

## **The Rite of the Stone**

By Nick Hayden

Cruelty had been etched upon the brothers' faces in their youth, and the passage of years had sanded it to an unconscious savagery. They shared the same heavy, bearded chin, the same thick misshapen nose, and the quick, cunning eyes that pierced as sharply as the knives in their belts. In old age they were heavy-set but still strong when they willed. Alone, each commanded his setting, whether inn common room or forest camp. Together, they stood implacable, indisputable, and indomitable. The younger was called Baron; the older, Bel. They were known everywhere as the Butcher Brothers.

They hiked the road that led over the mountains to the Plain of Blood, upon which no city or settlement had been built or would be built, until the fires of the end, for since the great kings waged war, it had been a waste on which only the Judgment stood. The snow blew strong and cold through the firs as Baron and Bel trudged with flakes in their beards, blinking against the flurries. They had come this way once, long ago, when they were still children, in the company of men like the ones they had become, for the purpose of crushing their enemies beneath the Stone.

Bel's memory of that time held his first exhilarations of terror. It had been colder then, and in his memory there was no sun, only gloom and darkness. He remembered, almost as if it were a dream, the dark mass of the temple, its hallowed emptiness, and the bulk of the Stone, the presence of which still weighed heavy in his mind. It had been an epiphany.

The wind howled down the path. It blasted them in the face, a spirit bitter and desperate clawing at them.

"We could be warming ourselves by the hearth," Baron grumbled.

"You agreed to come," said Bel.

"You left me little choice."

"I've never been able to make you act against your will."

The wind swept down again, like a hand pressing them back. It did not slow their pace.

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Bel had come to Baron's room in the night, and Baron, awakening at the opening of the door, sat up. Many times one had come to the other unexpectedly. Some plan of retribution or tale of conquest or insight into their men would strike one, and he would seek the other. They trusted no man or woman, but each trusted the other, and they had never broken that trust. That night, Bel had trembled, and Baron had noticed.

"What is wrong? Shall I send for the physician?" Baron had asked.

Bel had shaken his head, and Baron had waited.

"We are old," he had said. It had sounded trite.

"Go to bed."

"I had a vision. The Plain of Blood. We must go to the Plain of Blood."

"There is no one to accuse us," Baron had said. "No one masters us, and none has a right to charge us with any crime worthy of the Plain of Blood. Go to bed. In the morning you will see that there is no cause."

Bel had nodded, but he had not lost that strange look that made him seem older and more worn than he was. "I will go. Even without you."

"In the morning you will say differently."

"If I do not, will you also come?"

"For judgment?"

"Yes."

"Go to bed, brother."

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In their journey up the mountain, they came to a small edifice of stone. The roof was mostly gone, and wind howled through cracks in the walls, but with work, the empty fireplace blazed. They ate and sat close to the flames, close enough to singe themselves. Baron swore bitterly. "What old men!" He removed himself from the fire and its warmth and lay upon his back in a cold corner. He looked to Bel, and Bel looked to him, but the brother did not move.

"It is weakness," Bel admitted.

"It would be better to plunge the dagger in, then to continue in this way. If I ever have spittle on my beard, use your blade."

"It's easy enough," Bel said. "It's drunk the blood of hundreds. What's one more?"

"I will not be your brother then. I will be someone else, someone less. It will be just one more. I will die by my own hand or by yours. No one else will have that privilege."

"We were going to live forever," Bel said. "Forever is not as long as I thought."

The fire blazed hot, devouring the wood, and the wind blew and grew more bitter. The brothers slept.

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The pass that crossed the Bonesaw Mountains ascended by a steep, frozen path that in its last leg narrowed to a blustering, precipitous trail. Up this the brothers trudged, heads bent, cold beneath their cloaks and furs, moving steadily and inexorably up. They did not talk. They were in a black mood, and if one stumbled or made some motion or suggestion, the other cursed and raged. When in such condition, they rarely separated, but imposed themselves on the other maliciously.

It was late afternoon when they reached the summit, and an opening along the pass showed them the Plain of Blood. A pale sun cast pale light upon the wide, empty expanse. The blood of armies had poisoned the ground. The blood of criminals and scapegoats and the traitors watered it still. The brutal mass of the Judgment alone rose

above the plain, a rough-hewed block of masonry within which waited a blind sanctuary. They paused here and looked upon the Judgment.

"There it is," Baron sneered.

"Are you frightened?"

"You are the coward, committing your judgment to superstition."

"Death is coming," Bel said coldly, mockingly. "You know that as well as I. After I drive the knife in and spill your blood, after the earth drinks it up and the birds eat your eyeballs, then what?"

"Nothing." Baron seethed and trembled. "There is nothing. There is power and there is pleasure, and then nothing."

"We'll see."

They walked until evening and slept beneath a sky of stars and empty night.

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Bel had only had the dream—or the vision—once, but if he let himself dwell upon it, it returned with the same power and vividness, as if it were not a memory, but a present, living thing residing within him. And yet, despite its presence and weight, he struggled to put it into words. Speaking of it somehow drained it of its power upon him. In silence, it spoke.

The dream, or vision, went something like this. Bel *was*—in entirety, in his whole being. He felt the substance of his body, felt the fire of command from thought to limb. Beneath, around, and within his self, were acts, each solid, with a mass and a pressure and a pain. These were slayings in battle and drunken nights spent on the ashes of burning houses and the flesh of women in dim rooms and the lessons to children of sword and knife, and betrayals and tribunals and coins tossed into boxes by bowing men, and any of a hundred thousand moments. These existed as individual realities, like distinct blades of grass or tiles in a mosaic or pores on his skin. The substance of the world consisted of these.

But a heavier presence lay upon him, like his own shadow grown large and resting its bulk upon him. Or, again, there was a relentless hammering, filled with fire, and he was the metal caught between anvil and tool. Or, again, an axe splintered the wood of his self with stroke after stroke, and he felt the pressure of a blade before it cut through, like the spray of blood from a fatal wound. And he knew this: the shadow and the fire and the blade were Weakness and Time and Vengeance.

To say it out loud meant nothing. To stand, in reality and emotion, before Weakness and Time and Vengeance given apocalyptic form.... Bel found ways to distract himself before the horror overtook him.

It became the goal of his life to remove that horror.

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The Judgment was a black mass before them, and as they approached, it grew wider and taller and more imposing. It had no windows and only a single doorway, which was not on the face they approached.

"You will find no hope here," Baron said. They trudged across cracked ground as hard as steel. "There is only death."

"But it is just."

"Who's justice? Power decides. If you submit to another, he will judge you. What is the purpose?"

"I will face the Stone."

"What has happened to you, brother?"

Bel did not answer. He had tried to explain. Never before had there been prolonged disunity between the brothers. Never before had words fallen upon ears that did not, or could not, understand.

"The Stone is not a god," Baron said after some time. The words were offered as friendly dissent, but the iron of stubborn will lay beneath.

"It is the backside of a god."

"Ha! I might offer a prayer to a god who will pledge fellowship in arms, no matter how ugly his face, but only cowards show their backsides and deserve every blade that sticks there."

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Bel stood before the dark, narrow entry.

"There had best be a fire and some beer inside," Baron said.

"Why did you come, Baron?" the brother asked.

"I'd accompany you to steal Death's chamberpot if you asked."

"I know." Bel looked at his brother. He had had pleasure in his life—women and feasts and victory and vengeance, with wrath and the power to wield it. But he was not sure there was much he would call good in it. His brother, this bond they shared, it was a good thing.

"I will go in alone," Bel said.

"No, I will go. Priests are little thieves."

"Yes, they are that."

"There is hardly a man more irreligious than a priest."

"You are a priest, then?"

Baron laughed. "Perhaps I shall take up residence here and spill blood in the name of my god, and I shall be praised for my butchery."

Inside was dim and dry, a few sputtering candles lighting the cavernous entryway. They wandered into another, larger chamber. In the center of the chamber, a hole in the ceiling allowed a weak column of gray light to shine upon the Stone.

Upon its altar, the Stone waited, as tall as three men, a boulder roughly shaped like an egg, its surface pocked and cut by harsh angles. In the high-ceilinged, barren room, it drew one's eyes and held them, and like some work of art, the more one studied it, the more it seemed to contain purpose and systems; but it refuted any meaning and remained heavy and silent and primal. The temple smelt of age and dust, but the

Stone shone with perspiration. Out of one of the doors that lined the chamber came a man in a thick, hoodless garment that flowed loose below the waist and tight about the chest. His hair was close-cut, and he wore a thick beard. His eyes seemed younger than his face. "Which of you has come to sit beneath the Stone?"

"What if we both have come to sit?" Baron demanded.

"Then it would be a rare thing. Pilgrims come alone to suffer beneath the Stone. When they come together, one is convinced and the others are captors or authorities or kindred. They come to punish or to save. They do not come to suffer."

"I have come," Bel said. "This is my brother. He has come to talk me out of it."

"He has not yet?"

"No."

The priest gave a searching look over the two brothers, not hiding his intent. They met his gaze with cold eyes and stoic faces, very like one another in their regal implacability.

"My name is Onis. There is a room where you can stay until you are ready. I will explain how it is done. You have freedom to choose your own timing. Only, we will and must observe."

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The Rite of the Stone was simple. A suppliant would slide into the narrow space carved beneath the Stone, a slot not much larger than the width and breadth and height of an average human male. A hole had been carved in the roof of this slot where one might look upon the base of the Stone or put one's hand upon its surface. Then one waited until the presence and form and weight of the Stone pressed down upon body and mind and soul, and one understood justice.

The brothers understood this as much as they were able after Onis's explanation.

"Do you think it the result of some curse or enchantment?" Baron asked when Onis had left. "Surely, there must be something real to it if men continue to come."

"Then you do not think it a deception?" Bel asked.

"All spells are deceptions and all religion is deception and nearly all relationships are deception. But there is power in spells and religions and relationships. What power is here and can you master it, that is the question. Do you want to master it? Or do you want to be mastered?"

Bel, injured, said, "I have never been mastered."

"Good. If you do this, you must conquer it. Whatever you think you have seen or experienced, here you can master it. Whatever it shows you, question it. Dissect its lies. Command it. The Stone's power is just that, an exercise of power. Stand firm, strengthen your will, and resist."

These words cheered Bel, who had become reserved and constrained by the presence of the Stone. He had begun to doubt his purpose here, and he had little experience with such doubt and little capacity to weather its effect. Baron's plan of action gave him confidence. Things of the spirit, he realized, were ultimately contests of the will, and in such a contest he was well practiced.

That night the brothers drank and retold stories of their early days, when they worked as bounty hunters and assassins, how they stole their first weapons and gathered their first followers, which led to tales of Astrod's gambling and Menos's endless talk of horses and the night Hammerfist nearly bled to death because some woman had stabbed him while he slept. They laughed and cursed and reveled in being alive while others had suffered and died.

It was late when they woke. Bel sat with elbows upon knees, staring at the wall when Baron finally rose from bed.

"You mean to do it?" Baron asked.

"We've said all. There's nothing left."

"Let's eat first."

Onis met them as they approached the Stone. "You are prepared?"



"I am ready."

The crevice beneath the Stone crouched like a small beast waiting to strike. Bel was told to lay upon his back, with his head nearly in the dark opening. Then, Onis would grab his feet and push him carefully into the hole. The floor was smooth and slick from years of men lying helpless upon their backs beneath the weight of the Stone.

Bel complied without hesitation. Baron watched and said nothing, scrutinizing Onis with his dark eyes.

In Bel slipped, his wide shoulders scraping the sides. Onis, with expert maneuvers, pushed with steady pressure until even Bel's boots could not be seen in the darkness of the Humiliation. Onis stepped back and grasped his hands behind his back and waited.

Minutes passed in silence. Besides the three of them, no one else was in the chamber; perhaps the entire temple held only Onis, Baron, and Bel; perhaps for miles outside, plain and mountain, no human moved. Within, even the breath of those waiting seemed muted and a blink of an eye sent a whisper through the cavernous space.

Then, a sound – a moan – pain escaping against one's will. The Stone itself seemed to moan. The moisture condensing on its cold surface might be the sorrow and deep brokenness expressed in that groan. Whimpers followed, as if from a scared child, but it was deeper than a child's, and in time it grew more hopeless than a child's. It was the gasp of a man tortured who knew there was no word to stop it.

"Pull him out," Baron demanded.

"He has not asked. I will not."

The gasping beneath the Stone quickened. To the sorrow was added terror and desperation. Words came, unintelligible words, spoken between heaving breaths. Baron watched the Stone with ferocity.

"What is happening?" Baron said through clenched teeth.

"The weight of the Stone is upon him."

"When will it end?"

"When he is crushed."

Bel cried out, sharply, suddenly. Baron flinched.

"He is strong," Baron said.

"That is unfortunate."

Three times more Bel cried out as if pierced. The terror returned. He began to sob. Baron had never heard his brother sob.

"Hold strong," he whispered fiercely.

Bel seemed to hear. He called out, so that the word rang in the chamber, "Baron!" Then again, "Baron!"

Baron stepped forward, reached into the dark gap, and dragged his brother from beneath the Stone. He knelt beside Bel and looked upon his countenance, which was sweat-soaked and wide-eyed. Bel did not seem to see him or anything else for several minutes.

Onis slunk away as Baron waited for his brother to recover.

Bel's eyes eventually focused. "Why... did..."

"You called my name."

"Now you are kind?"

"I would not let my brother die. I would slay a god if it was required."

"And you would enjoy it...." Bel sat unsteadily. "You should not have intervened."

"You called me," Baron said. "You begged me."

"I was mastered. I should not have called."

"No one masters the Butchers, whether spirit or man. *You* called. It is your weakness, then."

"I am mastered still. I must return to the Stone."

"You are an aging fool. Let us leave this place and return to our homes. We have food, servants, women, power. We lack nothing."

Slowly, Bel stood. He looked at the Stone, his face pale. "We are slaves, Baron. We will perish like slaves, our bodies left to rot and our souls sinking into the earth."

Baron seized his brother's shoulders and forced him away from the Stone. "You are bewitched. We answer to no one, god or man."

"You answered me when I called."

Baron stepped back, flinching as if from a blow.

"It is a good thing," Bel said. "We all answer to someone. But you cannot answer me beyond the grave, and I cannot answer you. Then we will answer our true master." He turned again to the Stone. "Do you remember Ludden?"

"That fool man who called himself king of Allendron?"

"A week we tortured him. We beat him and cut him and screamed at him and shamed him and tempted him. He was a man with talents. We could have used a man like him, if he would have said the words we needed him to say. He refused. To the end, he refused."

"I respect him for that at least," Baron said.

"I did too. I don't know now."

"It's time to be done with this, Bel. This dream of yours, this place, it's a delusion. Whatever spirit you think you felt, it's just another self-appointed king. Like Ludden. Like you and me. Why give up what we have taken by rights? Are you truly afraid?"

Bel met his brother's gaze, but he did not answer immediately.

"What if we are nothing?" Bel asked.

"We are what we have become."

"What if when I lie beneath the Stone, it squeezes me like a sponge, to see what of weight is left when my body is shriveled and twisted. What if it squeezes and squeezes, and nothing comes, not a drop, not even dust, and it presses and grasps and smashes

me flat, but I am empty, because I have emptied myself of everything of weight. What is life then? What is death? A horror of contemplation.

"We lusted for power, for glory. We stood on the necks of our enemies. We drank from the purloined goblets of kings and warlords. We gazed upon women and treasure to glut our appetites. But are our souls shriveled? Maybe we have no souls and we are filled with pleasure and blood. I need to know. Before I die, I need to know."

"It will come to nothing!" Baron shouted. His voice boomed through the chamber. He swung out his arm as if he would attack his brother. "You know that everyone is crushed by the Stone. That's what they say. That way lies madness. Peasants, thieves, men, women, have you heard of one that was not ultimately crushed? Onis will tell you some nice story, but you've heard all I have."

"I have." Bel said. "I know."

"We are done here."

"I am not."

The brothers looked at one another. Baron's chest heaved.

"I will not stay," Baron said. "In this, I will not. You are asking to be broken."

"Yes, I am."

"I will not let it break you."

Bel nodded solemnly. "You will have to. You must go. I cannot do it with you here."

Baron clutched Bel's arm, his fingers digging deep. "We are going."

Bel met his gaze and said nothing.

"You are a fool!" He drew his knife.

Bel, with a quick movement, disarmed him. The knife clattered against the stone floor.

"Will you resist me?" Baron seethed. "In this?"

"In this alone, we do not understand one another. Afterward, perhaps we will again."

"The world awaits us outside. Our world," Baron said.

"Everything without is tinged with dread. I must see the end of myself. There is something I cannot see yet—perhaps it is only terror after terror, but..." He stepped back and looked full upon his brother. "If there is a grain of gold to be found in my flesh or any hope to be found beyond, it is rooted in.... Baron, go."

Baron's face became iron. He turned and left, cold and hot, storming and silent. Bel stared after him for a long time.

Onis reappeared. "You will suffer the Stone again?"

Bel watched the memory of his brother. He knew that Baron would not stop until his legs could carry him no longer. "Is there any hope?"

"I, once, long ago, suffered the Stone. For a long time after, the world was dark. That is all you see when you look upon the weight of truth. It cracks you open. But there is truth beyond oneself, beyond the Stone. To live, they say, a seed must die."

Bel could see his brother stalking across the plains, climbing the mountain paths, striding through the night, full of hatred. He, too, was being crushed.

"I am ready," Bel said.

"You are not," Onis said. "But if you will lie down, I will help you begin."