

# The Stone

by Mikko Tirkkonen

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“**W**hat have you got there?” Sam looked up from his find to see George emerge from the cardboard hut. For a homeless man it was almost luxurious. It even had a plastic tarp tightly wrapped around its base to keep the water that made it under the bridge away from it.

“Beats me,” said Sam and scratched his wild beard. He sucked in air through the hole his two missing front teeth made. He had lost them keeping unwanted people away from the underside of the bridge.

It was a nice bridge with little traffic and a concrete bank that kept the river from overflowing and gave a solid and level place to set up your cardboard home. It was Sam's territory and George was the only one he had allowed to move in.

George was a good man. Always ready to share a bit of the booze he got while many others guarded theirs jealously. He gave space when wanted and didn't steal your stuff.

Sam turned his attention back to what he had found. It was white and looked to be made of stone. It had a sphere shaped base from which an rounded, triangle shaped handle rose up. It reminded him of the sort of hand weights he'd seen in some of the local gyms, though he couldn't be certain since most of his attention had been geared towards the women on the treadmills.

It usually didn't take long for the gym owners to appear and drive him off from the window.

What such an object would be doing under the bridge and how it had gotten there was a mystery to him.

“Looks heavy,” said George as he got next to Sam. His long jacket was tattered, but still offered warmth during the winter months. George wore it even during summer out of fear of someone stealing it.

Sam reached out and gripped the triangle shaped handle. He felt the static electricity crackle against his fingers as he got close and wrapped his fingers around it. He lifted the stone and found it surprisingly light.

“Well?” asked George.

“It's not as heavy as it looks,” said Sam and lifted it a bit.

“Let me try it,” said George and extended his hand.

*Feed me.*

Before he knew it Sam had swung the stone, hitting George squarely in the head, making him sprawl on to the ground. To his horror he found his hand raising for another hit and then a third and a fourth. Finally he was able to loosen his grip of the stone and scramble away from the bloodied mess his friend had become.

His breath was wheezing and his hands shook. *What the hell? Why did I do that?*

He noticed the blood on his hands. With morbid curiosity he watched as the stains slowly gathered into droplets and fell to the ground and slithered towards George's body.

*Impossible.*

He turned to look at the body to find the white stone emitting a low hum as the blood flowed to it. Slowly, the white of the stone began to darken, reaching a red that was borderline black. Then he heard a bone snap and saw George's body shudder and move.

It was being pulled into the stone.

*Holy grandma of sheep.*

More bones snapped, followed by squishing sounds that made Sam feel queasy, but he could not drag his eyes away from what he was witnessing. Minutes went by and the body of George slowly disappeared inside the stone that was no larger than a small watermelon. Nothing remained to indicate someone had just been killed; no blood, no stains in Sam's clothes, no pieces of skin or bone. Nothing.

*What the hell is going on? What just happened? Why did I swing that thing? Fuck.*

Hesitantly, Sam took a step towards the still humming stone. As nothing happened he got even closer, close enough to touch it once more.

*Am I crazy? Why do I want to touch that thing again? Get away!*

But the urge was too much. With a shaky hand he put his hand on the triangle grip once more. There was an almost burning sensation that shot up through the palm of his hand, up his arm and into his entire body.

He let out a surprised yelp and released his grip of the thing. There were spots of pain all around his body.

*So this is it? George, if it's any consolation, I did not out live you by much.*

Most notably he felt a dull throbbing inside his mouth and as he tried around with his tongue he could feel the budding sprouts of new teeth where he had lost the old ones. After a minute the pain began to fade away and he had two new teeth in his mouth.

*How the hell did that happen?*

As he examined his hands he could see many of the wrinkles of time had disappeared and the youthful bounce and tightness had returned.

*Holy shit. I feel like I'm twenty again.*

He felt lighter and the grogginess that years of poor dieting and boozing had brought on had disappeared.

*This is amazing.*

He found himself having memories that had not been there before. As they flashed by him he soon realized they were George's memories. The touch of his ex-wife, the laughter of his children, the finer points of mechanics that he had studied at MIT. All there for Sam to call upon.

He let out a surprised laugh.

He was still wondering what the hell was going on when he heard a polite cough from behind himself.

He quickly spun around to see a man dressed in a black suit and long coat of similar colour and quality. His grey moustache and black bowler hat gave him the look of a butler one might expect to find working for the wealthiest of the wealthy.

"I am glad to see it found a new master," the man said in a polite voice.

"Who are you?" demanded Sam. Had he witnessed what had just taken place? Would he give him up to the police?

The man tilted his head slightly. "Richard." He took a moment to taste the name as it rolled out from his lips. He nodded. "Yes. Richard will do. Rich and hard." He chuckled.

*Odd geezer.*

“What do you mean 'it has found a new master'?” demanded Sam. He was not amused.

Richard pointed at the almost black stone as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “The Stone.”

The confused look on Sam's face was enough to make the man sigh.

“We call them Stones,” he began to explain in a tone most suited to talking to a five year old. “They take some and give some. You've just provided yours with its first meal and it has given you new teeth, all the knowledge of your past friend George, and shaved off years from your life.”

*Yeah, and I've been to the Moon and back.*

The initial scepticism soon gave way as he realized everything the man said was true. He had gained all those things.

“But I didn't mean to,” protested Sam as the realization sunk in.

Richard shook his head. “But you did and the Stone is now yours for all the good and bad of it.”

“What bad?”

*Killing your friends. Feeding on them. What the hell more do you need for bad?*

“Like us the Stone needs sustenance. Humans, to be precise.”

Sam swallowed hard. “I can't..”

“Why not?” interjected Richard. “You've already killed one. What's another one? Or a dozen? Think of what you can do with the knowledge of a dozen people if you choose your targets wisely!”

Sam just shook his head.

*Crazy bastard. Who'd want to kill people even if it gave you all that?*

“That's too bad,” said Richard as he stroked his moustache. “The Stone will eat one way or another. Whether it is someone you feed it or whether the Stone feeds on you is up to you.”

Sam grew pale at hearing the words. “What do you mean? That thing will eat me like it did George?” There was a hint of hysteria in his voice as he wildly pointed at the Stone.

*I'm fucked.*

Richard shrugged his shoulders. "It has to eat." There was no sympathy in his voice, just the coldness and hardness of the facts.

"I didn't even intend to do any of this!" shouted Sam.

*Screw this. He's just some crazy weirdo telling me his delusions.*

Richard did not seem to care and dusted off something from his shoulder. As Sam continued to shout and ramble and try to somehow twist his way to freedom from the madness he found himself in he remained calm and composed. He even yawned.

Finally, as Sam began to run out of steam and his voice started to crack from all the shouting, Richard gave the poor homeless man a stare that shut him right up.

*He's going to kill me. I'll die. Run! Run!*

Sam's feet refused to move.

"You are not alone," said Richard in a calm, cold voice. "There are others with stones just like yours. They're roaming the world, killing people for their knowledge and other benefits."

A wicked grin appeared on the man's face.

"If you feel so strongly about it you could hunt only those. They are killers after all. You would be doing the world a favour."

Sam still seemed in panic and not anywhere near ready to accept anything he was being told.

"Just think what you will gain from someone who has taken twenty lives. The knowledge of twenty-one people," added Richard in a tempting voice. "Of course, they'll come looking for you as well for the very same reasons," he added quickly in a nonchalant manner.

*Listen to the man! He's telling you how to survive!*

"How long do I have?" asked Sam in a resigned voice. He saw no way out of the situation, at least no easy way.

"A couple of days," replied Richard and bent down to examine the Stone. He whispered something to it that Sam could not hear. The humming stopped and the Stone rose from the ground and floated over to Sam. It seemed to liquefy and without warning launched forward under Sam's sleeves and wrapped itself

around his left arm like a snake. He quickly pulled back the sleeve. It had become stone like again and resembled some sort of jewellery. It felt cool against his skin and weighed very little. It went all the way up his arm from his wrist and stopped just before his armpit. As he moved his arm it gave way to his movements.

“What did you do?” demanded Sam.

Richard smiled. “I merely made a suggestion. Its previous form was too..what's the right word? Distinctive.” Again he tasted the word as if it were a twenty-year old single malt. “Yes. Distinctive.”

*Get it off! Get it off you bastard!*

Sam did not like having the thing attached to his arm. “Will it listen to me?”

“Eventually,” replied Richard and stared at him with an intensity that could have dug a tunnel in solid stone. “But didn't you say you wanted nothing to do with it?”

Sam spread his hands, frustrated. “What choice do I have?”

“Kill or die,” replied Richard and began to walk away. “We'll talk more if you choose to live.”

Sam tried to run after the man to stop him, but he turned to walk on up the stairs that led to the street. He only lost sight of him for a moment, but as he turned the corner the stairs were empty. The man was gone.

*What the hell do I do?*

He spent the next few hours going over what had happened. He tried to get the Stone off his arm, but failed. He tried to come to a decision.

It was a hard decision to make, but after a day of thinking Sam made it.

Two days later the Stone fed again.