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The white crystal of Calithwain : a young adult fantasy novel

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THE WHITE CRYSTAL OF CALITHWAIN:

A Young Adult Fantasy Novel

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by Valerie Estelle Frankel

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ABSTRACT

THE WHITE CRYSTAL OF CALITHWAIN

by Valerie Estelle Frankel

THE WHITE CRYSTAL OF CALITHWAIN is a fantasy novel for young adults.

Andrea Brightman, age twelve, finds a mysterious play about a fantasy quest, and urges her school to produce it. After opening night, Andrea's vanished mother's amulet whisks her to Calithwain, the play's magical world. The White Crystal that powers all forest magic loses energy, threatening to kill the woodfolk. Andrea journeys with Kreliss, an elf-raised human whose accidental dark magic could destroy them all, and Geome, an overeager mage exiled from his Academy and determined to win back his place.

Interwoven with this tale of enchantment appear constant flashes of Andrea's school play. Fighting to win theater's greatest teen award, Andrea must find a mysterious vandal, and hold the quarreling cast together through teamwork. Yet, overshadowing the play are Andrea's failures at school and the anger of her parents, until she must do the unthinkable to escape them.

To all those who worked to make this book a success.

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Chapter 1: Fear Not

"And we all lived happily ever after."

Andrea Brightman delivered the play's last line to the packed junior high auditorium. Warm rainbow lights caressed her, coating her skin in colors, while fake coconut and oil paint mingled in her nose. Applause showered her. Andrea let herself forget all the calamities that had threatened to cancel opening night. The audience was applauding her, and all the other grinning cast members. Andrea felt like a fairy princess.

The curtain closed, and the other students hurried backstage to change, whispering with no regard for the nearby audience. Andrea sank onto the pitted wood floor, sticky with pale green glowtape. After the biggest role of her life, she ought to be ecstatic. "Yeah, right," Andrea muttered aloud. "Happily ever after."

She wiped a stinging eye, and her hand came off smeared with the blue eyeshadow Jessica had told her didn't match green eyes. Andrea wiped the makeup off on her sock with a hand peppered with freckles and dimples. She grimaced. *I just smuck out of the house, trashed my pre-algebra grade, and infuriated my parents, all for a fairy tale. And I don't even know what drove me to it!*

Silence informed her the audience had wandered outside to meet the cast members and finish off the concessions. Swallowing hard, Andrea slipped through the blue velvet curtains to stand before the quiet auditorium. She couldn't hide here forever. A few glimmers filtered into the shadowed room from overhead windows. The light glazed discarded programs and the backs of chairs, creating hundreds of glowing semicircles like close-lipped smiles.

“Ducking your ecstatic fans?”

Andrea jumped. Ghostlike, Jessica watched her from offstage. The other girl’s pale skin and perfect perm shone against the unlit curtains.

Andrea wondered whether Jessica knew none of Andrea’s family had come tonight. “I just wanted to think,” Andrea said, snapping more than she intended. She was thoroughly sick of Jessica’s poisoned remarks.

Jessica smiled, no, she *glowed*. “Planning your acceptance speech for the O’Keefe Award, hmmm?” Her makeup turned her into a glamorous movie star (though she hadn’t actually performed tonight), while Andrea knew she looked like a little girl playing dress up in her overdone stage paint.

Andrea swallowed. Jessica couldn’t know how desperately Andrea needed to win the national competition, for reasons that had nothing to do with acting.

“You wearing that home?” Jessica eyed Andrea’s pink beaded shirt, plastic circlet, and leather vest. “Might as well wear Miss Jarnowski’s pink dress; your outfit’s just as bad.”

“Someone should bury that nasty thing.” Andrea shuddered at the memory of stiff gauzy skirts smothered in wallpaper daisies. The dress was frilly enough Little Miss Muffet would have vomited. “Quick, before it attacks someone else!”

“Uh huh,” Jessica said, making Andrea feel silly and childish a second time. Jessica crossed the stage, walking with the light footsteps that came naturally to her. Andrea had clomped onstage for weeks before learning to step softly.

Jessica turned to raise arched eyebrows. Her pink-framed glasses robbed her of some of the effect. "Just think of it. An hour 'till someone wins a casting session on Broadway. Not that you need to lose sleep."

Andrea crossed backstage to the greenroom. There, she picked up her backpack, bulging with her jacket, plus a classic-novel-turned-into-comic book and two candy bars. No point in stalling any longer. She followed Jessica to the stage door. "I'd call it a long shot for anyone." Andrea kept her voice casual. If she never told anyone what the award meant to her, she might win. *A chance to meet her at last.* The thought bubbled up beyond Andrea's control. *My real mother.*

Jennifer Brightman had walked out when Andrea was a baby, never sending as much as a birthday card. No, better not to think about her. Andrea had never even seen a picture, but she still felt the void deep inside her. Like a missing tooth, the urge to probe the cavity was irresistible. If Andrea ever found her real mother, she knew things would change. No more yelling every night.

"Come on! With just an hour to go, you must be nervous." Jessica shouldered open the heavy stage door leading to the empty parking lot. "Even Cindy's panicking, and *she's* guaranteed to win." Jessica hated Cindy, but she hated Andrea more.

"If Cindy wins, she can send me an autograph." Andrea's teasing words came out flat and strained in the dark night.

With a last condescending look, Jessica flounced to the front of the auditorium, though Andrea doubted the other cast members would receive her well. Andrea held her breath and zipped her purple ski jacket. Like too many of her clothes, it was tightening

around the middle. She tugged her short brown curls into a tidier ponytail and hurried from the theater.

Outside, she huddled into her jacket. The wind blew through it as if Andrea wore only shirtsleeves. She shivered. California shouldn't have this kind of weather, even a northern city like Norfolk. November was ending, and the whole world seemed bleak and chill. Even worse was the thought of how furious her parents would be when she came home. A bright red leaf, like a beacon, flew at her, thumping her nose with softness. Andrea snatched it from the air and impulsively stuffed it in her pocket. Another gust blew into her, carrying a mist of sprinkling rain. She backed against the side of the theater. The wind howled, ghostlike, until her ears stung.

"This is ridiculous," Andrea muttered, referring to both the weather and her fears. The swirling sky reminded her of the fable about the sun and the wind: how the wind wagered he was stronger and could take a coat off a traveler before the sun could. The wind puffed and blew, tearing at the traveler like a ravenous beast. But he couldn't get the coat off. Then the sun shone and warmed the air and the traveler removed the coat himself. Andrea held her jacket tighter, smiling a bit at her silliness. While she had been remembering the fable, she had already walked halfway down the block. Storytelling always protected her, rescuing her from reality for as long as she could remember. Greek myths, Irish folklore, fairy tales. No matter how many novels she read, those were her favorites. Good always won while evil perished, banished forever by brave heroines or sword-wielding knights.

Andrea sighed. If others had been reading her story, they would have thought her silly to be frightened of an unseasonable wind. "All right! Maybe life isn't a fairy tale, but I can still protect myself," she murmured. "I won't let anyone hurt me." Best not to think of Dad or Shanelle. If she didn't think about them, just put the worst possibilities out of her mind, then when she went home everything might be quiet.

I'm sorry, Dad. I'm sorry, Shanelle. I shouldn't have said what I did. I only abandoned my schoolwork and ran away because of the play. After I found the strange script, everything felt as if fate was giving me my only chance: earning the starring role, holding the play together through disaster after disaster. This play offered me my real mother.

Andrea shook her head. She would never be able to say those words. Not to the parents awaiting her. She neared her gray-green suburban house and winced. Even from the sidewalk, she could hear her stepmother shriek, high and shrill. Her father yelled back, voice scratchy. Andrea crossed the lawn, stepping over the garden hose coiled across her path. Damp grass squelched under her loafers. Stroking her hair with a probing branch, the wet maple tree felt cold as dead fingers. Andrea clenched the sharp edges of her house key.

Turning the key, she burst into the hallway. After her bundled-up walk, indoors hit her like a blazing furnace. Too-thick smells of cinnamon and cooking apples flooded the air and the teakettle hissed angrily. Faded green wallpaper coated the hall in a dying forest of neutral stripes. Now Andrea could make out the voices in the living room, hear the typical argument.

Her father pounded the glass coffee table, rattling it like icy thunder. "Your teaching doesn't support this family!"

"Some family," her stepmother said. "Noticed how few times Andrea's shown up for dinner? Even before the play, she made a sandwich and ran off to the library every night. She just reads fantasy and hides from the world. That's why she's failing math." Andrea stared down at Shanelle's yet-to-be-corrected papers, where they spilled over the purple and silver puff paint tablecloth. Tears flared in her eyes. Okay, she'd screwed up. But even when she was perfect, they still screamed.

Now the thump of him sitting down heavily. "You should try harder to be close to her." Andrea could picture them, him in the old jogging pants he wore at home, her in a loose silk blouse with tweed skirt and dangling gold earrings.

Shanelle's voice oozed with sarcasm. "I? I should? You spend every spare minute at the office, with no time for anyone. There's a reason she doesn't ask you for help."

"I'll spend some time right now," he snapped. "Andrea? Andrea, come in here. We're going to talk."

Talk? Yeah, right. Andrea glanced toward the living room. Her parents stood around the corner, out of sight. They hadn't even looked up when she had come in. Without a word, Andrea rushed upstairs.

Hands over her ears, she raced into the haven of her bedroom and kicked the door shut. Why did they have to fight so much, anyway? Why did her parents take it out on

her? No matter how many times she begged, they wouldn't stop screaming at each other, even when she wasn't the cause.

Andrea turned the radio to the local station. Forty-five minutes to O'Keefe Award. "So all the art departments are feeling the pinch?" a male voice rattled.

"Not just art," a tinny woman said. "Band, shop, theater. All have suffered thanks to the recent—"

"Don't you take that tone!" Shanelle shrieked. She hated loud noises, except when she caused them.

Andrea flinched. Her parents' fighting downstairs pierced the radio program like a scissors through paper. She unzipped her jacket and threw it on the floor, missing the white desk chair and brass reading lamp. She sat heavily on the bed, squashing the fuzzy blue comforter in her fist. Tears drizzled down her cheeks, and Andrea groped under the bed for the near-empty tissue box. More tears dripped; she wiped them away, not bothering to fight the misery.

Okay. You're all right. Take everything one thought at a time.

The math book was pressing a sharp corner into her leg. It was practically new; maybe its previous owner hadn't read it either. Andrea shoved the book aside, too hard, and it thudded to the floor. She managed a shaky deep breath. The dusty smell of dozens of books permeated the air, blending with the unlit vanilla candle on her bedside. Home. It didn't matter if she had to go to summer school. Nothing mattered except keeping this wall between her and her parents. They didn't care she was shut in, forced to hear their voices swell louder and louder. She had a math test Monday, for crying out loud!

Staring down at a plastic box of Barbie dolls, Andrea eyed their medieval princess garb. The purple bin stood out against the neutral carpet, reminding her of another failure. Shanelle had outgrown Barbies by the time she was ten, and here was Andrea, almost thirteen and unable to let go. Shanelle didn't say anything, but her knowing glances made Andrea want to bury the dolls. They were busy enacting a royal court, with the ugly first Barbie Shanelle had bought her under sentence of death. Leaning down, Andrea slammed the lid on the box, wishing she could cage the voices downstairs as easily. All of her back muscles felt horribly, painfully tight.

Andrea flipped on her CD player, already set with Brahms' Lullaby. She spun the volume up as high as it would go, loud enough to drown out both the murmuring radio beside it and her angry parents. She would turn it down soon for the announcement. Lazy strains flowed into each other; the Brahms Lullaby played sweet notes at wall-shaking volume. With her parents blocked out, Andrea could relax. Yet tension wouldn't stop pounding her shoulders. She lay back on the bed, glaring at the blue-flowered wallpaper chains entrapping her.

I don't want to be here, Andrea thought. I have to win the award so I can go find Mother. Better yet, I wish I could poof myself all the way to Calithwain. I can't lie here day after day, listening to my parents scream. My grades are garbage. Everyone expects everything from me. I can't do this.

On her bedside table, beside the candle and an emergency candy bar, lay the circlet she had worn like a headband in the play. The only piece of jewelry her real mother had left behind, the peach-pit sized oval of green plastic fit smoothly into

Andrea's palm. Andrea stroked the smooth surface and then coaxed it into her hand, coiling and uncoiling the silver chain over the surface of the stone.

Under the bed, Andrea found her mangled script, creased until it resembled used wrapping paper. She sat up, flipping to the first page, and forced down her tensed shoulders. The music still played, drowning the room with high-volume softness. If Andrea focused as hard as she could, she could make the outside world disappear, and concentrate on her play that offered the chance to join Jennifer Brightman in New York. Forty minutes left until the announcement. Andrea squeezed her mother's jewel, and saw an odd sparkle flitter across its surface. She read the familiar lines.

SEER:

Fear Not:

Our champion has come.

Now face your frayed reflection, Alenna;

your tether weaves both worlds.

Forget your pride,

for I protect each step you take.

Through castles lofting over crimson gardens, soft

and treacherous with sinking sand,

let peace be upon you.

Confront your foe,

the voice that cries inside you for a chance.

Descend into the fortress pit,

until you find what you seek...

ALENNA: I am Alenna, summoned by the Sorceress. I won't rest until I save your people.

KELL: We'll need to cross Calithwain, and little time remains.

ALENNA: Courage, Kell. With my Forest Gem, we can rescue the elves before the White Crystal dies and the forests vanish forever.

Andrea murmured the words aloud, letting her voice drift off when the scene ended. When Cindy had played Kell, the elf warrior, she had brought an incredible vibrancy to the part. Plus her looks were perfect. She could easily win the award.

The auditorium shimmered in Andrea's mind, with its backdrop of trees painted in strokes of creamy brown, sponge-dabbed with green. In the corner of the canvas rested the red autumn leaf she had painted. The hardwood stage, pitted and sticky with glowtape, pressed against the thin soles of her ballet slippers. Andrea could smell thick dust on the velvet curtains and the fake coconut of the fog machine. Her eyes drifted shut.

The plastic jewel warmed in her hand until Andrea nearly dropped it. Instead, she squeezed tighter. *Mother, where are you? You're an actress, like me. You understand why I had to perform tonight. Mother, take me away from here.*

Shocking green light glowed against her closed eyelids. As Andrea concentrated, the image in her mind shifted. Painted trees expanded from the canvas to become a real

forest, brushstrokes strengthening into branches and bark. Pinesap permeated the air, thick with redwood dust. A cool breeze blew against her.

Perplexed, Andrea jumped up, eyes bursting open. The forest solidified around her in a horde of evergreens. She took a stunned step backward, and lost her balance. Arms flailing, Andrea tried to catch herself. Her fingers scraped rough tree bark. She steadied herself and then looked at her hand. Stinging white scratches marked where her fingers had grazed the tree. A real tree.

Wherever she had traveled, she wasn't dreaming. Andrea looked down at the dusty path cutting through the towering evergreens. A single leaf lay there, burned with scarlet. Cloudless clear air sent chilly goosebumps up her exposed arms. The complete silence of the forest unnerved her; any birds or squirrels hid too perfectly for Andrea to see them. A slow breeze sighed through the trees, stroking Andrea's cheek. Dry pines blended with the damp smell of soil and a faint tinge of smoke. Her room, with its soothing vanilla scents and the Brahms CD, had vanished. Andrea still held her mother's jewel in her hand, although the script had vanished. She stared down at the jewel, and found it was shining bright as a green stage light. She slipped it around her head.

In the distance, the trail opened to a clearing. Within its space, Andrea counted a dozen buildings, their rectangular forms shrouded in thatch and bark. The houses sagged, silent. Limp thatching drooped over the roofs. A pile of logs slumped against one house, while the center building had draping banners on each side.

"Guess the elves really are in trouble," Andrea muttered. Where had that thought come from? Andrea glanced back. The path stretched through the forest and then curved

like a beckoning hand, pointing behind trees toward more unending forest. Andrea stood there, under the dusty branches, completely alone.

"I'm supposed to be *your* bodyguard?"

Andrea spun to face a girl about her own age. A few inches taller than Andrea, she had dark red-brown hair cascading to her waist. Andrea instantly envied it, thinking of her own scrubby curls. The girl's expression reminded Andrea of Jessica's rival, Cindy, proud and scornful at once. She stood like an athlete, all long legs and firm muscles. Andrea felt every dumpy pound bulging around her waist and knew she was freckled and ordinary.

"Kell." The word spilled from Andrea's lips. Aside from the human ears, this girl could have been the elf warrior from the play.

The girl's narrow nose sliced precisely down the middle of her flawless chocolate-colored face, wrinkling when she eyed Andrea. She wore plain brown hose, shirt, and tunic with a deep red sash. "Huh? Don't tell me Our Sorceress sent a half-wit." The girl sized her up with a self-important sniff.

I am Alenna, summoned by the Sorceress. I won't rest until I save your people.

"I—I'm Andrea, and I have no idea how I got here."

"Wonderful. Helping the half-wit would be preferable." She crossed her arms, creasing her leather tunic.

Andrea blinked at the animosity in the girl's voice. She certainly had Cindy's attitude. "You're trying to help me?" It certainly didn't sound that way.

With a loud sigh to inform Andrea just how much she was stretching the limits of patience, the girl said, "You certainly need it. I'm Kreliss Eaglewing. Our Sorceress, Sidaria, Guardian of the Forests and Lady of Light—did you get all that?—sent you vital information. The sylvans—"

"Are dying. I know that part. But Calithwain's just a script." Andrea didn't believe her own words. This place felt like the Calithwain she had imagined through every minute of the play. She had wished to come here and her wish had come true.

Kreliss tossed her hair. "Calithwain's as real as you are. Sidaria brought you here with her last strength to cure the White Crystal before her people die." The girl looked her over from ponytail to loafers, taking in Andrea's theater costume. A smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. "You don't know anything about magic, do you? If lives didn't depend on you, I'd laugh. Now, come." She took wide purposeful steps.

Andrea didn't follow. In the script, Kell had been loyal and steadfast, without the abrasive attitude. Someone had definitely misrepresented this place. "*I'm your champion?*" She had only pretended to be Alenna, the elves' mystic heroine. How could she possibly save people's lives? "I can't even fix the screw-ups between my parents. Why would the Sorceress choose someone as useless as I am?"

Kreliss met Andrea's panicked gaze, this time with recognition in her eyes. She hesitated. Animosity drained from her, leaving a girl as uncertain as Andrea. "I felt the same way when I arrived here from the West. But Calithwain does something to people. Sidaria's never chosen a champion wrongly. And you have her Forest Gem."

Andrea pulled the circlet off to stare at it. A glimmer of light stroked its surface, and it sparkled, far more than a chunk of plastic. The play was becoming more real by the moment. Andrea shivered. "This? It's fake. Costume jewelry. I've had it for years."

Kreliss stared, a strange longing filling her eyes. "I'd hoped to wear it one day." Her lips parted slightly. Andrea held the circlet out. The girl yanked her hand back as if Andrea had slapped it. "Put it on. Sidaria entrusts you with a great honor. While you wear it, the passage will remain open."

"Passage?"

Kreliss rolled her eyes, obviously fed up with Andrea's confusion. "Between this world and your own. Its power will protect you with all Sidaria's remaining strength. When Sidaria recovers, she'll use it to send you back."

Andrea replaced the Forest Gem on her forehead. "And if I lose it?"

"You'll never return home."

Andrea arranged the circlet around her brow. It felt light enough she only noticed its warmth. Why would her mother have owned a priceless jewel from Calithwain? Thoughts of her mother and the O'Keefe Award stabbed through Andrea. "If what's happening is real, your sorceress shouldn't have brought me here. I mean, I belong in my world. Tonight I'll find out if I get to meet my mother." Andrea bit her lip. This girl was the first person she'd ever told.

“Then you should understand; the woman who’s protected me like a mother is dying. Would you run away and doom all of us?” Kreliss’s eyes flashed, and her voice slapped Andrea with disdain. “Now, come.”

Andrea walked behind her obnoxious guide. Memory opened in her mind like a heavy-scented blossom, pulling her back three months to when she had found Sidaria’s script. The Forest Gem burned against her forehead. Puzzled, Andrea tried to dismiss the memory, but it raced through her mind, dragging her away just as suddenly as she had come to Calithwain.

Chapter 2: Our Champion Has Come

Andrea remembered...

"Come on, Andrea. I'm taking us out to eat!" her father shouted from downstairs.

"But you said lasagna would be fine," her stepmother protested.

"Real lasagna, not that boxed stuff. Too bad you spent the day at the gym and not buying food."

"Me! What about you, watching football yesterday with your friends? If you came home sometimes, you could cook."

Brahms played as loud as the volume dial could turn, but not loud enough to drown out her parents. Andrea lay on the bed, lost in depression. Dad had told her to clean her room, but didn't he understand how she felt, trapped up here listening to them? Apparently not. Andrea glanced at the school newspaper's cover, eyes flitting between two headlines: "Greentrees Junior High enters O'Keefe Competition." "Drama program calls on students to submit their favorite scripts." It was September, a week before auditions for the school play.

Not that I have a chance to win, Andrea thought. She sighed. *I need a book.*

When she felt too tense for Brahms to make an impact, she always lost herself in fiction and abandoned the ugly feelings, traveling to another place, another reality. Andrea scanned the fairy tale section of her bookshelf. No matter how many clothes lay scattered on the floor, or stuffed animals overflowed off their shelves, her books always stayed organized. Classics, an endless collection of young adult fiction, and the biggest section of all, mythology. Eyes stinging, Andrea ran her fingers along the familiar titles.

Wait, that book was new. If either of her parents had bought her one, they would have left it on the bed, rather than filing it away in her bookshelf, let alone in the right section. She tried to look away. Anything on either of her parents' recommended reading lists (from Shanelle, things like *A Teen Woman's Journal for Self-Awareness*, from Dad, historical fiction) wasn't likely to interest her tonight. Yet her eyes leapt back to the cover, unable to abandon it. The hardbound book towered over its fellows with its title written in silver: *The Road to Calithwain*. The rich green leather sparkled when the hanging lamp's gleam danced on its spine.

Andrea's feet guided her over, independent from her brain. She gripped the pebbled cover, and the volume fell into her hands, lighter than she had expected. A mirrorlike tower glistened on the front. Her fingers traced the raised shape, easing over the shining lines. She opened the book and began to read.

NARRATOR: In a world so long forgotten its name has vanished from the hearts of children of earth lies Calithwain.

"Calithwain," Andrea murmured, tasting the sound, rolling it like a cherry pit still full of flavor. She read on.

NARRATOR: It is a land of waterfalls pouring into silent pools, where trees smell of orange blossoms and honeysuckle when it rains. In the west, dryads sing, welcoming the morning into the glades of pine forests. There dwells the Sorceress in a tower that glistens like an icicle among the villages of the elves. And so, time continues, peacefully, uneventfully.

Curtain opens.

NARRATOR: Kell, an orphan living among the villages, first noticed the ruin threatening her people.

KELL: Can't you hear the silence? The birdsong's vanished.

Andrea read on, watching the disaster unfold as the White Crystal, source of elf magic and life force, died. Kell recruited the mystic storyteller, Alenna, to rescue her people. They traveled through fairyland and choking swamps to reach the evil witch who had poisoned the crystal and its guardian, the Sorceress.

Andrea reached out and brushed the script with a tentative finger. *Hmm, a storyteller. Like I want to be.* Something in Alenna's confident words called out to her, summoning her into the play.

Andrea stood onstage in a shimmering lavender dress. Hundreds of people filled the auditorium, applauding, cheering, whistling. Andrea took a final bow and then walked offstage straight into her mother's arms. "I should introduce you to my friend, the director," Jennifer Brightman said. Andrea had trouble picturing her mother. Would she look like an older version of Andrea herself? "After you won the O'Keefe Award and auditioned with those casting directors, so many agents asked about you."

Andrea smiled and hugged her mother tightly.

"We should be in the same play, now that we're both actresses," her mother said. "And I'll never leave you again."

Andrea stared dreamily at the wallpaper. This play was reaching out to her like fate speaking. It had magically appeared to rescue her and carry her to a better life. Even

as she wondered who could have sent it, Andrea knew she had found the perfect school play.

The memory of the script trickled away. Andrea found herself still in Calithwain, following Kreliss silently. She stroked the Forest Gem, reassured by its warm presence. Had it pulled her into the memory? Why? “The birdsong’s ended,” Andrea said without thinking.

“I know.” Kreliss looked back for an instant, and Andrea saw pain flash across her face. “All of nature’s linked to the White Crystal. Everything’s dying, first here, then in all the worlds.”

“All the worlds? Mine, too?” Andrea swallowed. The script hadn’t warned her of a threat to Earth. This job should go to the President, not to her.

“You can’t separate the realities.” Kreliss’s eyes widened, taking on a new intensity. “Your world hasn’t fallen into the twisted realm yet, but if the goodness here dies, this world will stop pulling yours toward the light.” Stepping toward Andrea, Kreliss extended her hand coaxingly. “You’re not my idea of a champion, but we need you.” She swallowed. “Since, well, since Sidaria didn’t want *me* to save the elves.”

Andrea looked away, gazing into the thinning forest. She was hardly responsible for the Sorceress’s choice. Trees and brush crowded both sides of the well-trodden path. Closer to the village, pine trees gradually changed to fruit trees. Apples dangled just out of reach, while grapevines draped trees, drooping sullenly with clusters of purpling fruit. Andrea blinked. Her parents’ apple tree grew half the apples one of these trees did. And

these apples themselves were huge, as big as grapefruits. Well, Andrea could see how the elves used their magic. A ticklish feeling of excitement spread through her. Magic. Kreliss didn't offer any of the scenery a second glance. Around them, leaves burned purple and gold with autumn's chill. The land slowly sloped uphill, as if barring Andrea's passage. "Where are we going?" Andrea asked at last.

"To my village, for supplies. Then east, to seek the Ancient Mystics. It's quite late in the morning to travel." Kreliss spoke curtly, biting each word. Apparently, concentrating on her own thoughts had darkened her mood. "I just hope they can tell us who's attacking the crystal and how to stop him." Kreliss climbed even faster.

Andrea stubbed her toe on a tree root, and winced. Kreliss expected her to save everyone, but Andrea couldn't even watch her own feet. "So we don't know? I could be stranded here forever." Andrea heard a tremble of panic in her voice and forced it down. Hysterics wouldn't help.

Kreliss stopped and turned to face Andrea. Anger still coated her voice, but under it, her words shook. "What do you suggest? In less than a week, when Sidaria's last glimmers of magic vanish, everyone will die. My friends are dying."

Maybe it was obvious, but Andrea had to ask. "In my play, a witch attacked the White Crystal. Could that be the solution?"

Kreliss resumed walking, and Andrea followed her. Tripping on the slippery leaves, Andrea winced when Kreliss eyed her. The other girl's watching only made her clumsier. "I doubt it's so simple," Kreliss said. "Sidaria can't see all the future, only

glimmers. Don't rely only on the script; as Sidaria's message traveled through all the worlds to reach you, it twisted. The play will trick you."

Andrea swallowed. Trapped in this world without even a reliable guide. Only Kreliss, who clearly didn't like her.

"Come, we've reached the village."

The scattered wooden huts stood before them, with paths worn between drifts of gold and crimson leaves. Trees drooped like crippled skeletons, while empty branches grasped toward the gray sky, barely sheltering the houses. Their own crunching footfalls echoed in the silence. Andrea couldn't see any people or animals.

Kreliss stopped before a house. The squat wooden cottage slumped from age, yet, under a thin cover of vines, every board was pegged in snugly. Two flowerboxes hung under windows draped in shiny yellow cloth. Several thick trees leaned so close against the walls that, still growing, they had been built into the house. The cottage blended into the forest behind it as if they were only separate by accident. A little rag doll lay discarded beside the doorstep. Kreliss picked it up.

She paused on the threshold a moment and then walked into the hut. Andrea followed, glancing at the clumps of green in the window box. Even the flowers here were fading; the orange and yellow blossoms sagged. The scent of flowers pierced the air, even dying, as they spent their last energy sending up clouds of fragrance.

Inside, a woman lay sleeping on a bed, cradling two little girls, one on each side of her. The girls were perhaps four and six. All three had pointed ears and golden skin, and wore loose leather dresses. The woman's dusky hair rested in elaborately braided

coils, the ends woven with green feathers. A round pendant of silver knots lay at her throat. She was obviously pregnant, stomach round as the lid of a treasure chest.

Kreliss's soft footfalls echoed through the hut, breaking the silence. Andrea backed against a shelf of baskets and clay pots. Overhead, living vines of blossoms drooped in the rafters. The smaller girl huddled in a ball, tight against her mother. The mother's arm spread over her, as if protecting her child from all the harm of the world. It seemed she had failed.

The older girl's face lay serene and calm, confident her mother and the adults of the village would care for her. That peaceful look on her face would echo forever in Andrea's mind if the elves slipped from their slumber into death. Andrea swallowed hard and looked away. *They're only sleeping*, she reminded herself. Yet the three elves lay there, barely breathing, silently reproaching her for being healthy. The excitement of the adventure died as Andrea stared at her shoes, vividly aware of the White Crystal's victims only a few feet away. In the play, she hadn't had to look at the elves' dying faces. She scrubbed her hands against her costume's stretch pants. "They— they aren't—"

"No." Kreliss's voice softened, losing its barely restrained contempt and anger. She laid the doll under the younger elf girl's hand. "Woodfolk vanish when they die, and rejoin nature. The sylvans are all asleep, just like Lyril and her daughters here. In every house."

"Everyone?"

“Yesterday, the entire tribe chose to give their strength to Sidaria. They poured it into the White Crystal, like pooling your last cup of water with others in a dripping sieve to carry you all across a vast desert. The shared power will last a few days longer, to give Sidaria more of a chance to save us. We *must* seal that sieve while Sidaria still has people to protect.” Kreliss glanced around the silent cabin. “They made a great sacrifice. Lying helpless, waiting for death to come claim them.” How could she look so calm and determined? Andrea wanted to shrink away from the mother’s still face, weary in sleep. Now the children and Lyril would pay the price if Kreliss and Andrea couldn’t save them.

Forcing herself to gaze at the youngest elf girl, little more than a toddler, Andrea felt her chest tighten. While pale and still, the girl looked adorable, with eyelids wrinkled up as if they were buttoned. The rag doll lay burrowed under the girl’s arm, pressed against a dainty pointed ear. She could have been a human girl, almost, just ready for preschool. Andrea’s breath caught in her chest. “There’s no one else, is there?”

Kreliss shook her head. “I’m the only one not tied to the crystal, since I’m not an elf. I’m just as much an outsider as you are.”

“Yet you’d risk your life to save the sylvans?” Andrea tucked the blanket, like fluffy silk, up to the little girl’s chin, and risked a peek at the sleeping face.

Steel filled Kreliss’s voice. “Without hesitation.”

Andrea swallowed, but the words spilled out. “Then I’ll help you.”

“You will?” The surprise and joy spreading over Kreliss’s face gave her an innocent girlishness.

“Definitely.” Andrea smiled back, feeling cheerful for the first time in this world.

“We’re a team.” Kreliss believed in her; maybe that would suffice.

Kreliss smiled foolishly and then seemed to realize how open she looked. She hurried to an intricately carved chest against the wall, flung it open, and dug to the bottom. Kreliss thrust a dark blue tunic and a pair of brown hose at her. “Try these, see if they fit. Lyril’s sister left half her clothes here from the last stay.”

“What?”

“We need practical clothes and food for the journey.” Andrea could hear an edge sharpening Kreliss’s voice. Perhaps the other girl felt as helpless as Andrea did. In a more level voice, she continued, “The sylvans share everything, and give freely when another asks. Please take the clothes. I promise Lyril wouldn’t have— won’t mind.” Kreliss’s voice quieted until Andrea could barely recognize it. Andrea took the clothes.

Kreliss also found a rope, extra clothing, two leather satchels, canteens, scratchy blankets, and plenty of dried meat. Dumping everything in a pile, Kreliss dashed among the houses collecting supplies, and left Andrea to organize the two packs.

“What’s the hurry?” Andrea asked when Kreliss barely paused as she dumped a bundle of bandages and sour-smelling salves between them.

“Without guards it isn’t safe here,” Kreliss said. “Keep your ears like a fox’s for scavengers.”

Keeping alert, Andrea sorted two battered pots into one pile, and the copper kettle into another. The canteens could hang on the outside, but a fishing net and the pouches

of dried fruit would have to be padded with spare clothes. Andrea hoisted a satchel, longingly remembering the wadded paper she had stuffed in last year's backpack to play Alenna.

Was that a birdcall? But all the birds had vanished. It sounded again, a hawk's cry, but higher and shriller. Andrea peered in all directions. Nothing.

At Kreliss's insistence, Andrea had traded her school loafers for a pair of stout leather boots that rose high over her ankles. Their hard shells creased against her toes. She pulled on one of the heavy woven cloaks and huddled gratefully into its folds. Her only guide acted distant and hostile and Andrea had accepted a hazardous quest with no escape home.

A wave of soothing comfort flooded into her mind, offering reassurance so profound Andrea felt her legs turn into spaghetti. Memories of the play crowded into her mind too insistently for Andrea to shut out. The Forest Gem flared against her forehead, burning. Then Calithwain melted away.

Andrea remembered...

Monday afternoon Andrea walked into auditions, huddled in a dark green sweatshirt. The new teacher and the script both remained mysteries. Students wandered into the auditorium and sat in small groups facing the empty stage. Andrea noticed many of her old friends and acquaintances from theater. The teacher had announced a cold reading, with no need to prepare monologues or songs. Without a script to study, Jessica

slouched in her chair, painting her nails bright red. She narrowed her eyes at Cindy from across the room. Over the summer, they'd gone from best friends to worst enemies.

Someone tapped Andrea on the head, drumming fingers in a familiar rhythm. "Jesse!" She spun to face Jesse Yang, her friend of several years. His growth spurt still hadn't come, and his stature seemed to match his adolescent immaturity. "What's up?"

"Up's the opposite of down." Jesse grinned, and the corners of his crescent-shaped eyes crinkled. "You should know that."

Andrea rolled her eyes. "I thought your parents wouldn't let you do drama this year."

Jesse shrugged. "I finally convinced them. Having the new teacher push this school to win the O'Keefe Award helped. Guess she'll show up when she's done choosing my script." Jesse sat down and propped his feet up on the chair in front of him. He wore a white sock and black tennis shoe on one foot, and a black sock and white tennis shoe on the other.

Andrea raised her eyebrows and decided not to comment on the shoes. Jesse's clothes, like his acting, displayed his constant need for attention. "The Pilgrims' first Thanksgiving pie eating contest? *The Tempest* performed entirely on roller skates? No, how about *Peter Pan* with you swinging over the audience as Tinkerbell, dowsing them in glitter?" Andrea became aware the words were spilling out too fast. She always felt jittery before auditions, even when she knew there was no chance she would get a big part. Would the teacher even choose her script?

"Try *Cyrano de Bergerac*. The lead's incredibly funny, but the plot's strong too. Although I like the roller skating idea." Jesse wiggled his shoes on the chair back.

Andrea nudged Jesse and winked. "If you're the lead you'll have to spend the entire play sweeping the heroine off her feet. You might even have a stage kiss." Jesse was still under the impression most girls had cooties, making it hard for Andrea to see him as the romantic hero.

"Blech," Jesse said. His face scrunched up. "If that happens, I'm taking up a collection for the 'Have Jesse's Lips Amputated Fund.'"

Andrea couldn't resist. "Even that wouldn't stop you from talking." She glanced at Cindy, Greentrees' permanent drama star, where she sat with her friends. She wore a bright crimson plastic belt close to two inches wide. Even off stage, Cindy carried herself with the self-possessed confidence of a performer. Now, she sat poised, chin up, a loose curl draping artfully past each cheek, framing her face in gold. Of course, Cindy would win the O'Keefe Award and go to New York. It was guaranteed. Yet deep inside, Andrea heard a small voice whisper, *Why shouldn't I have a chance, too?*

Jesse leaned near Andrea to whisper, although no one else listened to him. "Oh, it's better. The heroine, Roxanne, faints and has to be carried offstage. Given the chance, maybe someone'll drop Cindy. Thud."

Cindy's crimson leather jacket was brand new, and, if possible, she had lost even more weight. Andrea couldn't look away. "She's not the only decent actress."

"Mrs. Spears would disagree with you. Cindy's gotten the lead for three years now." Jesse's tone was playful, but Andrea could hear an edge.

Although she had joked about it at the time, the memory of last year's play still stung a little. "Believe me, I remember. I read the Oz books over and over as a kid, and I really wanted to be Dorothy. Instead, I was a singing flying monkey. With oversized ears." She told the over-rehearsed story in the usual words, falling into familiar patterns.

Jesse gave her his cocky grin. "That reminds me, hello, Dumbo."

Andrea rolled her eyes. "I know. I know. My stepmom liked the way she sewed the ears. And I had the best tail. I just know I could've done a better job than Cindy did. She couldn't even skip without wobbling in the ruby slippers." Andrea sighed. Cindy looked like Shirley Temple, with a dazzling smile and perfect (if over-made-up) features. Mrs. Spears didn't even think before casting her. *I should try out for a medium-size part, but something fun. Maybe the villain. Being the heroine is a lot of work; just as well I won't get it. I wish tryouts would start, already.*

Jesse aimed a rubber band at Cindy, although he didn't fire it. Cindy was pushing away a bag of cookies Eric offered, so she didn't notice. "Once she rearranged the straw in my costume. That stuff poked me all through the play."

Andrea elbowed Jesse; the room was quieting. "Teacher's here."

Miss Emilia Jarnowski was known around campus as the "weird" sixth grade English teacher, the one who should be avoided at all costs. Around her, Andrea's showmates started giggling and whispering. Andrea suddenly remembered the story of how Miss Jarnowski had turned off the lights and cranked her classroom's heat to maximum, so her students could understand factory conditions.

Miss Jarnowski stepped onstage. Her purple dress, splashed with forest green splotches, stood out against the black curtains like a herd of streetlights. "Hello, students. I'm here to teach you how to act from your hearts and souls, not just from your lips and faces." She nodded, as if agreeing with herself. Artificially blonde hair bounced on her shoulders, growing mouse-brown at the roots.

"And to elevate Cindy to another half-acted role," Jesse hissed.

Her narrow greenish-gray eyes swept over the seated students. "I'm sure you're all curious about our fall play. We received an excellent group of scripts. At last, I decided on..." The teacher allowed for a deliberate dramatic pause.

"Come on, Cyrano," Jesse muttered.

Andrea bit her lip.

"*The Road to Calithwain*, submitted by Andrea Brightman."

Andrea's eyes flew open. Whatever fate had reached out to her from the book's shining tower had touched the teacher as well.

"Any comedy in yours?" Jesse asked. Hubbub filled the room.

"What about my script, *Silvia Stars*?" Cindy shouted over the other voices. "It's perfect."

Miss Jarnowski shook her head. Her yellow-green earrings dangled against her shoulders. "Too much of the focus stays on one character. This script has four female leads and one male lead, with plenty of smaller parts. Everyone cast will have at least one line." Miss Jarnowski regarded the turmoil calmly. "If you don't wish to audition,

now's the time to leave. I'll pass out three different scenes. Look them over, and then you'll audition in alphabetical order.

"Andrea Brightman."

Andrea exchanged a wink with Jesse and hopped out of her chair. She climbed the steps leading to the stage, hearing her feet clomp on each one. Her pulse fluttered in her neck. Only one chance to avoid being another flying monkey.

"Andrea, read the part of Alenna. Pilar Corvalles, please read Kell," Miss Jarnowski read from her clipboard, not bothering to look up.

Andrea cleared her throat. "I want to try out for the witch," she blurted. In the audience, Jesse grinned.

"That's fine, but just read the scene you have there, for now. Begin."

Although the stage lights were off, Andrea could feel dozens of eyes spotlighting her. Cindy was sitting in the front row, whispering with her friends. Andrea pushed the pressure of her thoughts away. Only the words of the script mattered. Andrea sucked air in past her lungs all the way into her diaphragm. She felt her belly expand with the power of it and then forced her words out twice as loud as usual, the air filling and strengthening them.

ALENNNA: "Kell, take courage. All good people are drawn to the light." She swallowed. "Evil can't even abide its own face."

The remaining auditions proceeded just as Andrea had expected. Jesse finished his goofy reading of the wizard, Gem, with yet another rendition of his hand-snake-eating-my-face routine. Although he had done this almost every week during their past year of drama, it still cracked Andrea up. Cindy presented her lines with saccharine gooeyness, and Andrea winced at the thought of Cindy, hair in little curls, playing the powerful champion.

Andrea sighed. The play would be wonderful, even if she had to be a ghostling with three lines. At last, auditions ended, and Miss Jarnowski, chirping like a six-foot canary, hustled the students out of the auditorium. Then, Andrea became aware of herself, watching each memory as it played out.

Auditions melted, leaving Andrea back in the real world of Calithwain. Andrea reached up to clasp the Forest Gem. It was feeding her these memories; she felt sure of it. Kreliss had said the jewel linked her to Earth. Was this how it did so? Through memories? Andrea carefully knotted the laces that drew the top of the pack closed, feeling less like a mystic champion than ever. Ballet slippers and stagelights hardly made anyone a hero.

She heard the hawk-cry again, and looked up. Four young women soared overhead, eagle wings supporting them on the air. Golden hair streamed behind them. Like angels blessing her journey, they dipped close enough that Andrea could see their shining white smiles. "How lovely," Andrea whispered, stretching her hands up toward them.

“Get back!” Kreliss shouted.

Andrea jumped. “What are you talking about? They’re like fairies from my play. Can’t you see how beautiful—”

“Get back now!” Kreliss ran up beside her, a wooden bow clutched in her hand. She dropped a canvas bag at her feet. “So you think the sylvans are dead?” she shouted to the airy visitors. “Some of us can fight. Fly off while you still have wings.” Kreliss drew an arrow from the quiver on her back, and fitted it to the bow.

The angelic creatures kept coming, flapping their white wings harder. Andrea gripped Kreliss’s shoulder. “You wouldn’t! They don’t mean any harm.”

“Harpies!” Kreliss dragged Andrea to the ground. The shock of the fall crashed up her knees. Just over her head, talons swiped the air and missed. The winged woman rose into the air, hissing between her sparkling teeth, circling.

“Now what?” Andrea whispered. She stared at the creatures. The talons could have killed her in an instant. Kreliss’s strong arm still pinned her to the ground.

“We could turn back time and have you listen to my warning.” Kreliss snapped.

Andrea recognized the sarcasm, but she had to ask. “Could we?”

“Don’t be stupid.”

A harpy dove toward Kreliss’s unprotected back. Without thought, Andrea snatched a sharp rock from the ground and hurled it at the creature, scaring it away.

Kreliss spun. “You—”

Andrea didn’t have time to analyze her reflexes. “How do we drive them off?”

“We need fire.”

“Well, I didn’t bring matches.” Andrea felt a crease starting between her eyebrows. Something in that memory, words of the script... “Evil can’t abide its own face. A mirror!”

“A mirror?”

“Yes, please get one.”

While the harpies hovered, several others plunged into the houses. With birdlike screams, they dragged bedding outside and ripped thatch from the roofs. They carried chairs and beds up into the air and dropped them, cackling at the echoes of each crash.

Andrea cringed when a breaking bed shook the ground. “Even if the sylvans don’t value possessions, they won’t want to wake up to this.”

Kreliss hopped to her feet, quick as a sparrow. “I think the seer had it last. Stay here.”

“Here?” The harpies were swooping toward them.

“Or try to hide, but don’t go far. I’ll need you.” Kreliss dashed off into one of the huts. Left out in the open, with the creatures diving, Andrea scurried behind the closest house, hopefully out of sight. As she watched, two harpies dove toward Lyril’s home, swooping toward the open doorway. Andrea’s breath caught. “Hurry, Kreliss!” She snatched another rock and hurled it, but she lacked the strength to propel it far enough. “Kreliss!”

“Here.” Kreliss returned, both arms stretched around an enormous bronze mirror. A loop of rope dangled from its back. “Don’t scratch it; a seer-focus costs its weight in

silver.” Kreliss aimed the mirror at the harpies and they retreated, shrieking like knives scraping glass.

Andrea hurried up to the other girl. “It’s working! It’s driving them back.” The script had saved them.

“Help me lift it onto the meeting pole.” Kreliss gestured toward the center of town, where a weather-beaten wooden pole rose out of the central square. Nearby stood blocky ovens and a grassy fenced area.

The harpies overhead kept their distance, shrieking in fury. Andrea heaved a side of the heavy mirror and the girls dragged it into the center of town. “When we hang it on the pole, it should rotate and protect the whole village, right?”

“Yes.” Kreliss didn’t even breathe heavily while carrying her half of the mirror.

Andrea hefted hers higher on her hip. At least the rounded edges didn’t cut her.

“But when we leave, won’t they come after us?”

Kreliss dragged the mirror faster, pulling Andrea along. “After we hang the mirror, we each grab a backpack and run. With luck, the flash of the mirror should distract them long enough for us to reach the trees.”

Andrea glanced at the pile of supplies. “Run? With heavy pots?”

“Just to the forest. Now, help me lift.” Together they hoisted the mirror onto the pole. It weighed Andrea’s arms down like a dumbbell, smooth and solid. “Go!”

And they raced into the forest.

Chapter 3: Now Face Your Frayed Reflection

Kreliss snatched both the larger pack and her canvas bag. Just behind her, Andrea grabbed the second backpack and chased the other girl into the trees. She sprinted as she never had in gym class. Kreliss easily paced her, not even breathing hard. Branches spread over them in a shelter of rustling leaves, blocking them from the harpies' sight.

Andrea bent over, arms on knees, panting in painful gasps. "I thought harpies were shriveled and ugly," Andrea said when she had recovered enough to speak.

"Inside, where it counts. Only their faces are beautiful." Kreliss stood straight, not even winded. She gazed out toward where the harpies were vanishing into the clouds above the village. "It's started."

Andrea leaned back against a tree. She was confused enough without Kreliss's riddles. "What?"

Kreliss controlled her voice, but couldn't mask the edge of frustration. "I told you whatever drained the White Crystal threw nature out of balance. The sylvans keep the west safe, and guard travelers against wyverns and harpies. Now no one stops the monsters from attacking. We're likely to encounter others." Kreliss hesitated, staring at her hands. "You did well."

"Right."

"I mean it. Unarmed and unprepared, you won your first battle. You should feel pleased. Perhaps—perhaps Sidaria chose rightly." Kreliss reached out and then hesitated, as if she weren't sure what to do. She dropped her hand awkwardly.

Andrea didn't feel happy or proud. Tremors raced through her when she realized how close those claws had come. They could have sliced her to pieces. She felt her eyes sting. No! She had beaten the harpies and even impressed Kreliss. Everything had gone perfectly. Why did she feel so shaky? "It wasn't my idea," she babbled. "Sidaria sent that script to help me. Just before the harpies attacked, I had this really strong memory of the scene where we scared off the witch's ghostling. I think, well, the Forest Gem flared and—"

"It triggered the memory. The Forest Gem provides spiritual guidance to its champion." Kreliss studied her for a moment, appraising. "After we leave here, perhaps I can find you guidance of another sort." Kreliss upended the canvas bag to reveal a sparkling pile of weaponry. The pale wooden bow slung over her shoulder, Kreliss rooted through the weapons for extra arrows, which she crammed into her quiver. A leather-handled short sword slid into a sheath down her left leg.

Andrea eyed the long knife on the girl's other leg and at least four suspicious lumps in her loose tunic. "You must be expecting trouble."

Kreliss drew her sword and held it to the light for a moment, plainly admiring the dappled sunlight sliding down the blade, like stained glass. "I'm a sylvan warrior, the youngest among my tribe. I always stay ready for trouble." Kreliss seemed to sense Andrea's scrutiny, so she turned to face her. "What?"

Would everything here defy her preconceptions? Andrea eyed her new friend. The girl certainly looked human. "Nothing. I- I just assumed, I mean in the play and everything, the elves had pointed ears. So did the women in the hut."

Kreliss turned back to the weapons. "I'm a sylvan *warrior*, by training, not birth. I was born as human as you are." Her tone suggested the subject was closed. She straightened the deadly pile at her feet. "Anything else we need?"

"Are there horses? Secret passages? There's so little time."

Kreliss opened her mouth and then closed it, as if rethinking what she had planned to say. "All animals here are fading. We only need three days to reach the Mystics, if fate favors us."

If Jesse were here, he would have complained that the Ancient Mystics sounded unrealistic, too dramatic to believe. Yet Andrea had known from the moment she saw the sleeping elf-children that this world was real. And that meant she could get hurt. "What about weapons for me?" Andrea didn't know how to use them, but felt she should ask.

Kreliss gestured toward the pile. "Go ahead. Can you draw a bow?"

Kreliss had to be joking. Her straightforward tone made Andrea feel even more uneasy. "I guess not." Andrea eyed the tangled arsenal. Did she have any skills Kreliss would appreciate?

"Swordplay? Knife throwing? I brought blades, though we mostly hunt with arrows." A faint smile crossed Kreliss's face at Andrea's helpless shrug. "Clanging someone over the head with a stewpot?"

"That I could probably manage," Andrea said. She saw Kreliss's smirk and felt her own mouth bending upwards. For a moment, the girls looked at each other in complete understanding.

Kreliss seemed much friendlier when she relaxed. “Well, I’m just as glad we packed one. Take these.”

Andrea gingerly accepted the sling and a dagger. How was she supposed to use the sling, a single leather loop? The solid dagger weighed down her hand, far denser than a kitchen knife. Its black stone blade sparkled in the sun, and it looked needle-sharp. The dagger seemed unnatural, out-of place compared with the bark-covered houses and leather clothing. “Surely you don’t have obsidian in the forest,” Andrea said, gazing at the trees.

A headshake. “All our metal and stone weapons come from the elven smiths in the Ebony Peaks.” Kreliss kicked leaves and brush over the piled weapons. “Our path lies this way.” Kreliss marched quickly, fast enough that Andrea had trouble keeping her breath.

“It feels like we’re in a story now. A sorceress needing rescue, elves and harpies battling, a warrior and a storyteller on a quest.” Andrea sighed. “I wonder who gets to read it.”

“A tale with no promise of a happy ending.” Kreliss’s chin drooped.

Andrea had felt a momentary closeness to Kreliss, but now it was slipping away. “What does Sidaria look like?”

A glow filled Kreliss’s face. “She looks like—light.”

“We’ll save her, Kreliss. We have to.” Andrea put all of her conviction into the words. Surely, they would save the sylvans before the worst happened. The universe couldn’t allow anything else.

Kreliss still watched her, eyes thoughtful. "Come." She turned and walked into the forest.

Andrea hurried to catch up. "Where're we going?"

Kreliss didn't pause. "I'm not leaving myself indebted to you."

"For the harpies? What'll you do, save my life?"

Kreliss didn't answer.

Andrea followed, scrambling over cracking branches and three squelchy patches of mud. The strong scents of pine and forest dust filled the air, thick and clean.

"Here." Kreliss pushed a branch aside to reveal a large pool reflecting leaves, glinting like an emerald. Draping branches completely sheltered the water, shading it from the sun's light. The still water smelled of lilies. "Lovely," Andrea murmured.

"Carry the Forest Gem into the water," Kreliss ordered.

The clear water enticed her, but Andrea wasn't sure she wanted just to dive in, in a world that followed such incomprehensible rules. "What'll that do?"

As green light filtered through branches to highlight Kreliss, she looked like a tree herself, tall and proud. "As you accepted Calithwain, Calithwain must accept you. I have friends here, friends who've remained quiet for far too long. If you enter the water, I hope they'll help you."

"Okay." Andrea peeled off her clothes, down to her underwear, and dropped them on the bank. The water certainly looked more beautiful than any swimming pool Andrea had ever visited. She stepped into the water, letting the ripples lap over her foot up to the ankle. It was soothingly cool, a perfect bath without all the smelly soap and hot

faucets. Andrea stepped deeper, sliding a little on the pebbles. The soft water slipped to her hips, then her waist. At last, it was deep enough to let go of the lake's floor and swim, trusting her entire body to the reflecting water. Slow, easy strokes brought her to the pool's center. Andrea breathed deeply and plunged toward the lake floor.

Underwater, everything glowed green. Soft-fingered fronds and tiny silver fish tickled Andrea's skin. Andrea felt her heartbeat slowing, preparing for a night's sleep.

Voices drifted through water, soft and trembling as the last note of a violin. "You swore to keep secret our dwelling, Kreliss-child."

Kreliss's voice vibrated through the water, gentler than Andrea had ever heard it. "You said I could bring one other here in my lifetime, one even more separate from Calithwain than I am. This is Andrea. She saved my life, just as I pray she can save the woodfolk."

Sadness filled the echoing voice. "Kreliss-child, we cannot change the present. We are spirits now, dwindling into the pale shadows of years."

Kreliss's proud voice broke through the spirits' murmurs. "You were once sylvans. I ask no more than you can give, no more than you once gave me."

"We protected you once from the voice of evil. We cannot guard you both." Now the voices turned stern, warning Kreliss.

Even underwater, Andrea could hear Kreliss take a deep breath. "She needs protection far more than I. Please, give her everything you can."

"Into the Forest Gem, as long as she holds it." The words were a promise.

A strange rushing filled Andrea's ears. Her skin warmed. A light shone from her forehead, brighter and brighter until she needed to close her eyes. Against her eyelids, the light still burned like red fire. The world died around her, leaving only the cocoon of pressing water. Slowly, the rushing diminished until Andrea could hear her own heart beating, slow and steady. She realized suddenly that her lungs burned for air. She dragged herself through the warm swirling water, swimming upwards with all her strength. Just before her head could burst through the surface, she heard the voice echo one last time. "It is done. We can give you a gift, though small. Fight well, Kreliss-child."

— Andrea gasped cool air into her lungs. Each breath tore through her, pressing out the water in shaking coughs. She opened her eyes to find herself floating in a single ray of sunlight that had somehow penetrated the forest canopy. Whatever light had come from the Forest Gem had vanished. "Kreliss?"

"Here." Kreliss knelt on the bark-strewn earth beside the pool. "You'd better come out."

Andrea swam toward the shore, feeling a new strength easing through her muscles, as if she were using them for the first time. At last, smooth stones greeted her feet under the water. "What happened?" she asked, stepping onto the bank.

Kreliss tossed her a blanket, the soft one, Andrea noticed. "They granted my wish. The spirits have a little power—not true magic, but hidden gifts of blessing and truth."

Andrea toweled off. She reached up to stroke the Forest Gem with a fingertip. It felt just as it always had. Andrea pulled on her sun-warmed clothes.

Kreliss took the damp blanket and hung it on the back of Andrea's pack. Her face looked surprisingly peaceful, given the sacrifice she had offered. She held out her hand. "And they gave me this."

A tiny snake was coiled in her hand. Staring, Andrea realized it was carved from stone, though it seemed lifelike enough to slither.

"A snake?"

Kreliss swallowed, staring at her hand. "An amolir. It's very precious, since few are left." She slid it into her pocket. "We can draw on it three times. When the amolir bites, it will drain any victim of magic and life force, leaving him near death."

"That's horrible!"

Kreliss raised an eyebrow. "Worse than a knife? The spirit elves must see we'll need it."

Andrea felt too peaceful and disoriented to argue. "Who were they?" Andrea pulled on one boot, and saw something twitch inside the other. She upended it, shaking it until a fat beetle fell out. Apparently, a few animals remained active.

"Once they were sylvans. Andrea—" Kreliss squeezed Andrea's hand, a surprising urgency in her eyes. "Andrea, this is a secret place, a place not even living sylvans know."

Andrea smiled at her friend. "I'll keep it that way." Around her, she could hear the sighing of trees, like the whispers of Calithwain itself. The forest looked like a home

of satyrs, with panpipe reeds gleaming along the lake's edge. Andrea stretched, suddenly feeling a kinship with this place, a sense it reached out to her. She reached out in turn, and felt a memory surface.

Andrea remembered...

"Talk or the French fry gets it!"

Beside Andrea, her friend Pilar jumped, tight braid bouncing on her back. Andrea turned to find Jesse dangling a French fry over his open jaws. Today he wore goat horns stuck on his forehead. The little brown points made his narrow face look startlingly impish. He smirked. "Did you get promoted to Cinderella's pet mouse?"

"The list isn't up yet. For all we know, you could be a cockroach." Andrea smiled, pretending she wasn't nervous. Jesse was right after all; she never got the good roles.

He pretended to consider it. "An infested magic kingdom? You should put that on our flyers."

"Hey, Jesse, what'd you get on the math test?" Pilar asked. "Andrea won't tell me her score." Andrea tuned out. Someday, her real mother would take Andrea to New York where she could follow her dream and become an actress.

Three days had passed since the auditions. Over forty students now crowded around the auditorium door, waiting for Miss Jarnowski to post the cast list. Cindy twisted a golden curl tighter and tighter around a finger. She lingered at the front of the crowd, surrounded by friends.

"Come on, Andrea!" Pilar said.

"Huh?" Andrea returned to reality.

Pilar placed her hands on her hips. "I'm going to lunch. There are fishsticks today, and I need to eat before science club."

Andrea blinked. "But you could be on the list."

"I never get picked, and if I did, I'd forget my lines. I don't know why I tried out." Pilar sighed, and Andrea instantly sympathized. Some people received fewer parts than she did.

"All right, go ahead," Andrea said. "I want to wait a few more minutes." Pilar sighed, but remained where she was, crossing her creamy brown arms.

"Where'd you get this play anyway?" Jesse asked. He wasn't being nasty, just curious.

"I'm not sure." Andrea explained about the mysterious play she had found in her bookshelf. "And neither of my parents put it there. I can't imagine where it came from."

Before either of her friends could give her a suggestion, Miss Jarnowski emerged from the auditorium. Today she wore a day-glo blue dress, set off with a foamy white scarf. All of the students rushed over in a huge mob. Miss Jarnowski's artificial smile expanded below her turned-up nose. She gestured for quiet. "Everyone," she said. "I want you to know I had trouble choosing who would get each part. You're all wonderful actors, and it's too bad you all can't be Alenna or Gem. I think I'd better read the list aloud, so I don't keep you. Ghostling One: Megan Chen, Ghostling Two: Tej Varma, Head Ghostling: Eric Stuart, Demon: Lorraine Denton..."

Andrea drummed her fingers on her leg. She had read more clearly than many of the students, with strong volume and emotion. All of the smaller parts trickled by without her name being called. Then the witch went to Jessica. Andrea felt a hot wave of resentment building within her. With each name that wasn't hers, Andrea's hands trembled. She might not have been the best actor on that stage, but surely she had some talent. The year before last, she'd been an orphan in *Oliver Twist*, but at least she'd had five lines. All of the flying-monkey-level parts had been announced. How could this unfair teacher not give her a part?

"The Fairy Queen, Pilar Corvalles."

Beside Andrea, Pilar screamed, jumping up and down. She leaned over and hugged Andrea. "That's the one I wanted! I even got the exact part I tried out for."

Andrea smiled at her friend, but with only half her attention. No part at all. Now Miss Jarnowski had almost finished reading the big parts. Distantly, Andrea heard Cindy's name. Didn't Andrea deserve even a tiny role?

"And as our star, Andrea Brightman as Alenna."

Andrea's head jerked up. She had been acting for years, but she had never had the main role in any play, not even a day camp skit. "Wow," Jesse said. "Guess I'll have to sell back the cockroach costume I got 'specially for you. Nice one."

The excitement welled up inside her, so powerful she couldn't think straight. The lead! "And you." Andrea hastily recovered her wits. "Miss Jarnowski gave you Gem the wizard, right?"

“C’mon. Who else could she cast for it? Tej always sneezes near stage dust, and Justin’s parents forced him to try out.”

“And Eric?” Andrea couldn’t help asking. Eric was talking to one of Cindy’s friends while Cindy spoke to Miss Jarnowski. Wavy blond hair glittered in the sun, setting off his tan. Andrea always felt a little shy and giggly in his presence, even though he obviously liked Cindy.

A nasal sneer filled Jesse’s voice. “Eric? Remember his part as the doorkeeper last year? He couldn’t project his voice past the ends of his shoes.”

“How did Mrs. Spears choose parts, anyway?” Andrea was having trouble speaking rationally. All her thoughts wanted to tumble off her tongue at once, racing faster and faster. She had the part!

“Well, luckily Miss Jarnowski doesn’t know the students,” Jesse said. He drew himself up to his full height. With the added horns, he was slightly taller than Andrea. “I got in on pure talent.”

Blonde curls flew past Andrea, attached to a fast moving body. “What about Cindy?”

“Kell.” Jesse’s voice dismissed her.

Andrea stared after Cindy’s retreating figure. “That’s the second biggest part. She shouldn’t be so upset. I mean, I would’ve been thrilled to have it.”

“Yeah, but after two years on top of the world, she’s been demoted to a mere mortal.”

“And her first scene mostly introduces my character.” Andrea glanced at her script page from auditions, tattered with the creases of her hands.

Jesse shouldered her aside so he could read it too. “Lemme see; I had to read the later scene with the ghostlings.” Andrea glanced over the words while Jesse read over her shoulder.

SEER: The lake fish sing and good spirits bless the air. She is coming.

KELL: Who?

SEER: The witch's secret self and greatest foe. One who will be champion of light.

Jesse winced. “I can’t believe this dialogue. And you’ll have most of it to memorize.” He mimed a dagger through the heart and staggered backwards onto Andrea.

Andrea shoved him upright. “Guess I’ll hafta learn to be the champion. But what’s wrong with the script?”

Jesse raised his eyebrows. “The champion of light? Fantasy is so melodramatic. I mean, light’s just what happens when you click on a switch.”

Andrea struggled for the words to explain. “It isn’t like that. We all need fantasy to, well, reach ourselves. At the root, we all want to make the bad things in life vanish forever.” The thought of her parents arguing flashed through her mind. “But we can’t. That’s why writers create a place where we battle our darkest shadows and win. That’s why we *need* a champion of light.”

"Still sounds like a flashlight salesman to me," Jesse said. "Hey, wait; maybe I can put that in my lines. This play could use a few jokes, so it doesn't sound like such a downer. C'mon, the end of the world?"

The end of the world was the last thing Andrea could think about in her giddiness. "If Miss Jarnowski lets you, put in all the jokes you want." She hugged herself tightly. "For once, I have more lines than you do. I did it!" She swallowed. "I need to go start memorizing."

"What about math? We both need to study more if we wanna catch up to Pilar."

"Another time." Andrea wanted to cling to the joy surging through her for as long as she could. She felt like cartwheeling. Her mother had never seemed so close.

The students wandered off, discussing their parts. Pilar made her way over. "Great job, Alenna," Pilar told her, and Andrea found herself grinning so hard she felt her cheeks stretch. This was going to be so much fun. There was one person, however, she had to see. She hurried over to Miss Jarnowski, who had just tacked up the list and was now heading to lunch.

"Oh, thank you, thank you, Miss Jarnowski!" Andrea said.

Miss Jarnowski smiled. "You're certainly welcome, Andrea, but you earned it. No one else knew that character as well as you did. I suppose that's not surprising, since you chose the play. While you were auditioning, I really thought I was seeing Alenna."

Andrea shuddered to a stop and bent over, rubbing the backs of her legs. Each muscle felt like overstretched rope under her fingers. Kreliss had kept to an exhausting

pace, hand on her sword hilt as she searched for enemies. None had appeared. The path had taken them south and east, until they stood beside the shore of an enormous lake, turned golden pink in the light of the dying sun. Tiny white flowers dotted the grass, which flowed into sandy dirt, then beach, then lapping waves.

“Tired already?” Kreliss sounded amused.

Andrea straightened, self-conscious warmth rising to her cheeks. “I don’t usually hike so far.”

“The lives of my friends aren’t *usually* in danger. Only days, remember?”

Kreliss looked her over and then gave an exaggerated sigh. “All right, we can stop. I see a grove of trees to the left.”

They walked to the slender trunks. Branches arched in all directions, providing a tenuous canopy. “Find wood for the fire,” Kreliss said, without as much as a please. “We’ll extinguish it after we eat.”

Andrea stumbled around the twilit cluster of trees, hauling a growing pile of fallen branches. She dumped her collection in front of Kreliss.

“Good.” Digging through her pack, Kreliss didn’t look up. “Now take the kettle and fetch water.”

“And what will you do, while I collect water and do all the chores?” she asked, an edge grazing her voice. The small kettle gleamed with a coppery brightness. It weighed surprisingly little in her clenched hand when Andrea swung it off the ground.

“Catch fish. Unless you wish to?”

Andrea could only imagine touching a scaly dead fish. Squirming, she shook her head and walked toward the lake.

Within the hour, fish sizzled and charred on spits, while Kreliss hummed a meditative tune, watching them. Three moons shone: a giant red crescent double the size of earth's moon, a three-quarters moon with a pale yellow sheen, and a tiny white full moon. Unfamiliar constellations spotted the clear black horizon, twinkling just as earth stars did.

Andrea lay back, still staring up at the heavens. "Even the skies are different here. We only have one moon, the size of that low one over there."

Kreliss gazed up and, for a moment, seemed caught in the night sky's spell. "Ordara, the light-giver. The largest is Milaurae, the mother."

"And the little one?"

"Aglaiia. I suppose Janrod— Sidaria's protector— would be singing evening hymns to the moon goddesses if he were with us." An odd wistfulness tinged her voice.

"I guess he couldn't save her," Andrea said hesitantly.

Kreliss's hand clenched on the stick she had used to stir the fire. "He's a fine protector. One day, I'll take his place. The fish is done." Two pieces were still pink in spots, but Kreliss busied herself with dislodging a few fillets from their sticks and handing one by its edges to Andrea. Lemon would have helped, but after her long walk, Andrea devoured every piece of her share.

When they had finished and extinguished the fire, the girls spread blankets under the stars. Andrea closed her eyes in a strange world that a week ago had been a piece of scenery. The play hadn't mentioned walking until her legs felt stiff enough to break, or the chilly breeze blowing over her neck. Why didn't anyone ever ask where mystic champions could find a real bathroom, instead of a clump of scratchy bushes? Andrea sighed, just once. Within her capabilities or not, she was stuck with the quest. She felt very, very far away from home.

In her dreams, Andrea remembered...

"Help! Help me, Alenna! It's got me! Come save me! Help!" The frantic screams were coming from the greenroom behind the stage.

Andrea walked in and sighed. "Jesse, this is getting really stupid."

Jesse crawled out from under the stuffed tentacle. Dust smeared his Hawaiian shirt, and his rainbow sunglasses were askew. "Come on, Andrea. I thought it was funny. What fun is acting if you can't lighten up once in a while? Like this." With those words, Jesse slipped on an imaginary banana peel, and went sprawling. The sunglasses flew across the room. Andrea giggled.

"Could we start before Miss Jarnowski stops us?" Cindy asked behind her.

"Andrea and I were ready half an hour ago," Jesse shot back while retrieving his glasses. "You know, when rehearsals began." The greenroom (actually beige, not green) echoed faintly, and the other students turned to look. Jesse cleared his throat. There wasn't much space to work with between the rehearsing students and the piles of sets

wobbling slightly where they leaned against the walls. The door to the walk-in costume closet dangled open beside a tall spotlight on a stand.

Andrea opened her script. "Let's practice."

KELL: "At least we can offer you supper. Noble Wizard, will you join our quest?"

GEM: "And face more of those creatures before I learn elementary magic? Trusting, aren't you. What were they?"

ALENNA: "Twisted shadows of chaos with no wills of their own."

KELL: "Then why'd they attack us in full moonlight? Instinct?"

GEM: "Or someone really needs a breath mint."

ALENNA: "Wizard, can you stop them?"

GEM: "Of course. Now, let me see. Ear of dog and vomit of rabbit. Toss in a monkey turd if you have it." His quarrel with Cindy vanishing in the joy of theater, Jesse held for the audience's laughter and grinned.

Miss Jarnowski cleared her throat at the front of the room. "Class, I need to talk to you all."

Cindy hurried over to her friends. Andrea exchanged glances with Jesse. "What's wrong?"

Jesse grimaced. "I heard her talking to the principal. The department isn't offering any money, and I'm not sure we can manage."

Andrea swallowed. "She wouldn't close the play. Not this early."

"Are we all supposed to chip in to advertise? Or just perform to a theater with our parents filling half the first row? We need colored fliers, a lot of them."

"Quiet, everybody quiet." Miss Jarnowski clapped her hands. "Thank you. I'm sorry to say, we've just had serious budget cuts, so we'll need to postpone the play until spring. I'm very sorry about this, but there's no way to earn enough money in time. I've done everything I could to find funding. I'm just not sure the Board of Education will give us any."

"What about the O'Keefe Award!" Jessica demanded.

"We can participate next year." She nodded reassuringly, hair bouncing inside the purple moon-and-stars-printed scarf.

Beside Andrea, Jesse looked crushed. Andrea knew exactly how he felt.

"I should've known we'd never do a fairy tale," Cindy muttered.

"You're just sore 'cuz you're not the lead," Jessica said.

"And you're happy as the witch?" Cindy shot back.

"We can fundraise!" Lorraine yelled loud enough to shake the windows. The dark skinned badminton player always drew attention to herself with dramatic gestures and a voice that could cut through a football stadium. While Lorraine didn't get the main roles either, Andrea had always admired her energy.

"That's it," Jesse said. "We'll raise the money. Before school, evenings, whatever it takes."

Everyone shouted his or her ideas.

"Have a bake sale."

“Sell candy!”

“Craft fair.”

“Do a monologue-a-thon,” Jesse shouted.

Miss Jarnowski raised her eyebrows. “You’re all willing to do the work?”

Despite her piled-up homework, Andrea nodded as hard as everyone else. Cindy looked uncomfortable.

The teacher smiled. “Then it sounds like I have a play to produce.” Everyone cheered. “I’ll call a PTA meeting; maybe your parents will help,” she continued. “As for the fundraisers, those are all good suggestions, but I think we’ll follow a time-honored tradition from my college theater.”

Andrea adjusted her red rubber nose. “Lorraine, I need more soapy water. This bucket’s turned black.”

Lorraine handed a clean bucket up to where Andrea knelt in the back of a pickup truck, scrubbing with a fat sponge. “I don’t wanna know what these high schoolers have been driving in.” To punctuate her comment, she scrubbed the underside of the truck with unneeded enthusiasm.

Andrea shrugged. “As long as they pay, we can clean up afterwards.” Since high school started an hour before junior high, the drama students had plenty of time to scrub cars and then hurry back to their own campus.

Jessica climbed off the truck, kicking the dirty water bucket so it sloshed Andrea’s shoes. “It was an accident,” she said quickly.

Andrea rolled her eyes.

Pilar hurried up. "Where's Jesse?"

"Up front, attracting customers by snapping his rainbow suspenders at them."

Andrea grinned. "And shooting a water gun full of soap."

Pilar made a note on her pad. "And Megan's with him. Then that's everyone, except Eric and Cindy. And Eric has the flu."

"Cindy again?" Andrea pressed her annoyance into scrubbing a nasty spot. "I guess fundraising isn't her style. How much are we making?"

"We'll need another two weeks of scrubbing, if business doesn't pick up. And we can make posters. We really need the publicity to boost ticket sales." Pilar eyed Andrea.

"Um, about your hair..."

"How many directions?"

"Mostly one-- straight up." Lorraine shrugged. "I doubt any of us are ready for a beauty pageant."

Andrea smoothed her hair back with an elbow, since her hands were soapy.

"Nina's friend at the copy shop might give us a discount on flyers," Lorraine said.

"We need posters everywhere, though." Lorraine punctuated her comment with a massive wave of her sponge, sending soapsuds flying.

Andrea heard a horn honk and glanced at the parking lot. "Wonder why my dad's here." She ran over to the white station wagon. Andrea could always recognize it by the bright purple tag dangling from the rearview mirror, even before she could see her father's face. The tag read, "Rock is Dead: Long Live Paper and Scissors." In Andrea's

opinion, he seriously needed a new slogan. Shanelle had made one that said, "A Clean Desk is a Sign of a Cluttered Drawer" but it was probably too true to amuse him.

Her father rolled down the window and handed Andrea a paper bag. One of his jazz CDs was playing. His balding head shone in the sunlight, over the familiar bifocals and black mustache. "You forgot your lunch. Shanelle put peanut-butter cookies in for you."

Shanelle disliked peanut butter, and her father stuck with health food. Touched Shanelle had baked just for her, Andrea took the lunch. "Thanks."

He didn't roll the window back up. "So now you're fundraising at eight in the morning?"

Andrea shrugged. "The play needs money."

He sighed. "It's just a play. Andrea, you're neglecting your schoolwork. You haven't mentioned any of your test scores in weeks, and I know that's a bad sign."

"You don't understand. I need to do this." Andrea bit her lip. She couldn't explain about the O'Keefe Award. Not to him. "Besides, it gets me out of the house."

Her father pinned her with his eyes. "Look, I know you're unhappy, but this isn't the way to solve your problems. You can't make your family disappear while you retreat into a fantasy world. You have the responsibility of doing chores and getting a good education."

Andrea nodded automatically. With luck, both problems would vanish within months.

He glanced at his watch. Andrea knew he liked to arrive exactly ten minutes early each morning, with just enough time to buy a blueberry protein shake across the street.

“Go ahead. I don’t want to make you late.” He would worry about it for days.

Her father sighed. “Have a good day. We can talk tomorrow.”

Chapter 4: Your Tether Weaves Both Worlds.

The next morning, the girls packed up the camp and wrapped the leftover fish for later. Kreliss led Andrea down a sandy path. Andrea blinked the sleepiness from her eyes and resigned herself to an even more exhausting day of walking. Her back ached as much as her legs from sleeping on the ground, in a night too chilly for her single blanket. Andrea sighed. In the play, the quest had breezed by in a single day, where characters grinned after defeating each enemy. There hadn't been a word about dried-out bread or sleeping on pebbles. "Guess Sidaria didn't want to discourage me," Andrea muttered, folding the scratchy blanket.

At last, the river shore's tracts of open sand disappeared behind curtains of bushes with featherlike branches. Shedding leaves that tumbled like a soft rainfall, thick treetops spread high over both girls' heads. Andrea watched colorful birds flitting among the branches, squawking like quarreling crows. "Look at that little yellow one! It's darting so fast."

Kreliss didn't turn her head, though she stopped humming for a moment. "Very nice. But we haven't time for bird watching."

"Are these birds Sidaria's?" They seemed unaffected by the devastation of the White Crystal.

If possible, Kreliss walked faster. "All birds are. The loss of the White Crystal just hasn't reached them at this distance." She spat the words out like bullets.

"Worrying won't make us walk faster."

"It might."

Andrea sighed. Kreliss seemed determined to dwell on their quest for every minute of the day. "I really wish you'd—"

A loud screech distracted Andrea, and she spun. A creature like a dark green hedgehog, triple-sized, was spitting at her from under a bush.

Andrea backed away slowly. The creature had two pointed teeth like a rodent's in front. "Kreliss, help!"

Kreliss bent over, trembling. Andrea tensed. Then Kreliss straightened, and Andrea saw she was shaking with silent laughter. "Scared of a carric!" she managed to sputter between waves of laughter.

Andrea crossed her arms. "It's angry."

"You're between the carric and its nest of babies."

Andrea glanced at the tree and saw a large ball of mud lying against its roots. She quickly moved out of the way. "Well, you could've mentioned."

Kreliss still grinned. "You need to learn to stay alert on your own."

Andrea scowled. Kreliss was letting her screw up, just as Andrea had done to Cindy. "That wasn't funny."

"Quiet!"

Andrea stopped, searching Kreliss's closed face for clues. "What do you—" she whispered.

Kreliss gestured sharply with her hand and Andrea fell silent. The woods waited with her, she realized. Even the trees muffled their sighing, and the birds hid.

A human-shaped shadow drifted from the groves. It hovered for a moment, silhouetted before the thick gray tree trunks. A second drifted from the forest before them, then a third and a fourth. While they lingered, Andrea felt a trembling start at her fingertips and spread over her entire body. The shadows seemed to be watching her, like eyeless worms, cold and slithery. "What are they?" Andrea whispered.

"Tzalmaveths. Run!" Kreliss drew her sword, fumbling for a dagger with her right hand.

Realizing Kreliss meant to fight the horrible creatures, Andrea yanked hard at Kreliss's hand and nearly sent the taller girl sprawling. "Stop, Kreliss. We both need to go. Come on!"

Kreliss shook her off, an edge of panic grazing her voice. "Andrea, run. We can't fight this many."

The tzalmaveths were drifting closer, hissing in the chill morning air. Andrea shuddered. She felt an unnatural panic come over her from somewhere outside herself, as if nothing could ever be light or beautiful again after seeing the writhing ugliness before her. She yanked harder on Kreliss's arm. "I doubt your sword'll even hurt them. Now let's go, together."

"What's the point? We can't outrun them." Kreliss's voice shook with a tone Andrea had never heard before, not even in the elf village: defeat.

"Kreliss, what's wrong with you?" Kreliss's face slackened into a strangely unfocused expression. Andrea snatched both of Kreliss's shoulders and shook them, hard. Kreliss couldn't abandon her now. "Move!"

Kreliss's eyes focused. "What?" A burst of welcome clarity flooded her face. Kreliss began backing away from the tzalmaveths, keeping herself between them and Andrea. "You run left, I'll take right."

Andrea hesitated. "And let you get killed?"

Kreliss tried to push her. "There's no time—"

"Kreliss, look out!"

A smoky tendril extended from between two tzalmaveths, groping toward Kreliss. Kreliss shoved Andrea left and dashed to the right. The tendril hovered for a moment, then snatched Kreliss's right arm, darting quick enough to half-dissipate the shadow. Kreliss cried out and dropped the dagger she held, while her left arm clutched her sword even tighter. The tendril tightened around her arm, dragging her a few steps away from Andrea. "Go!" Kreliss yelled.

Andrea reached for Kreliss. The Forest Gem burned her forehead, blazing green radiance into the afternoon. The tzalmaveth hissed and recoiled. "Why's it only attacking you, not me?"

"It must be the Forest Gem," Kreliss gasped.

Andrea. The voice echoed in her head, a woman's voice, hushed as the silent fall of a star.

"Who said that?" Andrea asked, wondering if she had heard the voice at all.

The voice whispered again. *The Circlet you wear is mine, and you stand against my servants. Why have you journeyed to Calithwain? Why do you seek me?*

“Sidaria?” A strange impulse made Andrea want to ask, Are you my fairy godmother?

Hardly. The voice in Andrea’s head chuckled, a cold brittle sound that slid over her spine like a smooth icicle. Andrea tried to visualize the voice, but saw only darkness. *The tzalmaveths will carry you to me. We shall meet soon enough, my child.*

“Andrea!” Kreliss cried. The tzalmaveth dragged Kreliss closer and closer to its own shadowy body. Dust climbed as Kreliss’s skidding boots dug furrows in the dried mud of the road.

Andrea’s full attention spun back to her friend. She rushed toward her, and the tzalmaveth drew away, dragging Kreliss with it. Andrea stopped. “What can I do? What will drive it away?”

Kreliss’s head came up, an acknowledgement of surrender in her limp mouth. “Nothing. It’s too late.”

Panic strengthened Andrea’s resolve. Kreliss could never give up; Andrea couldn’t manage the quest alone. “Quit it, Kreliss! There must be something.” Suddenly, she remembered.

Before the tzalmaveth could drag Kreliss away, Andrea lunged. She dug into the warm pocket, shoving aside coiled thread, coins, sharp fishhooks. At last, she brushed against something hard. Her fingers closed on it, only to drag out the coiled snake. She shoved it at the tzalmaveth, and the creature hissed, voice sharp as fingernails on slate. It

melted back, paling to a breath of smoke, and freeing Kreliss. The other tzaImaveths advanced on them.

“Hurry,” Andrea yelled.

The two girls raced down the path, until they lost the shadows in the distance. The creatures didn’t follow. Andrea’s lungs felt ready to burst through her chest; at last her feet shuddered to a halt. Beside her Kreliss did likewise, then bent over, breathing through clenched teeth.

“What is it?” Andrea asked.

Kreliss clasped the captured arm close to her body. She looked up, eyes filled with a terrified despair that shook Andrea to her very center. “So cold. It won’t stop throbbing. I’ve failed the quest, already.”

“I don’t care what they did to your mind, you can’t break down. We’ll find a doctor.” Andrea silenced the panic churning inside her, reminding her how easily they could have died.

“Out here?” Kreliss remained hunched over her arm.

“Someone must live here,” Andrea insisted. She took Kreliss’s shoulders and pulled her upright.

Kreliss shook her head. “Only— only a few humans.”

Andrea pulled Kreliss along the path, relieved the girl’s legs were moving. If she stopped to think, she knew she would crumple herself, so she kept walking. “Yeah? Why can’t they help us?”

“No.”

Andrea kept her voice as steady as her footsteps. "If they live near the tzalmaveths, they probably know what's wrong. Is there a village?"

"Just Evrel's Refuge. Beside the lake." Despair still tinged her voice, and Kreliss looked away. At least the lake was close; Andrea could see it spreading ahead, like a welcoming beach. A hill blocked some of her vision, but the lake was enormous.

"What aren't you telling me?" Andrea squeezed the other girl's shoulder. "Pull yourself together."

Kreliss bit her lip and then finally looked up at Andrea. "I'm afraid—afraid the humans here attacked the White Crystal."

It didn't make sense. "Humans like us? Why would they attack anybody?"

"They're jealous of the sylvans' magic and of their craftsmanship. Sylvans who visit these towns have reported harassment and rock throwing." Kreliss seemed so hesitant. Her eyes shifted constantly, and she shrank in on herself as if someone had punched her. "We don't know who attacked my people or how to save them. We haven't a chance."

Andrea straightened. Whatever had happened to Kreliss, Andrea would have to take charge. "That's why we're going to the Ancient Mystics. Of course we'll free the sylvans. But first, we need to go to the human village and find a way to help you." At Kreliss's stubborn look she quickly added, "You're useless to this quest with an injured arm."

Kreliss nodded at last. "I feel so strange, as if something's affecting my mind." She shook her head, like a person awaking in unfamiliar territory.

Andrea nearly exploded with relief. At last, Kreliss was fighting it. "I noticed. You gave up so easily, despite everything."

Kreliss nodded. "At least Sidaria's Forest Gem is protecting you. We'll need to hurry. We don't have much time to finish the quest."

Andrea squeezed Kreliss's shoulders in a half-hug. "We'll do our best, Kreliss, I promise."

Andrea felt the Forest Gem heat against her forehead. She shrugged it away. "Not now, the danger's passed." Ignoring her, the Forest Gem dragged Andrea into another memory.

Andrea remembered...

Andrea sat cross-legged, eyes closed, listening to the soft sighs of her own breathing. "I'm waiting for my stepmom to pick me up. She's already an hour late. I told her I'd meet her at the mall's parking garage. It's dark here, and cool. Hardly anyone comes into this garage; row after row of silent cars surrounds me. I've long since finished the ice cream cone I wasn't supposed to buy. Now it's after dinnertime. I've paced around the entire parking lot, tried standing at the entrance, ducked back into the mall to check their clock because I'm not wearing a watch. I called home twice, but there's only the answering machine. I stare at every green minivan, and every car that might be a green minivan. I'm shivering."

"Time's up," Miss Jarnowski chirped. "Now that all four people have had a chance to share, go find your scene partners and start running lines. I'll be right back."

Andrea opened her eyes. Lorraine, Pilar, and Jessica sat in a circle around her, holding hands. "You should've picked a happy sense memory like I did," Lorraine said, waving her hands as she always did when she spoke. Lorraine easily dominated most conversations, usually by raising her voice until the walls shook. She seemed to be a whirlpool of attraction, swirling everyone's attention in to focus on herself. "Alenna's supposed to be a confident champion. Be confident. Be *so* confident, no one can look away."

"Or being scared could work," Jessica said, nastiness coating her voice. "If your cue comes and you're hiding in the stairwells waiting for Mommy, we'll know what happened."

Andrea climbed to her feet, breathing in the soft smells of dried-out strawberry jam and dusty papers. Ignoring Jessica, she glanced around Miss Jarnowski's classroom. The students rose from their clusters, surrounded by a circle of desks. Over the past two weeks, they had only rehearsed once onstage, before band practice had stolen the entire auditorium. Miss Jarnowski had assured them her classroom made a wonderful greenroom, but Andrea longed to spread out onto the real stage, rather than a cramped classroom. However Miss Jarnowski directed their blocking, it would change as soon as the students stepped onstage.

Poems and student artwork dotted the walls, while giant posters at the front spouted sayings like "Feel the Possibilities" and "Each Day is a New Beginning." Most of the posters had sleepy kittens or playful puppies. Posters on the parts of speech stood at the back of the classroom, on either side of Miss Jarnowski's cluttered desk. One

listed oxymorons from bittersweet and jumbo shrimp to legal principles and military intelligence. The other featured cartoon mice teaching popular grammar errors. A rocking chair full of pillows wobbled in the corner, creaking softly.

Andrea hurried over to where Jesse was turning the teddy bear on the windowsill so it stood on its head, polka dot dress upturned and furry brown rear mooning the room. Andrea poked him in the back through his purple jacket, nearly causing him to drop the script tucked under his arm. "Cindy here today?"

Jesse turned, showing Andrea his single eyepatch (a pirate one, not a medical one). "D'you see her anywhere?" Jesse dumped his script on a nearby chair. The force of his release pushed the chair onto its shorter, footless leg, rattling hard. Andrea jumped. "She's in every one of our scenes. Pilar can read the part for now, but what about dress rehearsals? Will somebody stand in for her, or will she breeze in, expecting to play her part without a day's practice? Maybe she'll just show up opening night, thinking we'll let her on."

"She's come most days." Andrea didn't know why she was making excuses for Cindy.

"Not this week." Harshness filled Jesse's normally good-humored voice. "We should kick Cindy out of the play, give the part to someone else."

"Like Pilar? She still mispronounces half the words. And she's practiced more than anybody except Cindy. What if Miss Jarnowski pulls someone out of her role, and Cindy comes back and has a good excuse? We have no choice." Andrea took a shaky

deep breath. They couldn't afford to argue until they tore the play apart. The O'Keefe Award beckoned tantalizingly in the background.

Jesse kicked the nearest plastic chair. This one, at least, had four working legs. It scooted toward the wall, as if to avoid Jesse's outbursts. "Other than Miss Jarnowski telling Cindy off for not taking the play seriously. She shouldn't get to drag us all down with her. I mean, I'm here and I have a biology test tomorrow."

"Me, too." The thought flashed through Andrea's head that she really ought to study. Maybe she would find time that evening. Wednesday. Shanelle had the painting class, and came home late and...usually yelled. Andrea winced. Maybe in the morning. "She won't kick Cindy out. I don't know who else knows the part."

"Shouldn't you two be running lines?" a voice asked, sweet as honey congealing on a radiator. Cindy stood behind Andrea, picture perfect as always. Today she wore a short red skirt and a dump truck full of makeup.

"Cindy. Nice you finally came," Jesse said, each word a challenge. He leaned back against the counter. Andrea couldn't see his face against the afternoon sun pouring through the window, but she knew how he felt.

"Doctor's appointment." Cindy shrugged off her jeans jacket and tossed it lightly on the chair he'd kicked.

"Uh huh," Jesse said, fingers twitching. He glared at her jacket as if ready to rip it in half.

"Cindy, we really need you here," Andrea said quickly. "We had to wait for you, y'know."

“And it’ll be the only time this week you’ll show up.” Jesse glowered at Cindy.

“If you won’t come to rehearsals, you should give up the part. That’s the decent thing to do.”

Cindy shrugged, expression bored. “I don’t need much rehearsal. Now let’s run page six.”

Andrea and Jesse picked up their cue cards, index cards with each of their lines, and the line just before it.

“What are those for?” Cindy asked, glancing up from her script.

“So we just look for our own lines and cues,” Andrea said. A mixture of resentment and grudging helpfulness made her add, “They were homework due today. Miss Jarnowski’s checking to make sure we have them.”

“And lines need to be memorized next Monday,” Jesse said, twisting the knife.

“Cindy?”

Miss Jarnowski drifted over. Purple bouncy-ball earrings bobbed against her cheeks, over a teddy bear sweater. “Back to work, students. You need to run lines until you’re confident.” She glanced over Andrea’s and Jesse cue cards, noticing Cindy only held a script. Then she wandered off without saying another word.

Cindy raised her eyebrows. “Anything else, or can we start already?” Her voice was developing its own edge.

Andrea shuffled her cue cards to the proper scene. She would have to talk to Cindy after rehearsal. Surely the other girl would start taking responsibility for her part.

It was completely unfair that one person could ruin the entire show and with it Andrea's dreams.

ALENNNA: "Why do these villagers hate us?"

GEM: "Remember, they're simple townsfolk. You know... cannon fodder."

KELL: "Don't give in to despair. They fear the ghostlings, not us."

GEM: "I can keep you safe through the village; I know all the taverns where you'll get salmonella."

KELL: "You don't follow the Sorceress."

GEM: "No, but I know what it means to be in danger. I mean, my sister-in-law's visiting. Please, just trust me."

Andrea roused to find Kreliss staring at her. "Another memory?" Kreliss's voice still sounded shaky.

Andrea nodded. "What's the Forest Gem trying so desperately to warn me about?"

Kreliss shivered. She drew her arm away from Andrea to stand on her own. "The tzaamaveths, obviously."

Andrea shook her head. "That's not enough." Did the town have an evil concealed beneath its surface? Was that what the Forest Gem feared? Andrea wrapped an arm around Kreliss. "I'll figure it out later. You need a healer."

Kreliss's arm heavy across her shoulders, Andrea approached the village. A wooden sign, worn to grayness, announced the borders of Evrel's Refuge. With deep

wheel marks on either side, a wide dirt road led into the village. A stream bubbled past, thick with silt, trickling into the woods. Beside the path sprouted random patches of grass intermingled with tiny red flowers. Blending with baking bread and ripe fruit, outdoor smells filled the air. The main square of the village lay directly ahead, boasting a dozen shops and as many stalls. Houses clustered around the square, like game pieces waiting to be picked up. Ahead, the square bustled with people in red and blue ponchos moving between brightly colored stalls.

The girls walked toward the central market. Despite Kreliss's injury, Andrea felt a surge of relief. At least these people were alive and busy doing normal tasks. Children raced between stalls, while couples held hands and everyone chatted and haggled. One man in a yellow straw hat was putting on a puppet show, just as if this were Earth. Lively notes from a flute drifted among the stalls, punctuated by the smells of fresh bread and sizzling meat.

Andrea helped Kreliss to the nearest stall, one selling many different colors of nuts, in and out of their shells. Some resembled pecans and hazelnuts, while others were blue and spiny, like prickly-balls. The red-cheeked woman behind the counter reached a pudgy hand out from a purple shawl. "Help you, dears?"

"Can you find us a healer?" Andrea blurted.

The woman raised her eyebrows and came out from behind her stall, leaving a sleeping baby in its woven carrier. "What's wrong?"

"Tzalmaveths," Kreliss said, her voice drained of emotion.

The woman clucked her tongue, eying the two girls. "The healer's gone on a journey to buy supplies up north. She won't return for another two weeks."

Kreliss glanced at Andrea. "We'll keep traveling, then."

Andrea's eyes widened in alarm. "Kreliss, you can't! The tzalmaveth's affecting your mind."

The woman folded her hands across a wide stomach and looked sympathetic. "Wait, Geome's keeping house for his mother. You could see him."

"Is he a healer?" Andrea asked.

"He's a mage, on vacation from the Academy during harvest season. But Healer Ardiss's his mother and besides all the book knowledge, he knows plenty about local troubles. Unfortunately, that includes the latest rounds of shadow attacks." The woman hesitated. "You girls might want to put your cloaks on."

"Why?" Andrea asked.

The woman lowered her voice. "Those elf garments won't go over well around here. Be careful." The woman glanced about swiftly. "Sarel, heading home?" she asked, addressing an older woman who was walking past.

Sarel raised her head from inside a thick kerchief. A round nose surrounded by laugh lines dominated her face. "Almost, why?"

The nut seller smiled broadly. "Geome's first patients have arrived."

Sarel smirked. "What do they need, hours of lecture on the eating habits of firebirds and the best way to cast an invisibility shield?"

The nut-seller's face took on a look of fond exasperation. "He does know a few things under all that education. Just walk the girls there."

Sarel stared at Kreliss. No, not at the girl, at her red scarf. "Where'd you get that?"

Kreliss blinked. "It's just a linen scarf."

"Not the scarf, the dye!" Sarel ran the sash through her fingers, and Andrea noticed blue stains under the woman's nails. "You have a permanent crimson dye. Don't you know how rare those are? Where does it come from?"

"A snail, I think." Kreliss shrugged. "Elves make lots of bright colors."

"Humph. And never share their secrets." Sarel dropped the scarf as if it were poisoned. "Come along." Sarel hurried off quickly enough Andrea barely had time to thank the nut seller for her help.

As the gray-haired woman led them through the village, everyone seemed to stare. "Kreliss, why's everyone watching us?" Andrea whispered. Two children, a boy and girl in yellow ponchos, saw them approaching and hurried off in the opposite direction.

Kreliss didn't look to either side. "Humans wearing elf clothing are rare, especially here." Suddenly Kreliss turned white. Andrea snatched her arm, afraid the other girl was preparing to faint. Kreliss spun to face Sarel, eyes blazing. "Your people dare—!"

Andrea searched for whatever had offended Kreliss. Ahead stood a few shops, signs marked with a threaded needle, a many-petaled flower, and a bottle and mug. The latter had a small placard in the window. "Kreliss?"

"It says 'no elves.'" Kreliss's accusing glare didn't leave the old woman's face.

"Why shouldn't we?" Sarel crossed her arms, instantly on the defensive. "They live to judge us, protesting our chopping down trees to build homes. Where do they expect us to stay? In caves?"

Kreliss stiffened. "You can hardly blame them for asking you to respect nature."

"Well, they're awfully snooty about asking." Sarel sniffed. "We don't tell them how to live."

Kreliss rose to the challenge, of course. "Oh, don't you? You're always asking us to export more resin for polishing, more syrup for your tables. If we sent all you ask for, Arden Forest would diminish."

"And with a shortage of elf products, you can raise the prices," the woman snapped. "Don't think we haven't noticed."

Kreliss tossed her hair. "Your taxing caravans inflates the price just as high."

"You may protest our building roads, but you're certainly happy to travel them, aren't you?" The old woman wagged a finger in Kreliss's face. Kreliss looked angry enough to bite it off.

"Is now really the time to discuss all this?" Andrea asked helplessly.

Kreliss wasn't as pale as she had been; in fact, her eyes burned with bronze fire and her cheeks flushed. She scowled and looked away. Sarel scrutinized both of them and then pressed her lips together in a tight little grimace. They walked the rest of the way in silence.

At last, Sarel strode up to a modest one-story house. The wood gleamed reddish brown with white trim around the top and a white door. Despite the warmth of the day, smoke puffed from the chimney, spreading scents of smoke and herbs. Small plants, most of them blossomless, sprouted in white windowboxes. Sarel knocked at the door with a sharp little rap.

"Coming." The house banged and clattered as if tin cans were rolling down the stairs.

The door yanked open to reveal a boy of about fourteen. Pale hair waved around his face like a halo, while his peacock-colored tunic highlighted him against the brownish interior of the house. His brow creased when he looked at the travelstained girls. "Can this wait? I'm really in the middle of something." His voice sounded high and awkward, not even close to adulthood.

"No, it can't, Geome," Sarel said. "One of these girls is seriously hurt." Her duty discharged, Sarel stalked off.

Geome blinked behind round glasses, like a computer addict confronted with real life. "Oh. Well, come in then."

He led the girls past an immaculate parlor with striped chairs to a room overflowing with junk. The outside of the house had been tidy, but this study looked as if another person owned it. Stacks of papers leaned precariously against the walls, while beakers, flasks, handles, gears lay randomly scattered about the floor. A row of books, leaning out at sloppy angles from one another, lined up along a walnut chest. Geome lifted several broken wagon wheels off one chair, and a complicated pile of interlocking

rings off another. Gesturing for the girls to sit, he perched himself on the only uncluttered chair in the room, his fingers twitching. Geome looked like a walking stick; long and thin from his aristocratic nose to his skinny build. "What's the problem?"

"A *true* healer should be able to tell," Kreliss said. "It's my arm." She slid it out to him, as if she were offering a honeycomb to a hungry bear.

Geome took her arm and rolled up her sleeve, dragging a nearby lamp closer. Andrea stared at Kreliss's arm, far paler than her normal brown. Geome touched it and flinched. "A tzalmaveth attack, wasn't it? And a recent one. The creatures grow larger and fiercer each day."

Andrea perched on the edge of the leather-padded chair. "Can you help her?"

"Well, since I'm not a true healer as she says, I guess I'd better remove the arm." Geome glanced from one still face to the other. "I'm joking to make you more comfortable."

"Maybe you shouldn't," Andrea said.

"No one in this village understands my sense of humor." Geome shoved several random items off the chest and started rummaging through it. After a moment, his upper body emerged from the chest, clutching a bottle of pearlescent liquid triumphantly. He sat down opposite Kreliss and captured her hand.

Before he could rub anything into her arm, Kreliss jerked it away. "What's in that bottle?"

He grinned. "You don't want to know. But it works, I promise. Breathe the scent in deeply. We've had to mend tzalmaveth attacks too many times." He held out his hand coaxingly, displaying a wavering blue inkstain.

Kreliss eyed him, and more importantly, the bottle. She finally relaxed her arm.

"When you lose the coldness, the despair usually follows." Geome began rubbing clear goo into Kreliss's arm. A sharp spicy scent, like pine needles, sifted through the room. Geome glanced at Andrea. "I can spread some of this on a handkerchief for you to breathe."

Andrea shook her head. "I'm fine. Kreliss needs the help, especially if those things are making her act weird."

"They project a cloud of hopelessness, which prevents people from escaping, or even caring." Busy lecturing, Geome didn't look up from his work. "Are you sure you don't want salve?"

"No! I mean, um, I'm fine." It smelled all right from a distance, but given how Kreliss's nose was wrinkling, Andrea didn't want the salve any closer.

"And who has the honor to be my first patient?" Geome obviously meant his smile to be reassuring and friendly, but it merely came out awkward as he held it too long. He had an eager puppy quality, simultaneously hyperactive and anxious to please.

"I'm Andrea."

"And I am Geome, well, really Geomattus but we shortened it down. The name sounded well enough for Alcanster, but when my mother came here, she felt something shorter would be more appropriate. Oh, I'm babbling, aren't I? Where are you from?"

Andrea hesitated. "Apparently another world." She studied the teenage boy. He was nothing like Jesse, or the wizard Gem, but he might still be the character from the play. Could she trust him?

"A tale for another time. And I'm Kreliss." Her voice carried an edge, but Andrea couldn't tell if Kreliss was angry at the shadows or the hostile villagers.

"Pleased to meet you." Geome seemed to have his tongue under control at last. He started to rub in the liquid with awkward motions. Kreliss's glare would have been enough to set anyone on edge. Geome coughed and quickly asked, "When were you attacked? Last night?"

"This morning," Andrea said. It seemed like longer.

"Tzalmaveths attacked you in the full light of day? Why?" Geome gave Kreliss a suspicious glance. "What do you have that they want?"

"That's not your concern." Kreliss's voice flattened, concealing a faint edge of malice.

"Well, you asked me to repair the damage."

Kreliss glared at him. "We escaped just fine after we hit the creature with an amolir."

"Crude, but effective." Geome's voice filled with censure rather than admiration. Apparently, he believed crudeness to be a crime of the highest order.

"What would you have done?" Andrea asked, curious.

Geome drew himself up proudly. "I've been working on a tool to let people pass by tzalmaveths undetected, even at night. It masks magical energy. It won't protect you

from the tzalmaveths' despair, but the creatures only project it if they know you exist. I'm still perfecting them, but they're almost complete." Geome waited for something, probably compliments, judging by his eagerness. "Or I could feed them my cooking to chase them off."

Andrea glanced through the doorway to the kitchen. Now that Geome mentioned it, something smelled like burned pancakes.

"What's the drawback?" Kreliss asked.

"Why would you assume there's a drawback?" Geome looked miffed at the implied criticism of his work.

"There always is." Kreliss waited.

Geome surrendered, fidgeting on his chair. "They tend to engulf the magic of the wearer. Shields won't stay up and spells emerge with less strength."

"Well, that should only bother mages," Kreliss said, dismissing his concerns.

"Any help we can get," Andrea said. "Will it harm the Forest Gem?"

"Forest Gem?" Geome's eyebrows shot up. "I thought that was a legend." He eyed the circlet as if already plotting to dismantle it. Andrea's fingers twitched, longing to cover the Forest Gem from his eyes. "You must be on a mission from the Sorceress Sidaria."

Kreliss winced. "What if we are?"

"Did Kreliss curse the elves somehow?" He directed his words toward Andrea. "Sidaria's doing the right thing by sending her and her evil magic away."

Kreliss's glare should have frozen him. "You're wrong, mage student. About almost everything. Now finish with my arm and we'll leave."

"We're traveling together," Andrea said.

Geome's eyebrows leapt toward the ceiling, and he tugged on Kreliss's arm, causing her to jerk away from him. "Did Sidaria tell you what Kreliss carries?"

"Stop!" Kreliss ordered. She glared at him from her chair, barely leashing her anger.

"There's evil in her," Geome said simply, his gaze on Kreliss.

"What?" Andrea said, turning to stare at Kreliss as well.

Kreliss crossed her good arm protectively over the injured one. "He's mistaken."

"No, I'm not," Geome insisted. "Only people corrupted by the Shifter feel so *empty*, like a deadness in space. The only other one I've met murdered his sister and poisoned acres of forest with the power he harvested from his crime. I took an oath to fight people like you!"

"The Shifter?" Andrea asked.

"Evil incarnate," Kreliss said impatiently. "Sidaria accepts me as I am, Mage, and I assure you, Andrea can do the same. This doesn't concern you."

"Of course it does," Geome said. "Sidaria's in such desperate peril she can only send you two—"

Andrea bit back a response. Feeling insulted wouldn't help anything.

"—with Andrea from outside Calithwain and Kreliss polluted by evil. How can this quest possibly succeed?"

A black cloud covered Kreliss's face. "Tend to your own affairs, Mage."

"All right. I only need a few minutes to pack and leave a note for Mother."

While Geome's words were mild, determination suddenly sparked in his eyes.

"What?" Kreliss's jaw gaped.

"Your arm's nearly done now," he said, not meeting her glance. "I'll just wrap it in some gauze." Geome dug through a drawer beside him and then emerged with his prize. Kreliss reluctantly surrendered her arm, and Geome wrapped it. "The feeling should return in a day or two. Soaking it in hot water will help."

"Fine. Now what'd you mean about packing?" Kreliss snapped.

"I'm going with you," Geome said, as if explaining himself to a toddler. "If Sidaria needs help from humans, I want to contribute." He directed his next words toward Andrea. "You need far more protection than she offers. You'll find I'm quite an asset."

"But we haven't told you what we're looking for," Andrea said.

"Doesn't matter. You need my help far more than this village does." He finished wrapping Kreliss's arm and neatly tied the bandage off.

Andrea glanced at Kreliss, unsure how to handle this. She doubted the other girl appreciated how lightly Geome took their quest. Yet, Geome was supposed to join them, wasn't he?

Kreliss didn't hesitate. "No."

Geome was a bit immature, but he could protect them from the tzalmaveths.

Andrea shuddered. She didn't want to take care of Kreliss when they faced the creatures again. She dragged her friend into a corner and whispered, "We could use his help—"

"You heard what he said about me!" Kreliss's eyes flashed.

Andrea glanced away.

"Goblin's Heart! You're as bad as these villagers. You believe I'd betray you? Betray Sidaria?"

"No!" Andrea hesitated. After pushing Cindy too far only weeks before opening night, she hardly wanted to repeat the pattern with Kreliss. "We should tell Geome about our quest. He's like a character in my play." Andrea felt her shoulders clench at the sight of Kreliss's closed-off face. "Come on, you're as prejudiced as they are!"

Kreliss tossed her hair. In a normal voice, she said, "Think what you wish. He's not coming."

"Kreliss!"

"Fine," Geome said, acting as if he didn't care. He stood. "Go alone if it's so important."

Kreliss cleared her throat. "Thank you for healing my arm. Do you wish payment?"

"Not at all," Geome crossed his arms.

"We'll be leaving, then. Come, Andrea."

Geome let his arms fall, longing crossing his face. "You won't let me help?"

Kreliss's face closed, hard as iron. "I don't think it's a wise choice. Good day."

"Likewise," he said coldly. "Luck on your path, Andrea." He saw them to the door.

"You too," Andrea mumbled. Andrea stepped out the door and then drew back.

A mob swarmed around the house, muttering. When Kreliss appeared in the doorway, a sour-faced thin woman at the front of the crowd shouted, "Go home, elf. You've no place in this town."

"And why aren't I welcome here?" Kreliss asked, rising to the bait. "Elf caravans from Fisher's Village bring all the trade you see, so far from the borders or the shipping routes. We sell your goods and supply guards for you. Ungrateful, small-minded townsfolk."

Andrea closed her eyes. Why did Kreliss always have to provoke people?

"You'll sell our goods for us, all right. And take half the profits with you," the woman shouted. "You steal the very cloaks off our backs in exchange for selling our wool and fine cheeses."

A heavyset man in rich blue cloth stepped out of the crowd, red beard all bristles. "Your people didn't even arrive this week as they promised. What's going on? We've a right to hear the truth."

Kreliss's face hardened. "The truth? I'll tell you. Someone attacked the woodfolk and all of them are dying. At this moment, they lie in their villages too weak to move. That's why they haven't honored their trade agreements, because they can't."

"This isn't the first time the elves have failed to honor the Pacts. Trade closed down for two weeks last summer," whined a man leaning on a crutch. He had a crooked scar over his mouth. "Prime season, too."

"The dwarves attacked us based on a false rumor," Kreliss said, voice barely audible over the noisy crowd. She raised it. "We were at war."

"Such peaceful people, the elves," the first man said sarcastically, seeing the opportunity to renew his attack. "You people battle the dwarves every generation." He crossed massive arms. "Why've they brought trouble upon us? What did we do to them?"

"The dwarf war is over now, thanks to Sidaria's heartstone—" Kreliss started.

"Best to stay far away from their villages," the whiny man said. "The same thing could happen to us, especially if the elves' enemy believes we're helping those woodfolk."

"No one could possibly think that," Kreliss muttered. Her voice disappeared in the crowd. It advanced on the two girls like a flood tide, muttering with the anger of mob force.

"Kreliss—" Andrea said, but the other girl ignored her.

"Maybe we should go there after all," a woman shouted, shoving back a white bonnet to reveal bright red cheeks and angry eyes. "One of those elves owes me thirty-five silvers for those lace tablecloths I made, pricking my fingers and straining my eyes by firelight to see the work done in time. I should go collect now while there's still someone to collect from. Especially since they won't be up to arguing."

Kreliss's face blackened with fury. Andrea snatched her arm before Kreliss could plunge down into the crowd. Kreliss tugged against her, but Andrea locked her fingers. The people surged closer now in an ugly wave of hate. Chilling fingers moved up and down Andrea's spine.

"Neither of these girls is an elf." The unexpected voice spoke from behind her. Andrea spun to see Geome standing there in the now-overcrowded doorway. He placed his hand on Kreliss's shoulder, ignoring her look that suggested she wished to bite his hand off at the wrist.

With his other hand, he moved Kreliss's hair back to display her human-sized ear. "They're as human as you are. And both are my guests."

"You're a mage, boy," the red-bearded man shouted. "How can you defend them? Elf lovers are as bad as elves. Sidaria tried to disband the Academy, remember that?"

Geome's voice flattened, losing all its musicality. "Some of us don't worry about what happened thousands of years ago. Now go about your business and leave them alone."

The crowd muttered angrily. To Andrea's surprise, Geome stared down each of the villagers, looking deep into their eyes as if reading their souls. The villagers drew back uneasily.

Geome ushered the girls inside and firmly shut the door. "I suggest you wait a few minutes."

Andrea collapsed in the nearby leather chair. "I can't believe you faced that mob. You can't be more than fourteen."

"Well, almost." The tips of Geome's ears turned pink. "I thought you two could use the help. My mother needed rescuing before I was born, but everyone in Alcanster, my home country, feared her because she could cast spells. So I always do what I can."

"You should control all this prejudice in your town," Kreliss said, voice frozen with anger. She stood stiffly beside the painted wall. "My people have done nothing to yours."

"For years, they've bought our goods and left this village poor and isolated. We supply all your wool and flour, all the farm goods the elves can't make. If we were dying of some magical illness, would they help us? If Lady Sidaria had her way, no human would practice magic anywhere in Calithwain."

Kreliss glared.

"All right, it's not an excuse. But many elves feel the same way about us; you know they do. And at least I'm trying to help you." Geome turned appealing eyes at her, like a hurt puppy.

Kreliss turned toward the door. "We hardly require your protection."

Andrea hesitated. "It was good of you to help, even if you aren't comfortable around Kreliss."

He shrugged her thanks away. "My comfort isn't the issue here. The elves need help, and I just feel I'm the one to do it."

Kreliss sniffed. "You're one of those mage-students desperate for adventure and heroism, eyes filled with fairy dust. Tell me, have you ever killed anything magically? Even an animal? Ever faced a monster, knowing it meant to rip you apart?"

"That's not the point," Geome said (meaning no, of course). "I know a tremendous amount of theory—"

"Book knowledge will get you and everyone at your precious school killed," Kreliss said, ending the argument with the finality in her tone.

"Did Sidaria really try to close the Academy?" Andrea asked.

Geome nodded. "She believed it to be a place of evil since her younger sister, Jixil, had built it. Sorceress Jixil rebelled against the Seven and tried to conquer Calithwain. Her siblings imprisoned her under the Perilous Cliffs. But that's ancient history. The elves are dying now."

Kreliss edged toward the door and Andrea followed. "And we'll save them. Goodbye."

Geome opened the door for the girls a second time. The mob had disbanded, leaving a vacant street. "Be careful."

As the door thumped closed behind them, Andrea studied her companion. Kreliss was fingering her bandaged arm, but any traces of despair had left her.

"I don't see why Geome couldn't have joined us." Andrea would have felt better having him along. Surely, Gem was meant to give them more guidance than a bandaged arm.

Kreliss's head snapped up. "It's a bad idea. Sidaria entrusted the mission to us."

"No one said we had to do it alone," Andrea said, suppressing a shiver. What if he were right about Kreliss? "Geome's supposed to come."

"We don't know if we can trust him." Kreliss's tone closed the subject.

"Oh, is that your reason? Because he doesn't trust you?" Aware she was goading Kreliss, Andrea bit her tongue before she said anything harsher.

Kreliss's hands played with the hem of her shirt. "Mage students pride themselves on their abilities to sense different kinds of magic. Often, they read far too much into the projections around them."

"All right," Andrea said, reluctant to push her only ally. She and Kreliss would have to succeed alone. Andrea only prayed Kreliss deserved her trust.

Even the birds chirped quietly on the subdued trip. With the White Crystal's power fading, they were dying as well. With a start, Andrea realized she had forgotten all about Geome's invention that could protect them from the tzaamaveths. Kreliss had changed the topic and driven the thought straight from her mind. Andrea glanced at her companion. Surely, Kreliss wouldn't betray Sidaria and their mission. But what about Geome's warning?

Chapter 5: Forget Your Pride

The girls walked from Evrel's Refuge on a true road, unlike the twisting little paths they had traveled earlier. Its hard-packed dirt didn't allow a single tree or bush to trespass onto its surface. Thick scents of dust caked the air. Dry leaves, broken and mashed by human feet, carpeted the trail in orange and gold. Most of the leaves were too broken to crunch, except for a few newcomers sprinkled on top. This road also gaped far wider than any Andrea had seen in Calithwain, evenly four feet across. On Earth, people might have tried to level the ground. Here, it sloped up and down as it wished, unimpeded by human progress in the area. Deep ruts of carts scarred both sides of the path, freshly imprinted on deeper ones half worn away by rain and wind. Bushes huddled by both sides of the road, interspersed with slender, weak trees. Spindly branches dangled strange fruits in front of Andrea's face and dropped them on the path to smash and rot.

Beside her, Kreliss dropped her hand to her sword. "Someone's coming."

Andrea glanced back, but saw nothing. "Could be friendly."

"And rain could fall upwards," Kreliss snapped. "Hide."

The girls crouched behind a clump of prickly bushes, half smothered by creeping vines. Near Andrea's hand, the vines dripped pungent yellow sap that stung like a spiderbite. Soft odors of bruised plants rose through the air. Dry leaves crackled and crunched under the girls as they shifted. At last, everything quieted. When Andrea strained her ears, she could hear distant footsteps, coming closer.

Andrea remembered...

KELL: "They're coming. Watch out, Gem!"

GEM: "Ahh! I should've eaten my Wheaties!"

GHOSTLING 1: "Surrender. With your champion gone, the quest has already failed."

GEM: "Go, she's the important one. Her pack has the toilet paper!"

Pilar, standing in for Cindy, tried to keep a straight face. *KELL: "Even without Alema, you and I are a team. I won't leave you behind."*

"Andrea?"

"Oh, right." Andrea turned away from Jesse practicing with Pilar and back to the scenery she was supposed to line up. "Tape the left side higher. It isn't straight yet."

Andrea watched Tej and Lorraine adjust the canvas, draping it over a chalkboard on wheels. "Perfect." The flat village where Gem lived sprang into perfectly painted life.

Lorraine jumped off the ladder, grinning when the stage shook under her. She circled the chalkboard to inspect their work. "It looks okay. But we only have one chalkboard. The crew'll have to retape each of these in the dark. Just make sure no one falls on me." She lowered her voice. "And Cindy'd better show up." Even Lorraine's high spirits were drooping after Cindy's latest round of disappearances.

Miss Jarnowski came over to inspect their progress. "Good. We'll tape all the canvases to the chalkboard, one on top of the other. Then we can simply flip the top one over the back, and have our next scene ready. How are all the canvases coming?"

"The native village is done," Andrea said. "So's the witch's castle. The forest and fairyland are being painted. Lots of flowers. And what about the seer?"

"We'll just put the entrance to a hut onstage. Good job. And Andrea, thank you for donating so much extra time."

Andrea's mind raced over the things she was avoiding, mostly dinner with her parents. And there was a math quiz tomorrow, plus homework. Andrea shook her head. After the O'Keefe Award, none of it would matter.

The teacher cleared her throat, as if her brown dress with bright yellow bananas didn't call enough attention to her. "Everyone, stop for a moment; I have some announcements." When they had all crowded into the small backstage greenroom, the teacher continued, "I'm pleased to tell you, we have enough money to keep the play going."

Everyone cheered.

She motioned for silence. "But we're four weeks into the play now and must take rehearsals seriously. Everyone should have lines memorized now. I don't want to see any more cue cards or scripts. If you miss more than one rehearsal for any reason, I will drop you from the play."

"What if we forget a line?" Pilar asked.

"I'll have somebody on script, to prompt you if you need it. Just say 'line.'"

Andrea glanced around the room to see how Cindy was taking the new regulations, especially the one about absences. To her disgust, Cindy wasn't in the room.

“Andrea?” Her father stood at the backdoor. He swallowed, apparently not prepared to see so many staring faces. “You have a test to study for tonight.”

Andrea grimaced. Did he have to come in while they were rehearsing? “I’m busy,” she lied.

“That’s all right, go ahead,” Miss Jarnowski said.

Andrea swallowed and grabbed her coat. Why did her parents always drag her away from the play, the one place she could relax and be herself? It wasn’t fair. She pushed her anger all the way down into her fingers and the tips of her toes. A few more weeks and she wouldn’t have to see her parents fight through dinner or take a math quiz ever again.

“I just need to grab my jacket,” Andrea said. As Andrea walked onstage, she noticed a dark shape behind the curtain, like a twisted shadow. The shadow’s owner hissed a sharp short sound of discontent, then vanished. Andrea stared at the dark spot behind the curtain for a moment, but she knew her father was waiting.

Andrea stepped onstage, and her jaw dropped. Mops, buckets, soap bottles, all the contents of the janitorial closet lay scattered over the stage, slippery with slimy, soapy water dripping down the sides of the stage and into the orchestra pit. Andrea stared at the outline of the village, paint on canvas gleaming dimly against the darkness of the back curtain. Did the back curtain move? No, just a hint of darkness twisting across the wooden floor. The soap bubbled over the ground in front of it like an evil spell. The town image seemed so fragile, the students’ one mark on the stage before the sabotage.

Andrea could only watch the black soapy water race across the stage, soaking the curtains and the bottom of the canvas forest. “Who’s wrecking the play now?”

Andrea shivered behind her bush. Given how many students had been absent that day, the shadow she had spied had probably belonged to the saboteur. Wait, she didn’t remember that happening. The Forest Gem’s artificial memories were clearer and far stronger than the originals. Was that all? Or were the tzalmaveths creeping into Earth because the White Crystal weakened? Did that mean she was destined to fail? Perhaps only her memories were growing darker. Andrea could feel her back tensing at the thought, paralyzing her when she pictured the shadows loose on earth.

Andrea forced a deep breath into her lungs and glanced at Kreliss kneeling beside her. The script had offered her a message, as always. Geome was Gem, the helpful wizard. Apparently, Geome was meant to do more than help them; he was supposed to journey with them as he had done in the play. She shouldn’t have left him behind. How could she persuade Kreliss to turn back?

Light footsteps sounded on the path; someone walked with regular steps, making no effort to conceal himself. Andrea gripped Kreliss’s sleeve, even as she tried to calm her own harsh breathing. Whoever it was, no tzalmaveth could walk like that.

The footsteps grew louder and clearer. The traveler would pass them in seconds. “Just one,” Kreliss murmured, the words barely slipping out between her lips.

Andrea nodded.

A maroon hood caught her eye, surrounded by a long cloak of the same fabric. Andrea could make out worn brown boots and a flash of light-colored hair, but no more. Kreliss shifted to crouch on her feet instead of her knees.

"We'll wait 'till he's gone," Andrea whispered. Surely, Kreliss wouldn't attack the traveler. "This is a public road, isn't it?"

"Keep your voice down," Kreliss hissed, even though Andrea had been whispering. "Nobody walks alone through a haunted area without goods to sell." She waited for the figure to pass and then sprang onto the path behind him, sword slicing the air. "Stop!"

The cloaked person turned, pushing back his hood. "Kreliss! There you are."

Geome! Andrea stood. "Why on earth did you follow us? Don't tell me that mob's coming."

"No, no, of course not." Geome turned toward Kreliss. "You can lower the sword now."

Kreliss's sword didn't budge. "When you go home. We've delayed enough."

Geome set his jaw. "I can't do that; I'm here to join you."

"Kreliss, we need him," Andrea said. The memory had cemented her determination. "He's supposed to come, and we're not leaving him again."

Kreliss finally lowered the sword. "Why do you want to join us so badly?"

"You need me." Geome clenched his jaw, revealing a deep-set stubbornness. "I can protect you from the tzaalmaveths. I'm a defensive mage; I know I'll be useful."

"And?" Kreliss crossed her arms.

Geome sighed. "All right, I just feel—some kind of compulsion. I need to be here, that's all. I guess it's fate. The hand of the White Lady and all that. My friends and family could die, not just your own people. And I'm not leaving you alone with Andrea, that's certain."

Andrea winced. So close.

Kreliss's fingers flexed as if she longed to rip Geome's head off. "Don't you think Sidaria trusts me? Trusts the two of us to finish the job?"

"Andrea may be Sidaria's champion, but she still needs protection." Geome shoved blond bangs out of his eyes. They flopped right back.

"What do you think I'm doing?" Kreliss said, face blazing with indignation.

A vein pulsed in Geome's forehead. "If you weren't so determined to get killed—"

"Will you both stop it, already!" Andrea shouted.

Two heads swiveled toward Andrea, wearing twin expressions of surprise. Andrea glowered at both of them, feeling a headache starting. "I won't have you fighting over me. Bad enough when my parents do it. Now, Geome, isn't there a chance you could be wrong about Kreliss?"

"It's possible," he admitted. "But I'm still going with you. I insist." He stood very straight, gray eyes penetrating hers through his thick glasses. His eyebrows were very thin over them, like scholarly wrinkles.

"Well, you've mentioned your suspicions, don't mention them again. Agreed?"

He gave her a stiff nod.

Andrea turned to Kreliss. "Kreliss, you shouldn't mind having Geome come if he isn't always accusing you. Unless you have another reason?"

Silence.

"Then he can join us." Andrea swallowed. Quarreling had nearly destroyed her play. Perhaps this time, she could stop the suspicion before it consumed everything.

"Down!" Kreliss said, grabbing the edge of Andrea's cloak and hauling both girls onto the path. Geome dove a moment later. A green bat flew through the trees.

"It's just a bat," Andrea mumbled, pressed into the dirt.

"Not in daylight," Geome said. He climbed to his knees and gripped the amber pendant dangling from his neck.

Kreliss threw a dagger at the creature, but missed. The bat swerved in midair, hissing.

Geome murmured, and golden light flashed through the clearing. The bat flapped in a wide circle, spiraling higher, then soared away.

Andrea stared at Geome while Kreliss retrieved her dagger. "What'd you do?"

"Alerted a witch's spy we're here," Kreliss said. "This might have been coincidence, but now they'll track us forever."

Geome shook his head, grinning broadly. "I actually did it! I severed the bond between a witch and her familiar. Don't you know how amazing that is?" He caught their blank looks. "No, you obviously don't. but the familiar won't report back; it's free now." He grinned. "I wasn't sure it would work."

Kreliss shook her head, but his success had taken some of the fire out of her.

"Will the witches bother us?" Andrea asked.

Kreliss shrugged. "They're human and more brutal than most. If they discover our quest, they might trap us in the swamps."

Geome blinked. "Witches and shadows both after you? The sylvans couldn't have been thinking clearly."

"No sylvan would ever wear a cloak that bright outside a lunar festival." Kreliss spat.

While Kreliss's rage hadn't bothered him, Geome at last looked flustered. "Well, I—"

"Have you no judgment at all?"

"It's reversible," Geome said, a touch of hurt in his voice. His hands moved automatically to the clasp. "It's light brown inside. The purple's scratchy wool."

"I think you should switch it," Kreliss said.

Without comment, Geome did so.

Andrea cleared her throat. "Ready? Any more complaints?"

Geome and Kreliss exchanged wary glances but stayed mercifully silent.

"Good. We have a quest to finish."

Geome walked along beside Andrea, breaking twigs off trees while he walked. He crumpled them in his fist and then tossed the pieces onto the path.

Kreliss suddenly spun, hand flexing as it hovered over her sword hilt. "Could you stop throwing those twigs!"

Geome didn't even blink. "It's no more annoying than your constant humming."

"I hum?" Kreliss asked Andrea.

"Well, yeah. But I like it."

"Humph. Just stop throwing things." Kreliss turned away.

Andrea let them walk for a few minutes before she spoke. Geome had stopped playing with twigs, but Kreliss continued to hum under her breath. "Could you teach me to cast spells?"

Kreliss snorted.

Geome shook his head. "Few people have the gift." He held up his amber pendent. "The crystal only focuses what's there, changing power into movement."

"Like Sidaria's White Crystal?" Andrea asked. The pendant glittered hypnotically in the light. Andrea reached for it hesitantly. Geome tossed it toward her, and she jumped. "Oh!" The chain caught it, and the crystal bumped back into his chest.

Geome grinned teasingly. "Gotcha. Lady Sidaria's woodfolk share a giant crystal. After Sorceress Jixil perverted the Academy's magic, her brother, Hotan, decreed humans would each use their own crystals, or wands with crystals inside." Geome glanced at Kreliss, who was staring at his pendant with a surprising hunger in her eyes. "Can you cast elf magic?"

"If I could, I'd be linked to the White Crystal and dying with everyone else,"

Kreliss snapped.

"I guess I should tell you why we're on this quest, Geome." Andrea glanced at Kreliss, but Kreliss didn't protest. "Like you guessed, the sylvans are in danger. In fact, all of the woodfolk are dying."

Geome turned quizzical gray eyes toward her. "Yes, Kreliss said. Couldn't Sidaria intervene directly?"

"The White Crystal is fading," Kreliss said softly.

Geome stared at her, mouth gaping. "I'm sorry. How serious is it? No, that's a silly question, isn't it? The compact ensures everyone will die."

"Compact?" Now came Andrea's turn to question.

"Sidaria's compact binds all the woodfolk to intermingle their power," Kreliss said tightly. "In exchange, she focuses magic for everyone through the White Crystal. Through the sharing, everyone's power grows."

"Except now it's backfired," Geome said. A smile lit his face. "Perfect."

"What?"

"*What?*"

Geome seemed to realize what he had said. "Oh, sorry. But now I can prove to the Academy Master I do use my magic to help others. I tried healing the villagers, but they prefer my mother. Apparently she doesn't babble about inventions the way I do."

"I don't understand," Andrea said. Kreliss was glaring hard enough to bore a hole through Geome.

Geome glanced away. "Well, the Academy Master thinks I'm spending too much time with my inventions. Only theory and all that. When I take the oath in two years, I'm supposed to pledge my magic to help those in need."

"So you want to try to save the lives of an entire community because it's homework?" Andrea must have used more sarcasm than she thought, because Geome squirmed beside her.

His eyes finally met hers. "It's not just that. It's the right thing to do. That's what the Academy is about, or used to be anyway. And guarding against, well..." He glanced at Kreliss and trailed off. His Adam's apple bobbed. Geome and Kreliss seemed to be getting along uneasily, neither mentioning Geome's suspicions. But the unspoken words lingered nonetheless.

Chapter 6: For I Protect Each Step You Take

After a quiet night's sleep, shrouded by long-branched trees, Andrea awoke early. Kreliss still slept beside her, a frown tugging at the corner of her mouth. Geome had disappeared.

Andrea stood up and peered through the forest, squinting through the early sunlight to find his telltale tall figure. At last, she caught a flicker of purple among the trees. She hurried over. Geome was pacing back and forth, twisting his hands behind his back. "I thought you weren't going to wear that cloak anymore," Andrea said.

He ignored her comment. "Is Kreliss still asleep?" Geome kept his voice low.

Andrea nodded.

"Follow me." His eyes darted from side to side, glowing nearly white in the early dawn.

"Everything all right?"

"Of course. Just come." He led her deeper into the forest, away from Kreliss and their small campsite. Geome ducked under a branch and stopped. "Here."

Andrea followed him closer. "A mushroom ring?" It circled only a foot in diameter, white caps glistening, dew studded.

"You don't have them on your world, do you?"

Something about his condescending smile bothered Andrea, sending a tickle down her spine. "Sure. That's how mushrooms grow."

Geome shook his head. Sunlight shimmered across his eyes as if he wore mirrored sunglasses. "Only the enchanted ones, here." He nodded toward the circle. "You gain a lifetime of luck from stepping inside."

"Incredible." Andrea stared at the mushroom ring and found she couldn't look away. In the center glinted a long-stemmed white blossom, a dewdrop sparkling in its center. A spicy scent like wine she was too young to drink drifted upwards, enticing her. Andrea reached out to stroke the indescribable smoothness of the petals. Brightness exploded into her eyes like a camera flash. Then the world fell away, swirling down a drain until Andrea stood in limbo.

Andrea blinked frantically, forcing the world to focus. She stood on something soft and black, a cross between rich potting soil and gym mats. Shaped like a tall hill, it smelled of fresh fungus. Far below, enormous flowers, open like tiny suns, crowded the ground. Some blossoms gaped as wide as her extended arms, while others were large enough for her to sit in. The littlest ones mimicked clover flowers or daisies. The larger ones resembled roses and orchids. Even the swordlike blades of grass looked tall enough to reach her waist. Andrea's eyes widened. Where had she traveled now?

A snide snicker interrupted her thoughts. "Look at this one," a chilling female voice said. "Seems the little sprite's lost her wings." Andrea spun, but no one stood behind her. The laugh tinkled again. Then Andrea looked up.

Two stately creatures circled Andrea, icy beauty shining from every pore. Ebony locks flowed over the woman's back, bordering her gorgeously embroidered blue gown.

The young man's mussed red hair burst in all directions, while his velvet shirt showed small snags and tears. He floated closer, paper-thin wings like a bluebottle fly's glinting in the sun. Andrea gazed back at him. His masklike smirk made him look completely untrustworthy. "A human? Here?" From behind the smirk, a startled vulnerability reached toward Andrea from forest-colored eyes. She met his gaze. Less than fifteen, he was good-looking, even better than Eric. He jerked back with a single beat of his wings, still watching her.

Under his eyes, Andrea's cheeks felt warm. Why did he have to look at her like that? "I'm sorry. Um, I didn't mean to bother you. I can leave."

The woman turned to her companion, ignoring Andrea. "Too old for a changeling. Too young for a bride. And few of us like mortals impudent enough to wander here without our blessing."

The young man shook out of his stare. "Don't you mean the queen's blessing, Issora?" His voice dripped with sugared malice, eyes veiling themselves. She glared, and he shrugged his own question off. Andrea felt she was in the middle of an argument ongoing for decades.

Issora soared upward a pace so she towered over him. "She must be made a spectacle, Robin."

Robin raised his eyebrows, sardonic mask still in place. Any vulnerability he had shown Andrea was buried deeply. "Better ask the queen first."

Issora watched him under her eyelids. "You're hardly her majesty's errand boy."

"Hardly," Robin agreed pleasantly. "If I were, I might spread tales about the three changeling boys you've taken this year. More than your share, wouldn't you think?"

"Go then. And take the girl with you. I'm not about to watch her." Issora stared at him, loathing thinning her lips. Both fairies' skin glinted pale green and strangely translucent, arctic ice in the sunlight.

"As my lady commands," Robin said, giving her a mockingly low bow. His long hair flopped in his face. "I'll leave her in the garden."

Without another word, he tucked Andrea under his arm and leaped up into the air. Andrea clung to Robin's elbow, digging her fingers into his tattered sleeve. He held her too tightly, grinding her rigid body against his side. Still, his touch caused a faint tingle to race through her. His wings now beat too quickly for Andrea to see. A faint hum rose from them, gentle as a tuning fork. Cool breezes flew by, rushing in Andrea's ears and satiating her nose with their fresh smell.

Andrea looked down and gulped, clutching the arm encircling her, while one hand groped for his bony shoulder. Far below, parks and clusters of houses swept by. If her jailer were to drop her, she wouldn't survive the fall. It was still an astounding view. Andrea cautiously glanced down, still holding tight. The sharp crimsons of the flowers and blues of the rivers gleamed so bright and full of life. Once she even spied a fairy tale palace, tinkling with tiny bells as it floated among the clouds.

Then she swallowed hard when she felt her captor sinking toward the ground. This was why she hated roller coasters! It wasn't rises; Andrea panicked over the sudden drops. She frantically wished not to be sick.

Andrea's feet jolted onto bushy grass. Stomach shaking, Andrea gulped in cool steady air. Hedges surrounded her and Robin, far taller than her head. They stood in a square clearing with a little bubbling fountain and two white stone benches. Openings in the hedges extended in all four directions.

Robin stood very close in front of her, hands on hips. A ring glinted on his hand, sizzling with a deep sharp red. It was an opal, but not like any Andrea had seen. It had no white, only red and more red, with glints of green and blue when his fingers moved. A winter-cold smile slashed his face. "You shall linger here until the Queen orders your fate." All of his mocking gallantry had vanished, replaced by chilling arrogance. "The food is safe enough for mortals, in case she chooses to release you. Farewell."

"Can I see her?" That had saved Alenna in the play. Besides, it was Andrea's only chance to bargain for freedom.

"She takes no interest in seeing the face of an outsider. The fairy queen disdains those who trespass here." His voice sounded so distant, as if his own words didn't matter to him. Yet, he avoided her eyes.

"I came by accident!" How had she ever imagined this beastly man handsome?

"That hardly excuses you." He glanced at her, revulsion crossing his face, as if she were a cat playing with a dead bird. "Your profane feet touch our immortal soil."

His callous voice brushed Andrea's temper. "Are all fairies this rude?"

"The fairykind hardly need answer to humans." Still distant. Was that a twitch of annoyance in his voice?

"Only to your queen." A flash of inspiration hit her. "Does she know you act like two different people?"

He scrutinized Andrea, eyes raking over her as they might a speck of mud on an expensive carpet. "What does a child who plays with dolls know of it?"

"I do not!" Andrea lied, horrified.

Robin only smirked.

Andrea felt her hands tensing. Her cheeks smarted. More than anything she longed to slap him.

"You didn't answer."

"What?" Why was she so off-balance? Andrea hated the snooty way Robin was looking at her.

"You seem an unlikely *child* to fight Sidaria's battles for her." He emphasized the word, eyes twinkling when she scowled. "Yet you carry the Forest Gem. Where are you from?"

"Another world." A thought struck her and Andrea spoke before she could reconsider. "We have strange powers there, beyond anything you can fight. You should let me go while you still can."

With a smooth finger, he raised her chin up to meet his eyes. His touch felt like sunlight cooled through leaves when his thumb settled on her cheek. "Brave words. Yet,

something about your homeworld troubles you, doesn't it? That's why you've come here, to be free of it."

Andrea drew in a shaky breath. "What?"

His voice dropped to a soothing insidiousness. "Don't you know? Fairyland has perfect harmony. The longer people stay here, the more of their troubles simply vanish, along with heartache, despair, fury, sadness..."

"And love?" her voice almost whispered. Andrea didn't know why she said it, but as soon as the words escaped her lips, she suspected they were true.

"Leaving only emptiness." He gave her a slow lazy smile. "And yet, many of your kind hide here forever, rather than returning to your world of troubles and sorrow."

He couldn't know how idyllic that sounded, compared with the idea of returning to her fighting parents. A place of perfect tranquility. She could stay here, reading books as late as she wished, free from the screams that made her clench up just remembering them. Protection from all the stress and heartache of home. Peace.

His voice cast a honeyed spell. "Give me the Forest Gem, and release all your troubles. If sylvans lack the wisdom to wield it, an Earth girl has no place trying." He held his hand out for the Forest Gem, expectantly. His eyes met hers, dark green as the pool where Kreliss had guided her. They widened, drawing her closer. Andrea felt the world slow around her. The balmy garden pressed against her skin, sweltering in its tropical warmth, and she shrugged her cloak back. Andrea's fingers twitched. She could surrender it to him. She could melt away into this world of perfection, and never be scared again. It would be a kind of death, embracing emptiness, leaving responsibility

behind. Her fingers crept up to her forehead, stroking the gem, feeling its hot pulse under her fingers. She only needed to let it go, release the last tie binding her to the heart-tearing search for her mother. Just needed to let go...

"No!" Andrea clasped the Forest Gem, pressing it into her forehead. "Sidaria trusts me, and I'll finish her quest."

Robin's eyes flashed. All temptation faded like grains of sand in a hurricane. Andrea swayed on her feet and then straightened, fighting for control over her shaky body.

"Keep your trinket, prisoner," Robin snarled. "Linger in this garden for a hundred years, before my queen remembers you and orders your death." He launched himself into the air and vanished from sight.

Andrea wandered among the hedges for hours, not spying a hint of a door. Kreliss's absence echoed within her, as she found herself alone in Calithwain for the first time. The sun sank behind the hedges, painting them red-gold and then black. Graceful fountains spouted clear water that Andrea sampled, scooping with her hands when she felt thirsty.

Once, she passed a marble bench with a golden tray of food on it. The tray's single plate offered a mound of chopped fruit, scents of summer drifting upwards. Andrea eyed it. Too many stories cautioned against eating in Fairyland. But Robin had promised the food was safe. The heady smell overcame her hesitations, and she tried a few pieces. The incredible sweetness of overripe plums soothed her tongue, better than

any dessert Andrea could have imagined. The mixed fruit tasted of strawberries, peaches, pomegranates, and yet, none of them. At last, Andrea reluctantly swallowed the last bite.

Before the food, this place had seemed like a temporary prison. Now Andrea suddenly realized she might linger here for the rest of her life. With sufficient food and water, the fairies had no time limit on how long they could trap her here. Robin had said she might wait for a hundred years. Had he meant it? Would she hobble around, gray-haired, still unable to leave the maze? Or would they keep her a child for a hundred years? Growing up suddenly didn't seem so bad.

Andrea had a pressing deadline of her own. The White Crystal was quickly fading. Soon all the sylvans would die unless Kreliss and Geome could save them without her help. The fairies might listen to her if she told them. Why hadn't she thought to appeal to any compassion they might have for the sylvans, instead of threatening Robin with acts she couldn't perform? Andrea had no idea how long she would wait before someone came for her. She had no time.

"I have to leave," she shouted, even while knowing no one could hear her.

"Please, it's very important. Can't anyone help me?"

"The first time someone's asked." Andrea jumped three feet into the air. The squeaky voice was more like Andrea's idea of a talking mouse than a human. Andrea found herself envisioning a genuine flying monkey. "And so nicely, too. What can I do for you, young mortal?"

Andrea swallowed. A monkey shouldn't frighten her. "Well, first can I see who I'm talking to?"

"Of course, of course." A little man walked out, so small he just rose past Andrea's knee. He had a short, gray beard and a round potbelly where he rested his folded hands. Dressed in shades of green, he had a bright red pointed hat that resembled a small traffic cone. Andrea tried to see his face, but the shadow from his hat and the enormous protruding nose hid him. A tangle of yarn and needles tangled in his belt, as if he'd been knitting. "At your service."

Andrea had only one thought. "Please, take me back to Calithwain."

He shook his head, almost teasingly. "Oh no, I'm an acorn among the oaks of Fairie. But I can lead you out of the garden."

Andrea felt her heart beat at double speed. "You can? Oh, that's wonderful. I'll find my own way back to my friends somehow."

"There's a price." Friendly as the little man seemed, his voice grew solemn.

"Oh." Andrea had read this many times in her fairy tales. What would he ask? A golden necklace? Her first child? She had no jewelry or treasure of any sort, and knew better than to promise for the future. Andrea's hand stole up to her forehead. She had one piece of jewelry. Wasn't her escape more important? "What do you want?"

"A story."

Andrea blinked. It couldn't be that simple. "Did you say a story?"

He sat on the ground. "Whenever you're ready. I'm in no rush." Despite his words, he licked his lips with barely-concealed eagerness.

"So I tell you a story and then you help me escape? That's it?"

"Why not?"

“All right.” Andrea sat down opposite him and cast about for a suitable story. Only one echoed in her mind. It was an obvious choice, really, considering she still remembered every word. *“In a world so long forgotten its name has vanished from the hearts of children of earth lies Calithwain.”*

Sometime in the middle, Andrea stopped reciting lines and simply told the story: the valiant champion and wicked witch battling over the dying sorceress. When she recited the last words, she felt a sense of peace creep over her. Her quest would follow the same script, to end happily ever after. It had to.

The tiny man held his hands out toward her, and drew them close against his chest, as if they contained a precious gift. “A true story, shining through the deceptions of Fairyland. It’s quite wonderful.”

“But it’s not a true story. Not exactly.” Andrea had the feeling it wouldn’t be wise to lie to the fairykind.

“A tale where good defies evil is the truest of all. As true as the one you’re living now. You may not have met Alenna’s challenges, but you are she, the champion come to save everyone. You have the power, even if you haven’t found it yet. I’ll help you as far as I can.” Without a backward glance at her, he shuffled toward an archway.

Andrea hurried to catch up. “You haven’t told me your name.”

He hurried along, not glancing at her. “And don’t plan to. We bargained for a single favor, didn’t we?”

“Okay. Strange Robin would trap me here, and yet leave me a way out. He’s so rude, and everything.”

“He didn’t let you out. I did. Besides, he’s a fairy, one of the high bloods. They’d never think a lowly gnome would interfere with their plans.” The gnome’s voice dripped with bitterness.

“Then why are you?”

He shrugged. “This is one I owe that stuck up Robin. He cursed my ears to droop until all six moons turn blue, and that doesn’t happen often, does it?”

Andrea swallowed. Three moons, and now six. Would she ever return to Earth? The startling thought bubbled up in her mind that she actually wanted to. O’Keefe Award aside, she had left matters too precarious with her parents. She didn’t want to be dead inside like a fairy.

They traveled in a complicated pattern Andrea could never reproduce, twisting through the bushes. Once or twice, the gnome crawled through a break in the hedges almost too small for Andrea, and she had to squeeze through as best as she could, minding the snags that yanked her hair and pierced her clothing.

After the worst of those passages, Andrea stood and stretched. She stood in a forest of stately oak and elm trees. Leafy branches spread in a canopy, distilling the last drops of sunlight into cool richness. “We’re out!” Andrea took a deep breath of clean, open air. The birds’ soft twitters made her feel a bit less alone.

The gnome cringed. “Shh. Out of the maze, but not Fairyland. Humans are all so foolish, like baby birds still covered in eggshell, aren’t they?”

Andrea swallowed. "Where do we go now?"

The gnome's eyes darted from side to side. "The fairies have a portal to the south of here."

"A portal?" Andrea struggled to catch up as the gnome began walking. He might have tiny legs, but they carried him very quickly.

"You might say a gateway. Once they existed all over Calithwain. The fairies have owned one for two thousand years, since before Jixil defected from the Seven. It'll carry you back to Calithwain."

A chilling breeze pressed through the air. Andrea shivered. An ancient strangeness permeated the forest, watching her with hundreds of staring eyes. She glanced back at her new friend, and found he had outpaced her. Andrea hurried to catch up.

The forest thinned around the pair until its curtain of trees opened, revealing what lay beyond. Andrea lifted her face to the moonlight that brushed over it, cool and soothing. Under four moons' light spread a magnificent garden, filled with flowers and elegantly groomed trees.

Grass cushioned Andrea's feet, while enticing aromas swam through the garden: the sharp spiciness of orange blended with the mellow tartness of plums and the sweetness of strawberries peeping from their faultless beds. Andrea's mouth watered. The fruit trees were the most magnificent she had seen, overflowing with abundance on every branch. Oranges, peaches, cherries, grapes all bore fruit at the same time. None of the fruits was green or had even the smallest bad spot.

She stepped forward, reaching toward a luscious peach that glowed red and yellow even in the dimness. The fruit tugged at her tired feet like a spell, reminding her of her exhaustion and thirst. Her grasping fingertips brushed its velvet surface, curving up to cup it in her hand.

“No!”

Andrea yanked her hand back as if the fruit had bitten her. “What? What’d I do?”

The gnome hurried up to her, shaking his head in dismay.

“Don’t you know you mustn’t eat the food of the Queen’s garden? If you so much as taste it, you’ll be cursed to stay here forever.”

“Oh.” Andrea brushed her hand off on her leg. “Thanks for stopping me.”

He managed a bobbing bow. “All part of my service. Once a gnome makes an offer, he means it, ‘till the trees of Fairie lie bare. This way.”

Andrea looked behind her, trying to fix the garden’s beauty in her memory forever. Yet she found that when she looked again, the garden was too faultless. The apples were like wax fruit, frozen in their forms forever. Not a single smashed apricot or even a leaf lay on the path below the trees. This was not a garden; it was a sculpture in honor of perfect food. Andrea turned away, any desire to eat the fruit vanished.

“Fairyland is really too beautiful.” Andrea remembered Robin’s description of perfect tranquility, with no sorrow. “Even if the inhabitants are so rude. I can’t believe how Robin acted.”

"You keep mentioning that, don't you?" The gnome sniffed. "If I had a choice, I wouldn't share boughs and earth with these folk. That Robin's just an example of the fairies and their haughty upper-class ways. A fairy'd rather die than help a gnome with anything." The gnome suddenly stopped in front of Andrea.

"What—?"

"It's the fairy queen," he squeaked. Andrea felt the Forest Gem flare.

Andrea remembered...

"We're in trouble," Jesse greeted Andrea. She was waiting with the other students outside Miss Jarnowski's classroom door, since the choir had filled the stage with music stands. The janitor hadn't been happy about mopping up all the soapy water.

Andrea looked up from the literature textbook. Reading a few stories was the easiest of her homework. The biology text sagged in her backpack, weighing down her shoulders with unpleasant reminders. Andrea shut the literature book, and drummed her fingers on the curlicue doodles of the cover. "Something else?" Andrea could tell from Jesse's face this wasn't good news. "The guy who wrecked the stage with everything in the janitor's closet struck again?"

Jesse grimaced. "Worse. A group of parents is trying to close the play."

"What!" This was the last worry Andrea had ever considered.

Jesse held up his hand like a chattering mouth and mimed it talking. "It's not appropriate for junior high students to perform fairy tales." Wearing an open monk's robe over normal clothes, he looked particularly peculiar.

Andrea groaned. "What should we have chosen, the end of the Civil War? How serious is it?"

Jesse scuffed the cement with one of his mismatched tennis shoes. "Miss Jarnowski started meeting with the parents, to have them protest our lack of cash. But some of them think fairy tales are dumb. My mom saw Jessica's and Tej's parents at the office, meeting with the principal. The office won't close the play, but the principal might decide to change it."

"A week before final dress rehearsals? We couldn't learn another play that fast. How could they do this to us?" Andrea closed her eyes briefly, hugging the textbook against her chest. There had to be an answer.

Jesse raised his eyebrows. "Complaining to the wrong people, aren't you?"

Andrea bit her lip. He was even more right than he knew. Her parents had been shouting again last night, a fight over dinner. Andrea had left the table early and still felt on edge.

"We should have our parents complain on our side," Cindy said.

Andrea jumped. This was the first time Cindy had shown up in three days. She turned to see Cindy walk up, wearing a tight green top and slinky jeans. "Would that work?"

Support was nice, but Cindy obviously wanted to keep her part. If Miss Jarnowski recast a different play, Cindy might find herself with no role at all, especially given her attendance record.

"It couldn't make things worse," Jesse said. "We've got to try."

"Well, we might as well practice lines while we wait for the teacher," Andrea said. She dropped her backpack onto the pavement, flexing her shoulders as the weight of the biology book vanished. Pilar and Justin hurried up upon seeing Cindy, and the students started to run lines.

FAIRY QUEEN: "How dare you intrude upon my private gardens?"

GUARD: "Madam, we once called the humans our friends."

KELL: "Before the fairykind became self-centered introverts, caring only for pleasure."

FAIRY QUEEN: "I hear of a champion from a land of make-believe, where people speak across vast distances and fly without magic. Where is she?"

ALENN: (whispering) "Kell, quick, hide me behind you. The fairy queen mustn't see me."

GEM: "I'll distract her. Jesse rolled up his sleeves and gripped imaginary lapels.

GEM: For a fairy kingdom, you all have a very dingy castle. I happen to have invented a fabulous machine that will blow all the dirt out of existence with a single puff. See? Real magic."

"Where are we getting a vacuum cleaner?" Andrea asked. "Or were you going to mime one?"

"Could we just read the script?" Cindy asked. Andrea noticed she still didn't have cue cards. At least Cindy was only peeking at her script occasionally. "Or whatever Jesse's done to his lines. Pilar? Go."

"And remember to project," Andrea added.

"Oh, um, right." Pilar took a deep breath, staring at the wall as if her lines might magically appear on it. "What was the cue?"

"Real magic," Jesse said, voice sounding strained.

FAIRY QUEEN: "Your tricks won't help you, wizard. The fairy queen is far more powerful than any conjurer of cheap illusions. Fire!"

"Flame," Jesse corrected.

"Oh, right," Pilar giggled nervously.

Cindy sighed.

Andrea darted around a bush and hid beneath it.

"What's the panic?" the gnome whispered, dropping down beside her.

"Keep still!" Andrea peeked through the bush. A group of fairies strode up the path, only the shuffling rustle of their feet announcing their presence. At their front walked a tall woman with auburn hair. Flashing emerald eyes dominated the pale green skin of her face. Long sleeves trailed from her white gown, while a train draped behind her, nearly transparent in its thinness. The gown's fabric sparkled like diamonds in the starlight. Staring straight ahead, the woman lifted her chin, not letting her gaze fall to either side.

"Why's she here?" The gnome muttered, rocking back and forth in his distress.

"The Queen would hardly bother with a mortal trespasser, would she?"

Andrea risked another peek at the haughty lady. She was definitely walking with single-minded determination. The Queen paused and beckoned to a fawning courtier.

"Still no trace?"

"None, Majesty. But she's only a human."

The woman stiffened. She looked like a queen, strong and powerful. "If this girl matters to Sidaria, she's valuable. Who left her in the garden?"

"Robin, Madam."

"Well then. He's trustworthy enough. Though he visits the outside world more than he should. Send him and his brother out again..." The queen's voice trailed off.

"Madam?"

"I feel someone strange is in Fairie. The girl's escape is vibrating through the land like a bell."

Andrea peeked through the bushes, and a heavy fist clenched around her lungs. The Queen was staring at her bush. Panicking, Andrea clenched her hand over the Forest Gem. *Hide me. Please hide me. Don't let her notice.* She repeated the chant over and over in her head, faster and more desperately each time.

The Queen shook her head absently, and drifted farther from hearing range. Andrea sagged into the grass, exhausted. Without Kreliss or Geome to protect her, she had finally managed to use the Forest Gem's power. Within her relief echoed a heady exhilaration. Magic.

"Oh no," the gnome whispered. He snatched his knees, huddling into a tiny ball with his ears protruding on either side. "She's discovered you're missing, hasn't she?"

Shaking off her excitement, Andrea gripped his thin arm. "Please, take me to the portal. We mustn't wait any longer."

"It's not that simple." The gnome cowered in his huddle. "I'd hoped to sneak by while she wasn't watching, but now she knows."

"Who'll be watching? The Queen?"

"Worse, the crone."

Chapter 7: Through Castles Lofting Over Crimson Gardens

Andrea closed her eyes for a moment. The gnome's terrified tone sent sharper chills through her spine than a description ever could have. "Who is she? Why is she so horrible?"

The gnome trembled in his crouch. "She hates humans even more than the Queen does. Gnomes say she took a human husband, and he stole her secrets then ran away. The fairies deny it, but they don't offer a different explanation, do they?"

"How do we sneak past her?" Andrea demanded.

"We can't. She sees every leaf that falls, every blade of grass bent in the wind."

There had to be a way. "What does she want? Or fear?"

The gnome shook his head, but at last he uncoiled slightly. "The portal's hers. If only I hadn't rushed to free you. We should have waited until the queen lost interest. Our lives aren't worth an acorn cup!"

Andrea climbed to her feet. "Let's go find her portal, before things get any worse."

His ears bolted upright in terror. "Are you mad?"

"If we're doomed anyway, we might as well try to escape."

The gnome pulled away from her outstretched hand. "No, there's no chance. I'm not going."

"Then I'll have to do this alone. Thanks for all your help." Andrea smiled at the gnome and walked up the path, leaving him behind. She swung her arms all the way up and all the way back, stretching them. Andrea kept her pace determinedly casual.

"You heard me, didn't you?" he called.

Andrea stopped. "All of the woodfolk of Calithwain are dying. Don't you care?"

The gnome shifted; his gray bangs fell in his face. "My folk aren't part of Sidaria's compact."

She spun to face him, exasperated. "You're still people. And so are they. Doesn't everyone in the world have some responsibility to help each other?"

"Oh yes?" Miniature fists landed decisively on the gnome's hips. "The fairies care nothing for my people, nor for yours, nor for anyone. Why should I risk my hope of the Summerland when fairies wouldn't bother?"

Andrea studied the little creature. Why was she risking her life? The fairies might be able to send her home as well as Sidaria could. But the sylvals were defenseless and Sidaria had asked for her help. She had to return to Calithwain and save them. "Because it's the right thing to do."

"Not for me." The gnome vanished into the brush as suddenly as he had appeared.

Andrea's head dropped into her hands. Her only guide had vanished. How could she ever succeed? Through her panic, Andrea felt the Forest Gem pulse reassuringly against her forehead.

Andrea remembered.

"I thought we'd try some different warm-ups today," Miss Jarnowski said. She wore a green sweater with little red Christmassy elves, though it was just October.

Andrea straightened. She was tired of tongue twisters.

"For our first activity, I want you all to raise your right arms." Everybody did. "Now, I want you to bend down so your head touches your knees. Let your arm drop with you to dangle near the ground." She gave them an example, and everyone followed her lead. "After that, we straighten, but bring the left arm up instead of the right one. At the end, we should be standing straight up with our left arms raised."

"But, Miss Jarnowski," Jessica said. "I don't see how doing these warm-ups will help us be better performers. Why're we doing them?" As always, she looked picture-perfect, except for the disagreeable look on her face.

"I'm very glad you asked that," their teacher said. "This exercise is completely meaningless as we're doing it. We have to make the noise." She pressed her lips together, and vibrated them, making a noise like a buzz saw. She hummed through her vocal chords as well, blending a hum into the buzz. Her hum dipped down with her body and then screeched toward the ceiling. Everyone stared. Miss Jarnowski ceased her buzzing and humming for a moment.

"Come on everyone, we are going to do fifteen of these before we do anything else." Everyone slowly joined in, with Miss Jarnowski counting them out loud. On the third one, she stopped. "No, no! You all *must* make the noise that goes with it. I won't do all of the work!" The class joined her. From the glances her classmates exchanged, Andrea could guess they felt as ridiculous as she did.

"Now, for our final warm-up," said Miss Jarnowski. She clasped her hands in front of her with a clap that made all the students jump. "Hold on tight. I want everyone

to shake all over.” The students around Andrea grinned. They all started wiggling, shaking their clasped hands along with the rest of their bodies. Andrea could only think that this was the weirdest teacher she’d ever had.

Before she could walk away, Cindy came up behind her, munching on sugar-free soy cookies. “What’s up?”

“That way,” Jesse said automatically, pointing toward the ceiling. His green jacket, ponytail, and goat horns had returned, with the addition of hiking boots. “You missed all our wonderful exercises.”

Cindy shrugged, crumpling the empty package in her fist. “I know how to act. Let’s just run lines.”

“Miss Jarnowski said if students are absent, they’ll lose their parts in the play,” Andrea said, keeping her voice even. Behind Cindy, Andrea could see Jessica tossing her hair and pretending to nibble a cookie in imitation of Cindy. Eric was ignoring her.

Cindy gave both of them a superior look. “She isn’t going to kick me out; I’m a main character.”

“Cindy, you need to take this seriously,” Andrea protested, trying to stifle the whine in her voice. If she was wrecking her report card for a chance at the O’Keefe Award, Cindy could at least rehearse.

Cindy just tossed her hair and gave Andrea a *look*.

“You’re replaceable,” Jesse said. “I can put on a wig and play Kell just fine.”

“And play Gem at the same time?” Andrea couldn’t help asking.

“Sure.” He stood on one side of Andrea.

"Alenna, I think we can bribe these fairy guards."

Then he quickly switched sides.

"Don't be ridiculous, wizard. What could fairies want from us?"

He hopped to the other side of Andrea for Gem's next line, barely missing Cindy's feet. *"How 'bout a two-for-one yogurt coupon?"*

He turned to Cindy. "Where's my standing ovation?"

Cindy sighed loudly. "Are you two ready to work? Let's start on page one."

Slow applause echoed through Fairyland. Andrea spun, searching for the source, but no one appeared in any direction.

"Lovely speech. You know, you'll never escape." A male voice drifted from behind her. Andrea turned, only to find the path deserted. "The entire kingdom is searching for you." This time the voice came from her left. She turned again, again saw nothing.

"Are you trying to help me?" Her voice came out high and childlike in the still meadow.

"Why should I?" His voice took on a playful attitude. "Will you bribe me with gold, jewels, your firstborn child?"

Well, if he wanted to play... "If you show yourself, maybe I could think of something you'd want."

"As you wish." Robin sprang out of the air, red hair shimmering like fire against the night. His green velvet tunic glared bright as one of Miss Jarnowski's worst outfits.

Andrea sprang back. "You! What do you want?"

He paused in the middle of an extravagant bow. "You know me?"

"Of course. You trapped me in the garden." Was he toying with her?

"I—" Andrea watched the thoughts churn through Robin's eyes. Then he grinned. "We haven't met. I must have a shadow, busy stealing my shape. But I assure you, I'm the genuine Robin. I just flew down to admire your pretty speech to the gnome. Pity it won't help you escape."

"Can you?" Andrea watched him cautiously. His voice was teasing, with no snobbishness at all. And his opal ring had vanished. Perhaps she had met two people. She still didn't trust him.

Robin cocked his head, rather birdlike. "My question is, why shouldn't I throw you to the Queen? She can certainly offer me more than you can."

He *was* toying with her, Andrea realized. "Then why haven't you? Perhaps I have something you want after all."

"I doubt it." Robin studied his nails with deliberate indifference. "I'm not a little gnome to be impressed by an idyllic fairy tale." He waved his arm, encompassing the gorgeous scenery. "Here, life circles on, unaffected by the outside world. We live our own wondrous tale, filled with dreamy beauty." Andrea could sense the sarcasm, even though his voice remained dry.

He had to want something, even if it wasn't a story. The script had suggested bribery. Studying him, Andrea knew. "And that doesn't suit you at all, does it? You

don't like everything beautiful and safe and stagnant. That's why you visit Calithwain, and maybe my world as well."

"One possibility." He leaned back against a tree. "I suppose turning you over to the Queen would excite me."

"No, it wouldn't. The chase is better. When I'm her prisoner again, everything reverts to the way it was. Boring." Andrea leaned back against her own tree. "You don't want that."

"So, what do I want?" His eyes met hers at last, challenging.

"Help me. Help me escape. I promise you an adventure like you've never had."

Robin raised an eyebrow. "Now that's a tempting offer. I'm impressed."

She was actually convincing him! Andrea kept her tone casual. "So you'll help me?"

Robin grinned. "Why not? The Queen hasn't had cause to scream at me for a few weeks, and that's an intolerable situation." He spread his wide wings, letting them drift upwards like gray moths in darkness. "Let the games begin."

Robin tucked Andrea under his arm and rose smoothly into the sky. She felt only warmth with his arm wrapped around her. Once again, the world dropped away.

Rushing past Andrea's ears like a wild creature, the wind sang. Their speed tore the air from her lungs, and Andrea laughed at the heady exhilaration. While his double had smelled of strange, spicy plants, this Robin smelled of orange and lilac, convincing Andrea more than ever that there were two lookalike fairies.

All too soon, Robin lowered her to the ground. Andrea felt cold stone bump the soles of her shoes, and then she stood on the edge of the cliff, looking down, down on the forest where she had walked. The night wind penetrated her shirt with icy fingers, whipping hard. Andrea gathered her thrashing hair with one hand and clung to Robin's arm with the other. "Are we—?"

"Shh!" Robin's hand clamped down across her mouth, hot against her cold cheek. "Someone's following us."

Andrea listened. The wind blew so loudly in her ears she had no hope of detecting a footstep. Who could be following them? And why? Surely a fairy would track them from the air. But Robin stared down the cliff, obviously expecting persecution from below.

The minutes crept on. Cold air pounded her, rougher than before. How could Robin know someone was following them? Wasn't he as blind from the wind as she was? Robin's grip around her wrist tightened. Was that a speck of red on the cliff? It vanished behind a rock and then popped up again, closer. Andrea squeezed Robin's arm.

Without warning, Robin dived behind a nearby rock. Andrea stumbled around it, hampered by her own blustering hair, to find Robin pinning a smaller figure to the ground. Any contest of strength had already ended.

Andrea stared down at two sets of blowing hair, one red, one gray-brown. The little gnome twisted and turned, but didn't have a prayer of escaping. He glared up at Robin but spoke to Andrea. "So you've taken help from Robin?"

"Most small folk use my title," Robin said through gritted teeth.

“Only for worthy fairies,” the gnome said, and Andrea could hear the smirk in his voice. “Offend the queen once more and you’ll be shuttling us to the palace each morning, won’t you?”

A vein in Robin’s forehead throbbed for a moment, and Andrea knew the gnome had struck a nerve. “Are you unleashing your feeble wit on us for a reason?”

“I’ve reconsidered. I want to help.”

“And why would she want help from a man the size of a squirrel?” Robin shook the gnome. The pitiful creature shrank into itself, hands protecting its head.

Andrea stepped forward. “Because he helped me when I needed him. If you want to come, you’ll have to put up with him.”

Robin eyed Andrea and she could see him reassess her. He stood up, hauling the gnome to his feet. Robin smiled, although this smile seemed weaker than his others, and doffed his hat. “Anything for a lady as fair as you.” Andrea felt her cheeks burn. Robin smirked, and Andrea blushed deeper. “Now, shall we leave before any more of Fairyland’s hidden creatures show up to defend you?” Robin popped the hat back on his head.

The crone’s cave rose ahead, oozing icy air. Andrea hugged herself. Behind the sheltering mountains, the wind had vanished. Instead of dustiness, a strange rot, sweet and dank like something long putrefied, seeped from the cave.

Andrea backed away, hand clasping her nose. “She lives in there? I’m not going.”

"I'm just as glad of it. You're the wrong kind of distraction." Robin dismissed both of them with a wave toward the cluster of rocks and the cave entrance. "Wait here with the gnome. I'll talk to the crone, and see if I can distract her. If you see an opportunity, run for the portal, but don't risk yourself 'till it's sure."

"Where's the portal?" Andrea whispered.

"There's no need to keep your voice low; she's half deaf. The portal lies just down the path, but she's sure to be watching it." Robin grinned. "'Till I divert her with my talents." He raised his eyebrows the way Jesse sometimes did after a particularly clever trick.

"Good luck. We'll wait right here."

Robin tossed his flaming hair. "Fairies never need luck." He vanished into the cave.

Andrea sucked in a great breath of clean air and then ducked in front of the cave, peering into its murky black mass. A large fire crackled, sending hot light piercing through the cave. Before the fire sat a woman, with a shroud of shining white hair shielding her features.

"Why is her hair white when everyone else looks so young?" Andrea kept her voice down despite Robin's reassurance.

The gnome shuddered. "The other fairies have perpetual youth, or at least the appearance of it. No one knows how old the crone is, but most people believe she used up her youth centuries ago, or more. Now she relies on magic to keep her young."

The woman's head snapped up; she sniffed the air. "One of the princes, is it?" Her head snapped around, eyes narrowing on Robin. Andrea bit her lip at the sight of steel-colored eyes, lined all around with black. Aside from those eyes, her face seemed featureless, lips, nose, eyebrows all vanishing into her pale skin, like eggshells on an expanse of snow. "Robin, is it?" her voice hissed through the cave.

Robin sauntered in, cap in his hand. He unfastened his cloak and tossed it on a rickety chair with his usual self-assurance. "Don't trust your eyes?"

She cackled a parody of a laugh. "Not with you, never with you. I know how often you trade places with your twin."

"My brother's the worst dresser in Fairyland. I hardly wish to read his books. while he steals my adventures."

"Well, my pretty bird," The crone paused over the endearment, rolling it on her tongue. Andrea shuddered. "Why are you here?"

"Oh come now, Garacha. Don't you remember what we promised each other in childhood?" Robin murmured, voice teasing.

Garacha hissed, sickly pink tongue slithering out to trace pale lips. "Say it again for me."

Robin bent his head down to her ear, yet his whisper echoed through the cave. "First we take Fairyland and then all the worlds."

Andrea shivered when the voice brushed over the fine hairs on the back of her neck. For some reason, she resented Robin's being so close to that creature. She clung tightly to the gnome's shoulder, and he slid a small hand over hers.

"We had quite a partnership, you and I." The crone turned in Robin's arms to trace curving nails down his chest. "What do you offer me now?"

He smiled slowly. "The fairy queen's incompetence. Offered to you on an emerald tray."

Andrea could plainly hear the woman's gasp of delight. "The human child that's raising such a fuss? You know how to find her?"

Andrea's hand clenched down on her gnome friend. Only his muffled squeak reminded her to release him before he choked. She bit her lip, awaiting Robin's answer. The script had warned her repeatedly of a nearby traitor.

"Of course," he said, a slimy trace in his voice Andrea had never noticed before. "She's hiding nearby."

"Are you proposing an alliance?" Garacha's voice shifted from eager to cautious. "And what do you wish of me?"

"Your renewed friendship."

She sat straight up in her chair. "You offer me such a prize for nothing?"

His voice oozed in streams of poisoned honey. "Oh, not nothing. For I will expect this friendship to last until you have the power you seek. Then I trust you will remember your friends."

"I see. I see quite well, pretty Robin. And you shall have your friendship. The Queen must be ignoring you far too much for her own good, eh? Now, where is the human?"

The gnome yanked at Andrea's arm. "We must flee! We must run away, hurry, very fast, before he betrays us and she finds us. Come, now." Despite his panic, the gnome's voice didn't rise above a whisper.

Hide me, Andrea ordered the Forest Gem. Despite the danger, she felt a momentary thrill at the power the Forest Gem gave her. Could she really return to Earth and give that up? Climbing to her feet with agonizing slowness, she stayed careful not to betray herself with a loud scrape. Andrea took the gnome's hand and pulled him up, but he promptly slipped, scuffing his shoe on the rocks.

"A noise! Is it her? The girl?" Andrea flinched. The Forest Gem hadn't protected the gnome, even though she was touching him. That was a line from the play, even though the Forest Gem hadn't triggered this particular memory: "I only need touch him." Why did the fairy tales have to go wrong now? Andrea heard the crone hiss in anticipation.

A slow grin inched across Robin's face. Longing to knock the smile off him, Andrea felt her fists tighten. Robin rested an elbow on Garacha's chair. "Without question. I'll delay her, while you ready a spell. Then we parade her around the fairy court."

"Perfect, my partner." Garacha slipped farther into the cave, until the thick blackness swallowed her.

Robin raced out the entrance and snatched Andrea's free hand. "Let's go. We have only moments while she fetches fairy dust."

"She's not going anywhere with you," the gnome said.

"Don't be silly." Robin gave her arm another yank. "Andrea, come."

Andrea pulled her arm away and crossed them in front of her. "We could hear what you said. Every word."

"Oh come now. That was for her. Turning you in isn't part of the adventure."

"Isn't it?"

"No!" Robin glanced around and quickly lowered his voice. The teasing tone vanished. "Garacha's always been ambitious, but she's exiled here because no one will ever support her. Including me. I'm loyal to my queen." He met Andrea's eyes straight on, his gaze intent. In that moment, Andrea saw his connection with the twin she'd met earlier.

"All right. I'll come."

"What?" the gnome squeaked.

"You needn't follow. But I trust him."

Rabin bowed extravagantly, sweeping his plumed cap to the ground. "Why thank you, my lady. I shall endeavor to merit your trust."

Andrea stifled a giggle. "Quick. Before she comes back."

The three of them hurried up the hill. Soft grass slipped and slid under Andrea's shoes. The hill grew steeper and steeper, until Andrea had to cling with her hands as well as her feet. Beside her, Robin and the gnome had no such problems, although she noticed Robin was using his wings to aid him over the slipperier spots.

"Turn left."

Andrea glanced in the direction Robin pointed. Jagged ruins of white stone piled against each other like a set of abandoned building blocks. "That's the passage?"

Robin gave her one of his enormous grins. "I thought you planned to trust me. But yes, there waits the portal to carry you back to Calithwain."

"Then let's hurry." As she advanced on the ruins, each block of stone took shape, solidifying and separating from the others. They stood in a ring, like a British stone circle. In the center lay a round stone altar.

The gnome squealed, with a sound surprisingly like a cheer. "That way! The portal's only a few feet ahead."

Andrea hesitated. "Robin, you meant it about perfect tranquility here, didn't you?"

"Ah, the young lady regrets her decision to leave. You might make a bargain with the fairy queen, if staying means enough to you. Many others have sought peace here, a release from obligations. We could always use a storyteller with your resourcefulness."

Andrea bit her lip. A world without responsibilities, without the screaming of her parents, without arguments. Only silly courtly intrigues. "The sylvans need me."

"Stay a hundred years, and you'll only be gone five minutes." Robin sounded amused at her predicament. "Don't let that stop you. I must say, it would be amusing to have you here."

Perfect peace, embracing silence. A place to simply *be*. “I can’t.” Andrea swallowed. “It seems like an escape, but I have to do the right thing. You can’t relieve me of my quest. The sylvans are waiting, and so’re my parents.”

Robin raised an eyebrow. “You passed the test. Many mortals don’t. They stay here, and linger, and wither away. All to avoid facing themselves. You’d best leave now.”

“Are you coming?” she asked them both.

The gnome giggled. “I only need to burrow. She’ll hardly follow me down there, will she?”

Andrea turned to Robin.

“Once the fairies discover your absence, they’ll scurry about, quarreling and blaming each other like an upset anthill. No one’s escaped in decades.” Robin grinned. “Go. Only step onto the altar and the portal will transport you to Calithwain.”

The pale altar gleamed enticingly, only feet away from where she stood. It had a strange amethyst sparkle in it. “I don’t know how to thank you.”

Robin winked at her. “You promised me an adventure and you delivered. That’s all I wish. You’re quite resourceful, for a human. Perhaps I’ll see you again.”

“In Calithwain or on earth?”

Robin laughed. “Now that’d be telling. Fair skies, earth girl. Remember me in your stories. I’ll see you when I can, in any world.” He kissed her hand, and Andrea felt her perpetual blush return.

"Goodbye." Andrea stepped into the portal, still feeling the touch of his hand on hers. Deep, swirling blueness surrounded her, pressing so close it seemed a tangible thing. A deep hum seeped into her bones, soft, steady. The inside of the portal jolted electrically through her, hot with pulsing power. Andrea closed her eyes, feeling it press into her body. The energy heated faster and faster, accelerating like a car on the freeway. And then, motion vanished.

Andrea remembered...

The stage lights turned from blue to green. Andrea tried to ignore them. Even with Miss Jarnowski supervising the fairy dance across the room, the lighting crew needed to learn.

Andrea crossed to the big X stage center. Scratches and slivers of masking tape blanketed the floor, showing the effects of years of drama at her school. *"Let me free the crystal, then I'll return as your willing prisoner."*

GEM: "Alenna, you mustn't! Leave me, instead. If I eat enough beans, I can force the fairies to let me go."

Pilar choked on her laugh, struggling to act impassive. *"Or me. The road goes on without Gem or me, but not our champion."*

ALENNNA: "Gem, the sorceress needs me. I must—"

"This is stupid," Jesse interrupted. "Pilar shouldn't have to read two parts." He turned toward the thin girl. "You should concentrate on the fairy queen."

Andrea collapsed on the nearest folding chair. "Without Cindy, this play is ruined." Worse yet, the principal had just finished an impromptu visit, a frown on her face. Apparently, the parents who wanted the play changed had found enough attention.

"Andrea, it's just a play," Pilar said. "An after-school activity. You know, fun?"

Andrea scowled. Pilar could never understand.

Jesse frowned under the goat horns. His hair dangled in a tiny ponytail, while his green corduroy jacket glimmered magically under the stagelights. "Cindy hasn't been here all week. She's probably dropped and just hasn't had the nerve to tell us. If she tries to rejoin, she doesn't know her lines or any of the blocking. I'm gonna talk to Miss Jarnowski and tell her she has to throw Cindy out."

"What!"

All three students spun to find Cindy standing there, hands on her hips. "I miss a couple rehearsals—"

"Try almost all of them," Jesse said.

"—and you're replacing me behind my back?" Her eyes flashed at Jesse's interruption. "Andrea's always pushing me about my lines, and Jesse says I don't have the dedication. I'm sick of Jessica's snippy little insults. I don't need this!" She slammed her book bag onto a chair so hard a bag of baby carrots jumped out the top. Angrily, Cindy shoved them back in. She went stark white, hands shaking.

"Neither do we," Jesse said, voice angrier than Andrea had ever heard. "You don't show up for rehearsals, you have no respect for the other cast members, Pilar's been doing your work for weeks—"

"I've had a few problems," Cindy snapped. "I just couldn't make it."

"Problems like?"

Silence. Cindy seemed to be staring inside herself. "Oh, no, not now. I'm in control." She swallowed loud enough for Andrea to hear her.

"Cindy—" Andrea started. Was the other girl going to faint?

Jesse wasn't distracted. "That's it. If you can't even tell us why you're ruining the play, I'm talking to the teacher. Just because you don't care doesn't mean you get to destroy it for the rest of us. In fact, I'm sure you're the one wrecking sets and sabotaging the stage. Can't ever take second place, can you?"

With a heavy swallow, Cindy controlled herself and straightened. "That's ridiculous. And there's no need to talk to anyone." She dropped her script on the floor. "I quit. Go ahead and find someone else to take this lousy part. If they're willing to act with you, that is." She stomped offstage and out of the auditorium, leaving the black curtain waving behind her.

The three students were silent for a moment.

"Pilar, I guess you'll have to be Kell," Andrea said. "You know it best." She kept her voice quiet. Maybe she had nagged Cindy too much. In any case, Pilar hardly deserved her anger.

"Then who'll be fairy queen?" Pilar sounded more stunned than anything else.

"I don't know. Maybe Jessica could take both parts." Andrea glanced around the room. "Where is she? Don't tell me Jessica's started skipping, too."

"Who needs either of them?" Jesse muttered. "If Jessica just plays the witch, at least she's type-cast."

"You should enjoy being Kell," Andrea reassured Pilar, who was looking disappointed. Was Andrea's pushing out of control? Andrea longed to stop, but with Cindy gone, they needed Pilar to take Kell's part. "I'll tell Miss Jarnowski."

Jesse raised his eyebrows. "Miss Jarnowski's working with the ghostlings now." He pointed. The ghostlings stood in the corner, all shaking as if they were doing the exercise. "Might as well finish the scene. Andrea, start with your cue."

Andrea stood up, and sank into the familiar world of theater. She stood on her X, feeling its straight edges penetrating her ballet slippers. *ALENNNA: "Gem, the Sorceress needs me. I must finish the quest."*

GEM: "No, don't leave us. I'll have to housetrain Kell all by myself!"

Pilar giggled. *KELL: "We'll tell the Sorceress how you saved her. She'll owe you."*

FAIRY QUEEN: "You're surprisingly wise for an elf. Very well. But remember your promise. Everyone around you needs your support." Andrea swallowed. Maybe the play was too preachy after all. The words in the script here seemed directed at her.

KELL: "We won't disrupt your gardens any further." Pilar's voice shook as she spoke the words, now hers, and Andrea knew Pilar didn't want the bigger part, and worse, didn't know her lines.

Off balance, Andrea staggered forward, as if using her legs for the first time. The sun-warmed grass under her boots glimmered impossibly bright. Overhead, birds tweeted their tiny lungs out in the midday sun. Andrea sucked in her breath. Entrapping her, a ring of mushrooms shone like turnstiles. Would she need to return to Fairyland, as she had promised in the script? Or was she free? Andrea took a deep breath and stepped out of the circle. Nothing. Andrea felt her shoulders slump. All that had followed her was her new knowledge of the Forest Gem, and how to use it. She had escaped the fairies.

Pounding footsteps approached her. Before she had time to hide, Kreliss burst into the clearing. Her hair hung in tangles, with leaves and bits of twig captive in the long tresses. A needle-thin scrape stretched across her cheek. "Thank the Eagle!" Kreliss panted. She rushed toward Andrea. "We've been searching for hours."

Andrea caught Kreliss's shoulders, relieved beyond words to see her. "Hours? The fairies kidnapped me a day ago."

"Legends say time is different between realms, like between here and your earth. At least we haven't lost much. It's just midmorning."

Andrea nodded. That had been her biggest worry.

Kreliss grinned, her tension subsiding into humor. "Did a fairy prince come to our world and snatch you away? Will you inherit the Emerald Crown?"

Andrea blushed a little at the memory of the twins, one so gallant and shallow, the other so bitter. She mumbled something incoherent and Kreliss's expectant smile

widened. Andrea bit her lip; she had buried her worries while in Fairyland, but now they bubbled to the surface. "Geome. Where is he?"

"Around here somewhere, searching for you. Come."

In Andrea's play, one girl's actions had nearly destroyed everything, sabotaging the entire production. Was this what the visions were telling her? Why couldn't she remember Kell's last line? Like dream fragments, the play melted away when she tried to grasp it. "Let's just wait 'till Geome gets here."

Chapter 8: Treacherous With Sinking Sand

At last, Geome walked down the trail. "Andrea, there you are. Bad time to go prospecting for fairy gold." He caught their startled glances and raised his eyebrows. "Just an expression."

Andrea planted her hands on her fists. Geome could have killed her. "You tricked me into walking into the fairy ring. I should have realized. Every fairy-tale quest has a traitor. Is that why you wanted to come?"

Geome's eyes suddenly turned hollow black. A hiss snaked from his lips.

Kreliss's hand dropped to her sword.

Andrea backed away. In her play, a demon had taken over Gem's body, but this reality was more horrific than any glitter or echoing microphone. A sickening deadness covered his face, draining him of emotion. "What's going on? Geome, is that you?" She thought it a stupid thing to ask, but had no idea what to say.

"Your wizard has helped me well." The hoarse whisper chased chills up Andrea's spine.

"Geome betrayed us," Kreliss's voice echoed through the clearing, oddly withdrawn. "He tried to destroy the quest."

Andrea felt her insides twist. In an instant, Geome had changed into some creepy thing, more shadow than human. "Kreliss, we have to do something! How can we separate them?"

"You endangered Andrea, deliberately trapping her in Fairyland. You tried to slaughter all the sylvans," Kreliss's voice sank into a rhythmic deadpan, and her eyes

didn't move from Geome's face. Andrea watched from behind Kreliss, uncertain whether to interfere.

"And I would do it again." The voice came from Geome's lips but sounded nothing like his own. "You foolish children threaten our plans. Now, die."

"Well said." Kreliss drew her sword in a motion smooth as an eagle's dive. Barely within range, she swung it toward the thing that both was and was not Geome.

"Kreliss!" Andrea jerked the other girl's right shoulder back, spinning her away from Geome. "Watch it! You'll kill him."

"That's the idea," Kreliss said, voice still remote.

"But it's not Geome. Just listen. Look at his eyes: the colored part's gone." Geome looked as if his soul had been sucked out through those empty sockets, leaving a collapsing husk. He snarled, and power crackled between his hands, vomit-yellow.

Andrea clung to her companion's bony shoulder. She couldn't believe Kreliss would slaughter their friend. But what would Geome's spell do? "Give me the amolir!" It had destroyed the shadow before; perhaps it would free their friend now. Andrea snatched it from Kreliss's belt and hurled it at Geome.

Yellow energy vanished. Geome folded as if she'd kicked him in the stomach. Then he lifted his head, displaying eyes still horribly blank. "Foolish," he hissed between gasps. "So foolish. You half-killed my host, but I still thrive." Despite his words, he remained hunched over, and didn't cast a second spell.

"Idiot," Kreliss yelled, probably at her.

Andrea winced. Her sweaty hand turned slippery where she gripped Kreliss's sleeve. Kreliss wouldn't actually try to kill Geome, would she? "Kreliss, it's the despair. Fight it." Andrea's voice trembled. This was more than the tza'maveths' hopelessness. Something new and frightening had entered Kreliss.

Come to me. The female voice vibrated between Andrea's ears harsh and raspy, like the protesting strings of a cello.

Andrea flinched. "Never."

Your mother left, years ago. All your life you've searched. Do you wish to find her?

"Not at the cost of Geome's life." The words snapped the Andrea out of her hypnotism. "Kreliss, fight the despair. You told me sylvans have a code; they don't kill people who don't deserve it. We have to trust each other."

The other girl still stared at Geome, sword raised. The detachment was melting away, replaced by fury. Even her leather-clad shoulder felt warmer in Andrea's hand. Andrea rushed around to stand between her warring friends. Unleashed power blazed in Kreliss's eyes. "Oh, he deserves it. He tried to murder hundreds of my people, thousands of woodfolk."

Andrea still held Kreliss, but doubted she could stop the stronger girl. Kreliss's arm and shoulder trembled under her grip. "It's not him. You can't blame Geome for whatever controls him."

"He's our enemy," Kreliss shot back. She launched herself forward, sword point aimed for Geome's heart.

Andrea shoved her away by throwing her full weight onto Kreliss, slamming them both against a thick tree. Even with Kreliss cushioning her, the shock rattled Andrea's teeth. "Sidaria has faith you'll follow her code, and not hurt innocent people while you're trying to save her. You think she'd want this?"

"Sidaria dies as we speak. She trusts me to make the best decisions I can for her." Still struggling, Kreliss cast imploring eyes at Andrea. "Don't you see? I can't be wrong. Whatever he is, he isn't Geome anymore."

Andrea closed her eyes. "Forest Gem, give me a hint. I can't do this alone," she whispered. To her immense relief, Andrea felt a memory open in her mind, tugging her inside it.

Andrea remembered...

ALENNA: "Gem, stop!"

DEMON: "Gem? I have taken his body and soon, his soul. Ha ha ha ha ha."

The stage lights changed to red, briefly, then back to the usual blend of colors.

Andrea gathered her breath, projecting her voice to fill the entire auditorium. In a heady rush, the words bolted from her diaphragm, filled with controlled power and triple her normal volume. *ALENNA: "Behold! The Forest Gem casts you out."*

DEMON: "Silly girl, you have no power here."

Andrea lowered her volume to her normal stage voice. *ALENNA: "Don't I?"*
She reached out and snatched Jesse's hand.

Jesse crumpled onto the stage, purple wizard's robe flapping. He fell face down, deliberately revealing that his robe hung open in the back to reveal a plastic butt.

"Guess we've gotten to the bottom of this scene," Miss Jarnowski said, lips twitching. For Halloween, she wore a filmy black dress that draped around her like a sorceress's shadow.

Lorraine beamed. "I love doing that demon laugh."

"Yeah, but how do we pretend she's speaking out my mouth?" Jesse asked. "Will she have a microphone?"

"Now that band practice is finally over, we can block this onstage," Miss Jarnowski said. "We'll start right now. Pilar, fine where you are." As she pointed, her charm bracelet jingled. "Andrea, you can sit down for a moment."

Andrea perched offstage, cross-legged, just beyond the tape border. It was good to sit; she'd been standing for the last hour, and the stage lights were very warm. She drummed her fingers on the math book and reluctantly opened it. Three pages of exercises were due Friday.

"Eric, let's have you and Megan move downstage since you're fairy guards in this scene. Eric! Wake up. And don't touch the curtain; those are expensive."

Eric's hair was ruffled in a kind of cute way. The two students exchanged glances and both backed away from the audience. Andrea opened her mouth to correct them and then closed it, words unspoken. Right. Concentrate. She returned to fractions.

Miss Jarnowski beckoned with a hand. "No, downstage. Toward me."

"You both went upstage," Lorraine explained. "Upstage is toward the back. And center stage is in the middle."

Miss Jarnowski smiled. "Yes, but do you know why?"

No one did.

"When theaters were first constructed, they slanted in a ramp, down toward the audience. Parts of the stage were literally up or down. Later, they got the idea to slant the audience, and keep the stage level." The teacher frowned for a moment. "I suppose no one taught you stage right and stage left either."

Andrea sighed. She was trying to concentrate on math, but she just couldn't. Even worse than neglecting her work was trying to do it and failing. The red "See Me" on the top of her last quiz glared at her. Maybe her father could help her that night. Oh wait, after he watched the news, he'd probably be on the phone, just like last night. And Shanelle would be grouchy he had barely said hello. Maybe tomorrow.

"They're the actor's right and left, not the audience's," Jesse said. "So how's Lorraine's voice gonna come out of my head?"

Miss Jarnowski considered for a moment. "I'd like to use a fog machine, but we'd never have the money to rent one. Instead, we'll have Lorraine standing just in the wings. She'll deliver her line and then walk on. Lorraine, how loudly can you project?"

Lorraine grinned. "That shouldn't be a problem."

"Andrea," Miss Jarnowski called. "I want Gem to be sitting. Could you get a cube out of the prop room?"

“Sure.” Andrea scrambled to her feet. The “prop room,” as Miss Jarnowski called it, was a big closet holding all the donated junk and old costumes the drama department had been accumulating since the beginning of time. Cracked plates, silk flowers, a stethoscope, footstools, every random item ever conceived of piled in random clumps along the floor, while trench coats and frilly skirts draped down from hangers, cloaking the entire mess.

Andrea opened the door and stared. The overpowering odor of lemon soap poured from the prop room. Cold water leaked from the door, puddling around her shoes. The janitor’s sprayer, a minivac that also sprayed soapy water on cue, sat like a king in the middle of the prop room, soap still dribbling down its top. A murky smell drifted toward Andrea, thick and mildewed. Props bobbed and sank in three inches of water. Oozing like bleeding hands, floating silk flowers leaked red dye into the swirling water.

Hands. Bleeding hands. Touching Jesse’s hand, the demon leaving. As Andrea returned to reality, images still echoing, she glanced at Geome’s fist. Crimson light burned through his sleeve. “Look out; something on his wrist is glowing.” Both girls watched. A tendril of blackness seeped forth, grasping toward them.

Kreliss shoved past Andrea. “Stay back.” Before Andrea could intervene, Kreliss raised her sword. In a single blow, she sliced his arm.

Andrea’s eyes flew shut. She peeked cautiously, half-expecting a gush of blood. A shattered bracelet lay on the ground. Its dye-red stone sparkled for a final moment then stopped.

Geome's sleeve hung in tatters and he bent over, panting like an exhausted dog. "I guess... these flashy accessories... just attract the wrong sort. Maybe I need Kreliss's fashion advice after all," he gasped.

Andrea sighed in relief. Geome was breathing hard, but his eyes slowly returned to their normal gray. She stared at the red stone, lying on its broken brass chain. "What is that? Why were you carrying something so dangerous?"

"Because he came to sabotage the mission," Kreliss snarled. "Go before I kill you myself." She raised her sword again. "I'll give you one chance but you'll never have another." Geome hesitated, and Kreliss closed her eyes, pain creasing her face. "Leave now!"

"Kreliss, what is it?" Andrea cried. Why did she look as if she were warring with herself? With Geome back to normal, surely the danger had ended.

Kreliss dropped her sword with a clatter, staring. She backed up toward the tree, whimpering. "No, no. This can't happen. I ended it. I'm in control. Me. I can do this."

Andrea glanced at Geome, but his puzzled expression must have mirrored her own. Were both her friends possessed? Andrea stepped toward the other girl. "Kreliss?"

"Stay back," Kreliss spat. Her eyes focused on Andrea for a moment, filled with seething fury. Then she looked away, staring at her hands, which she opened and closed slowly. Flex. Clench. Flex. Clench.

Andrea swallowed hard. There was no sanity in Kreliss's face, no thought. Yet, it was still Kreliss's voice, her eyes. Andrea had saved them all from external threats.

But how could she protect anyone from this? Without knowing where the words came from, she said, "Kreliss, stay with me. You have to come back."

Flex. Clench. Flex. Clench.

"Kreliss, I need you. I can't do this alone."

Kreliss ignored Andrea's plea, continuing to open and close her hands.

"If you're a sylvan warrior, fight. Sidaria trusts you."

At last, Kreliss looked up, knowledge and sanity flooding into exhausted eyes.

Andrea hesitated, but she had to ask. "Would the Forest Gem help?"

Kreliss gulped. "No. I can't take your burdens anymore than you can take mine. I finally understand." She took a shaky breath. "It's all right. I have control." She slumped to the ground, leaning against the tree.

"Here." Geome hurried over with a handkerchief stinking of spicy salve.

"Breathe deep."

Kreliss's eyelids sagged, and she swallowed huge mouthfuls of scented air. At last, she nodded, handing the handkerchief back.

Geome sat on his heels a few feet from Kreliss, watching her. He hesitated.

"Kreliss, what just happened? Who, what was controlling you?"

Kreliss fixed angry eyes on him, but it was her own, human, anger. "I have control. And I should ask you the same question."

"But it isn't dangerous!" Geome half-reached for the chain before he reconsidered. He pulled his long fingers back and wiped them on his leg. "The device makes me invisible to tzalmaveths. It works perfectly except that it backfired."

"This is your great secret?" Andrea asked. She sat down beside Kreliss. Her hands shook a little, now that the danger had passed. "Hiding from the shadows by carrying one?"

"No, it just shields a person's magic. Makes it impossible for a tzalmaveth to find me." He cleared his throat a bit. "Maybe I should update my definition of impossible."

Andrea winced as she eyed the simple-looking bracelet. "Ever taken it off?"

Geome's mouth fell open. "Well, yes, one of the creatures could have seen me then. But why hide inside it?"

"To destroy the quest," Kreliss said.

Andrea looked from one friend to the other. Geome had regained his coloring and crouched opposite Kreliss, bending twigs into patterns. Kreliss's fists clenched in her lap. "What did it feel like?" Andrea asked Geome, stalling to give Kreliss more time. "Having that thing control you?"

Geome shuddered. "Cold fog in my thoughts. All that despair, shadowing everything until I couldn't tell what was real any more. Normally I was just myself. But when you told me you were going to help Sidaria, I suddenly knew I had to come with you. Then later, I felt compelled to show Andrea the fairy ring. I'm sorry, you know. I never wanted to trap you."

Andrea studied Geome. Perhaps all the suspicion could finally die. "What about your saying Kreliss was evil, so I wouldn't trust her?"

Geome tied a twig in knots, not looking at Kreliss. "Ask her. I've only felt darkness like this once, when I fought a wizard from the Crimson Circle. The magic he'd stolen by sacrificing others in the Circle's bloody rites had stained him forever."

Kreliss looked back at him, color flooding her cheeks. "I lost my grip when I got angry. It's over, and won't happen again. You have my word."

Geome swallowed. "That's not enough."

"Geome!" Andrea said, unclear which side she should choose. What Kreliss had become had scared her, but these two were all she had. Kreliss could keep her secrets, for now.

Geome didn't falter. "We can't trust her! Don't you see she's evil?"

"I do trust her." Andrea willed steadiness into her voice. "And I need you to stand by me."

Geome straightened. "You know I will, Andrea."

"Yes, I do know." Andrea took a deep breath, relieved. "Can we force the tzalmaveth out of the bracelet?"

Geome glanced at the broken chain, and disgust crossed his features. "No need. I brought lots of spares. If the three of us wear bracelets all the time, the tzalmaveths should simply not notice us." He passed out armbands and both girls accepted them. He eyed Kreliss for a moment. "Ready to go?" Inside the simple question, Andrea could hear an entire speech of forgiveness and cautious trust. It was a fragile partnership, but it would last. It had to.

Chapter 9: Let Peace Be Upon You

Kreliss pointed down the side of the mountain. Afternoon sunlight gleamed over the rock, banishing all thoughts of the murky swamp behind them. Far below, a small dip between the mountains glowed with the dark perfection of a flawless emerald. "That's it. There's Sacred Valley."

"Sure? That's a long way down." Andrea eyed the steep path. It twisted like a tangled thread. They had spent the morning hiking up the side of the mountain, and downhill did look appealing. And terribly steep.

Geome cleared his throat. "No one knows very much about the valley. Everyone who's visited the Mystics tends to be very close-mouthed about the experience. But according to some of the accounts, they don't have human form."

Andrea blinked. "That can't be right. In the play, the seer was a woman."

"That's part of the mystery: no one knows." Geome rubbed his hands together, and actually looked excited. "No one else in Calithwain has the vision the Mystics do. And think of the opportunity to learn. We shouldn't pass this up because of a little danger."

"More than a little, I'd think." Andrea felt a swallow catch in her throat.

"Are you staying behind?" Kreliss asked, voice neutral.

Andrea spun to face Kreliss. All right, she was nervous. But she wasn't quitting. "Of course not. I said I'd help the woodfolk, and I will."

"Then we go." Kreliss's eyes softened for a moment. "Please."

Together, they walked down the twisting path that led to the mystic seers.

Andrea hurried over a fallen branch to catch up with Geome. "You still want to come with us? I thought the shadows compelled you to join."

Geome played idly with a leaf. "They did. But I believe I can help. I've never been on such a fun adventure."

"Fun?" Kreliss asked in her most withering tone of voice.

"Of course. Tell me, would you truly have killed me?" His voice didn't waver from its pleasant, conversational tone.

"Yes." Kreliss's voice didn't flinch. "My people need a warrior, not a sentimentalist."

"Even though I was an innocent victim." Geome watched her.

"I gave you a chance." Now her voice shook slightly.

"Well, thank you for that, then. Besides, if you'd stabbed me, this cloak you despise would glow red on both sides. We couldn't have that, could we?"

Shaking her head, Kreliss hurried a few paces ahead, eyes constantly darting from side to side.

Andrea glanced at Geome beside her. "The shadows attacked us twice. Could they be draining the White Crystal?"

"Not from a distance. And no one can visit Sidaria's tower without her help or the help of one of her siblings. Besides, shadows could snatch power far more easily from a passing traveler. They lack the determination to attack the crystal on their own."

Andrea swallowed. That mysterious voice had filled her head, sneering at her struggles, and it had banished the tzaamaveths instantly. Did it control them? And what

did it know about her mother? The uncomfortable thoughts raced through her for a long while.

Andrea remembered...

The sabotage wasn't as bad as expected. While the students mopped out the closet, they rescued battered pots and dented swords unaffected by their bath. Hair crinkling in the dampness, Miss Jarnowski gathered the costumes to run through her washing machine. Andrea glanced at the teacher's desk. There lay a pile of scripts, with *History of Our Country* resting proudly on top. Andrea swallowed. A few parents were closing the play the mysterious arsonist hadn't quite ruined.

The students could never learn a new play in the time remaining. On her way back from dumping out a load of soggy papers, Andrea stopped. If she didn't take steps, there wouldn't be a show to produce. Maybe she had been pushing the other actors too hard, but the administration was a different matter. Now she had a better plan. No more battling shadows; it was time to face the real enemy.

Switching directions, Andrea marched up to the main office. She reached for the doorknob and then shrank back. Mr. Walsh was just leaving, carrying some folders. Andrea thought back guiltily to the "see me" note on her math test, still not dealt with.

She let him pass her, and hid around the corner. Tomorrow. Really. Today she had to save *The Road to Calithwain*. At last, maybe her pushiness could do some good. Straightening, she walked into the office.

"Can I speak to the principal?"

The secretary raised his eyebrows. "Is there an emergency?"

Andrea bit her lip. "No, there's just an issue to discuss with her. It's kind of serious."

"All right, I'll see if she has a minute." The secretary knocked on the door and held a murmured conference, then motioned for Andrea to enter.

The office had bright posters of apples and schoolbooks on the walls, and a desk so piled with papers that Andrea could barely see the short, silver-haired principal behind it. She looked up from an immense stack of files. "Hello. What brings you here?"

Andrea gripped one arm with the other. "Well, I'm in the school play, and that's what I need to talk to you about."

The principal closed her eyes. "Not another one."

Andrea straightened. "You can't change our play two weeks before dress rehearsals. It's barely hanging together as is."

Eyebrows climbed. "The play's in trouble already?"

Andrea winced. "No, we're fine. But we won't be if we have to switch. All the kids feel this way."

"But your parents don't." The principal watched Andrea regretfully, but the expression didn't soften her words.

Andrea shook her head. "Most of them support us. Only a few parents came here to complain."

"The point is that some parents want the show changed, and it's my responsibility to listen to both sides." The principal folded her hands. "I'll let you know what I decide."

"But—"

"Now if you'll excuse me." The principal flashed an insincere smile. "You have rehearsals."

As soon as the principal shut the door, a secretary beckoned to her. "C'mere. I think I may be able to help." She was plump, with curly black hair and a conspiratorial smile.

Andrea hurried over. "Really? How?"

"What you need are parents on your side," the secretary explained.

"Yeah, my friend Jesse suggested a petition."

"No, a petition can't compete with complaining parents. We see this constantly. Send *four* of your loudest parents in here. Have them explain fairy tales have always been young adult classics. Have them protest changing the play will cheat you of time. Whatever you want. Just don't let them be wishy-washy."

Andrea felt hopeful for the first time that day. "That'll do it?"

"And I'll talk to the principal. With the price on chemistry books rising and the addition of Japanese class, she has enough to worry about. I think I can persuade her to drop this one, if parents support it."

"Wow, thanks."

The secretary winked. "And tell Lorraine her next-door neighbor expects her right after rehearsals end. Her mom's working late again."

Leaving the office, Andrea let herself breathe again. If she could find willing parents, she could save the play. Andrea thumbed through the script. She read the single line that leapt out and felt her shoulders loosen. The script had finished giving her uncanny messages about working together.

SEER: You must face your fears, and confront your enemy, the witch herself.

Descend into the fortress pit, until you find what you seek...

The three travelers hurried down the mountain toward the patch of green that glowed like a four leaf clover against the dull gray of the mountains. They descended, watching the shimmering emerald patch solidify into a meadow full of pink and yellow flowers. Even so far above, heady scents drifted upwards, sweet and fresh enough to slice through the mountain dust and fill it with scents of springtime. Among the tall flowers, graceful figures walked, appearing to be enormous white blossoms themselves. Andrea stared, picking out the horselike shapes against the green grass.

Kreliss froze. "The Qi-lin!"

Beside her, Geome's mouth hung open. "Unicorns! Of course. After they defeated Jixil two thousand years ago, they've always waited nearby, ready to help." He closed his mouth. "The legends are coming alive."

Even before such breathtaking creatures, Geome was still a walking library. "C'mon, Kreliss just passed us."

Indeed, Kreliss was racing down the hill toward the valley of the unicorns below. Andrea and Geome caught up just in time to see her halt a few feet from the resting animals.

Andrea squinted. The unicorns weren't white at all, but silver, reflecting the sun like softly moving mirrors. "Are they all that color?"

Geome's face glowed, watching them. "They'd have to be, to reflect the Silver Pillar. Once they were gray, but each year they grow brighter and brighter. I can't imagine them looking like anything else, can you?"

Geome was right. Instead of the horned horses painted on forest backdrops, these creatures shimmered in the air like heat waves, slipping in and out of vision. Thin and sleek, they hovered toward the shape of deer. Only their hooves belonged to horses, while their tails were slender like an ox's, just a puff of dandelion down at the tips. Gliding through the meadow with a delicate serenity, the unicorns lingered as if they could stand still while the rest of the world turned around them. The silver horns were small and shining, tapering to near-nonexistence.

Kreliss curtsayed deeply before one of the tallest creatures. "It's an honor beyond telling to meet you. Elf lore speaks of your goodness and wisdom."

The unicorn hissed, and reared on hind legs. Its companions thundered over, shoving Andrea and Geome aside with their bodies and surrounding Kreliss.

"What're you doing?" Andrea demanded.

One of the unicorns lifted its sleek neck, glancing over at Andrea and Geome.
You bring great evil here. The unicorn had not spoken aloud. Its words projected straight into Andrea's mind, echoing in a crystal chime.

"Kreliss? That's ridiculous!" Andrea glanced at Geome, who didn't say anything. "Let her go. We're on a mission from Sidaria, and we need your help."

This one can travel no further.

Andrea crossed her arms. "Then none of us will. You can't divide us."

"Thanks, Andrea, but be sensible," Kreliss said. "We need their advice." She turned to the unicorns. "I can't help what I've become, but I can control it, I swear."

The closest unicorn pawed the ground. *You nearly lost control.*

Kreliss swallowed. "Nearly."

The evil feeds on your fear. It will slip your control soon, this time with strength to kill.

Kreliss's face went white. "No." She turned to her friends. "Leave me behind. The quest's too important."

Andrea swallowed. Kreliss's terror scared her more than the unicorn's words.
"Kreliss, we need you. The unicorns must be mistaken." She eyed the closest one.
"You're really the mystic seers?"

The unicorn blinked. *Some travelers find answers here.*

"But in the script it was—" Andrea's voice trailed off. "I can't trust it, can I?"

Sidaria only intended her words as a guideline. They cannot solve your quest for you. That is your own task. The unicorn's gaze fastened on her, penetrating like a knife through butter. *So the prophecy is yours.*

"What prophecy?" Andrea stammered.

*Fear Not:

Our champion has come.

Now face your frayed reflection, Andrea;

your tether weaves both worlds.

Forget your pride,

for I protect each step you take.

Through castles lofting over crimson gardens, soft

and treacherous with sinking sand,

let peace be upon you.

Confront your foe,

the voice that cries inside you for a chance.

Descend into the fortress pit,

until you find what you seek*

"That's from my play. The seer said it."

Indeed.

The adolescents and unicorns stared at each other, at an impasse. At last, another unicorn walked up. Smaller than the rest, she turned her green eyes penetratingly on Kreliss. *You will stir no farther into our lands.*

"I understand," Kreliss mumbled, dwarfed by the silver beasts. They fell away, leaving only two unicorns to face the travelers.

The female unicorn blinked long silvery eyelashes at Kreliss. *What help do you seek, that you would imperil us all?* Her voice chimed louder than her mate's. Hoofbeats sounded in the distance, and they all jumped. *Speak quickly. Trouble comes.*

Andrea gazed around. The unicorns stood with ears pricked, all facing west. Andrea swallowed. Who was coming, that could threaten a unicorn?

Kreliss straightened. "My people, the sylvans, are in desperate danger."

Your people indeed, more than you think. The unicorn looked directly at Kreliss.

She squirmed under the steady gaze. "I don't understand."

You will.

"They always speak in riddles," Geome whispered.

The unicorn blinked amber eyes. *Not always. Sometimes the enigmas of life deserve time to unravel. Here is another. Sidaria promised us a sanctuary here, a place where we could contemplate the turnings of the universe undisturbed. Why does she send you now?*

"We're asking so little," Andrea protested. "Only the answer to a question. You're a part of this world and we need you. Please help us. What's draining the White Crystal?"

The unicorn's gaze filled with sorrow so profound Andrea felt her throat catch. Yet, not a single drop flowed from the animal's eyes. *They can't cry*, she realized. *A giant lodestone lurks under Sidaria's tower, bleeding her magic away. Some malevolent creature has coaxed it to grow there, feeding off the woodfolk's life energy. Even now, it has nearly drained all of the Sorceress's power.*

"Lodestone, what's that?" Geome asked.

Kreliss demanded, "How do we destroy it?"

The male unicorn who had greeted them rustled his hooves in the thick grass. *Lodestone is iron ore, magnetized to destroy any focus. It must be monumentally strong to weaken the White Crystal. Inherently destructive, lodestone can only unmake.* The hoofbeats strengthened, nearing them. *Lady...*

The second unicorn lowered her head, shining horn brushing the ground. *I know. As for destroying it, you cannot. Lodestone shatters under a crystal of equal yet opposing power. Yet only one of the Seven could create such a crystal, with many years of effort.*

"Can't you give us useful advice?" Kreliss planted her hands on her hips. While her posture was aggressive, she still looked close to tears.

"Wait." Geome picked a twig off his sleeve. Ignoring Kreliss's glare, he folded it into tiny pieces, concentrating as if the twig held all their solutions. "We already have the most powerful crystal in the world, right next to the lodestone. The White Crystal."

The female unicorn tilted her head. *Yet the lodestone *matches* the White Crystal's frequency, draining its power.* She twitched nervously as the hoofbeats grew louder.

Andrea struggled to follow this. "So we somehow reverse the White Crystal's polarity?"

"Exactly. It's perfect." Geome slammed one fist into the other, crumpling the twig further. "But that would require an enormous amount of power, directed into the crystal at the precise opposite frequency. No mage in the world has that much. Even a group of mages could perish if they tried, with the crystal so desperately depleted." His head lifted from his examination of the mashed twig. "Who're they?"

A group of close to twenty unicorns, far outnumbering the eight scattered nearby, thundered toward the party.

The female unicorn darted in front of the adolescents. *Leave them!*

You welcome intruders bearing the stink of evil to the sacred valley? You profane all our laws, their leader thundered. He was the largest male to appear yet.

One of the female's followers stepped beside her. *The laws are hers to interpret.*

Not until next moon's turning.

By the choosing of the Silver Pillar, I have guardianship. None of the female's unicorns moved, but Andrea could feel the tension grinding through them.

When my rule ends, not before. By my rights, I order the strangers killed, as so many of their kind have done to us.

No! The female pointed her horn at her opponent, but made no move to strike him. Both creatures glowed brighter, like mirrors catching sunlight, until Andrea couldn't bear to look.

"What's happening?" Andrea murmured.

"The gift of Compulsion. I've heard of this," Geome whispered. "Whichever is stronger can command the other to submit or even die." He swallowed, Adam's apple bobbing. "I doubt I could interfere."

As they watched, the glow around the female unicorn weakened, dimming until she was only gray. The male unicorn gleamed brightly enough to set the grass burning.

"No," Kreliss whispered. "He'll kill us." She hesitated a moment, then ran to the male unicorn. "I'm the one you fear, the one who'll destroy the quest. Leave the others alone."

Both unicorns ignored her, locked in their battle. The male let out a soft whinny, as if in fear, yet he maintained his brightness and the female continued to dim.

He has no power here. The female unicorn spoke to them all. She remained dull-colored, while the male unicorn shone for both of them. He turned and trotted away. *He will obey me now.* She raised her horn to contemplate Kreliss. *You are brave to offer your life for them. Yet you know that may not be enough.*

"I know. That's why I'm leaving."

"Kreliss, don't!" Andrea said. "You're part of the team and we need you. You can't know how things'll fall out. No one can, not even seers. We can't succeed without you."

“She’s right,” Geome said. “If you and I can’t work past this, what hope do my people ever have of changing? It has to start here, despite the secrets. Come with us, Kreliss.”

Kreliss turned to the unicorn. “Can you help me banish it?”

No one can solve another’s quest, only offer support. You will triumph someday, if you will it. And now, if I have provided your answers, you children must go. Compulsion is never used on another unicorn lightly, and I have much to answer for.

“And we’ve got to rush to Sidaria and somehow restore the crystal,” Kreliss said, new animation in her voice.

Geome threw aside the twigs he’d been crushing. “Two days left. We can’t return before the White Crystal dies.”

Terror filled Kreliss’s eyes in a way Andrea had never seen. “We have to!”

Geome looked away. “It’s logic, Kreliss, I’m sorry.” He fumbled with his hands before tucking them in his pockets.

Kreliss kicked the gentle slope hard enough to send grass blades flying. “I hate logic and I’m not accepting it. We must have some chance!”

“Wait.” Andrea turned to the unicorns. “You must be able to help us. That’s why I had that memory flash about the seer. You tell us an answer that leads us into a dark fortress.”

The male unicorn blinked at her words. *There is a way.*

That is an ancient secret, the female said.

The children called on us for help, he said, almost pleading.

"We're asking now," Kreliss said. "Please tell us."

The female blinked. *A set of ancient paths, existing since the Seven arrived.

The mahalak orachim.*

"The what?" Andrea asked.

"They exist?" Geome asked.

The male nodded. *With all the species of Calithwain so separate, much knowledge has vanished. Yet, the orachim still await those with the lore to seek them. In the ancient tongue of the Seven, the name means Journey Portals. In an instant, they can cross all of Calithwain.*

"Do you have one here?" Geome asked. "How exactly do they work?"

The male unicorn dug in the ground with a tapered hoof. *Alas, the unicorns do not possess such a gift. But each of the Seven once kept one.*

"There's a mahalak orach in Lady Sidaria's tower?" Kreliss asked.

In the chamber of the White Crystal. The male unicorn lowered his horn.

"She hasn't told the sylvans," Kreliss said, giving the unicorns an accusatory glare.

Andrea breathed in deeply. Scents of honeylike flowers filled the air. "But how does that help us?" I mean—"

The female tilted her head, considering. *You must locate another orach. Fortunately, there is one close by.*

"The Academy?" Geome asked. "All the students search for Jixil's Passage, but I don't think anyone's ever found it."

Closer.

"Where?" Kreliss shifted from foot to foot, eyes dancing with eagerness.

The male let out his breath in a huff. *Ah, there is the difficulty. The only one nearer than the Silver Pillar is in Hotan's ancient dwelling, the Shakan Tzalmaveth.*

"Does that mean what it sounds like?" Andrea asked slowly. The honey scent grew tinny in her nostrils.

Kreliss nodded, her enthusiasm drained away. "The Fortress of Shadows."

"So let's see if I have this right." Geome's annoyingly cheerful voice broke into Andrea's thoughts. They walked away up the mountain pass, the beautiful valley lying pristine and untroubled behind them. Between Geome's compass and Kreliss's knowledge of sun patterns, they should be able to reach the Shakan Tzalmaveth, south of Sacred Valley. Even with no knowledge of how to save the White Crystal, Andrea longed to get there; from a distance, they could do nothing. However, neither Andrea's friends nor the unicorns had said anything about how they would deal with the tzalmaveths. "We walk right up to the tzalmaveths' country home," Geome continued. "Knock on the door, and politely ask if we could borrow their mahalak orach, which they may not even know exists. If it's still there after all this time. Which we've no proof of."

"What if the tzalmaveths don't know it exists?" Andrea asked. "Wouldn't that make our job easier?"

Geome's eyes took on their analytical expression while he considered. "Perhaps. But Sidaria has a portal of her own. What if they use theirs to attack her from the inside? We'd be giving them a deadly weapon."

"Do we have another choice?" Andrea asked.

Geome looked away. "No, I suppose we don't. But it seems so risky."

Kreliss folded her arms. "No one's asking that you come. The shadows might sense you more strongly since one's been inside you."

"I'm certainly not staying here."

"Nobody's staying here," Andrea said. "So let's leave already and finish this job."

That night they camped in the crumbling remains of a castle, perched on one of the few completely dry patches above the unending marshes. Red flowers bobbed on the water's surface, dripping crimson pollen in languid streams. Soft gray grass stretched into the distance, proliferating with hopping brown birds. Their bent needle-shaped beaks dug into every corner of the mud as they poked and prodded the marshy shore with surgeonlike touches. Andrea could see nothing beyond the wetlands, nothing but tufts of straw-colored grass in any direction except for the lingering trail of trees they had left, reaching out like an arm waving farewell.

After climbing steadily uphill, Andrea and her friends had reached the foot of the gently sloping hills easing out of the marshes. The smoky campfire Kreliss lit helped to scare off the mosquitoes, but did nothing for the murky smell that drifted toward them at

all times, thick and mildewed. Sweat dried on Andrea's skin, turning stiff and dry as sandpaper against the unending dampness. Every moment she felt sticky. More than anything, Andrea longed for a long, long shower in clean ice-cold water.

The dark blue expanse lapping against the base of the hill, covered in floating shadows and grass clumps, looked indescribably welcome to Andrea's tired eyes. She knelt beside it, pressing her fingers into the stagnant water. Fragments of broken red stems bobbed at her fingers, floating in the murky greenness. Andrea yanked her hands from the wrist-deep pool. "No way I'm drinking this. Could we dig, you think?"

Kreliss shrugged. "Our canteens won't kill us."

"We don't have that much water in them," Geome said, prodding the wet ground with a shoe. He plucked a spike off a thick-stemmed red plant and used it to dig a few inches. "We should restock, if we can."

"I don't plan to drink from a *swamp*," Kreliss said.

"It should be fine if we dig."

"Okay, I'll grab some sharp sticks." Andrea hurried off, out of the range of their argument. Why did those two always have to squabble? Geome might have forgiven Kreliss for attacking him, but he seemed determined to bait her at every opportunity. Andrea found some likely specimens and tossed them to Kreliss. Digging dried meat out of her pack, along with a few mushrooms they'd gathered on the road, Andrea realized how much she missed chocolate.

"Leathery stew again?" Geome asked. "Isn't there something fresh we could eat? Before the midges eat me, that is."

"If you're in the mood, you could summon up a glorious feast for us through magic, overflowing with delights. Though anything's better than your watery porridge." Kreliss dug the sticks into the ground as if emphasizing her point.

Geome flushed. "My talents run in other directions."

"I've yet to see they run in any direction. Other than endangering us all, of course." Kreliss smirked. "Your bracelets are probably swallowing all the power you haven't burned up making explosions."

"Oh, you're one to talk, after that display earlier. Why Sidaria trusts you—"

"Watch it!" Kreliss's hand clenched around her digging stick.

"Stop fighting already!" Andrea exploded.

Two abashed gazes greeted her. "It bothers you?" Geome asked.

"Yeah. It just does," Andrea muttered.

"You've certainly held your temper," Kreliss pointed out.

Andrea shrugged. "In theater, I kept pushing people. But I found out they worked better without my help."

"Yes, but Andrea, we're a team," Geome said, his voice apologetic. "You can tell us if we're putting you in the middle."

"I just wish someone else would say that," Andrea muttered to herself, remembering her parents. Maybe she could tell them the truth. If she made it back home.

"Kreliss, you dropped your knife," Geome said, holding it out.

Her brow knitted. "I did?" She took the knife and tried to tuck it in her belt, only to find her own was already there. "Not mine."

"Of course it is, look." Geome pointed at the knife. It changed into a yellow butterfly and fluttered onto Kreliss's head.

"Hey!" Kreliss batted at her hair and tried to dislodge the straggler. With a sparkle, the butterfly vanished.

"Magic?" Andrea asked. It was nice to see it used for something pleasant.

"Of course." Geome caught Kreliss's wary look and sighed. "Just lightening the mood." He raised his eyebrows. "Kreliss, I can purify the water. Would that satisfy you?"

Kreliss nodded, accepting the peace offering. Geome knelt, slipping on the slimy grass. He raised his hands over the hole Kreliss had dug. His breathing slowed and his eyes half-closed.

Andrea watched him as Geome knelt there, motionless. Silhouetted against the rosy sunset, he looked like a statue. Beyond him, furlike marsh grass coated the pink and gold water. "Anything worth drinking?" Andrea rubbed the back of her neck, where condensation trickled into her shirt.

Geome winced. "Never disrupt a mage casting a spell. If he can't focus on the magic, it'll backlash." He must have seen her grimace, because his voice softened. "You didn't blow my head off this time, at least."

“What’s your Academy teach you?” Kreliss asked. She pulled a leather pouch of sour-tasting elvish pepper from her pack. “Where I’m from we learn to steady our magic, no matter what. An instant’s distraction could kill.”

“Since dryads and centaurs are so deadly? How would you know anything about magic?” Geome’s tone wasn’t challenging, only puzzled. Kreliss stared at him. He glanced away, tossing a stick on the fire. “Perhaps we should stop arguing and cook. The tzalmaveths are waiting.”

Andrea tossed a stick on the fire, and it flared up, red as paint. She closed her eyes, relaxing into the glow against her eyelids and the fire’s incredible heat. She felt a memory surge.

Andrea remembered...

Red lights glowed on her face, nowhere near as hot as the campfire, but still intense enough to make her sweat. *“I shall return ‘till you finally face me, Alenna. I am the Sorceress’s shadow, and a shadow does not vanish so easily.”* Jessica shoved Andrea, a real shove, not a pretend one. Jessica’s snicker grated on Andrea’s ears. Completely unlike Lorraine’s booming demon laugh, Jessica’s witch laugh sounded moments from complaining.

Andrea grimaced. Jessica had been even nastier than usual lately. She thrust out with her plastic sword, making sure to hit Jessica in the arm. Andrea put all her loathing for Jessica into her words. ALENNA: *“I banish you, creature of the foulest depths!”*

Andrea emphasized the word foul. *"The seer has given me the answer. Here, in the fortress of shadows, dwelling of greatest darkness, I have a power you do not. I have—"*

"Andrea, your turn," Miss Jarnowski called.

Andrea abandoned Jessica without a word, and hurried over to where Miss Jarnowski sat. The teacher wore a simple gray dress with pearl earrings, but her outfit made the frilly pink jumper she held look even more threatening. Costumes slumped over her desk like an upcoming avalanche. "The high schools donated some unwanted dresses. Try this one on."

Andrea caught the enormous armful of gauze and straightened out acres of ruffles. Huge orange and yellow daisies covered the jumper, looking as if they'd crawled off some extremely tacky wallpaper. The skirt puffed out from the layers and layers of gauze. And it weighed as much as a backpack stuffed with books.

"You're kidding!"

"No, Andrea, we need something bright-colored and attention-getting."

"It is that. Blech." Andrea reluctantly pulled the dress over her head. There was certainly room for her jeans and t-shirt underneath. Not to mention several tennis courts.

"Can I take it off now?"

"Straighten out the skirt."

Andrea unclumped the gauze while her teacher looked on. "Perfect. Go put it backstage. Oh, did you bring that possible Forest Gem you mentioned?"

"Yeah." Andrea pulled the plastic stone out of her pocket and placed it on her head. "This dress should be curtains in a day-glo bus. Please, let me wear anything else."

"It looks perfect for a fairy tale." Miss Jarnowski grinned at Andrea's wince. "We'll see. Go hang it backstage."

A fairy tale. Right. Say, Cinderella and the 1960's Godmom? Grimacing, Andrea hurried backstage before anyone saw her. The plastic jewel heated against her forehead. *What the—?* Andrea pulled the Forest Gem off, but it looked normal. Maybe it was the stage lights.

Backstage, Jessica knelt over the cans of paint left over from the scenery. She pried a sticky lid off, and dragged the open can of dark red paint toward the finished forest canvas.

"Drop it!"

Jessica spun. Red paint splashed Andrea, spreading in a crimson wave over the wallpaper daisies and soaking into the layered fabric. Jessica set the can down on the stage floor, scowling. "Why'd you have to find me now?"

"Jessica, what're you doing?" Andrea realized her mouth was still hanging open. She hugged the gauzy dress against her body like armor. Andrea swallowed, very aware she was wearing a paint-covered bad fashion statement. At least the bodice was still dry. "I thought Cindy was the one—"

"Then why didn't you throw her out of the play, before she endangered the whole drama department? She's dragging us all down with her. And Miss Jarnowski didn't even give me Cindy's part. None of us will win the O'Keefe Award!"

Andrea swallowed. Only a week ago, she would have said the same thing. She scrutinized Jessica. The other girl crossed her arms, face holding barely a trace of guilt. Was Andrea capable of similar behavior? Surely not. Yet the words were hers; how long until she became another Jessica, spiteful enough to ruin the play out of pique? Andrea shivered. "She's been out for a week; why didn't you stop then?"

"Because this play's gonna flop no matter what. I doubt we'll even get to perform it, with the script change coming. I might as well destroy it before the administration does."

Andrea clenched her fists. "You're worse than Cindy, lying to us and wrecking everything."

Jessica tilted her head, looking pityingly at Andrea. "Oh, yes, you with the stupid little play you found. Look at you, with that lame dress. You're only playing at being an actress. Well, you can all ruin the drama department on your own. This cast is so bad, the O'Keefe committee will never look at us. I quit. Try performing without the sidekick or the witch either. Believe me, you all deserve to fail."

Andrea watched Jessica storm off. The witch had left, all right. Time to see if someone could take her part with only a few days remaining. The cast list was growing thin. Andrea glanced at her gauzy dress. The wet stain was spreading, bright red clashing with the sharp pink. Andrea scooped a painting rag off the floor, and

automatically wiped at the paint. It only spread worse. Andrea contemplated the skirt for a moment and then deliberately smeared the paint in deeper. At least Jessica had done her a last favor.

"I need to face the witch, whoever she is," Andrea told her friends the next morning. "She'll return until I do." The cloying swamp swelled up around them.

Kreliss shivered. "Some witches live near here. Keep your nose to the wind."

"Nothing about tzalmaveths?" Geome asked.

Andrea shook her head, and drifted into silence. Kreliss and Geome were squabbling about how long the trip would take, and neither of them heard the faint sound that halted Andrea in her tracks. "What was that?" The other two stopped arguing and she heard it again, a low soft moan. "Someone's nearby."

Kreliss jumped. "That came from below us!" She pointed down the hill of yellow straw-grass. "There."

"Hello," Geome called. "We're here to help you."

"Don't be so certain of that," Kreliss hissed. She snatched Geome's arm. "One of the swamp witches could be trapped."

"Help, help!" This time they all heard it.

"Where are you?" Geome asked. "Are you hurt?"

Feminine panic filled the voice. "Near the ruins. Please, come help me."

The three travelers exchanged glances. Finally, Kreliss dug in her pack and found a long rope.

"We're coming," Andrea called. "Just wait."

As they approached the voice's source, the puddles coating the ground like spilled motor oil deepened from shoe soles to ankles and then higher. The travelers waded through gummy water that bobbed against their knees, cold and thick with floating grass. At last, they reached the source of the voice.

A young woman struggled waist-deep, against some unseen adversary. When Andrea looked more closely, she saw the woman's flowing golden curls had tangled in a fence of jagged reeds and thick cattails. The woman's violet eyes widened with panic. She pulled, but the fluffy cattails yanked her back against them. Each time, more flowers tumbled from the daisy wreath propped precariously on her head. Tears on her pale pink dress reflected how much she had already struggled. Despite the woman's bedraggled appearance, Andrea instantly envied her looks.

Geome hurried forward. "Calm down, please!" He gripped her arms and eased them down from where they tugged her tangled hair. "I have a little knife. I'll cut you loose."

The woman let out a small sob. She pressed her hand against her forehead. "Not my hair. Please don't cut off my hair. It's my only beauty."

Andrea raised her eyebrows. Even with the thin scar curving over her cheek, this woman was one of the most beautiful she'd ever seen. Short hair would hardly endanger that.

Geome slid his knife back in his pocket and stepped even closer to the woman to untangle her hair by hand. As he circled the jagged reeds, Kreliss suddenly shrieked, "Stop! Don't move."

Geome froze, mouth dangling open. "What is it?"

Kreliss seized one of the pieces of deadwood floating languidly on the green surface of the water. Splashing, she raced around the reeds to poke the sandy ground behind them. The stick sank into the sand with a sickly gurgle.

"Quicksand?" Andrea asked. "But I thought wood floats, even there."

"It's not quicksand. Or at least, not anymore. Now it's something far worse." Kreliss stared at Geome accusingly. "Can't you feel the magic coming off it?"

Geome tilted his head, considering. "Now that you mention it, I feel a trace. I'm surprised you could."

"The question is whether she knows about it," Kreliss said, staring at the lovely prisoner. "He could've freed you by now if he'd used his knife."

The woman's eyes widened. "I didn't know anything about enchanted sand, I swear! The witch just left me here, trapped by my own hair, and said she'd return for me soon. Oh, you brave travelers, can't you free me somehow?"

Geome considered for a moment, pacing from side to side. Andrea saw his eyes light up with inspiration. He drew his knife once more and the woman flinched, probably anticipating the destruction of her hair. Instead, Geome carefully knelt at her feet and sawed away at the root of the reeds with his blade. White fluff from the plants' tufted tops blew into his face and clung to his hair.

The plants creaked and groaned, then toppled. Geome snatched them in a bundle before they could fall and further tug the woman's curls. "Now we can untangle everything somewhere safer."

The woman's eyes glowed. "How incredibly clever. Thank you so much for saving me."

Kreliss rolled her eyes. "That enchanted sand could've killed him," she muttered to Andrea. "Good to see you being practical for once," she said, louder.

Geome escorted the woman from the place of her confinement with all the gallantry of a noble at court. She clung to his hand, allowing him to help her over thickets of reeds, and around the most treacherous marshy puddles. Andrea didn't see why the young woman had to act so delicate, especially considering the white dress hung in tatters. Andrea slapped away a buzzing insect. The last thing they needed was a fairytale princess.

All four of them climbed back toward the dry ground and stood there, water streaming off their cloaks. Geome sat beside his damsel-in-distress and untangled every strand of reed taking, in Andrea's opinion, far too long about it. Andrea glanced at the woman uncertainly. "Kreliss and I have spare clothes, but you look too tall for them." The woman had to be at least five and a half feet.

"Here." Geome stopped a moment, and snatched his dry poncho from where it lay on his pack. He draped it around her, maroon side out.

The young woman didn't even acknowledge it, staring as she was at the three of them. Her violet eyes widened. "But you're only children!"

Geome turned bright red.

Kreliss crossed her arms. "We're on an important quest and I expect you not to delay us."

"Of course," the woman said, voice trembling like a flower petal caught in a windstorm. She huddled into the borrowed cloak, suddenly smaller. If Andrea had ever thought the woman secure in herself, the thoughts were instantly banished. "I would never wish to trouble you. If you could only escort me away from the swamp, that would be far more than I could ever repay."

"That isn't out of our way," Geome said. "You're welcome to join us. There, done." He dropped the last lock of hair.

"And what's our guest's name?" Kreliss asked. "I believe you neglected to tell us."

"Oh, forgive me. My name is Dalia."

Geome made introductions all around.

"So how long have you lived here?" Geome asked. "If you live here, I mean." His voice barely restrained his eagerness, as if he were chasing a new puzzle.

Dalia took a shaky breath. "I'm on leave from the Academy. While I was traveling through this horrid swamp, a witch caught me and demanded I pledge to join her."

"Anyone you knew?" Geome asked.

"I don't understand. Why would she know a witch?"

Both heads turned swiftly toward Andrea, as if they had forgotten her presence.

"Witches are mages, just as I am," Geome explained. "They usually attend the Academy."

"Well, they hardly sound like nice people."

Geome nodded, a scowl touching his features. He kicked a rock down the hill and into a swampy puddle. "That's just it. Witches are students who break the Academy's laws, cast out as punishment. Many live in the swamp here, for lack of anywhere better. Some join the Crimson Circle."

"They plot their revenge on everyone who cast them out," Dalia said. "Some day, they will attack the Academy and make Calithwain's mages suffer as they themselves have suffered."

"We'll be ready for them," Geome said. "I am also a pupil there."

She turned her wide eyes on him. "You're *that* Geome? The one who blew up the Academy last year?"

"You blew up the Academy?" Andrea asked.

The tips of Geome's ears burned red. "Of course not. Just a storage shed."

Geome seemed to notice that three pairs of eyes still fixed on him. "I was formulating an explosive undetectable to magical senses. If I can succeed, Moren's Defenders could destroy the Crimson Circle before they know what's happening. It'd be an invaluable advantage."

Dalia's eyes lit up. "You're battling the Crimson Circle? You must be terribly brave."

Geome drew himself up, preening. "It's my duty, as a wizard from Alcanster," he said with false modesty. "Even if the king can't stop the evil destroying my country, I, and others like me, will tear apart the Crimson Circle piece by piece."

Dalia stepped closer to him. "Defying them is an ambitious task. I suppose the witch who captured me would never have stopped you. You see, my defense magic is rather weak. Your powers must guard you from everything, even possession."

Andrea winced. The reminder of the tzaamaveth speaking through Geome's lips still lurked in her mind.

"Let's sit and eat a little," Dalia said.

They usually walked a few more hours before stopping to make camp, but Geome scurried to wait on his new friend. Not even Kreliss's scowl made him hesitate. Geome generously did Dalia's share of the work, and less generously left his own chores to Andrea and Kreliss.

"Oh, Dalia, you're too delicate to work, let me wait on you hand and foot," Kreliss said when Geome brought her the piled supper plates. As if oblivious to Geome's glare, she added, "Yes, and lick your boots while I'm about it."

"Stop it."

Kreliss raised her eyebrows at Andrea. Andrea found she couldn't resist. "Well, if you really want, I suppose you might carry me for the rest of the trip," she said in a voice nearly as high as Dalia's.

Geome straightened. "You girls know nothing about it." Striving for wounded dignity, he walked back to where Dalia sat, but he tripped on a tree root, still a gawky adolescent.

Andrea sat down on a tiny hill of dry grass, feeling it crunch agreeably beneath her. The steady buzzing of flies and the warm sunlight were making her drowsy. She blinked a few times, only to see Kreliss nodding as well. Andrea let her eyes drift closed again, just for a moment...

WITCH: Join me.

ALENNNA: Never. You're everything I stand against.

WITCH: Am I? We all have roles to play, and it's too late to change. Two sides of the same coin, good and evil, light and dark. How do your goals differ from mine? Your choices in the next moments will determine everything.

"Knock knock?"

Andrea looked up from her cue cards to see Shanelle standing in the doorway, framed by the hallway dimness.

"Honey, why do you need so much drama? You're so busy with after-school activities you never even go out with your friends."

"I have to start now if I want to be an actress someday." Andrea bit her lip. She couldn't tell her stepmother about New York, about the real reason the play had to succeed. She was sure both her parents would discourage her from seeking her true mother, since they had given her so little information all her life. She glanced at the

Forest Gem, just a silly trinket. Yet, it had warned her about Jessica...or had it? Maybe she *was* spending too much time pretending. If only the circlet could truly cast spells and rescue her from parents and school.

"Hardly anyone succeeds at that. You shouldn't throw away your other choices." Shanelle hesitated. "Your father said it's affecting your schoolwork." Shanelle's forehead creased, and Andrea felt a twinge deep inside. "You know we're both happy to help."

Sure. When they weren't screaming at the tops of their lungs, or putting in overtime, or watching television. Andrea swallowed the words. Why bother? "I know."

"I want to understand. Andrea, why is this so important to you? You're making this choice." The unspoken line echoed through Andrea's head. *Your choices in the next moments will determine everything.*

Andrea quickly reached a decision. "I'm going out." It was a slender chance, but it could save the play. She forced a smile. "And you're right. I'll have Dad help me with math tonight." Andrea hesitated and then gave Shanelle a brief hug. "I won't let my grades slide further." Andrea snatched her jacket and raced out the door.

Andrea rang the bell. "Hi," she told the woman with the blonde bun. She wore a sleek purple dress and looked like a queen in it. "Can I talk to Cindy?"

Chapter 10: Confront Your Foe

"Cindy, you have a guest," her mother yelled up the stairs.

Cindy hurried downstairs. "Andrea? What's going on?" A film of hostility coated her voice.

Andrea swallowed. This was harder than she had expected. "Can we talk? I have news about the play."

"Cindy isn't in it anymore," her mother said, blocking the hall into the rest of the house with her body.

"Just talk. Please?"

"Oh, come on," Cindy grumbled.

Cindy's bedroom was trendy and red, with movie posters blanketing the walls. An autographed picture of Sarah Michelle Gellar held center stage. Cindy perched on her bed cross-legged and gestured to a cherry-medicine-colored beanbag on the floor.

"Yeah?"

"Jessica was sabotaging the play."

Cindy's jaw dropped. "What? First she spends weeks pestering me about how she won't win the O'Keefe Award if I stick around. Then, when I don't quit, she does this?"

"I think she was trying to frame you. Or maybe close the play altogether if she couldn't win. She almost succeeded." Andrea stared down at her hands.

"Well, I assume she's out."

Andrea nodded. "Lorraine got her part. I think she can handle playing two bad guys with no problem."

"And Kell?" Cindy asked, voice a bit too casual.

"Pilar. Megan went from ghostling to fairy queen, and the other ghostlings took Megan's part."

"So you came to tell me all this?" Cindy's cold glance said everything. "I thought you'd be busy rehearsing."

Andrea cleared her throat. "I also came to apologize. I was a tyrant whenever we rehearsed, and I shouldn't have pushed everyone so hard. Especially you. We need you."

"You do? I thought everything's taken care of." Cindy's eyebrows rose toward the ceiling.

Andrea scooted closer to the other girl. The beans crunched underneath her. "No, it isn't. Pilar really doesn't know her lines. She'd just finished learning her own part when this whole mess started. And Megan doesn't know the fairy queen's lines."

"Sounds like a silly arrangement then."

"I'm not arguing."

Cindy tossed her hair. "I don't have time to coach Pilar. You'll manage."

Andrea straightened on the beanbag, ignoring the crunching. "No, we won't, that's what I'm saying. We're all scattered and nobody knows their lines. The school already cut money to the drama department. If we do a bad play nobody wants to see,

they'll have the perfect excuse to close us down forever. Not only will none of us win the O'Keefe Award, none of us will even have a chance to compete for it again."

"I can't go back." Cindy spoke as if reciting a fact. No challenge remained in her voice.

"I know Jesse was rude, too, but he was just mouthing off. You know he never stays mad."

"It's not that. Why do you think I skipped all those rehearsals?" At last, Cindy met Andrea's eyes. "I've just been so tired lately. I fall asleep the instant I come home from school, and Mom knows it. I can't rehearse; I can barely stay awake in the afternoons. I guess Pilar'll have to take this one." Cindy bit her lip, staring at the clear blue sky out the window.

"What's wrong? Is it serious?"

The words left Cindy's lips like gunshots. "Permanent. I have diabetes."

Andrea couldn't see the problem. "So does my cousin. So that's why you don't eat sweets. Has it always tired you this much?"

"It just started. I have to give myself blood tests and shots every day; there's so much to learn. And Mom worries about how it'll affect my schoolwork. She said I had to cut down, and the only thing I had this semester was drama."

"You're awake now."

"I'm getting used to it. But Mom worries I'm going to overdo stuff. She doesn't want me to try out for the spring musical, either."

Andrea could only imagine how she would feel if she were stuck at home every day. "You should talk to her, Cindy. Tell her you're feeling okay."

Cindy snorted. "And do what? You must be in dress rehearsals now."

"We are. And we really need you. I could help."

"I know the part," Cindy mumbled. She stared down at her hands where they played with a fold of the starry gold and red comforter. "But I'm not part of the play anymore; I've blown my chance for the award."

Andrea hesitated and then leaned forward to squeeze Cindy's arm. The beanbag moved alarmingly under her, and she nearly slid off. "You haven't blown anything, no more than I did. At least think about coming back; we need you. It's your part, and no one else can fill it in your place." Andrea wondered if there was anything else she could say. Without Cindy, the students had no play.

Andrea's eyes burst open and she sat up, or rather, tried. With each movement, pain exploded through her body in the worst cramps she could possibly imagine. Every muscle screamed in agony, so badly she couldn't even shift to relieve the pain. Andrea gasped for air. She gave a last wiggle and tumbled down the hill, inflicting scratches she couldn't even feel over the fiery needles piercing her stomach. Around her, she heard faint signs of distress through her own agony. One mid-pitched, the other lower. Kreliss and Geome. But where was Dalia?

"How does it feel, to know you wasted your strength coming this far, only to fail now? Look at you, playing at heroes." Eyes watering, Andrea looked up to see a blurry

Dalia standing over them. "I spent years devoting my life to magic only to have it ripped away when Master Melnor expelled me. He's already ruined everyone's magic, so I might as well finish it. Everyone at the Academy deserves to fail. What's wrong, don't feel like speaking?" She pointed her wand at each of them in turn. Andrea felt the pain ease slightly. It burned her guts far too much for her to sit up, but she could breathe more easily. Her hair dangled in her face, but she didn't even have the strength to jerk her head. She stared at her knees. *Focus.*

"We saved your life," Geome said. His voice was tight with his own agony.

Dalia fingered her long blue wand, tapping it like a flute. "Don't be naïve. I saw you arrive and tricked you long enough to take this." She held up the amber crystal Geome normally wore around his neck.

Geome groaned. "Why'd they throw you out— did the Academy Master catch you strangling kittens or something?" He lay behind Andrea, out of sight. The only person she could see was Dalia, towering over them and smiling as if she'd eaten someone's soul.

Dalia glared at him for an instant before her voice congealed into honey. "With every spell they bind our power tighter into restrictions and rules and consequences. Where's magic's joy?"

"You broke your oath. I know what that makes you," Geome snapped. He breathed heavily, sounding as sore and cramped as Andrea.

She tossed her hair. "Yes, I am a witch, and I take power from those who waste the gift. Still, your weak focus will hardly benefit me. Perhaps I should smash it."

Geome groaned, more pain in his voice than Andrea had heard when the shadow had taken him over.

"But this," Dalia's cold finger brushed Andrea's forehead, smoothing closer to the Forest Gem. Andrea shuddered as Dalia groped, but she still couldn't move. "This belonged to my mistress, centuries ago."

"No!" Heat and electricity jolted against Andrea's head. The shock pushed her back into wet grass.

Dalia screamed and jerked her hand away. "She said you were travelers, easy prey. She promised a simple victory, a chance to win what those mindless tzmaveths failed."

As Dalia talked, Andrea's arms clenched tighter around her middle. The pain was fading. Was the Forest Gem protecting her from the witch's spell, or had Dalia ceased paying attention? Or both? Andrea cradled her stomach and simply listened.

Dalia's voice sank into a purr. "You're free to join me, Geome. You were exiled from the Academy just as I was."

"I'm not expelled. I just need to think my actions over during harvest month." Under his indignant protest, Andrea could hear a hint of vulnerability.

"You have other choices," she coaxed. Dalia's violet eyes glowed like eerie magnets. "The Academy stifles students, exiling them for perfecting their craft instead of nursemaiding others. But I can teach you magic without limits, without restraints. While you twiddle with your gadgets, the world is changing. You could take your place in a new order."

Geome's voice chilled. "The wizards of the Crimson Circle said something similar to my mother. She refused to join. As do I."

Dalia shrugged. "Then die, along with your friends."

Andrea tensed. Neither of her companions had moved; the pain must still be binding them. Andrea felt well enough to act, but what could she do? Take her dagger and stab Dalia? Never! Even the thought made Andrea want to vomit. Kreliss, too far away, still had the amolir. What could she do? Then Andrea smiled, remembering defeating the evil witch onstage. All right, the Forest Gem hadn't sparked the memory, but she had no choices left. Dalia was pacing back and forth, gloating over all three of them. Soon. Dalia stepped closer, almost close enough. Now! Snatching the canteen from her belt, Andrea hurled the contents straight at the witch.

Dalia shrieked. The spell trapping Andrea vanished in a wave of soothing green light. Dalia shook the water out of her face, but didn't show any sign of melting. She slapped Andrea hard across the face. "For that, your death will be twice as painful, Sorceress's pet."

Cheek stinging, Andrea forced herself up. She had only distracted the witch. However, if she could stand before Dalia renewed her spell, then she could stop her. The mud slid when Andrea climbed to her feet, like treacherous ice in a parking lot.

"Stop!" Kreliss's sword pressed against Dalia's throat. "Stand up slowly."

Geome gestured, and his focus flew out of Dalia's hand and into his own.

As Dalia stood, something glinted gold against her neck. "What's that?" Andrea asked, staring at the tiny charm. The diamond shape trapped inside a circle teased a memory from her childhood. "Where'd you get it?"

Dalia smiled. "You recognize Sorceress Jixil's emblem? She'll be so pleased. Soon you'll be able to ask her yourself." Dalia still held herself like a princess, despite her muddy dress and Kreliss's sword brushing her neck.

"You aren't taking anyone anywhere," Kreliss said

"Jixil's been imprisoned under the Perilous Cliffs for thousands of years," Geome stood, ineffectually brushing mud off his shirt. "I don't care how many Academy students try to worship her; she's gone."

"Sorceress Jixil has powers you cannot envision." Dalia's voice sharpened like a knife, cutting through the damp breeze. "Mistress, I entreat your help. This child sorceress has powers you didn't warn me of. The Forest Gem has accepted her."

Incompetent magician! Foolish woman playing with cheap tricks.

Andrea's head snapped up. "The voice! It's speaking inside my head again." She saw Dalia's eyes flash with fury and, could it be, jealousy? "I think she hears it, too."

"What voice?" Geome asked. He gave up cleaning his clothes. "What's it saying?"

"What do you mean, again?" Kreliss asked.

"Mistress," Dalia coaxed. "Aid me. Give me the tzaamaveths' place."

The voice spoke again, this time directly to Andrea. The voice caressed her, warming her in a burst of deep sympathy. *You recognized my necklace, didn't you, Andrea? Hand the Forest Gem to Dalia. That's why you came to Calithwain, to rescue me from my imprisonment. You know me, Andrea. You've sought me for so long. Free me and take your destined place at my side. You need never return to the troubles of Earth.*

"There's only one person I want." Andrea desperately kept her voice steady. "She isn't here."

The voice hissed in her head. *I know everything you are, the worst things you've done. You cannot bury the truth.*

Andrea remembered...

ALENN: I want to protect the elves, while you're destroying them. Now, release the White Crystal.

WITCH: There, you see now? We both want it. And there's something more you want, isn't there? I offer it to you. Everything you've ever desired.

This close to the show, Andrea's lines raced through her head, completely outside her control. Clouds gathered above in a sickening swirling mass. Andrea burst in the door. "Shanelle, could you make me a sandwich? First call's at 5:30, for a show at 7:30. Oh, do you have your tickets yet? Because they're more expensive at the door." Shanelle hadn't moved from her seat at the kitchen table. "Are you busy? I can make it." Why was Shanelle so quiet?

"Honey, the math teacher called," Shanelle said. "Did you know you've been getting D's on tests?"

Andrea shifted from foot to foot. "I guess. Once. I'll study harder for the next one. Now, I really have to go."

Shanelle stood up, her eyes brimming with hurt. "Andrea, you can be a little late tonight. Why didn't you tell us you're having trouble? Either of us can work with you, Andrea, you know that."

"Yeah, sure. Look, Shanelle, I know you're trying to help, but it's opening night." Why did Shanelle have to spring this on her now?

"And your exam's Monday. You have performances Thursday through Sunday; when do you expect to study?"

"I should have time Sunday night. I'll find some." Andrea moved toward the fridge, but Shanelle turned her around with a hand on her shoulder.

"Honey, drama isn't everything. Maybe for the weekend performances you should let somebody else go on."

"I can't! The cast needs me." Shanelle didn't understand anything!

"I'm sure someone else knows the part. Andrea, you've been driving yourself so hard, as if this play defines your existence. It doesn't. You need to get back to your schoolwork, re-examine your priorities, kiddo."

Andrea fisted her hands. "You're not my mother! Leave me alone."

Shanelle backed away, hurt crossing her face.

Andrea longed to stop her mouth, and yet, more words tumbled out. "If I have to have a wicked stepmother, I should at least have a fairy godmother to rescue me. You can't tell me what to do."

"Andrea!" Her father walked into the room.

"Shanelle's delaying me when I have to leave," Andrea said quickly. Perhaps she could escape before things escalated.

"Shanelle and I are in agreement on this one," her father said. "And after that display of rudeness, you certainly aren't going to your play now."

"It's opening night!"

"And you can spend it studying. Now go upstairs."

Andrea hurried upstairs and slammed the door behind her. She hurled her math book onto the floor, but that didn't relieve her feelings.

Her father might relent and let her go to the play, but she couldn't she gamble all her chances on it. They were both completely unfair; neither understood how much she needed theater. Without pausing to think, Andrea snatched her coat from her desk chair and pulled it on. She opened her window and unlatched the screen. Outside, the old climbing tree beckoned. Andrea swallowed. While it looked benign enough in daytime, now the branches rattled against her window like a monster clawing to get in. Shadows slithered over the walls. Holding her breath, Andrea levered herself out the window and into the branches. She glanced back at the brightly lit house and then turned away.

I should have told Shanelle, Andrea realized, drifting back to reality. I think she even would've understood why I have to find my real mother. Now, I just hope I'll have the chance to explain, after I get back home. With a flash of guilt, Andrea realized that once she found her mother, she wouldn't need Shanelle, would she? But while she had been planning to run away to New York, Shanelle, oblivious, had tried to help her. Andrea swallowed; her throat felt thick. *I hope I do make it home. Just long enough to explain why I've been blowing off tests and putting everything into drama. I want to tell her myself. I hope she understands.*

This vision of the past had felt darker in her memory. It had been a sunny day and balmy night; Andrea was sure of it. And had Andrea truly been so angry, her parents so close-minded and unreasonable? The argument had felt so short. Was Andrea's guilt coloring it? Or was the dying crystal poisoning the past? If Andrea failed, perhaps this darker world would appear.

Come. Andrea sucked her breath in between her teeth. The seductive whisper lulled her deeper into the darkness of her mind. Everything she had ever wanted. Security and welcome waited on the other side of the Forest Gem. *Come, Andrea,* the voice caressed her. Andrea closed her eyes, feeling the speaker's love wash over her.

"Andrea, what is it? What do you hear?" Kreliss asked, voice trembling.

In a voice she barely recognized, Andrea said, "I think it's my mother."

"What!" Kreliss bit her lip, but didn't move from where she held her sword on Dalia. "Geome and I are here. Stay with us."

"Whatever spell this witch is using, you mustn't trust her," Geome said firmly. He clasped her shoulder from behind, shoes squelching in the mud.

Andrea gripped Geome's hand, relishing the physical stability while her mind spun. "When I was very little, and couldn't sleep, she'd dangle a charm in front of my eyes, and I'd watch it drift back and forth." Andrea pointed at Dalia's diamond-in-circle pendant. "That charm."

"It's just a necklace," Geome said. His hand felt wonderfully supporting. "No one believes Jixil could rise again, no matter how many circles surround the diamond." He patted her shoulder and then walked to stand between her and Dalia. "This ends now."

"Oh? Then taste the power of this!" Dalia ripped the charm from her neck and hurled it at Geome. A shifting ring of golden light swelled around him. Andrea reached for him, but her hand sprang back like a bouncing ball on concrete.

"You'll die!" Kreliss's sword point trembled at Dalia's neck.

"And the boy dies just after," Dalia said. Still cool and dignified. Underneath her features lay a coil of anger, barely checked. "Can you live with that?"

Andrea. The voice echoed through her head, still soft, coaxing.

"No," Andrea whispered. "Not for Geome's life. End this, if you're my mother. End it now."

"Mistress, you promised!" Dalia screamed. A surge pulsed through the Forest Gem, as if someone reached through it. A haze of red-gold sparks swirled around Dalia

like a cloud of bees. Dalia vanished with a shriek. The shimmer that had trapped Geome likewise vanished.

You are nothing. The voice spoke to Dalia, sounding breathless.

“But that’s impossible,” Andrea whispered. “My mother left years ago, on earth.” She bit her lip. It couldn’t be.

A clap of thunder split the murky air.

“It’s the magic,” Geome said, looking at the sky. His loud breathing filled the air, and he shuddered, face white. “So much concentrated power is breaking up the balance of the weather. We need to leave before this swamp floods.” The three travelers climbed to higher ground.

Geome glanced at Andrea as they walked. He looked shaken, but his color was returning to normal. “Is your mother truly in Calithwain?”

She bit her lip. “I don’t want to think about it. I’m so confused.” Andrea couldn’t allow the doubts crowding her mind to surface, not now. She concentrated on walking, each step a triumph. Here on the high ground, the mud thickened into tall grass. It stiffened in brown clumps, with no trees visible. Just flat barrenness stretching ahead.

“In your play, what happens when we get to the fortress?”

Andrea raised her eyebrows. “I can’t depend on that.” She glanced at Geome and sighed. Next to Kreliss’s fierce passion to protect her people, Geome’s steadiness was like a landmark, linking Andrea with the humdrum world of schoolwork and jokes.

“Tell me.”

"In the play, we snuck into the castle. We found that a witch and her ghostlings had stolen the crystal because she hated the elves. We dumped a bucket of water on her, so she melted. Then her power over the ghostlings vanished. They apologized and gave us back the crystal."

Geome burst into rueful laughter. "I can just imagine that happening! Did you expect Dalia to melt away, like the witch in your story?"

Andrea shook her head, giggling herself. Now that the tension had ended, her emotions were running completely out of control. "It was the only thing I could think of. I'm just glad the water distracted Dalia long enough for Kreliss to deal with her." Andrea hesitated. "Fighting the witch was the last scene in my play. That's over now; it's like I'm alone." Andrea spoke as if the memory hadn't conjured waves of guilt when she remembered abandoning her parents. How angry they must be! Yet that familiar anger would feel a hundred times better than the tempting love that had beckoned from inside her mind. Andrea swallowed, hard. The sticky-sweet voice in her mind made her want to throw up. She wiped her sweaty brow; the dank air only made her feel worse.

"Of course you're not." Geome patted her shoulder, briefly and a bit awkwardly. "Kreliss and I are here." To cover his clumsy moment, he scooped a broken fluffy-topped reed off the ground and began folding it in pieces.

"But you two argue all the time. And when Kreliss tried to kill you—"

Geome's voice grew quiet, and he concentrated all his attention on the reed.

"When someone threatens your entire way of life, you'd be surprised how you'll react.

Kreliss wanted to kill me, or at least part of her did, but all of the woodfolk's lives are resting on her shoulders."

"She shouldn't have to choose." Andrea nearly tripped in a muddy pit and quickly steadied herself.

Geome tossed the crumpled fluff against a tree. "Life isn't what we'd like. And the only way to combat injustice is to do just that, to fight it." His eyes burned with emotion.

Andrea raised a teasing eyebrow. "Don't tell me someone stole one of your inventions."

His gaze turned toward her, completely serious. "A hundred years ago, Vornak the Shadowlord seduced the mages of Alcanster into servants of evil. He changed the Wizards' Circle into an object of terror and brutality before anyone realized what had happened. The queen at the time banished all the mages of Alcanster, but those loyal to the new Crimson Circle ignored her decree. Now, if anyone displays a hint of power, he's banished. Most mages are innocent, but the king doesn't care. Only evil wizards of the Crimson Circle live in Alcanster anymore, casting spells for extortion and murder."

Andrea shivered, even in the thick stillness. "What a horrible place!"

"No, it's a beautiful country, just north of Calithwain, but the overwhelming fear of magic strengthens every day. Some of the mages who come here to Calithwain vow to fight the Crimson Circle until we can come home." A proud smile crept across his face.

"You?" He was only a year older than she was.

He shook his head. "I still have years of training left, before I take the oaths of a full mage. Then, yes, I plan to join Moren's Defenders and fight for my country. That's why I'm learning all the magical theory I can manage. I have to be the best."

"Who's Moren?"

"Moren the Merciful led the banished wizards to safety in Calithwain, and taught them to love their country, even though they could never return." An odd wistfulness crossed his face.

"Stop chattering like jays and watch the storm ahead. Not that there's anything else to see," Kreliss called.

"Dalia?" Andrea asked.

Geome shook his head. "I believe Dalia's influence has faded with distance. However, weather magic is quite unpredictable."

Kreliss's hands landed on her hips. "Are we out of danger? Yes or no?"

"I believe so."

Lightning jolted through the slate gray sky like a pin stabbing velvet. Thunder rumbled a moment later. Geome glanced up. "What under the Seven was that?"

"Thunder, nitwit." Kreliss scowled. "We need to find shelter."

"Quickly," Andrea added. "We're standing in an open field with nothing but grass and scrub brush. That means we're the tallest targets for the lightning to hit."

"Not precisely the tallest. What about that tower?"

Andrea stared in the direction Geome pointed. "That's a pillar of black clouds. Even if you like cloud pictures, I don't think we can hide in there."

"No, it's an illusion. Watch." Concentrating heavily, Geome stared at the overcast sky. A thin ray of sunlight stabbed through the clouds to flare on the tower briefly. The building's surface sparkled like a mirage.

"Is that the Shakan Tzalmaveth?" Andrea asked. She wished for a hint from the Forest Gem, but it remained silent. Apparently, it had finished advising her.

Geome shook his head. "It doesn't feel like tzalmaveths. Someone else must live there."

Kreliss punched her thigh. "I was sure I was leading us south, but without the sun it's impossible to tell. I may have missed."

"Next time, tell me earlier," Geome said, pulling his brass compass out of his pocket. "I thought you could find your way."

"With no sun?" Kreliss tossed her hair, abandoning the argument before they could fall into familiar patterns. "Hurry, before the lightning burns us to charcoal."

Clouds churned. The skies darkened like a frown. The travelers exchanged glances. "Run!" Thunder roared overhead, over and over. Bolts of lightning crashed down around them. Racing headlong over the ground, Andrea and her friends somehow avoided the bolts.

They clambered up the long, twisting path that led to the narrow gates. Kreliss, the fastest by a few paces, banged on the door with her fists. "Hello? Is someone home?"

Silence.

"It could be abandoned," Andrea said.

"Well, we need to get out of the rain," Kreliss said. "If no one lives here, then it's all ours. We can't travel any further tonight."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea—" Andrea started to say.

A sound like tearing cloth came from behind them, and all three travelers spun.

"Who disturbs my peace?" A figure materialized before them, no taller than Andrea's waist. His voice sounded amazingly deep and vibrant. Lightning flashed over dark blue skin, like the stormy sky in miniature. His dark robes crackled with an electric smell, a tingling that permeated the air as well. A white beard cascaded over his chin in triple tufts. "Those who shatter the sanctity of my isolation must face my terrible wrath." He scowled. "Merely children. Hardly a challenge for someone of my power."

"Try us," Kreliss said, drawing her sword.

Beside Andrea, Geome clutched the pendant at his neck. A glowing shield rose around the three of them. Andrea shivered. She doubted her dagger would help anything.

"So, you children would fight me?" He sounded amused, as if he played with them.

Kreliss raised an eyebrow. "And someone as powerful as you feels the need to stalk travelers?"

"We have no quarrel with you," Geome said quickly. "We merely sought shelter for the night."

The man eyed Kreliss. "You came to me." Then he gave them a slow smile that chilled Andrea to the core. "I need you to solve my quest."

"Not a chance," Kreliss said. "We're already on a mission, and running out of time.

He blinked. "No matter. I ask everyone who passes this way. Eventually, someone will know the answer I'm seeking. Then I can leave my tower to them and return to my world."

"A tower full of magic?" Geome asked. At Kreliss's glare, he hastily added, "That could be enough to save the White Crystal."

"Who are you?" Kreliss asked, suspicion coating her voice. "I've had my fill of mages today.

"Mage!" the man thundered. "You think me a mage?" His theatricality had returned.

"Aren't you?" Andrea asked.

"Certainly not. Have none of you heard tales of my great feats? I conjure colors from darkness, joy from despair, music from the mouths of harpies. My task is to shape the dreams of all of those who live in Calithwain, and beyond. This is the Ophel Chelem, the Dreamtower, and I am the Dreamweaver."

The Dreamweaver beckoned, and a long thread of cloud drifted down from the storm overhead. He wound it around his finger, molding and shaping it. The Dreamweaver built a strangely textured painting in front of their eyes, flat, but with protrusions and rough edges.

A purple dragon roared its fiery breath at them and Andrea shrank back, momentarily frightened of getting burned. To her surprise, the fear seemed woven into

the dream cloud, an emotion from without, meant to be experienced by her heart just as the colors were by her eyes. "Incredible," she breathed.

"These are my powers. But I can only offer them to one powerful enough to answer my riddle."

Andrea hesitated. "And if we guess wrong?"

He smiled, as if he knew what his words would cost them. "I lock you up for a week or three to teach you wisdom. No exceptions."

"Then we won't guess," Kreliss said. "Come on, we're leaving."

She turned, but faster than thought, he stood in front of her. "Not so easy, my dear. Everyone who comes here must answer, or how should I solve my puzzle?"

"You'll stop riddling with my sword in your gut," Kreliss said.

"What is it with this place?" Andrea exploded. "Everyone creates these nasty puzzles. Why can't you just ask for what you want, instead of demanding three hairs off a turtle's head, or that we lay a golden egg?"

"Wait," Geome said. "At least we could try before Kreliss attacks him. We might even solve it. I've read a lot of books."

The Dreamweaver snorted. "And no other adventurer has? Here is my question: How do I make dreams real?"

Kreliss blinked. "You're the Dreamweaver and you don't know?"

"Seems my servants will have extra duties this week."

"Why're you forcing this on us?" Andrea asked.

His eyes flashed. "You think I enjoy harassing travelers? What am I, a storybook villain? I ask because I have no choice, because the Shifting Realm cursed me with too great a challenge, a quest no one person can master. I swore I would do whatever needed."

Geome cleared his throat. "You could at least offer us supper. I think better on a full stomach."

"Geome!" Kreliss shoved him. "We aren't going inside, to your dungeon or your table."

"Oh you're perfectly safe, at least until you answer." The Dreamweaver gestured toward his house. "You children are correct, I've abandoned far too many of the social graces." He sighed at Kreliss's glare. "You have my word. Come, I insist." Flicks of power danced at his fingertips. Swallowing past the constriction in her throat, Andrea followed him inside.

Chapter 11: The Voice that Cries Inside You for a Chance

Murky air swirled with incense strong with nutmeg and lavender until Andrea could scarcely breathe without coughing. Drifting on all sides, tapestries in every color of the rainbow displayed gentle misty patterns. Carpets cushioned their feet as delicately as clouds. They passed from the spacious front hallway into a large dining room with a ceiling like a starry sky. There, constellations twinkled and slowly rotated, like a voiceless planetarium.

The Dreamweaver motioned them all to seats around the table and sat himself. The table lay completely empty, with no signs of dishes or food. Andrea glanced around her. Not even a bell pull. "Do you live alone?"

"Mostly." The Dreamweaver sank into a thronelike chair, feet dangling like a young child's. The travelers sat as well, settling into the wooden chairs with much creaking.

His riddle still hung over them all. Andrea ran through all the traditional fairy tale answers in her head. "Rumpelstiltskin. A man walks on four legs in the morning of life, two in the daytime, and three (one and a cane) at night. Time conquers everything. A cherry when it's blooming has no stone, a chicken in the egg has no bone... what was the rest of that song?"

The double doors blew open and then slammed. A gust of air rushed through. Another gust, and another. The winds swirled over the table, depositing place settings in front of the Dreamweaver and his three guests. The next set of winds brought serving dishes heaped with bread, fruit, rich-smelling soup, cheeses, glistening sweets. Andrea

peeked into the enormous soup tureen. It was less than a third full, presumably to prevent sloshing.

"Please begin, I don't stand on ceremony." The Dreamweaver smiled like a fond parent. "Sorry about the simple food, but the servants don't have much skill at cooking."

"Invisible servants?" Geome asked, fingers twitching on the tablecloth. "Did you render ordinary people invisible? Or shape air into human form? If it's the latter, how do you keep them from disintegrating? Or do you recreate them each day?"

The Dreamweaver's eyes widened. "Scholar, student, or the author of trivia games? I feel encompassed by a whirlwind." He began buttering a large wedge of bread. "Unfortunately, my arts won't solve the puzzle."

Geome wasn't one to give up. "But how did you create them? What spell did you use?"

"No spell. I told you, I'm not a mage. I wove them in my studio. And you." Taking an enormous bite, he eyed Andrea. "You've certainly traveled a long distance to join me," he mumbled around the crumbling bread.

Andrea blinked. "You can tell that?"

The Dreamweaver swallowed his mouthful, and beckoned for a gust of air to serve him soup. "Oh yes. My dreams reach everywhere, even the far places. My own home is one of the furthest of all. But please, go ahead and eat. Your answer can wait 'till after."

The meal passed simply enough. Andrea spent the time running over every lines of the script in her head. Nothing suggested itself. Meanwhile, supper's sweet apples

and crumbly white cheese seemed a banquet after days of badly-cooked food eaten by the side of the road. Andrea reluctantly swallowed the last bite of a berry pastry, comfortably full for what seemed like the first time in Calithwain.

At last, the Dreamweaver straightened in his chair. "Have you an answer? Or will you spend the next weeks as my prisoners?"

Geome smiled confidently. "To make dreams real, you need only believe in them and make them come true."

The Dreamweaver winced. "That is the sappiest answer anyone's subjected me to. Wishful thinking won't solve my quest."

"The answer's no stupider than your question," Kreliss retorted. "How can you interrogate everyone who walks by, innocent people who've done nothing?"

"Nothing?" The Dreamweaver pounded the table. "My own world melts into chaos as you, as you say, *do nothing*. I need an answer, and I shall take it however I can. Now, have you finished guessing?"

Andrea studied him. The question had a catch. It had to. "We can't answer."

"Andrea!" Kreliss shrieked. Geome grasped the pendant at his neck.

"So you forfeit." There was something of a smirk in his features.

"It's *your* quest, not ours. That means no one else can solve it for you. The answer needs to come from you, doesn't it?" Praying she was guessing right, Andrea continued. "Ask all the travelers you want, but if you came to Calithwain to find a solution, then no one can help you." The words echoed uncomfortably in her ears. Sidaria had chosen her to save the elves. No one else.

The Dreamweaver raised his eyebrows. "You mean you don't want my tower with all its servants and spells to solve your own quest? That's never happened."

Andrea crossed her arms. "Of course I want a solution. I want the elves to be safe so I can go home. But you can't reawaken the White Crystal, can you?"

The Dreamweaver sighed, face an odd mixture of resignation and frustration. "Quite right, young lady. I fear that's beyond my power."

"Well, you can't take shortcuts either. Until you discover the solution for yourself, you're as stuck as we are."

The Dreamweaver sighed. "Unfortunately, you make a compelling point."

"Well, now that we've solved your puzzle, can you help us?" Geome asked.

"Solved my puzzle? I don't recall an answer."

"Or saw through it, whatever." Under the Dreamweaver's stern gaze, Geome wilted. "Maybe just a bed for the night?"

The Dreamweaver rose and beckoned the three to follow. "Now that you've turned it down, I might as well show you my strength. I'm sure the young man is curious." Indeed, Geome was nearly bouncing on his toes in eagerness.

He led them down a stone corridor and through dimly lit hallways, then ushered them through a square doorway. Geome stopped in front of Andrea so suddenly she bumped into him.

"What—" Andrea started and then she saw where Geome stared.

A giant cloud glimmered in midair, sparkling with all the colors of the rainbow and many more besides. Andrea blinked. She couldn't possibly see the red-black so

deep her eyes seemed to melt. An invisible sparkle in the air marked the presence of another unlikely color. The hues shifted almost randomly, yet with an intrinsic beauty. The room smelled like honey, sweet and fragrant. Soft tones drifted through the room, humming with the shift of color. A sense of happy peace drifted over Andrea, and with it an undercurrent of excitement, as if she had a wonderful idea for a craft project.

The Dreamweaver stepped onto a dais of dark gray stone. Instead of being smooth, the flat surface rippled with eddys and textures, swirling round and round. Andrea could only see the moving half out of the corner of her eye, yet her senses insisted the patterns in the stone were constantly shifting. Above the dais floated the colorful cloud, bobbing easily.

The Dreamweaver stepped onto the platform and reached into the bloated cloud. He drew a misty handful out slowly, kneading it with his fingers as if it were cotton. A trickle seeped out from his hand, flowing back to the cloud from which he tugged it. The Dreamweaver cast what remained into the air and then started to sculpt it, pushing and shaping with his fingers. While he worked, he hummed softly to himself.

At last, he stood back. "What do you think, young lady?"

Andrea stared. Using the clouds, he had sculpted Greentrees Auditorium. Blue velvet curtains framed the shining stage floor, complete down to each masking tape X. No actors, only a lone chair. With the image came the tug of home, with its warmth and security. Andrea breathed in, and smelled the janitor's bleachy floor polish and the dust of the curtains.

A girl walked onstage, head lifted confidently, pink stretch pants purple in the blue-shaded light. Was that herself? Andrea had traveled so far beyond the silly actress depicted there. Once she had been scared to face her parents and had dreamed of a perfect mother. Now Andrea only prayed she would survive long enough to face the coaxing voice inside her head. The image dissipated into air.

"I prefer not to draw people," the Dreamweaver said. He arched a blue eyebrow over twinkling eyes. "It's risky stealing another's image for only a moment's entertainment."

"Could you show me my parents?" Kreliss asked softly. Andrea blinked. This was the first sign of sentiment she had seen from the other girl. Andrea bit her lip, uncomfortably aware she had been about to ask the same thing, to see her real mother.

"No." The Dreamweaver's voice had lost its stage presence, as if he was sensitive to what his words cost both girls. "You've never seen them. I could show you your old home."

Kreliss shook her head without hesitation. "I've seen enough of Darkland." Her next words came out forced, too quick. "Maybe you can paint up Andrea's fairy prince."

"Who?" Geome asked eagerly. After the incident with Dalia, he seemed to relish any opportunity to tease either of the girls.

Face hot, Andrea mumbled something that sounded like "no one."

"Shall I create an image for the young man?" the Dreamweaver asked with gentle tact. Without waiting for a reply, he began to twist and bend fragments of cloud together. Within moments, the Dreamweaver had created one of the intricate inventions the girls

had seen in Geome's house, bristling with cogs and copper pipes. Kreliss and Andrea exchanged glances and then both burst into laughter.

The Dreamweaver smiled tolerantly at both of them, not asking the girls to explain the joke. "It's late. You should all sleep very well here. In the morning, I'll let you return to your quest." The Dreamweaver led them up twisting gray steps to a corridor of four identical wooden doors. "The servants should have your rooms ready by now. Just tell them if you need anything. Sleep well."

"Wait," Andrea called.

He glanced back, one eyebrow raised.

"Why do you need to make dreams solid? What's your mission?"

A glimmer of pain crossed his face briefly, but he banished it so quickly Andrea couldn't be sure of what she'd seen. "Rescuing young travelers from bad weather, of course. And now you should sleep."

Andrea opened the closest door to find a small bed, a chest, a chair, and a mirror. Small but bright, the candle on the chest cast flickering shadows. The room's welcoming dimness made Andrea suddenly sleepy. A little stand by the door offered towels and a basin of steaming water. Andrea glanced back at her two friends. "I guess there's no point to saying pleasant dreams here."

"Especially if we have to dream about Geome's inventions," Kreliss said with a smirk. "Good night, both of you."

"What's wrong with my inventions?" The bang of Kreliss's shutting door saved her having to reply.

Andrea hesitated in her own doorway. "Geome, how long?"

He swallowed, a lump jiggling down his throat. "Tomorrow, during the night, the White Crystal will die."

Had they failed the quest? "Oh, Geome—"

"We'll get there, Andrea. We have to." He met her eyes, and Andrea could see the same hopelessness in his face that must have been in hers. "Go to sleep. You need it."

Andrea nodded and silently shut the door. Inside her room, she washed up and then fell straight into bed. The soft sheets smelled of lavender, a strong but not unwelcome scent. She had worried she wouldn't sleep, but the mattress was soft as bubbles, with a big fat quilt to tuck around herself. After days of sleeping on the ground, even a real sleeping bag would have carried her to heaven. Andrea blew out the candle from where she lay, snuggled under the covers. Her head sank into the pillow, soft as a giant powder puff.

Andrea remembered...

White powder flew through the air whenever the female ghostlings doused their necks and faces with dry-smelling makeup. Backstage during the play was a perfect definition of chaos. Sweltering, too. Everywhere Andrea turned, someone was changing her costume or retouching her makeup. Girls crowded along the space in front of the mirror, blocking any newcomers from even approaching the glass. Andrea glanced at her stretch pants and pale pink shirt. The outfit wasn't authentically medieval, but it was

better than the pink dress. Then again, anything was. She found the deck of cards she'd tucked in her street clothes. For once, she'd be onstage enough she might not need them.

Behind Andrea the door opened, to shrieks of "Close the door; we're naked in here!" Andrea glanced behind her and saw Cindy standing just inside the room, arms crossed in front of her.

"I'm here to play my part," she announced to the dressing room at large.

"That's ridiculous," Lorraine said. She turned away from the mirror, one eye covered in stage makeup all the way to her eyebrow, the other eye still undone. "You've missed almost a month of rehearsals. You don't deserve to be in this play."

"That's true, but it isn't the point," Andrea said. "Pilar was a fantastic fairy queen, but she doesn't know all of Cindy's lines. Remember the ghostling scene at the last rehearsal? For the play to succeed, we need to put it back the way it was."

Lorraine dropped her compact on the table. "I thought you didn't want Cindy around since she wasn't doing the work."

"I was wrong," Andrea said. "We're a team, and we need Cindy's talent."

Andrea suddenly became aware of herself, asleep in the Dreamweaver's tower. Why was everyone in the play fighting her, turning against Cindy? It hadn't happened like this, before. Didn't they realize how important the play was? She had to succeed, even if she needed to fight harder this time. Andrea swallowed and addressed the room. "I know you feel like taking revenge on Cindy for not rehearsing with us. But that's what Jessica did. We can't destroy everything because we're angry." Andrea saw the closed-off faces around her, and appealed to them directly, meeting each girl's eyes. "Whatever

Cindy did to this play, we need her. She knows the part and the blocking. Without Kell, this show'll completely fall apart. If we keep fighting, none of us will win the O'Keefe Award."

Lorraine hesitated. "Pilar, don't you mind it's a smaller part?" she asked protectively.

Pilar shook her head.

"Well, Andrea's right, Cindy," Lorraine said grudgingly. "We really do need you."

Andrea let herself relax. It seemed the play would succeed after all. "Pilar?"

"I know," Pilar muttered, picking up the tube of iridescent glitter. "Make sure I project."

"No," Andrea said firmly. She slid her ballet slippers on. "I know you're a fantastic fairy queen. You'll be perfect. I just wanted to say, break a leg."

Pilar's smile was the best reward Andrea could ever expect. Maybe it was time she relaxed and let herself have fun.

Miss Jarnowski poked her head inside. In the warmth of backstage, she wore a cotton tie-dyed dress in a rainbow of colors. "Cindy?"

A grin split Cindy's face nearly in half. "I'm back in!"

"Oh, good. We do need you out there. I wasn't sure how the rest of you would feel about it, but with so little rehearsal time for the new cast, our play isn't strong enough. We should put Cindy back as Kreliss." Miss Jarnowski glanced over the students, analyzing their appearance. "Five minutes until first call. Finish your makeup

and costumes and then meet me in the greenroom. Megan, did your friend bring the fog machine?"

"Sure, it's in your classroom."

"Wonderful." Miss Jarnowski smiled, and her shoulders lowered a few inches.

Andrea raised her eyebrows at Cindy. "You know all your lines, right?"

Cindy tossed her fairy-princess curls. She seemed oddly calm now, as if she had settled her doubts. "Try me."

ALEENNA: "The witch won't escape us this time, Kell."

KELL: "Meditate and clear your mind tonight; the witch has treacherous spells at her command and guards the greatest secret of all. I fear this battle will challenge your heart far beyond your body, Champion. Rest and prepare while we have time."

Andrea grinned. "Great. I guess we're ready."

Within the next few minutes, all the students gathered in Miss Jarnowski's classroom. At the teacher's prompting, they formed a circle and did the usual exercises: buzzing, humming, shaking.

Miss Jarnowski lowered her arms. "We've all worked so hard, and now the audience is waiting. Relax and have fun; you've earned it. Now we're going to do a grounding exercise. We start by kneeling on the left knee." The students did, although the carpet scraped Andrea's legs through the thin cotton she wore. Everyone silenced, until only the overhead lights hummed around them.

"Each sound and action should last for one breath," Miss Jarnowski parted her lips. "Ahhhhh." She slowly stood, raising her arms toward the sky in a curved V shape. Andrea and all the other students followed her. "This represents birth."

"Aayyyy." She brought her hands down rigid, vertically parallel to each other. "This is carving out your own piece of life, of the universe." *One part*, Andrea thought. *The star at last*. Nothing else mattered.

"Eeeeeeee." Miss Jarnowski pushed her hands to the sides, palms facing out. She ended with her palms up, as if offering a gift. "Here we push away negative thoughts." Andrea let go of the math tests, the yelling, the fights, the guilt. She felt them floating far away forever.

"Ohhhhh." She raised her arms up toward the sky. "With this sound, we offer ourselves up to whatever higher power brought us here, to join as a community." Andrea stretched her arms up, reaching toward the humming ceiling light and the night sky beyond; she remembered the script that had appeared like a blessing, bringing her the play and perhaps the award as well. Her mother had never felt so close.

"Oooooo." Miss Jarnowski slowly folded her hands in and down and then knelt until she crouched in the beginning position. "Here you receive what was given tenfold. This moment represents death, the instant before a new birth." Miss Jarnowski's gaze passed over each student in turn. "We're going to do this again. Now, everyone close your eyes."

The class repeated the exercise three times. After the last death, Miss Jarnowski stood. "Everyone into the stairwells. There isn't room for you in the wings. And

remember, no whispering. The audience will hear you. Now go and give a fabulous performance.”

Andrea felt a thrill surge through her. On the other side of the door, the audience waited.

Andrea sat straight up in bed. The Forest Gem was still helping her. What had the latest vision said? A mystery surrounding the witch. Her fingers itched with creativity. Andrea sucked in her breath and crept out of bed.

Andrea snuck back to the Dreamweaver’s studio. She knew if she considered her actions they would seem ridiculous, a childish whim. Yet Andrea just couldn’t stop herself. She *needed* to enter the room.

Once there, she hurried to the dais and reached into the swirl of clouds, just as the Dreamweaver had. She drew out a tentative handful, half-expecting the tendril to melt like cotton candy in her hot fingers. Yet it merely floated in front of her, cool and waiting.

Andrea plunged in her hands, feverishly shaping, molding, drawing some fragments out of the mass, pressing others back into it. Time to consider what she was drawing later; for now, she only knew what looked right and what wrong. A loose curl caught her eye and she dragged it up to smooth over a deathly pale cheek. And that little puff lay too streamlined; it craved more texture. There! That last poke had done it. Now a long lock of pale hair, drifting past silver eyes and over the shoulder. Silver? Shouldn’t they be black, deeper, more penetrating? Yes, that seemed right. Now for the

nose. Electricity flowed through her and Andrea couldn't have stopped if she were dragged from it.

The faint curls at the ends of the hair were solidifying when Andrea heard a noise behind her. The frantic energy still filled her, but she had finished creating. She finished the strand she was working on, unwilling to mar perfection by turning away too soon, then glanced over her shoulder.

The Dreamweaver stood there.

He smiled like an eager tutor. "I never would've thought you the type to sneak into my study. That seems more your inquisitive friend's department."

Andrea shuffled her feet. What compelled her to always break rules? "I guess. I'm sorry."

Wrinkles around his bulbous nose creased as he smiled. "All my apprentices have broken in, but they couldn't touch the cloud. In all my time, only you've mastered it. What've you drawn?"

For the first time Andrea looked at her work, half-fearing the result. A woman's face stared back at her. Soft curls of red-gold hair framed her face, wisping like clouds. Long neck, narrow face. The ebony eyes didn't match the rest. They marred the face with a strange flatness, as if all light had been sucked out of them. The eyes didn't follow Andrea, but looked inward, as if searching for the image's own soul. Andrea looked away, trying to banish the shivers up her spine.

"She looks like you."

"What?" They didn't share a single feature.

The Dreamweaver pointed. The hair shortened and turned browner. The face rounded. But the ears, nose, cheekbones, all were Andrea's already. Andrea tilted her head, staring deeper into the image. The woman tilted her head in return. Andrea stepped back, and the image likewise receded. Andrea turned away. "The voice in my head can't be my mother. Not here, not so far from Earth."

The Dreamweaver tucked his hands behind his back and started to pace. "You tell many stories, Andrea. Now I shall tell you one. Three thousand years ago, Sidaria and her many siblings joined together to create Calithwain. They stood around the Silver Pillar that marks the center of the universes and they sang together. All of the life of this world, sindaberries and nightbloomer, flame jaguars, sylvans, all materialized around the Seven. Each sibling took a section of Calithwain to protect. Ocean-haired Nulaan sheltered seas, lakes, and all the streaming waterways of the world. Fiki guarded the borders, Theored the dwarves, Sidaria the woodfolk. And so forth. It was a time of great deeds, when Haluk defended the Jubarti Desert with only his great bow, Vajra. Callnera of the Sundrops founded the School of Songs, an undying legacy that still preserves the oldest magic of Calithwain. Hotan tamed the great Thunderbird, and rode her to the stars to honor his new bride. And Jixil, the eighth sister, created magic.

"She spun the Golden Crystal, which rested on the Silver Pillar and focused magic for all of Calithwain. Yet, over a thousand years, her greediness grew, until she siphoned away the crystal's power. She drained her mages to the point of death. All creatures felt the pain of her gluttony."

"And it's happening again!" Andrea said. "But Kreliss said Sidaria's White Crystal shares magic among everyone. Sidaria wouldn't take it all for herself."

The Dreamweaver folded his hands over his round belly. "No, she wouldn't. But Jixil did. All the creatures of Calithwain, guided by the unicorns and by the Seven siblings that remained, cast Jixil down and imprisoned her under the Perilous Cliffs for two thousand years. Where she remains, even now. If she escaped, she could tear all the worlds asunder out of spite."

Andrea breathed a sigh of relief. "If she's imprisoned, she couldn't have had a child."

The Dreamweaver lightly touched the Forest Gem on Andrea's forehead and it pulsed in recognition. "You only needed this small gateway to come here. Jixil could've managed with less."

Andrea looked away. Mumbling, she admitted, "She's been calling me. I think, no, I know she wants me to free her."

"And will you?" the Dreamweaver asked, too calmly.

"I hear her, in my mind," Andrea pleaded. "She needs me, like no one on earth's ever needed me."

"Truly?"

Andrea felt her cheeks warm, thinking of her family on Earth. "This isn't fair! I shouldn't have to choose between them."

Andrea waited for the Dreamweaver to point out life wasn't fair, but he remained silent.

All this could be an accident, or better, a mistake. Andrea's mother could live in New York as she'd thought. "I—I need to see her for myself. Even if she isn't my mother, she knows something about me, something I don't." Andrea pounded one hand against the other. "This just—just feels so right, I can't explain it."

The Dreamweaver gazed directly at Andrea, dropping his chatty demeanor. At once, Andrea sensed the undercurrent of power he carried. "Andrea, my home calls in my dreams each night, yet I cannot return. Constantly shifting, my birth world defies definition; nothing possesses form or body. Even this semblance you see isn't mine. A single thought or story changes my world and then another. We dwell in complete chaos, shifting further every moment into anarchy and darkness. When at last I can learn to make pictures of thought permanent, to show the true future rather than bits and snatches, I'll return home and perfect my world, as someday you will yours. You must not surrender thoughtlessly now, or you will destroy all the worlds, even mine." He held up a hand at Andrea's protest. "You must complete your quest."

Andrea felt more lost than she ever had in Calithwain, even though her friends slept upstairs. "To find my mother? Or to save the sylvans? I don't know any more."

The Dreamweaver hesitated a moment. Then, "Don't you?"

"Stop it!"

"Stop what? Trying to help you?"

Andrea's hands thudded onto her hips, hard enough to bruise. "Oh, you're doing more than helping me. You and your tower are arranging everything. Where I go, what I do, even what I think. Well, I won't do it. My mother is here, or at least someone who

knows about her. I'll never learn the truth if I don't find her." Andrea stopped, realizing she was yelling.

Of course, the Dreamweaver didn't even blink. His calmness sucked in her anger and dissipated it like a glass of boiling water hurled in the placid ocean. "Jixil's tale hasn't ended. All stories merge, flowing into a great river, as they travel through each other and form patterns, history reflecting future. Our story too, is being told somewhere, as are all tales in all worlds. You're part of that pattern, Andrea. You must fulfill your destiny."

"But I don't know what it is. I mean, I sure can't kill her." Andrea swallowed. All the talk about destiny and champions was worrying her.

He nodded. "That choice would shatter Calithwain, if you destroyed one of its creators. But if Jixil escapes her prison, even without your help, tzaamaveths will kill us all."

Andrea tried to stare the short man down, even though she knew it was useless. "You can't blackmail me. I make my own choices."

"Sometimes fate plays with us all. Even now the pattern changes. See there."

Jixil's image vanished. In the swirl of colors hanging there in midair, Andrea saw a crystal as large as she was, pulsing silver energy. A purple cloud hung around it, damping its power to a pale trickle.

The Dreamweaver's voice still offered no anger. "The White Crystal fades. Soon it will die, unless you change the pattern."

"Darn you!"

"It's fate you struggle against, not me. Can you blame it for naming you the mythical champion who can free Calithwain?"

Andrea knew he didn't understand. She clenched her fists, feeling her short fingernails dig into her palms. "Even if I save Calithwain, I'm nobody on earth."

The Dreamweaver looked in her eyes. A flicker of power below the calm surfaced. "Andrea, you were sent here for a purpose. A higher power than all of us struggles to repair all the worlds, and it called to you. You cannot throw aside your life because it doesn't please you. Go back, and make the life you wish." He drew breath, and some of the unnatural strength faded from his voice. "Are you angry I say such things?"

"Maybe not. But I can blame you for pushing me into this. You can't know my destiny. No one can." She pressed her crossed arms into her body like a shield and glared at him.

The Dreamweaver said nothing, merely watched her.

Andrea remained equally quiet and then the words slipped from her. "The White Crystal?"

"Less than a day remains. May I wish you luck?"

Scowling, Andrea left the room. She couldn't stand to answer him, afraid of what she might say.

Chapter 12: Descend Into the Fortress Pit

WITCH: "So, the mystic champion has arrived. I have watched your progress for many nights."

ALENNA: "While you unleashed your ghostlings? Free the White Crystal. Now."

WITCH: "I have powers beyond your imagination. You cannot fight me. Ha ha ha!"

The heavy coconut smell of fog smothering the stage nearly gagged Andrea. Still, she fought back a grin, gazing into the blinding stage lights and the hazy auditorium of people beyond. Performing gave her a heady thrill like nothing else. Even her parents' disapproval could wait while Andrea made the most of her stage time.

ALENNA: "The Sorceress's amulet gives me that power. Look!"

Andrea held up the Forest Gem and Lorraine flinched. Though exaggerated, it fit into Lorraine's style well. Lorraine had taken Jessica's role along with her own and brought the witch to life fantastically.

WITCH: "What sorcery is this?" Lorraine actually sounded fearful, almost cringing.

ALENNA: "The powers of good will not abide your evil a moment longer." With her downstage hand, Andrea snatched a bucket filled with a blue scarf.

ALENNA: "Be banished from our world forever!"

She hurled the scarf out of the bucket toward Lorraine. To Andrea's horror, the scarf floated to the ground at Lorraine's feet, instead of over her head. Lorraine snatched the scarf from the stage and draped it over herself. The audience laughed.

WITCH: "Noooooooooooo!" Lorraine exited stage left, still draped in the scarf.

Jesse and Cindy entered stage right. Cindy's face glowed with joy under the stage lights. In that moment, Andrea understood how much Cindy loved the stage, as much as Andrea did. While the O'Keefe Award could lead Andrea to her mother, the stage had led Cindy back to herself. Cindy met Andrea's eyes, and Andrea could feel the glow spread to her own face as well.

KELL: "Noble Alenna, you've freed the Sorceress, light of our world. We can never repay our debt."

Andrea let the glow of the audience settle over her while they applauded. Hundreds of people packed the auditorium. This had been worth sneaking out, worth everything. Energy and light filled her; she stood on stage, the focus for a hundred eyes. She had succeeded at last.

Andrea drifted back into the real world. After journeying all morning, they had reached the Shakan Tzalmaveth. It loomed overhead, stark and black. "How do we get in?" Andrea whispered, gazing up at the gigantic iron door.

Darkness poured from the cold stone, enfolding the travelers in a seeping mist. Daylight dimmed, unable to penetrate the unwholesome fog. The thick stinking stuff pressed against Andrea's lungs like car exhaust. She kept her mouth closed. At the same

time, the bite of the air made Andrea huddle into her cloak and shiver. *Into the darkest place of all.* The script echoed in her head.

“Knock?” Geome suggested, a desperate trace of humor in his voice.

“Perhaps the door isn’t locked,” Andrea said.

Kreliss raised her eyebrows. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

Andrea didn’t want to discuss the face she had drawn, the mysterious woman who always seemed one step ahead of them. The voice in her head remained silent. Andrea swallowed. “I don’t want to die here.” Her hand brushed the Forest Gem, her only weapon. It barely flickered against her fingers. No! Was its magic finally dying, like all the animals? Or was the Shākan Tzalmaveth stifling it? Either way, Andrea couldn’t walk into a castle of the creatures without her only protection. Andrea realized she was shivering. More than anything, she just wanted to go home.

“We won’t die,” Kreliss said, a tremor in her voice. “We just have to get this job done.”

“Right,” Geome said, Adam’s apple bobbing.

Andrea swallowed. *I’m doing this for Earth. And for my friends here.* With willpower she didn’t know she possessed, Andrea walked up to the door and leaned on its chilling hardness with all her strength. It swung inward.

Kreliss breathed in sharply. “Too easy.”

Andrea nodded.

Side by side, they entered the dark castle. High-set windows allowed only faint glimmers of light to penetrate the hall's emptiness. Dust and cobwebs coated every corner. "Guess the tzalmaveths don't spend much time cleaning," Geome muttered.

He leaped backwards with a yell. His voice echoed down the corridor, booming and magnifying.

"Geome, quiet!" Kreliss said, too late.

"Something burned me. Look!" Geome turned to reveal a dark brown slash below his knees, as if a malignant fingernail had sliced him. "A trap."

"Can you disarm it?" Andrea asked.

"How badly are you hurt?" Kreliss asked. Both her friends turned to look at her. She shrugged. "I just want to know if our mage is too wounded to cast any spells."

Geome twitched his leg and winced. "I don't know that I'll be running. As for neutralizing it...hmm. Let me think. I can try a standard disarming spell, but in a place this quiet, it'd be easy to notice. We can't afford a tzalmaveth attack now."

"Reach out with your mind and track the pattern of energy," Kreliss said.

"What?"

"Use your focus. Concentrate. Now tell me, is that horizontal bars, or a solid field?"

"Horizontal bars, but they're jerking up and down. I'm not sure I could hit one without using an overall spell."

"You won't have to. While you watch the field, concentrate on each bar slowing, until they practically stop."

"All right." Geome's eyes sagged half closed. His voice drooped, drifting away from the world. "They keep appearing in different groupings, and I can't predict the pattern enough to snatch them all."

"What's the pattern?" Andrea asked.

"One. One. Two. Three. Now five." He waited almost a minute. "Eight... This makes no sense."

The numbers sounded so familiar. Andrea suddenly remembered her math teacher's handing out pattern worksheets. "Wait. I know this."

"Andrea, I need an answer!"

"Now thirteen. Get ready."

"What?"

"Do it. Hurry."

Geome drew in a shaky breath. "Caught them. Thirteen."

"Good. Hold them still and shatter them," Kreliss said.

"How?" A wary respect crept into his voice.

"Hold each bar completely still and then shake them. The conflicting energies should tear the spell apart."

"All right." Moments passed. "It's working; I can feel them shuddering in front of me." His eyes burst open. "Look out!"

He dragged Andrea and Kreliss to the floor. Andrea felt heat sear her back, burning through her thin shirt. *Hummm*. A wave of motion brushed against her, charged

like an electric shock. Something glowed green, just out of sight. Then, slowly, the world returned to normal.

"Are you both all right?" Geome clambered to his feet, slowly this time. He pulled Andrea up. "I should've shielded faster."

"You brought it up quickly enough to save our lives." Kreliss hopped to her feet in an easy motion.

"I'm just glad you knew about that spell," Geome said. His voice remained mild, but when he turned away from Kreliss, Andrea could see a hint of suspicion flash across his face. Andrea understood his thoughts perfectly. How did Kreliss, a warrior, know about spells?

Kreliss nodded. "And how about your numbers, Andrea? How'd you know?"

"It's a pattern I learned in class," she said. "It adds the two previous numbers to create the next one."

"Cycling feedback into itself to grow greater!" Geome said. "Brilliant." He didn't seem to mind that the trap had attacked him.

Andrea's knee ached from her impact with the hard floor, and her back felt hot and tender under the backpack. Her opposite hip wasn't very happy either. Beside her, Kreliss rubbed her shoulder then growled when the backpack straps disintegrated under her hand. The rest of the pack was charred and brittle. Andrea realized hers must be the same, to say nothing of its contents. How much further would they need to go?

The trio passed through corridor after dim corridor, all crowded with dust. Sweet odors of decay melted into the musty sourness of mildew. Lagging behind her friends,

Andrea had no idea what the portal looked like, and could never defend herself in a fight.

All she had was the Forest Gem.

“Look!” Kreliss’s voice drifted back through an open door. Andrea hurried inside to join her.

A dazzling golden mirror cloaked half of the room in distorted shimmers of light. Andrea gazed into it and saw her image standing beside her friends, twisted and misshapen. “What is this place?”

“Hopefully, the home of the mahalak orach,” Geome said.

“But what on earth’s this mirror for? Geome, didn’t you say mages cast through crystals?”

“Yes, of course. Even if this is real gold, it wouldn’t assist anyone with casting.” His lecturing tone had returned.

“Only seers and the Seven can communicate through mirrors,” Kreliss said.

“What would the tzalmaveths use it for, then?” Andrea asked.

“Bartering it for cleaning services?” Geome suggested.

“Look, there’s a door beside it,” Kreliss said. She pressed her hand against the faint outline, tracing it with her fingertips and then shoving with her entire body. The door thumped, but didn’t move. “I can’t open it alone. Help me, both of you.”

The golden gleam of the mirror darkened, as if shrouded in a heavy curtain. The few candles on the table sputtered and extinguished with a shadowy hiss. The door slammed shut.

A wave of shrill laughter exploded into the room, echoing off the dark walls. The three exchanged panicked glances. Who had discovered them?

A monstrous tzalmaveth materialized in the room's center, five times the size of any they had seen. It swelled to fill half of the room, scraping its formless head against the ceiling, still cackling with glee. Behind it, its monstrous reflection also swelled in the mirror, distorted, shapeless, opaque in its darkness. Andrea shrank back, reaching out for either of her friends, but they stood too far away.

Its laugh swelled with piercing menace until it sounded a thousand times more back-clenching than fingernails on a chalkboard. The Forest Gem flared, pulsing its warmth against Andrea's forehead and flooding the chamber with weak light. Despite the gem's power, the tzalmaveth's despair coursed through Andrea. It battered her defenses, clawing at her mind. She bit her lip to hold back tears. Why had she come here? She wasn't a fighter or a wizard. How could she stop a shadow? If Andrea felt such despair through the Forest Gem's protection, the helplessness must be incapacitating her friends. Every muscle they had must ache to flee.

"The first visitors in a thousand years. I am indeed honored." The voice overshadowed the laugh, shriller and hoarse in a way that scratched Andrea's own throat with sympathy. Roaring filled Andrea's ears with a kind of dizzy thickness, like the time she had almost fainted last year. She could see and hear the tzalmaveth, yet everything else was mist.

"He sees us!" Geome shrank away. With the rushing in Andrea's ears, his yell melted to a whisper, even though he stood beside her.

"Your childish bracelets are useless here. To think, you planned to hide from a shadow!"

"I should've worn a hat. My sunburn alone must be radiating off the walls." Geome's voice only trembled slightly.

The tzalmaveth dismissed all they had accomplished with a flick of a hazy arm. "I admit it was clever to find me by tracing the location of the mahalak orach. You must have realized it was the only way I could reach the White Crystal, guarded as it was."

"*You* planted the lodestone?" Andrea blurted. "I thought tzalmaveths could only act on instinct."

"Once perhaps. Now I am the Tzalmaveth Ashar, greatest of shadows. We have grown, thanks to our great benefactress." He chuckled. "We serve her devotedly... for now."

Kreliss stepped into Andrea's peripheral vision, hand brushing her sword hilt. "Sorceress Jixil?" Her faint voice trembled in the huge chamber.

The Tzalmaveth Ashar turned, gaze fixing on Kreliss. "She will take interest in you, with this evil you carry. I'm sure your friends would like to know about the Point of Shadow, don't you think?"

"Shadows divide from within," Geome said. He must have been shouting, but Andrea's ears still felt plugged, blocking out the sound. "Fight it, Kreliss. It has no hold over you."

Kreliss folded her arms in front of her. "I control any shadow within me. Can you say the same, echo of evil? You murder sylvans for another's whim."

Geome's hand sprang to the amber pendant at his chest and he whispered. A ring of silver light rose to surround the three of them, expanding outwards toward the Tzalmaveth Ashar. "My magic will protect us!"

It laughed. "Your magic? All theories and formulas. You are nothing here, and your so-called training is nothing."

Geome's spell didn't waver. "I'll save us and then I'll save Alcanster. That's why I was born."

The tzalmaveth's arm darted through the shimmering shield, grasping toward Geome's unprotected throat. Shining talons ripped away the gold focus that dangled at Geome's neck and dashed it against the wall at Kreliss's feet. "You plan to battle evil, but you cannot even protect your friends. You have failed them, as Alcanster failed you and your kind. You cannot stop the hatred we create." The shadowed hand scraped Geome's head, slamming him to the ground. Blood dribbled from a cut at his hairline, and his face paled to gray.

Andrea's racing pulse thumped frantically in her ears, and she dropped beside him. Geome still lived; the Tzalmaveth Ashar couldn't have killed him so quickly...could he? Despair took her over, yet through it, Andrea felt a heartbeat. Geome's eyes lay closed where he slumped, perfectly still.

A blast of pure white energy hit the tzalmaveth in the chest. It shrieked and stumbled, turning toward the blast's source.

Kreliss knelt there in the corner, slumped against the wall and panting. A hint of gold gleamed in her clasped hands. After a moment, Andrea realized it was Geome's

focus. But Geome had said quite clearly that only a mage could cast spells; the focus provided nothing. Kreliss's face shone as pale as the focus's owner. She tried to stand, but instead slumped to the floor, panting.

"Kreliss!" Andrea shouted, jolted out of her paralysis. Even if she wasn't anyone important, she had to save her friend. She dashed in front of her.

"Hard using another's focus," Kreliss mumbled.

An ear-splitting cackle echoed through the chamber. "Such children. I shall earn great rewards for my loyalty when Lady Jixil returns and reclaims her empire. She'll be so pleased to find you imprisoned in her fortress, awaiting her."

"Never." Kreliss whispered the word into the darkness closing in around them both.

The shadow cackled, the sound clenching Andrea's shoulder blades. "The shadow within you is darker than even you can imagine. It needs only a little power to corrupt you forever."

"I fight it, just as I'll fight you." Stepping beside Andrea, Kreliss drew her sword, and held it nearly steady. She looked like a tiny blaze of crimson against the dark room. The tzalmaveth swelled over her, ready to extinguish her.

"Stop playing the hero. You know in your heart what you are." The tzalmaveth blew a foul wind toward them. It hurled itself at Kreliss, shoving Andrea aside, and pinning Kreliss to the nearest wall. Andrea bent over, choking. The wind stank of spoiled milk and something far filthier, like a nightmare transmuted to scent. Kreliss

stagged forward, hissing between her teeth. Andrea backed away. Kreliss sounded feral, shadowlike.

“Kreliss?”

Kreliss ignored her, turning toward the tzalmaveth. “So, you would waken the mightiest force of all, the power of the Shifter?” The hissing voice wasn’t hers.

Andrea swallowed, remembering Geome’s description of the wizard who had obeyed the Shifter and murdered his own sister. Could it possibly force Kreliss to attack her friends?

The tzalmaveth advanced on her. The room darkened around him, until Andrea could only see Kreliss’s shape. “To think, this little elf-lover carries the greatest evil of all.”

“It has...the deepest...hold.” Kreliss’s voice returned, penetrating the stillness. She sucked in air, panting like a woman giving birth. “I can’t fight it. It’s too strong here.”

“Kreliss, you have to,” Andrea shouted. The murky blackness flattened her words, draining them of power. “I need you.”

Kreliss stared at Andrea for a single moment, eyes shining in the darkness. “You can do it alone, Andrea. That’s why Sidaria summoned you.” She shuddered, shaking like Jesse had when he pretended to be possessed. That memory made the reality even more grotesquely real. Kreliss plunged her hand into her pocket, as if that forceful gesture took all her power. She snatched the amolir and pressed it to her heart.

"Kreliss, no!" Andrea shouted. While she watched, Kreliss folded against the wall and collapsed. Andrea winced. Stupid! Why hadn't Kreliss attacked the tzalmaveth with the amolir? The ugly thought ran through her mind that perhaps whatever dwelled in Kreliss threatened them more.

"And now, the stranger." Andrea's head jerked up to find the shadow staring straight through her, piercing her body with icy needles of loathing, greedy to shatter her soul. "Poor Sidaria knew none of her subjects would take on such a foolhardy quest, so she cast it to you. She betrayed you." The tzalmaveth hissed into the dank air that hung stagnantly around them. The singed taste of it filled Andrea's mouth, coating her nose and tongue with sour dust. An eye-twisting purple darkness thickened around the tzalmaveth. It burst in a lightning strike, speeding straight toward Andrea. Her friends lay at her feet, unconscious. The terrifying knowledge echoed through Andrea. Here and now, all alone, she would die.

The wave hit her with the shock of ice water. Crackles of power sizzled on her skin, burning and itching like poison ivy all over her exposed arms and face. Andrea stared down at her hand, wincing. Gleaming red, with thin white lines, her skin stung horribly.

The Tzalmaveth Ashar hissed its displeasure. "I see the Forest Gem has accepted you. But here in my fortress, far from nature and surrounded by tzalmaveths, little power remains. A stronger blast will finish you and it together."

The Forest Gem still pulsed on her forehead, but it slowed and cooled every minute, like a dying heartbeat. It couldn't last much longer. Andrea wondered when it would lose the strength to send her home.

"You have a choice, just as the foolish elf lover did."

Andrea braced herself against a fresh wave of despair, and climbed to her feet between her helpless friends. They still needed her. "Not interested."

The hiss oiled around the room. "Even if I offer you your dear mother?"

"What!" Andrea stepped back, revolted this creature knew her deepest secrets.

"The Forest Gem has powers Sidaria didn't tell you. It can lead you to her. Let me show you."

"No." Andrea could hear the tremble in her voice.

The tzalmaveth's hissing grew hypnotic. "You know I speak the truth. You hear her voice, see her face in your dreams. She is your mother, Andrea. Jixil needs you to rescue her."

Andrea closed her eyes. It all fit so well. The strange symbol she'd seen. The voice echoing in her head when she encountered tzalmaveths. Dalia's anger. *She needs you,* his voice whispered in her head. *The sylvans were lost before you arrived. Save your friends now. They can live. Don't abandon them, as you abandoned your earth parents' trust.* The tzalmaveth's despair pounded inside her head, willing Andrea to choose.

"No." Andrea braced her shaking legs. "I won't let all those people die. Not even to find my mother."

"A foolish choice for a hopeless cause. Your human sentimentality will destroy you." Purple darkness expanded from him, feeding like a cancer upon the air. Andrea heard the hiss of power and knew this time it would kill her. The sounds of the room grew distant, echoing through her ears. Grayness threatened the edges of her vision. She had come so close to saving the White Crystal, only to fail...

Stop!

The Tzalmaveth Ashar hissed, but the purple darkness died.

She is mine, not yours.

"So you are my mother?" Andrea breathed.

The melodious voice reached for her, enfolding her. It echoed, stretching deep down into the earth and towering like a sheltering tree. *Of course. I have waited for years, knowing you were the one destined to free me.* A face appeared in the golden mirror, hazy yet incredibly familiar.

Andrea struggled to understand. "But you tried to kill everyone in Calithwain. Are you murdering the sylvans now?"

They aren't your people, Andrea. I'm the connection you've always needed. Blood of your blood. Now I've found you. Simply reach through the Forest Gem and pull me through. Be my champion. Underneath the coaxing lingered icy perfection, a chilling rationalization of everything Jixil had done. The figure straightened, mirroring Andrea's posture with hands clasped in front of her. In that moment, they seemed identical, one self divided by a sheet of gold.

Andrea's fists clenched. She had found whom she had longed for, but it was wrong, twisted. "As we speak, you're killing all the sylvans and your own sister with them."

She was my sister. Now she's only my jailor, taking everything I should have had. You're destined to save me. You cannot fight your calling, my daughter, the voice chided.

"On my world, attacking children and those too weak to fight's a tremendous crime. I won't let you do this." Andrea felt like a small child having a tantrum. She was practically screaming, but Jixil didn't hear the words.

The voice remained unruffled. **You don't understand.**

"I understand murder!"

A faint sigh of regret. **Then I must take my Forest Gem. Even dying, Sidaria has sent me the key to my prison.**

Pain burst through Andrea's skull like fireworks, hot explosions burning behind her eyes. Andrea pressed the Forest Gem into her forehead. "No, I won't let you through. I'll stop you. Sidaria believes in me."

A daughter of mine would not refuse. Tzalmaveth Ashar, mightiest of my servants, guide me through the Forest Gem.

Through her tearing eyes, Andrea saw the tzalmaveth float closer, closer. She shrank away, but deep within she knew she was helpless. As she had done once before, she silently begged the Forest Gem to send her a memory, to give her the clues that would help her defeat this creature of evil.

Andrea didn't remember. Despite her desperation, the gateway to the past had vanished. The Forest Gem hung between her eyes, lifeless, icy cold. It still battled the despair, but even that was failing. No energy remained to conjure memories. While Andrea helplessly watched the tzalmaveth reach for her, a sentence whispered in her head. *Now face your frayed reflection; your tether weaves both worlds.*

She snatched the Forest Gem from her forehead and hurled it at the Tzalmaveth Ashar. A wave of incredible hopelessness hit Andrea. The quest was useless, trying to escape her parents, idiotic. Everything she had done in her entire life had no value. The Tzalmaveth would kill her, and she deserved it, after all the moments she had wasted, frivolous decisions she had made. Missing her only protection, Andrea longed for her parents.

The Forest Gem struck the Tzalmaveth Ashar, dissipating the hopelessness. He burned, sizzling as holes melted in his evil form. The tzalmaveth didn't make a sound, only faded into the dimness. The Forest Gem burned with the piercing light of the White Crystal, vanquishing the darkness and chasing away the shadows. Then, with a crystalline chime, it shattered. The Tzalmaveth Ashar vanished, melting back into the gloom that had birthed him.

Kreliss sat up groggily. She stared at Andrea, eyes widening to the size of doors. Tendrils of her hair straggled in all directions, and a round bruise marked her cheek. "You threw the Forest Gem at him!"

Andrea felt a relieved grin stretch across her face. "And it worked, right? It kills despair, so it destroyed him. He's gone?"

Kreliss tried to stand, but quivered when she reached her knees. She sank back onto the floor. "Well, yes, of course, but that's the symbol of Sidaria's champion, your only protection. Now that it's smashed, you have no way home."

Andrea sank down beside Kreliss. The stone floor's coldness seeped into her legs, but she didn't care. "Sidaria and the spirit elves can't have much protection left in them. Better to use the Forest Gem now to save everyone than let them waste their last energies helping me." Andrea tried not to think of her passage home, now sealed off forever. She remembered her earlier thoughts, how she could never bear to lose the magic she had gained here. Yet, she had thrown away the source of all her power, to destroy the threat to the sylvans. Andrea picked the still-glowing jewel off the floor. Cracks spiderwebbed through it.

"Can it truly help you find your mother?" Kreliss's voice actually sounded sympathetic.

"It needs to go back to Sidaria. The Forest Gem is too much of a temptation." Andrea replaced it on her forehead. The strange heaviness that usually accompanied its presence had vanished. Even without the weight, Andrea could feel her eyelids sagging with true exhaustion. "I can't believe how stupid you were, attacking yourself with the amolir!"

"I had to stop the evil," Kreliss said simply.

Andrea met the other girl's haunted eyes, and suddenly realized what a burden she carried. Her heart wobbled. "Whatever happens, I trust you, Kreliss. I know you're loyal to the sylvans and to Sidaria."

Kreliss swallowed. "It's not that simple. I was born in Darkland."

"Another realm, like Fairyland?"

Kreliss shook her head. "Darkland is... west of here. But it holds the portal to the Shifter himself. The Point of Shadow."

The tzalmaveth had mentioned it. "And you went there?"

Apparently Kreliss wouldn't be rushed. "Above everything, people of Darkland value the gift of magic, to defend us against ogres, trolls, and even darker things."

Kreliss's voice remained hypnotic, as if she could only tell her story by distancing herself.

"But you have magic," Andrea said, struggling to follow the conversation. "I just saw it."

Kreliss stared down at her clenched hands. Andrea could see the tension in her trembling fingers. "The elders trained me early, far earlier than they would have with the other children. They said I was strangely powerful, but they—they never had a chance to complete my training. The power struck my mind like a lightning blast and suddenly I could see more clearly than ever before. Yet, within that clarity, something strange and clouded called me. I followed it all the way to the Point of Shadow." Kreliss kept her voice dispassionate, as if that was the only way she could recall her past. "And I saw."

"You saw?" Andrea prompted. The chill in Kreliss's eyes implied she might not want the answer.

A headshake. "I won't describe it. When I returned to my tribe, they declared me outcast."

Andrea shivered. "And then the sylvans found you?"

"More or less. I renounced my newfound magic and came to live with them."

Kreliss stared down at her hands. "I'm a threat, but Sidaria welcomed me unconditionally. That's why I have to save her."

"So when that thing possessed you—"

Kreliss colored. "I lost control for the first time in a year. The Point of Shadow never relinquishes its hold."

As if echoing her words, a roar went up through the palace, a horrified wailing of lamentation a hundred times more shrill than nails scratching glass, more devastating than a tidal wave after an earthquake.

Kreliss's head lifted from where she slumped and she stared at Andrea in panic. "The other tzaamaveths!" They would be coming, eager to revenge themselves on their lord's killers.

Andrea hauled Kreliss to her feet. "Quick, help me get Geome to the mahalak orach."

"We don't know where it is."

"We'll have to find it somehow. There's no time."

Together, the girls dragged Geome to the door that nestled beside the distorted mirror. Kreliss and Andrea both pressed with all their might, but it refused to open.

Geome lay motionless on the floor between them, dead weight.

Andrea pounded the door in her frustration, but the smoothly cool stone didn't even tremble. "Kreliss, could it be locked somehow? Do you think the Tzalmaveth Ashar had a key?"

"If he did, it's gone now. I don't see any kind of latch or hole." Kreliss controlled her voice, yet an undercurrent of panic raced through it.

"'S an illusion."

Two pairs of eyes darted to where Geome lay on the floor, eyes closed. A thick, reddish bruise disappeared up into his hairline, with another starting on his jaw. Blood seeped through his sleeve at the shoulder. Yet, impossibly, he had spoken.

"You're awake?" Kreliss demanded.

"Here." Andrea dropped her canteen into his hand. She could make out individual hisses now, coming closer, closer.

"I wish the tzalmaveth were here, so I could return this headache to him." Geome cracked an eye open and then quickly closed it. He gulped half the bottle down.

"The others are coming." Andrea pressed her sweaty palm against the stone.

"The door isn't an illusion. I can feel it."

Geome didn't even turn his head. "Typical first stage magic. We need to break through." He handed the canteen back. Eyes still closed, he lurched to his feet. Kreliss quickly offered him a shoulder, staggering a bit herself under his weight.

"I don't think you should cast right now," Andrea said. Who knew what a disoriented spell would do? "Kreliss, can you take it down?"

"What?" Geome exploded. He winced and clutched his head.

"I don't think so," Kreliss said, looking away from Geome. "I've never seen this kind of spell, and it could be trapped. I wasted my power when I used the amolir, and it'll take time to rebuild. We don't have time." She handed Geome his focus, and he accepted it with only a blink of surprise.

"Right." Geome stepped away from Kreliss, slipping the focus around his neck. "I have to unweave the threads of the illusion."

"Better hurry," Kreliss said, tightness constricting her voice. Andrea could hear the hissing shrieks of shadows, much closer now.

"I know, I'm trying. I've never had to cast when I was this tired." Sweat beaded Geome's already pale face, and he grimaced, clutching the small crystal with both hands. Andrea watched, fists balled at her sides. The seconds counted off in her head. She heard the tzmaveths' shrieks grew closer, louder. She doubted a few doors would stop them.

A gasp from Geome spun her head back to him and away from the sealed door. The crystal at his throat blazed with golden light only a shade darker than the gleaming mirror beside them. The door sputtered, flickered and then finally blinked out. A square opening gaped before them.

"Let's go!" Kreliss burst through the opening, Andrea and Geome behind her. Only a few steps in, Kreliss halted. The others crashed into her. "Shut the passage. See if you can bar it somehow."

"Kreliss, are you sure—"

Kreliss stifled Andrea's protest with a quick shake of her head. "Whatever waits ahead, we can't go back. Hundreds of tzalmaveths are moments behind us. I just pray we find the mahalak orach."

"My magic is practically gone," Geome said. "We may need it before the end."

"We won't reach the end of the tunnel if the tzalmaveths catch us first. I'll try."

Kreliss held out her hand and Geome dropped his focus into it without a word. Kreliss clutched the crystal, pressing until her knuckles turned white. A white curtain of mist sighed into existence. It formed a panel thin and translucent as swimming pool ice over the gaping entrance. Kreliss handed the focus back, her breathing loud and harsh in the dim cavern. "Let's go." After a single step, Kreliss staggered, lurching against the wall beside her. She clung to it a moment, legs trembling.

Andrea rushed over and gave Kreliss her shoulder. Exhausted as she was, the other girl was clearly close to dropping. Kreliss shuddered against her, leaning an alarming portion of her strength against Andrea. Andrea braced her knees. "We can wait a minute."

Kreliss shook her head. "Now. Before they come."

Chapter 13: Until You Find What You Seek...

The three travelers raced down the crumbling stone corridor as fast as Kreliss and Geome could manage. Andrea could feel her breath tearing at the inside of her lungs, and her skin still stung from the magical burns. Kreliss's weight dragged more with each step. Trickle of light from the small windows dimmed, reddening, and Andrea flinched. "I think the sun's setting."

"We *must* leave before nightfall." In the grayness, the steady thumps of Geome's feet hastened. "After dark, we'll be lost in an instant. Even with the Tzalmaveth Ashar dead, his followers have more strength than we can handle, especially now." He, at least, staggered down the tunnel on his own feet. Red bruises shone on his pale face like crimson paint spilled on glass.

"We don't even know where this tunnel leads," Andrea said, eyeing the rough stone walls. She puffed a little under Kreliss's weight. "Just because the Tzalmaveth Ashar was in the room doesn't mean the mahalak orach is here. We may have left it behind us." Andrea gasped for air, but she couldn't help asking, "Can magic help us find the portal?"

"Magic is the science of manipulating energies, not some expert treasure hunter. Logic dictates the Tzalmaveth Ashar would stay close to the portal. Besides, we don't require a mahalak orach. Any exit will save us." Apparently, Geome had enough breath to theorize.

"I'll keep that in mind." Even over their heavy footsteps, she could hear the hissing of tzalmaveths behind them. Their rank stench, like sour milk, permeated each

burning breath she gulped. Andrea glanced up at the heavy iron candelabra. Clichéd weapon or not, she doubted its weight would affect a tzalmaveth.

Andrea stepped forward and ran straight into Kreliss's back.

"What—" Andrea's eyes came up and she just stared.

A gray stone gate rose ahead of them, with twin pillars double the height of a man. Purple-green shimmers coated the empty space in between, like a soap bubble's glistening surface. A smell of something electrically alien sizzled along its shimmering translucence, jarring the stale still air.

Andrea swallowed, her mouth very dry. "Another illusion?"

Kreliss grinned at her, triumph in her eyes. "This one's real. One step should take us straight to the White Crystal. Once we open the portal, that is."

She raced forward.

"Wait!" It was Geome. He blocked her, feet firmly planted and arms crossed. "Before you lead us any further, I need to know you can control the darkness within you."

"Geome, now is hardly—" Andrea said.

"It's the perfect time. A mage, obviously touched by evil, is guiding us to the White Crystal, where she'd have the power to destroy all the woodfolk. If you aren't going to ask these questions, I am."

Andrea closed her eyes. The shadows were still chasing them. "After all we've been through—"

"He's right."

Both travelers stared at Kreliss.

Kreliss glanced at the rock passage that closed in on all sides. "Sealing the door behind us sapped the last of my magic." She met Geome's eyes. "I've controlled it for a year, and it never escaped unchecked. I can hold it."

Geome hesitated.

"Look at me with mage-sight. I have no power left," she said steadily.

Geome concentrated for a moment and then blinked. "You're right. And the evil isn't part of you; with your shields down, I can see it like an ugly coating. But how—"

"Later!" Andrea shook her head. Suspicion had torn this world apart enough. "Geome, your suspecting Kreliss is just as bad as the villagers' hating the elves. Start trusting here."

Geome straightened, a strange energy in his eyes. "That's it!"

Kreliss blinked. "What?"

"No time now. Kreliss," Geome stretched a sympathetic hand out toward her, then, hesitating, dropped it. "I'm sorry I doubted. Now, let's hurry." He paused, almost an apology.

Kreliss eyed Geome. "We're both drained. Together?"

Geome took a deep breath and nodded. "I'll use the focus, you guide it." He clasped his pendant in trembling hands, and Kreliss placed hers above them.

Long moments passed. The hallway dimmed further, as evening advanced into night. The few cracks of dusk-light that had seeped through the walls had vanished.

Tzalmaveths hissed shrill and loud, echoing up the corridor. The spoiling stench intensified, until Andrea's stomach rose up into her throat.

She swallowed hard, and took a deep breath to quiet her pounding heart.

"Kreliss? Geome?" How long had they stood there, silent, locked in their mental battle? The pair had easily opened the last barrier, Geome springing the trap with Kreliss's guidance. Had they both lost so much power? The hissing strengthened now, until it seems to be in the same room with them. In seconds, the tzalmaveths would arrive to find Kreliss and Geome locked in their spell, and only Andrea to defend them with the now-useless Forest Gem.

"The spell needs more power," Kreliss said, her voice drifting as if from a long distance.

No! They couldn't give up now, one barrier away from escape. The room darkened into true nightfall. In the instant before the last glimmers of daylight vanished, Andrea saw a dozen tzalmaveths plunge through the door. One shrieked its rage, and Andrea thought her eardrums would pierce and shatter. The creatures flew at her. Andrea shrieked as she held up an arm.

She ran to her friends and pressed her hands on theirs. A green light flashed before her eyes. Behind her, a cold tendril scraped the skin of her neck, slithering upwards into her hair.

"The barrier's down!" Geome shouted. "Run!"

Andrea yanked her head from the shadowy grasp, losing some hair in the process. She thrust out behind her with an elbow, but only hit an icy murkiness, like almost-frozen

pea soup. She ran for the mahalak orach, hearing Kreliss panting beside her. Andrea pressed her hand against the clear air of the portal and felt it warm, hotter, hotter. Then a white light pulsed, bright enough to blind.

They burst into another room, where Andrea blinked in the dim light. She felt herself standing inside a giant kaleidoscope, yet with the light all muted to fuzzy grayness. Andrea's own startled eyes stared back at her, reflected, reflected, reflected. Around her, she could see a series of dim forms, mirroring the two of them. Wait, two of them?

“Where's Geome?”

Kreliss's eyes glowed hugely in the gray light. The odd luminescence made her appear shadowlike, only half in the room. “He went in before us. You think of your destination and you'll go there.”

“The White Crystal chamber.” Andrea swallowed. “I guess he thought of somewhere else.”

“That snake! After all he said.” Kreliss's voice trembled. “I thought your words about working together meant something to him.”

“We'll have to do this by ourselves.” Andrea hesitated. “Could the shadows follow us?”

Kreliss shook her head. “With Sidaria's protection, only sylvans can enter here uninvited.”

“Just sylvans?”

"Look as if I'm close enough," Kreliss said, a thin edge of smugness in her voice.

"And you have the Forest Gem, whatever state it's in."

"Did that stop Geome?" Perhaps there was a rational explanation after all.

"If it had, he'd be pounding on the barrier. You can't excuse him." Andrea could almost hear Kreliss's teeth grind.

"Worry about him later. Now hurry, there must be some way to save the crystal."

In this room of endless reflections, Andrea couldn't locate anything besides herself.

"Where is it?"

"Your left. Where the air's sparkling hardest."

Andrea reached out with her left hand and encountered something hard and cold.

A hum drifted through the room, pitching up and down in a melody of timeless loveliness. Its tones stroked their ears like the beat of a butterfly's wings.

Andrea's fingers groped over the crystal, struggling to discern its shape. "The unicorn said we should reverse the magic in the White Crystal by pouring power into it."

Andrea heard Kreliss swallow. Her voice sounded thick when she finally spoke.

"The room should be filled with light, but the sylvans are still dying, despite our finding the answer. We failed all of them." The crystal flickered and then dimmed an infinitesimal fraction. The fog was deepening, darkening like a stormy sky. Soon Andrea would no longer be able to see Kreliss, then her own hand waving in front of her face. And then total darkness would entrap the girls. Forever.

Andrea's voice cut through the silence. "We just need a huge burst of magic."

Her fingers brushed the shattered Forest Gem. Too late, she repented her rashness.

A tear shone down Kreliss's cheek. "Don't you see? I have no power; the amolir took it all. I'd give all my life-energy to restore the crystal, but it needs far more. Only an army of spellcasters could provide enough." The room darkened.

Andrea slammed one fist into her other hand. "The crystal's almost dead!"

Kreliss sank to her knees. "After all this work, all the struggle, we failed. The quest is over."

Glimmers of light caught Andrea's gaze, as the purple-green shimmer glowed, lit by an internal radiance. "Kreliss, look. The portal's lighting up."

"Tzalmaveths, trying to invade." Kreliss didn't move.

"I don't think so." Andrea could make a familiar silhouette against the portal's gleam. "It's Geome, with a crowd of people behind him. Open this!"

Kreliss paled. "Mages from the Academy, here to destroy Sidaria. I won't let them."

Andrea's fingers itched to shake the other girl. "Kreliss, after all we've been through, you have to learn to trust. They came to help us."

"I won't risk the crystal!"

"Kreliss, it's dying. And I'm going to save it." Andrea pressed her hands against the smoothness of the portal, hands sliding as if she stroked the oiled glass of a cake pan. She prayed for the magic that had aided her once before. Her palms warmed. Then, shuddering, the portal eased open.

Kreliss drew her sword.

"Hello, Andrea, Kreliss." Geome stepped through the mahalak orach, a swarm of white-robed mages behind him. They glimmered like angels in the mist, talismans against the flooding grayness. They were all different heights, from over seven feet tall to the size of a toddler. One was even a centaur. At last, Geome approached close enough for Andrea to make out his shy smile. "Andrea convinced me to call in the rest of the Academy. I'm not the only one who's stayed trapped within walls, fussing over my own problems instead of trying to save lives. We've come to help."

Kreliss hesitated. "The crystal has so little power. If we can't reenergize it with a strong enough burst on our first try, it'll drain away everyone's strength while we're still tied to it." She bit her lip. "You all could die and accomplish nothing."

One elderly wizard with a white beard approached Kreliss. His easy gait contrasted with the stiff way he held his left arm. "Humans and elves have quarreled for too many years. Young Geome reminded us your people are mages of Calithwain as well." His face softened. "Let us help."

The mages formed a circle around the dying crystal. Andrea and Kreliss scrambled out of the way, darting behind all the newcomers. One of the figures nodded, and all of them grasped hands. Geome stood among them as if he belonged there. All about around the circle, wands and pendants began to glow.

Then the shimmer of magic faded. "It's not enough," Kreliss whispered. "We're failing."

"Andrea, come," Geome said from the circle. Two of the mages extended hands to her and Kreliss. Andrea saw Kreliss hesitate, then finally join the mages. Andrea took

the hands offered and clasped them tightly, warm and strong around hers. She found herself marveling at how much she'd grown. Five days ago, she had been performing her first lead in a play. Now, she was Sidaria's mystic champion. Against her forehead, Andrea could feel the warmth of the Forest Gem blossoming into life.

Andrea could feel the power rising around her, warming and crescendoing as it built toward release. Andrea pushed outwards, like breathing but much more forcefully, and with the power she sent need. "Heal the crystal. Restore its power." From all around her, energy rose in waves of strength so fierce Andrea feared she would be knocked backwards. The woman on one side of her spasmed and clutched Andrea's hand tighter.

Pure, golden power exploded from each of the mages, blasting into the White Crystal. The crystal flared, white as real earth moonlight. Far below Andrea's feet, the ground shook with the force of iron splintering. With more power flowing into it, the crystal's strength grew exponentially, flaring brighter and brighter. Its harmonies raced to life, erupting in a burst of pure joy, fast as a beating heart and loud enough to shatter the walls around them. Andrea's eyes shut, tearing at the explosion of light around her. The glorious brilliance at the end of the tunnel of darkness embraced her, the light of birth. After the twilight caves, this new chamber glowed like an exploding sun. Squinting, Andrea saw a glow emanate from her forehead as well, pale green against the whiteness. The Forest Gem pulsed, jolting to life and warmth and throwing her into another memory.

Andrea clutched hands tightly on both sides, waiting for Miss Jarnowski's words.

"All of you did a fantastic job, and we had our first phenomenal performance tonight. I like to do a little something special, so we're going to construct a memory web.

"When you catch the ball of yarn, I want you to find someone in the circle, and tell them something wonderful, something you really admire in them. Then throw them the ball. They should make a little loop with a knot and hold onto it, then say something nice about someone else.

"I'm going to start with the girl who proved it's possible to actually catch water." Miss Jarnowski threw the yarn across the circle to a beaming Lorraine. "You have so much enthusiasm and energy. I'm sure your love for the stage will take you very far."

To Andrea's amusement, Lorraine tossed her yarn to Pilar after tying a loop. "You've made so much progress, and worked harder than anyone. You were always sweet and accommodating, even with all the different parts you've had to cover. Thank you for making this show fantastic."

Round and round the white yarn arced, looping through the students in swirls and crisscrosses. At last, Cindy caught it and tossed it straight to Andrea. "Andrea, I want to thank you for being a real star, in every sense. Having the main part didn't matter to you." Here Andrea bit her lip to keep from correcting her friend. "Keeping the play together did. You whispered lines to Justin, encouraged Pilar, and persuaded me not to leave. In fact, I wouldn't have gone onstage tonight if not for your believing in me. The team spirit you brought to this play kept it alive. Thanks."

Andrea turned toward the last person. "And I want to thank Miss Jarnowski, who brought us all together and never gave up. You made this all happen."

Miss Jarnowski beamed at all of them. "I'm going to pass a scissors around, so each of you can snip your loops off this web and keep them, to remember each other. Now go home and rest. Plan for an even better show tomorrow."

"The crystal!" Kreliss cried. "It's awake again."

"We did it," Geome shouted back from across the circle. "Humans and elves together, we repaired the crystal."

Andrea's eyes burst open to see the crystal sparkling, filling the room with wholesome white power. Every inch of the chamber shone, reflecting the brilliance back toward the crystal. Andrea grinned so hard her mouth hurt. They had triumphed.

The room around them gleamed like semitransparent glass. When Andrea looked closer, she could tell from the fierce sparkle that the walls were actually made of gleaming crystal. They stood in a giant translucent dome, filled with light. It was much more beautiful than any dwelling Andrea could imagine, even the fairy queen's private palace.

Kreliss's eyes sparkled. "We couldn't have succeeded without you, Andrea. At the end, there, your magic tipped the balance. You truly are Sidaria's champion."

The elderly wizard nodded. "I am glad we could serve the woodfolk. Tell your Lady Sidaria that if she needs our help again, she need only ask."

Andrea was treated to the amusing sight of Kreliss gasping for air like a fish deprived of water. "Thank you," she stammered. After a moment, she rallied enough to close her gaping mouth. "I know our Sorceress would wish to thank you herself. The mages of the Academy saved not only Sidaria and the sylvans, but all the woodfolk. Won't you stay and speak to her?"

The mage smiled softly. "Sidaria's warmth and compassion are well known throughout Calithwain. I would be honored to speak to your protectress. However, in our urgency to aid you, we left the Academy unguarded. All of us had to come here; no half measures could rescue your people. We spent every fragment of power we had, and I rejoice to say, we succeeded. Now that the woodfolk are safe, we must return swiftly. Your lady Sidaria and all her people have my good wishes and those of all the mages of Calithwain. Luck to you on your path." He took Geome aside and murmured a few words to him.

Andrea watched all the mages file through the portal one by one. At last only Geome remained. He glanced after the mages, and took a half step in their direction.

"Geome, stay." Kreliss's voice was softer than Andrea had ever heard it. "We owe you the greatest debt of all."

Geome actually flushed. "I knew we'd need help, since all of us were burned out and didn't have the power to heal the White Crystal. I'm just grateful Master Melnor gathered all the mages of the Academy so quickly. It was amazing."

"Not as amazing as working together to restore the crystal. Thank you." Before Andrea's amazed eyes, Kreliss reached forward and hugged Geome tightly.

"Well done," a melodious voice behind Andrea said, permeating the air like the scent of honeysuckle. The voice was filled with light, bright as Jixil's had been dark and brooding. Andrea turned to see a dark-skinned woman standing behind her, on the other side of the White Crystal. Dozens of long, long braids swept down to the crystal floor, over a simple white gown. Translucent sleeves floated in the air, draping like a swan's wing. Encircling her neck, a circle of moonstones shimmered. Her brown eyes deepened with thousands of years of knowledge. When Andrea looked into them, she felt her breathing slow, and her agitated heartbeat calmed. Waves of drowsiness stole over her. After a moment, Andrea forced herself to look away. The corners of the woman's lips turned up, amused.

"Lady Sidaria!" Kreliss said, kneeling at her feet.

"Rise, Kreliss." Sidaria waited until Kreliss had regained her feet. "You have saved our people and I owe you my everlasting gratitude. What can I ever do to repay you?"

Kreliss's eyes darted up at her. "I—I only have one wish. To serve you all my life as Master Janrod does."

"To be my protector? It is ill-chosen, to turn your back on magic. Renouncing it will not free you of it." Sidaria's voice lowered, softness filling her eyes. "It was not your fault, Kreliss. You were a child, not ready for the burden they placed on you."

"Whether you accept me to your service or not, I have chosen." Kreliss's voice had steadied now. Andrea couldn't imagine pitting her will against this magnificent

sorceress, especially when the sorceress had welcomed Kreliss, despite the Shifter's presence. "Have I not earned your trust?"

"It is your choice. You will train with Janrod and, in time, be my protector. Yes, you have earned my trust. And also my love, though you did not ask for it."

Kreliss bowed low, her eyes unusually bright. "Thank you, great sorceress."

Sidaria turned to Andrea. Andrea smelled starlight. "My debt is also to you, champion from another world. You saved my people when I could not."

Andrea stood before the great sorceress and asked the question that had been in her mind for so long. "Sidaria, am I truly your champion?"

"Of course."

"But your sister's amulet brought me here. She's—well—nothing like you."

Though Andrea couldn't say the words, she had to know if anything remained to save.

"She is me."

"What!"

Sidaria didn't blink at Andrea's outburst. "Jixil and I are the same, two parts of a whole, both shaping the world according to our wills. We reflect each other."

"She's a murderess."

"Not this time, thanks to you." Sidaria must have seen the frustration in Andrea's eyes. "Peace is the greatest gift of the world. Yet we treasure it more when others threaten it. Good cannot exist without evil, Andrea. And so, even Jixil bears the capacity for goodness inside her."

"Does she?" Andrea could only think of Jixil's brittle coldness, the carefully-explained killing, the dead eyes.

"If she did not, the Forest Gem could not have carried you to me, to save us all. You are my champion, a champion of rightness. Andrea—" Uncharacteristically, Sidaria hesitated for a moment. "You are Jixil's child. It is a heavy burden to be one of the Seven, and I fear your role will be harder still."

She was right about that! "Who am I? If Jixil is my mother and can do these horrible things?"

"Andrea." Sidaria's gentle smile was a blessing. "We can only choose for ourselves, not make the choices for others. I trust you, and I believe in the path you have yet to travel."

"But she's still trapped!" Andrea hesitated. "Isn't she?"

Sidaria nodded. "And I pity what she has become. But even more I pity her as a mother. It is a terrible burden to part from your only child." Did Andrea imagine it, or did Sidaria's eyes flicker briefly on Kreliss? Andrea glanced at the other girl, but Kreliss was staring wistfully at the White Crystal and hadn't noticed the moment of longing in Sidaria's eyes.

Andrea felt rather than saw Geome shifting behind her. Sidaria straightened. "But I also owe thanks to this young man, who gave us unlooked-for aid when we needed it so desperately. Courage in the face of despair is the greatest of all. Thank you, Geomattus."

Geome bowed, and the tips of his ears turned red. "It was an honor, Lady Sidaria."

"And is there some gift I might give you? I value your aid as much as that of my chosen champions, if not more."

Geome hesitated, fiddling with the hem of his tunic. "I've heard you grant a few favorite people the status of elf friend and freedom to travel through your lands, much as Kreliss has."

"What would you do with such a gift?"

"I've concentrated for so long on being the best student at the Academy, so I can save Alcanster. But Calithwain needs me, too, to strengthen the bond between elves and humans. Besides, it seems my magic needs practice."

Sidaria's smile warmed them like a sunbeam. "How could I deny you? Be welcome in the forest lands, now and forever."

She turned to Andrea. "You are an elf friend eternally. More than that, you are my champion."

"Then I can stay in Calithwain?" As she asked, Andrea found herself wondering if she truly wanted to. She still had so much to say to her dad and Shanelle.

Sidaria's smile was just as kind as the Dreamweaver's, and just as sympathetic. "Look in your heart, Andrea. You have a home waiting for you, and people who share their love with yours. Duties and responsibilities await you in your own land, deeds you have postponed in order to rescue my people. You cannot run away from your life. The quest is over now."

"But I thought—" Andrea gestured toward the crippled Forest Gem. "Is it all right?"

"You cannot sever your ties from Earth with a moment's bravery, any more than you can sever your ties to Calithwain. You are a child of two lands. Are you ready to return home?"

Andrea squirmed, her eyes on her feet. "Not yet," she said, voice unsteady.

"Andrea, all things take courage, especially things we do not wish."

Andrea swallowed, but a lump remained lodged in her throat. "Will I ever come back?"

"I have named you my champion. You will be that and more for the rest of your days. Calithwain will not relinquish you lightly, and not forever."

Andrea looked away. "A lot of things are better here than they are back home."

"Then isn't your duty to improve them, to remake others' hearts, one by one? Healing the world is the duty of ordinary people as well as champions."

Andrea looked straight at Sidaria. "It's not easy."

Sidaria returned her stare. "It never is."

At last, Andrea nodded. She didn't belong here, after all. "Send me back, then." She turned to her new friends. "I wish you both could come with me."

Kreliss smiled. "You saved Calithwain through your compassion for people who you hadn't even met. I'll remember your example as I serve Sidaria to the best of my power."

"This adventure was all I could have hoped for," Geome said. "You believed in me and trusted me even when I let you down. Your courage brought out my real talents."

Andrea hugged them both, big close hugs. Then she turned to Sidaria, who had been waiting patiently. "I guess I'm ready to go."

"Farewell, Andrea, and know I owe you a debt that can never be paid." Sidaria stepped back, behind the crystal that powered all her magic.

The White Crystal flared brighter and brighter, until Andrea could only see white brilliance shining all around her. A clean scent like lavender soap fluttered against her nostrils. At last, the light faded. Andrea found herself sitting in her room, surrounded by all her shelves of books. Her hands were empty. Andrea jumped to her feet, staring all around herself. Where was the hardcover script that had brought her to Calithwain? It wasn't on the floor or anywhere around her. Andrea glanced down and saw she wore the same silly costume she had worn before any of the adventure had started. The thin white burns had vanished from her hands and arms. The bruises down her leg had ceased aching.

Brahms no longer played; the CD must have reached its end. The radio still chattered; any minute it would announce the winner of the O'Keefe Award. Andrea switched the radio off. She had no reason to chase her mother any longer. Calithwain had indeed given her the answer she needed and the last one she ever would have wanted.

Outside her room, the house was blissfully silent. For the moment, her parents had stopped fighting. Andrea eyed the door. Time to walk downstairs and apologize.

Escaping had been a silly dream; time to grow up. After they talked, she could do her math homework, and ask Shanelle to help her on the confusing problems.

With a sigh, Andrea turned away from the bookshelves. There was no use asking if it had been real; she could still feel the magic tingling on her hands, still hear Kreliss's voice in her ears, and still smell the smoke of their campfires. It was real. It had to have been. Walking toward her bedroom door, Andrea caught a glimpse of herself in her white-framed dresser mirror. She turned for a closer look.

Staring back were the same freckles and green eyes that had been in the mirror this morning. Yet something was different. Draped between and above her eyes, just as it had in Calithwain, sparkled the Forest Gem, strong and whole, glowing with the green light of magic.

"Looks like I'm still Sidaria's Champion." Andrea murmured to herself. "I wonder if the Forest Gem can bring light to the darkness on earth. It looks like I'll have a chance to find out." She stroked the circlet, feeling the smooth warmth pulse against her fingertips. Deep within it, she imagined she could hear her mother's voice, crying out to her across the worlds, coaxing her back to Calithwain. But not today.

The End