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YA Fantasy Novel  
54,000 words

The White Crystal of Calithwain

By Valerie Frankel

## 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 the dust on the velvet curtains and the fake coconut scent of the fog machine 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, together with all the other grinning cast members. Andrea felt like a fairy princess.

The curtain closed, and the other students hurried backstage to change, whispering despite 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, smearing her hand with the blue eyeshadow Hester had told her didn't match her green eyes. Andrea scrubbed the makeup off on her pant leg with a hand peppered with freckles. She grimaced. *I snuck out of the house for this. I trashed my pre-algebra grade, and ticked off my parents, all for a fairy tale.*

Silence. By now, 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 moonlight glazed discarded programs and the backs of chairs, creating hundreds of glowing semicircles like close-lipped smiles.

"Ducking your ecstatic fans?"

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

Andrea wondered whether Hester 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 Hester's poisoned remarks.

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

"You wearing that outside?" Hester eyed Andrea's pink beaded shirt, plastic circlet, and leather vest. "Might as well

wear Miss Jarnowski's old pink dress; your outfit's just as bad." Hester crossed the stage, walking with the light footsteps that came naturally to her. Andrea had clomped onstage for weeks before learning to step softly. Hester turned to raise arched eyebrows behind pink-framed glasses. "Just think. Tonight Cindy's off to New York to be a star while you go to bed early."

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. Under it, her brown loafers were waiting. She slipped out of her ballet slippers and into her everyday shoes. No point in stalling any longer. She followed Hester to the stage door.

"I'd call the O'Keefe Award a long shot for anyone." Andrea kept her voice casual. If she never told anyone what it 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, not sending as much as a birthday card. 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. The woman hadn't appeared in any theater reviews or even on the internet. In person was the only way to find

her. 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." Hester shouldered open the heavy stage door leading to the empty parking lot. "Even Cindy's panicking, and *she's* guaranteed to win." Hester 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 as she followed Hester outside.

With a last condescending look, Hester flounced toward 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. At least her costume was close enough to street clothes not to be a problem. She tugged her chin-length brown curls into a tidier ponytail and 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.

A bright red leaf, like a beacon, flew at her, thumping her nose with damp softness. Andrea snatched it from the air and impulsively stuffed it in her pocket. Another gust blew into

her, carrying a mist of rain. The wind howled, ghostlike, until her ears stung.

"This is ridiculous," Andrea muttered, referring to both the weather and her fears. Resolutely, she stepped forward. 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. Unbidden, the words she needed to speak crowded into her head.

*I'm sorry, Dad. I'm sorry, Shanelle. I shouldn't have said what I did. I only 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, of course. Andrea crossed the lawn, stepping over the garden hose coiled across her path. Damp grass squelched under her loafers. Cold as dead fingers, the wet maple tree stroked her hair with a probing branch. 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. 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 familiar 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 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 and tweed skirt with 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 argued around the corner, out of sight. 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.

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. 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. 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 smell 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 Barbie Shanelle had bought her six years ago 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 dial 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.*

Andrea pulled off the tiaralike circlet she had worn 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, coiling and uncoiling the silver headband over the surface of the stone.

Under the bed, Andrea found her mangled script, creased until it resembled used wrapping paper. She sat up 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. Forty minutes left until the announcement. Andrea squeezed her mother's jewel, and saw an odd sparkle flitter across its surface. Flipping to the first script page, 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,*

*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 sylvans 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 sylvan warrior, she had brought an incredible vibrancy to the part. Plus her looks were perfect. She could easily win the award.

The stage 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 fake coconut and oil paint. 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.*

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.

Andrea jumped up, eyes 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 the rough tree bark of a gray and white birch. 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 sky blew chilly goosebumps up her exposed arms. The complete silence of the forest unnerved her. 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, with limp thatching drooping over them. A pile of logs slumped against one house, while the center building was draped in blue banners. Andrea stood there, under pine and elm 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. 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 sylvan 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 a 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 sigh loud enough 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 sylvans' 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. She reached toward it. "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. Its

power will protect you with all Sidaria's remaining strength. When Sidaria recovers, she'll use it to send you back."

Andrea arranged the circlet around her brow. 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.

"Well, you won't have a chance to meet her if the White Crystal fails. All of nature'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 sylvans."

"You've got the wrong person. Send me home, now." Andrea had had enough of this confusing place, and she felt fed up with being polite.

"Only Sidaria can send you home, and she's dying. Seems you're trapped here until we succeed." Kreliss's eyes flashed, and her voice slapped Andrea with disdain. "Now, come."

Andrea walked behind her 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. 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 For Best Young Actor." "Students Can Choose Our School Play: Find Out How." It was September, a week before auditions.

*Not that I have a chance to win,* Andrea thought. She sighed. *I need a book.* Andrea scanned the fairy tale section of her bookshelf. No matter how many clothes lay scattered on the floor, or stuffed animals overflowed from their shelves, her books always stayed organized. Classics, an enormous 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 walked over and gripped the pebbled cover. 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 sylvans. And so, time continues, peacefully, uneventfully.*

*Curtain opens.*

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

*KELL: (to Seer) Can't you hear the silence? The birdsong's vanished.*

Andrea read on, watching the disaster unfold as the White Crystal, source of sylvan 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 book 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 script 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 dying with the White Crystal."

Andrea looked away, gazing into the thinning forest. 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 sylvans 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 were 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 meet Sidaria. Then east, to find the villain killing my people, whoever he is." Kreliss spoke curtly, biting each word. Apparently, concentrating on her own thoughts had darkened her mood.

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 colored her voice, but under it, her words shook. "What do you

suggest? In less than a week, when Sidaria's last magic vanishes, 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 with only Kreliss, who clearly didn't like her.

"Sidaria said to bring you here." Kreliss gestured into the clearing ahead.

Inside rose an ice sculpture of a tower, pristine white. Andrea drew in a deep breath and felt a delicious serenity steal over her. She stared, trying to soak in as much of the tower's presence as she could. This before her was *magic*.

Kreliss pressed her hand against the sealed door. "It's never been shut before." Her voice trembled. "Lady Sidaria?"

Golden lightning arced out of the ground to spread over the white tower like a cancer. Andrea yanked Kreliss back hard

toward herself. Both girls tumbled in a heap. Though neither girl was touching the tower, electricity shot toward both of them. *Dying here is so stupid*, Andrea thought. *I'll never even find out about the O'Keefe Award.*

A white shield, wobbling like a soap bubble, extended around the two girls. Andrea stared at Kreliss, still reeling. "Did you—"

The other girl shook her head. "Sidaria."

A voice chimed faintly in Andrea's head. \*Go, children, quickly. Find and stop her.\*

"Find who?" Andrea demanded.

Silence. The bubble wavered, and Kreliss pulled Andrea up. "C'mon. We'll manage on our own."

"But—"

"Sidaria's spending herself fast enough just keeping us alive!" Kreliss hauled Andrea to her feet, and dragged her in the opposite direction from the one they'd come. They ran until Andrea's breath was thundering in her lungs, then, at last, Kreliss slowed. The tower and its lightning had vanished from sight.

"What was that?" Andrea asked.

"It should be obvious." Kreliss breathed heavily, though she wasn't sweating. "Whoever's draining the crystal was waiting for us." She swallowed. "I just wish we could've

helped Sidaria. I've seen her blow away an avalanche without breathing hard. She must be terribly weak."

"So, now what?" Andrea asked.

Kreliss's face closed. "Someone's slaughtering my people. We have to stop her in the next four days."

"Without a clue where we're going?"

Kreliss hesitated. "I may know someone who can guide us, after we finish here."

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 at the gray sky, barely sheltering the houses. The girls' 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 stiff 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, or would be if they were human. All three had pointed ears and golden skin, and wore loose leather dresses. The woman's dusky hair rested in elaborately braided coils, 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 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. If the sylvans slipped from their slumber into death, that peaceful look on her face would echo forever in Andrea's mind. Andrea swallowed hard and looked away. *They're only sleeping*, she reminded herself. Yet the three sylvans 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 sylvans' 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 sylvan girl's hand. "Sidaria's people 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 cups of water in a dripping sieve. 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 sylvan 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.

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. Lyr'al'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, Hester 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.

*ALENNA: "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 Lyr'al'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 woods. 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 and saved me twice. 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 sylvans 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?"

If Jesse were here, he would have complained that the quest sounded unrealistic, too dramatic to believe. Yet Andrea had known from the moment she saw the sleeping sylvan-children that this world was real. And that meant she could get hurt. "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.

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, sylvans 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 and before? 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. "We only need a little wisdom. Who's done this?"

"One banished years ago, who cloaks herself in shadows. She is entering our world again, in an abandoned castle to the west. We can do nothing to thwart her."

"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 sylvans 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 fish sticks 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 Hester. 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 gradually west 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 twilight 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!" Hester 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," Hester 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.

Hester 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." She 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."

<end of selection>