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THE STORY OF STONE

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BEFORE

ONE

The Chief Findsman was angry. A pearl of sweat, stained blue with the dye of his hair, trickled down his forehead to mingle with the deeper blue of his plaited beard.

‘I don’t know what in the name of scholarship and the Spirit of Enquiry you are doing, but it isn’t enough.’

He glowered at his small, cowed audience of Findsman Millard, Findsman Flear and Nela, his apprentice and daughter. The two Findsmen toyed nervously with the braids of their scarlet beards and nodded their agreement: Nela’s father was fond of humiliating them. Nela wiped sweat from her face with dirty hands and slapped at one of the oversized stinging insects that droned near her ear. By all the scholars and trollops of Scraal, this was a blighted place. The pervasive smell of decay, sweet as a festival pudding and rank as the Scraal City midden, made her feel nauseous. It was hard to concentrate and she

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found herself idly watching the camp bondsman as he manoeuvred round their fire, his economical movements barely straining his ridiculous slave-tether as he prepared food for their meal. She did not know why her father had insisted on the tether, attached by an oiled ring to the oiled rope of the perimeter cordon at one end and to the bondsman's belt at the other: no one used such things in the city any more and it hardly seemed necessary where there was nowhere to go but the wilderness, and nothing of any value to steal. Nela sensed her father's icy gaze upon her and quickly averted her eyes from the bondsman. Even away from Scraal it was not seemly to acknowledge the existence of a servant.

Her father was still ranting. 'We have to find some kind of proof soon or all our reputations will lie in tatters! We are running out of time, money and patience.'

He had a point. The Worshipful Company of Historical Archivists of Scraal had been reluctant to support this expedition, which was a pet project of her father's. Their small team had been camped by the stagnant Mordant Lake for ten days already, seeking evidence for her father's theory that this was the cradle of their people, in the stinking mud and sterile soil of the decaying forest, but they had unearthed nothing more than a few ancient shards of early dye-pots and a leather-wrapped black stone. The Chief Findsman held that stone in the palm of his hand now.

'Nela!'

She tried to look intelligent and stood a little

straighter, though she felt as if she were a child's wax doll melting and slipping away from herself in the humid heat.

'There is an ancient song, is there not, about a black stone?'

'In the ancient song cycle of exile there is a fragment of a song called "Black Stone of the Unmaking", Father,' Nela said, and clearing her throat she sang:

*Weep if you will for the life that is gone,
For hunt, for caves and evening song,
Weep if you will for the life that is gone
For loss and lies and hope undone
She's grieving still and it's scarce begun
And the stain of their blood
Has seeped through her bone
Has defiled now dark lands
Unmade by Black Stone*

She paused and Findsman Flear smiled at her. She had a sweet, musical voice at odds with her appearance and it always surprised people the first time they heard it.

'And . . . ?' said her father.

'I doubt that stone has anything to do with the song.'

She spoke dismissively and wished she hadn't the moment the words escaped her suddenly constricting throat. She should remember that she was not at home, that no one here cared for her opinion.

'Ah, and I had forgotten that you were such an expert Findsman,' her father said in his precise,

barbed voice. 'I should perhaps leave this Seeking to you! No, go on, please, I must insist. We await your judgement. Take the stone and tell us your opinion – we are all waiting.'

The other men, Millard and Flear, smiled uncomfortably. She knew it was worry that made her father cruel. His reputation hung in the balance, but she could still have wished him kinder.

She was not as reluctant as she pretended to take the stone he offered her, nor was she sorry to hold it in her own hand. She could not see how an old song about a faerie woman called 'Black Stone' could have any connection with a real black stone: her father was clutching at straws. When she touched it, though, she understood. It was the size of her palm – smooth and black, shiny as though wet, polished by much handling. She had expected it to be cool, and its living warmth shocked her. She measured the weight of it gravely in her hand, as she had seen her father do. If his expression softened as he watched her, she did not know it. She was totally immersed in her investigation. She touched the stone delicately with the tip of her forefinger; it seemed to pulse under her finger like the fragile heartbeat of a small animal. She stroked it as one might a midget kitten and felt it vibrate like a blown bone-comb in paper. She heard a sound within her head, buzzing in the browbone of her skull. It was a long note, like the resounding echo of the prayer bell pealing high and clear. She blinked as her vision dimmed and thought she heard a sweet voice singing words she couldn't quite hear. Then there were no words, only the overwhelming flood of

impressions, filling her senses with the thoughts of someone else – somewhere else.

I am shaking. I know what he wants. I thought the old tales were forgotten at last, but I was wrong. For every story of the poverty and powerlessness of the Night Hunters there are ten tales of our power and evil magics. The greed was in his eyes: I saw it in his face when he caught me – greed and longing and a strange, unexpected beauty.

I know I should not have gone the way I chose. I should have trusted my own foreboding, but I was tempted by the berry-red of his cloak, and he hid his tracks well – not so stupid, this giant Bear-man, not so greedy that he forgot his wits. He has watching eyes – eyes that notice almost as much as one of us.

He has at least put me in the cool blessed dark – in the dove cote and the carrier coop at the top of the Chief's house. There are no birds here now, though they have left their smell behind and feathers enough to make a soft bed for one with the ease to sleep. He has sworn me to silence and I gave him my promise for the sake of those eyes, not for the greed but for the beauty and the longing and the noticing – almost like one of us. I gave him my promise, but I cannot stop the shaking and the fear that sours in my empty stomach as the timber walls close in. Oh, Lady, Womanface-hidden-from-view! It is hard to be silent.

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Beneath me I can hear the movement of the wives and the youngest ones. I dare not cry out nor murmur in fear, for my captor is one thing, but the others might be worse. I dare not try to escape for fear of them. The smell of roast chicken is driving me mad and my stomach is hollow as an empty cooking pot. Hunger overrides even my fear. I have had only a small handful of the end of season breadberries all day – and the stale heel of wanderer's loaf I had in my gather bag. I lost my gather bag, left it behind in my panicked flight, but it was empty anyway and, as one blessing among so many curses, my name stone, blessed by the gift of the Wandering Man, was in my waist band with my small knife, and that I have still.

I am a fool and a hungry fool, and there is nothing for it but to wait until he comes and I suppose that will not be until tonight. I can smell the morning seeping through the holes in the thatch along with the first sharp shards of sunlight. I will have to sleep and if a natural sleep will not come (and it will not with my heart beating like a calling drum) I will wait until there is enough noise down below to mask the sleep-song-for-the-too-cold-night. I will be safer if I can sleep, still as a hibernating bear, and don't fidget for the lack of space to stretch. I have heard it said that the Bear-men have poor hearing, but the one who caught me had sharp enough ears and more patience than he is supposed to have – so that story is the wild

boar's ordure I always suspected it was.

One of the babies wakes, below me. I hear someone pad on heavy feet to lift it from its hammock. She murmurs softly and the wailing stops. I think I have missed my chance, and then she sings a lullaby of her own. It is a simple tune, but it is not badly sung. The woman has a strong voice, low and breathy, which suits the melody – I do not hear the words, though there seem to be a great many. So those that say the Bear-men are song-deaf too are wrong. There is little art to the song, but still it unknots some of the tension in my neck and eases my fear just a little, so it is not without efficacy. I ready myself for my own lullaby. I will sleep until dusk and hope he feeds me then.

'Nela! Nela!'

Cold water on her face and her father's insistent voice drew her back from the darkness, from the cloying stench of the coop, the smell of roasting chicken, the feel of feathers and the cool air, damp under the thatch.

'Are you all right?' The Chief Findsman's bright eyes that were bluer than his beard looked stricken. 'Nel, what happened?' He never used the affectionate diminutive of Nela's name in front of outsiders: she must have frightened him a great deal.

He helped her to sit up and Findsman Flear offered her water to drink. She was quite wet with the water that had been thrown over her and she started to shiver.

'Maybe she could use something stronger.' Findsman

Millard reached under his coat and produced a polished tortoiseshell hip flask, decorated with silver filigree, which he offered her. The dark wine it contained was strong and fine and Nela remembered that Millard was of good family and probably wealthier than her father. She smiled her thanks.

'What language were you speaking?' Flear asked, with a kind of awed reverence. He was trembling slightly, as though in shock, which was surely an overreaction. Nela's father glared at him.

'What did you experience when you touched the stone?' the Chief Findsman demanded.

'I don't know . . . it was as if I were somewhere else, suddenly. It's difficult to explain . . .' Nela did not know how to begin.

'What? Like a dream?' Her father's voice was professional now, without sympathy, as if he had never been afraid for her, as if she was just another subject for the Findsman's seeking and systematic questioning. She tried to round up her thoughts.

'No. It was real – like I was someone else.'

'Who?'

'I don't know. A girl I think, young – maybe my age, maybe older. And she was frightened – she was hiding somewhere – at the top of some circular building.'

'A Tier House? Like the ancients built?'

'Maybe. I don't know.'

Her father sketched a three-tiered circular building. Each tier had a steeply pitched thatched roof and each diminished in size so that the top floor was small – small enough and high enough to house carrier birds.

'Nela, this was the traditional layout of the family Tier House of a Chief of a Dependency in the earliest settlement times.' He spoke as if he thought her ignorant and she felt herself flush with humiliation. She knew all about that! She was an apprentice Findsman – by the Lord of the Earth! But the Chief Findsman carried on in his lecturing tone, oblivious to her discomfort, 'Some Findsmen think that this top part was for the message birds of the Chief – could you have been here?'

'Maybe – yes. Probably – it could well have been.' She tried not to sound sullen and uncooperative – it would do her no good. Then her eye was caught by the notes above the sketch, written in her father's neat notecode.

'What's this?'

'This is a sound-by-sound representation of what you said.' He spoke as if it were obvious and she were foolish not to recognise them. 'I am surprised that you used the most ancient language traditionally associated with the nomadic hunter-gatherers, but I have long suspected that the settled people spoke the same tongue.'

'You took notes?'

'Of course. Have you no idea how significant it is to find evidence of ancient power so many scholars have dismissed as old stories? It is the strongest evidence we could find that this place really is the cradle of our most ancient civilisation. We *must* know what you said. It seems you spoke in some dialect of that old tongue – I recognised many of the words, though I'm not familiar with the precise idiom so we must set to work

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on our return to the city to unscramble the whole.'

'The stone spoke to *me*,' Nela said with emphasis, suddenly stubborn and cold. Her father took notes while she was in the grip of who knew what. He took notes!

'Did I have a fit?'

Her father looked uncomfortable. 'Yes.' He looked slightly embarrassed. 'But I was sure you were not in any danger. This stone and its ancient power to speak to us changes everything.'

Since her earliest childhood she had been prone to fits, periods of black unconsciousness and wild exhausting thrashing; it was why no aunts would take her in after her mother's death. It was why she was permitted to accompany her father. It was why she was allowed to be a non-woman and shave her head as a sign that she was not available for courtship. It was why she was free. Even so, she could have wished that her father took her condition more seriously and put her health and welfare before his work.

She shut her eyes to block out his face, his cold and searching eyes. He was Seeking her, searching her demeanour for clues as to the nature of her experience, trying to squeeze every last drop of information out of her, like every good Findsman did, and she hated it. She felt his smooth and heavy hand pat her gently on the exposed skin of her head, like a blessing for a child, like a request for understanding, but she did not lift her leaden lids. Her father had let her down again and she wasn't even sure if he knew it. She was exhausted, and sleep came to her at once, like a heavy blanket burying her under its rough, enveloping weight.

TWO

It was not so very unusual for the Chief of the Tier House to come downstairs: he regularly checked his stock, including his children, and often trained with the Hearth Guard, even though he was getting old. It *was* unusual, however, for the wives of the four quarters to come downstairs – they lived unseen and largely unheard in the Heart of the Home, the circular room above the Hall, and rarely left it.

The children, the youngest of the Chief's extensive Brood Trove who lived below in the Hall with the beasts and the Hearth Guard, the core of the Chief's Battle Horde, were not told of this moderately momentous event in advance. This was because, as a general rule, no one told the children much at all. Instead, they were set new tasks: all of them had to sweep and muck out the central section of the Hall with unaccustomed vigour, scrubbing it with 'old men's tears', a cleansing mixture of the Teller Priest's devising. Drannott of the third quarter had been sent

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to collect the sweet grass to burn in the pot stove to mask the pungency of the animal smells that filled the Hall. This was enough for Mirit of the first quarter to remark to Jerat of the second that something was going on.

'The wives'll be down, sure as Keran farts. They can't bear the stench of horse shit. We're getting a new sibling. They always make us do this stuff for an Acceptance Day.'

Jerat's memory of previous Acceptance Days was hazy, though he remembered a feast and he remembered fearsome women in masks. He never noticed the beasts' strong smell as anything unpleasant – but perhaps the wives would. What did he know of wives? Anyway, the Teller Priest claimed that bad smells might carry contagion and being a wife was dangerous enough anyway without the risk of that.

It took most of the day to clean the Hall. The Hearth Guard insisted that all the children wash – even the parts that didn't show – and, in an unusual act of considerate care, heated the water first, putting it in the feast day cauldron that took two men to lift. Guardsman Lema cut Jerat's hair so that it formed an even curtain at a level with his chin and combed it ruthlessly to remove all the lice until his head stung and ached from her efforts. She rinsed his hair with nettle water to keep it clean. She was not gentle, but Jerat thought perhaps she had forgotten what it felt like, as her own head was shaved right down to the skin, to show she was a man-woman. Drannott said that meant she was barren, but if it were true, and

Jerat wasn't sure Drannott knew as much as he pretended, she didn't seem to care.

The Chief had provided all of the Brood Trove with new cloaks that the wives had woven. Jerat's was berry-red and green like the spring grass, the colours of the second quarter in the glorious, victorious Dependency of Lakeside. The cloak smelled of the imported cedar chest in which it had been stored. He loved the smell and the touch and the colour of it.

When all the Chief's Brood were dressed and cleaner than Jerat could ever remember them being, when tapestries had been laid on the clean dirt-floor, when the food cooked above and transported below had been laid out in lavish display, when the Teller Priest had arrived with his wild hair all neatly braided, then, finally, the Guardsmen manning the pulley lowered the wives down to the Hall in the large half-barrel that was kept for the purpose. The roof ladder that was normally used for conveying small items between the floors was altogether unsuitable for the wives, who needed to be treated with respect and honour, cosseted in the warmth and comfort of the Heart of the Home. The no-men, the gelded captives of bloody, now-forgotten wars, brought cushions and furs and heaped them on the ground and then the wives walked in stately procession into the Hall. Of course you couldn't see their faces, though Jerat peered. Each was cloaked in fur-lined finery and masked according to custom. He wondered what the wife of the second quarter looked like, behind her wooden mask of red and green, painted in a serene and unconvincing parody of a woman's face.