

The Slayer's Request

By Brady Klein

In a distant land permanently covered in snow, a man, known only as the Slayer, happened upon a town at the base of a mountain called the Peak in his travels. He saw from far away the lights of the town. It seemed to him that this town was for some reason different than most others. Maybe it was the lack of smoke coming from the tiny houses, huddled around the center marketplace of the town, or maybe it was the odd style in which the houses were built, but whatever it was, it made him decide to stop rather than pass the village by completely.

As he entered the town from the south, he saw a large, wooden sign, with only the simple word "Berichten" written on it, which the Slayer assumed was the name of this hamlet. It had just begun to snow, covering the ground with a fresh layering of the stuff, and giving a satisfying crunch under his boot with each step he took. As the Slayer walked into the center of the village, he noticed a sign hanging from a building, the only one in the entire village with a second floor; the Slayer knew without reading the sign that this was the inn of the town from the boisterous noises that could be heard from outside of it. He walked up to the brightly lit door, and found it locked. The Slayer rapped three times, and waited for a response.

Slowly, the door creaked open, and light spilled out of the crack. A voice emanated from within, saying "Enter quickly, you're letting the cold in." Without a reply, the Slayer entered. He was first taken aback by the smell of the inn. At once it smelled

of ale, followed by the stench of cooking food, and last, but most noticeably, the smell of sweat. The inn, he reasonably concluded, was used by most of the passerby. As he shut the door behind him, he noticed the man standing behind the bar counter. This tall and friendly looking man waved him over immediately, and called out, "If you're looking for food and drink, we have plenty, and if you seek a room, there are plenty of extra beds waiting."

The Slayer sat down at the counter, and plopped a coin purse on the surface, replying, "I seek drink. If you have any, some of the whiskey from the Northern tribes would be appreciated."

"Aye, that can be arranged," said the innkeeper, "but for that drink, I'll have to ask you to pay in advance. No tabs for something so expensive." The Slayer wordlessly opened his purse and tipped it over and one thing came out: gold. More gold than the innkeeper had ever seen before. He quickly snatched up a few coins, and said "This should cover the costs." Greedy men, the Slayer reasoned, should be dealt with and left alone. The innkeeper grabbed a glass from under the counter and a bottle from a lockbox behind him. He poured in a perfect arc, the way a man who had been raised in an inn would. The Slayer took his glass, and, for the first time, noticed a storyteller sitting in the corner of the inn, quietly speaking to a few attentive children. He slid out of his chair and silently walked from the bar to the storyteller.

"—and, children, if you someday climb to the top of the Peak, you will find him. Once you've found him, the curse laid on him by Arianne will force him to grant you any wish. However, you should be careful how you ask him for your wish, or he will twist it to

make you as miserable as possible, to share in his pain.” With that, the storyteller finished his story, and took a drink from his ale mug.

“Pardon friend, but what was that story you just told the young ones?” The Slayer asked, his interest piqued.

The storyteller explained that “Twas the story of a magical and malicious creature who cheated a sorceress by the name of Arianne. She cursed him to stay forever on the top of the Peak, granting wishes to all who came. But, it’s just a story. No one in recent memory has ever gone to the peak and found ‘im. And, those who go looking never come back to tell the tale.”

The Slayer normally didn’t pay any heed to old wive’s tales, but, much in the same way that the town had seemed off, the story seemed ... different. He asked the storyteller “So there are some who believe in the tale? It could be true?”

“Well, I suppose if you believe in children’s tales often, then it could be. We’ve had more men go up the mountain never to come down than I care to admit. But if you should care to go up, be warned. It is said that the ghosts of those who died in their attempt to climb the Peak haunt those who would go now.”

The Slayer stood for a moment, and realized that he was still wearing his heavy, black, panther-fur cloak. He lowered his right shoulder and allowed the cloak to slide off into his waiting hand. Laying it down gently, the rest of the inn could see his sleeveless iron and leather armor, and the crisscrossing scars running up and down his arms. He then replied to the storyteller “If what you say is true, then can you show me the way?”

“I know not why you care so much about a tall tale, but aye, I can show you the trail on the morrow. We’ll break our fast at dawn and then be off. It’s not too far from here.” The storyteller answered. “What are you called, friend? We’ll inscribe it on your tombstone.”

The Slayer looked solemnly at the storyteller. “My reasons and my name are my own. And, there is no need for a tombstone, because I’ll be back down that mountain in no less than three days. Rest up though, I like to travel quickly.” With that, the Slayer walked to the counter, cloak in hand, and negotiated with the innkeeper for a room that night. Key in hand, the Slayer quickly walked up the creaky wooden steps for the night. Laying down in a nondescript room for the night, the Slayer was beset by a vision in his sleep. He saw two people, one boy, sitting in a black chair, and an older man, standing behind him. They both seemed to be looking at a glowing box.

“I’m telling you, don’t go up the mountain. You’re not ready for it yet,” the man said.

“I can handle it. The Slayer has to be ready. That sword will save him, I think,” the boy answered.

“You don’t know that. Anyways —” As the man spoke his final words, the Slayer saw a bright light emanate from in front of him. The light grew brighter, and brighter, and brighter until it was almost blinding. And then, nothing. Blackness. The Slayer opened his eyes, and let the morning sun fall into his eyes, taking it in. He slowly sat up, and realized he had slept in his armor. Nothing could be done about it now, so the Slayer moved on. He picked up his cloak and went out of his room, and again walked down the

steps. Coming downstairs, he smelt a faint aroma...sausages, maybe? He noticed that the storyteller was sitting at the bar, eating, yes, sausages and some eggs. The Slayer plopped down on a stool next to him and said, "Are we ready to leave soon?"

"Relax for a few minutes. It's at least a quarter-day's walk to the mountain, and you'll need your strength to overcome the challenges that await you." The storyteller answered in a lackadaisical manner. He obviously was accustomed to a village lifestyle, the Slayer thought. Best not to push him. The Slayer sat down, and pulled a few strips of dried meat out of an inner pocket in his cloak. He silently ate these, while the storyteller munched and crunched his breakfast, with enough noise to mimic a swine. After a few minutes, the storyteller pushed his bowl forward, and got up from his stool, releasing an enormous belch.

"Alright, let's take you to your grave. Might as well get it over-with." The storyteller said to the entire room despite its emptiness. The Slayer could tell he was a performance artist through and through. The Slayer threw his cloak on over his shoulders, and walked out the door behind the story teller. As they walked out of the door, he unsheathed his blade with a satisfying hiss. The brightly polished copper blade shined in the light, and the many residents of the town, out on morning errands, looked over at the sound and light. Seeing nothing but a man they knew not and their storyteller, they saw nothing of import and returned to their mundane tasks. The Slayer immediately felt more comfortable looking at the relic. Passed down in his family for generations, he was told by his father that all of his ancestors would protect him while

he wielded the blade. As of yet, his father was right. No matter how severe the blow, he always seemed to find the strength to get up and keep fighting.

As he walked, he expected to notice more of what every other town had: people tanning hides, sweeping, haggling for good. And, he did see that; something, however, was again off. In the central market, there was nobody there. It almost seemed like people were avoiding it. The Slayer paid no heed, deciding that the market must not meet that day, for whatever reason. Suddenly, the storyteller veered to the right, towards the mountain. The Slayer quickened his pace to match, and noticed that around the market circle, there were some blurry spots, as if the circular wall was ... disappearing. The severity of oddity which the town showcased was beginning to unnerve the Slayer. Nevertheless, he followed the storyteller, now huffing vigorously from effort, out of the town and to the base of the Peak. Looking at it from a closer distance, the Slayer was not impressed. It didn't seem like it was an extremely tall mountain. In fact, it barely had any peak to speak of. He reckoned that he could climb it by the end of the day.

"There you are, sir. The Peak, as promised. Try not to die, but just in case, what size should we make your casket? It'll be empty, but I think it's right to give a dead man a proper burial." The storyteller said, in between breaths.

"Thanks for the consideration, but no casket will be necessary. Have another meal ready for me at the inn tomorrow morning, will you? I'll likely be famished." The Slayer responded. He gave the mountain a good look, then set his eyes on the path in front of him. Stairs, stone stairs. Whoever had made these stairs originally intended

them to be trod upon regularly, but they appeared to have been mistaken. Blades of grass and some weeds poked through the snow, suggesting that underneath were some very hearty — and old — plants growing. He looked behind him and where he had expected to see the town, it appeared as if nothing was there except plains, dusted with snow. The Slayer turned to look at the storyteller, but saw nothing, except a set of footprints leading back to the town.

Thoroughly confused, the Slayer decided that it was about time to begin the not-so-arduous climb. He drew the cloak tighter over his shoulders, and began walking up the steps; although, rather than walking up the steps, he walked up what he assumed were the steps. He couldn't really tell because of the snow covering the ground. Cool mountain air stinging his throat with each breath, he noticed that the sky seemed to be darkening, which didn't make sense. He had just woken, the sun had barely risen above the horizon. Breaking his gaze from the sky, he noticed a ghastly blue light directly in front of him. As he drew closer, the light seemed to morph, looking more and more human, and as he drew nigh on 10 feet, a face materialized. He saw an old, old man who seemed to be losing hair and weight from the appearance of his meager limbs. The man opened his mouth to speak: "Turn away now, if you value your life. This mountain holds nothing but dread for all who seek its treasure."

"So the creature, it's real? It can grant your wishes?" The Slayer hurriedly asked.

"It grants your wishes, but you will not like what you get. I sought him out, as I was too poor to afford care, and I was dying of the plague. When I found him, I asked

him to cure my suffering. He gave me a toothy grin, and said, 'Your wish is granted.' I died there, on the spot, convulsing in agony. I —”

“Okay, but it *does* grant wishes? You see, you simply made the wrong wish. I'll choose the correct option. I won't make the mistakes of other who came before me.”

The Slayer interrupted. In such frenzy to learn more, he reached out to grip the ghost. His hand clamped down on its shoulder, and fell through. As he brought his hand closer, he felt cold, and noticed the pale blue ooze covering his hand. The strange substance seemed to be both smooth and sticky, runny and viscous. Ectoplasm. The Slayer had once read a book saying that this was the stuff that made up the ethereal bodies of ghosts.

The ghost once more opened its mouth and spoke: “Please do not continue. You are not ready for what the mountain holds. Please turn away.” With that, the ghost seemed to disappear. The sky still dark, the Slayer noticed that the moon had come out, as well as the stars. He paused. The stars seemed so serene. Resuming his journey, the Slayer noticed the trees ahead of him. Pine trees, yet they were covered with yellow needles. Something had killed these trees, and it certainly wasn't nature. He looked down the path and realized he was already halfway up the mountain. For whatever reason, his travels had been fast. The trees started to thin out as quickly as they had grown in, and he saw another light, only this time it was red. The red light quickly became a person. A woman. Standing fairly tall, she seemed to be healthy and young. She couldn't have been more than twenty. Strangely enough, she was dressed differently from the villagers the Slayer had seen earlier.

“Halt, sir, and listen. The beast you will find at the top of this mountain is truly evil. I came from the other side of the mountain, and begged him to make a man named Vilad love me more than anything. I had loved him for so long, and when the beast told me that my will was done, and I couldn’t believe the happiness which I felt. Well, it turns out that he did love me more than anything. By the time I returned to my village, Vilad had killed himself for want of me. I could barely believe what had happened. I withdrew, and starved myself to death. I just wanted to be with him again, but I had not the strength to do it in any other way.” The woman recounted to the Slayer. As she finished her final sentence, she burst into tears, and ran into the treeline at my back, disappearing.

The Slayer paused again, biding his time. Was this truly the path he should take? He had only one chance to take everything he’d ever wanted. He chose then to capture it, rather than let it slip through his fingers. He had traveled the world, he never wanted, he had bested impossible foes, yet one thing still seemed to elude him: understanding. Why did monsters behave the way they did? Why did so many die, innocent and guilty alike? The Slayer felt that if he could understand these things, he could do good things for the world. Punish the wicked. He could make the world better for everyone. His resolve renewed, he continued up the mountain for what he knew would be the final leg of his journey. The Slayer walked for a few minutes, and the sky not only remained dark, but it began to thundersnow. Bolts of lightning began to crack down around the mountain, but for some reason the area around himself seemed to remain unstruck. The fresh air now polluted with the stench of fried air, the Slayer once again paused, and for

a moment, the lightning and the snow stopped. His strength replenished, the Slayer continued on, with the snow and lightning resuming along with him.

As he reached the peak, a darkness, vastly different from the previous lights began to materialize, so dark that it was visible against the black sky of the night. The Slayer began to feel hate, anger, fear, and suffering exuding from the darkness. Sensing malevolence from the specter, the Slayer drew his sword, the copper ringing into the night. He slowly put one foot in front of the other, creeping along at a snail's pace. More unlike the previous ghosts, this darkness took much longer to take a human form, but take one it did. As the Slayer crossed some unknown threshold, at once the specter took shape and he could smell the stench of death emanating from it. He racked his brain for any scrap of knowledge as to what this could be.

A wraith. It had to be. Wraiths were vengeful spirits that would haunt a certain area of importance to them during their lives, killing all who passed through. This must be the reason no one recently had managed to come back from the Peak. Luckily enough, all wraiths had one weakness in common. Unluckily enough, the Slayer had no idea what that weakness was. He had never dealt with them before, and couldn't for the life of him remember what the weakness was. Best to try talking his way out of this one. "Hail, wraith," he called out.

"It has been a long time since someone recognized me for what I am," a male voice called out from the wraith, "and for that, I will grant you some time to talk before your death. I'm sure you've already heard the others warn you against the dragon. Anything you'd like to ask me?"

“First, is it a dragon? I have fought all manner of beasts, but dragons I always assumed were a myth, lost to the ages,” the Slayer asked.

“Yes, it is a dragon. Yes, he can grant any wish. Oddly enough, he doesn’t breathe fire, or even eat sheep very often. He mostly waits on the Peak for someone foolish enough to come seeking him. I’ve been preventing people from meeting their death at his hands for the better part of 20 years,” the wraith told the Slayer. It had begun to take a face.

“Well, you said it granted wishes. What was yours? Also, wraiths are born from violent deaths. What was yours?” the Slayer asked. He began noticing the face. It appeared to have its eyes on the copper blade. Is it possible for copper to be the weakness?

Never taking its eyes off the blade, the wraith responded, “I wished to be the best duelist in the world. I fought well over 100 duels, and never lost. I never even was touched. Then, in my sleep, I was stabbed in the back by my best friend in a fit of jealousy. I then came back to here, to prevent others from dying at the dragon’s hands. Claws. Whatever.”

Whatever the weakness was, the wraith seemed to be scared of the blade. The Slayer let his sword down for a moment, a feint to distract the wraith, make it feel like it’s safe. The wraith relaxed momentarily. Gotcha’. The Slayer leapt into the air, torquing the blade in a full arc around his body. There was an issue, however. Where he should have felt the blade cut through the wraith, instead, he felt the clang of metal of metal. He looked and found the wraith clutching a rapier, parrying his attack with ease. Apparently,

his skill had followed him into the afterlife. The wraith almost seemed to smile, but it was difficult to tell with his black features. The Slayer then stood upright holding his blade at the ready. Without warning, the wraith unleashed a flurry of strikes, moving so fast its blade turned into a whirlwind of shining gray steel. It was all the Slayer could do to just deflect the blows. The wraith slowly edged the Slayer up to the edge of a cliff, and with one final blow knocked him to his back. As he got up, the Slayer turned over, and was met face to face with an incredibly long drop. Funny, it had seemed smaller from the base. He hopped up, facing the wraith once more. The wraith was so incredibly fast, that the Slayer knew he could not last much longer against the blizzard of snow, lightning, and steel that was currently buffeting him. The wraith waited a moment. It thought it had won. It had underestimated him, and it was arrogant. He could use that.

“Any chance you’d accept a surrender?” The Slayer called out, having to yell to be heard over the onslaught of the weather.

“I will, but you will not keep your life. I will take it swiftly however.” The wraith said, cockily.

The Slayer moved closer to it, kneeling with a reverse grip on his sword hilt, leading it into the snow. He noticed then that the wraith’s blade had become a longsword, ripe for beheading. He bowed his head. He heard the sword raise up, whistling in the wind, and thrust his sword through the gut of the wraith. He slowly carved it up through the ectoplasm, leaving a shining trail of bright white light behind him. With one final effort, he tore it up and out of the wraith’s shoulder, dismembering its left arm. “You were the best duelist. But, surviving is more than just fancy

swordsmanship, you see.” The Slayer turned away. Satisfied that he had won. Then, he stopped. Something had touched his back. He looked down, and saw the longsword, biting clean through his cloak, armor, hide plating, and his innards. Falling to his knees, he suddenly felt colder. His vision became spotty, and the colors faded from the world. The snow looked gray, the few trees that were still alive lost their rich green hue. And then he looked behind him, and saw the wraith standing.

“I warned you, it would be your funeral,” the wraith said, but the wraith no longer had blackness for a face. In it, he could see the face of the storyteller. “I’m no ordinary spirit. Some have called me Death, but I prefer to be called by what I do. I reap the souls of the wicked. You sir, are one of those. You walk into the Berichten, and as soon as you hear my tale, greed fills your heart. Had you done anything but lust after the power of the dragon, you could have lived. The saddest thing for those of your ilk, is that they will never know if the dragon is real or not. Did you waste your life in an attempt to get what you sought that could never exist. Oh, those ghosts you saw earlier were me as well. I really tried to help you live. I want you to. But, you just couldn’t be persuaded. Better luck next time.” The Reaper said calmly, walking closer to me with each phrase.

The light of the world began to fade from the Slayer’s eyes. As he lay on his back, dying, he realized the Reaper was right. He would never be able to help all those innocents. The Slayer looked around him. Snow was frozen in the air. The Reaper was above him, his longsword now a scythe, poised to take his soul. Had he really become as wicked as those he hated? The Slayer looked within himself. He saw the same hatred and fear that he had sensed in the Reaper at first. He realized for the first time

exactly what his wish would have been. He would have asked to rule the world, to abolish the cruelty of other rulers. He looked into the distance, far away from the mountain and saw the future. He would become everything he hated. Absolute power would corrupt him absolutely. He realized that he would have had so much that others couldn't even get their bread. He saw himself getting killed by a mob of his subjects.

This was not the life he wished for himself. This was not the world he had envisioned. He would have destroyed what he sought by the act of seeking it. He realized this, and was ... glad. He knew then that what the Reaper had told him was true. He thought that what he had wanted was to help the world, and, even though it was by him dying, he was helping it. With that thought, he closed his eyes and waited.

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“Dang it, I knew that the quest was too high of a level.” I said to Tom, my brother. “And even worse, I forgot to save my game after the town. I’ll have to start all over again.”

“Ha, I warned you earlier, but you just had to go to the dragon and get your wish.” Tom mocked. Then he asked, “Also, do you know why the render distance dropped once you got to the mountain? You couldn’t see the town.”

“I don’t know. Maybe I need to update my graphics card. Or my processor just couldn’t handle the updated games. I really enjoyed what I played of it though.” I said to Tom. I had bought the PC over 5 years ago, but had updated the processor to the i11 last year, so I assumed I just needed a better graphics card.

“Yeah, *The Slayer’s Request* has to be one of Microsoft’s biggest hits thus far. Feel free to keep the game for a bit. I have to go though, or I’ll miss my flight back to college. Maybe you can get past the Reaper this time.” Tom said, jokingly.

As he walked out, I booted the game up again.

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In a distant land permanently covered in snow, a man, known only as the Slayer, happened upon a town at the base of a mountain called the Peak in his travels.