

THE
HEART OF STONE

PRE-RELEASE SAMPLE

1

What is man, if not a shell for the Architect's imagination?

FROM THE MANUAL OF LIFE

35TH FADING, 2&7&82

The day that gripped the Irkmire Yawn was a foul one. The strip of sea was strangled with eager winds, the air choked with icy drizzle, and the waters boiled to a spray.

The only mercy the Yawn could offer the valiant men of the glorified barge was its size. The gap between Irkmire and the soaring cliffs of Hartlund was barely eight leagues at its skinniest point. The journey might have been a detestable wash of rain and saltwater, but it was a brief and relatively steady one. The *Bilgesnapper* was a stout craft. Its squat shape and mean, flat prow bludgeoned the waters aside, bothered not a penny by the swell.

With the sails stripped almost bare, and the belowdecks crammed with two-score of sweating rowers, the rest of the barge's crew had taken to sulking below the gunwales. They blew into hands and grimaced into the murk. Each of them rocked back and forth in odd and silent unison, slave to the monotonous canter of the sea.

'There ain't nought miserabler than a Lundish fading's day,' wheezed an old sailor, trussed up in two thick coats and still shivering. His olive skin spoke of a southern heritage and time spent in the sun. Even the seawater and the slick of drizzle hadn't managed to bring a chill to it.

Ole Jub was right. The others around him murmured in agreement, each of them pulling at their collars, as if the mere sight of Jub made them all feel the cold a little keener.

Another sailor took up the chatter, eyes wide and urgent under the brim of his floppy brown hat, which had wilted in the wet. He had a worry in him and was eager to see it voiced. He was not alone; a few of the sailors around him shared the same awkward expression.

'Ain't even some good pouches at the end of this, did you 'ear? We should be gettin' double for the danger,' he hissed. 'Spit on it all.'

A woman's voice shushed him from the stairwell, just a few bodies behind. She was barely audible over the wind and slapping waves. 'Oh, give it a rest, will you, Norbin? You're twitching over a spot of rain. You've seen worse.'

Norbin wasn't thankful for her words. He shot her a baleful look over his soldier. 'An' I told you to shut it, Kein. Ain't the weather I'm worried about, and you knows it,' he said, eyes falling back to the deck as another soldier came edging past, spear low. Norbin needn't have worried; the man was far too preoccupied with the... *thing*.

That was the only word for it.

When the soldier had passed, he snuck another look at the great lump sitting square in the centre of the deck, just before the mast. There was an empty circle around it, one made out of fear.

Nobody, not one soldier, not one sailor, dared to come within an oar's length of the thing. If that wasn't reason enough for worry, Norbin didn't know what was.

Kein had never been one for letting up. She shuffled along the deck, clearly eager to be heard. 'What's wrong? You afraid of old-magic?' she said.

'Quiet down there!' came a bark from the aft-castle. As if to punctuate the order, a stray wave stole over the gunnels and splashed their huddle. The sailors moaned as cold water seeped under collars and into the throats of boots, finding all sorts of new crevices to chill.

'Deffing Yawn,' swore Norbin. He was about to give Kein another piece of his mind when a noise stole his words away. It sounded like the swift popping of knuckles, or the low grumble of a distant landslide. The chains rattled once and then fell still.

Norbin jabbed a finger at it. 'See? It's laughing at us!' He cast a look back at Kein, now crouched behind him. He met the look on her tightly pinched face, her pucker-smirk. 'I'm tellin' you, it ain't right. I didn't sign my name on no line for this. Evil is what it is. Architect spit on it.'

Kein laughed at that. 'Bet you're glad for the wet, hmm? Can't see you pissin' your breeches then, can we?'

That drew a few chuckles from the others. Norbin stamped on the deck.

'Tell me why's it chained up then,' he asked. 'And why they're all giving it a word berth?'

'Could tip over the side, bein' so heavy n'all,' ventured another shipmate. He was a tall lad, tall enough to poke above the gunnels and receive more drizzle than he perhaps deserved. His cheeks were scrunched up so tightly he had two thin slivers for eyes.

Norbin whirled on him. 'You can pipe down, Spew, afore I take back that blanket I given you.'

Spew threw up his hands. 'That ain't fair!'

'Cap'n doesn't want it moving around is all,' Kein muttered.

Norbin scoffed at that. 'Fawl-piss! It's bloody dangerous, that's why. The *Snapper's* solid as a harbour wall. Alright, 'ow many soldiers we got on this ship, eh? Why are all they needed then? It's a demon, I'm tellin' you.'

Laughter at that.

'It's a machine for the war, you deffer.'

'Yeah, something special for the Truehards.'

'I don't care. Their war ain't my war.'

'Oh no, that's right. You're the man whose only home is the sea, ain't you?'

'You can shut it as well, Fargle!'

'Well it's about time somebody mentioned it.'

'You've told us four times this week already.'

'Will you be *quiet* down there!' came the shout. First Mate Botch, eager to stretch his chords as usual. 'We're coming out the deep waters. See to!'

The crew begrudgingly saw to it, apparently a little more begrudgingly than management would have liked.

'I said SEE TO, you ingrates!' Botch roared.

‘Yessir!’ chorused the crew, scurrying across the deck, making sure to give the cargo a wide berth. They snatched quick glimpses through its ring of soldiers.

The *Bilgesnapper* nosed into a shallow crescent of grey beach that lay in the shadow of the Drunken Cliffs. A gaggle of people waited on the sand, maybe half a dozen at the most.

Norbin stretched his neck upwards to gaze up at the rocks. It was his habit, whenever they came to Hartlund by this route he would stare at the cliffs. This time felt more special than usual. The *Snapper* had sailed the Yawn less and less in recent months. Something to do with both the Truehards and the Last Fading being bankrupt.

The Drunken Cliffs were aptly named; only alcohol could elicit such an angle from its victims. The slabs of grey granite were pressed together, halfway fallen like a slumping bookshelf. Their lofty heights were covered by dark green grass, and standing on it, the barely visible threads of a crowd. Between them and the beach, a jagged yet impressive footpath ran in a zig-zag through the rock and up to the sky.

Now the barge had been swallowed by the shadow of the rock, the day seemed even gloomier and wetter than it had before. Fortunately for Norbin, he was on anchor duty, and that meant a scrap of shelter behind the fat capstan, just behind the bow and under a walkway.

From there, he could finally get another decent eyeful of the thing. As big an eyeful as the murk could afford, at least.

If he peered hard enough, he could make out contours beneath the green tarpaulin, and gauge the girths the chains encircled. The soldiers had taken a liberal approach with the irons. The thing was practically clothed in them.

Norbin silently begged it to move, as if to prove it was not some sort of rain-made mirage. Some trick of the sea-spray.

‘Master Ghurn!’ yelled Botch.

Norbin raised a hand. ‘Yessir?’

‘To the bow, you, and Miss Simpkins!’

Norbin inwardly groaned, but he did as he was told.

‘Yessir!’

Kein scurried past him, always eager to lick an arsehole whenever one was presented. Norbin glowered at her as he put one hand on the cog and one hand on the brake.

‘Hold oars!’ yelled the captain. Hecka was her name. A Graden who’d inherited the *Bilgesnapper* from a dead father. She sailed it as though it were his tombstone.

The big barge shuddered as the oars were held fast, bucking the momentum.

‘Boat oars!’

There was a squeaking of painted wood on wet metal as the oars were brought in, before they stuck on the shale beneath the waters.

‘Hold all!’

Norbin always like to count. His challenge was to see if he make the crunch land on three. To his private infuriation, he was always slightly out.

With a loud scraping, the flat bottom of the barge met the beach, grinding against the dark pebbles.

‘Door!’ came the order.

Norbin released the brake and held the pressure of the cog for a moment before gently loosing it. The snub-nosed bow slowly peeled away from the vessel, forming a ramp between the deck and the damp sand.

‘All yours, Captain Jenever,’ called Hecka.

‘Thank you, Madam,’ said a hoarse voice amongst the soldiers.

Norbin toyed with his thumbs behind his back, squeezing them between fingers. He could tell Kein was looking at him, but he didn’t give her the satisfaction of meeting her gaze. He could feel what little colour there was left in his face draining away. From there, at the bow, he could finally understand the architecture of the chains. His eyes tumbled down the thing’s outlines. *Head. Shoulders. Arms...*

‘Right then,’ said the captain, stepping forward to tap the hulking cargo with the butt of his sword. It sounded far too solid for flesh. Nor was it the dull thud of wood. The sailors hugged the gunwales as the men in armour stepped forward. They brought their spears up, one by one.

‘Time for you to wake up!’

The sound came again; that rumble, like fawl-bones cracking. It sent a shiver down Norbin’s spine. The thing didn’t deign to move. It was as though it taunted them.

‘I said, wake up!’ The captain poked again.

It was then the monster moved. Its form shifted jerkily under the tarpaulin, head twitching to the side.

‘Behave now!’ Jenever warned it, bringing his sword-tip to bear. The only answer he got was the sound of two rocks grinding together.

‘It’s time for you to meet your new owner,’ said Jenever, as he signalled to his men. ‘You four, see to those chains. Don’t let them out of your grasp.’

The thing seemed to have other ideas. Slowly, inexorably, before fingers could get to bolts, it rose to standing. The tarpaulin was ripped aside like wet parchment. Chain-links unfurled as if they were made of rusted wire. Where the sodden deck was weaker than iron, chunks of wood sprang forth, skittering across the deck. The soldiers stood frozen in awe.

The monster was immense. Man-shaped, it stood at least nine foot-lengths tall without being generous. Its flesh was made of pieces of stone knitted together, ashen grey with veins of misty blue, shifting with every crunch and shiver of his swollen limbs. Its shoulders were as broad as a battering ram’s, and his fingers were jagged shards, stained black like a fireplace, shiny like marble where a human would have nails.

Norbin felt his gaze being drawn towards the thing’s jagged face, heavy-jawed and angular as it was. He could not avoid those eyes: those bewitching points of light that seemed to escape scrutiny, floating in two black hollows set deep in its face. They fixed him with a cold look as he passed. The sailor felt his chin quiver as the stone beast marched down the ramp with purpose.

Norbin knew then that he would die a different man to the one who had started the day picking weevils from crackers. He would go to the grave knowing that the Architect had not built man in his image, but instead in that great monster who had pierced his soul in the time it took to glance.

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