

# Patroclus asks Achilles to fight him

From *The Song of Achilles* by Madeline Miller, Chapter 5

942 words

Note: The first person narrator is Patroclus. The “him” he refers to throughout is Achilles.

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One afternoon, as I went to leave **him** to his private drills, he said, "Why don't you come with me?" His voice was a little strange; if I had not thought it impossible, I might have said he was nervous. The air, which had grown comfortable between us, felt suddenly taut.

"All right," I said.

It was the quiet hours of late afternoon; the palace slept out the heat and left us alone. We took the longest way, through the olive grove's twisting path, to the house where the arms were kept.

I stood in the doorway as he selected his practice weapons, a spear and a sword, slightly blunted at the tip. I reached for my own, then hesitated.

"Should I —?"

He shook his head. No.

"I do not fight with others," he told me.

I followed him outside to the packed sand circle. "Never?"

"No."

"Then how do you know that..." I trailed off as he took up a stance in the center, his spear in his hand, his sword at his waist.

"That the prophecy is true? I guess I don't."

Divine blood flows differently in each god-born child. **Orpheus'** voice made the trees weak, **Heracles** could kill a man by clapping him on the back. Achilles' miracle was his speed. His spear, as he began the first pass, moved faster than my eye could follow. It whirled, flashing forward,

reversed, then flashed behind. The shaft seem to flow in his hands, the dark gray point flickered like a snake's tongue. His feet beat the ground like a dancer, never still.

I could not move, watching. I almost did not breathe. His face was calm and blank, not tensed with effort. His movements were so precise I could almost see the men he fought, ten, twenty of them, advancing on all sides. He leapt, scything his spear, even as his other hand snatched the sword from its sheath. He swung out with them both, moving like liquid, like a fish through the waves.

He stopped, suddenly. I could hear his breaths, only a little longer louder than usual, in the still afternoon air.

"Who trained you?" I asked. I did not know what else to say.

"My father, a little."

A little. I felt almost frightened.

"No one else?"

"No."

I stepped forward. "Fight me."

He made a sound almost like a laugh. "No. Of course not."

"Fight me." I felt in a trance. He had been trained, a little, by his father. The rest was — what? Divine? This was more of the gods that I had ever seen in my life. He made it look beautiful, this sweating, hacking arts of ours. I understood why his father did not let him fight in front of the others. How could any ordinary man take pride in his own skill when there was this in the world?

"I don't want to."

"I dare you."

"You don't have any weapons."

"I'll get them."

He knelt and laid his weapons in the dirt. His eyes met mine. "I will

not. Do not ask me again."

"I will ask you again. You cannot forbid me." I stepped forward, defiant. Something burned hot in me now, an impatience, a certainty. I would have this thing. He would give it to me.

His face twisted and, almost, I thought I saw anger. This pleased me. I would goad him, if nothing else. He would fight me then. My nerves sang with the danger of it.

But instead he walked away, his weapons abandoned in the dust

"Come back," I said. Then louder: "Come back. Are you afraid?"

That strange half-laugh again, his back still turned. "No, I am not afraid."

"You should be." I meant it as a joke, an easing, but it did not sound that way in the still air that hung between us. His back stared at me, unmoving, and movable.

*I will make him look at me*, I thought. My legs swallowed up the five steps between us, and I crashed into his back.

He stumbled forward, falling, and I clung to him. We landed, and I heard the quick huffs of his breath as it was driven from him. But before I could speak, he was twisting around beneath me, had seized my wrists in his hands. I struggled, not sure what I had meant to do. But here was resistance, and that was something I could fight. "Let me go!" I yanked my wrist against his grip.

"No." In a swift motion, he rolled me beneath him, pinning me, his knees in my belly. I panted, angry but strangely satisfied.

"I have never seen anyone fight the way you do," I told him. Confession or accusation, or both.

"You have not seen much."

I bridled, despite the mildness of his tone. "You know what I mean."

His eyes were unreadable. Over us both, the unripe olives rattled

gently. "Maybe. What do you mean?"

I twisted, hard, and he let go. We sat up, our tunics dusty and stuck to our backs.

"I mean –" I broke off. There was an edge to me now, that familiar keenness of anger and envy, struck to life like flint. But the bitter words died even as I thought them.

"There is no one like you," I said, at last.

He regarded me a moment, in silence. "So?"

Something in the way he spoke it drained the last of my anger from me. I had minded, once. But who was I now, to begrudge such a thing?

As if he heard me, he smiled, and his face was like the sun.

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A STORY EVENT is an active change of life value for one or more characters as a result of conflict (one character's desires clash with another's).

A WORKING SCENE contains at least one story event.

To determine a scene's story event, answer these four questions:

1. What are the characters literally doing?
2. What is the essential action of the what the characters are doing in this scene?

3. What life value has changed for one or more of the characters in the scene?

4. Which life value should I highlight on my Story Grid Spreadsheet?