

A sweeping sword stroke, augmented by the villain's shadowy magic, sent the hero crashing across the stone floor, his own sword ringing as it clattered out of his grasp. The villain sighed and rolled his eyes.

“Oh, just give up, boy,” the villain growled, running a frustrated hand through his long, salt-and-pepper locks.

“Never,” the hero shot back as he pushed himself up off the floor. The villain noted grimly that some of the boy's blond hair was clinging to the blood on his face.

The young hero charged again, blue eyes blazing. The villain merely sighed again. He sidestepped the inexperienced youth and smacked him again with blunt magic.

“You'll die here, boy,” the villain warned. “Run home now. Your mother will be wondering where you've gone.”

Spitting out some blood, the hero yelled some defiant phrase that the villain barely registered. The man didn't have to listen closely to know the words for what they were -- an evocation of divine protection. This little hero fought for his home and family and was blessed by his gods. Golden light wreathed the hero as he charged again. The hero became faster, stronger, and the swordplay pressed the villain harder.

The villain was forced into an instinctual attack to prevent a heavy blow against him. Black magic swirled around his blade as he swung it levelly at the hero, striking the boy out of the air. The golden aura shattered like glass, and the villain felt the hero's ribs give in under the force of the blow. For the third time, the boy bounced across the stone floor. This time he left smears of blood as he did so.

He lay face-down on the floor for a moment before turning his head and coughing, blood pooling beside his mouth. The crimson substance flowed from his nose and mouth and numerous cuts, but it was clear that the fatal damage was internal. The boy sobbed as he choked on blood; the villain crossed the distance quickly so that he was standing over the boy. As the hero looked up at the villain, fear registered on his features, and although the boy's native tongue which he now slipped into differed from the villain's, the man understood that the boy was crying for his mother. He undoubtedly expected torment and torture before death.

The villain collapsed down to his knees and cradled the boy in his lap. He recognized that the child was beyond saving, but he would never believe that a dying child was beyond comfort.

"Shhh," he soothed, brushing bloody, blond hair out of the hero's eyes, "you did just fine."

He pieced together other words and phrases that he thought might comfort the boy.

"You can rest now."

"Your mother would be proud of you."

"Your gods will embrace you."

The hero died, choking on blood, crying for his mother, burying his face in the chest of a villain.

The villain stood up, still cradling the child's body. He carried the hero down a hidden set of stairs and laid him to rest beside three other coffins in a room filled with

gold and prayers and pain. Incense and herbs burned to ward evil spirits away from the honored dead.

The villain moved the lid of a fourth ornately-carved, stone coffin over the rapidly cooling body of the hero.

He then fell to his knees, looking up at the ceiling, imagining the sky beyond, the gods who had blessed the young hero.

“Stop sending children to fight your battles!” he screamed as tears spilled down his face.