

Why not smile while the bodies hit the floor?

Grinning, laughing, walking through the battle. Because I know what none of them know, and that is that life and death alike are at their finest when there's a razor's edge between them.

One, two, three, another step sideways. Someone looks scared and I focus on him, grinning. He doesn't belong here. He's out of his element, and everyone knows it. He should be gone. With a swipe of the axe, he is.

The people around me recoil. It doesn't matter which side they're on. They recoil. They fear me. They don't understand. They look at the violence and don't see the beauty. They listen to the battle and don't hear the song.

I tense my muscles and leap, every part of my body working in tandem, everything functioning as a part of a coherent whole. I surge up into the air, grinning as the air flows over my skin, cooling me.

I hang in the air for a moment, at the peak of my leap, like a drop of water glittering in the sunlight in the instant before it starts to fall. The fight spreads out below me and around me, glorious in its chaos.

I pass from one skin into another in that moment, as easily as breathing. Some people characterize what I do as magic, as casting a spell. I don't see it that way. For me, body is a state of mind. Stepping from one into another is more a change of perspective than anything.

I slide from one into another, with a slick layer of blood to ease the passage, and a heartbeat after I left the ground I'm soaring over it. From the eyes of an eagle, that old lover of war, I look down on the world I've just left behind.

I see my axe lying abandoned on the ground below me. Some things don't carry over with a change in perspective. Some things don't fit into a new worldview.

That's fine. I don't need it, anyway. Weapons are tools. A wise person never lets herself grow fully dependent on a tool. They are useful. They are not *necessary*.

I drift up on the breeze, soaring, floating weightless. I look down on the world from a hundred feet high.

From up here, it all looks so small.

Again I hang motionless as time seems to stop for that one endless moment of transition, that liminal moment that I live in, that I live *for*.

And then I twist and fold my wings, and I plummet. At first I drop as fast as a falling stone, then faster, and faster, the world passing in a blur around me.

Instants before I hit the ground I snap my wings out, catching and cupping the air, letting it buoy me up once again. I skim by just above the surface of the ground, friend and foe passing me by at a dizzying speed.

One of them is in front of me. Another male, more experienced than the last. He doesn't flinch as I fly towards him with the speed of my long dive behind me, just raises his blade to bat me out of the air.

But there's no fire in him, no spark. There's a fine, crucial distinction between a good fighter and a great fighter, and he's on the wrong side of it. This is just a job, for him. It isn't an art. It isn't a lifestyle.

As I approach him, I fold my wings down again and drop until I'm just above the ground. Another quick shift in perspective, in focus, and I'm on the ground, my legs a blur as I sprint forward with the speed of a diving eagle at my back.

He tries to react, sidestepping and cutting at my spine. But he isn't good enough, not quite. Not fast enough, to move or to react. Before he can do more than twitch, I pounce, and rather than the bird he had anticipated, a wolf hits him in the chest.

I overbear him and pull him down, with speed more than muscle, and we tumble, hitting the ground together a moment later. I writhe against him, my breath hot in his face as I twist and contort and close my jaws around his throat.

This is the perspective of the wolf. Teeth to bite and rip and tear. Legs to run the long, slow race of hours. Nose that one cannot hide from. This is what it means to be *wolf*.

He smells of fear and grimaces in panic as he realizes what I already know: that I am at home here, and he is merely visiting, and that makes all the difference.

My jaws snap closed and jerk away, tearing at his flesh. Instants later I taste the hot, salty rush of crimson across my tongue. I see a thousand emotions in his eyes as he, too, experiences that frozen liminal moment. In his case, the very last.

I stand and walk stiff-legged away as the body begins to cool. Lying in the snow, it won't take long.

There is a pause in the flow of the battle, a half-beat break in the rhythm, and I know that something is changed, that a new variable has entered the fight.

I see it, a moment later, through a break in the bodies. It's another man, clearly on the other side. It's not hard to see why the fight paused as he took the field. He towers over the rest of the combatants, even the giants. He's enormous, larger than a man has any right to be. Ogre blood in him, I'm guessing.

More than the size and obvious strength, though, I'm struck by his bearing, his attitude, his *presence*. The heavy spiked armor he wears doesn't cover his face, and I see his expression. It's a joyous

grin, one that revels in the chaos, one that glories in life and death all around. It's the same grin I still wear, though my crimson-stained teeth are sharper and wider than his.

I've never seen this man before, never spoken a word to him. And yet I feel that I know him better than anyone else I've seen today.

I run toward him and no one bars my path. Perhaps it's luck, or perhaps I have a similar aura of battle-frenzy around myself that similarly frightens those who lack such passion, or perhaps they simply have the wit not to stand between us. In any case, the result is much the same. Deed follows thought, and it's only seconds before I stand in front of him, only ten feet separating us. The battle continues to rage, but leaves a gap around us, an eye in the storm. It lends a sense of privacy to the proceedings, as strange as that might seem.

I blink and step back into my natural form, the icy giant, tall and gaunt and terrible. Even so, I'm small in comparison. I am naked, have been naked since this battle started—clothing and armor are, for me, just more accoutrements of another world, a perspective that has no place here and now. I am unarmed, having left my axe behind. He is neither of these things, and much larger than I, as well.

And yet still, his grin sharpens as he sees me. He can recognize a kindred spirit when he sees one.

The duel opens slowly, the beginning moves of the dance. We circle one another, in the open space everyone else has so thoughtfully left us. Each of us is considering the other, taking stock. How do they move, how do they stand, how do they carry themselves? There are a thousand variables to be weighed and measured, most of which can't be named or quantified.

Taken as a whole, it creates an impression, more than anything. Again, it isn't something that can be quantified, or even really qualified. It isn't something that can be put into words or numbers. It's more a base-level awareness of the person I'm facing off against. It's more instinct than rational thought.

It's instinct that tells me when he's going to move.

It's instinct that tells me, without my so much as having to think, just when and how to dodge to let his axe crash to the ground behind me, carving a hole in it rather than in me.

It's instinct that tells me when and how to leap to catch him in the back, off balance, and drag him to the ground.

But it's experience that lets me wrap my arm around his neck in exactly the right way to cut off his breathing and limit his movement.

He struggles, but there's very little he can do. He tries to pull me off, but I'm behind him, and between the armor and the sheer muscle mass of his shoulders, his freedom of movement is limited, his leverage nonexistent in this position. He tries to stand, but my knee presses into the side of his, forcing

him to collapse again or let me destroy the joint. He tries to roll over and crush me under his weight, but I go with the motion and throw my own strength behind it as well, ending up back on top of him.

I squeeze tighter, leaning down beside him where he can't move my weight as easily. Again, it's a matter of experience, of understanding how to arrange matters such that leverage and balance favor me more than strength favors him.

Not that strength is favoring him much, at this point. He hasn't been able to breathe for over a minute. Here, his bulk is a detriment rather than an advantage. It takes a great deal of air to sustain that much mass, particularly when struggling violently. Denied that air, he's already beginning to grow weak.

He tries to push himself to his hands and knees again, scrabbling at the ground with his hands. I slam my weight down on him, forcing him back to the ground, shoving his face down into the snow with my free hand. I grind my hips against his armor, pinning him down.

There's a moment, after he passes out, when I could let him go. I could let him live.

I choose not to.

I hold on. If anything, I squeeze tighter, clenching down almost convulsively. I hear things break in his neck. He's too massive, his neck too heavily muscled, for me to have broken it and saved myself the effort of this slow strangulation. But as he loses consciousness, he can't resist. I still don't break the spine, but the trachea, some blood vessels, they rupture as I bear down on them.

He dies.

I throw my head back and howl sheer exultation to the sky as the battle continues to rage around me.