

*Scene: The narrator is 18-year-old Iakos. Aithon is Iakos' uncle, a ship captain. Tesapili is a Hittite general who is paying Aithon to escort his Syrian grain ships to the Hittite homeland. Oi'nops is Aithon's second in command. They are about to fight a sea battle against two Sikilian pirate ships.*

"Iakos: Have you ever killed a man?" Aithon asked quietly.

I felt ashamed. "No, Uncle."

"Breathe slowly. Shut out the noise. See nothing but your target. Your target today is nothing but a bale of hay, as always. When you nock your arrow, say to yourself, '*I nock my arrow.*' Say it." I was looking back at the Sikilians. "Go ahead, say it," he repeated.

"I nock my arrow," I mumbled, barely hearing him.

He grabbed my chin, pulled it toward him, and stared into my eyes. "Say it. Concentrate."

"*I nock my arrow.*"

"When you aim, say to yourself, '*I aim at the bale of hay.*' Say it."

"*I aim at the bale of hay.*"

"Good. The torso is the bale of hay. Iakos, no one at sea has ever worn such armor as you wear. The Sikilians will only have staff bows. Unless they're right alongside, they can't penetrate your armor. You're invulnerable. Don't think of their arrows, think only of the bale of hay."

"Yes, Uncle."

"Don't release till they're in range. Don't rush. Lead your target by an arm's length. As long as they trail us, the wind will be in their favor. But they're moving toward our arrows, and we're drawing away from theirs; that will cancel out the wind advantage. The difference maker will be the power of our bone-glue bows compared to their staff bows." He kissed my cheek. "May heaven protect you."

He trundled aft, calling out, "Down-sail," to gather speed, and as the crew lashed him in on the port side, he nocked an arrow and checked the distance to the Sikilians, now much diminished.

*Breathe. I nock my arrow.*

The lead ship was not yet in range, but I could clearly see their ship-leader studying us from the bow, with a mariner to his left. The ship-leader wore a bowl-shaped leather helmet tied under his chin and a scruffy looking, undyed wool tunic. Over that he wore a leather cuirass with green bars of copper sewed on. Except for the mustache, he looked like an Achaean.

*Wiiiiiiiish.* An arrow knifed through the copper on his right side, resounding with a *thunk!* and toppling him over backward.

*What?*

I glanced leftward. Uncle was calmly nocking another arrow.

Impossible! The Sikilians were way out of range. Aithon aimed and let fly, and the arrow whisked between our ship and theirs with hardly any arc. It nicked the shoulder of the second mariner and then wobbled past the ship and plopped into the sea.

At this angle, I could see the Sikilians on the first two benches on the far side of their ship.

*Breathe. I aim at the bale of hay.*

*Wiiiiiiiish.* I released the arrow.

Twenty paces in front of the ship, it skipped once on the surface of the sea, then came to rest and bobbed harmlessly on the waves.

“Wait till they’re in range,” Uncle shouted. *Wiiiiiiiish.* His arrow struck the left shoulder blade of the rower I had aimed at.

I heard foreign voices, panicked voices, and the ship veered to port, opening up the range. But they lost the wind and began to fall behind; in a few moments the second vessel was positioned where the first had been. Holding a line to keep his balance, a Sikilian leaned out over the bow, peering at us. The first ship must have masked his view of Aithon’s marksmanship. He wore no armor.

*Wiiiiiiiish.* The impact from Aithon’s arrow knocked the man clear across the bow and over the port side. After the second arrow smashed into the timbers next to the first portside oarsman, that ship quickly steered to port as well and drew up alongside the first ship. I could see mariners on the two ships gesticulating—trying to decide what to do.

“They’ll either break it off or make a rush for us,” Aithon shouted to the entire crew. “Stand by your oars.”

The second Sikilian steered hard to starboard and cut across our stern under oars, while on the port side the first also took up the oars and steered toward us. There was now one of them on each side of us.

“It took them two dead and two wounded to figure that out,” said Oi’nops.

Tesapili came aft and positioned himself on the starboard side across from Aithon. Lashed in, Uncle and I weren’t going anywhere.

“Deploy oars,” Aithon commanded. The men ran out the oars and waited. “Prepare for arrows.”

When the Sikilians were equidistant off our stern, they leaned into the oars and made a dash for us. As they came within range, Oi'nops called out, "Pursuit Speed!" With a grunt, each man dug his oar into a patch of sea and yanked it backward, as a man would rip a shovelful of dirt from the earth and toss it away.

Unlike ours, their shields were fixed in place beside them; and at the current angle, except for an oarsman's head, and momentarily his left shoulder as he completed his stroke, they were a poor target.

But the fools to port had left their lookout aloft. *Wiiiiiiiish.* Aithon's arrow arced upward, missed, and arced gracefully downward into the sea somewhere beyond.

*Wiiiiiiiish.* His arrow arced upward and embedded itself in the sail.

*Wiiiiiiiish.* His arrow arced upward and embedded itself in the mast.

*Wiiiiiiiish.* His arrow arced upward and embedded itself in the forehead.

The man slumped over the edge of the crow's nest and crashed on the deck twenty-five paces below, feeling nothing.

*Wiiiiiiiish.* To starboard, the Hittite joined in. After half a dozen arrows, a scream from far away told me he struck flesh.

"Volley!" called out the Old Man, and our men at the oars instinctively scrunched down. A moment later, half a dozen arrows from each Sikilian vessel arced downward, burying themselves into the sea up to the feathers, then quickly bobbed to the surface lengthwise as we left them behind.

*Breath. I nock my arrow. I aim at the bale of hay. Wiiiiiiiish.*

My arrow arced downward and struck just above the waterline.

"Volley!" Somehow the two Sikilian ships were coordinating their volleys. Half the arrows splashed short, half caught wood. They were at extreme range for their staff bows and had to arc their arrows too much to aim at individual men. Hits would be random.

*More elevation, more pull. I nock my arrow. I aim at the bale of hay. Wiiiiiiiish.*

Had sail cloth veins, I would have drawn blood.

With forty-five oarsmen in each ship to our thirty-five, they relentlessly gained on us and were now only thirty paces short of our stern. "Try for the bowmen," Uncle told me. "It doesn't matter if you hit them, just make them worry about *you* rather than their targets."

"Volley!" This time, all twelve Sikilian arrows thumped into the ship, sounding as if a dozen men swung their axes at the same tree.

Mouth agape, unharmed but with a look of surprise, the steersman of the ship to port held his hands to each side of his neck. He fell clumsily onto his left buttock and leaned against the port gunwale, still astonished. Then his hands drooped to the deck, and blood spurted out both sides of his throat. Aithon's arrow had passed clean through.

With no steersman, their ship lost its clean line. One brave Sikilian grabbed a shield and darted to the steering oars. He lived till Aithon's third arrow. No one took his place.

Their bowmen hid behind the shield line; then like moles sticking their heads out from their burrows, popped up just long enough to loose their arrows and then ducked back down. I stood my ground and aimed just above the shield line, loosing my arrow when I caught a glimpse of them beginning to rise up. I hit no one, but after a couple volleys managed to break up their rhythm. They began volleying individually rather than as a unit.

"Aithon, the men are spent," said Oi'nops. "I can't keep ahead. They're hemming us in."

*Clang.*

A bolt of fire seared my breast.

I rocked backwards, dropping my bow and rotating my arms wildly to catch my balance. The lashing line was to keep me from falling overboard—not backward. I was a tall pine that had taken the last swing of the axe. Slowly teetering toward the gangway, the last thing I saw was the arrow sticking out of my chest.

\*\*\*\*\*

There is no pain—just a feeling of peace, complete, utter peace.

"Iakos—can you hear me? It's your cousin."

My cousin. Eurylochos.

"Iakos—your wound is mortal. There is no hope."

My eyelids ease open. His face is a giant oval haze hovering overhead.

"Eurylochos?"

His face is wracked with despair. "Do you understand me, cousin? Your time is at hand. You'll sleep this day in the Fields of Asphodel. Is there any message you wish me to carry to your parents?"

Mother. Father. "Tell them ... tell them I love them, and that I died in battle."

"I will." He kissed my cheek. "Farewell, cousin."

“Eurylochos, you’re an idiot,” barked Uncle. “Get up, boy, you’re fine. Your cousin is just being a goat’s ass.”

Eurylochos giggled. He and Oi’nops pulled me into a sitting position. “I’m not going to die?”

“Yes, you are,” Aithon answered gruffly, “and so are we all, but not today.”

They had stripped off my armor. Below my right nipple, blood was drying into a sticky patch.

“It’s just a puncture wound,” said Aithon. “Your armor was hardly breached. It was your head that we feared. You owe a debt to the man who invented helmets.”

“Thirty boars died, that you might live,” pronounced Eurylochos solemnly, then burst into another giggle.

“What happened?” I asked.

“You smacked your head on the gangway.”

“But I mean, with the battle.”

“Oh. Just after you fell, we passed by the ship-flock. The Syrians are seasoned mariners. Each ship let loose with a volley of arrows. That was the last straw for the Sikilians. They broke off and went in search of easier pickings elsewhere.

“You fought bravely, Nephew,” said Uncle.