

New Life In The Ruins

By Daniel Berryman

The mist lies over the hills like smoke, boulders shouldering clear of the thin soil to jostle each other. With the right sort of eyes, one may look out over the shattered highlands and see where the Long Winter's War splintered itself against the eternal stone, faltered, and finally fell back. From here, it is hard to say whether there was ever a winning side.

There are pieces left here of those years, gone to rust and splinter. This is impassive land, slow to forgive, too proud and hard to swallow a grave. Only wolves sang funeral dirges here, over so many bodies that they are still singing even now, so long after the last bone was scattered. I have learned much in my snowbound years here, not least the kinship an old priest might have with wolves.

There was a ruin here, once. A fort of some obscure past glory, even in those days a forgotten relic of greater times. It took a fair few hours to find it, now gone to stones amongst stones as it is. A shred of cloth still hangs, impossibly, where some forgotten soldier once lashed it to signal their fellows; after so many years of sun and rain, it is little more than a colourless rag, half its threads plucked away by birds to warm their nests. I cannot help wondering how many little birds this amnesiac flag has sheltered from the wind, whether they might have cared whether it was once red or blue.

A tremulous thistle pushes its single head through the shattered eye socket of a warhorse, the rusted chain of its bit still clenched between cracked teeth, the bridle long having fallen to dust. I consider it for quite some time, crouching to run my blessing fingers across its ivory forehead. I have learned not to linger amongst the bones of soldiers, often as furious and savage in death as in life, but those of their beasts somehow draw me into contemplation. An animal does not enlist, and I may only wonder what they make of the wars that slay them; even the most maddened of ghosts might speak some sense, if I were to listen well, but a beast's soul will always be a profound mystery to me. Is the spirit of a beast contented in the knowledge that their great flesh would nourish countless lessers, that the caverns of their bones would shield tender greenery from the cruel winds? Boundless servant in life, did it desire no more of an afterlife than one of simple utility, if indeed it conceived of one at all? My ponderance might well be nonsense, I am aware.

Still, with no definitive reason save my own sympathy and no Temple to rebuke my unorthodoxy, I mouth my soothings to the bones, offer some small acknowledgement to its sacrifice in the name of men's ideologies it could never have comprehended. A beetle crawls into the long vestibule of its muzzle, and my thoughts turn naturally to Ald'Ruhn, to the great carcass of Old Skar in which my mother's House sheltered for a thousand years. I kneel beside it in silence to watch the moons rise.

A barbed, gnarled pillar of ever-charred stone arches over the crest of the hill across the gorge,

its shape like that of a snake rearing against the sky. It is broken apart now, rendered safe by its sundering, only memory informing its once-arched shape from the debris it has become; and yet, as Masser rises behind it to paint its unclosed centre red, I cannot help but recall the roiling fury of the portal this arch once contained, a simmering crimson hatred. Though it is not the first one I have found within Skyrim's borders, not by quite a margin, still each time I feel again that rush of dread which still belongs to these monstrous doors. For a moment, I almost think I can taste the sulphur and blood at the back of my throat, the brassy bitterness of fear...

Enough, enough. The gate is but a dead thing now, like the others. Broken stone and nothing more, shattered jaws never to knit back together. No more to be feared than the ruin in which I stand, and moreover, quite a distance from me besides.

My reverie is broken soon enough. I hear murmured voices somewhere close by, tucked behind some slab of fallen wall. It is not an uncommon trick of the wind, or the mind, and so I only pay it so much attention as to be wary. It is only when I glimpse a flicker of ear, a gleam of feline eye in a gap between the stones that I give it real credence. By my reckoning, if they'd meant to have harmed me, they would have done so long before I spied them, but even so I stand quiet and still long enough to be recognised as similarly benign in my intent. I cast a patient smile and a welcoming call to the rubble, and it is not so long before I hear my greeting echoed back to me.

"*Ai, kinsmer!*"

A Khajiiti trading caravan, albeit a small one. Only four amongst their number, their shaggy-coated draft mule stoically cropping dead grass in a slight valley down the hill. With the flawless manners of fifth-generation traders, they invite me to rest a while within their camp, to share tea and conversation as unspoken prelude to potential transaction. It is a pleasure to spend a little time amongst newer, younger voices than my own, though with every year my dubious Ta'agra grows ever-more frail and archaic.

I make myself useful with the fire while the Khajiit raise their tents, clustered like circled wagons where the stone blocks the worst of the wind. Tinder is scarce here, what trees remain being windblasted into miniature and sent sprawling over the rocks like creepervine. It takes substantial heat to coax bone to burning; I lend the splintered deer my own strength until it may burn alone. The Khajiit join me around the fire in hand-rubbing contentment, setting spice to water, water to pot, pot to flame. The tea they favor takes some time to brew, though my stomach lunges for the scent of cinnamon and ginger, rich red anise flower still dewy with nectar.

Naturally, one of their tradeband produces a seven-stringed guqin-lute from a saddlebag, plucking deftly at the strings with claw-tipped elegance. The song they sing is slow at the first and quick at the last, a tale of a Khajiiti maiden scorned at the gallows by her kin, only to be rescued from the hangman's noose by her beloved. It sounds oddly familiar, and beneath their exotic instruments and Ta'agra trill I do not quickly realise that it is a song I already know. The

words and tune have changed a little since I was a young mer, when it was banned from open performance yet still quite popular in certain dens of iniquity.

Once, in Vvardenmeris, the song's maiden had been a Khajiiti slave, the kin her Dunmeri master and his wife. Her true love, most often, was implied to be the master's son. It is strange to hear it now sung so openly and with such joy; I catch myself glancing about for listening ears, as though I were a young mer again, fearful of the golden scowl of my father's mask. I wonder if these Khajiit know of what this song used to be, so many generations hence.

I sit silent and merely listen to them sing together, watch them laugh and dance. Haregut strings lilt light and sweet through the cool night air. The fire is warm, and the tea brewing in the billy-can smells as divine as old temple hours. Firelight dances across their fur, painting them the shades of steam: of cinnamon, ginger, rich red anise.

The old year slips away into the dark, the new slithering in on song and silk. The stars are clear and bright, and there is peace here. For today, that is enough.