SECRET of the STONES

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Barrington Stoke

For my cousin Trevor Bradman –
gone, but not forgotten

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Chapter 1
A Storm Coming

My name is Maglos. My father is the High Chief of my tribe, the Guardians of the Great Temple. His name is Daguno and I am his only son. Listen now as I tell you the story of how I was cast out of the light and into the darkness. How I was lost, and how I found my way again.

Listen closely. For this is the story of how I died, and came back to life ...

*

My story begins on a summer morning. I woke up early to go fishing in the river near

our village, but my father stopped me as I was leaving the great hall. We stood side by side in front of its doors and looked over the huts at the wide plain beyond. In the distance we could see the Great Temple, its giant stones grey in the soft light of dawn. Thick clouds were moving in from the west, and I knew they would bring a rain storm.

"Stay with me today, Maglos," my father said. "I have a feeling I will need you."

He was frowning, and seemed troubled, but that wasn't unusual. I knew it wasn't easy to be High Chief. The Great Temple was a holy place, the gateway between the Land of the Living and the Land of the Dead. People came from near and far to have their new babies blessed here, and to bury their dead chiefs. They came to the festivals of the sun in summer and winter. They came to make sacrifices to the Gods.

And so, my father, as the High Chief, was always busy. He had to make sure things were



done in the right way, especially the prayers and the rituals – the High Chief was a priest as well as a leader. The people who came needed shelter, they needed food and they needed to be cared for. And people can be difficult, so there were often problems to be sorted out. But in the last few days, my father had been more worried than normal, and I guessed why.

"Of course I will stay with you," I said. "But what is wrong? Has Tigran done something?"

"Not yet, my son – it is what he might do that makes me feel uneasy."

"Why is he always so horrible to you?" I asked. "He is your brother. Why aren't you friends?"

"There is great love in families," my father said, "but there can be great hate too." He gave a sigh. "I only hope that one day Tigran will see we can be friends again ..."

‘Such a thing will never happen,’ I thought, but I said nothing. Tigran was my father’s younger brother, and once they had loved each other and played together. They had always looked alike – both were strong, their backs and arms broad, their hair black like that of most of the tribe. People said I looked just like them too.

But my father and uncle had grown up to be very different from each other – as different as two brothers could be. My father was kind and thoughtful. Tigran had become a warrior – he loved to fight and, sometimes, to be cruel. He often said my father was weak, and that he, Tigran, should be High Chief.

I hated Tigran for the way he treated my father. My mother had died of a winter sickness when I was still a baby, 12 summers before, and my father had not taken another wife. My father and I were very close, and I knew just how brave and wise a man he was.

Only one person could be High Chief after him, and that was me. In our tribe, when the High Chief dies, it is his oldest son that takes his place.

"Will Tigran come back from his hunting trip today?" I said.

"Yes," my father said. "He sent one of his men ahead of him to tell us he would be back before sundown."

"I wish he would go hunting more often," I said. "Things are better when he and his band of warriors are away."

My father smiled. "Perhaps he will surprise us this time, and be kind," he said.

Then he looked up at the sky. "I sense a storm … Come, let us see to the people who arrived yesterday, and make sure they have everything they need."

Tigran and the rain storm both arrived later that day, one after the other. The rain fell, a gusting wind blew it sideways. Lightning flickered and crackled over the plain, and the Gods spoke in the dark sky. The deep thunder of their voices rumbled above our heads.

Tigran returned just as the storm finished. He ran in the village gate with his men, their tunics wet from the rain, their legs thick with mud. Two of the men carried the body of a fine deer, slung on a wooden pole between them.

"Greetings, brother," my father said. "I see you have had good hunting."

Then Tigran did surprise us. I expected him to show off to his warriors by saying something sharp or mean to my father, the way he always did. He stopped, as if he wanted to speak, but then he seemed to change his mind. He frowned instead and turned away to go to his own house.

As I watched Tigran go, I felt a chill run down my spine.