



**Learn English Through
Stories
B1 Novels and Stories
Pre-Intermediate Level**

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Sue Murray

The Singing Stones

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By Sue Murray

CHAPTER ONE

The dark day

This is the story of a boy named Finn who lived by the sea. Finn thought he was like every other boy in the village. One day he found out, he was not. That day started out like every other day for Finn.

'Come on, lad, I want you to come fishing with me today,' said Finn's great uncle Keenar.

Finn said nothing. He sat and ate his porridge.

'Go on, Finn,' said his great aunt Tia. 'Keenar needs your help today. He must catch as many fish as he can. The fish will swim south any day now on their journey to the Great Glassy Sea. Storm season is coming.'

Finn said nothing. He looked out of the window of their small hut on the beach of black pebbles on the west coast of Avondel. The sun was shining, the sky was blue, and the sea was still. Yet he knew that storm season was only days away. It could start tonight. There was no fishing in storm season. And their store of fish was not full.

'Those fish won't wait for us, lad,' said Keenar, standing up and pulling on his fishing boots.

Finn said nothing, but he stood up and pulled on his fishing boots too.

'Here, take this,' said Tia, giving the man and the boy some bread and cheese in a cloth bag.

Tia stood in the doorway of the little hut. She watched Keenar and Finn walk across the beach of black pebbles. She watched the dark-haired, dark-skinned man and the thin, red-haired boy. She sighed. Everybody in the village was dark-haired. Everybody except Finn. She sighed again as she watched them push Keenar's boat into the water. Then she turned, went into the hut and started sweeping.

Keenar's boat was small and flat, like every other boat on the water. These boats were only found on this part of the west coast of Avondel. It took years for people to learn how to row them. The men of Finn's village could row their boats across the water as fast as most men could run on land. Every villager, even very small children, loved being out on the sea. Every villager except Finn. He got seasick.

It was all right in shallow water - Finn didn't get seasick when they went fishing in the bay. It was when they went out deeper, out past the bay, that Finn got sick.

Keenar looked at the water around the boat. He shook his head. 'We'll have to go into the deep water today, lad,' said Keenar. 'The fish have left the bay. We'll have to follow the last of the fish out past Shark Island.'

Finn hated going into the deep water. But he nodded. He sat at the front of the boat. Keenar stood at the back of the boat, rowing. He rowed by using one long oar that went deep into the water. He swept the oar from side to side. Keenar was strong. He'd been rowing boats for fifty years or more. His boat moved across the still water of the bay faster than some men can run.

When they left the bay, the water turned from green to dark blue. They were in deep water now.

Finn started to feel sick.

'Keep busy, lad. Get the sails ready,' said Keenar. Outside the bay, there was enough wind for the sail. Finn got the sail ready and gave the ropes to Keenar, who put the oar away.

Finn started to feel very seasick.

'Look at the horizon, lad,' said Keenar. 'That can help stop seasickness. Here, you sail the boat. That helps too.'

Finn held the ropes of the sail. He looked past Shark Island to where the dark blue of the sea met the light blue of the sky. Then he saw the dark clouds on the horizon. Storm season was coming - soon.

Later that day, Keenar and Finn carried two baskets of fish into the hut.

Tia smiled. 'Two baskets! Wonderful!'

Finn said, 'Can I go to the forest?' Finn loved spending time in the forest. He loved the quiet, still trees. None of the other boys from the village went into the forest. It was too dark and quiet for them. But Finn liked being alone there. He spent hours sitting and watching the birds, small animals and insects of the forest. He loved watching them building their nests and collecting their food. Most of all, he loved watching the newborn birds learning to fly.

'Yes, Finn. Go. But be back before the sun sets, please,' said Tia.

Tia and Keenar watched Finn run down the road towards the forest. His red hair shone in the afternoon sun.

Tia sighed.

'He's a good lad,' said Keenar. 'He worked hard all day. He was seasick again. But he kept working.'

Just as he reached the forest, Finn saw a group of soldiers riding towards him on the road that led to the village. There were eight of them. They rode black warhorses and wore the red and black colours of the warlord Gondar. Every person in Avondel lived in fear of the warlord and his soldiers. Finn hid behind a large tree.

Then Finn saw an old man and an old woman walking along the road. It was Bentar and Nita. Finn often chopped their wood for them. They were carrying a basket of vegetables to the village. They sold their vegetables at the evening markets. Two of the soldiers stopped next to Bentar and Nita. The other six soldiers rode on.

'Stop, old man! Stop, old woman!' yelled one soldier. 'Stop in the name of Gondar, warlord of Avondel!'

Bentar and Nita stopped. They looked at the ground.

The second soldier got off his horse and marched over to Bentar and Nita.

'Tell me, does a boy with red hair live in this village?' the soldier yelled at them.

Bentar and Nita looked at each other. They looked frightened. But they both shook their heads.

'You're lying!' yelled the soldier. 'The sky readers told Gondar that the boy lived by the sea on the west coast. They said he lived within sight of Shark Island. He must live in this village. Tell me where the boy with red hair is.'

The old people didn't speak.

'Tell me now!' The soldier hit Bentar. Nita screamed and dropped the basket. Potatoes rolled across the road.

Hiding behind the tree, Finn was frightened. Gondar's soldiers are looking for a boy with red hair? I'm the only boy with red hair in the village, he thought. The sky readers can see the past, the present and the future. What was written in the sky about me? What did they tell Gondar about me?

He heard Nita scream again. This time the soldier had hit her.

'Where is the boy with red hair?' yelled the soldier. 'Speak!'

I have to stop this, thought Finn.

He was about to come out from behind the tree when he heard the sound of a trumpet.

The first soldier said, 'Leave them. The others have found something. Maybe they've found the boy.'

Finn heard the trumpet again. The second soldier got back on his horse and the soldiers rode away.

Bentar and Nita started picking up their potatoes. Finn came out from behind the tree. 'Thank you,' he said. 'Let me help...'

'Finn!' said Nita. 'Run home, now! Don't let the soldiers see you, but run!'

Just as Finn started running back to the little hut on the pebbly beach, he heard thunder. He looked up. The sky was dark and full of black clouds. Storm season had come.

CHAPTER TWO

The armlet

Keenar shut the door of the hut behind Finn. Tia stood next to Keenar. She looked frightened.

There was a loud clap of thunder. The rain would soon start.

'Did any of the soldiers see you?' asked Keenar, looking out of the window that faced the road. Finn saw that Keenar held one of his large fishing knives.

'No,' said Finn. 'But I know they're looking for me. Why?'

'I'll tell you, Finn,' said Tia. 'But first help me move the table. We don't have much time. Someone will tell them where to find you. Someone will send the soldiers here.' She went over to the big wooden table near the stove.

Finn helped Tia to move it. Under the table, there was a small door in the floor. Finn had never seen this door before. Tia lifted up the door and reached into the small hole under the floor.

There was another clap of thunder - louder and closer than the last.

'Take this,' said Tia. She lifted a bundle of cloth from the hole and gave it to Finn. 'It is not yet time to give you this, but there is no time left, you poor boy.'

'What is it?' asked Finn.

'I will tell you everything about your family, your mother, and the power you have. Read the note and then we'll talk.'

Tia went over to help Keenar, who was pushing all the furniture in front of the door to the hut.

In the bundle of cloth, there were two things: a note and a circle of gold.

Finn looked at the note first. It was addressed to 'My darling son, Finn.' He opened it. He read.

Darling Finn,

Our family are the keepers of the stones, my son. When you are strong enough to use the power, you will find the way to help all of Avondel. Find the stones. They are hidden for all to see. Listen to the stones, Finn. And keep the gold armlet, always. It is yours now, darling boy. Be brave, keeper of the stones.

Your loving mother

Finn read the note again. Stones, hidden for all to see? He thought. Keeper of the stones? Use the power - what power?

Then he looked at the circle of gold. His head was filled with questions. He turned to Tia and said, 'Tia, what really happened to my mother?'

Suddenly they heard trumpets very close by. They heard screams from a nearby hut. They heard horses coming closer and closer, and the shouts of the soldiers. 'There - that must be the hut!'

'Quick, Finn, there is no time. Climb out of the window. Now!' said Keenar.

Tia grabbed an old woollen cap of Keenar's and pulled it onto Finn's head.

'Keep that red hair of yours covered, Finn.' She grabbed Keenar's fishing cloak and gave that to Finn too. 'Go!' she said, with tears in her eyes.

Finn kissed Tia. Then, holding the cloak, the note and the gold armlet, he climbed out of the back window.

In the evening light, Finn could just see the edge of the water, dark grey now against the black pebbles. Which way to go? Where could he hide from the soldiers? The forest! He'd go to the forest.

A very loud clap of thunder made Finn jump. A strong wind started to blow. The storm was very close now.

Finn quickly put on the cloak. Then he put on the armlet. And as he put it on, his head was filled with singing.

All thought of the forest, of Gondar's soldiers, of danger, left him. All he could hear, all he could think of was the song.

The song was like a cradlesong - a song from when he was a child - that he knew, or half-knew. He remembered the tune and some of the words. A

picture of a beautiful woman with red hair came to him in his mind. In his mind, this woman was singing the song.

I remember this woman singing that song, Finn thought. It must have been my mother. I wish I could remember her.

Now parts of the song filled his mind.

One day the stones will sing to you

Then you must find out what to do...

Beware of nylars, they're seldom nice

Their smiles are wide, their hearts are ice...

Beware of the blood-sucking voomax...

And on that day three suns will shine

And stone will live, dear child of mine

Peace and joy will come to our land

Just as the all-seeing Zan planned

Finn shook his head. Monsters, three suns - singing stones? He thought. That was just a cradlesong, wasn't it? Who - or what - is singing it now?

The song seemed to be coming from the beach. Finn turned towards the beach. The song was louder. He walked towards the water. The song grew louder and louder.

Suddenly Finn heard other sounds as well as the song. He heard screams and smashing wood. Keenar and Tia! He turned back to the hut as he heard another clap of thunder, the loudest yet. This time, the sky lit up - lightning!

Soldiers came running around the side of the hut.

'There! There's a boy on the beach! After him!'

Finn turned and ran along the pebbly beach, with the song filling his head again. He couldn't think. He just ran, with the soldiers getting closer and closer. He ran with the song getting louder and louder. Thunder and lightning filled the sky and the wind grew stronger and stronger.

Suddenly, ahead of him, he saw something that he had never noticed before - two different stones among the many, many thousands of black stones on the beach. It was strange - these two stones seemed to shine. And suddenly Finn knew that these stones were calling to him. They were singing.

As his mother's note said, they were hidden for all to see. How long had these two stones been there on the beach, waiting for Finn to find them? As he got

nearer to them, the song grew louder and louder - it filled Finn's mind and seemed to fill his whole body.

The soldiers were only a few steps behind him now. There were three of them, running close together. 'Got you, lad!' said the closest one, reaching out for Finn.

But at that moment, Finn quickly bent down and picked up the stones. The soldier wasn't ready for such a move, and he fell over Finn. Finn got up and ran along the beach. Looking back, he saw the three soldiers had all fallen. The other two had fallen over the first soldier. They were all trying to get up but their swords were caught in each other's cloaks.

Finn then realised that the stones had stopped singing. He put them into his pocket and kept running. More soldiers ran onto the beach. Finn knew he'd be caught within minutes. There was nowhere to run.

Suddenly Finn heard a boy's voice calling to him from the water.

'Finn! Finn! Over here!'

CHAPTER THREE

The sky reader

In the shallow water, in the last of the evening's light, Finn saw a boy - a stranger. He was holding one of the fishing boats.

'Quick, Finn!' the boy called.

Two soldiers were very close to Finn. He had no time to think. He ran into the water. He and the boy pushed the boat away from the beach and jumped into it.

'Quick,' shouted a soldier. 'He's getting away! He's in that boat!'

Finn looked back to the beach and saw some soldiers pushing two fishing boats into the water.

'So how do we make this thing go?' asked the boy. 'Do we use this?' he asked, holding the oar.

'No, in this wind we can use the sail. Help me.' Together, Finn and the boy got the sail ready. Holding a rope, Finn was able to sail the boat away from the beach and away from the soldiers. He pointed the boat towards the deep water, into the dark night. The wind was strong now, so the boat went across the water very fast. The thunder and lightning were stronger than ever.

'Look!' said the boy, pointing back towards the beach.

Finn looked back, and in a flash of lightning, he saw two soldiers in the water, holding onto one of the boats. Two other soldiers were trying to row the boat they were in. Finn could see they were pushing when they should be pulling.

In the next flash of lightning, Finn saw they'd fallen into the water too. Other soldiers were standing in the shallow water, shouting and yelling at the soldiers in the water.

Finn and the boy laughed.

'They'll never catch us now,' said Finn. 'These boats are hard to sail even in good weather.'

'But you know how to, don't you?' asked the boy.

Finn nodded.

They sat in silence as Finn sailed the boat out of the bay.

'There's one problem,' Finn said after a little while.

'Only one problem? That's not bad!' said the boy.

'At night, I need the stars to sail by. I need the stars to show me the way.'

Both boys looked up into the sky. It was black now but there were no stars.

'Oh,' said the boy. 'Well, I know one way we can't go - back that way,' he said, pointing back at the beach.

When they were past Shark Island, Finn asked, 'Who are you, anyway? And how do you know my name?'

In the light of the next flash of lightning, Finn took a good look at the boy. He was about Finn's age and he had a thin face. His hair and skin were white but his eyes were large and black. They were as black as the stones in Finn's pocket. Finn put his hand on his pocket.

'Are the stones safe?' asked the boy. 'I want to help you, keeper of the stones.'

Finn took his hand away from his pocket. 'Who are you?' asked Finn again.

'And how do you know about the stones? How can I trust you?'

'Because I'm a sky reader,' said the boy.

'Oh,' said Finn. Of course, the boy was a sky reader. All sky readers had white hair and black eyes. Finn had never met one before. But Finn knew he could trust the boy, because sky readers cannot lie. They can only speak the truth.

'What's your name?' he asked the young sky reader.

'Lorca.'

After that, it was impossible to talk. The storm suddenly grew stronger and the claps of thunder were almost non-stop. The sea was wild and Finn was worried that they'd be thrown into the water. The wind was so strong that the ropes were almost pulled out of Finn's hands. It was like holding onto a wild horse.

'Help me, Lorca. You hold this rope and I'll hold this one.' The boys sailed on through the storm, and through the dark night.

CHAPTER FOUR

Lost at sea

The boat sailed on and on. There was no light. Everything was black - the sky, the sea, everything. The storm got worse and worse. The wind was so strong it sounded like a screaming monster.

'We must take the sail down,' yelled Finn. 'The wind is too strong. It will tear the sail apart.'

'Just so long as the sea doesn't tear the boat apart!' yelled Lorca, as he helped Finn to pull the sail down.

'And we don't hit any rocks - they would tear the boat apart!' Finn yelled back.

'Will we? Will we hit rocks?' asked Lorca.

'I hope not,' said Finn. But he thought, I don't know. And I have no idea where we are.

'What did you say?' yelled Lorca. 'I can't hear you over the wind.'

'Oh... nothing. We'll be fine. Let's try to get some rest,' yelled Finn. As he said this, the rain started.

The boys lay in the bottom of the boat. They covered themselves with the sail but they were cold and wet. Finn felt very seasick. They tried to sleep but it was a long and terrible night.

Finn thought of the stories he'd been told as a child. The stories were about monsters that lived far to the west, past the horizon, past where the sunset. Nobody from Finn's village had ever sailed past where the sunset. But they'd all heard tales of monsters that could tear people apart with their teeth. Finn used to have bad dreams about terrible creatures that flew out of the evening sky and carried him off into the sunset. He hoped they weren't being carried towards such creatures now.

Sometime after midnight, the rain stopped, but the wind kept blowing. Finn thought it had changed direction, but he couldn't be certain.

After many hours, the light changed a little.

It must be daybreak, thought Finn. But there was no sunrise to see - only clouds everywhere, grey, dark grey or black.

Finn stood up, holding onto the mast. The wind pulled at him. He looked in every direction - north, south, east and west. He couldn't see land anywhere.

He sat down next to Lorca.

'So where are we, do you think?' asked Lorca.

'I don't know,' replied Finn. 'We've travelled so fast and the wind changed direction a few hours ago. I hoped to see the sunrise, so I could tell which way was east. But in this storm I can't tell.'

'I'm hungry!' said Lorca. 'Do you know what I'd love right now? A bowl of hot porridge.'

'Oh, please don't talk about food,' said Finn, 'I feel terrible.'

'But you're from a fishing family. I'm surprised you get seasick.'

'I always have. And I don't know much about my family. My great aunt Tia was always going to tell me... one day. Now it may be too late for her to tell me anything.'

The boys were silent.

Finally, after many hours, the wind dropped. The boys were able to talk to each other easily, and to stand up and move about in the boat.

The boys pulled the sail back up the mast. 'It needs to dry out,' said Finn.

'We need to dry out too,' said Lorca. He and Finn spread out their wet cloaks but they had no way to dry out their clothes.

Finn held onto the ropes of the sail. 'I don't know which direction to sail in,' he said to Lorca. 'I can't see land anywhere. We should look for the signs of land - look for birds flying, Lorca. That means land is nearby.'

Lorca looked up into the sky. 'The strange thing is that I can't read anything in this sky. I've never tried to read the sky from the sea before. Maybe that's why I can't read it.'

To pass the time, the boys talked.

Finn said, 'I'm so worried about Keenar and Tia. Have you sky readers read their future? What will happen to them?'

Lorca didn't speak for a moment. Then he said, 'They will be taken to the city of Liana, to the warlord. He will try to make them tell him where you are. That's all I know.'

'Oh no! That's terrible!' said Finn. 'I have to help them! I must go back.'

'You can't,' said Lorca. 'Even if you knew the way back, Gondar's soldiers would be waiting for you.'

Finn sat in silence. Then he asked Lorca, 'And... and what about me? What have you read about my future?'

'That's the problem, Finn,' said Lorca. 'It's why I've been watching you.'

'You've been watching me?'

'Yes, for some days now. Ever since Gondar heard about the stones.'

Finn knew that sky readers read the sky for anybody who paid them, good or bad.

Lorca went on, 'I want to help you. It is written that the keeper of the stones has the power to turn Gondar into stone. And it is written that the keeper of the stones must use singing stones to do this. And it is written that you, Finn, are the keeper of the stones.'

'But I don't know anything about the stones! And I don't have any power.'

Lorca said, 'The sky doesn't lie, Finn. Nor do I.' Lorca looked at Finn, then said, 'Maybe I should explain why I want to help you. I hate the warlord. I hate the way our country is filled with sadness and fear. But most of all I hate Gondar because he killed my grandfather. So if you can turn Gondar into stone, I want to help you.'

'So what do we do now?' said Finn, putting his hand into his pocket and touching the stones.

'I don't know. Maybe the stones will tell us. Are the stones singing now?' said Lorca.

'No,' said Finn.

'I'm hungry and thirsty,' said Lorca.

'We can drink the rainwater,' said Finn. There was rainwater in the bucket that was used to hold the fish. 'But there is no food, I'm sorry.'

The boys tried to catch little fish that swam past the boat. They saw sea snakes and green turtles too. All the sea creatures were swimming in the same direction as the boat was being carried by the sea. 'I know which direction

we're going in!' said Finn. 'Why didn't I think of it? All these fish are swimming south, south to the Great Glassy Sea.'

'Is that good?' asked Lorca.

'Well, it's good that we're not going west. I've heard of monsters in the west...'

'... that eat people in one bite,' said Lorca.

They sailed on and on under the grey sky that slowly turned to black as evening came.

That night, a second, bigger storm started. The boat was tossed on huge waves. The wind screamed and roared. It changed directions several times and carried the boat for miles. Both boys held onto the mast and to each other. Again and again waves crashed over the side of the boat. Water started filling the boat. Rain poured down. Thunder and lightning filled the sky.

'Look - there,' yelled Lorca. 'Are they birds? Maybe we're near land!'

In a flash of lightning Finn saw dark shapes in the sky, bigger than any birds he'd ever seen. He thought again of the terrible monsters that flew out of the evening sky. Then the sky was filled by a huge wave that grabbed Finn and tossed him into the sea.

'Lorca!' he called.

He heard Lorca calling back, 'Finn! Finn! This way!'

Finn tried to swim towards the boat but the waves tossed him the way a cat tosses a mouse. Finn felt himself going under the water. He held his breath and swam back up into the air. He took a deep breath but soon went under the water again. He was getting weaker and weaker. He swam up for air just as a wave crashed over him. He went under for a third time.

I'm, going to drown, he thought. He felt hands grabbing at him, pulling him up and out of the water. I'm flying, he thought. The monsters have come. Or have I drowned? Is this death?

CHAPTER FIVE

The Nylars

Finn woke up. It was a warm, sunny morning. The storm had passed. He was lying under a tree on a sandy beach. I'm not dead! He thought. It was such a pleasure to lie, warm and dry, on the soft sand. Then he thought of Lorca.

Finn stood up. 'Lorca! Lorca?' he yelled. The beach was empty.

'Who's Lorca?' said a voice from the tree.

Finn looked up. In the tree were three strange creatures. They looked like short, fat monkeys with wings. One was black, one was brown and one was red. They stared down at Finn.

'You're not going to... eat me, are you?' Finn asked, backing away from the creatures. He thought, is this a dream? Am I dead? Where am I?

'Eat you? Hee hee,' laughed the red one, showing small, sharp teeth in his wide smile.

'Yuck!' said the brown one. Then it grabbed a berry from the tree and ate it.

The third creature, the black one, stared at Finn. Then it turned to the other two creatures and said, 'Catch!'

It threw something across to the red creature, who threw it back. The brown creature tried to catch it as the other two tossed it between themselves. Finn looked carefully at what they were tossing. It was the armlet!

He felt his arm - the armlet was gone. He reached into his pocket. The stones were gone too!

Finn yelled, 'That's mine! Give it back!' He reached up and tried to grab the armlet from the red creature. But it held the armlet out of Finn's reach.

'Hee hee,' it laughed. The brown creature ate another berry, then looked down at Finn and said, 'It's ours, now. It's the price you pay for being saved by nylars.'

Nylars! Finn remembered a part of the cradle song.

Creatures and monsters are everywhere

So please, my child, always take care

Creatures of every shape and size

To get past them all, you must be wise

Beware of nylars, they're seldom nice

Their smiles are wide, their hearts are ice

They're like pirates seeking treasure.

Treasure is their only pleasure

Nylars! So the song was true! And they had the armlet.

The nylar with the armlet bit it gently.

'Hmm. Pretty. We'll keep it. We like pretty treasure.'

The brown nylar picked up something that was sitting on the branch. It was one of the stones! The nylar bit it. 'Yuck. Not gold, not silver. And not pretty.'

The nylar picked up the other stone and looked down at Finn. 'Why do you carry these in your pocket? Are they treasure?'

Finn thought quickly then said, 'They're from the beach where I come from. They remind me of home.'

As he thought of the pebbly beach, Finn was reminded of Lorca.

'Lorca! Lorca!' Finn yelled. He ran along the beach. Did Lorca drown in the storm? he thought.

'Lor-ca!' Finn yelled, again and again. The nylars followed him, flying above him, carrying the armlet and the stones.

Finn ran all the way to the far end of the long, sandy beach. A large headland covered in trees stopped him from going further. There was no sign of his friend or of the boat.

Finn stood and looked out to sea. There were no waves - the sea was flat. Finn couldn't see anything on the water. The horizon was an unbroken line.

He sat on the sand and sighed. The nylars flew in circles above him, going higher and higher in the warm air.

Finn didn't know what to do. He didn't know where he was. He didn't know how to get the stones or the armlet back from the nylars. And if he did get the stones back, he wouldn't know what to do with them.

Gondar doesn't have to worry about me, he thought. I'm not going to defeat him.

He reached into his pocket and took out the note from his mother. To his surprise, he could still read it. It was wet but the writing was as easy to read as when Finn first read it. He read it again. The last part made him feel terrible.

...And keep the gold armlet, always. It is yours now, darling boy. Be brave, keeper of the stones.

Brave? He wasn't brave. And he wasn't wearing the armlet. He felt tired, hungry and very, very sad. He closed his eyes. He felt defeated before he'd really begun.

'Hey, boy. Boy!' called one of the nylars.'

Finn didn't open his eyes. He didn't want to see them playing catch with the armlet again.

'Boy!' the nylar called again.

'This Lorca you are looking for. Does he have white hair?'

Finn opened his eyes.

'And is he in a wooden boat, perhaps?' called another nylar, flying high in the sky above Finn.

'Yes! Yes!' Finn stood and almost danced in the sand.

'Can you see him? Where? Where?' Finn looked out to sea but it was still empty.

'And does he have any treasure, perhaps?' asked the brown nylar.

Finn thought quickly and said, 'Yes, I'm sure he has treasure.'

Without another word, the nylars flew over the headland and down towards the water.

Finn couldn't see them anymore. Soon, they all appeared again, around the headland, flying close to the water. They were pulling on ropes. And behind them, at the other end of the ropes, was the boat. And in the boat, asleep, lay Lorca.

CHAPTER SIX

Lorca's reading

'Lorca!' called Finn, running into the water.

When Finn reached the boat, Lorca opened his eyes and smiled. 'Hello, Finn.'

The nylars landed on the boat and started grabbing at Lorca.

'Treasure! Treasure! You must give treasure to the nylars for saving you!'

Lorca looked at Finn, then said to the nylars, 'But I didn't need saving. I was safe in the boat.'

'Treasure! Treasure!' yelled the nylars. 'Or we'll take you and the boat out to sea again and we'll drop your friend back in the deep blue sea!'

Lorca reached into his pocket. 'This is all I have,' he said, and he held out one gold coin.

'Hee hee! Gold!' said the red nylar, grabbing the coin.

'Only one coin?' said the brown nylar. 'Let's take them back out to sea!'

The black nylar said, 'One coin is better than none.' It grabbed the coin and looked at it closely. 'Oh! One coin is very good, when it is a zania.'

'A zania! A zania!' screamed all three nylars.

'To the cave! To the cave!' They flew up onto the headland, screaming and laughing all the way.

'What's a zania?' Finn asked Lorca.

Lorca smiled, 'Oh, just an old coin. One that my grandfather gave me.'

'Oh, Lorca, it must be worth so much. Why did you give it to the nylars?' asked Finn, looking up at the creatures.

'Our lives are worth more than any old coin,' said Lorca, but he sighed. 'It was the last thing my grandfather gave me. He used to call it his lucky coin. I sometimes think that if he'd kept it, Gondar may not have killed him.'

Both boys were silent.

Then Finn said, 'The armlet was left to me by my mother. And I'm meant to look after the singing stones. The nylars have everything - the zania, the armlet and the stones. We have to get them back!'

'How?' asked Lorca. 'We'd never be able to climb up there and grab everything back from the nylars,' he said, pointing up at the top of the headland. 'They must keep all their treasure in a cave up there.'

Finn and Lorca thought hard.

'I know!' said Finn. 'You're a sky reader. You could pretend to read their future. Tell them that they have to give us back our treasure or they'll all die.'

Lorca looked at Finn. 'That's a bad idea. I can't pretend. Sky readers can't lie, remember?'

'Oh,' said Finn. 'Well, I can. I'll pretend to be a sky reader. You can tell me what to say.'

'But...' said Lorca. Before he could finish, the boys saw the nylars flying down from the headland. There was no sign of the armlet, the stones or the zania. They were about to fly past the boys. They were flying towards the berry tree at the other end of the beach.

'Stop, nylars!' called Finn. 'I am a sky reader - I will read for you!'

'Hee hee,' laughed the red nylar. 'You're not a sky reader. He's a sky reader!' it said, pointing at Lorca. 'All sky readers have white hair and black eyes.'

The nylars flew in circles above the boys.

Lorca looked up at the nylars. Then he stood very still, staring up at the sky.

Finn said, 'Lorca... Lorca. Are you feeling all right?'

Lorca looked at Finn but didn't seem to see him. Then he smiled. 'I'm fine.' He then called to the nylars, 'Yes, I am a sky reader. And I will read the sky for you all.'

'How much will it cost?' said the red nylar.

'Nothing. I will give you a free reading,' said Lorca.

'Free! Free!' screamed the nylars.

'But I cannot read on an empty stomach. My friend and I are hungry.'

'Yes, yes, food. We can bring you food.'

The nylars flew across the beach and into the forest that grew beside it. Finn and Lorca heard them screaming, 'Free reading!' to each other as they went.

Finn looked at Lorca again and said, 'You saw something, didn't you? You saw something in the sky!' Finn looked up at the sky but all he saw there were a few small clouds on the horizon.

Lorca grabbed Finn. 'Yes, I saw something. I need to do a full reading to get the whole story, but I saw us in the city.' Lorca stopped talking and frowned.

'What is it, Lorca?' asked Finn.

'Nothing. The picture I saw was of you. You were smiling - and a lot of people were cheering.'

Finn looked at Lorca, then asked, 'And you? Were you smiling and cheering in the picture too?'

Before Lorca could reply, the nylars returned.

'Eat! Eat, then read the sky!' said the red nylar.

The boys ate all the fruit and berries that the nylars brought them, and drank cool water from a bottle the nylars gave them.

'Keep that bottle. It is not pretty. We took it from one of the warlord's men,' said the brown nylar.

'Thank you,' said Finn.

'Read now!' the black nylar said to Lorca.

'Yes, but up there. I need to be high, as close to the sky as I can be, for a good reading.'

The nylars grabbed both boys and carried them high up onto the headland.

As they flew through the air, Finn felt as helpless as a baby. He looked down, and the trees grew smaller and smaller. He'd often watched the birds as they

flew over the water looking for fish - he'd always wanted to fly. He laughed. Lorca did too.

From the headland, Finn could see that they were on a very small island. It was in the middle of an ocean. He couldn't see any other land. The water was so still it looked like glass. Of course! This was the Great Glassy Sea!

Suddenly Finn realised that Lorca was talking. He was standing on the highest part of the headland. Lorca looked different. He looked taller and stronger. He almost seemed to shine. His voice was strong and clear. He looked up into the sky as he spoke, with one arm moving slowly back and forth, as if he was reading from the biggest book in the world.

'... and you three nylars will be known throughout Avondel as heroes and friends of the keeper of the stones.'

Finn looked at the nylars. They were watching Lorca so closely that they moved back and forth too.

Lorca continued, 'And you three brave nylars will be there on the day of three suns, the day that is coming very soon. You will be there to see the defeat of Gondar!'

Lorca stopped speaking. He closed his eyes and his hand fell by his side. He looked very tired.

'More! More!' yelled the brown nylar. 'Tell us more!'

'We will see the defeat of Gondar!' yelled the red nylar.

'Nylars hate Gondar. He takes our treasure!' said the black nylar. 'Every third new moon his men come from the mainland. They come and take our treasure. We hate the warlord.'

'Then help us,' said Finn. 'I am the keeper of the stones.' He felt strange saying this.

'The keeper of the stones will defeat Gondar with your help. It is written in the sky,' said Lorca softly.

'But we will need our treasure back,' said Finn. 'We need the treasure to defeat Gondar.'

'We must talk,' said the red nylar to the other nylars.

The nylars flew off into their cave. The boys looked at each other. What would the nylars do?

Within minutes, the nylars flew out of their cave again. One was carrying the armlet, and gave it to Finn. Another was carrying the stones, and gave those to

Finn too. The last one, the black nylar, was carrying the zania. The nylar sighed, smelled the zania and sighed again. Then it held out its hand and gave the zania back to Lorca.

'If we keep it, Gondar's men will just take it,' said the black nylar.

'We're not heroes but we hate Gondar,' said the red nylar.

'We will help you to defeat Gondar!' said the brown nylar.

'We'd better get our treasure back,' said the black nylar.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The song of the stones

'What now, keeper of the stones?' asked the red nylar.

'What now, sky reader?' asked the brown nylar.

'What now, what now?' said the black nylar.

The three nylars flew in circles above the boys as they stood on the headland.

Finn said softly to Lorca, 'What now? I have no idea. Did you read anything else in the sky?'

'No,' Lorca quietly replied. 'Are the stones singing now?'

'No,' said Finn.

'Come on, let's go!' said the nylars.

Finn looked at Lorca, 'What shall we do?'

'I don't know!' said Lorca.

Finn felt something get warm in one of his hands. He looked down. The armlet was glowing.

'Look!' he said to Lorca.

'Look at what?' said Lorca.

'The armlet - it's glowing! See how it shines!'

'It looks the same to me,' said Lorca.

Finn saw some writing inside the armllet. 'Can't you see the writing inside it?' he asked Lorca.

'No.'

Finn read the words that glowed inside the armllet: CIRCLE THE STONES.

Circle the stones? Finn thought. What does that mean?

Then he had an idea. He held the stones so that they were inside the armllet. They started singing.

'They're singing, they're singing!' he yelled.

The nylars landed beside Finn. They watched him and the stones.

'I can't hear anything,' said the red nylar.

'Neither can I!' said the brown nylar.

'I hear nothing!' said the black nylar.

'Shh!' said Finn.

This is what Finn heard the stones sing:

We stones are the lost eyes of a Zan

Seek the stone Zan with the stone man

and the stone woman in the square

In Liana, you'll find them there

Son of a daughter of a son

of a daughter of a son! One

day you'll crown the ancient god

The Zan will tread where Gondar trod

And on that day three suns will shine

And stone will live, dear child of mine

Peace and joy will come to our land

Just as the all-seeing Zan planned

The stones stopped singing but their song filled Finn's head. Again, he thought of the cradlesong and the beautiful, red-haired woman. He stood on the headland and sang the words to Lorca, to the nylars, to the world. Finn was the keeper of the stones!

Finn pulled the armlet up onto his arm. He carefully put the stones into his pocket.

'So,' he said to the nylars and to Lorca, 'we need to get to Liana. We need to find a statue of a Zan in a town square in the city.'

'I've been to Liana,' said Lorca. There are a lot of squares in the city. I've never seen a statue like the one in the song.'

'We'll find it. We must!' said Finn. He looked at the nylars. 'Do you know the way to Liana?'

The nylars nodded. 'But it is a long way from here, and it will be a very difficult journey for you,' said the red nylar.

The brown nylar said, 'Yes, for you boys. You cannot fly.'

'And it's too far for us to carry you. We could fly there, find the statue and put the stones in it,' said the black nylar.

Finn replied, 'But I must be the one. I am the keeper of the stones.'

Lorca said, 'And I saw in the sky that you nylars would be helping Finn, remember?'

'Yes, yes, yes,' said the red nylar.

'All five of us will go together,' said Finn.

'First, we will pull your boat across the Great Glassy Sea to the mainland,' said the red nylar. 'It will take two or three hours.'

'Great! Let's go! The sooner we start, the sooner we'll get to Liana,' said Finn.

'Or the sooner we die trying,' said Lorca, as the nylars carried him, and Finn, back down to the beach.

'But you saw us in Liana!' said Finn as he got into the boat next to Lorca. 'When you read the sky - you saw us there!'

'But that was only one future,' said Lorca.

'What?' said Finn.

'That was the future as it was written then. But when we change things in the present, then the future changes too. It's like... when you go on a journey, you have to choose which road to take. The journey changes when you choose one road and not another road.'

While the boys were talking, the nylars were pulling the boat across the water. The ocean was so still that Finn could see deep into the water. There were thousands of fish. Keenar would love to fish here, he thought. He hoped that

Keenar and Tia were all right. Had they been taken to Liana? What was Gondar doing to them?

Finally, Finn saw the mainland. The nylars pulled the boat into the mouth of a river that flowed out of a forest. Then the nylars came to sit in the boat with the boys.

'There are two ways to Liana from here,' said the red nylar.

The brown nylar said, 'The easy way is to go up the Coast Road to the Great Eastern Road.'

The black nylar said, 'The hard way is through the Dark Forest.'

'The Dark Forest?' said Lorca. He and Finn looked at each other. They'd both heard stories of the Dark Forest, of people who went into the forest and never came out again.

'That's the Dark Forest?' Finn asked. The nylars nodded.

'The roads will be filled with Gondar's soldiers, Finn,' said Lorca. 'They'll all be looking for you. Maybe the forest would be safer.'

Finn didn't know which way to go. He thought about Lorca's sky reading and said to him, 'So you saw a future... but you don't know how we can get to that future? You can't tell if we should go through the Dark Forest or on the Coast Road?'

Before Lorca could answer, they all heard trumpets. Soldiers!

'Quick! Let's get this boat under the bridge!' said Finn.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The way to liana

The boys and the nylars hid in the boat under the bridge.

The trumpets got louder and louder.

Then Finn could hear the horses of the soldiers. They were coming from the south. Would the soldiers see them? Finn and Lorca sat very still as the soldiers reached the bridge.

The soldiers rode their horses onto the bridge.

Finn heard one soldier call, 'Stop!'

Had they been seen? Nobody moved. Nobody breathed.

The soldier said, 'My horse has a stone in its hoof. I'll have to get it out.'

'Hurry!' said another soldier. 'The next village is only three miles away. If we find the red-haired boy, the warlord will give us a lot of gold!'

'And new horses!' said a third soldier.

'And a lot of wine!' said another.

The first soldier said, 'I've got the stone out now. Let's go!'

The soldiers rode away, north along the Coast Road.

'I hear more soldiers coming,' said the brown nylar, and from the south, Finn heard another trumpet.

'We could pull the boat up the river into the forest,' said the black nylar.

Finn thought, then said, 'Yes, let's go into the forest.'

The nylars pulled the boat along the river into the Dark Forest.

Finn looked at the trees. They were strange - very different from the trees that grew in his forest. Their trunks were almost black, and their leaves were very dark green. He was frightened. He wished he had a sword or some other weapon. He felt in the pockets of Keenar's old fishing cloak. He found some fishing line and a small knife. Keenar used the knife to cut fishing line if it got caught on a rock. It wasn't a sword, but Finn felt a little better. He could use the knife as a weapon if he had to. It was better than nothing.

After an hour, the river became too shallow and narrow for the boat. The nylars flew down and sat on the side of the river beside the boat.

'That's it,' the red nylar said. 'You'll have to walk the rest of the way.'

'We'll fly above you or ahead of you,' the brown nylar said. 'We can show you the way.'

'We'll look out for... things in the forest,' said the black nylar, looking around.

Finn said, 'Wait! Before we go on, I want to say thank you. And I don't even know your names.'

'I'm Poko,' said the red nylar.

'I'm Merlo,' said the brown nylar.

'And I'm Karlo,' said the black nylar.

'And I'm Finn and this is Lorca,' said Finn with a smile.

The day was coming to an end, and above the tops of the big trees, the sky was getting darker. There were no paths through the Dark Forest, but there was enough space between the trees for the boys to walk. It was very quiet in the forest. Finn didn't see or hear any animals, birds or insects. This was strange -

his own forest was filled with life. The only sound came when Poko, Merlo and Karlo called out directions.

'Go left now! There's a clearing there.'

'Watch out for the fallen tree ahead.'

'Come this way - there's an easy way around the big rock ahead of you.'

Finn and Lorca walked on through the forest until it was too dark to see. Then the nylars lifted the boys high up into one of the tallest trees. It was covered in dark brown nuts - Finn had never seen nuts like these before.

Poko said, 'These branches are big and wide. You can sleep here.'

Merlo said, 'It's safe up here... from... things.'

'And you can eat the nuts of this tree,' said Karlo.

The nylars started eating. 'Come on, eat,' said Poko. 'They're good.'

The strange nuts were difficult to open, but when Finn did open some, he liked them - they tasted like roast lamb.

Finn found it difficult to sleep that night. He was cold and he didn't like being so far from the ground. And he didn't like thinking about why some people went into the Dark Forest and didn't come out again.

The next morning, he found out.

Karlo was flying ahead of the other nylars and the boys when they heard him scream.

Finn and Lorca ran. They came to a clearing and looked up. Karlo seemed to be stuck in mid-air. Then Finn saw that Karlo was being held by thin vines. The vines came from a large tree beside the clearing. This tree was different from the other trees. Its trunk was grey and the tree had no leaves. Instead, it had vines that moved like snakes.

'What is it?' said Finn, who'd never seen anything like it.

'A snake tree!' said Merlo. He flew near Karlo but was careful not to get too close. Karlo was trying to get free of the vines but his wings were held by his side.

Merlo and Poko started trying to pull Karlo free from the vines. They had to keep clear of vines that tried to grab them. They were trying to pull him up and away from the tree, but the tree was too strong for them.

Finn looked carefully at the tree. Each vine was about as long as two people. The vines came from the ends of branches high up on the snake tree. Those

branches looked like the branches of most trees. But where the branches grew from the tree trunk, there were mouths that opened and closed. Mouths with sharp teeth. The tree was like a kind of monster, and it was trying to pull Karlo towards one of its mouths.

Suddenly Finn had an idea.

He called out, 'Merlo! Poko! Pull Karlo down towards the ground!'

'What? Why?' said Lorca.

'You'll see - I hope,' said Finn, as he quickly started climbing the tree next to the snake tree.

Merlo and Poko pulled Karlo towards the ground. When they did this, the vines holding Karlo were pulled tight. The tree pulled in one direction while Merlo and Poko pulled in the other direction.

Finn was sitting high up in the tree, his legs tightly around a branch. He reached out and pulled one vine towards himself. It was sticky.

Ow! He thought. My hand is burning.

The vine was burning his hand like acid but he didn't let go. In his other hand, Finn held Keenar's little knife. He cut through the vine. Lorca cheered. There were three more vines to cut. Finn cut one, then two, and each time his hand hurt more - but as he cut the last vine, he fell.

CHAPTER NINE

Stayaway Valley

Down, down, down Finn fell from the tree.

'No!' yelled Lorca.

Just before Finn hit the ground, Merlo and Poko caught him.

'Got you!' said Merlo.

Karlo's wings were badly burnt by the vines of the snake tree. So was Finn's left hand. But Lorca said, 'I know something that will help you.' He looked around the forest floor, found a plant, and broke off some leaves. He put them on Karlo's wings and on Finn's hand.

The leaves were cool on Finn's hand. 'That feels good,' he said.

'Your hand will be better in two days,' said Lorca. 'My grandfather taught me about using plants.'

Finn remembered what had happened to Lorca's grandfather. Then he thought of Gondar the warlord, and of Keenar and Tia.

'Come on,' he said, standing up quickly. 'We must get to Liana. We must hurry.'

'Why?' asked Lorca. 'You and Karlo need to rest.'

But Finn knew they must hurry. He couldn't explain it, but he knew. He reached into his pocket and took out the stones. 'Look,' he said. The stones were glowing. They weren't black any more. They were deep red, as if there was a tiny red light in each of them.

The nylars, Lorca and Finn all looked at the stones.

'To Liana!' said Merlo.

'To Liana!' said Poko and Karlo.

'To Liana!' said Finn and Lorca.

The five friends travelled quickly through the rest of the Dark Forest. They saw four more snake trees.

'We'd heard of snake trees,' said Karlo. 'But we'd never seen one before. They're horrible.'

Merlo and Poko were carrying Karlo. They'd used some branches to make a chair for him and they were carrying it through the air.

'I wish I had an air chair like that,' Lorca said quietly to Finn.

'Remember, Lorca, we nylars have excellent hearing,' said Merlo.

'And it would take several nylars to carry you in an air chair,' said Poko.

Three days after they went into the Dark Forest, the five friends came out into a beautiful valley. It was filled with sunshine and with flowers of many different colours. Insects flew from plant to plant and Finn could smell honey.

Finn said, 'It feels so good to be out of the forest and to feel warm. What is this beautiful place?'

'Oh no! This must be Stayaway Valley,' said Lorca. 'Quick - we have to get back into the forest!'

Lorca pulled Finn back into the Dark Forest.

'Why?' said Finn. 'Stayaway Valley is the most beautiful place I've ever seen. It's paradise!'

'My grandfather told me about this valley,' said Lorca. 'The last time we went to Liana together, we took a path that not many people know about. Grandfather was trying to hide from the warlord's men. The path goes along the side of a hill, and from there we looked down into Stayaway Valley. My grandfather told me that it looks like paradise, but that something in it makes people who come here get sick. They all die before the next full moon. Nobody knows what it is. He made us hurry past the valley, even though we were high above it.'

Finn felt the armband glowing. He took it off and read the words inside: BEWARE OF SILVER AND BLACK.

Finn said, 'Silver and black? What does that mean?'

Lorca said, 'I don't know, but I do know we have to get across the valley to get to the city. Or we have to go back through the forest and along the Coast Road.'

Finn knew they needed to hurry. He said to the nylars, 'Beware of silver and black - do you know what that means?'

Poko said, 'No. Nylars stay away from this valley too.'

Finn said, 'I'm going to keep going. But if any of you wants to go back, I'll understand.'

Lorca said, 'I'm coming with you.'

The nylars looked at each other. Karlo said, 'We'll come. We'll look out for anything silver and black.'

'Maybe it's treasure!' said Merlo.

There were beautiful red berries on some bushes. 'I'm so hungry,' said Lorca. The five friends were all hungry.

'They're not silver or black!' said Finn, and the boys and the nylars grabbed some berries and started eating. As they walked, they tried different fruits and berries. Everything was delicious. Bees buzzed and flew from bush to bush and birds flew from tree to tree, building nests.

When they had almost reached the far end of the valley, Finn said, 'This is paradise! And there's been no danger. The armband must have been wrong.'

They looked up at the hill ahead of them.

'Look!' said Finn. He could see a path along the side of the hill, far above the valley.

Lorca shouted, 'That's the path I took with my grandfather! Liana is less than a day's walk from here!'

Just then, they all heard a loud buzzing sound. From a peach tree near them flew several large insects - and they were silver and black!

'Run!' shouted Finn. He and Lorca ran as fast as they could up the side of the valley.

'Fly!' yelled Poko. The nylars flew up, up, up away from the silver and black insects.

Finn picked up a large stick as he ran. He tried to hit the insects. They were as large as mice and they had long stingers. He hit and killed one, two, three of the insects. Only two more, of them buzzed around Finn and Lorca. Finn killed the fourth insect but as he did so, the last one flew at Lorca.

'Oh!' cried Lorca.

Finn looked at his friend. The last black and silver insect was dead at Lorca's feet. But the insect's stinger was sticking, out of Lorca's neck.

CHAPTER TEN

Facing the voomax

Lorca pulled the stinger out and threw it on the ground. He held his neck tightly. Finn could see red lines on Lorca's neck. The poison from the stinger was already spreading.

'I'm all right!' Lorca said. But both boys remembered what Lorca's grandfather had said about people dying before the new full moon.

Finn said, 'Let's get to Liana. Maybe someone there will know how to help you. Maybe there is a way to stop the effect of the poison before the next full moon.'

The boys climbed up the hill towards the path, glad to leave Stayaway Valley behind. The nylars were waiting for them on the path.

'We have to choose which way to go,' said Finn.

'If we go south, we will come to the main gates of the city,' said Lorca.

'But I won't be able to go through the main gates,' said Finn. 'There will be soldiers at the gates. They'll be looking for any red-haired boys.'

'Let's go north, then,' said Lorca.

'And maybe we'll find a way into the city without any soldiers,' said Finn.

Merlo looked at the other nylars, who nodded. Merlo then said to the boys, 'We will tell you a secret. Nylars know a way into the city. We use it when we want to look for treasure there. But you must never tell anybody about this way into the city. Do you promise?'

'Yes, yes,' said Lorca, and Finn said, 'We promise.' He took the stones out of his pocket. They were glowing much more brightly now. 'We must hurry!'

'All right. We trust you,' said Karlo. 'Our way into the city is on the south-east corner.'

'We'll fly ahead and clear the rocks from the opening,' said Poko.

'Good idea,' said Finn.

'Follow the walls of the city to the south-east corner,' said Karlo. 'We'll look out for you by sunrise tomorrow.'

The nylars flew off, with Karlo on his air chair between Poko and Merlo.

Finn and Lorca travelled quickly until they came to a wooden bridge across a deep gorge. It was nighttime now, but a full moon glowed. They looked down, and deep below them at the bottom of the gorge, they could see a river.

'Are you sure this bridge is safe?' said Lorca.

'No, I'm not sure,' said Finn. 'But we have to cross it.'

Just then, came a loud, horrible roar. 'Blood or gold!'

Across the bridge slid a huge, horrible creature. It was almost as tall and wide as a house, and many times longer. It looked to Finn like a huge slug, or like a leech. Finn hated leeches - there were some in the forest back home, and they hung on to your leg tightly as they sucked your blood. Words from the cradlesong came to him.

Beware of the blood-sucking voomax

Remember always these three facts

It wants your blood, it wants your gold

And it loves best the gold that's old

The voomax stopped in front of the boys and roared again, 'Blood or gold!' The huge, sharp teeth in its open mouth shone in the moonlight. Finn didn't know how they would be able to get past this creature.

Lorca held out his zania and said, 'I have this.'

The voomax moved its head closer to him. Then it stopped and turned to face Finn. 'Old gold!' it said, and moved towards Finn. 'Old gold! Old gold!'

The voomax was very close now. Finn could smell it, and it made him feel ill.

'I don't have any old gold,' said Finn quietly, and he moved away a little. He was standing at the edge of the gorge.

Then Lorca said, 'The armlet! It must be made of old gold. Give it to the voomax. Quickly!'

'All right,' said Finn quietly to the voomax. 'I have this.'

As Finn took off the armlet, he saw writing inside it again. The words glowed, SEE GOLD THROUGH ME WITH THE MOON ABOVE AND THE STARS BELOW.

Stars below? Thought Finn. How can stars be below?

Then he looked down. Far below, in the river, he saw stars. They were shining back from the still, black water.

Finn held out the armlet. A moonbeam shone through it into the gorge below. The armlet made the moonbeam seem as bright as the sun. And where the light hit the bottom of the gorge, something shone like a huge pile of gold.

'Look!' said Finn. 'There's lots of old gold down there!'

'Old gold! Old gold!' roared the voomax, and it slid over the edge of the gorge and down, down towards the pile of gold.

'Run!' yelled Finn, and they ran across the bridge. They looked down. As soon as Finn had moved, the light had stopped shining from the bottom of the gorge and the voomax could see it was about to grab a pile of rocks, not gold.

'Aaagh!' it roared. The terrible sound filled the gorge. The angry voomax started sliding up towards the boys again. But it was slow, and they ran across the rest of the bridge, along the path and far away from the gorge and the voomax.

They ran until they could no longer hear it roaring.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Into the city

Finn and Lorca met the nylars just before sunrise. After a few short hours of rest, the five friends stood by the thick stonewall of the city of Liana. The wall was three or four times taller than any man and the stones were old and grey. Vines grew up the side, but Finn could see that near the top of the wall was a row of sharp metal spikes.

'Soldiers walk along the top of the wall, day and night,' said Poko. 'We're not going up there. We're going this way.'

In front of them was a pile of large rocks. The nylars led the boys past these rocks and into a hole in the wall.

The nylars went first, then Finn, and then Lorca. The boys had to go on their hands and knees. The wall was so thick that it took a few minutes to go through the hole - and Finn hated every second. He could feel spider webs brushing against his face. If I can feel spider webs, he thought, where are the spiders?

Finally, though, Finn came out of the hole - he was in the walled city of Liana.

Lorca came out just after Finn. He stood up, and said, 'We're in!' and then fell against Finn.

'Are you all right?' said Finn.

'I can't see very well,' Lorca said quietly. 'And I feel weak.'

'Oh no!' said Finn. 'It must be the poison working.'

'Let's find the statue - I want to help you defeat Gondar before...' Lorca stopped talking, then said, 'Let's hurry. Before anyone sees us.' He stood up again.

Finn could feel the stones in his pocket. They were warm. He took them out. They were glowing even more brightly. They were a warm yellow colour.

'Which way now?' asked Lorca.

Finn turned in a circle, trying to choose which way to go. As he turned to the right, the stones grew colder in his hand. As he turned back to the left, they grew warmer.

'The stones can show us the way now,' he said. It was like the child's game of 'hotter and colder'. Through narrow, winding streets, the stones let them know the way. The nylars followed the boys, hiding behind carts or doors or up on the roofs of houses. They knew they weren't welcome in Liana.

Soon they were near the centre of the city. The stones were so hot that they were difficult to hold now.

There were some people on the streets, and they all looked frightened and tired.

Finn heard a soldier's trumpet. It was close. He made sure his hair was covered by the cap.

Suddenly Lorca said, 'There! Look!'

Ahead of them was a square. And in the middle of the square was a stone statue of a man and a woman. They held something small between them - an animal. It was the shape of a frog but about as big as a cat.

'What's that animal in the statue?' said Finn.

'A Zan! That's a Zan!' said Lorca. 'One of the old ones, who make the stars shine, the rain fall and the world turn!'

The boys ran towards the statue, with the nylars flying just behind them.

Finn saw that the stone Zan's eyes were empty.

'Stop!' shouted a loud voice. A trumpet blew. Finn looked around and saw soldiers running into the square - about six of them.

The boys ran in different directions. Finn held onto the stones, even though they were hot enough to burn him. The nylars flew above the square. They picked up boxes and rocks and dropped them on the soldiers. More and more soldiers ran into the square.

One soldier almost got Finn but only grabbed his cap, which he pulled off Finn's head.

'Red hair! Red hair!'

Suddenly a huge man on a black horse rode into the square. 'A boy with red hair! Stop him!' It was the warlord Gondar himself. 'Nobody move! The boy's mine.'

Finn was very frightened. He stood still. Gondar got off his horse and took out his long sword. The soldiers stood still and watched as Gondar walked slowly towards Finn.

The three nylars dived at Gondar from the sky. The warlord roared. He held up his sword and struck Poko, who fell to the ground. The other two nylars grabbed Poko and flew away.

While this was happening, Finn saw his chance. He turned and ran. He ran towards the statue. He reached up and put the stones into the empty eyes of the stone Zan.

Nothing happened.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The crown

Gondar grabbed Finn and said, 'Get ready to die, boy!'

Finn heard the stones singing, screaming, 'The crown! The crown!'

Lorca tried to help. 'Great Gondar, I am a sky reader. Let me read the sky for you now.'

Gondar stopped and laughed. 'No need, little sky reader. I can read your future - it is a very short story. It's your turn next, after I deal with this red-haired insect.'

Finn thought fast. The crown? What crown? He felt terrible. Their journey was for nothing. He had no crown. Then he felt something burning into his arm. The armlet!

He took it off and inside it, he read: I AM THE CROWN.

With a huge effort, Finn pulled himself free from the warlord and ran over to the statue. He reached up and put the armlet on the small head of the stone Zan.

And suddenly the singing stones, now the eyes of the Zan, glowed and shone as bright as the sun itself. A day of three suns!

Gondar roared and marched over to Finn with his sword raised. But as he was about to strike Finn with his sword, the light of the stones shone on him and, at that moment, the evil warlord was turned into stone - a terrible, ugly statue.

Lorca ran up to Finn. 'We did it! We did it!' he said, hugging his friend.

Finn and Lorca stood there, laughing and cheering. Then, to Finn's horror, Lorca fell to the ground, eyes closed.

'Lorca!' Finn shouted, kneeling by his sick friend.

The woman and the man holding the Zan - the stone people - slowly moved. Finn looked up at them. They were alive!

As Finn watched, they slowly changed colour from the grey of the stone to the colours of life. The woman wore a beautiful green dress. The man had thick, red hair. And the woman's hair was long and red.

Finn heard cheering. He looked around. The square was filled with the people of the city. Gondar's soldiers were bowing before the statue of the Zan that the man and the woman held. They'd all put their swords on the ground. Bells started ringing. Finn looked up, and in a window of a tall tower, he saw Keenar and Tia. Their window was barred - but they reached out their arms and waved

and yelled, 'Finn! Finn! You've saved us! You've saved us all! You've saved all of Avondel!'

All of Avondel, Finn thought, except Poko and Lorca.

Then Finn felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned around. It was the woman with red hair. She held the stone Zan, whose eyes glowed softly now.

'Your poor friend,' she said. 'This will help.' She shone the soft light on Lorca. In less than a minute, he opened his eyes. 'Hello, my friend!' he said to Finn and smiled.

Finn called to the nylars, 'Bring Poko here!' Soon, in the soft light of the stones, Poko, too, smiled at his friend Finn.

The woman with red hair hugged Finn and said, 'I knew you would save us, my darling boy!'

Finn looked at her. 'Mother?' he said, slowly.

'Yes, Finn. Yes, keeper of the stones. This is yours now, my darling.'

She gave the statue of the Zan to Finn with a smile, and with tears in her eyes.

The man with red hair came to stand next to them. 'You are the keeper of the stones now, my boy,' he said. The man was Finn's father.

Lorca didn't die. The only lasting effect was that he could never bend or move his neck again, and the red lines on his neck stayed forever. Poko's wings were never the same, so he took to flying in the air chair, carried by his friends and fellow heroes, Karlo and Merlo.

Finn had found more than he ever hoped for that day. And that was the start of many years of peace and good times in Avondel.

And how did Finn's parents come to be statues in the centre of Liana? That's a story for another day.

- THE END -