



Taking Leave

by Tell Payne

Flames licked the cold air of the night, dancing defiantly in the freezing chill, but no warmth fell on Kai. He stared into the flames without relief from the cold, for his chill came from within. Gunnar his brother, Harold his father, the breath of their lives was taken by his hand. It didn't lessen the chill that his life could have been ended in either fight, nor did it lessen in the face that each person's life is laid out before, and one may not live a minute longer than granted by their skein. Whether it was through his hand or some other way, they would have died. He only regretted that he had to be the one to cut their skeins.

Little sleep had fallen on Kai since Gunnar had died a month ago, though he noticed the weight of exhaustion as much as he felt the warmth from the fire. He was as one in a dream, and the world around him took no shape before him. Shadows and half shaped things were all he noticed when he would lift his eyes. All noise fell on his ears as distorted whispers borne on the wind.

He was leaving the North Realm for the Empty Lands, there the country mirrored his heart, there he would seek what his skein in life held for him.

Kai stood up. He brushed the ground from his leggings then put the fire out. There was no better time than now to leave, he wouldn't sleep.

His horse, Slipnar, stood beneath a tree, ghostlike in the night. Kai took up the reins and began walking at a somber pace. Slipnar followed without any resistance. He was a well trained war horse, used to long and hard traveling. And though he had gotten little sleep since they had began the trek, Kai had not mounted Slipnar after securing Gunnar's axe to the saddle.

Kai's pace was steady, and though a bit slow, he would be in the Empty Lands before the next night fell. Already land was leveling out and the trees thinning, even a faint moan or howl could be heard of the ravaging wind riding across the Empty Lands. But Kai was immune to any changes; he trusted his feet to lead him.

Slipnar snorted as he became fully alert. Suddenly the night noises ceased. Slipnar tugged against the reins a few times, but continued following Kai when he didn't stop, though the horse didn't slacken his weariness.

Shadows surrounded them so subtly that it looked as though a breeze was moving



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through the underbrush, but the light of the moon couldn't pierce those shadows. Again Slipnar tugged at the reins, but Kai was numb to it and plodded on unheeding.

Fifty yards ahead a flame appeared. Kai kept walking towards it. It appeared to be a torch, the one holding it stood still. As Kai neared the figure, he suddenly snapped back to his senses.

It was a child, or seemed to be, but now it appeared to be an old man. Kai stopped about ten feet away when the appearance changed once again, this time into a young woman. The changes were subtle, and could be the play of torch light on an exhausted mind, but Kai was certain of what he was seeing.

"Are you lost?" the young woman asked.

Kai stood silent. Slipnar stopped at his shoulder and stomped the ground twice. Kai turned his head and looked around. He could see nothing but trees, rocks, bushes, and shadows, nothing out of the ordinary, but there was also a chill in his spine. Two stomps meant danger.

"No. I know where I go," Kai responded.

"Why are you travelling at night? Do you need a place to rest?"

"I travel until I need rest, and I have no need for rest yet."

For a second, the girl's face seemed to shift into another then settle back. She took a step back, and lowered her torch.

"Are you alright, girl?" Kai asked.

"I'm well. I must leave now, and so should you. If you need a place for the night, you may follow me. You'd do well to get out of the night."

A movement in the shadows to his right caught Kai's eye, but as soon as he noticed it, it was gone. He put a hand on his sword and turned back to face the girl. She had already started to walk away from him. With her back towards him, it seemed that her shape was shifting again.

Drawing his sword, Kai called out, "Call them off."

"I cannot. They do not listen to me. They are feral," she said, walking away.

"Feral what?"

The young woman kept walking, offering no response to Kai. Keeping his sword ready, Kai led Slipnar and followed the girl. She walked into a thicket of pines and disappeared. When



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Kai reached the thicket, he couldn't see any traces of the girl. Noises of animals began to fill the night, hungry animals.

Kai turned his back to the thicket to face the shadows, whatever they were, but was pulled backwards into the thicket. He stumbled backwards until his back hit a tree. It was light in the thicket, though it could not be seen from without.

Kai pushed himself from the tree and turned towards the girl. What he found startled him. Instead of the girl, a demon stood before him. It stood no taller than five feet and had the body of a human, but looked more like a corpse. Grayish-green skin covered an emaciated body and greasy black hair grew on top of its head. Its eyes were black where the whites should have been, and white where the pupil should be, the irises silver. A stubby, flat nose was placed above a mouth with a full set of yellow teeth, from which the canines grew like fangs. Black finger nails grew pointed on its skeletal hands.

Kai's sword was stopped mid-swing by another sword. Kai jumped back, holding his sword before him. Next to the demon was another one of its kind. The sword it held seemed too heavy for its emaciated frame, but it stopped Kai's sword with surprising ease.

Kai attacked the sword wielder. The demon parried and stepped back as Kai thrust. He swung again, and again the demon deflected. Each attack was parried or avoided without effort. The demon wasn't straining at all, but Kai was. Each swing left him more fatigued and his mind clouded more and more as exhaustion took hold.

He gathered his strength and will for another attack. Kai rushed in with his sword. As his strike was being deflected, he pulled out his saex and stabbed the demon.

"Stop!" A voice filled the air with such force that Kai and the demon were thrown back.

Kai landed at the base of a tree, his sword and saex landed beside him. His head was unsteady as he tried to stand. He made it up on one knee before everything around him started to spin. He took a deep breath and steadied himself. He took another deep breath before he made it up on his feet.

Between Kai and the demon he was fighting stood the young woman.

"Get behind me, girl. There are demons here," Kai said.

The young woman stood up straight and looked at Kai in a dignified manner, then slowly she began to change. It seemed as though Kai was stuck in a nightmare, before him the



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young lady seemed to be melting and changing appearances to that of the first demon he had seen in the thicket.

Slipnar whinnied and stomped outside, and the sounds of slaving beasts could be heard. Kai looked at the demon in front of him, then reached down for his sword. He stood and pointed the sword at the demon, then began to make his way to Slipnar.

“It’s not safe out there,” the demon warned.

“It isn’t safe in here,” Kai said.

Kai stumbled and pushed his way out of the thicket to find Slipnar encircled by more demons. They resembled the two demons in the thicket, except these seemed ravenous and dumb. They walked on all fours instead of upright, and moved like desperate beasts on the hunt. Hideous guttural noises and hisses filled the air about them, and froth fell from their mouths.

Summoning up more endurance, Kai bounded to Slipnar’s side to confront the demons. They looked like mad, rabid animals. Kai sheathed his sword then mounted Slipnar. He patted the horse’s neck and unbound Gunnar’s axe, taking it in both hands.

Fatigue fell away from him, the heat of battle filled his body, and he welcomed the fight. He howled to the sky as Slipnar charged forward.

A demon stood before Slipnar, but its skull was crushed by a hoof. Kai swung the axe at a demon that jumped up at him, sending it crashing to the ground nearly cut in half. The remaining demons swarmed on them, attacking from all sides.

Slipnar kicked and bit, sending showers of blood and broken bodies. Kai swung the axe fervently, rending heads and limbs from bodies. But the demons were crazed, they didn’t slow their attack. One made it behind Kai and bit the back of his neck. Kai swung back with an elbow, sending the demon sprawling on the ground. Another demon clung to Slipnar’s neck, its claws embedded deep in flesh. Kai tried to kick at it, but it held fast. He abandoned the axe and drew his sword. He stabbed at the demon, killing it, though its corpse still clung to Slipnar’s neck.

A swarm of demons came from all directions. Slipnar attacked the ones in front and behind, while Kai swung steel to either side and at the occasional demon which managed to mount Slipnar. Kai didn’t know how many there were, and he didn’t care, he’d keep slaying until they were all dead.



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They were a flood of evil. Though their numbers were beginning to thin, they were unyielding in the face of death. And Kai was once again slipping into exhaustion. He rose and swung mechanically now but still with a devastating efficiency. Slipnar worked harder now to keep Kai saddled and alive, the brave horse having slain nearly as many as its master.

Kai was hard-pressed now. More and more demons were closing in on him; it was all he could do to keep them off Slipnar's back. He swung left then right, stabbed at bodies below him, hacked any within reach. As he swung again, his saddle slid off Slipnar, taking Kai with it. Kai lay sprawled on the ground in the midst of the demons.

There were only six left, but Kai now had no advantage. He rose to his feet, and once again wielded his sword. He slew the closest demon, then turned to face another charging at him. He met the charge with a foot to the demon's stomach followed by a thrust of his sword into its chest.

Two down, four left. The sword in Kai's hand was hard to hold now, but he gripped it tight. Slipnar finished off two demons while Kai confronted another. He lunged in, missed the demon, and fell to the ground. Something had hit the back of his head, and he had no more endurance to keep his head from spinning. He desperately swung his sword, meeting only air.

Kai heard a loud crack behind him, and then he collapsed.

"You are a warrior. You are worthy of our help," he heard a voice say.

"But look at what he's done. How many dead?" another voice asked.

"He didn't fight them for anything more than survival; such was their path as well. We can neither condemn him for his nature, nor them for theirs. Now help me move him," said the first voice.

Kai felt hands grab his arms with an iron grip and drag him to the trunk of a tree. He tried to shake his head clear, but to no avail. Leaning back against the trunk, he gave himself up to exhaustion and welcomed sleep.

Sunlight crept over the horizon, chasing away the night's lingering shadows, and falling on Kai's sleeping face. Kai furrowed his brow and turned away from the morning light. Slipnar bent down and nuzzled Kai, but was grunted away. Slipnar stared down at Kai, then nudged him with a hoof. This time Kai rolled over and opened his eyes.

"Can't a man get some sleep without being disturbed?"



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Kai sat up and took a deep breath of the frosty air, chasing away the lure to lay down for more sleep. A dull ache made him aware of crusted blood on his neck and left arm. Gingerly, he put fingertips to his neck and the throb worsened to a stabbing fire. Looking down at his arm showed him an evil wound, black and bloodied. Kai furrowed his brow. He was stiff and sore all over, but these wounds were bad, he didn't know what to do about them. Kai had had many wounds before, but these had a feeling he couldn't quite describe, there was a sluggish chill in them he didn't like which sent a feeling of unease through him.

Rising to his feet, Kai took a look around. A few straggling pine trees grew sporadically across the barren lands before him, with a chill wind licking their branches. Grayish sedge grew against rocks and the base of trees where nothing else dared to grow. He had made it to the edge of the Empty Lands, though how he made it so far in one night he still could not remember. By nightfall he should be well within the Empty Lands, where the sun was said to shun the land, leaving it in night's grasp.

Kai made his way to Slipnar, who was grazing at what vegetation he could find. Gunnar's axe was strapped to the saddle. He ran a hand across the blade and sighed. He would survive in the Empty Lands or perish there; either suited him. He reached into a saddle bag and drew out supplies to clean and dress his wounds, which he did deftly as he had countless times before. He instinctively checked his sword and saex before mounting Slipnar.

Slipnar took a few gaits before Kai pulled him around. He stared at the land, the North Realm, his home, and said a silent farewell before urging Slipnar into a run towards the Empty Lands.



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