

Sepulcher

(01/13/2018)

Once upon a time, there was a field. This field had seen a glorious battle many years ago, and was littered with standing stones. Beneath these stones were the bodies of the many, who fell by the sword and arrow; crushed beneath the axe and club, they now sleep below the soil, remembered only by the stones and the few who would come to visit.

A young man walks through the field with his mother. His tail sways as he drags his feet through the tall grass, choked by untamed weeds. She pulls away from him, undaunted by the leafy hands that seem to grasp at her ankles. She had come to visit the grave of her husband, the young man's father. He had fallen in the battle, and like all the others, he sleeps beneath the soil. He's marked only by the standing stones she had built many years ago.

The young man doesn't recall his father, as he was too young to absorb anything of significance before he fell in the field. These visits serve only to unnerve and annoy him. His mother finds the standing stones of her husband, falling on her knees before them. The young man watches as her hands grasp at the base. Her sharp claws scratch the stones as she seems to speak to them, tears running down her snout and dripping from the tip of her nose.

He watches his mother, pained by her suffering, though not by the loss of a father he had never known. Suddenly, her pointy ears prick and she turns her head. A man walks through the field not far from them. He is a human with a grizzled appearance; greying hair flows past his shoulders and a bushy grey beard that nearly reaches his chest, flanked by black hairs on either side. He passes them, stopping only to look at the two Voeldahn for a moment.

“What are *you* doing here, human?!” She snarls, bearing her teeth.

“Mourning my own loss, ma’am.” He solemnly replies.

“Then go, and get away from me!” She growls, her voice trembling in sorrow.

The old warrior leaves the two and continues down a path that winds through the field. The young man watches for a moment, before turning back to his mother. He wonders why she was so hostile to this man. Had she met him before? Did he fight with her husband, or against him? As the young man isn't nearly as attached to the pile of rocks as his mother, he allows his mind to wander.

Soon, his curiosity claims his body; he walks from his mother and towards the path, though she doesn't seem to notice. He follows the path for a moment, his eyes narrowing

as he brings a hand to his brow, blocking out the glare of the sun. He scans the horizon looking for the old warrior, and is not disappointed. The old warrior sits on his legs in front of a pile of stones, staring at them.

As the young man approaches, he wonders who it is this man is mourning. Was it a fallen comrade? A relative, perhaps? Or maybe it was a worthy adversary that he had felled in the battle, and now he comes to admire the remnants of his handiwork. The young man can't help but grin at the thought, his lips curling gently over his short and rounded snout. As he walks ever closer, the man abruptly rises. Walking several feet away, he sits again in front of a second pile of stones. The young man clears his throat.

"Pardon me, sir... Would you mind if I join you?" He asks the old warrior.

The old warrior turns, looking somewhat apprehensively at the young Voeldahn. His long tail swishes and a gust of wind rustles both the fur on his body, and the leaves in the distant trees. His expression is quite pleasant, and he does not bear his claws. The old warrior sighs and gives a single nod. The young man smiles, approaching and taking a knee beside the old warrior, who quickly turns back to the second pile of stones.

“I saw that you were visiting another marker. Did you know these two men well?” The young man asks, eager to spark a conversation.

“Indeed, I did...” The old warrior replies.

“I see... How well did you know them?” The young man presses.

“I buried them both and built these markers for them...” The old man answers.

“So... I did not know that humans visited here.”

The young man struggles to continue the conversation. The old warrior turns to the young man, his eyes scanning the curious Voeldahn.

“It would be far simpler to ask me what is truly on your mind.” The old warrior suddenly says.

“I did not think that would be very proper.” The young man remarks.

“Curiosity does not care for proper.” The old warrior chuckles.

The young man looks at the old warrior; he stares intently at this second set of stones, as he did with the first. He can no longer contain himself.

“Which side did you fight for?” The young man asks.

“It does not matter anymore, if it ever did at all.” The old warrior replies.

The young man is quite perplexed by his answer.

“Who exactly are you mourning?”

“Two very good men...” The old warrior answers.

In his impatience, the young man becomes more direct.

“Human, or Voeldahn?”

“Both.” The old warrior says.

“I do not understand.” The young man remarks.

“Take a look around you. What do you see?” The old warrior begins.

The young man turns his head, his eyes scanning the field littered with standing stones.

“I see an old field with many grave markers in it.” The young man says, sighing in mild frustration.

“Then you are not looking hard enough. This is not merely a field of graves, but a grand monument to even grander fallacies.”

“And what is that?” The young man asks, enthralled.

“The fallacy that underneath my skin and your fur, we are somehow different; that some lives matter more than others. The fallacy that a field of slain men can somehow justify our own beliefs and ideals. The fallacy that some are more deserving, while others were born less worthy. It is all an artifice created by the haughty, who have never shed their own blood for their causes.” The old warrior laments.

He sighs, his breath trembling like leaves in a breeze. He hangs his head, resting his hands on his knees as he leans forward, as though to stand. He tilts his head up to look at the marker, his eyes glossy with tears.

“It is a lesson that I wish I did not have to learn the hard way...”

The young man is taken back by the old warrior’s earnest contrition. He did not expect an emotional display, however subtle. The young man can’t help but be a little disappointed. He had hoped that perhaps this old warrior would regale him with a story of valor and glory, though he made an interesting point. The young man sits with the melancholy warrior for a time, looking at the standing stones.

“You never did answer my question though... Who is buried here?”

The old warrior turns his head to the young man. He seems to chuckle silently before turning back to the stones, his lips curling into a tenuous grin.

“It really does not matter. Next year, I will visit these graves, and mourn two very good men who died before their time. I will sit here and mourn them both as brothers, as it always should have been, but was not.”

They sit in silence as the old warrior seems to drift away into a sea of his own thoughts. His eyes stare at the stones as though he were looking through them. The young man glances to the old warrior, unsure of what to make of this encounter. Suddenly, he hears a voice calling his name. They both turn back to see the young man’s mother, standing some distance away, beckoning to him.

“I apologize, sir, but I still only see a field with many markers.” The young man says.

“It is alright. I was not dissimilar when I was your age.” The old warrior smiles.

“Perhaps one day I will learn, and then I will see this field as you do.” The young man comments.

He rises to his feet and returns to his mother who waits for him, leaving the old warrior to sit alone at the grave marker.

“... God, I certainly hope not...” The old warrior murmurs as he closes his weary eyes.