophesied, you've got to have the right Heroes along for the fight or the gods don't like it and you end up losing.

In our case we're light two particular Heroes. Odysseus – and Achilles. Top notch, brilliant warriors, famous for being totally unstoppable in battle and with the usual family connection to the gods. And both of them mysteriously unavailable for war due to other commitments, so to speak. Odysseus's excuse is that he's gone mad – which is a shame cos he's just about the sharpest knife in the whole box of Heroes. And Achilles's mum doesn't want Achilles involved on account of a prophecy that he'd get killed at Troy – so she's got him in hiding somewhere.

Anyhow, Agamemnon turns to one of his lads Palamedes and says – you - sort it. And Palamedes turns to us lot and says – you - sort it.

So we sort it. Palamedes turns out to be surprisingly persuasive and in no time Odysseus has decided he's not mad at all and he's in the team, raring to go. As for Achilles – well... mum-Hero, Hero-mum, no contest huh?



Back at camp we're all set and ready. One hundred thousand men and two bona fide Heroes. I'm thinking – bring it on! But Agamemnon wants to do the thing by the book. So he sends Odysseus, Menelaus and Palamedes off to Troy to give them one last chance. And since I'm now one of the boys, I get to go too.

Two months later I'm standing outside the gates of Troy and I'm thinking holy moussaka – this place is immense! We'll never storm this. There's trenches and palisades and fortifications and the biggest walls you ever saw in your life. Odysseus and the others don't seem that bothered, mind.

When we get to the court, the whole Trojan top mob is there – and there's a few faces I recognise. King Priam of course; Hector his son who's another top-gun Hero - built like a dozen oxen; Paris who's leaning against a pillar totally bored by the whole thing; and up at a secret window making wee sniffing noises – Helen herself looking well-miffed at how things have turned out.

Menelaus gives Priam his ultimatum – hand over Helen and a bunch of compensation and we'll call the whole invasion off. Refuse - and we'll smash Troy to pieces. Attaboy, Menelaus, I'm thinking, that's the stuff.

At first there's no response. Then there's a big commotion and Priam's daughter Cassandra starts leaping around screaming and shouting that she's seen it prophesied, the walls will fall, Troy is doomed and so on. Scary or what? But the Trojans don't react at all. In fact, if anything...they look embarrassed. Anyways, after a minute she gives up and shuffles away muttering to herself.



Then Priam stands - all king-like – and tells Menelaus just what he can do with his ultimatum. Tells him go ahead, you try and invade and see what happens...Cos he won't just be fighting the Trojans – he'll be fighting the Trojans' allies. All of them! And he reels off this list: Dardanians, Zeleians, Adrasteians, Percotians, Pelasgians, Thracians, Ciconians, Paionians, Halizones, Mysians, Phrygians...

And I swear that as we pass through the palace gates and head back to the ship that list is still going on and on and on...

When we get back to Aulis and report, Agamemnon is hopping mad. He can't wait to invade – and after a bit of fuss waiting for the right wind – the moment finally arrives.

The Greek ships loose anchor. There's a big old roar from us soldiers – well, it's kinda expected, know what I mean? And the great fleet heads east – to war...