

Heroes of Troy by Neil Richards. Part 5

When we reach the battlefield, the Greeks are on their last legs – and half our boats are burning. So when our lads see what they think is Achilles himself racing across the plain, all fit and shiny and bursting for a punch-up, you can imagine how they feel. There's a shout goes up from both armies – 'Achilles!' - and before you know it – wallop – me and Patroclus have slammed into the fight.

It's amazing how things go when folk think there's a hero leading the way. We start winning. When we hit the city Patroclus is scaling those walls taking out Trojans right left and centre. But suddenly there's Hector in a gap in the walls. He's staring at Patroclus across the heaving bodies – and he looks angry. Very angry. Patroclus spots him – and freezes. Because of course – at heart, Patroclus is no Hero...

Hector winds himself up, then he's on him in a flash, all sword and spear in a blur – Patroclus's helmet goes flying, then his shield, he staggers back in a panic, tries to run, but this is Hector remember, you can't run from Hector – and seconds later Patroclus is dead in the sand. The whole place goes deadly quiet. No-one knows what to do.

But I do. I leap onto Patroclus's chariot. Like an arrow I'm off - heading for Achilles' camp in a cloud of dust.





Soon as I get there, I'm into that tent telling the Hero himself what's happened and who did it and how terrible it was and cruel and unfair and how brave young Petroclus was at the end... Then I slip outside and I cross my fingers and I wait for the desired effect. Bang on cue, Achilles comes staggering out seconds later all crying and cursing, and racing towards the distant battle.

But when he gets there it's dusk so all the Big Man can do is stand on the hilltop roaring like a lion for his lost pal. In the night he makes his peace with Agamemnon and at dawn the gods deliver him a new set of Golden Armour.

As he buckles it on he knows he might be going to his death – cos though he's supposed to be immortal there's another conflicting prophesy that says he's going to die at Troy. Don't ask me how these things work, I just fight here, know what I mean?

So cometh the dawn cometh another day's bloodshed. By now I've been fighting in this war for ten years and I'm thinking I've pretty much seen everything. But this day – this day of Achilles' revenge – this is a day of killing the like of which I never want to see again.

Achilles is unstoppable. Soon the river itself is running red and there's more dead Trojan bodies than sand. King Priam orders the gates to be opened so that some at least can be saved. But Hector refuses to retreat. He's no coward – he knows what he must do, he knows only one death will satisfy Achilles.



He doesn't have long to wait. The two Heroes finally come face to face – and both armies pause to watch the titanic struggle. In the end, it doesn't last long. Without mercy, Achilles brings Hector to his knees and runs him through with a spear. Then without a word, he ties Hector's body to his chariot and drags him back across the battlefield to the Greek lines.

No-one who was there that day will ever forget that moment. It was brutal vengeance – not heroism. Somehow the fighting just petered out, we had no spirit left for it. We looked around us at the death we'd wrought, and we walked back to our lines.

And then I heard the wailing. From Troy. Men and women who'd lost a loved one that day. I think there was not a soul alive in the city that was not weeping. The wailing went on for days. We didn't fight. We couldn't. We just sat in our tents. Or tried to sleep.

And the people of Troy wept, and wept, and wept.

Until finally one night King Priam himself made his way secretly through the Greek lines to Achilles' tent. Brave exhausted King Priam. He begged the Hero to hand over the body of his poor son Hector so that it might be buried.

I watched as all the anger in Achilles face finally turned to pity. He gave food to Priam, and told him to sleep. Then Achilles slipped out and dressed Hector's body in a beautiful velvet robe and surrounded it with treasures. And in the morning he let Priam return to Troy with Hector's remains on a wooden cart.



The next night there were two funeral pyres on the plains of Troy. The Trojans bade farewell to the body of the great Hero Hector. And on the shore line Petroclus, the boy-warrior who wanted to be a Hero was lain on a funeral boat by his dear friend Achilles, set afire and launched into the forgiving sea.

And as the two fires burned through the night, I sat alone on the hillside above. Watching and praying that this terrible war would soon be over.