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# **Hearts of Stone**

Written by Simon Scarrow

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# HEARTS OF STONE

Simon Scarrow

headline

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# PROLOGUE

*Lefkas, September 1938*

The shutter clicked and Karl Muller lowered the camera and smiled at the three teenagers, two boys and a girl, sitting on the bench. He coughed and spoke to them in Greek.

‘That’s it. All done.’

As he packed his Leica away in its leather case, the three teenagers stood up and crossed to the table where the latest findings from the archaeological dig had been placed. A student from Berlin was the only assistant still working with Muller; the rest had already packed up and returned home after the summons from the head of the department at the university. Not only this expedition, but the two others on the Ionian islands, and, as far as Muller knew, every other archaeology team around the Mediterranean, had been ordered to abandon their work and return home. All thanks to the deteriorating international situation. Muller had delayed for as long as possible, and had finally given in after the last telegram from Berlin ordering him to do as he was told, or face the consequences.

As he recalled the telegram he looked anxiously at his son. Peter was tall for a boy of sixteen and could easily be mistaken for someone a few years older. He had yet to build muscle on his slender frame and as a result looked somewhat fragile. The glasses he wore only seemed to emphasise that. Muller sighed briefly. His son was all that he had in the world following the death of his wife several years earlier. He was afraid for the boy. Peter was staring in fascination at the latest discoveries uncovered on the site. In a better world he would be free to follow the dictates of his heart and his father’s interests in archaeology. But the

world was as it was, dominated by the hard-hearted credos of powerful rulers and their henchmen. They threatened war, and if they got their wish then Peter would be drawn into its perilous embrace. Muller had seen service on the Western Front in the first great struggle of the present century and could not forget its horrors. He prayed that his boy, and millions of others, would not have to share the same fate as the previous generation.

The girl had approached him shyly and was watching Muller as he packed his camera away. He turned to her with a warm smile. 'What can I do for you, Eleni?'

'Herr Doktor Muller,' she addressed him by his German title before continuing, haltingly, in the German taught to her by Peter. 'The picture you took. Is it possible . . . May I have a copy for myself?'

He nodded. 'Of course. I will see to it when I get back to Lefkada and develop the film.'

Eleni Thesskoudis smiled brilliantly, white teeth contrasting with the olive tone of her skin and the long dark hair that framed her oval face with its brown eyes. A pretty girl, he thought to himself. He could understand why Peter had developed feelings for her. It was obvious the boy was smitten, even if he refused to admit it to his father, denying it in the adamant, embarrassed way that teenagers do.

'Thank you, Dr Muller. You are most kind.'

'And you know how to charm men to do your bidding, eh?' he teased and she gave a shy smile and shook her head before turning away to join her friends leaning over the nearest table. Peter was pointing at a shard of pottery, still carrying its delicately curved handle, and was explaining some detail to Andreas, the sun glinting off his glasses each time he looked up at the Greek boy. Muller turned his attention to the student sitting at the next table and cleared his throat.

'Heinrich!'

The student looked round, his brown hair neatly combed into place. Heinrich Steiner's shirt and shorts were stained with sweat and dust but Muller knew that he would discard them the moment he returned to Lefkada and change into his usual neat combination of flannel trousers and white shirt, with that wretched party pin fixed to the breast pocket. Muller approached him and stood on the opposite side of the table.

‘Have you finished cataloguing the day’s finds?’

‘Almost, Herr Doktor. Two more entries and it is done.’

‘Good. Then put them away and return to the villa. When you see the foreman tell him I want this all packed up first thing tomorrow. The finds are to go into storage in Lefkada. The same with our equipment.’

The student arched a brow. ‘We are leaving it all behind?’

‘What else can we do?’ Muller shrugged. ‘The university wants us to return at once. I’ll have to try and arrange the shipment of our finds when I return to Berlin.’

The student nodded and turned back to his notebook and continued filling in the details of the last items in front of him. Muller turned back to the teenagers.

‘You three can go with Heinrich. He’ll drive you back into Lefkada. I’ll follow in the car.’

‘You’re staying here?’ asked Peter with a frown. ‘But Andreas’s father has invited us all to dinner tonight.’

‘I’ll be there. I would not want to disappoint Mr Katarides. But I have a few last things to deal with before I leave the site.’ He pursed his lips and glanced round the small vale surrounded by steep hills. ‘Before I leave it for the last time.’

‘You’ll come back, Father. Once the trouble has passed.’

Muller patted him on the back. ‘Yes. Of course I will, and you. If you want to.’

Peter grinned. ‘Try and stop me! Besides, I would miss my friends too much.’ He gestured towards the other boy and girl and switched back to Greek. ‘My father says we will be coming back. When the world has come to its senses.’

‘Good!’ Andreas flashed one of his rare smiles, then frowned briefly as the girl gave the German boy’s arm an affectionate squeeze. ‘We will be waiting for you.’ He continued in a voice laced with irony, ‘No doubt bored out of our wits with no one here to explain our own history to us in such fascinating and endless detail.’

Peter shook his head sadly. ‘I am a civilised man amongst philistines . . .’

‘Enough of your games, you young fools!’ Muller interrupted as his assistant completed his work, snapped his notebook shut and rose from his bench. ‘Go with Heinrich. Now.’

The impatience in his voice was obvious and Peter and his friends turned away from the tables and made for the path that led out of the vale in the direction of the camp where the members of the expedition lived when they were not at the house in Lefkada rented by the university. The tents, camp beds and stoves would all join the rest of the equipment to be stored in the warehouse to await the archaeologists' return. Muller watched them until they were out of sight and then waited another few minutes until he heard the rattle of the truck starting up. The gears ground, the engine note rose in pitch as Heinrich eased down the accelerator, and the vehicle clattered and jolted off along the rough track.

When at last the sound of the engine had died away and there was silence, Muller looked round the small valley. Nothing moved. No sign of life. Then he stirred, striding purposefully around the main excavation with its pegs and taut lengths of twine marking off each area. A section of the foundations of the large structure they had discovered lay half a metre below the surface of the ground, and had been painstakingly exposed over the last two years. Now it was to be abandoned, left to return to nature if the great powers of Europe decided to turn on each other again.

Muller left the main site and made his way through the shrubs and stunted Mediterranean oaks towards a nearby cliff. Emerging from the thin line of trees, he paused and glanced round, listening, to be sure that he was quite alone. Satisfied, he eased his way round a gorse bush and began to climb a narrow path that ran up the cliff. The ascent was not difficult, there were plenty of protrusions to use for foot- and handholds. Five metres up he came to the ledge that rose at a gentle gradient towards a finger of rock standing proud of the cliff face. Unless a person was close, the rock appeared to be part of the cliff. Indeed, it was only a week before that Muller had ventured up to the cliff, looking for a vantage point to take some photos of the whole site. It was then that he had noticed the geological peculiarity and climbed higher to investigate.

Breathing heavily from his exertions, Muller shuffled along the ledge until he saw the dark opening, hidden from sight behind the rock. His heart quickened with excitement as he approached. At the mouth of the cave he felt the coolness of the space within, and

shivered. Catching his breath, Muller crouched low and squeezed through the gap.

Inside, the light penetrated only a short distance, as no direct sunlight entered the cave. Muller pulled out the torch in his pocket and switched it on. Abruptly a shaft of light cut through the gloom towards the rear of the cool, clammy interior. The air was musty smelling and Muller's boots crunched on the small stones on the floor of the cave. He felt an excitement burning in his veins that he had hardly ever felt before. And then bitter frustration. Here was the great archaeological discovery of the age. And yet he could not take advantage of it. If only there had been more time. More time to explore the cave properly and discover all its secrets.

As he had done a handful of times before, Muller slowly approached the rear of the cave, where the hewn rock gave way to a flat surface. Two columns, cut out of the mountain, flanked a great slab of stone. It was featureless, save for a short phrase engraved into its surface, the work of a mason who had passed from this earth nearly three thousand years before, yet preserved so well it might have been the work of yesterday. Muller shone the torch at an angle so that the words would be clearly discernible. There was no mistaking the name, or the epitaph. One day, Muller vowed to himself, this discovery would make his reputation. The world would forever link his name to this place and the treasures that rested in the darkness beyond the wall of stone.



# CHAPTER ONE

*November 2013, Kent*

‘**W**hy do I have to do this, miss?’ Anna had been walking back towards her desk, between the tables of the year nine class, and stopped to turn towards the voice. Jamie Gould stared at her with a questioning expression. She was aware that a number of other faces had looked up from their worksheets, waiting to see how she reacted. Anna knew the class well enough to identify those characters who were disruptive rather than simply clueless; Jamie was not one of the latter. Instantly her guard was up.

Anna cleared her throat softly. ‘Do what exactly, Jamie?’

‘This.’ Jamie nodded at the worksheet, and his dark wavy hair shimmered momentarily. He was an undeniably handsome boy and Anna knew that many of the girls in the class were attracted to him. Including, regrettably, Amelia Lawrence, a studious girl who would be sure to get an A\* in history, provided she chose to study the subject for GCSE. Anna hoped very much that she would. She felt genuinely protective towards Amelia in that way that female teachers did about those female students they hoped would go on to achieve a decent future for themselves, unencumbered by children, and boyfriends or, God forbid, husbands and partners like Jamie Gould.

‘The worksheet is part of the assessment process, Jamie,’ Anna replied patiently. ‘You need to complete the tasks so that I know how much you have learned about the topic.’

‘But it’s boring, miss.’

Anna smiled. ‘There’s no guarantee that everything you learn in school will be entertaining. Some of it is merely important. I’m sure you’d understand that if you gave your full attention to the subject, Jamie.’

There was a beat and she saw the hostile gleam in his eyes and instantly regretted her put-down. Anna despised those teachers who derived satisfaction from slapping down their students. As if there was the smallest kind of achievement in humiliating a younger, less educated and experienced human being. And yet she had just indulged in the same practice. Almost instinctively. There was no excuse for it, she admonished herself.

‘Why should I pay attention, miss?’ Jamie set his biro down with a sharp tap and leaned back in his seat, stretching out his legs. ‘History’s boring. There’s no point to it. Why make us do it? It ain’t like there’s any use for it once I leave this dump.’

*And that day can’t come a moment too soon, my dear Jamie.* Anna approached the table Jamie shared with five others, carefully selected to surround him with positive role models as if their work ethic might somehow be viral. She kept her expression neutral as she met his defiant gaze, hurriedly trying to decide how to deal with this latest assault on her authority.

‘My, what a lot of issues you have raised. Where should I begin?’

‘You should know, miss. You’re the history teacher.’ Jamie glanced round as some of the class laughed nervously and others regarded the confrontation with curiosity. Anna saw Amelia’s lips flicker in a smile as she regarded Jamie. That smile, small, thoughtless gesture that it was, wounded Anna and she turned back to the boy with a cold expression.

‘Yes, I’m the teacher, and it is my job to try and teach you. For your sake. What do you want to be when you leave here, Jamie?’

‘I want to do somethin’ interesting. Something well paid. Not like being a teacher.’ He paused. ‘That’s boring.’

‘I see. Boring, is it?’ There were so many responses desperate to find expression. The first, and most necessary to hold in check, was to tell the arrogant teenager that, on current form, he would leave the school with a clutch of poor qualifications that would be little more than attendance certificates and let him see how far he got with that during the present recession. Then there was the urge to explain what education was all about. How important it was, for Jamie, for everyone. How it underpinned everything that made civilised life possible. Anna decided it would be best to restrict herself to a more narrow argument.

‘You say history is boring.’

‘Boring.’ He nodded. ‘It’s just stuff that’s happened. Long ago. We can’t change it. Means nothing to me. Nothing to anyone around now. We shouldn’t have to waste time on this rubbish.’ He stabbed a finger at his worksheet where Anna could see that his answers amounted to little more than a handful of words, begrudgingly scrawled in the spaces provided. A scribbled-out doodle extended down one margin.

Anna’s gaze flicked up to fix on the boy’s eyes and she saw there the peculiar hostility towards female teachers that she had seen in many boys in the five years she had been teaching. She tried to ignore it as she framed her reply.

‘I find it impossible to share your opinion, Jamie. For me history is not boring at all. Far from it. History is like a great story, and it explains everything. It tells us why things are the way they are. That’s why it’s important. To all of us. Even you, Jamie. It’s my job to try and make you see that.’

‘You can’t make me.’ He clicked his tongue. ‘You can’t make me do what *you* want. And if I don’t want to do history then you’ve no right to make me. Why can’t I learn some proper stuff? Stuff that’s going to help me find a real job?’ There was a dangerous glint in his eye now and he leaned forward as his voice rose. ‘What’s all this about?’ He picked up the worksheet and waved it in front of Anna. ‘A load of crap questions about some bridge that fell down in Great Yarmouth over a hundred years ago. What’s the point of it?’

Anna felt her heart beating faster and the familiar sick feeling swirling in the pit of her stomach as the boy challenged her. In truth she shared his dislike of the worksheets, with their tired old evaluations of primary and secondary evidence, but that was what the head of humanities at the school insisted on using. It was depressing to watch students working through coloured folders, differentiated by ability, year after year.

Anna tried to tailor her lessons to share some of her passion for history with her students but for a small proportion of them it was a challenge that would have exhausted even Sisyphus. She wanted to tell Jamie that she shared his opinion of the worksheets. She wanted to tell him about the great stories that filled the pages of history, about the

characters, heroes and villains alike, who strove against each other or pursued daring courses of principle and enlightenment. To share with Jamie the powerful lessons of the past. A quote came to mind, a few lines on an index card she had pinned above her small workstation in the staffroom: 'Those who don't study history are doomed to repeat it. Yet those who do study history are doomed to stand by helplessly while everyone else repeats it . . .' She had put the card up to remind herself every day why she had chosen to become a teacher of the subject. One day, perhaps enough people would value history enough to break the cycle. Until then, she must contend with Jamie, and those like him.

A sudden movement caught her eye and she glanced aside quickly enough to see Lucy, a heavily made-up blond girl, gesturing towards the clock above the whiteboard and making a winding motion with her hand. Jamie had seen it too, and then noticed that his teacher had shared it as well and he gave a thin smile of defiance.

So that was it, Anna thought to herself. The familiar game of engaging the teacher to waste time until the bell rang at the end of the lesson. She felt cross at herself for falling for the ruse. She slowly drew a deep breath. It was all part of the give and take of the profession. It would balance out in the round, she told herself. There would be better lessons, where Jamie would simply content himself with being bored rather than disruptive, or better still, content himself with yet another unauthorised absence. She leaned forward and spoke in a calm voice.

'Jamie, there is no getting out of this. So you might as well make the most of it. Finish the worksheet, and don't disrupt the lesson any further, understand?'

Even as she spoke Anna mentally winced at the admission he had extracted from her. He had disrupted the lesson. That was his prize. His fruitless reward in his ongoing struggle against an authority that would grind him down in the end. And now the little idiot was grinning.

Turning away from his table, Anna made her way back to her desk at the front of the class and glanced at the clock.

'Ten minutes left. I don't want any more talking. Just finish the worksheet. Those of you who complete it can hand it in at the end of

the lesson. The rest will finish it for homework and let me have it first thing tomorrow. Get on with it.'

For a moment Jamie did nothing but stare defiantly back at her. Then he shrugged and picked up his biro and began to make small circular motions. Anna considered confronting him again and insisting that he do as he had been told but realised that it would only mean a renewed disruption to the lesson and even less work being done by the rest of the class.

It was with relief that she responded to the shrill ring of the school bell announcing lunch break. Before she could utter a word there was the customary shuffling as the students reached for their bags and began to put their stationery away.

'Finished sheets on my desk. I expect the rest first thing tomorrow, in my pigeonhole.' Anna had to raise her voice as chairs scraped across the worn vinyl floor and shoes and bags clattered against the metal legs of the tables. Jamie and most of the others made for the door. Only a handful headed for Anna's desk and hurriedly placed their work in a rough pile to one side of the class register. Amelia was the last to leave and she flashed a quick smile as she handed in her sheet, each answer box filled in neatly and fully. There was something about her smile that told of the embarrassment she felt for her teacher, and Anna nodded her head subtly to share the brief moment of understanding.

Then Amelia was gone and Anna was alone in the classroom. She wondered why so many schoolkids found it difficult to share her passion for history. It was hard enough battling a system that seemed intent on marginalising the subject in favour of 'relevant skill sets'. It was even worse when politicians used history as an opportunity to ram home some patriotic ideology, or to raise awareness of whatever contemporary social issue vexed the more progressive members of parliament. Sometimes it seemed that there was no love of history for its own sake.

Anna opened her eyes and stood up, sweeping together the thin sheath of completed worksheets, and paused. There was a sheet of paper still on the table where Jamie had been sitting. With a sigh she crossed the classroom and picked it up. A series of ink swirls surrounded two lines written diagonally across the sheet. 'History should be fucking history.'

Anna shook her head, then considered reporting this to the headteacher for him to take further action against Jamie.

‘What’s the point?’ Anna asked herself quietly. She tucked the sheet under the others in her hand and turned to leave the classroom and make her way down the corridor to the staffroom. When she opened the door the scene was as familiar to Anna as the living room of the small terraced house she rented. More so, in many respects. The same people were sitting in the same chairs opening their plastic tubs and taking out their sandwiches, fruit and crisps. The sharp tang of filter coffee wafted from the short stretch of kitchen counter where the staff stacked their mugs. A few faces looked up and nodded a brief greeting.

Anna made for the doorway leading through to the narrow room lined with work cubicles. She had been allocated one as a newly qualified teacher when she first came to the school but no one had thought to re-allocate it and now Anna regarded it as her spot. She placed the worksheets on the shelf above the cluttered desk space and sat down. The school’s IT technician had replaced the usual screen saver with a cosy animated fireplace surrounded by holly and Christmas stockings with a digital clock on the mantel counting down the seconds to the end of term.

The image vanished as Anna flicked the mouse, and then moved the cursor over to the login box and tapped in her email address and password, and the folder containing her applications appeared. She moved the cursor on to Facebook and double tapped. The familiar blue masthead appeared with the drop-down timeline and she quickly scrolled down the newsfeed. There was the usual round of personal updates, adverts and offers to join games or take part in a quiz. Anna read them without interest and then turned her attention to the three red icons at the top. Two friends of friends wanted to be accepted. She hit the not now button and moved on to the messages. There was one new item, from someone named Dieter Muller. Not a name she recognised and she opened it with a mild sense of curiosity.

> Is this the Facebook account of Anna Thesskoudis? Daughter of Marita Thesskoudis. Granddaughter of Eleni Carson Gée Thesskoudis).

Anna was surprised. She did not know anyone called Dieter Muller, and she felt uneasy that he seemed to know something about her family. Her fingers hovered above the keyboard and then tapped out a quick reply.

> Who wants to know, and why?