

THE DEEPER DARKNESS



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Also by KE Stapylton

Books 1, 3 and 4 in the Prism Series:

The Terror of Prism Fading

Phantism

The Wood at World's Edge

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THE DEEPER DARKNESS

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To Dixon, who loves truly,

and

David, who personifies all blue crystals.

– Chapter One –

AN UNEXPECTED TURN OF EVENTS

It wasn't like the last time, when they'd been dragged into the blackness.

Now, firm but gentle hands held Rabbit's shoulders and she opened her eyes quickly as she was pushed deeper and deeper under the water. A look of surprise washed over her face and her mouth stretched into a silent "Oh!"

The first thing she saw was a mass of blue hair that swayed to and fro in the current. It took a moment for her to notice the grinning face in the middle of the silky blue tentacles, and Rabbit was surprised when she heard its owner say clearly "Breathe!" As he spoke the word, he looped a strand of something that looked like pearls around her neck and popped one directly under her nose. The bubble that escaped made her sneeze, and she was momentarily frightened as she instinctively inhaled. It passed in an instant as she realized she was gulping in great mouthfuls of what seemed to be breathable water. The boy smiled and nodded enthusiastically and Rabbit noticed dozens of tiny shells and thousands of grains of silver sand shake free from his long blue hair. She reached her hands out to his shoulders, taking a firmer hold as he pushed them both lower and lower. Either side of them, Jasper, Rupert and Aden were held by sea-people of their own, and they, too, seemed to be breathing normally thanks to the pearl strands they wore.

But on Rabbit's shoulder the sack she carried flipped wildly, as if something in it was trying to escape.

"Oh no!" said Rabbit, quickly tugging the bag open to discover Viff shivering inside and turning red from the exertion of holding his breath.

"Help him!" she cried.

The blue haired boy took Viff quickly, tore one of the pearls from around Rabbit's neck, and popped it directly under Viff's nose.

"Breathe!" he said.

Viff shook his head frantically and the bubbles that escaped the pearl floated away above them.

“Viff,” said Rabbit, “you must breathe! If you don’t breathe, you’ll drown! Breathe!” Rabbit tore another pearl from the necklace she wore and again held it under the struggling viffle’s nose. Again Viff shook his head vehemently and Rabbit saw his face was turning purple.

“Not to worry,” said the blue haired boy. “This happens sometimes.” He reached out and took the pearl from Rabbit’s hand and placed it in his mouth, biting down hard while keeping his lips pursed shut. Lifting Viff towards his face, he covered the terrified little viffle’s nose with his own mouth, and blew firmly. For a second Viff’s eyes opened wide in panic, then, as the boy removed his mouth, Viff gasped huge mouthfuls of water. He giggled uncertainly, and quickly licked the boy’s face.

“You’re welcome,” he said, and placed him back on Rabbit’s shoulder. “I’m Aniel, and welcome to Undersea!” he said with a wide smile. “I’m head of the Emperor Pompilius Nautilus’ scouts.” Then, looking towards the sea-people who held Rupert, Aden and Jasper, he nodded and said, “You might want to hold on now – yes, you too.” This last instruction was directed to Viff, who just had time to grab pawfuls of Rabbit’s hair and pull himself back into the sack on her shoulder before Aniel and the other scouts shot off, dragging the children with them as they clutched tightly.

The speed with which they swam made Rabbit strain to see Aniel’s feet, and she was surprised to see he had no fish-like tail. She blushed when she realized he’d noticed and was smiling knowingly.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “You’re so fast - I just thought you’d have a tail or ... or ... something.” Her voice trailed away.

“Not us,” he said, and Rabbit noticed he seemed to be panting. “Only the mer-people. People from Utter Deep,” he elaborated, seeing the confused look on Rabbit’s face. “We have the webbing, of course, and that helps a lot. I’m sorry I can’t talk more; I’m to get you to the Emperor as fast as I can and it’s a bit of a way.”

“Not at all,” said Rabbit, feeling lost for words. “Er ... carry on.”

Aniel smiled again and kept swimming.

On and down they swam, always further away from where they’d entered the water, till Rabbit had no idea how far they’d gone or even how long it was since they’d left Spectra and the palace. She had a

million questions, but the further they swam, the less important they seemed. Already it was as though the farewell from King Rohannan and Queen Ardentia and all the people of Prism had never happened, and that life above the water was a fading memory or a dream. The water grew darker, going from cobalt to a rich kind of stained glass blue, a color Rabbit had seen so many times in Chalice. In the end it was a deep blue-green and the sunlight was barely visible above them. The scouts who held Rupert, Aden and Jasper grew difficult to see then, and Rabbit almost felt as though only she and Aniel swam through the belly of the ocean.

The deeper they went, the colder it grew, and still Rabbit couldn't see the ocean's floor. Occasionally Viff worked his head out of Rabbit's bag to survey his surroundings. But the deeper and darker it became, the less he peeked out, till in the end he curled up in the bottom of the bag and slept. Clutched as she was beneath Aniel's chest, Rabbit's view was not good, but she could see enough to know they were rarely alone, no matter how far or how deep they swam. Looking backwards over Aniel's shoulder, she saw schools of fish, some small and brightly colored, and some that shimmered like liquid silver as they wove their way effortlessly through the water. Her view of these was brief and they disappeared almost as soon as she saw them. Occasionally she saw an octopus, and once she was sure she saw a shark, its big teeth grinning a terrifying smile as it passed by. Aniel felt her stiffen and her grasp on him grow tight, and he tried to reassure her.

"Very misunderstood, the sharks. Lovely fish, on the whole, and fabulous workers. They do most of the security details and they're excellent at enforcing the law in these parts."

Rabbit had no trouble believing him.

But after what seemed like hours and hours, Rabbit became aware that it had in fact been growing lighter for some time and, twisting her head to look beneath her, saw that she was no longer in bottomless ocean. Not more than fifty feet below twinkled the soft gold of fine, clean sand as the ocean's floor rose up to meet them. At the same time she realized it wasn't so dark, and the light she saw above her was the sun as it reached through the water.

"I think I might have fallen asleep," she said to Aniel, who still swam with her clutched to his chest.

"Indeed you did!" he said, and she saw that a rope made from

seaweed was wrapped around her waist, tying her and Aniel together. “Not to worry,” he said, as she began to apologize. “You weren’t the only one. In fact, I think you’re the first one awake - look!” Twisting to her right and left, Rabbit saw Rupert, Aden and Jasper, all similarly tied to the scouts who carried them, and all fast asleep. Small bubbles escaped Aden’s mouth, and Rabbit somehow felt better when she realized the princess snored.

“You’re quite close to the surface here,” said Rabbit.

“Yes,” responded Aniel. “We don’t live in the depths. In terms of those who live in the sea, we’re surface dwellers. We like the light and the shallows and the currents from the waves above. And if ever any are called to go on land, or to speak with your kind, they ask us. Of all those who live in the ocean, we’re most like you; although it’s many centuries since we lived on land, we can still manage it if the need occurs.”

“Oh!” said Rabbit. “Are we near land?” She started to kick as though to swim to the surface.

“Rabbit! No, wait!” called Aniel urgently. “You can’t do that!”

“Why not?” asked Rabbit, pausing.

“Once you’ve breathed our air, you would drown in your own. Were you to raise your head above the level of the sea you’d find your own air thick like water, and you’d choke on it immediately. Going back to land when you’ve lived in the sea is not an easy thing.”

“So we’re here for a while, then,” said Rabbit, and Aniel nodded. She paused for a moment then asked,

“How do you know my name?”

“Oh, we’ve been expecting you for some time,” said Aniel. “For well over a year, at least.”

Rabbit’s head shot up. “For over a year?” she asked, aghast. “How did you know to expect us? Even the centaurs in Spectra didn’t know we were coming!”

“Well, I’m not sure, Rabbit,” said Aniel. “You’ll need to ask the Emperor that. But it’s been common knowledge for a while now, as have your names.”

Rabbit gave an involuntary shiver. If the people of the ocean’s shallows had known to expect them for over a year, then even when Rabbit was back home, that meant ... well, what did it mean? Had somebody been preparing her for this all along? Somebody good?

Somebody evil? And who? Rabbit's head spun with the possibilities. For some time now, Rabbit had given little thought to the treachery the centaurs had prophesied. They'd said it existed somewhere in the quest to find the four stolen quadrants of Prism's sacred Crystal. Now, for some reason, it seemed so much more possible and real, and Rabbit wondered again whether it might indeed have something to do with her.

Lost in thought, Rabbit didn't notice immediately that the traffic around them had increased. Schools of beautiful tropical fish swam past in larger numbers, and bright green eels slithered along the ocean's floor. Crabs danced sideways, often carrying smaller shells on their backs, and Rabbit didn't even notice when they swam above neat rows of seaweed sown into crops. But when a group of three giggling young sea-girls almost bumped into them and Aniel laughed and said "Watch where you're going!" Rabbit was pulled out of her daydreams and suddenly noticed that things had changed yet again.

"Wait ... wait ... Aniel, can you let me go? I want to look," said Rabbit, and when Aniel let her go she flapped her arms to gain her balance as she floated upright in the water.

"Aniel! It's...it's beautiful!" she gasped.

The ocean floor sloped gently upwards into a succession of low hills, each larger and taller than the one before it, till right in the center stood the tallest peak, the summit of which was, at most, twenty feet below the waterline. Each hill was covered with openings and entrances carved into the surface, like an enormous and extraordinarily complicated ant warren, and on the center hill was the largest, most majestic castle Rabbit had ever seen. The underwater palace was a mass of towers and turrets, each flying a selection of flags that rippled in the water. But most beautiful of all was the way the sun hit each grain of sand, turning the entire structure into a twinkling reflection of sunlight; the home of the sea Emperor was like an enormous sparkling diamond in the center of its turquoise landscape.

"My word!" Rabbit turned and saw that Rupert had just woken up and was seeing their underwater destination for the first time. "This is amazing!"

"Wow!" said Jasper, who was staring and half shielding his eyes from the light the palace reflected. Next to him Aden was staring also, though quiet. Rabbit wondered if she was thinking about Chalice, the

castle of her parents, which she had left behind so unexpectedly. The four children hadn't had a chance to talk since being pulled underwater, and for the first time as she stared at Jasper, Rabbit remembered the completely unexpected kiss he had planted on her mouth in front of all the people of Spectra. She remembered the smile on his lips and the laughter of those around her, and she felt her face turn red despite the cool water.

"How dare he!" she said to herself. "It might have been a joke to him, but ... but ... ugh!" She was so cross she couldn't even finish the thought. So it made complete sense to her, and none at all to Jasper, when he swam towards her and Rabbit turned her back on him, saying to Aniel abruptly, "Shouldn't we keep moving?" Rabbit placed her hands on Aniel's shoulders once again, and he smiled and nodded.

Jasper pulled up short, a confused look on his face.

"Rabbit, I ... ," he started.

"Come on, everyone," said Rabbit, completely ignoring him. "We need to keep going. Aniel – let's move!"

Rupert, who floated next to Rabbit in the water, saw this exchange, and groaned. He'd had a feeling Jasper's kiss might not have been a good idea, and wished Jasper had told him about it beforehand.

"Although," he said to himself, "no guy is going to discuss it with his friends every time he wants to kiss a girl, especially not someone like Jas! I wish Rabbit would go a little easy on him."

"I'm sorry – I should have introduced myself earlier." A voice broke in on Rupert's thoughts. "I'm Barnacle, but you can call me Barney." Unlike Aniel, Barney's hair was the color of seaweed, and his eyes were bright green to match. His skin was white like alabaster, and it occurred to Rupert with a start that Barney had probably never felt the sun on his skin. Barney's long hair was filled with sand and tiny shells like Aniel's, which Rupert assumed was to be expected of people who lived in the ocean.

"Nice to meet you, Barney - and thanks for the ride," said Rupert.

"You're welcome! Not far to go now. Would you like to keep going the way we've been going, or would you like to swim this last bit yourself?"

For a second Rupert wasn't sure what he meant. Then it dawned on him that arriving in the palace of the underwater Emperor strapped to a sea person who was obliged to drag him along like a dead weight

wasn't going to add to his status in anyone's eyes. He glanced back at Barney and realized that he had foreseen this problem. "Thanks," said Rupert. "I'll take it from here. In fact ... Jasper, Aden, Rabbit!" he called. "I'm thinking we might like to swim the rest of the way. We're going to be arriving at the palace shortly and ... well ... I thought it might look better if we arrived under our own steam."

"Got it," said Jasper, and immediately began disentangling himself from the sea person who had transported him thus far. Likewise Aden began chatting to the sandy haired young man to whom she'd been tied.

Only Rabbit looked uncertain. She floated, biting her lip, and Aniel could see that, even in the cool water, she was blushing.

"I ... I don't think I can," she mumbled. "I'm not a good swimmer ... actually, I'm a crap swimmer." And at that she looked up and Aniel saw the worried look in her eyes.

"You know what? Don't you worry! We're going to travel at the very back, and I'm going to tow you right up to the edge of the palace, and - just before we get there - I'll let you go and you can swim the last tiny bit. Don't worry, Rabbit, no one will see. Here - hold onto my feet! If anyone looks back they'll just think you're swimming behind me."

Rabbit wasn't sure anyone would actually think that, and she was pretty sure that Aden, for instance, would assume she probably couldn't swim at all. As for Rupert, she didn't really care what he thought. She'd been in school with him, and he'd seen her in gym class, so she knew for a fact he couldn't possibly have very high expectations about her physical ability at anything - apart from the fact that she'd almost drowned twice on their very first day in Prism.

But Rabbit did care what Jasper thought. After that humiliating kiss at the top of the cliff back in Spectra, Rabbit was damned if she was going to give him the satisfaction of seeing her make a fool of herself again. So Aniel was a little surprised when he felt two small hands grip his ankles tightly and a determined voice say, "Let's go." Viff had relocated from the sack on Rabbit's shoulder to the small of her back. He stood proudly, the water washing his ears and fur and whiskers backwards as though he traveled in a high wind, and it occurred to Rabbit that an underwater life might quite suit this adventurous little viffle. "We both really need to learn to swim," thought Rabbit as she

struggled to hang onto Aniel's feet.

But only a few minutes later Aniel swam to a stop and Rabbit felt her discomfort turn to nervousness. She was grateful to be at the back of the group. As royal princess of Prism, Aden swam at the front next to her sea-person, and behind her, Jasper. For about the zillionth time since leaving her own world, Rabbit hoped nobody would notice her.

Aden, Jasper, Rabbit and Rupert hovered at an entrance made entirely of golden sand. Stretching to their left and right was the perimeter of a perfectly circular palace, and above them sat turret after turret, one on top of the other, till the top of the palace stretched to within not more than a few feet of the surface. Below and behind them, the city of the underwater Emperor reached out over decreasing hills, till at the very bottom, in the distance, could be seen a trench that surrounded the entire city. It seemed to contain a thin orange ribbon which stretched the length of the trench, and Rupert had just decided it must be colored sand, or rocks of some sort, when there was a flash of sunlight, and Rupert could have sworn he saw what looked for all the world like a spear.

"Barney, what's that orange stuff in the trench around the city?"

"Ah! That's our military. Soldier crabs. They link together making an unbreakable chain. Those flashes you can see are when the sunlight hits their spears or swords. Or shields. Or clubs for that matter. Very handy thing in battle, having eight arms! And built in shields, of course. We usen't to need them, but things are different now," said Barney, and his voice took on a serious tone.

Set in front of the walls around the massive entrance to the city was an arch of open clam-like shells, each containing an enormous pearl the size of Rupert's head. Every pearl emitted a soft glow, which meant that swimming through the entrance to the palace was like swimming into a pool of light.

"Must be kind of annoying if you're trying to sleep anywhere near here," muttered Rupert to himself.

"Oh no!" said Barney who still floated next to him. "The shells close at night. The pearls need sleep of their own!" Seeing Rupert's face, Barney explained, "Ahhh! I've heard about your world - dead pearls! I thought they were just making that up! You won't find anything like that here; our pearls are alive - and often bad tempered in my opinion! - so be careful what you say and to who! You'll find your toes nibbled

in ways you don't like if you offend them! And the Pearl Pathway of Light is honored amongst the sea-people, so treat it with respect or you'll find they can be heavy handed!"

Rupert stifled a sigh. He had no idea in what way a bunch of sacred pearls could be heavy handed, but he'd had enough experience in Prism recently to know he was almost certainly not going to enjoy it. This only seemed to be confirmed when Barney said, "In fact, never met any pearl that wasn't a little bad tempered. They represent long life, you know. Long life and tears. Anything that represents a long life of crying has got to be a problem from the get go if you ask me!"

Swimming up to the entrance, Aden's scout, who was at the front of the group, floated upright and dipped his head as if in respect to the pearls, paused for a moment, then proceeded through the arch. Following right behind him, Aden also stopped briefly and nodded, then passed into the arch.

She hadn't gone more than a few feet when a gruff voice said, "Hmmmph! Another princess – and a snooty one at that!" All the pearls swiveled round in their shells to the point closest to Aden, like a group of giant eyeballs. Startled, she took a few flaps backwards with her arms, and again the pearls re-centered themselves in their shells as though looking at the surprised princess.

"How do you know who I am?" asked Aden.

"Our job is to know the hearts of all those who enter the kingdom of the Emperor Pompilius Nautilus," said the same voice, and another voice chimed in. "No matter how black they might be!"

Looking at the shells, Aden tried to work out who was speaking. But there were no mouths to see, no eyes to follow – no indication where precisely the voices came from. Nor were the voices entirely human; when discussing it later, the closest Aden could come to describing them was like the ringing of a bell, but with words. "Not that that makes any sense," she said.

"May I proceed?" she asked. Jasper, who knew the princess best, knew she was trying to sound polite but was slightly miffed, and he stifled a smile. Humility had never been Aden's strong point.

At this, there was a soft cascading noise, and it only took Aden a moment to realize that the pearls were discussing the matter. She caught the occasional word or phrase, "... haughty ... oh yes, horribly haughty! ... quite cruel to that little one ... brave and, well ... I really

don't think ... and you know there will be trouble ... oh don't be so harsh! ... lets anyone in these days! ... oh alright, but don't come complaining to me if ... ” She strained to hear more clearly but couldn't, and in the end the voices faded away till she distinctly heard just one pearl say, “If you say we have to, but I don't like it!”

Aden continued to float upright in the water, till in the end the first voice that had spoken said, “Enter princess,” and Aden swam through the arch.

Watching this, Rabbit was appalled. What would they say about her? Would they even let her in? But she had little time to think as Jasper's sea-person swam up to the arch, dipped his head, paused, then entered. “The pearls must know the scouts already,” thought Rabbit. And then it was Jasper's turn.

Swimming up, an enormous grin on his face, Jasper stopped just before the arch, and bowed his head and waited.

“Enter Son of Naian, she who is pure of heart, whose son carries the joy of Prism,” said a soft, ringing voice.

“But do try not to break anything,” said a different, more shrill voice, from the other side of the arch. Jasper lifted his head, grinned at the arch in general, and entered. “Figures it would be easy for him,” thought Rabbit to herself disgustedly.

Like the other two scouts, Barney entered with no word from the pearls, and then Rupert swam up to the arch. Rabbit could see he was nervous, but privately thought he had no need. “Rupert is a good person. If they'll let Aden and Jasper in, they'd have to let him in.” For a second Rupert floated between the two sides of the arch in silence, and then the voices started again.

“Well! You're not from around here, are you! Where do you call home? And don't tell us Prism, because we can already see that you're not like that other one.” Rupert guessed they were referring to Jasper.

“Earth - I'm from Earth – and a country called Australia. I don't think it's actually in your universe at all. At least, it might be, but ... I'm not sure.” And the voices started to chime again.

“I like him ... nice sort of boy ... bit lonely, really ... loyal, in a stubborn kind of way ... not sure what to make of that red hair! ... old beyond his years – shame about his parents ... quite a smart lad ... yes, definitely ... let him in ... definitely welcome ... ”

“Be welcome, Rupert Everinham,” and Rupert was shocked to realize

they knew his name without being told. Of their reading of his character he said nothing, then or ever, and even Rabbit never had the guts to ask. Rupert lifted his head, and swam forward. And then Aniel swung round to Rabbit.

“Don’t be afraid, Rabbit, it’s going to be fine. Be respectful – but don’t let them intimidate you.” Aniel squeezed Rabbit’s hands then swam up to the arch.

“And what have you brought us this time, young Aniel, leader of the Emperor’s scouts?”

“I’ve brought those for whom the Emperor and all of Undersea wait.” Rabbit thought that, although he sounded respectful, Aniel was making it clear there was little time for these interrogations.

The pearls seemed to agree with him. “Proceed,” they said.

And then there was only Rabbit.

“Do it quickly,” she said to herself. “Don’t give them a chance to criticize you. Don’t stop – don’t look back. Just swim straight through the arch and keep going ...” Rabbit approached the arch in what could most charitably be described as dog paddle, Viff perched on her shoulder. She dipped her head briefly, and immediately began to swim to where Aden, Jasper and Rupert waited with the scouts.

“No!” said a loud booming voice from the very center of the arch.

“No! Definitely not!” came another loud, piercing chime.

“Never! Never!” cried a third in a great booming voice that was close to a scream. And then suddenly all the pearls were straining away from Rabbit, as though struggling to get as far from her as they could, calling out in screaming, thudding unison.

“No! No! No! No! No!” Over and over, louder and louder they called, till their voices boomed with a vibration that made the water shake, and grains of sand dropped away from the arch to the ocean floor beneath. The soft glow from the pearls stopped as though someone had flicked a switch, and in its place an ugly red light stained the water. Rabbit’s eyes opened wide in horror, and then she covered her face with her hands, pulled her knees up to her chest, and tried to curl into the smallest ball possible. Startled, Viff clutched her hair to avoid being bumped off altogether. On the other side of the arch, Aden’s mouth had dropped open and the scouts looked like they had no idea what to do.

“This is wrong,” said Rupert, and immediately swam to where Rabbit

floated, curled up, covering her eyes and ears, on the other side of the arch. Jasper hesitated for only a second, then dashed out behind Rupert. They reached Rabbit together, and Rupert wrapped his arms around the terrified girl, while Jasper turned angrily and faced the arch as it continued to boom.

“Stop it, you idiots! Stop it! What do you think you’re doing? STOP IT!” Jasper yelled at the top of his lungs to make himself heard over the pealing call of the pearls. But it was no use.

“No! No! No!” they cried, seemingly terrified. And then Aden, who was looking outwards through the arch, saw them; the long orange line was untwisting itself from the trench around the city and streaming towards the arch.

“Look out!” she called, but it was too late. In what seemed like only seconds, the water behind Rabbit had become a solid orange wall of soldier crabs, reaching out as far as the eye could see, and every crab held a spear and a sword, and all of them pointed at Rabbit.

– Chapter Two –

UNDERSEA

Immediately Jasper swung around to place himself between Rabbit and the soldiers, and Rupert stood his ground, both arms wrapped about Rabbit's shaking shoulders. Viff continued to grip Rabbit's hair, and chattered angrily in the direction of the crabs. Faster than Rupert would have thought possible, Aniel swam up to Rabbit's side and took a defiant stance next to her.

"What are you thinking?" he said, his tone angry. "These are they for whom all of this kingdom have waited! Let her pass! Why do you treat her this way? What is your concern?"

"No! No! No!" continued to toll the pearls, so loudly that Rupert thought the arch was in danger of collapsing.

"Who threatens my city?" said an imperious, angry voice, and the children, the scouts, and all the pearls swung round immediately. Just on the other side of the arch, flanked by a row of heavily armed courtiers, was Emperor Pompilius Nautilus, Emperor of Undersea, astride a magnificent green seahorse. In an instant the screaming of the pearls stopped, replaced by a small, sad tinkling, and Aden realized they were weeping. The red light had receded too, and the soldiers withdrew their weapons, leaving an uncomfortable silence which made the pearls' crying all the more obvious.

"My Liege!" said Aniel, and bowed deeply. The Emperor was a portly gentleman, his hair and beard long and iron gray. On his head he wore a large conch shell that fitted like a hat, and he was dressed in purple sleeveless robes that fell to his feet - or would have, had he not been sitting down. As it was, they billowed out behind him, swaying in the movement of the sea. Around his neck he wore a number of heavy gold chains, and his fingers were covered with rings made from precious gems. Overall, the effect was magnificent.

"I will ask you again, Aniel, chief scout of Undersea. Who threatens my city?" From where he floated, his arms still around Rabbit, Rupert could hear the anger in the Emperor's voice.

“Nobody threatens your city, Emperor,” said Aden, swimming forward, and again Rupert was stunned at the bravery of the young princess.

“And who are you?” asked Emperor Pompilius Nautilus.

“I am Princess Aden Justice, daughter of King Rohannan and Queen Ardentia, King and Queen of Prism. With me are Jasper Arrowsmith, son of Naian, High Priestess of Prism, and Rupert Everinham and Rabbit, visitors sent to us from another world to aid in the recovery of the stolen Crystal.”

At that, Aden, Rupert and Jasper saw the Emperor’s face change and some of the anger recede.

“Then who distresses the Pearl Pathway of Light, sacred entrance to my realm and reader of hearts?”

At this, Rupert spoke up, and if the Emperor was angry, Jasper could tell that Rupert was more angry still.

“Well, I’m sorry, Emperor, but your pearls aren’t as accurate as you may have thought. This is Rabbit Gray – yes, I said Gray! – called against her will to Prism and now brought unwillingly - by your scouts, I might add! - to your kingdom. It was prophesied by the centaurs of Prism that she must be involved in the search for the sacred Crystal, and she was instrumental in finding the red quadrant – at no small cost to herself! So I don’t know what your pearls are crying about,” and at this Rupert’s voice took on a disgusted tone at the pearls’ behavior, “but if they were as smart as you say, they’d be giving her the warmest welcome they knew how. And they’d be keeping their comments to themselves!”

As Rupert had been talking, Rabbit’s face had emerged from her hands, and she saw Aden watching the Emperor with pursed lips, and Jasper grinning at this uncharacteristic outburst.

For a moment the Emperor hesitated.

“Come,” he said abruptly, then turned and rode away, his courtiers swimming behind.

“Are you ok, Rabbit?” asked Rupert, one arm still round her.

“I’m ok,” she said, and privately Rupert thought this was far from true. From foster home to Prism and now under the sea, Rabbit seemed to get kicked out of every place she went. Rupert shook his head, but said nothing, and he, Rabbit, Jasper and Aden swam away together behind the king. The scouts traveled behind them, but Aniel

came and took a position on the other side of Rabbit.

“I’m so sorry,” he said. “I’ve never seen anything like that.” He put a webbed hand on Rabbit’s shoulder, and behind Aniel, Rupert could see Jasper scowling. This was going to be an uncomfortable visit.

As they swam, they passed through the city, twinkling in the sunlight that reached through the water. But as they neared the top of the highest peak, they swam over a wall and passed into a large open area. This stretched out to the right and left as far as could be seen, and was planted with what looked like underwater trees and coral laid out into lush gardens. They had reached the grounds of the Emperor and at the very summit sat the palace.

“I guess he likes his space,” said Jasper looking around. Unlike Chalice, which bordered the busiest parts of the city and was easily accessible to the inhabitants of Spectra, the home of Emperor Pompilius Nautilus was heavily guarded and well segregated from his subjects. Looking back in the distance, Jasper saw the ribbon of solid crabs, curled again around the city. But squinting his eyes he could just see the Pearl Pathway of Light, and through it, a wall of orange. Despite many of the soldiers returning to their original posts, plenty had stayed, guarding the city from what the pearls had deemed a threat. “Great. Making friends everywhere we go,” he muttered to himself.

Reaching the palace, they passed through open doors into a large entrance hall. Of the Emperor there was no sign. The children would never swim as fast as the sea-people with their webbed hands and feet and lifetime of living underwater, and Rabbit was excruciatingly slow, despite Aniel’s arm around her waist, pulling her along. Soldier crabs lined the entrance hall. “Wait here,” said one, apparently the commander, and scuttled off.

“We walk now,” said Aniel. “You aren’t as heavy here as you are in your own worlds,” he explained. “But you don’t exactly float, either. If you don’t swim, you’ll sink, and then you have to walk, which is much slower. So most of the time we swim when we’re outside and need to travel. But inside, we normally walk. A lot less things get broken that way.” And at that he smiled at Jasper.

“Look up!” exclaimed Rupert.

Above them the hall had no roof and was open to the ocean. Being as close to the surface as they were, sunlight shone through the opening,

and the sand walls sparkled as much here as they had outside. Even Rabbit was staring upwards, fascinated by this roofless palace, so it was off-putting when, out of nowhere, two large sharks swam past overhead, their mouths slightly open and their huge teeth glinting in the light.

“Whoa!” said Jasper.

“Yes,” said Aniel, smiling. “They patrol the waters above the Emperor’s home. The roof is open to keep the water fresh at all times, and the Emperor likes as much sun as possible. If you happen to look up at the right time, occasionally you’ll see birds through the water, floating on the surface, or even flying low. We feed them, you know, and it’s a view that’d make you laugh! All feet and backsides! Perhaps you’ll see it while you’re here.”

Jasper had tried to dislike Aniel. All this talking to Rabbit and putting his arms around her made him angry in ways he didn’t understand. And Rabbit’s coldness confused him. But disliking people just wasn’t in Jasper’s nature and, secretly, Aniel was exactly what Jasper wanted to be in a few years. Athletic, wild looking, strong and confident – if it wasn’t for Rabbit, Jasper was honest enough to admit he probably would have been following Aniel around, enjoying his company and asking him all about what it meant to be an underwater scout. So instead of scowling, Jasper forced a smile.

“I hope we see it while we’re here. Maybe we could do a tour if there’s time. I don’t know how long we’re going to be here, though.”

Before Aniel could answer, the doors at the back of the hall were thrown open.

“Enter!” cried half a dozen crabs in unison, and Aniel and the four children passed into another enormous hall. At the far end sat Emperor Pompilius Nautilus, and standing next to him, one hand on his shoulder, was the most beautiful girl Rabbit had ever seen.

“Isn’t anyone here ugly?” she thought. “Do I have to be the dorkiest, ugliest, plainest looking girl everywhere we go?” This wasn’t helped by the girl in question wearing quite a brief bikini made from shells which seemed molded to her perfectly proportioned figure and held together with strands of tiny pearls. Around her hips were tied loops of woven seaweed, soft and bright green, and around her neck hung a large necklace of coral. Her hair, silver and gold, floated in the water like a fine silk curtain, and her eyes were so blue that Rabbit was able

to make out their color from the other side of the room.

“Now tell me again how you came to be here. And speak up.”

Without a second thought, Aden stepped forward.

“Emperor ...” she started.

“No. Not you. Him.” The Emperor was staring at Rupert. “We know Prism, and I know of your parents. I want to hear of this other world from which these strangers came.”

With an uncertain cough, Rupert stepped forward. “Emperor Pompilius Nautilus ... er ... Sir ... my name is Rupert Everinham and I come from a world different to yours. My friend, Rabbit, and I were taken from our world by ... well, we don’t know what by ... but we were on a school excursion and in a boat on a lake. And then we got, well, dragged into Prism, and we landed on the beach there, and were taken to Chalice, home of King Rohannan and Queen Ardentia.” Rupert paused, aware he was making a mess of this. “In our world we’re nothing special,” he added.

“A lake, you say? And you landed on a beach?” Rupert nodded, and the courtiers behind the Emperor whispered to each other and exchanged glances. “Hmmm. Well, that sounds like it should have something to do with us, given all that water.” Rupert, Rabbit, Aden and Jasper looked hopeful at this. “But it doesn’t,” he said bluntly, and their faces fell again. “Oh yes, clearly it was us who pulled you under the sea at Spectra and into my realm. And it’s true that the pearls in the Pathway of Light have been expecting your arrival in Prism for some time now. But it wasn’t us who pulled you out of your world, Rupert Everinham, and we don’t know who it was, or why. Yet you were taken from your land in water and you arrived in Prism in water, and there’s only two other people we know with the power to do such a thing.” At this the courtiers were muttering to each other worriedly, and the Emperor looked very grave. “The mer-people or the slurry?”

“The slurry?” asked Rupert.

The Emperor ignored this question and grew silent for a few seconds. The girl whose hand rested on his shoulder bent down to him then and whispered in his ear and he looked at the children sharply, nodding slowly.

“You are inappropriately dressed for this realm. You cannot move freely in the water dressed in the apparel of land. Go with my daughter, the Princess Cerulea, and she will show you quarters and

give you raiment and food. Return then, and we will talk more. Go.”

The four children had mixed reactions to this. Rupert thought to himself what a far cry this was from the welcome they’d received from the king and queen in Prism, and how unfriendly Emperor Pompilius Nautilus was compared to those gracious monarchs. Aden looked cross. “Probably not used to being overlooked,” thought Rupert, not uncharitably. He’d felt so uncomfortable talking to the Emperor and his courtiers, he’d have been thrilled to have given the job to Aden – or anyone else. Jasper was smiling for reasons of his own, which Rabbit couldn’t fathom, while she was utterly appalled. Inappropriately dressed? What on earth ...

“I’m not wearing one of those bikini things!” she stated adamantly.

Jasper’s smile grew wide at this point. “Oh, I don’t know, Rabbit, I think you’d look awesome in one of those!”

Misunderstanding Jasper’s grin completely, Rabbit looked stunned for just a moment. Then her face filled with anger.

“I hate you!” she said. “This might be funny to you, but it’s not funny to me!”

“Rabbit! Rabbit, I was only joking! No ... I mean ... I wasn’t joking as such ... I just thought it’d be funny if ... noooo, not funny, wrong word ... but to see you in a bikini would be ... well, it’d be great to see you in a bikini! I just meant ...”. But Jasper was speaking to empty water.

Rabbit had stormed up to the Emperor’s daughter as she wafted towards them. “Take us to our rooms,” she said curtly, her body rigid and her back firmly turned towards Jasper.

But it was as though she hadn’t spoken. Princess Cerulea seemed to drift past Rabbit, straight to Rupert.

“Rupert Everinham, visitor from another realm, let me escort you to your room!” Much to Rupert’s obvious discomfort, the princess then looped her arm through Rupert’s and leaned into him conspiratorially. “Some of the bedrooms here are beautiful and I’ll find you something particularly lovely!”

Despite how angry she was with Jasper, Rabbit’s jaw dropped, and she looked questioningly at Aniel. Almost imperceptibly he rolled his eyes.

“My Liege, permit me to assist the Princess in showing our guests your hospitality,” he said.

“Take them,” said the Emperor who seemed to have lost all interest in his guests.

Aniel gave Rabbit his hand, and together they followed Rupert and the princess through a door at the back of the Emperor’s hall. “She’s a bit of a flirt,” whispered Aniel when they’d left the room. “Has a bit of a reputation, in fact. But she’s the princess, of course, so nobody says anything. And the Emperor ... well ... let’s just say the Princess is a little spoiled. Rupert’s going to have a rough time of it!”

Rabbit gave Aniel a tight smile, and he squeezed her hand. His face said he had a pretty fair idea what was going on between her and Jasper. Behind them, Aden and Jasper followed in silence.

“So, who are the slurry, Princess?” asked Rupert as the princess continued to propel him through the golden halls of the palace.

“Oh, don’t worry about them - we can talk about them any time!” she said. “And call me Cerulea. I can tell we’re going to be very good friends!” Rupert twisted and turned, trying to see Rabbit, Aden and Jasper behind him, but the princess dragged him irresistibly forward. She kept up an unbroken strain of small talk, batting her eyelashes and giggling, as they passed down corridor after corridor till they finally came to a halt at a hall, which opened at both ends.

“There’s bedrooms here for the three of you,” she said over her shoulder. “Take whichever ones you wish. Oh – and I’m sure there’s suitable clothing for you in there somewhere. If there’s not, tell one of the stewards and he’ll sort something out for you. Tell him you want some food, too.”

Cerulea started down the corridor then, her arm still linked through Rupert’s, tugging him along beside her. She gave him a wide smile and said “I thought you might like to sleep closer to me! There’s spare bedrooms in our wing of the palace and some of them are spectacular!”

“Princess!” said Aniel clearly and firmly. “I’m sure that the Emperor would prefer to keep our visitors in closer proximity to each other.”

Cerulea turned and smiled, but her eyes took on a steely look.

“I’m sure,” she said, emphasizing each word, “what my Father would prefer is for me to have what would make me happy.”

“Of course, Princess,” said Aniel in a purposefully calm yet friendly tone. It was obvious to everyone that those in the palace were used to dealing with the princess. “But he may well wish to call them for meetings of counsel, and how much more convenient he’ll find it if

they're all together! My suggestion is that you move all four to the royal wing. That way you can have easy proximity to ... ahem! ... them, but they will remain together – purely for convenience sake!”

Rupert shot Aniel a grateful look, and even Jasper had to smile at this.

Cerulea thought for a moment. “Alright,” she said. “If they're all together they can share my stewards, and that will save me the inconvenience of arranging staff, I suppose. Goodness knows, my stewards do barely anything!” Privately, Aden thought that anyone looking after the princess almost certainly had their hands full. “But you can share my factotum,” she continued, smiling warmly at Rupert. “You don't mind sharing, do you?” And at this she looked up at him through her lashes and pouted slightly in a way which made Rabbit want to slap her and Rupert wish he were anywhere else.

“Er ... no ... of course not, but don't you think ... ”

“Wonderful!” she said, and headed off again to the far end of the hall. After some time, and more twists and turns than Rabbit knew she would ever remember, they arrived at a heavy door made from deeply carved wood. This opened into a spacious sitting room, around which were a number of arched entrances not much larger than a normal doorway. Stewards dressed in matching livery stood next to each arch, and Rabbit was curious to see their uniforms were made from fish scales. As they entered the room at one end, an opposite door opened for an entering steward, and Rabbit was sure she caught a glimpse of the back of the throne the Emperor had sat on in the main hall.

“We've walked right around the palace!” she exclaimed.

“Why, yes. Do you have a problem with that?” Cerulea asked with the same hard edge to her voice that Rabbit had heard earlier.

“Nope,” said Rabbit, thinking wryly to herself that Cerulea had tried to place her, Aden and Jasper at the far end of the entire palace. Clearly, she wanted Rupert to herself.

“The doors on this side of the parlor belong to my father. The ones at this end are mine. But these are the rooms saved for royal guests, so you may choose whichever ones suit you. There are no clothes in these ones though, so I'll need to get some for you. Stewards!” she called, and two of the stewards immediately came to stand in front of her. “Procure clothes for these two girls – and for him,” she said, indicating Jasper. “Place them in their rooms. I'm going to get my factotum.”

Cerulea smiled at Rupert, and half walked, half floated to the central door to her rooms. "I'll be right back," she said to Rupert, ignoring the other three and Aniel.

"She's dreadful!" said Rupert when the door had closed behind the princess.

"She can be a bit of a handful," said Aniel ruefully. "My suggestion would be to just go with it. Be tactful – and remember, the Emperor dotes on her!"

"Rabbit," said Jasper quietly when Rupert had engaged Aniel about the layout of the palace, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you."

"Just drop it, Jasper," said Rabbit abruptly.

"But Rabbit, I didn't mean to ..."

"Forget it, Jasper. Consider it forgotten – by both of us." Jasper looked doubtful, but before he could say anything, Cerulea's door opened again and she emerged, followed by a doleful looking man whose arms were full of clothes.

"Rupert! Come and look at these. These will look wonderful on you!" Cerulea gestured to Rupert, who was starting to develop a hunted expression whenever the princess appeared. "We'll lay these out on your bed. Mollusc, take these to the suite next to mine and lay them out. We'll be in shortly."

"Princess," said Aniel, who could see where this was heading, "I think the Emperor expects the return of your guests as soon as possible. Let me assist them in changing. I'll have Mollusc procure them food, and I'll bring them back to you in the grand hall as soon as they're ready."

Cerulea paused for a moment, but even she could see the impropriety of a princess locking herself in the bedroom of a young man she barely knew. After hesitating for a few seconds, she nodded briefly.

"Alright. But bring them back quickly. I'll be waiting for you, Ruuuperrrt!" She lingered over Rupert's name and batted her eyelashes at him again, then turned and walked out, fluttering her hands at her sides in a way meant to propel her forwards, but which seemed more to Rabbit to be designed to draw attention to her retreating figure.

As soon as the door was closed behind her, Rupert spoke. "Thanks, Aniel. She is ... there's no words for it! She's trouble!"

"Yes, she can be, but be careful to whom you say that," said Aniel,

almost imperceptibly indicating the stewards that still lined the walls. “Quickly now, you all need to put on your clothes and we’ll get you something to eat as soon as possible. She’ll be back in here before you’re dressed otherwise.”

Aniel didn’t need to say another word. Rupert, Rabbit, Aden and Jasper each took a door and let themselves into their new quarters. The rooms obviously hadn’t been disturbed for some time; when Rabbit entered she startled a school of rainbow fish who froze for an instant, then darted out the open roof. An octopus uncurled himself from around the legs of a chair, and slithered up and over the walls. “Sorry ... sorry ... ” he said as he left. As had been the case in Chalice, the rooms were spacious and light, but here they were open at the roof and sparkling in the sunlight that made its way through the thin layer of water that separated the palace from the air not twenty feet above. Rabbit plopped Viff onto the bed where he half walked-half bounced his way up and down till finally settling on a sea-sponge pillow.

A knock on the door spun Rabbit around to find one of the stewards who had left earlier.

“Your clothes, Miss,” he said, “and some food.”

“Come in,” said Rabbit, and the steward entered the room to place the clothes on the bed and a tray of food on the desk. “Thank you,” she said to the steward who closed the door behind him on the way out. With trepidation Rabbit approached the bed to see the clothes provided by the palace for her to wear, and she was still standing in the exact same spot, holding up an outfit that hung from a branch of coral, when Aniel knocked on her door five minutes later.

“Rabbit, I was wondering if you ... ” started Aniel, then stopped as he saw Rabbit frozen motionless. “What is it? What’s wrong?” he asked when Rabbit failed to move. For a moment Rabbit was silent, then finally spoke as though the words were being dragged from her throat.

“Aniel ... there ... is ... NO WAY ... I am ... wearing ... this ... outfit!” She spun around to face Aniel, holding up something which looked to be a collection of seashells and strands of seaweed. “I can’t even work out how to put it on! In fact ... is this all of it? Half of it could be missing and I wouldn’t know! I’m not wearing this!” she said. A brisk knock sounded at her door, and before she could speak Aden came into the room, an angry look on her face too.

“They’ve got to be KIDDING!” she said, holding up something that looked remarkably similar to the outfit Rabbit was waving in front of Aniel. “How am I supposed to put this on? Where does this stuff go? I’m the Princess Royal of Prism! I will not embarrass myself by parading around in public half naked! Seaweed! Shells! Is this a joke?” Aden was so angry, a red wave seemed to be moving up her throat to her face.

“Girls ... I mean ... ladies ... all the women of the sea wear these clothes. My mother, my sister, the Princess, the courtiers – everybody! If anything, yours seem to have rather more to them than some of the things I’ve seen my sister try to get out of the house wearing! I’m sure they’ll look wonderful on you. And to be honest, you’ll draw a lot less attention to yourselves dressed in these than in what you’re wearing right now.”

“Listen, Aniel,” said Rabbit, and there was a tone to her voice Aden had never heard before. “You people live underwater, and you swim, or wade through water, everywhere you go. So basically, you’re working out the entire time you’re awake! You’re doing what we call aquarobics every time you move! No wonder you guys have spectacular bodies! I’ve spent my entire life trying to avoid gym class and my idea of hell is wearing the exact same outfit I’m holding right now! There’s no way. Do you get it? NO WAY.”

Despite not entirely understanding what Rabbit had said, the tone to her voice was unmistakable. She stood in front of Aden, their faces equally stormy, and Aniel knew it was not the time to be diplomatic.

“Aden, Rabbit, why are you here?” Aden and Rabbit looked taken aback. Of all the things they’d expected Aniel to say, this wasn’t one of them. Aniel spoke again. “Why are you here? Why did you come to Undersea? What are you hoping to do here?”

“We’re not sure, but we think we’ve been brought here to find the blue crystal,” said Aden, sounding a little confused.

“And is this important to you?” he continued. “Is this important to you?” he repeated more forcefully when they said nothing.

“Yes. Yes, it is,” said Aden, and Rabbit nodded her head.

“Then Aden, Rabbit, if this is important to you, if you understand that the health of both Undersea and Prism rely on the finding and retrieval of the blue crystal, if you can see how important it is not to offend the Emperor but, rather, to receive any aid from him that he and this

kingdom are able to give, if you have any concept how pressing this is and how short of time you are to achieve this goal and complete this quest ... shut up and put on the clothes!" And on that note Aniel spun and left the room, closing the door with a sharp click behind him.

For a few seconds the girls stood in silence.

"He's right," said Aden. "Come on – we have to. I'll help you. We'll make it work somehow."

Rabbit thought she had never been more miserable in her life. It was ok for Aden, naturally beautiful, to be willing to wear a bikini in front of a crowd of people. But for Rabbit, who hadn't spent the last fourteen years of her life riding and shooting and hiking the mountains of Prism, this was an entirely different proposition. Something told her that Aden, with her pure, clear skin, would look beautiful in the clothes of Undersea. But Rabbit had a pretty poor opinion of her thin body and lily-white skin, and her hair, though richer in color now than it had been in her world, was never going to be a silver and gold cloud like Cerulea's, nor even a thick black swathe like Aden's. Rather than floating around her body and providing a little extra coverage, Rabbit had a bad feeling that hers would probably float straight upwards, making her look like she'd just stuck her finger in a light socket. And she would have given absolutely anything for a tan.

"Yeah. It's going to be just great," she said sarcastically. "Come on – let's get it done."

Ten minutes later the door to Rabbit's room opened tentatively, and whispering could be heard from the other side.

"You go first!"

"No, you!"

"Oh for goodness sake – alright!"

And then Aden emerged from behind the door, her head held high and only a slight flush to her cheeks betraying that she wasn't as comfortable as she was trying to pretend.

"Come on, Rabbit, you have to come out," she said, and after a few seconds Rabbit's head appeared.

"Come on Rabbit!" said Aden. "The boys aren't even here. Better to do this before they get back – sort of ease yourself into it."

Aden heard a deep sigh, then slowly Rabbit emerged. It was true that Rabbit's hair didn't provide the beautiful curtain that Aden's did, but neither did it float straight upwards. Instead, it wafted around her face

and shoulders in a way which, could she have seen it through anyone's eyes except her own, she would have known was quite lovely. Her skin glowed white in the water, and her slim, finely boned body looked far better in the clothes of the people of Undersea than she had any idea. She walked to the center of the room, then sat tentatively on a bench made from a smooth piece of carved wood supported either end by two enormous conch shells. A stifled cough from one of the stewards made her glance up sharply, but the stewards were staring straight ahead as usual. She and Aden were trying their best not to look at each other at all, each obviously as uncomfortable as the other, and Rabbit was wishing yet again that she was back in her bedroom in Chalice. Only Viff seemed at ease, and she had left him laying on his back on her bed. His paws wriggled happily in the air and he chewed on something Rabbit had found on the plate the steward had brought earlier. In between getting dressed and helping Aden, Rabbit had tried a few mouthfuls of food, but no matter what she tried, it all tasted like salt water, and she'd had to force herself to eat. Aden was more disciplined and managed better, but even she didn't seem to be enjoying it much. As she sat in the communal lounge, Rabbit wondered how long it would be till she ate food she recognized again. She was lost in thought when the door to Rupert's room opened.

Rupert appeared first with Jasper behind him, and Rabbit felt herself instinctively blush and stiffen, and she braced herself for the wisecracks she felt sure were coming. While trying to act completely disinterested, she saw Rupert out of the corner of her eye, and felt bad for him. In things like gym class and swimming lessons, Rupert had been teased even more than she had; his freckly skin, overweight body, and shock of orange hair drawing all the worst sort of attention.

So she was taken aback when she finally turned fully towards them to see that Rupert was no longer the boy who had gone on the school excursion with her six months ago. Prism had changed Rupert's hair from bright orange to a deep, rich red, and his freckles had largely disappeared, his white skin glowing pure and alabaster underwater. But most noticeable of all was the change in his physique. Rupert's pudginess was long gone, and his chest had begun to fill out in a way that bore little resemblance to the boy who had been teased so mercilessly at school. He came walking towards the girls, somewhat embarrassed, but looking resigned to his fate.

“It’s not so bad, I suppose,” he said. Rupert was wearing a woven tunic wrapped around his waist, which offered about as much coverage as the average pair of board shorts. Rabbit snuck a look at Jasper, and his face made her forget her own embarrassment in a moment of surprise.

Jasper looked as uncomfortable as Rabbit had ever seen. In fact, this was the only time she’d seen him looking embarrassed, and he tried to hover behind Rupert, attempting to avoid the curious gazes of Aden and Rabbit.

“What are you doing?” asked Aden, sounding annoyed. “This is much worse for us! You should try wearing one of these things; it’s like trying to make a decent outfit out of strands of wet spaghetti!” Aden sounded disgusted, and Rupert realized she was cranky at how uncomfortable she felt.

Rupert also knew that Jasper wasn’t trying to hide from Aden. And he certainly didn’t care what Rupert thought of how he looked. But Jasper cared a great deal about Rabbit’s opinion, and Rupert would have happily shaken Rabbit for being completely unaware how sensitive the normally confident Jasper was to her opinion.

Rabbit and Jasper remained uncomfortable, Aden was still cross, and Rupert was exasperated with all of them when the door opened at the end of the sitting room and Aniel reappeared.

“Are you ready?” he asked. “And you look very nice, Rabbit. Nothing to be ashamed about!” Rupert glanced over briefly and saw Jasper’s face darken and his brows come down hard. On the other side of him Aden looked even stormier at the complete absence of a compliment for her, and Rupert was left shaking his head.

Aniel led them out the door and back into the main hall. The throne was empty and Rupert gave a quiet sigh of relief when he saw that Cerulea was nowhere in sight. Next to him Jasper grinned. The courtiers were filing into the hall, arranging themselves on either side of the throne, so the four children and Aniel were left facing an increasingly large group of people. And then a door on the other side of the hall opened and two rows of cornet fish filed in and formed two lines stretching out from the door they had entered.

“The Emperor Pompilius Nautilus!” cried a voice, and together the cornet fish trumpeted a grand entrance.

The Emperor walked in slowly, nodding to his subjects, all of whom

had dropped to one knee at his arrival. Behind him wafted the Princess Cerulea, and Rabbit could see her straining to peer over her father's shoulder, her head bobbing up and down, looking for Rupert.

"Kneel down!" whispered Aniel, tugging Rabbit and Rupert who stood either side of him.

Rabbit was only too pleased of a reason to be a little less conspicuous and wished she could stay kneeling for the rest of her stay in Undersea. When the Emperor was seated, the courtiers stood, but Aniel motioned Aden, Jasper, Rupert and Rabbit to stay kneeling.

"Visitors, step forth!" announced a soldier crab which Rabbit thought was probably the same one who had admitted them to the palace earlier. It was difficult to tell though; in Rabbit's opinion, they all looked alike.

Aden, Jasper, Rabbit and Rupert stood up and Rabbit thought she had never been more uncomfortable in her entire life. She wrapped her arms around her body and looked intently at the floor, trying to avoid eye contact with anyone who might be looking at her.

"Visitors from Prism," began the Emperor, "your arrival in Undersea has been predicted by the Pearl Pathway of Light for many moons now. More than one full cycle of your seasons has passed since your coming was prophesied, and we, too, have been anxiously awaiting your coming. We know of the centaurs' prophecy that said the red crystal must be the first retrieved, and we are frankly displeased with this disregard for the people of Undersea. It is no surprise to us that our needs, which are pressing, are placed below those of the people of Prism. I suppose we should be grateful. Well, we are not! The trouble that has come to Prism has come ten-fold to Undersea, and if the four of you are all the help we may expect, then we are in trouble indeed!"

At this, the Emperor glared, and Rabbit felt her hackles rising. But Aden looked as though she was about to burst, and to intercept the fight that was obviously brewing, Rupert, a natural peace-maker, interjected before Aden could speak the angry words taking shape on her lips.

"Emperor! We understand your disappointment, and we ourselves wish we had more to offer you. Well, quite a lot more, really. When we first heard the centaurs' prophecy, telling us that we were to go and retrieve the red crystal, we were even more disappointed than you! As far as we can tell, we have no special skills of any kind! But despite

that,” continued Rupert quickly, seeing the Emperor’s face turning purple, “we were still successful in retrieving the red crystal. And clearly the ... er ... Pearl Pathway of Light thought that we were the ones who should retrieve the blue crystal, or they wouldn’t have called us here! So I can only believe, unlikely though it appears, that we’re the right people for this task also.”

“Rupert Everinham, you misunderstand,” said the Emperor, unimpressed by this speech. “We were told to expect saviors from another world, that the royal line of Prism would come to our aid, and that the High Priestess herself would rise up to help us! We had no notion that we would be sent four children!” Behind him, the Princess Cerulea snickered, and Aden looked as though she could barely contain her anger. “The fact that we had your names counted for nothing. What we expected were mighty warriors from another world, Prism’s army, and the High Priestess to help us! Not ... you.”

“Well it’s not our fault if your pearls got it wrong,” muttered Rabbit.

“WHAT? What did you say?” boomed the Emperor, and the courtiers gasped.

“Rabbit! Rabbit, I told you – not the pearls! Don’t insult the pearls!” whispered Aniel urgently.

“I ... I ... I just said ... ” started Rabbit.

“Do not speak!” boomed the Emperor.

“Well gees, you said ... ” grumbled Rabbit, and next to her Aniel groaned.

“Silence!” boomed the Emperor again, and Rabbit’s muttering ground to a halt. “Do you not understand the trouble which has come to Undersea? Do you think we jest or can be mocked by your stupidity? Come with me and I will show you what has been delivered upon my kingdom!”

The Emperor stood, and, sweeping his robes up over his arm, marched towards the door of the main hall.

“Bring my mount!” he cried. “And bring mounts for these also,” he said, indicating Aden, Jasper, Rupert and Rabbit. As fast as they could, they followed along behind him, trying not to break into swimming, but not entirely able to keep up with the Emperor’s long, angry stride. Reaching the front of the palace, they found the Emperor already on his mount, and Cerulea on a vivid blue seahorse next to him. Half a dozen of the Emperor’s courtiers had left the hall with

him, and they floated in the water behind him and the princess, ready to accompany the party. But most unnerving of all, especially for Rabbit, were the three sharks that had appeared overhead and now circled the group continuously. The visitors from Prism were considered a threat, and the Emperor's law enforcers gave no hint of friendship as they guarded Undersea's royal family. Their teeth flashed as they passed Rabbit and she gulped. Growing up in Australia, Rabbit had heard stories of sharks attacking people all her life, and she had a very real fear of these enormous, terrifying beasts. As well as the sharks, behind each seahorse floated a soldier crab, holding both a spear and a sword in their claws, and Rabbit guessed that these were bodyguards for the Emperor and his daughter.

Mounts were being held for the four visitors, and they climbed up as quickly as they could. Angry as she still was with him, Rabbit whispered to Jasper next to her.

"Do you have any idea how to ride these things?" she asked nervously.

"I'm guessing they're like regular horses. Just watch Cerulea, and do exactly what she does. And hang on tight, Rabbit; something tells me these things travel fast." Jasper gave Rabbit an encouraging smile, and she gave him a halfhearted smile in return. The last thing she wanted was to be thrown off in front of this horrible Emperor and his pain of a daughter! So she gripped the reins tightly and squeezed her mount with her knees.

"Hey! Not so heavy with the knees!" said her mount, and Rabbit mentally kicked herself for forgetting that seemingly everything and everyone in this world talked.

"Sorry," she said. "Just a beginner."

"Well don't do anything!" said Rabbit's mount emphatically. "Don't try to help. If you squeeze me with your knees I'll throw you off, and if you even think about using those reins, there will be trouble! Got it?"

"Gees, ok, ok, I've got it! I said I was sorry," she said, but before she could get any further the Emperor shouted.

"Away!" he cried, and they were off.

The party shot away in the opposite direction to which Aden, Jasper, Rupert and Rabbit had arrived, sweeping around the palace and heading out into water previously unseen. Low hills ranged around the

palace on this side also, and the orange line of soldiers could be seen to completely surround the base of the city. Twisting behind her, Rabbit saw that a soldier crab had attached himself to the tail of her seahorse also and, glancing over, saw that they clung to the mounts of Rupert, Aden and Jasper as well.

“Hmmm,” she thought to herself. “Not so much a body guard as a jailer in our case I’m guessing.” Her seahorse mount felt her twisting in her seat and spoke.

“You know, if you’d been a little more friendly, I mightn’t have this annoying crustacean attached to my tail!” he said, though not sounding entirely cross.

“It’s not my fault!” said Rabbit, stung to hear the whole state of affairs laid at her door. “I never asked to be brought here! I thought we were going home! It seems to me that the Emperor knew very well who we were and it was he who ... ow!”

Spinning around, Rabbit saw that the soldier behind her had poked her in the back with the butt end of his spear. Apparently criticism of the Emperor was not tolerated in Undersea.

Traveling next to Rabbit, Rupert was interested to see that a reef stretched out from the summit on which the palace was situated. Sparkling with bright blues, greens and oranges, he was able to make out the intricate pattern of coral. It was as if a long finger of bright, delicate lace reached out from the palace into the warm waters. The party traveled together to one side of the reef and just above it, mere feet below the line where the ocean met the air above. For a moment Rupert had an almost irresistible desire to swim to the surface and return to his own world, and he was taken aback to realize he was homesick. He wondered what his parents were thinking, whether they were worried, whether anyone still searched for him, or whether in the six months since he had disappeared, he had simply been forgotten. He looked at Rabbit next to him and sighed. It was hugely unlikely that anyone still looked for her. Despite Rupert’s parents getting along pretty badly with each other, he had never doubted that, in their own way, they had loved him. But this was not the case for Rabbit and her continual succession of foster parents, and it explained why, of all of them, without even realizing it, Rabbit had adapted best to being pulled away from her home. Rupert grew more and more sad till in the end he gave himself a shake. “Snap out of it,” he said under his breath. “This

will be the most important thing you'll ever do, so if you want to make a name for yourself, now's the time!" He forced himself to concentrate on his surroundings. It was difficult to see clearly, given the speed at which they traveled, but Rupert thought he made out an evenly spaced line of soldiers, standing at regular intervals along the base of the reef. There wasn't an unbroken line, as there had been around the city, but there was still the familiar bright orange of a soldier to be seen every twenty feet or so along the coral. So wherever they were going, thought Rupert, it was being guarded.

They hadn't traveled for long when Rupert noticed they were passing soldiers more and more frequently. Another minute or two, and the soldiers once again formed an unbroken line. The seahorses, sharks and courtiers began to rise then, till they were swimming directly above the reef and just under the face of the water. For a split second Rupert saw that the soldiers lined the other side of the reef also, and then the party slowed to a stop.

The reef's point was entirely fenced with tall, black, wrought iron that reached from its base in the coral, up to the water's edge above, then further up and into the air. It was so thick that it was almost impossible to see through, and images of octopuses, fish, sea snakes, shells, and people had been shaped by skilled craftsmen into the bars. Anyone who wanted access to this part of the reef would first need to enter the air above it, which would be certain death to the sea people. Whatever was behind this fence was of great value to Undersea.

"Dismount!" commanded the Emperor, and slid off his seahorse to stand at the edge of the fence. They stood in silence for at least a minute and Rabbit was just about to ask the seahorse who had carried her how long they were supposed to wait, when she glimpsed a figure moving behind the heavy bars.

"Who stands at the entrance to the Cradle of Life?" asked a soft, female voice.

"The Emperor, your liege," responded Pompilius Nautilus.

"And what is the word which opens the gates?" asked the voice.

"The word is that which afflicts all of Undersea. The word is sorrow," said the Emperor.

"Then enter, Liege, and be welcome here, in Undersea's Cradle of Sorrow," said the voice. Emperor Pompilius Nautilus lifted his hand and placed it firmly against the image of a shell formed into the fence,

which Rabbit now saw shone like gold. Immediately a creaking and grinding began.

In front of the party, a crack formed in the fence, and two huge gates, previously invisible and seamless, swung slowly open by means which Rabbit couldn't see. Behind the fence was the tip of the reef, about the size of half a football field, and in every direction it was covered with oversized, open oyster shells, each of which sat on legs made from branches of coral. In every shell lay what looked like a silvery-pink glass bubble. They reminded Rabbit of the crystal ball she had once seen in a fortune teller's tent at the circus. Rabbit was dying to ask someone what this place was, but there was a solemn, sad feeling about it that made her bite her tongue. Between the shells moved sea women, like the one who had spoken to the Emperor at the gate, and for some reason they reminded Jasper of his mother. They were all dressed the same - in pale, shimmering dresses made from fish scales, which fell to the floor. "Why couldn't we have worn something like this?" wondered Rabbit to herself. Each of them had their hair tied up and pinned at the top of their heads, and over their heads they wore a hood. Unlike Cerulea's clothes, which floated out around her everywhere she moved, these outfits seemed to have been designed to stay as close to the women's bodies as possible, causing very little movement to the water. Some of the women walked slowly between the open shells, but some stood still, reaching in and seemingly stroking the bubble inside, while some tenderly held bubbles in their arms, gently rocking.

"They're babies," said Aden softly, a note of awe in her voice. "This is the nursery, and those women are the nurses."

But just then a cry rang out.

"Assist! Assist!" Towards the far end of the nursery, a nurse stood holding one of the eggs in her hands, rocking it gently while stroking it with her thumbs. Her movements were smooth and careful, but her face had taken on a desperate look. "Help me!" she cried, and immediately she was joined by other nurses, who moved swiftly to her side.

"Quickly!" said one, and half a dozen sea nurses reached out their hands and placed them on the egg, humming softly. But even from where she stood, Rabbit saw the sphere turning gray and growing darker by the second. The first nurse stroked the bubble urgently, and

the other nurses' humming grew louder and more insistent. But almost immediately the egg turned black and a loud cracking sound came from its vicinity. With the sound of breaking glass, something fell and landed in the oyster shell, and the nurse who had held the egg lifted something to her chest and rocked it back and forth, crying as she did, her grief spilling out to fill the nursery. Another nurse put her arm around her and led her to a set of stairs concealed at the side of the nursery, and Rabbit heard someone say "Who will tell its mother?"