

## Returning Lost

By: Dillon Deveney

*The Silver-Lion creeps ever forward to meet their destiny upon holy ground.*

I am dying.

I am nothing special. I simply have somewhere I need to die.

I made an oath. An oath to my blade. An oath I upheld.

That is the only thing that separates me from the monsters that roam this cursed land.

An oath.

But to die, before I return my blade to the Garden, would make me even worse than the Stricken. Even worse than the Warlocks that guide them.

Even as my lungs burn through my chest.

Even as my blood drips in cold streaks down my leg.

Even as I limp through the last corridors of this light-lost temple...

I still move forward.

I made an oath.

*A final act of obedience. To establish a sense of resolution to the chaos of life.*

The armor I wear is heavy. It used to be lighter when I was younger. These thundering footsteps against this overgrown stone hallway are nearly too much for me to withstand. Is it the reminder of the emptiness I feel? The pangs of loneliness that haunts my heart? Or is it simply my body succumbing to illness?

The plague cast upon our kind is unstoppable. You cannot believe you will be next. The disbelief is what keeps you sane in the dark times. That is, until you are next. And sanity stops meaning as much. That is why... why I thought I should do something with the life I was born losing. However, I never thought losing would be so harshly amusing.

I thought the gleam of my silver lion pauldrons would provide comfort in the chaos of the day and usher forth hope through the horrors of the night. I know there aren't many left to inspire these days, but I had so badly wished to be more than I was. If I could have inspired others to take hold of their own light, we could have battled back the invasion.

A fairy-tale thought, of course. A thought that got many others killed.

A horde of bleak thoughts spill over my barren mind:

Was only out of selfishness did I accept the calling of my blade in the first place?

Can a Knight be a hero if they act out of selfishness?

Even if they do good?

Or did they ever accomplish good?

Did they accomplish anything at all?

*I can feel the power of the blade permeating through the veins of this temple.*

Thárros. I always asked you. Why me?

Why choose a young lion?

A lion destined to grow old.

A lion destined to lose their Pride --

-- No.

Not lost. They made it.

I know they found their way back to the Garden.

That was the oath.

But, why me, Thárros?

You could have chosen better.

*Their world has been lost, yet their kind seeks to find. To discover. To save.*

My shield arm is now useless after that last skirmish. I have enough muscle left to keep my pace, but those teeth went in deeper than I realized. I do not think I can take down any more of these beasts without stopping for good. But I know they will never stop. It is in their nature. A human's insatiable avarice combined with the unholy hunger of Hell's gluttony is no simple foe to run from.

The Stricken had razed JaLorah's strongest cities within half a sun before we had caught wind of the threat.

Kulonore, City of the Gilded Dream – crushed in the wake of a Behemoth.

Nulaastia, City of the Amber Choir – silenced in a dome of ever-growing darkness.

Even my home... Tarenlore, City of the Shepherds – extinguished under the cruelty of the Warlocks. They say those dark mages always get the last word in a story. That is the source of their eldritch power.

I wonder what I would have said? If I had been home as I should have. Would those words echo eternally from my corpse – if I became one of their undead servants?

*Execution of all realms is guaranteed; as our stars have always foretold.*

I am taking too long. Even at the end of my days, I still find myself stumped with puzzles. Needless trials created by the Ancient Ones to test the future's heroes. Made to muddle and dilute the mettle of those who wander their primordial places of power.

I was always one who preferred strikes, slashes and finishers over the mental games. But then, Rendar was much more of a brawler than I ever was. He was always like that. Even before his weapon, Makt, Blade of Spirit, appeared before him. His natural tenacity was something to be both admired and feared.

I never did seem to have something I could call my own. Someone was always the better version of what I wanted to be.

Even my ability to cut through the hell-spawn was only thanks to the gleaming blade Thárros. We worked as a team, to lead the rest of the Knights through the Realm Temples and exterminate the Stricken's breeding grounds.

And for many years it worked. Thárros and I tore through thousands of the terrible beasts. I believed in the other-worldly weapon and it believed in me. Every move I made was assured, every choice we made was correct, and every rally we made was pure. It was a time of hope. It was time of resistance. It was a time for mankind to rekindle.

But a flame cannot take if there is no air.

The sickness took the air from our lungs.

I do not know if that was Heaven's final mercy or Hell's first joke.

*Humankind's struggle is meaningless, their quest is moot, their oath is flawed.*

I wonder if they have found peace on the other side. A Knight resting their blade in the Garden of the Four Corners is the true ending to one's story. That's what Kelrie always said at least. She always believed in the old stories. It must have been the effect of her sword, Samine, Blade of Ages, that gave her the knowledge... or the comfort to believe in the future. Because she understood the past.

Maybe if I had listened to her stories more... I would not be so surprised by the world I live in. The world I intend to leave. The world the angels turned their back on.

*Yet they continue forward, to face the new dawn, to save one more day.*

These hallways are getting darker. I hope the light is getting dimmer because I am getting closer and not because I am almost out of blood in my body. Only a few ladders further down. Only a few more walls to sidle. I am almost at this temple's core. The Stricken's presence is thinning. They have not yet feasted on the portal below.

*In a way, I am jealous. But that is not my place. I too have an oath I must fulfill.*

The runes in the wall are harder to read down here. Some of these I do not even recognize. Olon's people were the progenitor of this language. But she rejected her noble heritage, so I doubt even she could have deciphered this final riddle. Born into the role of an urchin, she lived the life of a thief and eventually, waged war as a Knight. No king, no general, no villager would ever have taken the time to call her a hero. Even though she was the absolute definition of that overused word.

The serpent blade Hebi didn't make her the hero she died as; it made her into the legend that will continue to live on for as long as I have the breath to sing.

The Knight who risked her life to kill three Sky Spawners at once just to save her home town. An exemplary icon of what a Knight should strive to be. Brave. Selfless. Powerful.

But we lost that town. Out of cowardice.

We lost all of the towns. Out of selfishness.

We lost everything. Out of weakness.

*Come to me, my lion. I await you. Your friends await you.*

Estera. I hope Gjak's terrifying powers kept you safe on your odyssey. I am walking in your footsteps. You were here not even a few months ago. I feel like I can still feel the warmth of your aura flickering from the walls. But it is not out of spirit, do I feel you. It is the blood you left behind. I know that the fanged-blade was hard to control, and that it times it would seem you were closer to a Stricken than a Knight... but it was never a question for me. You were my sister-in-arms. My shieldmate. My lover.

As I walk past the sea of beastly bodies you have left behind in your wake, I know where your true allegiance was. And I will see you soon to congratulate you on your final kills. We will feast, we will laugh, and we will embrace once more in the next realm.

The temple's nexus is just before me now. The Pride will be united once more.

Our oath's fulfilled. Our armor finally shelved. Our blades returned home.

*Your story has reached its finale – just as theirs did.*

I open the door reciting with the words I have been waiting to say to you all for many years now, "I am home now, my friends. We have survived. We have --"

*Regrettably, you never finished that sentence because of me.*

*Out of respect for the last Knight, I shall grant your corpse those missing words:*

*"We have won."*

**THE END.**