

There was a boy. He was hurt, and he healed broken.

There is more to the story. There are reasons and there are justifications and there are explanations. There is tragedy and there is horror and there is black sorrow that binds the heart and makes breath come slow and heavy. There are things that could be said to sharpen the edge of the story, make it cut cleaner and hurt less.

But at the heart of it, the story of any life is a simple one. And the story of my life is this. A boy was hurt, and he healed broken. It is a tragedy, one of many, one of the thousands that plays out every day, on every world. There are as many tragedies as there are once-fighters in the hall of the slain.

We cannot feel the pain of so many sad songs, and so we pick and choose, we select the sorrows and scars which we shall pity. We sharpen them so that they will cut us cleanly, and we bear their wounds upon our souls, and tell ourselves that this sacrifice is enough.

Take away the flourishes and details that we use to hide the true extent of the horror from ourselves, and the story becomes simple once again. A boy was hurt, and he healed broken. It is a simple, quiet tragedy. It is a pain that never truly ends. It is a story that, like any other, is unlike any other.

The metal flattened out under the force of my blows. The bar of steel was beginning to take on a recognizable shape as a longsword. Two edges, one point. The guard and the grip would be added later.

The metal began to cool and I thrust it back into the forge. Mortal smiths used tongs for this. I used nothing more than a leather glove and the touch of my homeland. The blade-to-be was still painfully hot beneath my fingers. I tightened my grip slightly and held it steady in the coals.

I pulled the glowing metal out of the heart of the flame and rested it on the anvil once again. Again, my hammer fell upon it, until the ringing of steel on steel echoed through the room and drove the silence out.

I listened, and I heard voices in the ringing, half-heard voices heralding war and blood and death. I looked, and I saw shapes in the twisting smoke and hazy air of the forge, wolves and eagles and grim-faced men sitting at their oars. I breathed, and I scented odors in the coal smoke, heated metal, and sweat in that room, salty sea air and death and hot breath that reeked of carrion.

I saw the feeders of eagles going to the field of battle, and I saw the iron game played there. Gaut's fires cut the circles of shields, and forest-dragons danced and darted and shed blood upon the ground. Many men were given the hanged god's hospitality, and many more were sent to Fólkvangr. I watched the raven banner flying over the field, and the ravens ate like kings.

I saw all of this and I hammered the steel and the blade took shape and form beneath my blows. My hands were burned, and when I plunged the newborn mail-coat's flame into the cooling water, it burst into steam and scorched my face as well.

I did not scream or growl or curse or cry, and my movements were calm and controlled as I set the blade aside.

I reached out and moved a piece on the tafl board. The attacking pieces had the numerical advantage, as was usual in a game of hnefetafl, and currently they had the advantage of position as well. But my defenders were not without all hope. The game was not yet over.

Haki instantly pushed his own piece ahead. The new location was more aggressive, threatening to capture on the next turn. Unsurprising. Haki Who-Fights-Alone was inclined to rapid, aggressive play. The play was an obvious threat, a straightforward attack, and these things appealed to him.

I regarded the board for a moment and then slid one of my defenders over to the edge of the board. On the surface it was a foolish, useless move. It did nothing to avert the impending capture of my imperiled piece, and my defender was now so far removed from the main action of the game that it could do little.

Haki moved his piece into position to complete the capture, and plucked one of my defenders off the board. My forces were dwindling rapidly; aside from my king, I had only six pieces remaining.

"I feel like we're losing," Haki said as he removed my piece, setting it to the side.

As I'd expected, he added nothing to this statement. He had said what he meant, and Haki was not the sort to feel any need to add clarifications and niceties to what he meant. He was not the sort to waste his words at all.

I said nothing as I moved another piece, shifting it sideways. Several of my defending pieces were left more vulnerable by this play, the organized defenses I had established beginning to collapse.

"The jarl is in over his head," he added, capturing another of my pieces. "He's a tricky bastard, no argument, and not one I'd like to come up against. But there's too many of them, and they're too big. We don't have a prayer."

From Haki, this was a great statement, as many words as he might use in a whole week. That was meaningful. It meant that he really, truly believed what he was saying, that he felt strongly about it.

I still said nothing. Haki spent his words carefully, but I had none left to spend.

The next several moves passed quickly and silently. He pressed further in, capturing another piece and threatening my king. I took five of his in quick succession, the collapsed defensive position of my pieces proving much more powerful in the counterattack than it had been in protection.

But my position was still very weak, and Haki moved another two pieces in, threatening my king again. It was now only one move from capture, and Haki was smiling with satisfaction. He thought this game was won.

Then I slid the piece I had moved to the edge earlier back into the center of the board. It was a self-destructive play; that piece would be captured almost instantly. But it disrupted his attack, capturing one of the key pieces in his structure and requiring others to move out of position to capture it.

The ensuing trade of pieces was swift and brutal. None of my pieces survived the exchange. But the sacrifice left my king with a clear route to the edge of the board which Haki could do nothing to prevent. I moved it out to escape, and the game was mine.

Haki regarded me with an annoyed expression. "For somebody who doesn't talk," he said, "you sure as hell have a way with words. But notice that your defenders all died."

I began putting the pieces back into the box. After a moment, Haki joined me, and then slipped the box under the game board. By the end of it he was smiling, any annoyance overridden by the satisfaction of a good game.

I did not smile or laugh, and my movements were calm and controlled as I stowed the game away.

The fae warrior danced past the wall of life-protectors and thrust his blade up under my ribs. The fine point of the sword pierced my ring-short chain coat and slid into my flesh, stabbing up toward my heart.

I braced my shield against the blade and brought my own sword down upon it. The sword shattered under my steel and the bold child of the courts of laughing killers laughed no more. I took his heart and left him on the ground for the ravenous ones. Freki's kin ran beside my feet, the grey, dusky howlers pouncing on the screaming and sending them on to the Screamer. They lapped up the battle-dew and sang their gratitude to the sky.

I stepped forward and cut another of the fae down, then another. To my left and my right were my kinsmen, walking beside me and bringing the enemy down beside me. Past them were ghouls and magic men, spinning their seithr and casting it out against those who stood against us. Odin's storm raged all around, and over it all I could hear the howling of the terrible one's dreadful creatures, the harsh cries of war-gulls circling overhead.

The last of the fae fell and died, and the battle was over. I was bleeding, my arm injured, the shard of a crystalline blade sticking out of my flesh.

But I did not scream or cry or pray, and my movements were calm and controlled as I gathered up the dead for the pyre.

On the first day, I cursed until I could curse no more. I uttered vile imprecations and I spoke horrid words. I wished the most terrible deaths I could think of upon my captors, and they did not care.

On the second day, I talked until I could talk no more. I told them everything I knew, and much that I only guessed at, but they were not satisfied.

On the third day, I begged until I could beg no more. I pled for mercy and for kindness and for death, but they were not moved.

On the fourth day, I sang until I could sing no more. I sang the songs of my people, the ancient sagas and heroic lays that we called our own. I sang of birds and beasts and the turning of the heavens. I sang my own poetry that I had never before spoken aloud, and I sang without any words at all, and they did not listen.

On the fifth day, I prayed until I could pray no more. I asked for help from the gods of my people, from Laupt lightning's son and the fen-dwelling wolf and the great serpent of the middle world and the huntress that hung the snake. I prayed to the gods who I had been taught to call on only in direst need, from the hanged god and the one-handed one and the bloody lady of cats and gold. I prayed to gods that were not of my people at all. I prayed to every god that I could think of, but they did not answer.

On the sixth day, I screamed until I could scream no more. I howled and ranted and raved and tore my throat with the screaming, and they did not heed me.

On the seventh day, I cried until I could cry no more. I wept and sobbed until I had no tears left to shed, but they did not console me.

On the eighth day, I laughed until I could laugh no more. Now, at last, my captors reacted. They looked at me with fear, and they knew that I was marked for more than this.

On the ninth day, I was silent.

When others came and finally cut me down from the tree, it was too late. I was not the boy who had been hung there, a sacrifice of myself to myself. There were things missing that should have been present, and there were things present that shouldn't have existed. I had seen too much.

As the years rolled by, I recovered from the ordeal. The visions came more rarely. I recovered my strength and my coordination. I grew from a boy into a man. I healed.

But I healed broken. I was strange and fey, an outcast and an outsider. I did not learn the charms and the runes, as Odin had, but still I was not what I had been. I saw too deeply, and too much. I do not

speaking; there is nothing left to say. The silence of the ninth day lives in me now, and I wear death and sacrifice as a cloak.

There was a boy. He was hurt, and he healed broken. It is a simple story, one more tragedy in a world that has known more tragedies than there are stars in the sky.