

RETURN TO FOREVERLAND
by Dave Biscella

Chase stared down the long dark hallway. It was incredibly narrow, built by golden bricks going up either side, lit only by torches burning every few feet. He'd been here before, but it'd been a while. He remembered this hallway, and knew he had to go down it. Once he gets to the other side, the memory isn't so clear. He thinks he had gotten a little beyond the hallway, but the memory is fuzzy. He knows he goes to the end, but does he take a right or left? Either way he goes, there are two doorways to choose from. Which of those does he take? He may have tried certain paths and failed in the past, but it's unclear exactly which ones did not work.

"Fuck it. I'm going for it," he said to himself, armed only with a level 4 broadsword and three witching grenades. He knew these likely weren't enough weapons to complete the task at hand, but all he could do was hope that he'd come across an arsenal that he could pick up along the way.

Centering himself in the hallway, Chase moved forward. It was an uneventful hallway, he remembered that much, but it was long. He remembered the first time coming down this hallway. He was tense and certain that danger would pop out at any second, but it never did. No matter how long the hallway went on for, which seemed like an unreasonably long time, he was never met with any challenges along the way.

Without needing to worry about any danger appearing, Chase used the time traveling down the hallway to develop a plan. He had no memories from the end of the hall, but he knew if he waited until he got there to come up with his next move that danger would certainly show itself. Running through the route in his head, he remembers the fork at the end of the hallway. No need to hesitate when that fork is reached, just go to the left, he decided. The decision was

based on nothing but a gut feeling. After going left, there will be two doors. Again, take the left one. Based on nothing, but there was nothing to base it on. It was absolute chance at this point, and Chase had accepted that.

Moving down the hallway, telling himself over and over that he would be going to the left once he reaches the fork, Chase moved on with purpose, finally approaching the end of the hallway. In his head, all he heard was himself repeating “go left, go left, go left” over and over again, but as he reached the end of the hallway, he noticed an arrow marked on the floor pointing to the right. That was never there before. He’d been down this hallway a few times and clearly would have noticed a mark drawn so prominent. Without giving it a second thought, the plans to go left were immediately abandoned and he followed the arrow right.

Plans have changed in the past, no worries. He’ll fight off whatever goblins or night trolls he comes across on the way to the double doors, then he’ll still take the left one as planned.

A night troll jumps out from his left and screeches loudly. Prepared, Chase raises his broadsword and does away with the threat almost as quickly as it appeared. Night trolls never travel alone, so he knew there would be more, and soon. Another loud screech is audible behind him, he turns and swings his sword, missing with the first strike, but following it up with a second that did not miss. Out of the corner of his eye he sees two more approaching from the right. He turns to face them with his sword and sees another three approaching him from behind. He grabs one of his witching grenades and tosses it towards the three to his back, hitting the middle one and exploding onto the other two. Two swipes with his sword and the two in front of him were no longer a threat.

Adrenaline rushing, he turns around, taking long looks in every direction. No screeches heard, no shuffling of feet. The threat seems to be gone, for now. It was always for now. In this world, threats and danger were always imminent. Especially when you’ve come this far. It was

further than Chase had ever come, but he knew that he needed to be prepared at all times now. He knew he had to be getting close to the Dark Lord of Foreverland, and that he wouldn't be able to get there easily.

After taking another look around to get a more confident feeling of safety in that moment, Chase proceeded forward. It wasn't long before he was standing in front of the two doors he knew were there. In his head, he was going left, but as he approached the doors, there was another marking on the ground, pointing towards the right. Confused, unsure where the markings had come from, he took the right door.

Broadsword raised, he enters the right door. He had no idea where the markings had come from, or who had left them, but he had nothing to lose by following them. Upon going through the doorway, he sees a double upgrade for his broadsword and three witching grenades. He loads up the witching grenades and powers up his broadsword, taking it to a level six. His sword was now more powerful than it has ever been, and it felt amazing in his hands.

Lifting his sword up, preparing for any upcoming threat, Chase moved forward. He heard the screech of a night troll, but it was off in the distance. He knew soon, he would be forced to engage in a battle. As he proceeded, he saw writing on the floor.

"Seven night trolls, three goblins, and TWO dark stones," he read aloud to himself.

Before he could even think about where these messages on the floor were coming from, he heard two loud screeches as night trolls jumped at him from either side. He was able to swing and fight the one off to the left, killing it before it hit the ground, but could not get to the one on the right before it swiped at his arm, scratching it with its extremely sharp claws, cutting him deep. He kicked it away and swung his sword, taking it down. Its corpse hadn't even fallen to the ground before three more night trolls came from the same direction. He grabs a witching grenade and tosses it in their direction as he sees a goblin approaching from his left. Trying to

turn to swing his blade at the goblin, he's grabbed from behind by a dark stone. Their stealth ability was always his weakness. Punching at the dark stone with his wounded arm, and swinging at the goblin while being pulled back with extreme force. Dark stones were strong, but they took their time killing you. Death by dark stone was a long and painful process.

Chase manages to take down the goblin with a flurry of desperate swings. Being lifted off the ground by the dark stone, two more goblins appear at his feet and start scratching at his legs. Being squeezed, lifted, and pulled by the dark stone, with goblins striking away at his legs, Chase thinks this may be it. Maybe the messages on the ground were a trap. Perhaps he fell right into the hands of the Dark Lord of Foreverland and needed to accept that this was his fate. He heard the screeches of two more night trolls approaching from the distance. He closes his eyes. Maybe this mission is one he can't complete.

"No," he says to himself. "Fuck this." He'd come too far. He couldn't let it end now.

Chase freed his hand up just enough to reach into his satchel and grab a witching grenade. He dropped it onto the ground at his feet, but was unable to land it with enough force to explode it. He reached in for another. Setting off two witching grenades together should really never be done, but at this point he had no choice. Mortals were immune to the effects of witching explosions, but the flash and sound would be hard to overcome. He had no choice at this point. He could now see the night trolls approaching. Chase grabbed a second witching grenade and tossed it down with a little more force than before. Based entirely on luck, the witching grenade landed directly on the first one, causing them both to go off simultaneously.

The blast was loud and fierce. The dark stone evaporated behind him, causing Chase to fall to the ground. The goblins at his feet were thrown back in the air, disintegrating as they flew away. The night trolls weren't close enough to be blown apart by the blast, but they were thrown back.

Chase stood up as quickly as possible, blinking his eyes, trying to overcome the flash. In his head was all one loud sound as he recovered from the sound of the blast. He knew the night trolls would be coming back, and he needed his vision or hearing to defeat them. He was confident in his abilities that he could defeat them with either one, but at this point he had neither.

A night troll had approached and swiped at Chase, scratching him across the chest. He took a mighty swing in the direction the swipe came from and felt contact. He blinked again and gained his vision back just in time to see the other night troll swiping at his face. He swung his blade, chopping off its arm. It let out a loud screech before Chase swung again, striking it dead.

Chase stood there, trying to regain his composure. He had fought many battles that he had been proud of, but none like this.

“Wait, TWO dark stones,” he thought to himself before turning around immediately to see a dark stone reaching for him. He swung his blade, striking it across the chest and knocking it back. He grabbed another witching grenade and tossed it, hitting the dark stone directly in the chest.

Suddenly, there was a knocking sound.

“It’s open,” Chase said loudly as he pressed pause on the controller and set it down in front of him.

“I brought pepperoni rolls from Tino’s,” Alec said as he entered the apartment. Walking over to Chase and dropping the bag from Tino’s on the table in front of him, he looks to the television. “Are you playing Foreverland? I haven’t played that in ages.”

“Me neither,” Chase said as he unwrapped a pepperoni roll. “My brother and I used to play all the time, but this is the first I’ve put it in since he passed away.”

Alec sat down on the other end of the couch, digging into his own pepperoni roll. "I don't think I know anybody that made it all the way through. Pretty much everybody quits out of frustration when they can't beat it. You get past the long hallway?"

"Yeah, that's where it got weird," Chase laughed.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I got to the end of the hallway, and there was an arrow prompting me to go to the right," Chase began.

"Really? I always went left for some reason," Alec said. "There was never any markings on the floor. Never. I know a ton of people that all gave up at that same spot, and nobody ever said anything about any marks."

"I know, right," Chase continued. "But that wasn't it. There was a mark telling me which door to pick, then after the door there was writing warning me about what all I had to fight next."

Alec bit into his pepperoni roll. "That's pretty odd," he said, not able to come up with anything else to add.

Chase finished his pepperoni roll and sat back on the couch. Alec's timing was perfect, as a break was very much needed after that most recent battle. Chase's heart was pumping, the adrenaline was running. He sat back, staring at the paused screen. He didn't want to make Alec watch him play this game for the rest of the night, but he'd never come this far and had no idea where those messages were coming from, so he was itching to dive back in and see how far he could take this.

A few minutes went by with Alec talking about his day and having a conversation that Chase was only half paying attention to, Alec stood up and gathered up the trash from their dinner.

“I’ll let you get back to your weird messages, or whatever,” Alec laughed. “I’m gonna jump in the shower. I think we’re going out to the Salty Orchid later if you wanna join us.”

“Sure, maybe, we’ll see,” Chase answered, with an obvious disinterest in his voice. All he could think about at this moment was this game, and he was eager as Alec headed away from the living room toward the bathroom.

Chase stared at the television for a few more moments before reaching for the controller again. His heart was still racing from the previous battle and he knew that was probably nothing compared to what was likely coming up next. After a few moments of gathering himself and regaining focus on the mission at hand, he pressed pause on the controller.

He proceeded down the long corridor, looking around and paying extra attention, not wanting to miss any notes that may be left for him. He saw a doorway shortly ahead, and knew that whatever was in store for him next was more than likely on the other side of that door. Chase approached the door, took one last look around for messages, and entered.

Raising his sword as he walked through the doorway, Chase looked around, ready to strike at anything coming at him from any direction. He heard a loud laughter echoing through the halls. An evil, terrifying laughter. He knew he was getting close. The Dark Lord of Foreverland was nearby. The laughter echoed through the cavernous walls and eventually faded. Chase moved forward, finding three more witching grenades along the way, and only encountering a couple more night trolls.

The laughter returned, and this time was much louder as Chase came upon another doorway. If the Dark Lord of Foreverland wasn’t on the other side of this door, he was definitely not very far beyond it. Chase’s heart raced as he tried to prepare for the battle ahead. He focused on the doorway and headed towards it, reaching out to open it.

Then he stopped himself. The laughter had thrown him off and distracted him. He was no longer looking for messages. Chase took a look around, wanting to make sure he didn't miss any messages before entering that doorway. The doorway he had convinced himself was the last one he'd be going through.

To the left, he saw writing on the wall, the same handwriting as before.

"Turn on the second controller," he read aloud to himself. "Huh?" he asked himself. The point where a second player could enter the game was long ago, even before the long hallway. Plus, Alec was in the shower and wouldn't be any help. It didn't make sense to turn on the second controller, but at this point, Chase's curiosity was at peak level. He set his controller down and reached for the second one that was resting on the coffee table in front of him. He pressed the button to activate the controller and set it back down and grabbed his controller again.

"Hey, bud. I was hoping you'd play this game again," a voice said from behind his character.

Chase immediately recognized the voice, but that wasn't possible. He turned his character around to see where the voice was coming from, and there stood the character that he had played this game with many times before. The character his brother Gary had created. The character they played as together for hours and hours a few years back. The character he was playing with when his brother told him he had an aggressive form of cancer, hoping telling him while playing video games would lessen the blow.

"Gary?" Chase said as goosebumps began to cover his entire body. It had been just over 21 months since the cancer had taken his brother from him. He got to speak to him roughly 18 hours before he passed away, and this was the first time he'd heard his voice since then. It didn't make any sense, but he knew that voice.

“Welcome back to Foreverland, brother,” Gary said. “It’s about time. I thought you’d never come back.” Gary laughed and smiled, which was what Chase missed most about him. No matter what was ever going on, Gary could always find a way to laugh about it, and his smile and laugh were contagious. “Look, we’re almost there. On the other side of this doorway, all hell breaks loose. There are goblins, night trolls, dark stones, everbats, and a few things I’ve never even seen before. Too many to count. There’s no way anybody could get through that on their own.”

Chase was listening, and couldn’t take his eyes off of Gary, but he wasn’t able to focus on what they needed to fight next. “Gary, wait a second,” he interrupted. “What the hell is going on?”

“I don’t know,” Gary answered. “I just know we need to get through this next battle and then defeat the Dark Lord of Foreverland. That’s the mission at hand. Are you ready?”

Chase stared at his brother for a moment and tightened the grip on his broadsword. Playing video games with his brother were some of his favorite memories, all the way from childhood into adulthood. He’d often said he would do anything for just one more chance to play video games with his brother again, and here it was. He didn’t know how and he didn’t know why, but, “Fuck it. Let’s do this!”

The two warriors went through the final doorway with broadswords raised. Immediately upon entering they were met with hordes of every type of demon they’ve defeated up until this point. It was an ongoing stream as they were attacked one after another by threats of all different shapes and sizes. The second they would kill one, another one was lunging at them. They battled hard, like two warriors that had trained their whole lives for this moment. Threat after threat was struck down with their swords, occasional witching grenades were tossed. They swiped and hacked and kicked as they proceeded through the room filled with evil for what

seemed like hours. Each one fought without fear of what was behind them, as they trusted the other one to have their back. Alone, this fight would be terrifying and not last long, but together, this was just the mission at hand and they were going to get to the end no matter what.

“I think that about does it,” Gary said as he pulls his sword out of the final living night troll in sight. The two brothers look around at the ground littered with the bodies and blood of their enemies.

“That was kinda fun,” Chase said, laughing.

The laughter came back, louder than ever before. Gary and Chase turned around to see a figure forming behind them. The corpses of all the threats they just slayed were sliding across the ground to one point, and growing together into an enormous being. The being grew to be well over 15 feet tall, with dark, fiery eyes and enormous horns of flame resting atop its head.

“You can never leave Foreverland!” the Dark Lord of Foreverland screamed in a dark ominous tone, the sound echoing through the room.

Without hesitation, Gary and Chase both charged at the Dark Lord of Foreverland, striking at him with their swords. He swiped back with his giant claws. They dodged and swung back, getting a lot of good strikes in, but not seeming to slow him down at all. Chase grabbed his final witching grenade and threw it towards the Dark Lord’s face, hitting him and causing the explosion. The Dark Lord took a few steps back and screamed in pain. The sound of his scream was the most terrifying noise either had ever heard. The scream was followed by an even louder growl as the Dark Lord of Foreverland clinched his claw filled fists and grew even bigger.

The Dark Lord of Foreverland, now almost double his original size, rushed towards Gary and Chase, swiping furiously with his claws, hitting them with each swing. The brothers tried to swipe their swords in return, missing each time. With one giant strike of his arm, the Dark Lord

of Foreverland sent Gary and Chase both flying to the other side of the room. They slammed against the wall and fell to the ground next to each other behind a large rock.

“He’s too big,” Chase said, out of breath, feeling defeated. “We’re not doing any damage to him at all.”

“Yet,” Gary said, getting off of the ground and dusting himself off.

“You have a plan?”

“Yeah,” Gary said, reaching into his satchel and pulling out a glowing orb that immediately grew into a sword two times the size of what he was carrying before. “I picked up a witching kamikaze blade a while ago, but I saved it. I figured I’d need it eventually.”

“No,” Chase said emphatically. “I can’t let you use that. It will kill you. We don’t know what happens after that.”

“I have to, brother,” Gary said, looking into Chase’s eyes. “We have to defeat him. This is our best chance. I can get close enough to hit him, then I’ll detonate it. That should weaken him enough for you to get in there and finish him off.”

“I can’t,” Chase said, tears starting to form in his eyes. “I want you to be there with me when we defeat him. We worked so long and so hard to get here. We need to enjoy it together.”

“We will,” Gary said. “Just trust that I’ll know the joy you feel, and I know when you’re down, and I know when you have rough days and good days. Just know all that, Chase. I’m not going anywhere.”

Chase just stared at his brother, tears now running down his cheeks. He didn’t have any words. His brother was right, like he always was. That was likely the only way they could defeat the Dark Lord of Foreverland. But he didn’t want this to end, and he certainly didn’t want to see his brother get evaporated from the blast of the witching kamikaze blade.

“Let’s do this,” Gary said as he stepped out from behind the rock, drawing the attention of the Dark Lord of Foreverland. He paused for a moment and looked back at his brother. “I just have to ask, how was the new Star Wars?” He smiled.

Chase, barely able to form words, chuckled and smiled. “It was perfect. You’d have loved it.”

Gary gave Chase one more smile before putting his head down and rushing towards the Dark Lord of Foreverland. He was able to dodge a few swings of the Dark Lord’s arms and jumped up onto a rock and off it, propelling himself up and able to strike the Dark Lord square in the chest with his sword. Hanging off of the sword as it rested in the Dark Lord, Gary gave one last look towards Chase. “I love you, brother,” he said before pressing the detonation switch on the handle of his witching kamikaze blade, causing a loud, monstrous blast and flash of light.

The Dark Lord was propelled back and slammed against the wall as everything around him evaporated. Chase wasted no time running towards the Dark Lord and swinging his level six broadsword furiously, hitting hard with every swing. The Dark Lord began to whimper in pain, unable to even swing back and Chase swung with everything he had. With one last swing, Chase struck the Dark Lord between the eyes, causing a blast as the Dark Lord of Foreverland disappeared.

“Congratulations! You have freed Foreverland from the Dark Lord!” appeared on the television screen as tears were pouring down Chase’s face. He’d never felt tears like this, or emotions like this, for that matter. He was relieved and exhilarated that he had just beaten the Dark Lord, overjoyed that he got to game with his brother, but extremely sad that it was over.

“I love you, too, Brother,” he said to the television screen.