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Opening extract from

Circles of Stone

Written by

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Published by

HarperCollins Children's Books

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First published in Great Britain by HarperCollins *Children's Books* in 2015
HarperCollins *Children's Books* is a division of HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd,
1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF

The HarperCollins website address is: www.harpercollins.co.uk
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ISBN 978-0-00-749117-9

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Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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Safe Harbour

"From the frothing talons of tempest a single craft emerged – broken but afloat – drifting wearily to safe harbour.*"*

THE TWO GIANT TREES towered above the others, their arms outstretched as though claiming the ancient forest as their own. But it was not only their size that made these mighty oaks so magical, nor their drapery of white where the other trees wore thin cloaks of orange and brown leaves. What made them wondrous was their slow graceful motion. Like commanders inspecting their troops they took a stately path between the lesser trees, sweeping this way and that through the vast skeletal canopy.

And so it was that as the forest chattered and rustled and chirped its welcome, the great masts of the *Windrush* brought it to the end of its long journey.

The captain heaved at the wheel and the battered old ship turned another bend in the river. He brushed back his ragged mop of blond curls and peered through the pockets of evening mist. He frowned and blinked.

"This is it..." he muttered, raising his head to look for his companions. "This is it!"

Simia was sitting with her feet dangling over the side of the ship and did not look up.

"You said that three bends ago, Ash," she grumbled, throwing a pebble into the river. "And two bends before that."

"But it really is this time, I'm sure of it! Get Naeo... or Sylas... either – both of them!"

"Aye, aye, Cap'n…" grumbled Simia, giving him a wilting salute.

She made her way to the nearest hatch and disappeared below. Moments later her shock of red hair reappeared above deck and behind her another girl stepped into view. She looked about the same age as Simia but was taller and climbed the ladder lightly, with a longer, more graceful step. Her blonde hair was drawn back and held in place by a criss-cross of sticks, revealing a narrow neck and delicate features. As she stepped on to the deck, she fixed Ash with her piercing blue eyes.

He grinned and stepped down from the helm. "Naeo, look – look at the trees!" he exclaimed, striding past them both to the bow of the ship. "There's something about them – this *has* to be it!"

Simia and Naeo walked up and stood at his shoulders, staring out at the forest. Birds flitted from branch to branch as the aged trees hung over the swirling waters, dropping the occasional long-dead leaf. Above, the canopy ascended towards two hills, themselves blanketed in yet more forest. There was perhaps an odd quality to the light, a slight vividness to the mottled browns and oranges, but otherwise everything looked normal.

"Ash, they look just like the million other trees we've passed," said Simia, shaking her head. "Except these ones are getting really close – I mean *really* close – shouldn't you be at the wheel?"

The river curved away in a wide bend and the *Windrush* was

indeed drawing ever closer to the far bank. Ash sighed his disappointment, then pushed back from the handrail.

"Don't!" exclaimed Naeo suddenly. She looked up at him. "Wait."

She leaned forward and peered into the tangle of branches ahead.

Ash tensed. "If I don't go now, we're going to crash straight into—"

"Trust me," said Naeo, calmly. "We won't crash." She turned to them. "Just watch – we're expected."

Their eyes returned to the wall of branches, trunks, bushes and shadows that loomed ever nearer. They all took a firm hold of the handrail.

"I hope you're right about this...." said Ash, wincing.

As he spoke the long arm of the bowsprit passed over the far bank and disappeared into the forest, snapping branches and crashing through twigs as it went, sending down a shower of dried leaves. Ash and Simia exchanged a glance and braced themselves for the shuddering impact with the bank.

Simia pressed her eyes shut. "This is a bad idea!"

"Don't worry," came a voice from behind. "It'll be fine."

Sylas was standing back along the deck, near the hatch. He did not approach – throughout the journey he and Naeo had sought to be as far from one another as possible – but he smiled at Simia and took hold of the handrail by his side.

Everyone held on tight. A moment passed, then another. They heard the scrape of branches against the hull, felt the cool of the forest as they passed under the overhanging boughs, heard a joist creak beneath their feet. But there was no calamitous crash, no snapping of timbers, no sudden end to their long journey.

The *Windrush* sailed on.

They looked to their left and right and saw the floor of the forest passing them by: low bushes and huddling plants, saplings and tree trunks. They looked up and saw the canopy high above, brushing past the rigging, crowding the mast. It was as though the wilderness had opened its arms and drawn them in. The keel cleaved through the soft folds of earth and living things as though they were water, bearing its great weight onwards, towards the two hills.

Their eyes were wide with wonder and Simia shrieked with delight.

"How did you know?" she asked Naeo, breathlessly.

"Look…" said Naeo, pointing out into the forest.

They turned to where she was pointing and narrowed their eyes. At first they thought it was just a muddle of light, or perhaps an oddly shaped trunk, but then they realised that they were looking at a human figure. It was a woman leaning against a tree, her body draped in loose garments of the same drab colours of the forest: browns, oranges, greens, limes and yellows. The only part of her that did not blend with the thicket was her pale face, which almost seemed to float in mid-air, smiling at their wonderment.

"They're everywhere!" shouted Sylas, pointing out over the side of the ship.

Now they knew what to look for, they saw the pale glow of scores of faces, some peering from behind bushes, some high in the branches of trees, but most gathering alongside the great ship, as though guiding it in as it rolled and yawed ever deeper into the forest. They walked in two columns, left and right, stepping lightly between the trees, many peering back to the river as though to check that the *Windrush* had not been followed, others looking at its path ahead.

Simia ran from the bow and joined Sylas, grabbing his arm. "It's changing! The forest – look at it!"

Some distance ahead the trees seemed to be thinning, the shadows falling away, the colours brightening. They could see flecks of light between the foliage, scattering beams through the damp air. The ship dipped into the trough of a ditch and mounted the bank beyond like a wave, gaining new height. Every part of the brush was shimmering with the promise of a break in the forest, and as more and more people emerged to walk at the ship's flanks, they knew that they were nearing their destination.

The four shared excited glances as suddenly the final curtains of green and brown fell away. Evening sunlight poured down upon them, scattering the shadows and bathing the deck in a welcome warmth.

Before them lay all the majesty of Nature.

A huge lake stretched out as far as the eye could see. Its waters were bright and crystal clear and made the air smell sweet, and it was so still that the surface was mirror-like, reflecting the giant canopy of blue sky above. Only in the distance could they see any movement on the lake, for there, fogging the horizon, was a giant waterfall, sending up a smoke of ethereal mist. Rising steeply on either side were the two hills, carpeted with a thick forest that even now, in early winter, retained its green. Birds of all kinds soared above, turning in wide arcs on the gentle breeze, tipping their wings, playing on the thermals, darting between the treetops.

Sylas laughed with delight and grasped Simia's hand. At that moment the tired joints of the *Windrush* let out a brief complaint and Simia shrieked as the keel plunged into the cool waters of the lake, sending up a great sheet of spray on all sides. The vessel rocked backwards and lurched a little to one side, then righted itself. They heard a roar and patter, which at first they thought

to be the falling water, but when they turned they saw that the bank was now crowded with a great assembly of Suhl, all of them clapping and cheering, smiling and shouting their welcome.

At their centre, one woman stood alone. She did not wear the forest hues of her fellows, but instead a flowing white gown – the gown of a Suhl elder. Her glistening grey hair fell about her shoulders, marked out by a braid of brighter colours. Her beautiful face was full of joy.

Filimaya raised her arms, gesturing to the Valley of Outs, and bid them welcome.