



The Serpent In The Pool

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The silver knight passed through the moist halls of the mountain cave. Above him small glowing worms hung from the cavern ceiling, shining down like stars upon the gloomy cave. He clutched the linen bundle which hung from his neck as he journeyed farther into the cave. He followed the path laid out by the lights above, like his ancestors before him. With each step he took towards his destination his heartbeat elevated, serving as both a warning and guide. He breathed in the cool stale air which served as a reminder of the unnatural stillness that filled these quiet tunnels. Despite the natural echo of the cave the only sound present was the silver knight's sabatons clanking against the ground. Drops of sweat slid down the back of his neck, tingling the nerves on his skin. Despite his discomfort he delved deeper into the cave's depths, following the destiny set in motion long ago. The beating of his heart overtook his body's sense, and the silver knight knew he was close. He turned a corner and entered a large unassuming cavern known as the sanctum. There were no statues to long dead gods, nor an altar on which to offer libations. It was desolate, lonesome, a symbol of the world as it was not what it had been. At the centre of the cavern sat a round pool, glittering with the reflections of the stars as the rising moon trailed across its dark waters. The silver knight looked up towards the sky. The mountain roof of the under-pool had collapsed some eons ago, or had never really been there, there was no way to truly know. The collapsed hole offered a window of light over the pool, denoting the time for the dark ritual. The silver knight breathed in the odourless air in the silent nothingness of the sacred dwelling. He approached the pool coming to a stop a few feet before a stone slab that lay in front of the water. He could hear his blood pumping in the echoes of the room, like a chorus chanting of his doom.

He looked out over the aquascape searching the darkness. Then he saw them, two black slits in glowing amber that flickered in the ripples of the dark water. The serpentine eyes stared back at him as it drew closer to the water's edge.

"Why are you here?" The serpent inquired. Its voice echoed throughout the sanctum, bouncing against the walls so that it seemed to surround him. The silver knight attempted to respond, but the answer hung in his throat. He tried forcing it out but had dug its hooks deep into his vocal cords and refused to budge. He could feel sweat pooling in the tips of his gauntlets as he stared out at the serpent in the pool. "What brings the son of the Carmonian to this place?" The serpent hissed, breaking the silver knight from his paralysis.

"You know why I'm here abomination." The silver knight berated the snake with a bluffed bravado made evident by the shaking in his voice. The serpent chuckled and sunk deeper into the pool, until the silver knight could no longer see those glowing eyes. "Come back here foul beast!" The silver knight cried, his voice now devoid of any pretense of control, emanating only fear and desperation. The chuckling returned as the silver knight felt a long form slither across his shoulder.

"Have you the strength to take it?" The serpent asked, its quiet voice approaching ever closer to the silver knight. Around him the air grew cold to the point he could feel the tissue in his lungs freezing with every breath. "Are you willing to make the sacrifice?" The silver knight breathed out in a long raspy groan that resembled a growl. Mist escaped his lips leaving a cloudy fog over his visor. With one arm he grabbed the linen bundle, while reaching behind his neck to untie the sling that held it. He lifted the bundle up and knelt down on the rocky floor. He lowered the bundle and set it down onto the stone slab, but couldn't bring himself to release it. The serpent chuckled licking at the tip of the silver knight's ear. "There is not much time left." The serpent whispered. The silver knight looked up and saw the moon had almost reached the night's centre.

"I know." The silver knight replied with a trembling voice. He tried to breath in, but the air caught in his throat.

"A sacrifice must be made for the cycle to continue. The first son in each generation of house Carmonian." The serpent whispered with a hint of mockery. "Shut up damn you!" The silver knight shouted with bitter angst.

"I understand, it's a high price and why should you have to pay it?" The serpent questioned as he slithered round the silver knight in loose coils. "Isn't it unfair that you should be the one to do this? What of the others? Those selfish leeches so quick to abandon you, despite everything you've done. What right do they have to ask this of you?" The silver knight rose from the ground bringing the serpent with him. He could feel a tremor in his body as he stepped into the pool. He breathed in and turned to face the bundle on the slab. "Take him and run. Run to the ends of the earth. Your family has done enough." The silver knight reached down and untied the linen wrappings and let the fabrics fall open. "Let someone else carry this burden." The silver knight reached down and lifted the babe from the rock. The little one giggled at his reflection in the metal helmet, donning a happy grin that seemed to glow through the darkness of the cave. The silver knight stared down into the youngling's blue eyes. "It can all end today. Leave this cave behind and never come back." The silver knight clutched the small boy's soft skin and lowered him into the water. The babe looked around with a tepid curiosity as he sank beneath the waves. The silver knight looked up at the midnight moon as he held the body in place. Time seemed to slow as he waited for the celestial body to begin its descent. The restless body beneath the surface grew still.

The silver knight opened his hands and pulled his arms from the water. Beneath him the crystalline blue of the moonlit water shifted, as a red cloud perforated through sacrificial waters. The flow of red spread out across the pool and turned it a deep crimson. He felt a cold empty horror sweep through him. He panted ragged shallow breaths that grew louder and louder. He felt the bundle in his empty hands. He could hear the laughter ringing in his ears. He could feel the serpent's coils constricting around him.

The serpent's coils clamped tight around the silver knight's body, squeezing the air from his lungs. Before he could react the serpent slammed down into the water, and dragged him down into the far depths of the sacrificial pool. The sudden rush of movement disorientated him, but he could sense currents of water rushing past as they descended. His eyes shot open and he focused his gaze. Above him he could see the bloody moon shining down on him through the ripples, judging his sacrificial sin. The silver knight gripped the serpent's body and tried to tear it off of him, but the tight coils held firm, refusing any slack. His heartbeat quickened as the silver knight lungs demanded more oxygen. He reached down for his sword only to find the serpent's scaled form wrapped around the handle. He reached out and tried to swim up, but the serpent's body weighed him down and they continued their descent. He could feel his lungs. While his decaying mind repeated the same phrase over and over, 'go up'. The silver knight flailed around splashing beneath the depths, in a desperate attempt to find some form of leverage to reach the surface. Above him the stars had begun to disappear leaving only the blood moon, a centre guiding light in a sea of darkness. His brain felt so foggy he lacked the mental fortitude for conscious thought. The silver knight felt a surge of strength as his brain released its regulatory valves and flooded his system with as much adrenaline as it could produce. He reached for the serpent again and clamped his fingers around the serpent's hard scales. He squeezed down on the serpent's body and pulled with all the strength he could. This time the serpent's coil loosened. He pried his fingers into the opening and pulled at the body with everything he had left. His muscles trembled under the strain. He released a gurgling growl and little by little he pulled the top coil off of him. The elongated form stretched and turned as the serpent's head came into view. He saw the glowing amber that looked at him with a cold stare, impressed but undisturbed. He could feel his lungs straining against his internal control and could tell they were nearing a breaking point. The amber eyes faded from view, but he could feel the many coils still around him and he knew it was over. His airways opened, expanding his lungs with burning liquid. His body stiffened locking in place as he sank deeper into the depths. With his vision darkened and his consciousness gone the last vestiges of his brain shut down, and then he died.

Water splashed onto the cave floor as the red armoured figure wretched out his lungs. Burning pain filled his throat as the red king expelled up the bloody liquid. He gasped for air between the wet coughs as the light began returning to his eyes. He came to realize he was laying on his side and lifted himself onto his hands and knees. His head hung below the shoulder coughing more water onto the floor. As he began to regain control of his lungs and throat the sound of coughing gave way to the serpent's hissing laughter. He swung his head to the side and looked at those reptilian eyes beneath the pool.

"The sacrifice has been made. The cycle begins again. Go now kin-slayer!" The red king rushed forwards on all fours, running like an animal through those winding tunnels. Above him the glowing worms receded into their holes as he passed, but he paid no heed.

He sprinted through the remaining passages, gurgling and squeezing as he escaped from the sanctum. Before long he reached the end of the worm trail and exited the cave's mouth and into the dark forest. He raced through the trees snarling as spittle ran down the interior of his helmet. He ran until he came to the end of the cliff that overhung the rest of the forest. He stepped up to the edge and looked out over the miasma soaked wilderness. From his vantage point he could see the rest of the woods in the midnight light. Beyond that he could see the farms and that ancient castle. He looked up at the blood-soaked moon and lifted his head as high as it could go. He could feel himself, he could feel everything. Tears streamed down his face and he rose onto his hind legs and let out a deep inhuman howl. The sound echoed across the mountain range and through the trees, reaching the animals within and the people beyond. It was a confession, a declaration and a signal, telling of the mad king's return.