

The Language of Stones

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Extract

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CHAPTER ONE

OUT OF THE VALE

Willand son of Eldmar turned his gaze away from the Tops and ran down towards the village. The sun was warm today, the sky cloudless and the grass soft and thriving underfoot. His long hair streamed freely in the sun like golden wheat as he ran past a cluster of thatched cottages and came at last to the Green Man.

‘Is Tilwin here yet?’ he asked, hoping the knife-grinder was already slaking his thirst. But Baldgood the alehouse keeper shook his head. There was no sign of Tilwin, nor of his grinding wheel, so Will went out and sat on the grass.

Sunshine blazed on the white linen of his shirt. It was a fine spot just here. Daisies and dandelions had come out all over the green, as if it had known to put on its summer best. Every year it was fine and sunny at Cuckootide. There was racing to the Tarry Stone, kicking at the campball, and all the other sports. And afterwards there would be the bonfire. Songs would be sung and there would be dances and games and contests with the quarterstaff before the drinking of dragon soup. It would be the same this year as it had always been, and next year it would be the same again and on and on forever.

In the Vale they called today Cuckootide, the day the May

Pole was put up and all the world came out onto the green to have a good time. But Will knew he could not have a good time – not until he had talked with Tilwin. He looked up at the round-shouldered hills they called the Tops and felt the longing again. It had been getting stronger, and today it felt like an invisible cord trying to pull his heart right out of his chest. That was why he had to speak with Tilwin. It had to be Tilwin, because only he would understand.

‘Hey-ho, Will!’

He knew that voice at once – whiskery Leoftan, the smith. His two thick braids hung like tarred rope side by side at his left cheek. He wore a belted shirt of white linen like Will’s own and a cap of red wool.

‘Your dad’ll be putting in your braids soon enough now, eh?’

Will shrugged. ‘It’s a hard week to turn thirteen, the week after May Day.’

Leoftan put down his armful of wooden tent-pegs. ‘Aye, you’ll have to wait near another year before you can run in the men’s race.’

Will scrubbed his fingers through his fair hair and stole another glance at the Tops. ‘Have you ever wondered what it’s like up there, Luffy?’

The smith stood up, gave him a distracted look. ‘What’s that you say?’

‘I was just thinking.’ He nodded towards the Tops. ‘One day I’d like to go up and see what’s there. Haven’t you ever thought what Nether Norton would look like with the whole Vale laid out down below?’

‘Huh?’

The moment stretched out awkwardly, but Will could not let it go. Once he had seen a small figure riding on a white horse far away where the earth met the sky. In the spring there were sheep – thousands of them – driven along by black dogs, and sometimes by men too. He had seen them many times, but whenever he had spoken of it to the others they had fallen quiet, and

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Gunwold the Swineherd had smirked, as if he had said something that ought not to have been said.

‘Well, Luffy? Haven’t you ever wanted to go up onto the Tops?’

Leoftan’s face lost its good humour. ‘What do you want to go talking like that for? They say there’s an ill wind up there.’

‘Is that what they say? An ill wind? And who are they who say that, Luffy? And how do they know? I wish – I wish—’

Just then Baldulf came up. He was fourteen, a fleshy, self-assured youth, and there was Wybda the Gossip and two or three others with him. ‘You want to be careful what you go a-wishing for, Willand,’ Wybda said. ‘They say that what fools and kings wishes for most often comes true.’

Will gazed back, undaunted. ‘I’m not a king or a fool. I just want to go up there and see for myself. What’s wrong with that?’

Wybda carried her embroidery with her. She plied her needle all the time, but still her pigs turned out too round and her flowers too squat. ‘Don’t you know the fae folk’ll eat you up?’

‘What do you know about the fae folk?’

Baldulf swished a willow wand at the grass near him. ‘She’s right. Nobody’s got any business up on the Tops.’

Gunwold grinned his lop-sided grin. ‘Yah, everybody knows that, Willand.’

They all began to move off and Leoftan said, ‘Aren’t you going over to watch the men’s race?’

‘Maybe later.’

He let them go. He did not know why, but just lately their company made him feel uncomfortable. He wondered if it was something to do with becoming a man. Maybe that was what made him feel so strange.

‘There’s a trackway up over the Tops,’ a gritty voice said in his ear.

He started, and when he looked round he saw Tilwin. ‘You made me jump.’

Tilwin gave a knowing grin. ‘I’ve made a lot of people jump in my time, Willand, but what I say is the truth. They’ve sent

flocks along that trackway every summer for five thousand years and more. Now what do you think about that?’

Tilwin never said too much, but he knew plenty. He was not yet of middling age, and for some reason he wore his dark hair unbraided. He came once in a blue moon to fetch necessities up from Middle Norton and beyond. Twice yearly he took the carts down to hand over the tithe, the village tax, to the Sightless Ones. Tilwin could put a sharper edge on a blade than anyone, and he was the only person Will knew who had ever been out of the Vale.

‘Who are the men who send the flocks through?’

‘Shepherds. They come this way because of the ring.’

‘What ring?’ Will’s eyes moved to the smooth emerald on Tilwin’s finger, but the knife-grinder laughed.

‘Ah, not that sort of a ring. Don’t you know there were giants in the land in the days of yore? There’s a Giant’s Ring away up on those Tops. A circle of standing stones. It’s a place of great magic.’

A shiver passed down Will’s spine. He could feel the tightness forming inside him again. Maybe it was the Giant’s Ring that was calling to him.

‘Magic . . . you say?’

‘Earth magic. Close by the Giant’s Ring stands Liarix Finglas, called the King’s Stone. Every shepherd who’s passed this way for fifty generations has chipped a piece off that King’s Stone until it’s now crooked as a giant’s thumb.’

‘Truly?’

‘Oh, you may believe it is so.’

‘Why do the shepherds do it?’

‘For a lucky keepsake, what do you think?’

Will did not know what he thought. The talk had set his mind on fire. ‘Fetch me a piece of it, will you, when next you go up there?’

‘Oh, and it’s a piece of the King’s Stone, you want now, is it?’ Tilwin had a strange way of speaking, and a strange, deep way

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of looking at a person at times. ‘Ah, but you’re lucky enough in yourself, I think, Willand. Lucky enough for the meanwhile, let’s say that.’

The strange feeling welled up and squeezed his heart again. His eyes ran along the Tops, looking for a sign, but there was none. And when he looked around again Tilwin had vanished. For a moment it seemed that the knife-grinder had never been there at all.

Will wandered down and stood under the painted sign of the Green Man. It was a merry face – one of the fae folk – green as a leaf and all overgrown with ivy. The sign was bedecked now with white Cuckootide hawthorn blossom.

Cuthwal was inside, playing his fiddle, but there was no sign of Eldmar, his father, so Will wandered away, sat down on the grass for a while and watched folk coming up from way down the Vale. Then it was time for the boys’ race and there was cheering as half a dozen lads sprinted across the green and tried to be first to lay a hand on the Tarry Stone.

But Will did not feel like cheering anybody on. Leoftan had mentioned an ill wind, and an ill wind had sprung up – or at least a cold one – and not just over the Tops either. Iron-grey clouds had begun to boil up and gather darkly in the west. At first no one among the villagers seemed to notice, but then as the sun went in, one or two of them started to look skyward, and soon the bunting began to flap and the crowns of the tall beeches in Pannage Woods started to sway and roar. Folk began to feel a sudden chill touch them. It looked suddenly as if it would rain.

The music stopped and folk set to helping one another clear the stalls and tables away. They muttered that this was unheard of, because the last time the May Pole dance had been washed out was beyond living memory. Will had just finished lending a hand when a cry went up. He turned and saw old Frithwold coming up the track, shaking his fists as he ran.

‘Jack o’ Lantern!’ he wheezed as he reached the Green Man.

‘May Death cut me down if I tell a lie! Jack o’ Lantern’s down in the lanes!’

‘Now, sit down and catch your thoughts, Frith,’ Bregowina, the brewster’s wife, said coolly. ‘There ain’t no warlocks round here.’

‘Sit down be blowed! It be Jack o’ Lantern in the lanes over by Bloody Meadow, I tell you!’

Baldgood peered past his barrels. ‘You’ve had too much of them cider dregs, Frith.’

‘Noooo! It was Jack o’ Lantern, as I live and breathe!’

They settled him down, and the clearing away carried on until all the doors were put back on their hinges and everything was closed up tight. There was no doubting Frithwold believed what he was saying – he was grey in the face and more upset than Will had ever seen him. Groups of Valesmen were muttering to one another, scythes in hand, glancing fearfully down the track. He turned to Baldgood and asked, ‘Who’s Jack o’ Lantern?’

‘You won’t recall him,’ Baldgood said, troubled.

‘Tell me.’

‘He’s a visitor who comes to these parts from time to time. And not such a welcome one neither. You’d’ve been just a babe in arms when last he came this way, or not even born maybe.’

Cuthwal leaned across. ‘We don’t none of us like the looks of him. And we never did.’

Will looked down the lane and saw nothing unusual. ‘Why not?’

‘Because he’s a *crow*, and up to no good.’

‘Don’t you fear now, Will,’ Baldgood said. ‘There’s a hue and cry gone up after him. Our stout lads’ll drive him off! Now you best get back home.’

Will looked out across the green. Inky clouds filled the sky now. It was almost as dark as night. Then it began to pelt with rain. The May Pole looked forlorn as it swayed with its ribbons streaming out. The wind had got up fiercely and was trying to tear down what was left of the bunting. Bregowina, unruffled as

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ever, lit candles, and her sons barred the doors. They had just finished when Gifold One-Tooth and both his sons started banging, wanting to be let in. The way they held their pitchforks showed they expected trouble, but nobody had told them what sort.

‘What does Jack o’ Lantern look like?’ Will asked, but nobody answered him.

He folded his arms. No fire burned in the hearth and the only light in the parlour now was from two candles that burned with a quavering, smoky flame. It was a light that did not penetrate far. ‘I’ve never seen a crow. Is that the same as a warlock?’

‘None of them knows much about what Jack o’ Lantern looks like, Will.’

He turned at the voice that came from the back of the room. At the table in the corner shadows sat Tilwin. He had found a place where nobody had noticed him. His hat was in front of him on the table, and he was thumbing the edge of a long, thin knife. He said, ‘The only man in Nether Norton who ever challenged Jack o’ Lantern face to face was Evergern the Potter, and he’s been dead these ten years.’

‘What are you doing, skulking back there?’ Gifold demanded, as if he was speaking to a ghost.

‘Minding my own business, Gif. Like you should be doing.’ Tilwin leaned forward and turned his gaze on the rest of them. ‘I slipped in quiet, so I did, while you were all running about down the way like fowls with their heads stricken off. I could have marched an army in here for all you’d have known about it.’

‘You’re a strange customer, and no mistake,’ Baldgood said.

‘That I may be, but let me tell you something about your Jack o’ Lantern – in this part of the Vale you call him by that name and say he’s a crow. Others further down call him “Merlyn”, or “Master Merlyn” to be correct about it, though that isn’t his true name. Down by Great Norton they say he’s “Erilar” and claim he’s a warlock. While over at Bruern they put the name “Finnygus”

on him and fetch their horses to him to benefit from his leechcraft. But none of them knows who he is, for Jack casts a weirder light than any lantern ever I saw.' Tilwin leaned further forward until the candlelight caught in his blue eyes. 'He runs deep does our friend Jack. Deep as the Kyle of Stratha. Nor does he suffer fools easily. So if he's got business in this place, I'd let him finish it without hindrance – if I were you.'

There was silence. Like everyone else, Will listened and held his peace. He didn't understand much of what had been said, but the thrill of excitement at Tilwin's words made the hairs rise up on the back of his neck.

'Now that's enough of that kind of talk,' Baldgood muttered, bustling out from behind his counter. 'Willand! Now, I thought I told you to get on home?'

Will went to the door but after what Tilwin had said home seemed a long way to go in the pitch dark. In truth it was no more than a furlong – a couple of hundred paces – but it was still raining hard. He poked his head outside. Water was trickling down the track. Where only a short while before there had been dry dust, now there was a stream. He jumped out into the night and set off at a run until the light from the alehouse gave out. Then he stubbed his toe painfully on a flint and almost fell. After that he groped his way along by the side of the green. His shirt was soaked. Every village door was closed and every shutter barred tight.

So much for welcoming the summer in, he thought as he felt twigs snapping in the grass under his feet. His outstretched hands met the deeply grooved bark of the Old Oak. He paused, listening. Overhead, leaves were rattling in the downpour, and there was something eerie about the sound, as if the tree was talking to itself.

He shook the water out of his eyes and peered into the dark to where a faint bar of yellow light escaped under a door. Home. He stumbled towards it, and soon his fingers felt a familiar latch.

The light guttered in the draught as he came in, then steadied.

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He saw Breona and Eldmar, his mother and father, standing together by the unlit hearth, and there, seated before them, was a stranger.

The figure was wrapped in a mouse-brown cloak with a hood that shadowed his face. Will's heart beat against his ribs. He was about to speak when his father told him sternly: 'Go up to bed, Willand.'

'But Father—'

'Will! Do as I tell you!'

Eldmar had never barked at him like that before. He looked from face to face, scared now. He wanted to go to his mother's side, but his father was not to be argued with, and Will obeyed. He felt his knees give slightly as he climbed the ladder into the rafters, and dived straight to his nest in the loft. There he lay on the bag of straw that served as his bed. It was warm and smoky up here under the eaves. His wet hair stuck to his forehead and his shirt was clammy on his back as his hand sought out the comfort of a stout wooden threshing flail. He moved as quietly as he could to the edge of the loft where he could watch and listen, telling himself that if anything happened he would pull back the hurdles, jump down and set about the stranger.

But if this was Jack o' Lantern, he was nothing like the warlock the men had spoken about. By his knee there rested a staff a full fathom in length, fashioned from a kind of wood that had a marvellous sheen to it. The stranger himself had a pale, careworn face, with a long nose and longer beard. The hair of his beard might once have been the colour of corn or copper, but it had faded to badger shades of grey. He was swathed in a wayfarer's cloak that was made of shreds, and at times seemed almost colourless in the flickering tallow light. Beneath his hood he wore a skullcap, but under the hem of his belted gown his long legs were without hose and his feet unshod. There were many cords about his neck, and among the amulets and charms that rattled at his chest, a bird's skull.

‘It is said that eavesdroppers will often pick up things they do not like to hear,’ the stranger said. His voice was quiet, yet it carried. It was touched with a strangeness that made Will think of faraway places.

‘Why can’t you leave us alone?’ Will’s mother whispered.

‘Because promises were made. You know why I am here. I must have him.’

At that, Will felt an icy fist clutch him. His world suddenly lurched and refused to right itself. He heard his father say, ‘But those promises were made thirteen years ago!’

‘What does the passage of time signify when a promise is made?’

‘We’ve grown to love him as you said we should!’

‘A promise is eternal. Have you forgotten how matters stood when you made it? You and your good wife were childless, denied the joys that parents know. How dearly you wished for a baby boy of your own. And then one night, on the third day past Cuckootide, I came to you with a three-day-old babe and your misery was at an end.’

‘You can’t take him back!’ Will’s mother shrieked.

The stranger made suddenly as if to rise. Will’s parents took a step back as his grip tightened on the flail. ‘He is no longer a boy. A child you wanted, and a child I brought. But now the child is become a man – a man – and I must have this son of Beltane as we agreed. I said there would be an errand for him, and so there is.’

A dark gulf of silence stood between them for a moment, then the stranger spoke subtle words and Eldmar and Breona hung their heads and made no further argument.

Up in his loft Will found himself numbed to the marrow of his bones. He began to tremble. Whether it was from shock or fear, or the working of evil magic he could not tell. As the stranger rose, Will’s grip tightened on the threshing flail, but when he looked again there was nothing in his hand but a wooden spoon, and the flail was nowhere to be seen.

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‘Call the lad down,’ the stranger suggested. ‘Tell him he has no need to fear me.’

Eldmar called, and Will came down the ladder as if his arms and legs had minds of their own. He felt his father’s hands on his shoulders, but his father’s face betrayed only heartsickness. ‘Forgive me if you can, Willand,’ he said simply. ‘I should have had the courage to tell you sooner.’

‘Tell me what?’ Will asked, blinking. ‘I won’t go with him. He’s a warlock, and I won’t go with him!’

‘You must, son.’ Eldmar’s face remained grim. ‘Thirteen years ago we gave our word. We swore to keep the manner of your coming to us a secret. We swore because we so wanted a boy of our own. Each year that passed sons came to others, but never to us. You seemed like our blessing.’

Will drew a hollow breath. ‘You . . . should have told me.’

‘We were sworn to tell no one,’ Breona wailed. ‘Even so we meant to tell you, Will. But first you were too young. Then, you were such a well-liked boy that we couldn’t find the proper time to upset our happy home. It would have broken our hearts, do you see?’

Eldmar hung his head and Breona held out her hand. There were tears in her eyes. ‘Say you forgive us for what we did, Willand.’

Will wiped away his own tears. ‘There’s nothing to forgive. You’re the best father and mother any boy could have.’

‘Please,’ Breona said, turning back to the stranger. ‘Can’t you give us just a little more time? Let him stay for one more day, as a mercy to us!’

‘It would be no mercy,’ the stranger said. ‘Of that I am quite sure, for he may be the Child of Destiny, the one whose name appears in the Black Book.’

At that, Breona’s eyes flared. She would have thrown herself on the stranger had Eldmar not caught her in his arms. ‘He’s my Willand, and nobody else!’

Will found himself unable to move. The stranger reached

out to touch man and wife, speaking words and making a sign above both their foreheads. 'Do not punish yourselves,' he commanded. 'You are blameless. You have done all that was asked of you.'

Eldmar's eyes drooped, and his wife's hands hung loose at her sides. Then Breona shook her head as if she had just come awake. She hugged Will, her eyes full of tenderness now. 'You must put on a dry shirt, son. I'll fetch out your best jerkin and give you a bundle of sweetcakes for your journey.'

But Will drew back in fear. 'What have you done to them?' he cried.

'Be calm, Willand. They remember nothing of their former fears. They have been comforted.'

'You've bewitched them!'

'I have applied an incantation. There is no harm in it.'

Will tried to launch himself at the visitor, but Eldmar caught him in strong arms and said, 'Willand, be easy! I made a promise, but it's you who must redeem it. That's often the way with sons and fathers.'

Breona kissed him again and went to the linen chest. From it she took a parting gift, an ornament the size of his thumb made of smooth, greenish stone. It was carved in the form of a leaping salmon, and engraved with a figure and some words. Words were beyond Will's plain learning to read, though the figure was three triangles placed one within another. Its meaning – if it had one – was not clear.

'It was inside your blanket when you were brought to us,' Breona said. 'It's only right that it should go with you now. Wear it as a charm, for a mother's love goes with it. And, like the salmon, may you return to us again some day.'

Her eyes sparkled when she smiled at him, and he threw his arms around her neck. 'You'll always be my mother. Always!'

Eldmar said, 'I have nothing to give you, but I will do one thing before you go. Sit down.'

When Will sat down on the three-legged stool, Eldmar caught

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up a handful of his hair. His big, blunt fingers carefully teased out the strands. They twisted and pulled and twisted again, working expertly until two braids were done.

‘There,’ his father said as he stood up. ‘Now you’re a man.’