

## Man of Stone

I was a great man. Then I was dead. Now, I am stone. The city I founded passed the crown on to another as soon as they put me in the soil. Time does not stop, even when kings die.

It turns out, that when you do enough good things for enough people, they like to remember you. But memories fade. So, atop the city's northern hill, they raised me from stone. From this hill I stand, arms outstretched, overlooking the great city I adore.

I do nothing but stand and watch. And feel. I feel great pride as I watch our armies return from battle, victorious, and having claimed new lands. I watch them march triumphantly below, proudly displaying their banners and shields. I hear their jubilant shouts and the roar of an entire city of clapping hands. All night, my people revel in their victory with great parties and feasts. Their happiness justifies the smile set in stone.

Sometimes I do not feel pride. I stand watch as my children turn against each other over petty pigmentation or position. I cannot turn away as brothers' swords break brothers' flesh. I am forced to look on, and must feel pain though I cannot weep. The city, now divided, falls. The people of a long-since conquered land arrive to exact revenge on my weakened city. Once again, I witness great revelry as the invaders rape my daughters and slaughter my sons.

Time heals all wounds. My people's blood fertilized the ground, allowing my beloved city to sprout from the ruins. My people, having learned from their mistakes, tolerate others' slights for the greater good of the city. Pride once more fills my stone chest as I watch the city grow. Buildings are taller now, and more blur the line between art and masonry. Farmers use new tools to master the land, and less paupers go hungry. When the current king dies, they bury the crown with him. It is no longer needed. Now, every voice carries weight when votes are cast.

I get more visitors now. They gather before me in huge masses, pointing their black boxes with blinding lights. I do not mind though, it makes me happy to be remembered.

When these groups gather at my feet, sometimes I hear their whispers. Whispers of an assassinated dignitary, of an offense that must be punished. In no time at all, whispers become shouts. A rally forms at my feet. One man stands above the rest, shouting of injustice. Shouting of pride, and revenge. He points at me, claiming I exemplify these things. I wonder if these people remember anything more than my name, or if they've warped my legacy too many times to recall the truth.

Men ride out of the city on dull metal war machines. Crowds cheer as they mount armored horses with treaded and fly away in their iron birds. For a while, the war brings them together. With my sons gone, my daughters work harder to provide for their children. Only good news comes in from the battlefronts, and there's no room in this society for dissent among my people. All seems well, until the war thrusts itself through our front gates.

From atop my hill, I witness the true horrors of war as they unfold within my city's walls. People can kill so easily now. They point loud sticks at one another, and fall over dead. War hounds carry warriors over the battlefield, trampling foes and sometimes friends. Armoured horses plow through buildings, and deliver death through a thick tube on their head. Iron birds drop exploding rocks on our roofs, breaking buildings and bodies indiscriminately. Despite the chaos, I seem to be the only one untouched. Apparently, my reputation has spread to lands far and wide. The same men who savagely executed my people draw near my feet, looking up at me with their black, flashing boxes. They smile and laugh. I feel anger well within me as I wish to crush them beneath a stone foot.

My people must have sensed my will, as the city surges forward in a great revolt. They drive the enemy from our borders, pushing them so far even I cannot see them from atop the great hill. At last, the glory of the city has been restored, and my children rejoice for a time. Buildings laid in ruin, but they can be rebuilt. Men and women have died, but we have plenty more to repopulate.

Yet, the illusion of security remains cracked beyond repair. No longer can the masses be pacified with propaganda. Spirits drop, and tempers rise as the reality of the war sets in. People are angry, and looking for a scapegoat.

They single out any and all who deviate from the main religion. They break the windows of these deviant worshippers' houses and expel their children from school. They mark businesses with paint, disallowing the deviant worshippers to provide for themselves. My stone heart drops as I witness acts of violence, public executions, and kidnappings. This is no longer the city I loved. My arms, though already outstretched, reach toward God, pleading for an end.

God listens well. The day after all deviant worshippers had been exiled, a particularly large pack of war eagles flies directly towards the condemned city. They swoop in, and drop a single stone. This stone bursts into glorious light, outshining even the sun. Powerful winds and a deafening blast radiate throughout the city, leveling buildings and vaporizing flesh. When the dust settles, only I remain, standing atop a hill of rubble.

For what could be centuries, I stand alone. I overlook brown, black and grey nothingness. Despite the static scenery, my emotions swirl and transform. I feel sadness that the city I loved no longer exists. I feel anger at my children for perverting it beyond recognition. Mostly, I feel alone. Eventually, my consciousness exits the material world and enters a deep slumber.

While asleep, I dream. The great deeds and great horrors of my city replay for what feels like millennia, until a sweet sound breaks the cycle. This sound is both new and ancient. Structured, yet natural. Melancholy, yet hopeful. I have heard this sound before, but a long time ago, in a time I can no longer remember.

My consciousness returns to the mortal realm, and I awaken to find my bleak brown nothing has become a lush green something. Grass has taken root where the streets once ran; thick tree trunks have replaced crumbled marble pillars. Instead of invaders' ropes and hooks, green vines creep over the few remnants of city walls. On my hand, a tiny blue bird perches, and emits the beautiful noise that dragged me from sleep.

I stand, listening to the bird release its sweet song. With each note, unconditional happiness sets. This verdant forest makes me feel as though I am not stone; this bird's song makes me feel light enough to float away. This place is pure bliss itself.

A soul finds peace.

A statue crumbles.

A bird finishes its song, and flies away