



## *Scuffle in the Stables*

by Tell Payne

Haze and noise filled the room, mingling with aromas of warm food and too many bodies. A large fire danced in the fireplace opposite the bar. In front of the fire, a skald was preparing to sing as patrons shuffled about to make room to sit before him. Kai was preparing to leave.

Rising from his table, Kai almost tripped as a child rushed passed him to find a place next to the skald. With more care, Kai made his way to the door, tossing the barkeep a few pennies as he walked past.

Once outside, the air stole his breath away in white puffs. Kai welcomed it, preferred it over the stuffy air of the hall. He pulled his cloak around him tightly against the chill breeze as he walked to the stables. He also much preferred sleeping with the beasts than rolling on the floor with drunkards.

A hush filled the hall behind him, and Kai could hear the skald beginning his tale. The smell of beasts was strong before the stable doors. As he opened them, a muffled cry came from the back, followed by a quiet grunt and a sudden covering of a lantern.

“What do you want? Go listen to the tale, there’s nothing out here for you,” said a disembodied voice.

“My sleep lies out here. If you don’t want company, you may leave,” Kai said gruffly.

Scuffles and grunts came from the back, along with a slap.

“There’s only one, and he looks old,” came a whisper.

“I am only one, but I’m not that old,” Kai replied.

With a rush of noise and light, two bodies crashed into Kai, bowling him across the floor. As he was rising from the ground, a body rushed at him again, but this time Kai could see what he was fighting, and with a side step, he caught a youth by an arm and threw him to the ground then turned in time to confront another attacker.

Before Kai stood a young man with a seax in one hand, shifting his weight from one foot to the other in a defensive stance, gesturing Kai to attack with his free hand. Kai reached for the pitch fork leaning against the wall next to him, but the man rushed in with the knife. He slashed at empty space. Kai caught the armed hand with an iron grip and hammered the elbow with his other hand. A cry of pain and crunch assured Kai that at least one attacker was downed, leaving only the one sprawled on the floor and the one holding the lantern.

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As Kai turned towards the lantern bearer, his feet were knocked out from under him, followed by a kick to the ribs. Kai coughed at the kick, which was followed by another. Another kick came, but Kai rolled towards the attacker, tripping him. Kai crawled to the tripped youth and punched him once in the face, knocking the fight out of him.

Rising once again to his feet, he turned to face the last man, only to find him sprawled out on his belly with a seax sticking in his back up to its hilt and a young, disheveled woman standing over him, spitting.

“I told you, Ryan: no means no,” the young woman said, smoothing her dress.

She wasn’t much more beautiful than any other maid around. Kai could see the roughing up and disheveled appearance didn’t take from or add to her beauty. But her manner demanded one’s attention.

“Thank you, sir. No doubt you have saved me from great shame tonight. My name is Greta,” she said bowing slightly.

“Kai,” he replied. “Are you hurt at all?”

“Just pride, but that has been mended,” she said, stepping over Ryan’s body while combing straw from her hair. “You have helped see to that.”

“You two get out of here, and remember what happens when you deal with me,” Greta said as the other attackers fled the stables.

Kai rubbed a hand across his ribs. They were far from broken, but he’d feel those kicks in the morning. He walked over to the body. Blood trickled from the stab wound, settling in a puddle around the corpse.

Kai sniffed in disgust. There were a growing number of violent acts around the countryside. Young men bent on making a name or claim what wasn’t rightfully theirs by force. It was sad, and even with the chieftains’ help, it was a growing problem in the more settled areas. Kai was grateful that he usually kept away in the wilds.

“You can’t possibly want to stay the night here now. You shall stay at my home for the night.”

“That would be better than sleeping with the dead,” Kai said, turning to follow Greta.

The skald’s melodic voice could scarcely be heard in the cold outside of the stables. Greta led Kai at a quick pace through the village, stopping at another, livelier hall. Light and noise flooded the empty street when Greta pushed open the door.



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“My father should be inside. Wait out here, and I’ll bring him out,” Greta told him before she strode in.

Kai pulled his cloak closer again and rested his hand on his sword hilt. The stars shined bright and clear through a few slight clouds. A chill breeze swept up the street at Kai before the doorway was filled with Greta and another.

“My daughter tells me that she was saved by some great warrior by the name of Kai. I could only hope she didn’t mean you, but it is you,” said the man next to Greta.

“Gunnar. How long has it been?” Kai asked as he unsheathed his sword.

“Not long enough, brother, not long enough,” Gunnar said, producing a great axe.



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