

Chapter 1

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.

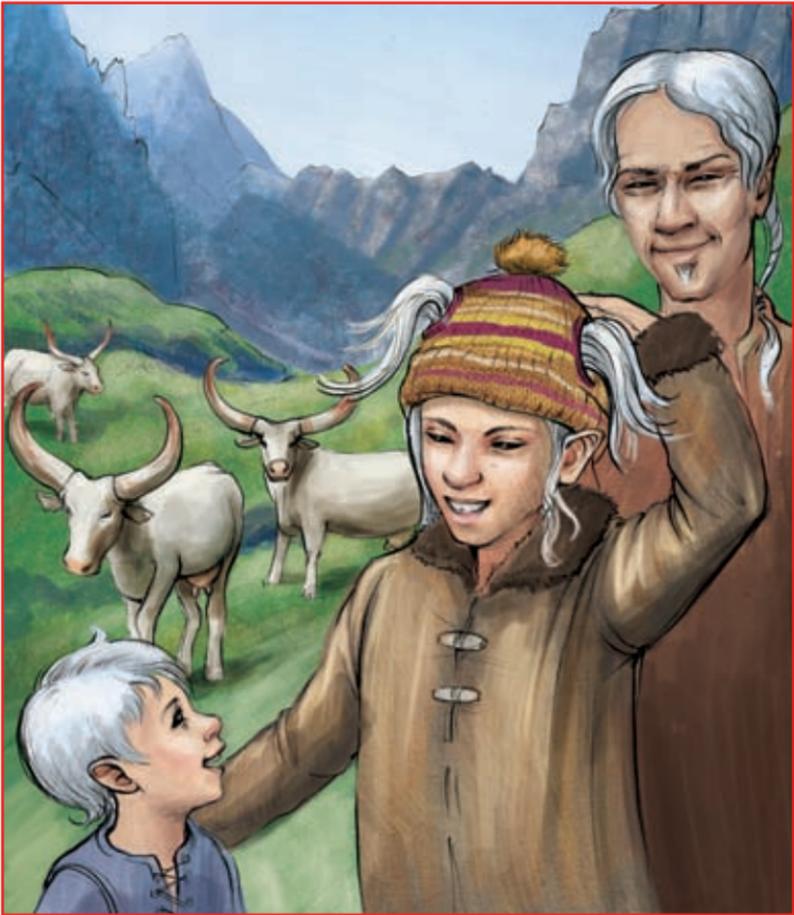
'Thank you, Father,' said Lewin, and he put on the jacket.

'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.'