



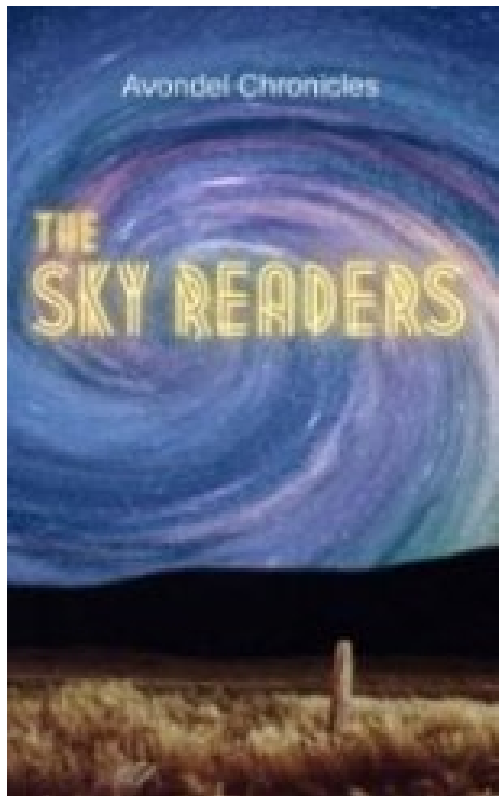
**Learn English Through
Stories
B1 Novels and Stories
Pre-Intermediate Level**

**Adopted and modified by
Kulwant Singh Sandhu**

<https://learn-by-reading.co.uk>

Avondel Chronicles

THE SKY READERS



The Sky Readers

By Sue Murray

CHAPTER ONE

The gift

This is the story of a boy who could read the sky. His name was Lewin and he lived in the far-off land of Avondel.

Long ago in Avondel, old magic was everywhere. In those times, god-like creatures called Zan walked among the people of Avondel. The Zan made the stars shine, the rain fall and the world turn. Avondel was a happy, peaceful land.

But by the time Lewin was born, the old magic had almost completely died out. Most people in Avondel believed that the Zan had never existed. And now the land was full of misery and fear. It was ruled by an evil warlord called Gondar.

Lewin lived on a farm in a valley high up in some mountains. It was a long way from the city where the warlord lived. Lewin heard terrible stories about Gondar and his soldiers. The warlord's men took food from families and horses from farmers. In the mountains, people felt safe from the warlord, but they worried about the future of their country.

Lewin was the son of a dairy farmer. He thought he'd be a dairy farmer too. His whole life changed on the day that he turned sixteen - the day he found out that he was a sky reader.

That morning, Lewin stood outside the milking shed, looking up at the sky. The sun was just coming up. There wasn't a cloud in the sky.

'Happy birthday, Lewin,' said his father as he walked over to stand by his son. They were both tall and slim, with white hair and black eyes. 'Here's your birthday present.'

Lewin smiled and opened the present.

'You needed a new jacket,' said his father.

'Thank you, Father,' said Lewin, and he put on the jacket.

'And young Lorca has a present for you too. He made it himself. Here he comes now.'

Lorca was Lewin's little brother. He was only five years old but he tried to be helpful around the farm. The boys' mother had died when Lorca was a baby.

Lorca came running from the farmhouse, carrying a small bundle of cloth. 'Happy birthday, Lewin!' he cried. 'Here's a present. Open it! Open it!'

Lewin unwrapped the cloth, put the gift from Lorca on his head, and said, 'What a fine cap this is!'

Lorca laughed and laughed. 'It's not a cap! It's a tea cosy. Maris helped me. You always say your tea goes cold in the morning. This will keep it warm. Maris told me about tea cosies.' Maris was the wife of the farmer at the other end of the valley. She sometimes came with gifts of food and cakes for Lewin's family.

'Oh, yes, silly me!' said Lewin to his little brother. 'Of course it's a tea cosy. I can see that now. Thank you, Lorca! And I'd love a cup of tea right now. I'm thirsty after milking the cows.'

'I hope you're hungry too,' said Lorca. 'I've made porridge for breakfast. With honey and cream, because it's your birthday!'

The three of them started to walk to the farmhouse.

'Looks like a good day to paint the barn,' said Lewin's father. 'We can start after breakfast.'

Lewin looked up into the blue sky. 'No, Father. It's going to rain.'

Lewin's father looked at his son, and up at the blue sky. He shook his head and said, 'You're never wrong about the weather. All right. We'll work inside today. We'll make some cheese after breakfast.'

'We won't have time to make cheese. We'll only have time to make butter.'

'What?' his father asked sharply. 'Why do you say that, Lewin?'

'Because Grandfather is coming,' said Lewin. 'He'll be here before noon.'

'How do you know that?' asked his father.

'Oh, didn't you tell me?' said Lewin, looking surprised.

Lewin's father was quiet for a moment. Then he suddenly said, 'No, I didn't tell you. Come on. Birthday or no birthday, there's a lot of work to be done, son.'

The boys watched their father walk across to the barn.

Lewin said to his little brother, 'I'm hungry. And I love porridge. Let's have breakfast.'

A few hours later, an old man came walking slowly up the road to the farmhouse. He used a walking stick and seemed tired and frail. It was the boys' grandfather. He too had white hair and black eyes. The old man's name was Laylan and he travelled all over Avondel. The boys had only met their grandfather a few times.

Laylan stood and looked up at the sky. Dark clouds now filled the sky and he felt the first drops of rain on his face. He looked up at the sky again and nodded to himself. 'It's time. The boy's ready to be tested,' he said to himself as he pulled the hood of his cloak over his head.

Lorca ran out of the house into the rain. 'Grandfather!' he cried. Lewin followed his brother outside, smiling and waving at his grandfather.

'Welcome, Grandfather! Come inside out of the rain.'

'Happy birthday, Lewin!' said the old man as Lewin helped his grandfather with his wet cloak. Lewin's father came in through the back door of the farmhouse. He nodded at his father-in-law but didn't say anything.

'You remembered!' said Lewin.

'I read it - in the sky,' said Laylan.

'Where?' asked Lewin.

Laylan said sharply, 'You really don't know about reading in the sky?'

Before Lewin could answer, his father said, 'I haven't told them anything, Laylan. There was no need for them to know, if - if they didn't have the gift.'

Lorca had been listening to all this. 'What gift? Is it another birthday present for Lewin?'

Laylan stood tall, looking far less frail and old. He said, 'No, young Lorca. It's not that kind of gift. The gift I am talking about is something some people are born with. And I think both of you boys have this gift. Your mother had the gift

too, as have many members of our family since the time of the Zan. You see, Lorca and Lewin, you come from a family of sky readers.'

CHAPTER TWO

The test

'Sky readers?' asked Lewin. 'What are sky readers?'

'We sky readers are part of the old magic, Lewin,' said the old man. 'We were given our gift by the Zan.'

'Are you saying that the Zan were real?'

'Oh, yes, the Zan were - and are - real,' said Laylan. 'The old magic still lives in Avondel. Believe it.'

'But what do sky readers do?' asked Lewin.

'We can read the past, the present and the future in the sky. But surely you have felt your power? Haven't you already begun to read the sky?' Laylan frowned and sat down. 'I felt sure you had the gift. It is written -'

'No, I haven't... No, wait! I always know what the weather will be. Is that the gift?'

Laylan shook his head. 'Many farmers can do that without being sky readers.'

It was Lorca who jumped up and said, 'This morning! This morning! Remember, Lewin? You knew that Grandfather was coming! How did you know that?'

'I... I just knew it,' said Lewin.

'You were looking at the sky when you said it,' said Lorca. 'Maybe you read it!'

Laylan stood up. 'Yes, maybe you did. Good, good! I'll test you now.'

'No!' said Lewin's father. 'I don't want you to test the boy. He'll take over the farm one day. He was born to be a farmer.'

Laylan said, 'Ah, but perhaps he was born to be a sky reader. It is the boy's right to choose. He's sixteen now. And if his mother was still alive, she would want him to be tested. Even if she did give up her own power to live in these cold hills with you.'

The old sky reader turned to his grandson and said, 'Do you want to be tested, Lewin? If you say no, I will not ask you again. Ever.'

Lewin looked from his father to his grandfather and then out through the window to the sky, now full of rain clouds. He turned to his father and said, 'I'm sorry, Father, but I need to find out. I need to know.' He then turned to Laylan and said, 'Yes, I want to be tested.'

Laylan led Lewin out of the farmhouse. Lorca wanted to go with them but his father held his arm. 'No, Lorca, you stay inside with me.'

Outside, the rain had stopped but a cold wind blew. Lewin and Laylan stood in a field, wrapped in their cloaks.

'Now, Lewin, for this test, I will ask you a question about the past. The past is always clearest to read. It has been fully written. The present is not always clear. It is still being written. The future is hardest to read, but if you have the gift, I will teach you.'

Lewin stood there, trying to take in all that his grandfather was telling him. 'What if I fail the test, Grandfather?'

'Then you will lead a good life as a dairy farmer. And I will wait to test your brother when he's your age. But we'll soon find out. Are you ready?'

Lewin nodded.

'Good,' said Laylan. 'The test is simple. I will ask you a question. You will look for the answer in the sky. Either you will be able to read it or you won't be able to read it. Don't think about it, just keep your mind open to what you see in the sky.'

Lewin nodded again.

Laylan said slowly, 'Lewin, can you tell me how my own history is linked to the history of the warlord, Gondar?'

Lewin was very surprised by the question. But he didn't say anything. He looked up into the sky. There was silence for three long minutes. Laylan stood there, frowning. Then Lewin started speaking, slowly. 'I can see it. You and Gondar were friends when you were young boys. But when you were about my age... Gondar betrayed you!' Lewin turned and looked at his grandfather. 'Is that true?'

Laylan nodded slowly. 'Yes, it is true. And one day, perhaps, I will tell you more about those days. But now, Lewin, you face a difficult decision. You have passed the test. Now you must choose your future. Will you be a farmer or a sky reader?'

Lewin's father was unhappy and angry. 'Old magic is dangerous, Lewin,' he said. 'In these troubled times, it's safest to be a farmer. Stay home. Stay with Lorca and me.'

But Lewin said, 'I can feel my power as a sky reader, Father. I want to learn all that Grandfather can teach me. I must do this.'

He found it difficult to say goodbye to his father and his brother. He also found it hard to leave the safety of the farm. But early the next morning, that is what he did.

'Take care of Father, Lorca,' Lewin said to his little brother. 'And I think I'll use this as a cap after all,' he said. He put on the tea cosy. 'I'll think of you when I wear it. And I'll wear it every day.'

It was a long, slow walk down the mountain. As they walked, Laylan told his grandson about the happy days he and Gondar had shared as boys. 'Gondar was born to the ways of old magic too. His father was a fire guide. Fire guides can make fire out of thin air and use it in many ways. But Gondar chose not to follow the ways of his father. He always wanted power. He always had to win every game we played. He didn't think becoming a fire guide was going to give him enough power. So he chose to become a soldier. He quickly became a very powerful soldier, and then became the hated warlord he is today. But I remember him as my good friend. We used to go fishing and hunting together. I'm sure that if he had chosen to follow the old magic, then the history of Avondel would have been different.'

Lewin asked, 'How did he betray you, Grandfather?'

'I'll tell you that story another day. But now, it is time for your first lesson. I want you to read the present. Look at the clouds over there and tell me what the warlord is doing now.'

Lewin looked at the sky. After a moment, he said, 'Gondar is searching for something... something golden? And... he's angry with a sky reader who cannot tell him what he wants to hear.'

'Yes,' said Laylan, frowning. 'I fear this is not good news for Avondel.'

But Lewin wasn't listening to his grandfather. He said excitedly, 'I saw it! So clearly! How?'

'It's our gift. It's old magic. Now, try to read the future. What we will be doing tonight?'

Lewin looked up. 'Ah... we will be talking to people. And they will give us money.'

'Well done. That is indeed what we will be doing. Sky readers earn money by telling people their fortunes. Tonight, in that village down there,' Laylan pointed to a village in the distance, 'you will tell fortunes and earn enough money to pay for our room.'

Lewin was amazed. 'But I can't do that!'

Laylan laughed. 'Telling fortunes is the easiest part of being a sky reader. You'll see.'

CHAPTER THREE

The red-haired woman

That night, Laylan sat at a table outside an inn. A line of people stood waiting to have their fortunes told. Each of them gave Laylan a coin before asking their question. Lewin stood behind his grandfather, watching and listening.

A farmer asked Laylan, 'Should I plant wheat or barley this year?'

The old sky reader looked up into the sky, then said, 'Wheat. But wait two more weeks.'

The farmer nodded and went back into the inn.

Lewin quietly said to his grandfather, 'I could read that too. But why does the farmer believe you? He didn't doubt you at all.'

'Ah - everyone knows that sky readers cannot lie. We can only tell the truth.'

A man came up to the sky readers and gave Laylan a gold coin. Laylan said, 'Lewin, you've watched me do several readings. Now it is your turn. You answer this man's question.'

The man asked, 'Should I buy a barrel of wine from the innkeeper?'

Lewin looked up into the starry sky and said, 'No. The innkeeper is selling bad, cheap wine. He is telling people it's old; expensive wine. But he is lying.'

The man walked angrily into the inn. Lewin heard two men shouting, then a fight started. Then a voice yelled from inside, 'Where are those sky readers? I'll kill them!'

'Come, Lewin,' said Laylan. 'I fear we will not be welcome in this innkeeper's inn tonight.'

They walked quickly away into the darkness. They wrapped their cloaks around them. As they hurried away, Laylan said, 'While we cannot lie, sometimes it is good not to tell the whole truth. Sometimes a short "no" is better than the full answer.'

Lewin said, 'But surely we must tell the whole truth!'

Laylan replied, 'Not always. Once I was reading for a lovely young woman. I told her that she would marry a tall, dark man. She was very happy to hear this. I didn't tell her that he was a bad man and that it would be an unhappy marriage. She would not have wanted to hear it.'

Lewin didn't agree with his grandfather. 'If you'd told her, she could have chosen not to marry the man.'

They argued about whether or not it was good to tell the whole truth to people. They kept arguing as they walked through the cold, dark night to the next town.

In the days and weeks that followed, Lewin learnt more and more of the art of sky reading. He learnt quickly and his powers became strong. He could soon read clear skies, stormy skies, the night sky and the morning sky. He missed his father and Lorca but he was glad he'd chosen to go with his grandfather.

Then something strange started happening. In their readings, Lewin and Laylan both started seeing a red-haired woman in the sky. Even if they were reading someone's fortune, the two sky readers saw the same red-haired woman. She seemed to be waving at them or calling to them. And sometimes she seemed to be holding a small statue that was in the shape of a frog.

'Who is the red-haired woman, Grandfather?' Lewin asked. 'Why are we seeing her in our readings?'

'She must be a stone shaper,' replied Laylan. 'Only stone shapers have red hair. And I think we're going to meet her. Soon.'

'A stone shaper? Tell me about them, Grandfather.'

'Stone shapers have the power to shape stone, gold and iron as easily as most people shape wet clay. It is said that in ancient times, the stone shapers saved the Zan at the end of the battle for Avondel. Nobody knows how they did this.'

'What was the battle for Avondel?' Lewin asked.

'It was between the last of the Zan and the Banshee. When the Banshee won, the Zan disappeared. Since then, those of us who still follow the ways of the old magic wait for the day that the Zan once again walk among the people of Avondel. And, young Lewin, I feel that day is coming soon. That is why we are seeing the red-haired stone shaper.'

'I wonder why we'll meet her? I wonder how our futures are linked?' asked Lewin.

'We will soon find out,' replied Laylan. 'But come now, let's find a place to stay for the night. It's getting dark.'

That evening the two sky readers sat by their fire in a forest. Laylan showed Lewin a small gold coin. 'It is time to tell you about this. It is a zania and it is made of old gold.'

'Old gold? What's that?'

'It's gold that has old magic in it - gold that was shaped by the Zan. This zania is magic and it is linked to the Zan. I am the keeper of the coin. But I am old now and must pass it on before I die.'

'To me?' asked Lewin.

'Perhaps. One day a young sky reader must become the new keeper of the coin, and wait for the signal, as I have.'

'What is the signal?' asked Lewin.

'I will teach you about these things in good time, young Lewin. Now it is time for another lesson - reading the moonless night sky.'

As soon as they started reading the sky, both of them saw the red-haired woman again. She was running from something and looking very worried. Then they saw why she was running - the warlord Gondar was chasing her.

The sky readers looked at each other. Laylan looked very worried. 'I fear there are very dark days ahead for us all.'

CHAPTER FOUR

The call of the Zan

The sky readers travelled along many country roads during the weeks of Lewin's training.

'It's best that we stay away from towns,' said Laylan. 'People in towns sometimes fear those of us who follow the old magic. Here in the country, people are closer to the old ways. We'll be safer here.'

But Lewin and his grandfather read in the sky about events in Liana, the city at the centre of Avondel. They saw Gondar's actions. He was forcing the sky readers in Liana to do more and more sky readings. This was cruel, as sky readers can go blind if they are forced to read too often.

As they walked along one evening, Laylan said to Lewin, 'The warlord is asking more and more questions about the time of the Zan. And he wants to know about the legends that tell of things made of old gold, like my zania. What is he looking for?'

Lewin looked up into the sky. 'See! There! That golden sword. That must be what he's looking for!'

'Where?' said his grandfather, looking up. 'Where do you see the sword?'

'In the dark part over there - past the stars. See?'

Laylan stared at his grandson. 'You have seen something that I have not seen. You have seen the Golden Sword of the Banshee.'

'What's that?' Lewin asked.

'You're a sky reader. Read.'

The sky burst into light for Lewin. Readings had not been like this before. He saw an ancient battle. It was the final battle between the Zan and the Banshee from beyond the Wild White Mountains. It was the final battle between old

magic and wild magic, when evil entered Avondel. The Banshee had a golden sword. The Zan had no weapon as powerful as the Banshee's sword.

Lewin sat down. He was very tired after the reading. He said to Laylan, 'What happened to that sword?'

'It disappeared. Many thought it had been melted down by the Banshee so that nobody could use it again. But I fear that is not true. It is my turn to do a reading now. But you must not look - you must rest your eyes.'

Laylan read the sky. Lewin did not look up. The old man said, 'I see in the future... I see very bad days ahead. Gondar will find the Golden Sword of the Banshee. This will give the warlord total power.'

'No!' said Lewin. 'We must stop him! But can we - if it is written?'

'The future we read now is only one possible future,' Laylan replied. 'Things that happen now can change the future. And we must try to stop this future from happening!'

'Yes! But how? Oh - Grandfather - look! There's a light coming from your pocket!'

Laylan reached into his pocket and took out the zania. The coin was glowing!

'Oh, oh!' he cried. 'It's the signal - from a Zan. All these hundreds of years we've waited. Oh, oh... What to do... What to do? I wish you were a few years older, Lewin. I never expected the signal to come in my time.' The old man hopped from one foot to the other, very worried.

'It's the call of a Zan! It's all right, Grandfather,' said Lewin. 'I'm here with you now. We can answer the call together. Don't worry. Let's think. What were you told about the signal when you were given the zania?'

'My grandfather gave it to me,' the old man replied. 'He told me that when the coin glows, I must go to a cave on Firebird Mountain.' Laylan pointed to a tall mountain in the distance, covered in cloud. 'But I fear what is to come. I am too old, and you are too young.'

'We must go, Grandfather,' said Lewin. 'We are being called.'

It took the sky readers two days and two nights to reach Firebird Mountain. All that time, they were not able to read the sky. 'Oh, there is too much magic!' said Laylan. 'Nothing is clear. Nothing is clear.'

As they got closer and closer to Firebird Mountain, the zania glowed more and more brightly.

Frail old Laylan found walking up Firebird Mountain very difficult. They stopped often so that he could rest. Lewin helped his grandfather with the last part of the climb. He put his arm around Laylan and helped him to climb up the hardest parts of the path.

The sun was setting behind them as the path came to an end. They were high up on Firebird Mountain. It was very cold.

'Where's the cave?' said Laylan. He looked white and he leant against his grandson. Lewin knew his grandfather could not go much farther.

'It must be here!' said Lewin. 'The zania is glowing as brightly as a fire! And the path stops here - in front of this stone wall.'

But they could not find an entrance to a cave anywhere.

It grew colder and colder as the sun set.

Finally, Laylan said in a tired voice, 'We must have walked past the cave on our way up.'

'We must climb down again and look for it,' said Lewin. 'But not tonight. It's too dark. We'll stay here tonight. I wish we could read the sky now. Perhaps we'd see where the cave was.' He leant against the cold stonewall.

Suddenly a small part of the wall seemed to melt. Lewin fell backwards - into a cave!

CHAPTER FIVE

The meeting in the cave

Lewin heard a woman's voice saying, 'Welcome, sky readers.'

He looked around. In the cave were three people - a man, a woman and a boy who was about three years old. They all had red hair.

Lewin said slowly, 'What happened to the wall? And who are you? - I know you! I've seen you in the sky! Grandfather - it's her! Look!'

But Laylan just said to the woman, 'Where is Maximus?'

Silently, the young woman lifted the sleeve of her cloak. On her arm she wore a golden armlet. 'I am his daughter. My name is Mariel. I am the keeper of the stones now. My father died last year. He refused to shape a new weapon of war for Gondar and the warlord killed him. This is my husband, Olaf, and this is our son, Finn. We left Liana when my father was killed.'

Laylan said gently, 'I am sorry for your loss. Maximus was a good man - and the best stone shaper of his generation.'

Lewin said, 'Stone shapers! Of course! You made that stone wall melt!'

Mariel nodded. 'Yes. We built it when we saw you climbing the path. We didn't know who you were - you could have been Gondar's men. We used my cloak - we turned it into stone.'

Laylan said, 'I greet you, Mariel, keeper of the stones. I am Laylan, keeper of the coin.' Laylan lifted his sleeve. He, too, wore an armlet. Lewin had never seen it before.

Then Laylan took the zania out of his pocket. It glowed brightly in the dim light of the cave. Silently, Mariel took two small stones out of a pocket in her cloak. They, too, glowed brightly.

'It is time,' said Laylan.

'Yes,' said Mariel. 'This is a call for help. From a Zan. I know that much. But I do not know what to do next. I am glad you are here.'

Shaking his head slowly, the old sky reader said, 'I'm sorry, my dear, but I do not know. I was told many years ago to come to this cave. That is all I know.'

'Perhaps you could read the sky?' suggested Olaf. He had been quiet until now.

Laylan and Lewin stood outside the cave trying to read the sky. But they could only see odd shapes - the sword, Gondar's angry face, a crying man, a burning building... nothing was clear.

'This is bad, very bad,' said Laylan. 'Wild magic is everywhere now.'

Everyone went back into the cave. Olaf and Lewin lit a small fire. But it was still cold in the cave.

Mariel wrapped her cloak around her son. 'I wish we had a fire guide here now,' she said. But then everyone fell silent. They knew that Gondar's family were fire guides.

Lewin said, 'How many keepers are there? Perhaps there are more of you to come?'

Nobody knew the answer to Lewin's question.

Lewin stood up and walked around the cave. 'Why here? Why this cave? The answer must be here in this cave!' He took a burning stick from the fire and looked carefully at every stone and wall. Finally, he called out, 'Look! There are some marks on this wall!'

Everyone came to the back of the cave. 'It could be writing,' said Olaf. 'But I can't read it.'

'I have an idea!' said Lewin. 'Grandfather, Mariel, hold the coin and the stones near the wall!' As they did so, the words too began to glow on the wall.

Follow the light to find me. I am hidden for all to see. Find me in the square. Others won't see me but I am there.

Lewin said, 'These words are from a Zan! Telling us how to find it!'

'But how are we to follow the light?' wondered Laylan.

The writing on the wall glowed less and less brightly. Soon it was gone.

'What was that about a square?' said Mariel. Nobody answered her. The stones she held still glowed brightly. She turned to talk to Olaf. As she did this, the stones glowed less brightly.

'Look!' said Lewin. 'Your stones glow more brightly when you are facing south, Mariel.'

'Really?' said the stone shaper, turning to Lewin. She was now facing south and her stones glowed brightly. She then turned in a circle. It was true. As she turned to the west, the stones glowed less brightly. When she faced north, they did not glow at all. When she faced east, they began to glow again and when she faced south again, they glowed very brightly.

Lewin said to his grandfather, 'Let's test your coin too.' So Laylan turned in a circle too. And the magical zania glowed most brightly when Laylan faced south.

'Well done, Lewin,' said Laylan. 'We can now follow the light. In the morning we will go south - to Liana.'

Mariel said, 'Yes, I agree. But I wonder what the rest of the words mean. Where is the Zan that is calling us? In a square? What is square? A box? A cupboard? A room?'

'Perhaps we will think better after a good night's sleep,' said Olaf.

'Yes, I am tired,' said Mariel. 'And poor Finn is half-asleep already.'

They ate a simple meal of bread, cheese and fruit. Then Mariel made a bed for her son using cloaks. She sat with young Finn and sang him a cradlesong.

Lewin enjoyed hearing the song. His own mother used to sing cradlesongs to him when he was a little boy. He sat thinking of his mother, and of the farm. Life had changed so quickly for him, and his future seemed so uncertain. He listened to Mariel's beautiful voice as she sang:

The Zan are the old ones, my son

They made our world, our stars, our sun

They gave us the stones in times long past

We must help when they sing at last

The 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

Mariel stopped singing. Her son was asleep.

Lewin said quietly, 'That's a beautiful song. What does it mean?'

Mariel replied, 'I'm not sure. My parents sang it to me. It's the Song of the Singing Stones. All stone shapers know it. But I think it's time for us all to go to sleep now, young sky reader.'

Lewin lay in the cave, thinking of all that had happened to him. He thought, too, about going to Liana. Why was the Zan calling? What dangers lay ahead? How would they find the Zan that was calling them? And would they have to face Gondar?

Then his thoughts came back to the cradle song Mariel had sung, and finally he went to sleep.

CHAPTER SIX

Problems and plans

Lewin woke before dawn the next morning. As he did so, he thought of the word 'square'. The glowing words had said Find me in the square. And then Mariel had sung, 'Seek the stone Zan with the stone man and the stone woman in the square in Liana.' Of course!

'Grandfather, wake up!' said Lewin.

The old man opened his eyes. 'What is it?'

'There are town squares in Liana, aren't there?'

'Yes, Lewin, there are many squares in the walled city,' replied Laylan.

'And are there stone statues in those squares?' asked Lewin.

The old sky reader laughed. 'Hundreds of statues. Maybe thousands of them. It is said that there are more statues than people in Liana. After all, stone shapers built the city and have lived there ever since.'

'Then I know where we'll find the stone Zan! It's in a town square, with stone statues of a man and a woman!'

'Of course!' said Laylan. 'Well done, Lewin! Let's tell Mariel and Olaf.'

They woke the others. Mariel agreed with Lewin. 'Yes, it's in the cradle song! Of course! We have to look for a stone man, a stone woman and a Zan. That will be easy!'

'I'm afraid not,' said Laylan. 'There are three problems.'

'What are they?' said Lewin. He was keen to get going, to start looking for the Zan.

'One problem is that there are so many squares and statues in Liana,' said Laylan.

'True,' said Mariel. 'But we have these, remember.' She held up her stones. 'With your zania as well, we can "follow the light". They will lead us to the right square.'

'Good thinking!' said Lewin.

'Yes,' agreed Laylan. 'The second problem, though, is that we don't know what this Zan looks like. Nobody does.'

'Oh,' said Lewin. Then he said, 'But maybe it will glow when we're near it, or the stones and the zania will take us straight to the statue of the stone woman and the stone man who are with the Zan.'

'That's the third problem, I fear,' said Laylan. 'Cradle songs can be about the past, the present or the future. They are like our readings. In fact, it is said that sky readers wrote the cradlesongs to help people when they need it most. Perhaps the verse about the stone woman and the stone man is for people in the future. It may not be for us now.'

'Oh,' said Lewin again. He found it hard, sometimes, to understand the way that sky readers could know about the future. 'Then let us read the sky now, Grandfather. Maybe we'll be able to see the square, or the statues or even the Zan itself.'

At sunrise, high up on Firebird Mountain, looking over all of Avondel, the two sky readers stood and read the sky. Mariel, Olaf and Finn stood quietly behind them.

After a short while, Laylan turned to his grandson. 'Did you see what I saw - the warlord?'

Lewin's face was white. 'Yes.'

'What? What did you see?' asked Mariel.

Lewin told Mariel and Olaf, 'Gondar is seeking an old sky reader and a young red-haired woman. He knows they are travelling together. His men are beating people and burning houses. The warlord will not stop until he finds us.'

'But - how does he know about us?' said Mariel.

Laylan said, 'There are sky readers in Liana. And they must tell the truth. Lewin and I saw Gondar beating an old friend of mine. Poor Lukan. He told the warlord that we are coming. But he did not tell him where we are now. Gondar thought he was lying. But sky readers cannot lie - Lukan can't see us now. Perhaps the old magic in this cave is hiding us.'

'But when we leave here - the sky readers will be able to see us!' said Olaf.

'Perhaps we should stay here.'

'But we must answer the call of the Zan, Olaf,' said Mariel.

'Hmm. I fear we face great danger,' said Laylan. He looked very old and frail.

Then Lewin said, 'Grandfather! I have an idea! Tell me - sky readers only answer the questions that people ask us, right?'

'Yes, that's right.'

'So, if Gondar asked a sky reader, "Where are the sky reader and the red-haired woman who are travelling together?", then the sky reader would have to tell him where you and Mariel were?'

'Yes, I fear that's right.'

'But only if you are travelling together!'

'Ah! I see what you mean!' said Laylan. 'Yes, it might work.'

'What might work?' asked Olaf.

It was Mariel who answered. 'If Laylan and I travel separately, then the sky readers won't have to tell the warlord where we are. Because we won't be together.'

'But what if the warlord asks about you separately?'

'I don't think he will,' replied Laylan. 'I know him. When he gets an idea in his head, it stays there. He'll ask the same question again and again.'

'I think it's too dangerous,' said Olaf.

Mariel said quietly, 'Darling, I must do this. I was born to be the keeper of the stones. A Zan is calling me. I must go. But you and Finn - you don't need to come. Maybe you could go to the west coast, far from here. Go and stay with my Aunt Tia and her husband.'

'No, Mariel. We'll stay together. I do not want you to travel to Liana alone. That would be far too dangerous. And my family are in Liana. They will help us.'

'Are you sure?' Mariel asked her husband.

'Yes, I am sure,' replied Olaf.

'Good,' said Lewin. 'Then that's the plan. We'll travel to Liana in two separate groups.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

Separate ways

Laylan, Lewin, Mariel and Olaf sat in the sun outside the cave. Lewin made tea for everyone. Young Finn played nearby.

'We should stay off main roads,' said Laylan. 'Even if we travel separately, we must hide from the warlord's men. They will be keen to find any old sky reader or young red-haired woman.'

'Yes,' said Mariel. 'But how will we get to Liana?'

'I have an idea,' said Laylan.

Laylan drew a map of Avondel in the hard dirt. 'We're here, on Firebird Mountain. The city is to the south of us, here. Between us and the city are the Heartlands. To the west of us is the coast. To the east of us is the Maze of Mazra.'

'What's the Maze of Mazra?' asked Lewin. There was so much he didn't know about Avondel.

It was Olaf who told Lewin, 'The Maze of Mazra is a series of small valleys and gorges. It looks natural, as natural as this mountain. But it is said that the first stone shapers made the maze. It is so full of twists and turns that anyone who goes into the maze gets lost. Nobody goes there. They say the maze was made for one of the lords who ruled Avondel in the days of old magic. His name was Mazra. It is said that Mazra asked the stone shapers to build the maze so that his enemies could not enter Avondel from the east.'

'It sounds like a terrible place,' said Lewin.

Laylan said, 'Yes, but it may help us too. Tell me, Mariel, as the keeper of the stones, do you know the secret of the maze?'

Mariel took a deep breath. 'Yes, I do. But I can tell nobody. Not even you.'

'I do not ask you to tell me. I am asking you something harder - to go through the maze yourself. You would not meet anybody there. And I think the old magic will protect you there.'

Mariel smiled. 'And the maze ends very close to Liana. That is a good idea, Laylan. Yes, we will go that way - if you agree, Olaf?'

'I go where you go, Mariel,' replied her husband. 'So does Finn. We are a family.'

Lewin looked at the map. 'So shall we go to Liana on this road, Grandfather?' Laylan had drawn a road along the coast.

'I wish we could, Lewin. But I fear too many people use that road. And so do Gondar's men. We shall walk through the Heartlands. Here, between this mountain and Liana.'

'I know of the Heartlands. It's farming country, isn't it? We trade our cheeses for oranges, plums and pears from the Heartlands.'

'Yes. That will be our main problem. Everybody knows everybody in the Heartlands. As strangers, we will stand out. And even in the Heartlands, everyone will be looking for an old sky reader - me.'

Lewin thought for a moment. 'When I wear this cap, it covers my white hair. Maybe you should wear a cap too.'

Laylan laughed. 'I'll wear a cap. But I won't wear a tea cosy!'

'A what?' asked Mariel.

'Oh, my little brother made this for me,' said Lewin. 'It's really a tea cosy but I think it makes a great cap - and it reminds me of him.'

'I'm sure he's happy to think of you wearing it,' said Olaf.

Laylan said, 'Your idea is a good one, Lewin. But I don't have a cap.'

'Here,' said Mariel. 'Tie my scarf around your head.'

'If I must,' said Laylan. He did so.

Lewin laughed. 'You don't look like a sky reader now, Grandfather!'

'No, I must look like a gypsy!'

Lewin thought. 'I know! If we meet anyone, we can say we're gypsies.'

'But we cannot lie,' said Laylan.

'But we can ask if we can do any odd jobs. They'll think we're gypsies, because gypsies always ask to do odd jobs,' Lewin said. 'We won't be lying - we won't say we're gypsies, we'll just let people think we are!'

Laylan said, 'I hope I don't have to do any odd jobs. I'm too old for hard work.'

Lewin laughed again. 'Don't worry, Grandfather. Most people just tell gypsies to go away.'

The small group climbed down Firebird Mountain. When they reached the bottom of the mountain, the sky readers and the stone shapers said farewell.

'It is agreed, then. We will meet at the next full moon,' said Laylan.

'Yes,' said Mariel. 'We'll meet in four days' time. At the agreed place - the north-east corner of the wall that surrounds the city.'

'Good luck!' said Lewin to Mariel, Olaf and little Finn.

'Take care!' said Mariel as she and her family started walking to the east.

'Ready?' said Laylan to his grandson.

'Yes, Grandfather,' said Lewin.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The greebles

Walking through the farming country reminded Lewin of his own farm. He hoped his father and Lorca weren't missing him as much as he missed them. When he thought of them, he felt an emptiness inside. He had no idea when - or if - he would see his family again. But he knew he was born to be a sky reader, to be with his grandfather.

There were plenty of fresh streams to drink from. And when they were hungry, they took apples or pears off trees. Laylan said, 'The farmers won't miss one or two pieces of fruit.'

'It's beautiful here in the Heartlands,' said Lewin.

'Yes, it is. This is my first time here.'

'Really?'

'Yes. There are so few people here that it does not pay to come this way. I need to make money from sky readings.'

Lewin said, 'This is so easy for us, walking through the Heartlands. I hope Mariel and her family are all right. The Maze of Mazra sounds terrible.'

'Let's see, shall we?' said Laylan.

Laylan looked up. 'Ah, they are in the maze. Do you see them?'

Lewin looked up too. 'Oh, yes! Mariel seems to know where to go. Is she singing?'

'She is. The secret of the maze is passed from one keeper to the next in a song. The words of Mariel's song tell her where to go.'

'Hey - you two!' said a loud, angry voice.

Lewin and Laylan looked behind them. A farmer was walking towards them. 'What are you doing here on my farm? Hey - you're not sky readers, are you? You were looking up in the sky like they do.'

It was Lewin who answered. 'Ah - beautiful day for doing odd jobs. Do you need any odd jobs done, sir?'

'Oh - gypsies, are you? Well, be on your way. Get off my farm. And don't you eat any of my plums as you go. Hurry up!'

The farmer stood and watched the sky readers leave. When they were far enough away, Laylan said quietly, 'That was close. Well done, Lewin.'

'Thanks, Grandfather. But we'd better keep a better look out for people from now on.'

They found a grassy place by a stream to spend the night. They made a fire and Lewin caught a fish and cooked it.

'Three more days until the full moon,' said Laylan. 'We have plenty of time to get to the meeting place.'

Little did the old sky reader know how wrong he was. The very next day, they fell into a trap.

That morning they set off early. They walked a long way. Every so often, they had to hide from a farmer. But the day was sunny and the air smelled sweet. Once or twice, they read the sky. They saw that Mariel and her family were going well. And they also saw that it would rain that evening in the Heartlands.

'We need to find somewhere warm and dry, Grandfather,' said Lewin.

'Yes. Perhaps we'll find an empty barn.'

They walked on. They did see a barn, but people were working in it. During the afternoon, the sky filled with dark clouds. As the sun was setting, they felt the first drops of rain.

'Look, Grandfather - over there!' Lewin pointed to a very old house. Long grass grew all around it. There was no glass in the windows. 'That old place looks empty!'

The two sky readers ran to the house. Lewin helped Laylan along. They stood on the porch, out of the rain.

'We got here just in time, Grandfather,' said Lewin. The rain was very heavy, and a strong wind started to blow. 'Let's go inside and get dry.'

Lewin was about to open the door, but Laylan said, 'Wait. Don't go in. Let's read the sky first. Something doesn't feel quite right to me.' He looked up into the sky. What he saw there made him cry out. 'Oh no! Quick, Lewin, run!'

But even as Laylan spoke, it was too late. The door of the old house opened and out came an army of small, hairy creatures. They were no taller than Lewin's knees. They surrounded the sky readers. Then some of them grabbed Lewin's feet. He fell over. So did Laylan. Lewin tried to get free. But strong, small arms held him tightly. The creatures carried the sky readers into the dark house.

To Lewin's surprise, it was warm and dry in the old house. There was a fire burning in the fireplace. The smell of roast lamb filled the room. How could this be? There was no glass in the windows. The wind should be blowing cold air and rain into the room. The creatures let go of Lewin. He stood up slowly. Then he helped his grandfather to get up. Neither of them spoke.

'Sit down,' said a deep voice. 'Sit down!'

Lewin looked down. The creatures were all frowning.

The biggest of them said for a third time, 'Sit down.'

Laylan and Lewin looked at each other. They did not move.

'Come, come, sky readers. Do not be afraid. Sit down.'

'You know we are sky readers?' said Laylan.

'Oh yes. Of course. So you can take off that scarf, old one,' said the biggest creature.

Laylan did so. He sat on one of the chairs. 'Will you tell the warlord about us?'

'Who?' said the creature.

'Gondar - the ruler of all Avondel.'

'Is he? We've never heard of him.'

Lewin said, 'Who are you?'

'We are greebles, of course. My name is Gronch.'

'Greebles? I've never heard of you,' said Lewin.

'Greebles? Of course!' said Laylan. 'Sit down, Lewin. I fear we may be here for quite a while.'

CHAPTER NINE

Trapped

Laylan sighed. 'This house was a trap. Greebles trap people by showing them what they most want to see.'

Gronch nodded. 'And some people want to see old, empty houses! But we don't often trap sky readers. We usually trap gypsies. You sky readers should have seen that this was a trap.'

Laylan replied, 'We felt safe in the Heartlands. We were worried about our friends in the -'

'Very clever, Gronch!' Lewin spoke quickly. He didn't want Laylan to tell Gronch about Mariel and her family. 'You're clever to have a trap like this.'

'Thank you, young sky reader. You will make a good slave. You are young and strong.'

'What? I won't be your slave!' said Lewin. 'Come on, Grandfather. Let's go. Even if it is raining, I'm not staying here.' He went over to the front door and tried to open it. He couldn't. The greebles just stood and watched him. Laylan didn't move. Slowly, Lewin went and sat on a chair next to his grandfather.

'I'm sorry, Lewin, but greebles have powerful magic. There is no way out of here. Unless the greebles let us go. I haven't had time to tell you of the magical creatures of Avondel - the greebles, the nylars, the voomax, the poddlewoppers - and many more. They still live in Avondel, but they usually live far from people. Some magical creatures are good. Most are bad. A few are - very bad.' As he said this, he looked at Gronch.

'Enough talking, sky readers. We are not so bad. We do give you a chance. You have three days before you become our slaves. Three days before we take away your power to think. If in those three days you can do the impossible, then we will let you go. You will be free. I think that is fair, don't you?'

'What is the impossible thing we must do?' asked Laylan.

'Something the last seven slaves tried to do and failed,' replied Gronch. Then he called out, 'Ask my father to come here.'

Several greebles hurried out of the living room. They soon returned with a very old greeble. 'What is it? Why did you wake me up?' This greeble was very grumpy.

'Father, look!' said Gronch.

The grumpy old greeble looked up at Lewin and Laylan. 'Humph,' he said. 'That one is too old to be any good as a slave.'

Gronch sighed. 'Your task, sky readers, is to make my father, Grollo, laugh. But I warn you - he hasn't laughed for forty years.'

Grollo said, 'Humph, I'm going back to bed.'

Gronch said to Lewin and Laylan, 'Eat, get warm, sleep. You will find beds in the room next door. Remember, you have three days.'

For most of those three days, the sky readers tried to make Grollo laugh. Lewin also tried to find ways out of the greebles' house, but he could not. They were trapped by powerful magic.

They told jokes and asked riddles.

Laylan tried asking a riddle: 'What goes up when the rain comes down? An umbrella!' A few greebles laughed. But not Grollo.

Lewin told a joke. 'Lorca always laughs at this joke: A man says, "My dog has no nose." His friend says, "How does he smell?" The man replies, "Terrible."'

Several greebles laughed, but not Grollo.

On the third day, Laylan quietly said, 'I fear we are trapped here forever. I'm sorry, Lewin.'

Lewin kept trying to make Grollo laugh. He tried to do a funny dance. It didn't work. He tried standing on his head.

That didn't work. He tried tickling Grollo. But even tickling didn't work. Nothing made the grumpy old greeble laugh.

Finally, at sunset on the third day, Gronch said, 'It is time. You have failed. You will now become our slaves forever.'

Lewin said, 'Wait! Before you make us your slaves - please pass me my cap. It's on the table. I want to wear it. Maybe it will help me to think of my home.'

Gronch shook his head. 'You will remember nothing. But pass him the cap, someone.'

One of the greebles picked up Lewin's cap. He put his finger through one of the holes. Grollo said, 'It's not a very good cap - it's got holes in it.'

Lewin sighed, 'That's because it's not really a cap. It's a tea cosy.'

'A what?!' said Gronch.

'A tea cosy.'

Gronch started laughing. So did many of the greebles. Then a strange sound filled the room, like rocks falling down a cliff. It got louder and louder. It was Grollo - and he was laughing! 'A tea cosy - ha, ha, ha! A sky reader wearing a tea cosy!' As he laughed, the walls of the house seemed to melt away. Lewin, Laylan and the greebles stood in an empty field.

'A tea cosy! Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!' laughed Grollo. He laughed so hard that tears rolled down his cheeks.

'We're free!' cried Lewin.

'And so are we!' cried Gronch. 'We were forced to stay in that house until my father laughed. Now we can return home - home to the Sunless Swamp!' The greebles started running across the field, faster than Lewin thought possible. Soon only Grollo was left, still laughing at Lewin's tea cosy. The sky readers walked quietly away from the old greeble.

Lewin said, 'I look forward to telling Lorca that his tea cosy saved us from becoming slaves! I wonder why the greebles were forced to stay in that house?'

'Come, Lewin, we have lost too much time already. We must hurry to the meeting place,' said Laylan.

Lewin looked up at the sunset sky. 'Why can't I see Mariel?' he asked.

'I don't know. It may be that there is too much wild magic in the air. The greebles' house was full of it. Or... I fear it may mean her family is in great danger.'

'Let's go!' said Lewin.

They travelled all night. It was the night of the full moon - the night they should have been at the meeting place. The moon helped them to find their way. They stopped for short rests. Lewin was worried about his grandfather but Laylan wanted to keep going.

The next morning they arrived, finally, at the wall that surrounded the city of Liana. It was three or four times taller than Laylan and the stones were old and grey. Vines grew up the wall, but Lewin could see that near the top of the wall was a row of sharp metal spikes.

'The spikes are to stop people climbing over the wall. And soldiers walk along the top of the wall,' said Laylan. 'We must look out for them.'

'This way,' said Lewin, turning to his right. 'The north-east corner is in this direction.' They walked quickly beside the wall. 'I hope they've waited for us. We're late.'

But when the sky readers reached the north-east corner of the wall, there was nobody there.

CHAPTER TEN

Through the wall

'What shall we do?' said Laylan. 'I fear that Mariel may be in danger. Should we wait for her here? Or should we try to get into the city? Oh, I don't know what to do.'

Lewin looked into the sky. 'I can see the warlord - he's still searching for you both. So Gondar hasn't found Mariel. But I can't see Mariel anywhere.'

Laylan looked into the sky. 'Oh yes - look. Gondar knows we're close. He believes that Mariel and I hold the key to the Golden Sword of the Banshee. But where is Mariel? I hope they're safe. They should have arrived here last night.'

'And where is the tunnel through the wall?' said Lewin. 'Mariel said it was at the north-east corner. It must be here somewhere.' Lewin started looking closely at the wall. The vines grew thickly up it. Suddenly he cried, 'Look, Grandfather! It's us!'

There, on the ground, were two tiny statues. They looked exactly like Lewin and Laylan. 'Mariel must have left these here as a sign,' said Lewin. He put the tiny statues in his pocket. 'The tunnel must be here!' He felt through the vines. 'Aha! It's here! Look! I can pull the vines aside like a curtain. The tunnel is here! Come on!'

Laylan followed his grandson into the tunnel. Then he stopped. 'It's so dark in here. I fear there may be spiders or snakes.'

'I'll go first,' said Lewin. He walked slowly with his arms out. He pulled aside a few spiders' webs but didn't tell Laylan about them. Soon there was some light and they could see better.

'We're not in the tunnel any more, Grandfather,' said Lewin. 'We're in a room. But it's very dark and dusty!'

The room was full of pieces of stone and old statues. The sky readers quietly walked around and past them to a door.

'Sh! I can hear voices on the other side of the door,' said Lewin.

The sky readers listened for a moment. 'Someone is coming. Hide!' said Lewin.

They hid behind two large statues and the door opened. Then they heard a woman say, 'I'm going through the tunnel again. What if they don't see the statues I left?' It was Mariel!

Lewin and Laylan stepped forward and Mariel cried, 'You're here! You're safe! How wonderful!' Then she said, 'Come through here. Come and meet Olaf's parents. This is the back of their workshop.'

'Wait, Mariel. We need to talk,' said Laylan. 'I fear that Lewin and I have been reading of this day for a long time now. We both saw you in readings before we met you. I think that today is the day where the future of Avondel changes. And I fear that your future changes today as well.'

Mariel looked at the old sky reader. 'Do you see Finn in these readings?'

'No. And the readings are not clear. There is much wild magic about. We can't say for sure what will happen to you - or to any of us.'

Mariel smiled. 'I know one thing, Laylan. I am the keeper of the stones. It is my duty to answer the call of the Zan. And the Zan will look after me, I am sure of it. I have known since our meeting at the cave that we all face danger. We must not turn away from our duty. But I do ask one thing of you, sky readers.'

Laylan said, 'Anything, my dear.'

'If... if anything happens to Olaf and me, promise that you will look after Finn for us.'

'Of course, but nothing will -'

'Take him far from here,' Mariel continued, 'to the west coast, to the village near Shark Island. Take him there to my Aunt Tia. She will look after him. Promise me this.'

Lewin said, 'Of course we promise it. But I hope we never have to keep that promise.'

'Good. Come now, and meet Olaf's parents. We have been waiting for you to arrive, hoping you were safe.'

But Olaf's parents were not happy to see the sky readers. 'I'm sorry, but you're not welcome here. You bring danger to our family,' said Olaf's father. 'I think you should all stop this search. It is too dangerous. The warlord knows you are coming to Liana. His soldiers are everywhere.'

And Olaf's mother said, 'What about Finn? It isn't safe here for him. And what if anything happens to you, Mariel? A boy needs his mother.'

Mariel sighed. 'Yes, I know. But I am the keeper of the stones. I love my son, but I know my duty. The stones have been handed down from son to daughter to son to daughter for hundreds of years. Each keeper has waited. Each of us has been ready to answer the call of the Zan.'

Olaf said, 'And I knew this when I married Mariel. She and Laylan must continue to search.'

Laylan said, 'And we must act fast.'

Lewin added, 'Remember - now that you two keepers are together again, Gondar's sky readers will be able to see you.'

Mariel turned to her mother-in-law. 'Can you please look after Finn for me? Laylan and I need to go out for a little while.'

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

Olaf said, 'I am too. Where you go, Mariel, I go too.'

Olaf and Mariel each gave their son a hug. 'We'll be back very soon, darling,' said Mariel softly. As she said this, Lewin looked out of the window and saw a terrible flash across the sky. Nobody else seemed to see it. Nor did anybody else see Mariel put something in Finn's coat pocket.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Golden Sword

Mariel, Laylan, Lewin and Olaf walked slowly through the narrow city streets. As they turned this way and that, the coin and the stones glowed more or less brightly and helped them to find their way.

It was busy - it was market day. They were glad there were a lot of people on the streets. It was easy to hide in the crowd. As they walked, they talked.

Mariel suddenly said, 'I think I know which square the Zan is in! The Stone Shapers' Square.'

Laylan nodded. 'Yes!'

They arrived at the Stone Shapers' Square, a place with many statues in it.

'How are we going to find the Zan here?' said Lewin.

Olaf suddenly said, 'Quiet! Here come some of the warlord's soldiers!'

There were soldiers everywhere and they were looking carefully at the people in the square.

Laylan said quietly, 'We'll have to be very careful.' He took the zania out and turned it this way and that. 'It's this way, I think.'

'I wish we knew what the Zan looks like,' said Lewin. 'It must look powerful and noble, I think. After all, Zan made the world turn and the stars shine. Perhaps that lion over there is the Zan?' He pointed to a group of statues. There were noble beasts such as lions and elephants, and plainer, more common creatures such as rats and rabbits. There was also a statue of a huge, ugly creature

holding a tree branch above its head. It looked as if it was going to hit the lion with the branch - if it wasn't frozen in stone.

'What's that ugly creature?' asked Lewin quietly.

Laylan said, 'That's the Banshee. The cause of all evil in Avondel. The first owner of the Golden Sword that Gondar seeks.'

Mariel looked at Laylan. 'There is old magic in these statues. I can feel it.'

Laylan said, 'I feel it too.'

'Then the lion must be the Zan!' said Olaf.

Lewin looked up at the statues again and said, 'Look! That branch the Banshee is holding! The stone branch - it's glowing!'

'So are my stones,' said Mariel.

'And my coin,' said Laylan.

It was Lewin who looked up into the sky. 'Look, Grandfather! That scene from the past! The first keepers trapped the Banshee in stone, using the coin and the stones from the Zan.'

'Oh no! By coming here, we're freeing the Banshee from its trap!' said Mariel.

Laylan started speaking rapidly. He was thinking aloud. 'No, it's not us, Mariel. We're not freeing the Banshee. The wild magic is doing it. It's been growing stronger ever since Gondar came to power. And that's why we were called! The Zan in this square has guarded the Banshee for all these years. And it knew the Banshee was about to be freed by the wild magic. That's why it called us! We must find the Zan and free it! Now!'

Lewin said, 'We're too late! Look!'

As they watched, the tree branch glowed brighter and brighter. Parts of it fell away - the leaves and twigs. It no longer looked like a branch. It was straight and had a handle at one end.

Lewin cried out, 'It's not a branch! It's a sword! The Golden Sword of the Banshee! And look! The Banshee itself is beginning to glow!'

As Lewin said this, the air was filled with the sounds of trumpets and drums. More and more soldiers filled the square. They pushed the crowds against the walls of the square, clearing a space around the statue of the Banshee.

Lewin found himself standing at the back of the crowd with Mariel and Olaf. He turned to talk to his grandfather - but Laylan wasn't there! Lewin looked for Laylan, but couldn't see him among all the people.

Then people in the crowd started saying, 'It's Gondar!' and 'Look, it's the warlord!' and Gondar rode into the square - a huge man on a black horse.

The warlord rode straight to the statue of the Banshee, reached up and grabbed the Golden Sword.

'Ah! After all this time - it is mine!' he cried and he waved the sword above his head. The crowd stood and watched silently - terrified.

Then Gondar got off his horse and walked over to a part of the crowd not far from Lewin and the others. He was walking straight towards someone... and then Lewin saw who it was - the warlord was standing face-to-face with Laylan.

Lewin watched as Gondar bowed to Laylan. 'Greetings, old friend! Oh, do not look surprised. My sky readers saw you the moment that you and the young stone shaper met up again in that little workshop. You, of all people, should know that you cannot hide from sky readers!' the warlord gloated.

Laylan stood there, facing his old friend. The warlord continued to gloat. 'Thank you, old friend, for coming and releasing the sword from its stony prison. Now, with the Golden Sword of the Banshee in my hands, my power will be unlimited!'

Everyone in the square heard Laylan say, 'I fear you will not hold it long. Not if its owner wants it back.' He pointed to the statue of the Banshee, which was now glowing brightly.

Gondar looked shocked. 'What?!' The warlord grabbed Laylan and pulled him close to the statue of the Banshee. 'Stop this happening, now!'

Mariel said quietly to Lewin, 'What can we do? We must do something!'

Lewin didn't know. But just then, he saw a small frog-like statue on the ground near the Banshee. The frog-like statue had empty eyes. And suddenly Lewin realised - this small statue was the same statue he'd seen in his readings. He'd seen Mariel holding it in those early readings. It was the Zan!

Lewin quietly told Mariel and Olaf. Mariel said, 'Ah! And my stones are its eyes! Remember that line in the cradle song? The stones are the lost eyes of a Zan.'

Yes, look - the statue has empty eyes. That's what I must do - put the stones into the statue to free it!

The three of them tried to get closer to the statue. As they did so, they heard the warlord yell, 'This is your fault, you old fool. You and the others who follow the old magic. You've come here and woken the Banshee.'

'No. It is you, old friend,' said Laylan. 'You have woken the wild magic with your evil ways.'

'Enough talk! It is time to die, sky reader!' The warlord lifted the Golden Sword of the Banshee.

Lewin cried, 'Olaf - you're closest - grab the Zan. Quickly!'

Olaf picked up the small statue. As he did so, it began to glow.

The crowd saw it and started shouting. Gondar swung around, saw the glowing Zan and came running towards them. Olaf turned to Mariel with the small statue. Mariel reached into her pocket for the stones - but it was too late - the warlord was too close. Gondar raised the Golden Sword above his head, ready to strike her.

There was no time for Mariel to place the stones in the statue. She threw the stones to Lewin. 'Take them! Look after Finn. Tell my son I love -'

Gondar's sword dropped through the air, but it didn't strike flesh - it struck stone!

The warlord screamed in anger and amazement.

There, in the centre of the Stone Shapers' Square was a new statue - a stone woman and a stone man, holding a stone Zan. Mariel and Olaf had turned to stone.

The crowd gasped. Nobody spoke or moved.

Suddenly there was a flash of lightning. Huge black clouds had filled the sky above the square.

Gondar turned to Lewin, raised the Golden Sword again and cried out, 'Die, young sky reader!'

CHAPTER TWELVE

Leaving Liana

Crack! Flash! A sudden light brighter than the sun filled the square as lightning struck the Golden Sword of the Banshee.

Gondar fell to the ground. He still held the sword. But the sword was no longer golden - it had turned black. And the statue of the Banshee was cold, grey stone again.

Soldiers ran to Gondar, who lay there on the ground. 'Quick,' cried a soldier. 'We must get the warlord inside to safety!' Several soldiers carried him away. The people in the crowd hurried away - scared of the soldiers, the storm and everything that had happened.

Lewin and Laylan hid behind some statues but the soldiers didn't even look for them. The soldiers seemed keen to leave the Stone Shapers' Square as quickly as everyone else. Soon the square was empty, except for Lewin, Laylan and the statues.

'Grandfather! We must help Mariel and Olaf! Look, I have her stones here. Let's put them into the statue of the Zan.' But the stones no longer glowed, and when Lewin tried to put them into the statue's empty eyes, they did not stay in.

Laylan said gently, 'Lewin, the stones must be placed there by the keeper of the stones.'

'But she's frozen in stone!' cried Lewin.

'That's true. The new keeper will have to place them there. When he is old enough to know his power.'

'Finn? He's the new keeper?'

Laylan sighed. 'I fear so, I fear so. The stones were handed down to the daughter. Now they must be handed down to the son.'

Lewin looked at the stones in his hand, then at the statue, and said, 'Grandfather, what happened here today?'

Laylan sighed. 'Today, old magic met wild magic once again.'

Today, the warlord held the Golden Sword of the Banshee in his hands - as you and I had read. And today, the Banshee was almost free.

'But today, the Zan, who has guarded the Banshee all these hundreds of years, saved Avondel from that evil. The Zan needed its eyes before it could turn from stone to flesh. That did not happen today. But the Zan had some power, even in stone, and it used that power to save Mariel and Olaf by turning them to stone too. And it made the storm - it made the lightning that struck the Golden Sword. The lightning took the wild magic away from the sword. If Gondar recovers, he will find that the sword has no special power now. But I fear this Zan has no power left until it gets its eyes back.'

Lewin looked up at the statue of the woman and the man with the Zan.

'Mariel, I will keep my promise. I will look after Finn. I will take him to the west coast, to your Aunt Tia. And I will watch over him as he grows up. Rest well, keeper of the stones. I hope one day we will meet again.'

The sky readers made their way back to the workshop.

'Where is my son? Where is Mariel?' cried Olaf's mother. She stood at the door of the workshop with Olaf's father.

Gently, Laylan told them all that had happened in the Stone Shapers' Square.

Olaf's mother wept. 'Oh, Olaf! Will I ever see my son again?'

His father wept too. Laylan sat and stared at the floor. He felt older than the hills.

Then Olaf's mother cried, 'What will become of Finn? He can't stay here!'

Lewin told Olaf's parents about Mariel's plan for Finn. 'I will leave as soon as I can. I'll take him through the tunnel and we will make our way to the coast. Finn will be safe there.'

Laylan sighed. 'I fear I cannot come with you, Lewin. My old friend Gondar will not rest now until he finds me and kills me. It is time for this old sky reader to leave Avondel. I will go west, past the Great Glassy Sea and into the sunset. I will go where no sky reader has gone before.'

Little Finn was asleep, wrapped up in his cloak. Lewin bent down to the sleeping boy. 'I will look after you, Finn. I promise.' He gently patted the little boy. As he did so, he felt something hard in Finn's pocket. Lewin carefully took out a bundle of cloth. Inside it was a note, an envelope and a gold armlet! The

note said: Whoever reads this, please take Finn to his great aunt Tia. And hide the stones on the beach near her house. Hide them for all to see. Ask Tia to give Finn the envelope and the armlet only when he is old enough and strong enough - when he is ready to be the keeper of the stones.

The envelope was addressed to 'My darling son, Finn.'

Lewin carefully put the bundle into his own pocket, together with the stones.

Later that day, the two sky readers said farewell to Olaf's parents, who kissed their little grandson but did not speak.

As Lewin, Laylan and Finn came through the tunnel, the sky readers looked up into the afternoon sky. Lewin saw a future where Laylan was teaching young Lorca to read the sky. He showed it to Laylan. The old sky reader nodded. They travelled a short way together. But when they reached the path that went past Stayaway Valley, they said farewell.

Lewin did take Finn to the west coast, to Mariel's Aunt Tia. And Lewin chose to give up his sky reading. Instead, he became a farmer, like his father. But not in the mountains, not back at his old farm. He grew vegetables on a small farm close to the coast, close to Finn. He kept the two tiny statues of himself and his grandfather on his mantelpiece. One day he planned to tell the new keeper of the stones about them.

As to what happened to young Finn, and if he did become the keeper of the stones and free his parents and the Zan - that's a story for another day.

- THE END -