

The Last Throne

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~A Tale by Dan Marchildon~



It is said that the first Dwarfmen awoke from an eternal slumber, encased and trapped within the Earth. Through sheer willpower, countless souls carved themselves out of the stone and were birthed into the darkness and shadow beneath the Mountains—this origination is a lie. While the reality of the Dwarfmen's birth and existence eludes them, their nature of determination and self-worth cannot be denied as myth. The Dwarfmen carve and adorn the great foundational pillars of the World in their image. Grand statues and mammoth bulkheads of resolute faces tower over their civilization and gaze, unmoving, into the abyss of the Earth. Dwarfmen take a sacred pride in the shaping of rock, and there were none as spiritually attuned and pious in the ways of stone as Arn the Carver.

Arn, like most Stonemen, lived away from the major hubs of the Underhalls—isolation guaranteed pure, untouched stone not tainted by the hands of any other carver. This isolation was most necessary in times of focused carving. It was obvious Arn was a master Stoneman and carver, his

house, upon first inspection, was hewn out of the rock face in the appearance of the gaping maw of a Dragon. The stone fangs of the Dragon acted as pillars supporting an open doorway and openings in the carved scales along the neck served as windows, which emitted a warm glow of light—creating the illusion of the beginnings of a breath of fire. Inside, Arn’s house was a work of art carved in stone.

Supporting rock beams that traveled up towards the ceiling were adorned with ancient faces, runes, and symbols. A Dragon’s tail spiraled around the base of a column and flared out into stone wings which acted as supporting archways into various rooms. Sitting at his work station, face covered in a dark earth soot and the tips of his matted hair clumped with dust, Arn was creating new life. His massive fingers mimicked blunt hammers, forcefully jabbing at a geode of stone, manipulating the shape as if it were a piece of wet clay. A

bulbous nose,

squinting eyes, and

a furrowed brow

took form, an

expression that

imitated the look

on Arn’s own face.



A self-portrait of stone appeared out of the geode as if by magic.

Arn clapped and rubbed his hands together, a burst of rocky dust plumed into his face and was subsequently blown away by a sneeze. The boom and noise of the sneeze masked a yell that came from outside. Arn took the new stone face in his hands and rolled it around, inspecting what little imperfections there were on the surface—he stared into the face as if he would a mirror.

“*Stoneman!*” The voice yelled out again, this time with no obstruction. The sound of hurried

footsteps echoed from outside. Arn quickly placed the stone face on the wall and trained his eyes towards the door. Visitors were rare and usually a herald of woe. A rotund Dwarfman rushed through the doorway, reaching back to grasp the pillars with his stubby arms to stop himself from toppling over. A great sigh bellowed forth from the Royal Courier, who was made evident by the rune insignia on his clothing.

“Grave news from the Heart, Stoneman.” The Royal Courier folded his arms across the wide berth of his chest. Arn had not heard from the Heart of the World, the Dwarfman seat of power, in sometime.

“What news?” Arn looked him up and down, taking measure.

“The King, First of the Earth, has fallen to the Dragon Plague. He will not recover.”

A spark of excitement, mixed with grief, went off in Arn’s mind. The death of the King only meant one thing, the carving of the death throne, a Stoneman’s most sacred work ever to be completed in a carver’s life. The reemergence of the Plague, however, was a terrifying prospect.

“The death throne must be commissioned and carved within three days, as per the accord with the Stone Carver Guild,” said the Royal Courier. “You were highly recommended by the Guild Council.”

“It would be my highest honor, Courier. No King can be put to rest without a throne.” Arn took his face in his hands and callously rubbed the soot away, along with any sign of emotion.

“The King’s slab will arrive shortly; the caravan is just behind me. I will return with an escort for the finished throne on the third day,” said the Royal Courier. “These are treacherous times for our kin,” the Courier paused for a moment to look over his shoulder, “be wary Stoneman—there is talk of foul shadows in the depths. The death of a King beckons to the darkness.”

Arn solemnly nodded in agreement. The Royal Courier attempted a squatting bow, with humbled intentions, but wheezed in the process and quickly went upright. With a grimaced smile and a pat on the door pillar, the Royal Courier turned and started the slow trudge back to civilization. Arn

found himself, eyes downcast, staring at the stone floor—his mind blank, carefully tracing the cracks in the rock in a trance-like state. He had never carved a death throne before. It was said to be the penultimate achievement a Stoneman could hope to attain. Their entire life's work summed up in a titanic throne that would stand the test of time and be laid to rest in the grandeur of the Tomb of Kings. Arn looked up and scanned the room, as if to try and find an answer or inspiration in his work. He met the gaze of his newly created stone face. But something was different. The stone face's mouth, instead of the wide and straight form of the mouth which he carved, was downturned into a grimacing frown. Arn's attention on this newfound detail only lasted for a moment—the King's slab arrived at his doorstep, and the work of his life had commenced. There was no time to waste.

King's slabs were solid and thick sheets of the purist quality of stone that were gifted to newly reigning Kings. Over time, through conquest and deeds, the King's scribe would make note of these achievements that would be carved and formed into the slab to create the King's death throne—where the King would sit and be infused to upon death. The Scribe's note was tacked onto the King's slab, which was now residing in Arn's workshop. Arn ripped the note from the slab and read aloud:

“These hereby are the momentous deeds and right doings of the First of the Earth, King of the Heart and Lord of Dwarfmen. . .”

The note was a mythos surrounding the King rather than an infallible account. Many of the King's accomplishments as stated on the Scribe's note were true, but overly exaggerated as to be perceived as miraculous in nature. Even the most incompetent and miserable of Kings, those who had no worthy deeds worth carving, were given the privilege of a death throne. Arn already knew of the deeds in which he would be carving—King Yagmir the Forebearer was the most famous of all past Dwarfmen Kings. Stonemen were known for their isolation, but even Arn had heard the tales of Yagmir surviving the Drake's Wyrmfire that engulfed his hunting parties quest for ancient reliquaries deep down at the ends of the Earth. Or how Yagmir took the pilgrimage to Giant's Peak and met with the Last Lord

of Giants himself, ancestor to all. Yagmir was deemed the protector and savior of Dwarfman heritage, earning him the title of Forebearer. It was a holy and sacred matter, that of carving the throne of Yagmir. Arn did not take such a task lightly—but proceeded with the utmost respect and reverence.

Arn set to task quickly, mapping out which story would be told on the slab and where to carve them. Stonemen were renowned for their hammer and chisel-like hands and how they could mold the stone to their will with no other crafted tools. A death throne, however, was an entirely different sculpt that demanded the most precise and accurate tools possible. Arn first grasped the slab with his hands, manipulating portions of the surface stone in his grip and smoothing it out in circular motions. Much like a painter, the canvass of stone had to be prepared and set. He started kneading into the stone, creating wave-like structures that resembled the wavering of flames—these would serve as the arm rests. At the top of the arm slabs would lay the skull and spinal columns of dual Dragons on either side. Arn used a



thunderous chopping motion to lay into the stone, separating out the vertebrae. Arn was so focused on the flow of his work, he did not notice, at first, the intense heat that began emitting from the stone flames he had just carved. Sweat mixed with flint specks and soot began to melt away from Arn's face in a coagulated consistency. Arn moved a hand to support his balance on the stone flame but lurched back in intense pain. He let out a confused yelp and darted his eyes towards his hand. A white-hot, searing mark had burned its way into his palm, which resembled thick leather hide. Waves of searing flesh rippled and tore apart, releasing a flow of blood as pitch black as the darkest coal. Bewildered at the black blood travelling down his arm, Arn

spun around his workshop in shock, frantically searching for anything to cover his hand with—and that is when he saw it again. With his arm outstretched and black hand twisted like a claw, Arn stared at his stone mask on the wall. The frown had opened into a gaping scream. Black blood poured out of the mouth and the eyes were a burning red. The mask's face began to move and contort as if in agony—Arn and the stone mask both let out a shrieking scream that shook the walls and darkness shortly followed, enveloping Arn's sight.

Arn woke up a day later, having been laid out on his stone floor in a comatose state. His body was covered in a thin film of black dust. Arn propped up, still seated and shaking while his eyes darted around the room. He raised his hand up to his face. There was nothing there. No searing or torn flesh, no blackness, no blood stains. Arn snapped his head over to where his stone mask hung on the wall—the mask was completely normal, as it was originally carved. He stumbled up to his feet and hurried over to the wall and took the mask into his hands.

Was it only a dream?

Is it the Madness?

Arn dropped the mask on the floor and moved over to the death throne. He pressed his hands against the fiery stone pillars. They were cold to the touch. A sense of confusion, yet relief, washed over Arn as he sunk down to the ground, leaning against the incomplete throne.

"Hello there."

In disbelief, Arn slowly brought his upturned head back down to eye level. He carefully scanned the room, quizzically looking at all his carved creations.

Where did that voice come from?

Arn started to feel the hair on the back of his neck raise and harden like stone nails. His eyes quickened their search and looked upon the main pillar support, his most carved piece of structure. Arn

leered up and down the pillar until he suddenly stopped his gaze on a carved face of King Yagmir—wide open eyes were staring directly back at him. The mouth began to form the words again:

“Hello there.”

“This cannot be happening,” said Arn. His once sooty black face now paled and lost all color.

“Oh, but it is. My name is Yagmir. What is your name?”

Arn managed a baffled whisper,

“*Arn.*”

“It is my great honor to meet you, Stoneman.”

Even in his bewildered state, the irony was not lost on Arn—that a carved stone face of King Yagmir called him a Stoneman. Arn got up to his feet and shuffled slightly towards the talking face.

“I see you are carving my death throne. I guess that means I am dead.” The stone face of Yagmir twisted into a grin and he let out a dusty bellow. “But why am I in a Stoneman’s workshop and trapped inside this pillar?”

Arn was just as confused as the stone King Yagmir, and slowly sounded out the words:

“*I don’t know.*”

“*Ah!* Now I remember,” King Yagmir twisted his stone face again and turned it upside down. “I am here to tell you an important message, would you like to hear it, Stoneman?”

Arn’s head was swimming and he was almost blinded by the smell of noxious fumes. He could barely manage a nod of his head.

“*Good!* Let me tell you then.” King Yagmir turned his stone face right side up. “But first, let me ask you a question, Stoneman. When you were a child, did you ever press your ear against the ground?”

“*What?*” Arn’s head was splitting in pain and a sheet of white covered his vision.

“When you were alone in the dead of night, did you ever listen to the depths?”

Arn was taught and told, like every Dwarfman child, the stories about hearing the heartbeat of

the Earth, that the World was alive.

“Yes, we all did.”

“And what did you hear, Stoneman?” King Yagmir’s squinted stone eyes turned into slits.

Arn could remember hearing and feeling a soft throbbing, a quickening pace and tremble.

“I know what it is you heard.”

The white sheet covering Arn’s vision dissipated and was replaced with an encroaching darkness, the lantern lights that filled the room began to flicker, as if to flee from the approaching shadows.

“What did I hear?” Words became increasingly hard to speak, Arn’s voice was retreating down to the safety and warmth of his chest. The room got darker still.

“Our doom.”

King Yagmir’s stone lips broke apart and chipped as a tongue reached out to lick and savor the words. The stone slits gleamed with light and his nostrils flared.

“It is named the *Call of the Dreadfather*. The dead, still beating hearts of rotting flesh play like drums in the darkness. *I forgot about my message for you, Stoneman.*”

The carved Dragon’s tail that coiled around the stone pillar began to shake and slither up towards the ceiling. The stone wings that served as archways quivered as dust fell from them like ash. Arn, at this point, was almost completely unresponsive—trapped and paralyzed in place as his once stone carving came even more to life. King Yagmir’s stone face elongated and started protruding out of the pillar.

“Everyone is dead, Stoneman.”

“The Heart is dead.”

“The King is dead.”

“Your world is dead.”

“You are dead!”

What was once the stone face of King Yagmir shattered, revealing the rotting face of a Dragon—it’s flesh dripping off the bone and scorching the ground. The encroaching darkness briefly vanished in a white-hot flash of light as a stream of fire erupted out of the Dragon’s maw, splashing in a wave over Arn’s face. His flesh instantly melted as he threw his hands up in defense of the flames. A scream, as if conjured by an inhuman creature, wailed from Arn’s mouth as his hands fused with his face. The fire stopped as suddenly as it started. The darkness waned and the lantern lights flickered back to life. All of the stone carvings remained intact and untouched, save for one. Arn’s stone mask hung on the wall, it’s once hardened facial features were now gouged and smoothed over, as if it were melted by flame. And there at the center of the room laid Arn, a huddled mass of petrified rock and stone—a Stoneman.

On the third day, the Royal Courier arrived at Arn’s workshop to procure the King’s death throne, as was promised and commissioned. The Courier, as quickstepped and out of breath as usual, hurried through the doorway yelling for the Stoneman.

“Stoneman! I’m here for the Thr—”

What he found was an unfinished throne and a dead Stoneman.

As the shrieks of the Royal Courier echoed from Arn’s workshop, something listened to the call and lurked in the darkness, waiting.