

Lion

By: Alejandro Serrano

I can still hear their screams. The bone chilling wails of a mother and daughter as their husband, and father, was torn in two. Like a hungry man tearing into a loaf of bread. The poor man hadn't even had time to scream.

The beast had come from the mountains. The Appalan Peaks, as they were known in the old tongue, or more commonly now, the Demon Ridge.

They weren't the only ones suffering. For centuries, even before the fall of the old ones, these mountains had been plagued by stories of beasts and monsters lurking in their caves. The shadows of their trees casting a shadow onto the hearts of mankind. Even so, humans still too stubborn, or perhaps persistent, to move away from these accursed heaps of rocks.

That is why I came. My order, nearly forgotten now, is the last of its kind. The power to fight these monsters is not in the limbs of men, but in the presence of God. The only god.

Not the idols these poor farmers have taken to worshiping. Not even the watered down version of him that the old ones venerated. Fools.

Into the mountains I tread. Not for me, nor the poor souls that still inhabit these lands. The world has moved on from the truth, and only proof will convince them to return. I am but a servant, preparing the way.

The truth will return. The world only needs to be ready for it.

Dusk begins to creep across the sky. The light and warmth of the sun taking all hope from the world with its retreat. Fear replacing it like a plague across the landscape.

The sword at my side feels cool. It's metal chilling as if with fear of the mountains and the creatures that inhabit them.

It is only a tool. I am its bearer. Together we serve the light that will cleanse this forest.

By nightfall I have constructed a small fire upon a tree covered cliff overlooking the valley. It's peaceful. With the light of the full moon the landscape could almost be called serene.

A stillness falls on the trees. There is no wind, no sounds of birds or insects, not even the crunching branches.

The forest fears the darkness.

The old legends say that demons inhabiting the ridge only feed or kill when they're hungry, or bored. But a sure way to draw them to you is to whistle into the night.

I wipe the remnants of stale bread from my hands and release a high pitched note out of my lips.

In the silent air it will carry for miles. Perfect.

The first thing that changes is the air. It grows colder, if that's even possible, and then the rank smell of decay and sulfur appears.

This is no common beast.

The wood of the tree trunks groans in protest as a shadow converges on it. Like a mist then forming into an owl. An overly large bird that twists its head completely around to face me.

With a single cry of its retched beak my small camp fire is extinguished. Coward.

“Are you what all this mess is about?” My tone is disdainful. “I half expected a wolf or bear. Not a Vendigo.”

The owl's eyes are ice. Piercing even my chainmail, but the crest of our Lord, the Roaring Lion with its mane consumed in sun fire, on my chest gives the beast pause.

“Well,” the voice of the demon states. A nightmarish sound. Half growl and half voice. The voice of a thief, a soothe sayer, a liar. “It’s been centuries since that lion dared appear on my mountain.”

The owl vanished, its shape replaced by a cat. The feline climbed down the trunk of the tree and approached me cautiously. My hand rested on my weapon, but I knew there was no need for it. Not yet.

“Why you could almost pass as one of the Knights of Old Core. Almost. You’d have to be taller, and far less ugly.”

“I didn’t come here to barter words with you, filth,” again I drip all of my hatred into my tone. Wishing my words could kill. Yet knowing only the Lord’s words matter here.

“Straight to killing already?” The feline's voice chuckled. “I must admit I’m not even hungry.” The monster watched me with its slitted eyes. “That armor will stick to my teeth for weeks, most likely.”

I drew my weapon. Steel singing as it was aimed in the direction of my enemy.

“In the name of God, he who molded us all, I will destroy you, Demon.”

The cat laughed then vanished. This time its shape became that of a woman. A gorgeous woman with pink hair, skin the color of milk, and curves like the winding of a river.

“Perhaps this appearance would be better?” The monster's voice was now sweet and seductive. “What man doesn’t long for the touch of a woman?”

I lowered the tip of my blade and aimed for the center of the would be female’s throat.

“So serious,” it teased. The claws in the shape of human hands began pulling apart the thin robe covering the feminine and physique. “Allow me to show you what you could have. Simply, put the sword down, and toss that emblem over the hill.” The robe dropped and the demon smiled. “I will be yours.”

My lips curled into a grin. “How strange you must feel,” I mocked. “Knowing one has come that cannot be corrupted by you or any thing of this world.”

The female before became a hag, with a vile face that screamed out in fury. It retreated only a few steps before rising and taking the shape of an eight foot tall knight in dark armor. A huge sword hung at its side. Two enormous horns protruded out of its helm. A poor imitation of antlers inside this cursed forest.

“If you won’t be corrupted,” the imitation knight’s voice boomed. “You will die like your puny saints of old!”

The demon swung and my metal met his sending sparks into the air. This is my purpose. I will not back down.

The beast has strength I cannot hope to match. Rather than stop his titanic strikes, I parry them and flow with them to ease the strain on my muscles.

The demon sneers. How many others have fallen trying to slay it? How many hopeless mortals have those filled teeth devoured? The world wasn’t always like this.

The trees at my back grow closer as I am pushed toward them, but three quick steps to my left adjust that. The beast spins, and tries for a blow that will sever my head. My knees drop and I avoid the strike aiming upwards for the monster's belly.

Too easy. It releases a wail and leaps backwards putting twenty feet between us in an instant.

Just as quickly, the demon lunged in my direction and covered the space once again. The steel of my weapon vibrates viscusly this time as I am barely capable of blocking the deadly strike.

My hands threaten to falter, and I curse, willing them to grip the worn leather even tighter.

Doubt, that damned bastard, creeps into my mind for the first time. I have battled many demons, but this one. This shape shifting gargantuan is mightier than them all.

I am nearing my fiftieth winter in only a few more years, if I even make it to then, why by God am I battling this monstrosity?

The beast strikes again. Faster and harder this time. The steel that shields me fly's from my grasp and I crash against the gnarled trunk of a rotting oak tree.

Cackling. Like the howling of a storm rings in my ears as my vision blurs. Before me there is now a wolf. Larger than a bear, with matted silver fur. The beast has changed its shape and approaches with its fangs on full display.

"You are all the same," the growl of the creature states. "You preach the strength of your faith, but falter all the same."

The monster kicks with its front leg and I see my lost weapon crash down within reach of me.

“I hoped you’d be more of a challenge than your predecessors. But an old man like you, I should have known better.”

The doubt in my heart turns to icy fear. My God I hadn’t felt that cold come over me in decades. The loss of valor. All warmth and hope sapped from the world. I wandered into the damned Demon Ridge out of hubris, nothing more.

Is my God truly dead?

The wolf sneers. My thoughts are evident to it somehow.

“Your God has abandoned this land. He did so long before you were formed, and hasn’t looked back since.”

My hands reach for the pommel of my weapon, but there is no will in the gesture. No further resolve to fight. The wolf was right.

Why else would the peaks be swarming with foul beasts? Why did children witness the mutilation and devouring of their parent? Shouldn’t the world be a kinder place? Shouldn’t God be ending the suffering?

I suppose I will know soon enough.

The creature shifted its form once again. This time appearing as a human sized fawn with twisted horns and fire in its eyes.

“There is only one power left for me to fear, and that is hunger,” the vile voice of the monster declared. “A thing that will be rectified momentarily.”

My feet are unsteady but I force myself to find them. My meek grip on my weapon is faltering as the monster stretches its jaws.

Then I feel it. Like the flame of a candle held up against the night sky. Peace. A peace so fulfilling and complete that makes absolutely no sense in the present situation. A peace of supernatural origins. The peace of God.

A God that is real. The Lord who is coming.

The monster tries to bite my head off my shoulders, but its teeth click together instead. My sword is sheathed and my knees are bent. What a fool I have been to despair.

Meekly I raise my hands to the night sky, and, with the demon preparing for another strike, I begin to praise my father.

The song I sing is an old one. Speaking of a fisherman chosen to follow. Not because of his wealth nor because of his battle prowess, but because of his faith.

The sound of my worship does what the force of my arms could not. The demon recoils in a hiss. Wincing at the words.

Reinvigorated, I continue the song. Each syllable proves painful to the monster, who is retreating and transforming into various malformed figures as it screeches out.

“Sssssssto.....ah! Stooooooooop!”

How could I have ever been so foolish? After the things I have witnessed, to have doubted the power of God.

“Not on my mountain!,” the demon has now become a lanky humanoid figure with skeletal eye sockets and huge malformed jaws. “You will not!”

“Hail!” I shout defiantly. “Hail to the Lion! The one who roars!”

“No! He is not real! He has abandoned us!” The screams and lies of the monster try to worm their way into my heart, but my singing repels them.

My hand grips the sword at my hip and I pull the blade free. This time, the metal is a lite. Burning like the fire of the sun concentrated into this one single weapon. A weapon of the Lord.

The shadows of the surrounding forest retreat in fear of the light and I charge my enemy. Singing as I swing the full might of the lord's vanquisher through the air.

“Prepare the way of the Lord!”

The demon dips and evades me, but its shifting ability has been stifled. I see the fear it once forced into so many others inside of its bleak and hopeless sockets.

I swing again and this time the flaming avenger tears through flesh. A malformed arm, or perhaps wing, flies free from the monster who shrieks in outrage.

“Curse you! Curse you! How dare....”

I thrust and the flaming fury of my sword pierces the beast's mouth. Silencing its lies. Of Course it's not dead yet, that would be far too simple.

The fire leaps from the metal and begins engulfing the acrid flesh. Squealing and anguish fill my ears, but I am far too busy praising.

“Hail to the Lion!” I shout one final time as I arch my sword, and take aim. One final stroke to complete my duty.

By the time the sun rises over the Appalan Peaks I am long gone. There is still too much work to be done. The world must be prepared for his return.

As the villagers of the mountains emerge from their homes they will be met with the sight of a cauterized head placed upon a stake. The beast is vanquished, and the work of God continues. The Lion will continue to roar.