

BOOK SEVENTEEN



Menelaus' Finest Hour

But Atreus' son the fighting Menelaus marked it all—the Trojans killing Patroclus there in the brutal carnage—and crested now in his gleaming bronze gear Atrides plowed through the front to stand astride the body, braced like a mother cow lowing over a calf, her first-born, first labor-pangs she'd felt. So the red-haired captain bestrode Patroclus now, shielding his corpse with spear and round buckler, burning to kill off any man who met him face-to-face. But Euphorbus who hurled the lethal ashen spear would not neglect his kill, Patroclus' handsome body. Halting close beside it, he taunted fighting Menelaus: "Back, high and mighty Atrides, captain of armies—back from the corpse, and leave the bloody gear! I was the first Trojan, first of the famous allies

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to spear Patroclus down in the last rough charge. So let me seize my glory among the Trojans now—or I'll spear you too, I'll rip your own sweet life away!"

But the red-haired captain flared back in anger: "Father Zeus—listen to this indecent, reckless bluster! Not even the leopard's fury makes the beast so proud, not even the lion's, not the murderous wild boar's, the greatest pride of all, bursting the boar's chest—they're nothing next to the pride of Panthous' sons with their strong ashen spears. But no, no joy did even powerful Hyperenor, breaker of horses, get from *his* young strength when he scorned *me*, stood up to *me*, reviling *me* as the weakest fighter in all Achaea's armies. Home he went, I'd say, but not on his own two feet, and brought no cheer to his loyal, loving wife and devoted parents. And you, I'll break your courage for you too if you try to take me on. Go back to your own rank and file, I tell you! Don't stand up against me—or you will meet your death. Even a fool learns something once it hits him."

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So he warned

but failed to shake Euphorbus who shot right back, "Now, high and mighty Atrides, now by heaven you pay in blood for the brother you laid low! You glory over it too—making his wife a widow lost in the depths of their new bridal chamber, bringing his parents cursed tears and grief. But I could stop that wretched couple's pain if only I brought your head and bloody armor home and laid them in Panthous' arms, in lovely Phrontis' arms! We're wasting time. Our fight's unfought, untested—we'll see who stands his ground, who cuts and runs."

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And he stabbed Menelaus' round shield, full center, not battering through—the brazen point bent back in the tough armor.

But his turn next, Menelaus
 rose with a bronze lance and a prayer to Father Zeus
 and lunging out at Euphorbus just dropping back,
 pierced the pit of his throat—leaning into it hard,
 his whole arm's weight in the stroke to drive it home
 and the point went slicing through the tender neck.
 He fell with a crash, armor ringing against his ribs,
 his locks like the Graces' locks splashed with blood,
 still braided tight with gold and silver clips,
 pinched in like a wasp's waist. There he lay
 like an olive slip a farmer rears to strength
 on a lonely hilltop, drenching it down with water,
 a fine young stripling tree, and the winds stir it softly,
 rustling from every side, and it bursts with silver shoots—
 then suddenly out of nowhere a wind in gale force comes storming,
 rips it out of its trench, stretches it out on the earth—
 so Panthous' stripling son lay sprawled in death,
 Euphorbus who hurled the strong ashen spear . . .
 Menelaus cut him down, was stripping off his armor—

Menelaus fierce as a mountain lion sure of his power,
 seizing the choicest head from a good grazing herd.
 First he cracks its neck, clamped in his huge jaws,
 mauling the kill then down in gulps he bolts it,
 blood and guts, and around him dogs and shepherds
 raise a fierce din but they keep their distance,
 lacking nerve to go in and take the lion on—
 the fear that grips their spirit makes them blanch.
 So now not a single Trojan fighter had the spine
 to go and face Atrides tensing in all his strength.
 Then and there Menelaus might have stripped Euphorbus
 and swept the Trojan's glittering armor off with ease
 if Apollo had not grudged him all that glory,
 rousing Hector against him, swift as Ares.
 Taking a man's shape, the Cicones' captain Mentès,
 Apollo spurred him on with winged orders: "Hector—
 you're chasing the wild wind, fiery Achilles' team!

They're hard for mortal men to curb and drive,
 for all but Achilles—his mother is immortal.
 But all the while Menelaus, Atreus' fighting son
 bestrides Patroclus—he's killed the Trojans' best,
 Panthous' son Euphorbus, stopped his fury cold."

And back Apollo strode, a god in the wars of men.
 But grief bore down on Hector, packing his dark heart
 as he scanned the battle lines and saw the worst at once:
 the two men there, one stripping the gleaming armor,
 the other sprawled on the ground,
 blood still spurting warm from his slashed throat.
 Down the front he charged, crested in flashing bronze,
 Hector loosing a savage cry and flaring on like fire,
 like the god of fire, the blaze that never dies.
 And the cry pierced Menelaus, deeply torn now
 as he probed his own great heart: "What can I do?
 If I leave this splendid gear and desert Patroclus—
 who fell here fighting, all to redeem my honor—
 won't any comrade curse me, seeing me break away?
 But if I should take on Hector and Hector's Trojans
 alone, in single combat—trying to save my pride—
 won't they encircle me, one against so many?
 This flashing Hector has all Troy at his back!
 But why debate, my friend, why thrash things out?
 When you fight a man against the will of the gods,
 a man they have sworn to honor—then look out,
 a heavy wave of ruin's about to overwhelm you.
 Surely no Achaean will curse me, seeing me now,
 giving ground to Hector . . .
 since fighting Hector's flanked by god almighty.
 Ah if only I knew where Ajax could be found,
 that man with his ringing war cry—we two together
 would go back to the melee calling up our fury,
 even fight in the teeth of every god on high
 and haul the body back to Achilles—somehow.
 Things are bad, but that would be the best."

Working it out, his heart racing as on they came,
 waves of Trojan soldiers and Hector led them in.
 And Atrides gave ground, he left the corpse
 but kept on turning round to face an attack—
 like a great bearded lion the dogs and field hands
 drive back from the folds with spears and sharp cries
 and the brave, battling heart in his chest freezes tight
 and the big cat, all reluctance, pulls back from the sheds.
 So the red-haired captain backed away from Patroclus' corpse 130
 but wheeled at bay when he reached his waiting allies,
 glancing round and round for Ajax' massive hulk.
 All at once on the left flank he marked him,
 spurring companions, urging them to fight,
 for Phoebus had filled each man with quaking fear.
 Atrides went on the run and reached him, shouting, "Ajax!
 Hurry, my friend, this way—fight for dead Patroclus!
 At least we could bring his body back to Achilles,
 stripped as Patroclus is—but not Achilles' armor:
 Hector with that flashing helmet has seized it all." 140

So he roused the fury in battling Ajax' heart
 and down the front he stalked with the red-haired king.
 Hector, tearing the famous armor off Patroclus,
 tugged hard at the corpse,
 mad to hack the head from the neck with bronze
 and drag the trunk away to glut the dogs of Troy.
 But in charged Ajax, shield like a tower before him
 and Hector, falling back on a crowd of comrades,
 leapt to his chariot, flinging the burnished gear
 to his waiting troops to haul away to Troy— 150
 trophies to be his own enormous glory. But Ajax,
 shielding Patroclus round with his broad buckler,
 stood fast now like a lion cornered round his young
 when hunters cross him, leading his cubs through woods—
 he ramps in all the pride of his power, bristling strength,
 the heavy folds of his forehead frowning down his eyes.
 So Ajax stood his ground over brave Patroclus now—

the fighting Atrides right beside him, standing fast,
 his grief mounting, every waiting moment.

But Glaucus,

Hippolochus' son and lord of Lycia's forces now, 160
 scowled at Hector, lashing out at him: "Hector—
 our prince of beauty, in battle all a sham!
 That empty glory of yours a runner's glory,
 a scurrying girl's at that.
 Now you'd better plan how to save your city,
 you alone and your native troopers born in Troy.
 Now not a single Lycian goes to fight the Argives,
 not to save your Troy. What lasting thanks for us,
 for warring with your enemies, on and on, no end?
 What hope has the common soldier in your ranks 170
 to be saved by you, Hector, you heart of iron?—
 if you could quit Sarpedon, your guest and friend-in-arms
 abandoned there as carrion fit for the Argive maws.
 Think what a staunch support Sarpedon was to you
 and to all Troy while the man was still alive!
 Now you lack the daring to save him from the dogs.
 So now, if any Lycian troops will obey my orders,
 home we go—and headlong death can come and topple Troy.
 If the Trojans had that courage, unswerving courage
 that fires men who fight for their own country, 180
 beating their enemies down in war and struggle,
 then we could drag Patroclus back to Troy at once.
 If we could haul him from battle, dead as he is,
 and lodge him behind King Priam's looming walls,
 our enemies would release Sarpedon's gear at once
 and then, then we could bring *his* body back to Troy.
 For the man we cut down here was the loyal friend
 of Prince Achilles—far the greatest among the Argive ships
 and at his command go rugged fighters hand-to-hand.
 But you—with enemy war cries ringing in your ears— 190
 you lacked the nerve to go up against Great Ajax,
 that fierce heart, to look him straight in the eye
 and fight the man head-on—he's a better man than you!"

With a dark glance from under his flashing helmet
 Hector lashed back, "Glaucus, such brazen insolence
 from a decent man like you, but why? Ah too bad,
 and I always thought you excelled the rest in sense,
 all who hale from Lycia's fertile soil. But now—
 you fill me with contempt—what are you saying?
 You tell *me* that I can't stand up to monstrous Ajax?
 I tell *you* I never cringe at war and thundering horses!
 But the will of Zeus will always overpower the will of men,
 Zeus who strikes fear in even the bravest man of war
 and tears away his triumph, all in a lightning flash,
 and at other times he will spur a man to battle.
 Come on, my friend, stand by me, watch me work!
 See if I prove a coward dawn to dusk—your claim—
 or I stop some Argive, blazing in all his power,
 from fighting on to shield Patroclus' corpse!"

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With that he loosed a shrill cry to his Trojans,
 "Trojans! Lycians! Dardan fighters hand-to-hand—
 now be men, my friends, call up your battle-fury!
 I'll strap on the brave Achilles' armor, burnished armor
 I stripped from strong Patroclus when I killed him!"

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So he cried and his own bronze helmet flashed
 as Hector veered away from the heavy fighting,
 running after his men and caught them quickly.
 They'd not gone far and he ran with eager strides
 as they bore Achilles' famous arms toward Troy.
 Standing far from the war and all its heartbreak
 Hector exchanged his armor, handing his own gear
 to his battle-hungry troops to return to holy Troy,
 and donned the deathless arms of Peleus' son Achilles,
 arms the gods of the sky once gave his loving father—
 and Peleus passed them on to his son when he grew old
 but the son would not grow old in his father's armor.

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Now,

when Zeus who arrays the clouds saw Hector from afar,
 strapping on the gear of Peleus' godlike son,

he shook his head and addressed his own deep heart:
 "Poor soldier. Never a thought of death weighs down
 your spirit now, yet death is right beside you . . .
 You don the deathless arms of a great fighter—
 and all other fighters tremble before him, true,
 but you, you killed his comrade, gentle, strong,
 and against all rights you ripped the immortal armor
 off his head and shoulders. So great power for the moment
 I will grant you to compensate for all that is to come:
 never again will you return from battle, Hector,
 nor will Andromache take that famous armor,
 Achilles' deathless armor, from your hands.

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So he decreed

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and the son of Cronus bowed his craggy dark brows.
 Zeus fitted the armor tightly on Hector's body
 and Ares surged in his heart with awesome force,
 filling his limbs with power and fighting strength.
 And on he strode amidst his illustrious Trojan allies—
 calling out with wild cries, now flashing before them all
 in the gleaming battle-gear of greathearted Achilles.
 He ranged their ranks, inspiring every captain,
 commanding Mesthles, Glaucus, Medon, Thersilochus,
 Asteropaeus, Disenor, Hippothous, Phorcys, Chromius,
 Ennomus too, who could read the flight of birds.
 Hector drove them on with winging orders: "Hear me—
 numberless tribes of allies living round our borders—
 I neither sought nor needed enormous hordes of men
 that day I called you here, each from your own city.
 What I needed was men to shield our helpless children,
 fighting men to defend our Trojan women—all-out—
 against these savage Argives. That goal in mind,
 I bleed my own people for gifts and food
 so I can build your courage, each and every man.
 So now, each of you, turn straight for the enemy,
 live or die—that is the lovely give-and-take of war.
 That man who drags Patroclus back to Trojan charioteers,
 dead as Patroclus is, and makes Great Ajax yield—
 to him I will give one half the bloody spoils,

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keep half for myself—his glory will equal mine!”

Strong vow—

and they bore straight down on the Argives full force,
shaking their spears, their hearts fired with hopes
of dragging Patroclus' body out from under Ajax—
fools! Over the corpse he'd cut down crowds of men, 270
though now, at this point, Ajax warned Menelaus,
lord of the battle cry, “Old friend, my Prince,
I lose hope that we alone, on our own power,
can make it back from the fighting.
I not only fear for our comrade's body—
Patroclus will glut the dogs and birds of Troy
and all too soon—but I fear for my own head,
for my own life. And yours too, Menelaus—
look at this cloud of war that blots out all the field,
this Hector, this headlong death that stares us in the face! 280
Quick, call to the chiefs—if one can hear you now.”

At that the prince of the battle cry complied
with a high piercing shout that reached all troops:
“Friends—lords of the Argives, O my captains!
All who join the Atridae, Agamemnon and Menelaus,
who drink wine at the king's expense and hold command
of your own troops, your rank and fame from Zeus!
Impossible now to pick you out, my captains,
man by man—the battle blazes up so wildly.
Forward, each on his own! You'll die of shame 290
if the dogs of Ilium make Patroclus ripping sport.”

And the quick Oilean Ajax heard him clearly,
first on the run along the fighting front to meet him—
Idomeneus after him and Idomeneus' good aide,
Meriones, a match for the butcher god of war.
For the rest who followed, waking Achaea's war-lust,
what man has spirit strong enough to sing their names?

Down in a mass the Trojans pounded—Hector led them in,
charging in as a heavy surf roars in against the rip

at a river's mouth, swelled with rains from Zeus, 300
and on either side the jutting headlands bellow back
at the booming sea with matching thunder—in they came,
the Trojans roaring in. But the Argives faced them,
standing fast in a ring around Patroclus, one fury
seizing their hearts, packing a wall of bronze shields
and round about their glittering crested helmets now
the son of Cronus spread a dense, deepening mist.
He had never hated Menoetius' son in the past,
while he was alive and still Achilles' aide,
and now the Father loathed to see him prey 310
to Troy's marauders, the ravening dogs of Troy—
so he drove his comrades on to shield his corpse.

At first the Trojans could ram the Argives back
and they abandoned the corpse, their fiery-eyed battalions
fled away in panic. But still the breakneck Trojans,
up in arms as they were,
killed off none of the Argives with their spears—
instead they began to drag away Patroclus' corpse.
But not for long would his comrades give him up:
in a swift maneuver Ajax wheeled them round, Ajax, 320
greatest in handsome build, greatest in works of war
of all the Argives after Peleus' matchless son.
Right through the front he plowed like a wild boar
ramping in power up on the high mountain ridges,
scattering dogs and reckless hunters at one charge
when he wheels at bay and drives them down the glades.
So now the son of noble Telamon, dauntless Ajax
scattered the massing Trojan packs at a charge,
all who bestrode Patroclus now, high with hopes
of dragging him back to Troy to win the glory—

Trying hardest, 330
Hippothous out for fame . . . Pelasgian Lethus' son,
lashing a shield-strap round the ankle tendons,
was hauling Patroclus footfirst through the melee,
hoping to please Prince Hector and all the Trojans,
Hippothous rushing on but death came just as fast.

No Trojans could save him now, strain as they might—
 Ajax son of Telamon charging quickly into the carnage
 speared him at close range through the bronze-cheeked helmet,
 the horsehair crest cracked wide open around the point,
 smashed by the massive spear and hand that drove it. 340
 His brains burst from the wound in sprays of blood,
 soaking the weapon's socket—
 his strength dissolved on the spot, his grip loosed
 and he dropped the foot of brave Patroclus' corpse.
 There on the ground it lay—he rushed to join it,
 pitching over the dead man's body face-to-face,
 a world away from Larissa's dark rich soil . . .
 Never would he repay his loving parents now
 for the gift of rearing—his life cut short so soon,
 brought down by the spear of lionhearted Ajax. 350

Hector hurled at *him*—a sudden glint of the spear—
 but Ajax saw it coming and dodged the bronze shaft,
 just by a hair, and the weapon caught Schedius,
 gallant Iphitus' son and Phocia's finest man,
 who made his home in the famous town of Panopeus,
 ruling tribes of men. Hector speared him now—
 the point split the collarbone, slashing through
 and out by the shoulder's base, sticking out the back.
 He fell with a crash, his armor clanging round him.

Ajax next—

with a lunge he stabbed Phorcys, Phaenops' warrior son 360
 bestriding Hippothous' corpse—he ripped his belly,
 smashing the corslet just where the plates join
 and the bronze spearhead spilled his entrails out
 and down went Phorcys, grasping, clawing the dust.
 The Trojan front gave ground, glorious Hector too
 and the Argives yelled wildly, dragging the bodies,
 hauling Hippothous' corpse along with Phorcys' now
 and tearing the bloody armor off their backs.

Then, once more,

Trojan troops would have clambered back inside their walls,
 whipped weak with fear by the Argives primed for battle 370

and they, they would have seized enormous glory—
 yes, defying even the great decree of Zeus—
 by dint of their own power and striking force.
 But god Apollo himself spurred on Aeneas,
 taking the build of Periphas, Summoner's son
 who had grown old as herald to Aeneas' father
 the aged king—a loving, loyal herald too . . .
 Like him to the life, Apollo provoked Aeneas:
 "Aeneas—how could you and your men save Troy
 with the gods *against* you? As I've seen other men 380
 who trust to their own power and striking force,
 their own valor, their own troop-strength—
 even badly outmanned—defend their country well.
 But Zeus is *with* us here! Decreeing triumph for us,
 not for the Argives now. But you, you're all frightened
 out of your minds—you cannot fight."

The deadly Archer—

Aeneas knew him at once, looking straight in his eyes
 and the fighter loosed a rousing shout at Hector:
 "Hector—all you captains of Trojans, Trojan allies—
 shame, what shame! Clambering back into Troy now, 390
 whipped weak with fear by the Argive forces? Look—
 one of the gods comes up beside me, tells me Zeus
 the supreme commander still impels us all in battle.
 So go for the Argives—head-on! Don't let them bear
 Patroclus' body back to their ships without a fight!"

And springing out of the lines Aeneas took his stand
 as the rest swung round and braced to meet the Argives.
 There—Aeneas lunged and speared Leocritus through,
 a son of Arisbas, Lycomedes' die-hard friend.
 And veteran Lycomedes pitied him as he dropped, 400
 sweeping beside him, rearing—a flash of his lance
 and he hit a captain, Hippasus' son Apisaon,
 slitting open his liver, up under the midriff . . .
 His knees went limp, a man who'd marched from Paeonia,
 good fertile soil where he excelled all fighters,
 all but Asteropaeus—

Down to the ground he went
 but battling Asteropaeus pitied his comrade's pain
 and charged the Argives hard, mad to fight it out—
 no use, too late. They'd packed behind their shields,
 ringing Patroclus round on all sides, spears jutting
 as Ajax ranged them all and shouted out commands:
 "No one back away from the body! No heroes either,
 bolting out of the Argive pack for single combat!
 Cluster round Patroclus, shoulder-to-shoulder,
 fight them at close range!" At the giant's command
 the earth ran red with blood, slithering dark now
 and the soldiers' corpses tumbling thick-and-fast,
 Trojans and breakneck allies piled alongside Argives—
 how could the Argives fight without some bloody losses?
 But far fewer of them went down, remembering always
 to fight in tight formation,
 friend defending friend from headlong slaughter.

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So on they fought like a swirl of living fire—
 you could not say if the sun and moon still stood secure,
 so dense the battle-haze that engulfed the brave
 who stood their ground around Patroclus' body.
 But the other Trojans and Argive men-at-arms
 fought on at their ease beneath a clear blue sky—
 sharp brilliance of sunlight glittering round them,
 not a cloud in sight to shadow the earth and mountains.
 Men who fought at a distance worked with frequent breaks,
 dodging painful arrows that showered side-to-side.
 But men who held the center suffered agonies,
 thanks to the haze and carnage—
 ruthless bronze hacking their lines to pieces,
 there where the bravest fought. Yet two men there,
 famous fighters, Antilochus flanking Thrasymedes
 still had not caught word of Patroclus' death:
 they thought the gallant soldier still alive,
 fighting Trojans up on the clashing front lines.
 But the two men kept their lookout, always alert
 to their comrades' deaths or signs of instant flight

as the two fought out on the flank—just as Nestor ordered,
 sending both sons forth from the black ships to battle.

So all day long for the men of war the fighting raged,
 grim and grueling, relentless, drenching labor, nonstop,
 and the knees, shins and feet that upheld each fighter,
 their hands, their eyes, ran with the sweat of struggle
 over the great runner Achilles' steadfast aide-in-arms—
 an enormous tug-of-war. As when some master tanner
 gives his crews the hide of a huge bull for stretching,
 the beast's skin soaked in grease and the men grab hold,
 bracing round in a broad circle, tugging, stretching hard
 till the skin's oils go dripping out as the grease sinks in,
 so many workers stretch the whole hide tough and taut—
 so back and forth in a cramped space they tugged,
 both sides dragging the corpse and hopes rising,
 Trojans hoping to drag Patroclus back to Troy,
 Achaeans to drag him back to the hollow ships
 and round him always the brutal struggle raging.
 Not even Ares, lasher of armies, not even Athena
 watching the battle here could scorn its fury,
 not even in their most savage lust for combat, no—
 so tense the work of war for the men and chariot-teams
 that Zeus stretched taut across Patroclus this one day . . .

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But great Achilles knew nothing yet of Patroclus' death.
 They were fighting far afield of the deep-sea ships,
 beneath the Trojan wall, so Achilles never feared
 his friend was dead—he must be still alive,
 pressing on to the very gates, but he'd come back.
 Achilles never dreamed Patroclus would storm all Troy
 without him, not even *with* him. No, time and again
 his mother Thetis told him this was not to be,
 she told him alone, in secret . . .
 always bringing word of mighty Zeus's plans,
 but not this time. One thing she never told him—
 his own mother—what a terrible thing had taken place:

470

while the man was still alive—
 now death and fate have got him in their grip.
 On with it! Take up the whip and shining reins,
 I'll dismount the car and fight on foot."

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Alcimedon sprang aboard the hurtling chariot,
 quickly grasping the whip and reins in both fists
 as Automedon leapt to ground. But Hector saw them
 and called at once to Aeneas posted close beside him,
 "Aeneas, counselor of the Trojans armed in bronze,
 I can see the great runner Achilles' team—look there—
 heading into the fight but reined by feeble drivers.
 So my hopes ride high that we can seize them now
 if you have the heart to join me.
 Charge! Those two will flinch, they'd never dare
 stand up to us man-to-man in all-out battle!"

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And Anchises' gallant son did not resist.
 They went straight on, shoulders shielded in oxhide
 tanned and tough and hammered thick with bronze.
 And a brace of fighters, Chromius, strong Aretus
 flanked their attack and the Trojans had high hopes
 of killing the men and driving off the massive stallions.
 Reckless fools! They'd never disengage from Automedon,
 not without some bloodshed. No, with a prayer to Zeus
 some new fighting power had filled his dark heart
 and he quickly called his trusted friend Alcimedon:
 "Alcimedon, keep those horses close beside me,
 breathing down my neck. Nothing can hold him back,
 this Hector in all his fury—nothing, I tell you—
 not till he leaps behind Achilles' long-maned team
 and kills us both and routs our forward line—
 or he goes down himself in the first assault."

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And he called the two Aeantes and Menelaus:
 "Ajax, Ajax—lords of the Argives—Menelaus!
 Leave Patroclus now to the best men you can find,
 they'll straddle the corpse and fight off Trojan packs—

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you fight the fatal day from us, we're still alive.
 Here they come, full tilt, Aeneas and Hector,
 Troy's best men, bearing down on us here—
 this point of tears and attack!
 But all lies in the lap of the great gods.
 I'll fling a spear myself and leave the rest to Zeus."

He aimed and hurled and his spear's long shadow flew
 and hit Aretus square in the balanced round shield—
 no blocking the shaft, the bronze rammed through,
 piercing his belt and gouging down his belly.
 As a burly farmhand wielding a whetted ax,
 chopping a field-ranging bull behind the horns,
 hacks through its whole hump and the beast heaves up
 then topples forward—so Aretus reared, heaving up
 then toppled down on his back. The slashing spear
 shuddered tense in his guts and the man was gone.
 A flash of a lance—Hector hurled at Automedon
 who kept his eyes right on him, dodged the bronze,
 ducking down with a quick lunge, and behind his back
 the heavy spearshaft plunged and stuck in the earth,
 the butt end quivering into the air till suddenly
 rugged Ares snuffed its fury out, dead still . . .
 Now they would have attacked with swords, close-up,
 incensed, but the two Aeantes drove a wedge between them,
 plowing through the press at their comrade's call.
 Cowering backward fast the Trojans gave ground,
 Hector, Aeneas and Chromius, noble prince,
 deserted Aretus there, his life torn out,
 sprawled on the spot. Automedon rushed in,
 wild as the god of war to strip the armor off,
 shouting in savage exultation, "Now, by heaven,
 I've eased the grief of Patroclus' ghost a little—
 though the man I battered down was half as great as he!"

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With that he tossed the bloody gear in the chariot,
 climbed aboard with his hands and feet dripping gore

like a lion that rends and bolts a bull.

And now, again,
 the fight for Patroclus flared, stretched to the breaking point,
 mounting in tears, in fury, since Pallas fired their blood, 620
 sweeping down from the heavens, sent by the Father
 thundering far and wide to drive the Argives on,
 for now his mind had changed, at least for a moment.
 Yes, down like a lurid rainbow Zeus sends arching
 down to mortal men from the high skies, a sign of war
 or blizzard to freeze the summer's warmth and put a halt
 to men's work on the face of the earth and harry flocks—
 so shrouded round in a lurid cloud came Pallas now
 and dove in the Argive ranks to fire up each man.
 And the first one she roused was Atreus' son 630
 powerful Menelaus—he stood right at hand—
 she took the build and tireless voice of Phoenix:
 "Yours is the shame, Atrides. You will hang your head
 if under the walls of Troy the dogs in all their frenzy
 drag and maul the proud Achilles' steadfast friend.
 Hold on, full force—spur all our men to battle!"

The lord of the war cry told the goddess quickly,
 "Phoenix, father, good old soldier—if only Pallas
 would give me power and drive the weapons off me!
 Then I'd gladly stand and fight for Patroclus. 640
 My comrade's death has cut me to the quick.
 But Hector keeps his terrible fury blazing,
 keeps his bronze spear stabbing
 and never stops the slaughter—Zeus hands him glory!"

Her gray eyes afire, the goddess Pallas thrilled
 that the man had prayed to her before all other gods.
 She put fresh strength in his back, spring in his knees
 and filled his heart with the horsefly's raw daring—
 brush it away from a man's flesh and back it comes,
 biting, attacking, crazed for sweet human blood. 65
 With such raw daring she filled his dark heart
 and he bestrode Patroclus, flung a gleaming spear—

and there was a Trojan, Eetion's son called Podes,
 well-bred, wealthy, and Hector prized him most
 in all the realm—a first-rate drinking friend . . .
 As he sprang in flight the red-haired captain hit him,
 splitting his belt, and bronze went ripping through his flesh
 and down he went with a crash. Atrides hauled his corpse
 from under the Trojans toward his own massing friends.

But Hector—Apollo stood by *him* and drove him on, 660
 disguised as Phaenops, Asius' son Abydos-born,
 dearest to Hector of all his foreign guests.
 Like him to the life, the deadly Archer taunted,
 "Hector, what Achaean will ever fear you now?
 Look how you cringe in the face of Menelaus,
 no great fighter before this—a weakling, soft.
 He's gone and snatched a corpse from under our noses,
 single-handed he's taken down your trusted comrade
 brave in the front ranks, Podes, Eetion's son."

A black cloud of grief came shrouding over Hector 670
 but helmed in flashing bronze he hurtled through the front.
 That very moment the son of Cronus seized his storm-shield—
 rippling and flaring bright—and shrouding Ida in dark clouds,
 loosed a bolt with a huge crack of thunder, shook the shield,
 gave the Trojans triumph and routed fear-struck Argives.

And the first to beat retreat, a Boeotian, Peneleos.
 Charging forward as always, head-on, until Polydamas
 speared his shoulder—just grazing its ridge
 but grating bone—he thrust at point-blank range.
 Close range too, Hector stabbed the wrist of Leitus, 680
 brave Alectryon's son, and knocked him out of action.
 No hope left he could wield a spear against the Trojans,
 no more fighting now—Leitus looked around and ran.
 But as Hector rushed him, Idomeneus speared *Hector*,
 struck the plate on his chest beside the nipple—
 his long spearshaft splintered off at the head
 and the Trojans shouted out. And Hector hurled

at Idomeneus now aboard a chariot—missed by a hair
 but he caught Meriones' aide and driver Coeranus,
 one who'd come with his lord from rock-built Lyctus. 690
 Idomeneus had left the ships on foot that morning
 and would have offered the Trojans a fine triumph now
 if Coeranus had not rushed to the rescue, lashed his team
 and come like light to the king—

he saved his life that day
 but he quickly lost his own to man-killing Hector—

Hector

spear-ed him under the jaw and ear, knocking teeth out,
 shattering roots and all and split his tongue in half.
 He pitched from his car, the reins poured to the ground
 and on foot Meriones grabbed them up in his hands,
 shouting out at Idomeneus, "Whip them hard now! 700
 Back to the fast ships! You see for yourself—
 no power left in the Argives."

So Meriones yelled

and Idomeneus whipped the team with their manes streaming,
 back to the hollow ships—fear seized the king at last.

Lionhearted Ajax and Menelaus were not blind . . .
 they saw Zeus turn the tide toward the Trojans.
 Telamonian Ajax voiced frustration first:
 "Dear god, enough! Any idiot boy could see
 how Father Zeus himself supports these Trojans.
 All their weapons land, no matter who flings them, 710
 brave fighter or bad—Zeus guides them all to the mark.
 Ours all clatter to ground. Wasted, harmless shots.
 So come, alone as we are, find the best way out:
 how do we pull the body clear and save ourselves,
 make it back to our lines and bring our friends some joy?
 They look our way in despair, they must. All hope gone
 that murderous Hector's rage and invincible spear-arm
 can be stopped—not now—
 he'll hurl himself against our blackened hulls!
 If only an aide could speed the word to Achilles. 720
 I'm certain he has not heard the dreadful news

that his dear friend lies dead. Wherever I look,
 no use, I cannot see the Achaean for the mission,
 such swirling mist blots out the men and horses both.
 O Father Zeus—draw our armies clear of the cloud,
 give us a bright sky, give us back our sight!
 Kill us all in the light of day at least—
 since killing's now your pleasure!"

So he prayed

and the Father filled with pity, seeing Ajax weep.
 He dispelled the mist at once, 730
 drove off the cloud and the sun came blazing forth
 and the whole war swung into view, clear, that instant—
 and Ajax called the lord of the war cry, Menelaus:
 "Look hard for Antilochus now, my royal friend.
 If you see him still alive, brave Nestor's son,
 tell him to run the news to great Achilles quickly—
 his dearest friend-in-arms on earth lies dead."

And the lord of the battle cry could not refuse
 but dragged his heels like a lion leaving sheepfolds,
 bone-weary from harrying hounds and field hands. 740
 They'll never let him tear the rich fat from the oxen,
 all night long they stand their guard but the lion craves meat,
 he lunges in and in but his charges gain him nothing,
 thick-and-fast from their hardy hands the javelins
 rain down in his face, and waves of roaring torches—
 these the big cat fears, balking for all his rage,
 and at dawn he slinks away, his spirits dashed.
 And so the lord of the war cry left Patroclus,
 resisting all the way—he feared the worst:
 stampeded in terror, his men would leave the body 750
 easy prey for the Trojans. So here Menelaus paused
 with much to command Meriones and the Aeantes:
 "Ajax and Ajax, captains of Achaea, Meriones too,
 remember Patroclus now, our stricken comrade!
 That gentle man, the soul of kindness to all
 while the man was still alive . . .
 Now death and fate have got him in their grip."

And with that the red-haired captain moved ahead
 like an eagle scanning left and right, the bird men say
 has the sharpest eyes of all that fly the heavens:
 high as he soars he'll never miss the racing hare
 cowering down low in the dense, shaggy brush—
 down on its head he swoops
 and pins it fast and rips its life away. So now,
 Menelaus O my King, you turned your shining eyes,
 scanning the crowds of comrades front and rear,
 trying to see if Nestor's son was still alive.
 He marked him quickly, out on the left flank
 and rousing cohorts, driving them back to war,
 and the red-haired captain halted near and called,
 "Turn this way, Antilochus, Prince, and hear the news,
 dreadful news—would to god it had never happened!
 You see for yourself, I know, how Father Zeus
 sends waves of ruin breaking down our lines—
 victory goes to Troy. Our best Achaean's dead—
 Patroclus, a stunning loss to all our armies!
 Quick, run to Achilles' moorings up the beach
 and tell him all. Perhaps—but he must be fast—
 he can bring the body safely back to his ship,
 stripped as Patroclus is—
 Hector with that flashing helmet has his armor."

760

770

780

Antilochus listened closely, hating every word.
 He stood there speechless a while, struck dumb . . .
 tears filling his eyes, his strong voice choked.
 But he still would not neglect Atrides' order.
 So handing his gear to a loyal aide Laodocus,
 who maneuvered his pawing horses close by,
 he set off at a run.

But he wept freely now
 as his feet swept him clear of the close fighting,
 bearing the dreadful news to Peleus' son Achilles.
 But you, Menelaus O my King, you had no heart
 to defend the Pylians, hard-pressed as they were,
 once their leader left, a heavy blow to his troops.

790

And putting the veteran Thrasymedes in command,
 he ran back to bestride Patroclus' corpse again
 and flanking the two Aeantes now, reported briskly,
 "I sent Antilochus. He's off to the fast ships
 to tell the swift Achilles. But I've little hope
 he'll come at all—for all his rage at Hector.
 How can he fight the Trojans without armor?
 So come, alone as we are, find the best way out:
 how do we pull the body clear and save ourselves
 from the Trojan uproar, flee our death, our fate?"

800

The Great Telamonian Ajax answered firmly,
 "All true, straight to the point, Lord Menelaus.
 Quickly, you and Meriones shoulder up the body,
 carry it off the lines. We're right behind you,
 fighting the Trojans, fighting this Prince Hector.
 The two Aeantes bearing the same fury, the same name—
 and no strangers at standing up to slashing Ares,
 each defending the other side-by-side."

810

So he urged
 and up from the earth they caught the body in their arms,
 hoisting it high above their heads with a great heave—
 and Trojan forces crowding behind them shouted out
 when they saw the Argive fighters lift the corpse.
 They swept in like hounds that fling themselves
 at a wounded boar before young hunters reach him,
 darting in for a moment, keen to rip the boar apart
 till he wheels at bay, ramping into the pack with all his power
 and the hounds cringe and bolt and scatter left and right.
 And so the Trojans kept on pressing, squad on squad,
 stabbing away with swords and two-edged spears
 till the two called Ajax wheeled against them hard
 to make a stand—and they turned white, none had nerve
 to charge forth now and fight it out for the corpse.

820

So they labored to haul Patroclus from the war,
 back to the beaked ships as fighting flared behind them
 wild as a flash fire, sprung out of nowhere, storming down

on a teeming city, houses caving in to the big blaze
as gale-winds whip it into a roaring conflagration. 830
So rose the relentless din of horse and fighting men
breaking against them now as they struggled back to shore.
Dead set as mules who put their backs in the labor . . .
dragging down from the cliffs along a stony trail
some roof-beam or a heavy ship timber, slogging on
till they nearly burst their hearts with sweat and labor—
so they strained to carry off the corpse. Right behind them
the two Aeantes held the Trojans off as a wooded rocky ridge
stretched out across an entire plain holds back a flood,
fighting off the killer-tides of the mounting rivers, 840
beating them all back to swamp the lowland flats—
none of their pounding waves can make a breakthrough.
So the two Aeantes kept on beating the Trojans off
but on they came, assaulting the rear, two in the lead,
Aeneas the son of Anchises flanking glorious Hector.
Flying before them now like clouds of crows or starlings
screaming murder, seeing a falcon dive in for the kill,
the hawk that wings grim death at smaller birds—
so pursued by Aeneas and Hector Argive fighters
raced, screaming death-cries, lust for battle lost 850
and masses of fine armor littered both sides of the trench
as the Argives fled in fear, no halt in the fighting, not now—

H O M E R

PENGUIN BOOKS



The
Iliad

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