

PHANTISM



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Also by KE Stapylton

Books 1, 3 and 4 in the Prism Series:

The Terror of Prism Fading
The Deeper Darkness
The Wood at World's Edge

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For Eleanor – who fills my heart with joy.

and

Poppy and Dapple – happiness on four legs.

With special thanks to Diego –
who walked into the right chocolate
shop at exactly the right time

– Chapter One –

AN UNCOMFORTABLE ENTRY

The rushing wind hit them with enormous force, and it was all the little firefly could do not to be dragged upwards and into the yawning cavern overhead.

“Agnora! Tie this around your waist! Hurry!”

Flyte’s panicked face appeared before her daughter’s, a fine metal rope in her arms. Despite the numerous times her mother had forced her to practice, Agnora’s hands were not made for this, and she stumbled as she struggled to clasp the hook to the belt now wrapped around her waist. The noise was deafening, and Agnora watched mutely as her mother battled with hooks and wires of her own.

“Stay against the wall! As close as you can!” Flyte screamed, and Agnora nodded and pressed her tiny body against the rock.

Staring out the door of their cave, a horrifying scene unfolded. Trees and plants, torn from the ground, rushed upwards, caught in the rising hot air. Small animals, mainly insects and reptiles, flew by, sucked towards the yawning abyss above. Screams filled the air, mixed with the whining roar of a hurricane that only seemed to grow stronger by the second. But as Agnora stared, open mouthed, a large figure passed, heading in the other direction.

“Mom! I just saw a ...”

“I can’t hear you, Agnora!”

“Mom! It was a ... there goes another one and ... Mom!”

“Agnora! I can’t hear you! What’s wrong?”

“MOM! PEOPLE! FALLING!”

“What?”

Flyte spun around in time to see another enormous form pass by, promptly followed by an even larger beast, red-gold in color and falling fast.

“Have to find Ferrick!” yelled Flyte. “Stay right here!”

The tiny insect unclasped the wire rope that locked her to a bolt sunk

deep into the rock, and inched to the mouth of the cave. Struggling against the wind while still inside, her feet were blown out from underneath her as soon as she passed through the doorway. Clinging to the wall of the cavern, Flyte dragged herself into the monstrous updraft of hot wind caused by the gigantic split in the roof overhead. Looking up, far above, Flyte saw a streak of pale blue she neither recognized nor understood, while around and below her pandemonium met her eyes. The air was full of animals and debris, and Flyte had no idea how she could navigate all these potentially fatal missiles on her quest to reach the ground. More critical still was how she could catch the plummeting interlopers before the heat of her world burned them to a crisp. Only Ferrick could come to her aid, so she laid her hand on the wall in front of her, closed her eyes, and spoke her need in her mind.

“What is it, Flyte?” yelled Ferrick, now hovering before her in the wind, his earth-colored hair whipping around his deeply tanned face.

“Interlopers! From above!” she yelled, and pointed to the rapidly descending figures. Luckily the updrafts slowed their fall considerably, but even so, it was only a matter of seconds before the four humans and the beast with them would hit the solid rock of the floor, or were burned in the fiery air. “They need the diamond juice!”

Ferrick nodded wordlessly, and dived into the rock wall, his shimmering figure disappearing as Flyte watched. Her eyes straining to see through the bodies and flying dirt, she just made out Ferrick’s body as it reappeared briefly in mid-air, emerging again from the rock wall slightly below the falling strangers. As the first stranger reached his position, Ferrick launched himself from where he clung to the wall and grasped him – a boy with red hair – around the neck. Ferrick stretched his hand to the boy’s mouth, and Flyte knew he was feeding him the diamond juice, which would allow this unexpected visitor to withstand the heat of her world. Ferrick jumped from the boy to a girl and put the vial to her lips also. From there he sprung to the other two humans and then lastly to the beast, clinging to them as they fell. Flyte lost sight of them then, and she inched her way back into her cave where she hovered, shaking and exhausted, next to her daughter.

In a matter of seconds an ear splitting creaking and groaning filled the air, followed by a sudden decrease in the wind, and Flyte knew the opening into the world above was starting to close. For a moment bodies continued to fly upwards, then suddenly, as the hot winds below

were no longer pulled into the cold air above, the dirt and debris, plants and bodies, which had previously been sucked so inexorably upwards, stopped still for one split second, and held position in mid air, going neither up nor down. In an instant all changed as everything reversed course, and a world of objects plummeted towards the ground.

Far below, general panic ensued as it became apparent that those falling from the sky would need to be caught. Dozens of short, stocky looking men with bulging biceps and swarthy appearance ran from place to place, their arms outstretched, catching the smaller animals who fell into their hands. Quickly they'd place them upright on the ground, pausing only to be sure their charges were on their feet before running off to intercept the next landing. But to catch the larger falling animals, strange, formless creatures appeared, and would link what seemed to be arms and stretch their bodies like elastic, forming living nets that bounced and sprang back as animal after animal landed in their grasp. The larger the animal, the more creatures clasped hands to break their fall, but to catch the four human invaders half a dozen or more of the rubbery figures linked hands and stretched out tight, their limbs extending as they pulled.

One by one, Rabbit, Rupert, Jasper and Aden fell onto the living trampoline that had been made to break their fall. They rolled off quickly, and immediately a small, frightened lizard dropped into Rupert's arms. Rupert placed him on the ground and watched him scamper away for a second before looking upwards to see Taw coming rapidly, tumbling out of the sky above them. Even though their faces were elastic and largely without shape, Rupert was able to see the looks of worry and doubt cast from one being to the other as dozens of the blob-like creatures appeared from all around them, linking limbs and stretching taut.

"Together now!" a voice cried, as Taw was largely upon them.

All the creatures pulled tight in unison just as Taw reached the ground. With an enormous spring, he hit the safety net that had been made for him, and bounced back into the air a small way, descending again immediately and finally coming to rest. It was an awkward business, and there was much stumbling and grunting before elastic hosts and large bull were disentangled and Taw stood beside Rabbit, Rupert, Jasper and Aden on the ground. Rubbish still fell around them and everyone's hair was dusty and full of dirt, and more than one

person was hit by small lifeless objects that nobody bothered to catch. People bobbed left and right, dodging small trees and bushes that continued to fall while, above them, the yawning crevice in the roof ground to a close.

But finally it was done and the roof was shut once more. The last rubbish fell, the remaining airborne animals caught and placed carefully on their feet, and the visitors from Prism were left standing in the middle of a large open area, looking around, amazed.

“Where on earth ...” began Rupert.

“Not on earth,” said the muscular man standing before them. “Under the earth. Welcome to Phantism!”

Rupert, Rabbit, Aden and Jasper looked about, their mouths open. Taw managed to keep his mouth closed, but his eyes said he’d never seen anything like this before. Phantism was unlike anything any of them had seen. Brightly colored beyond imagining, it was as though every plant, animal and blade of grass was lit by an internal fire. Everything glowed with a brilliant heat, which seemed to radiate from its very core. Rolling hills stretched out before them, far into the distance, and the horizon was aglow with a bright orange light which made Rabbit stammer in disbelief and ask, “Is ... is that ... an ocean?”

The man before them laughed. “It is! We call it the Ocheron Sea, sea of fire. And those mountains you can see on the far side are called the Berne Mountains. They’re not mountains as you know them. The Berne Mountains stretch from the floor of Phantism, right up to the underside of the overland, where they join the underside of your world.”

“Is that ... it can’t be ... it looks like snow on their slopes,” said Rupert, squinting and shading his eyes.

“To you, it would, yes. But it’s actually white-hot ash. And underneath are live coals. The Berne mountain range isn’t on fire, as such, but it’s close. Its rocks pour into the Ocheron Sea, perpetually feeding it with liquid fire. If you were to drill far enough into the Berne range, you’d reach the ocean in your world. The roof of Phantism changes depths in the same way the floor of your world does. Oceans in Prism push down into Phantism, though do not break through.”

Rabbit, Jasper, Rupert and Taw were staring at Ferrick, trying to grasp what he was saying about this upside-down world. But Aden

was peering up in the direction from whence they'd fallen, gazing into the bright yellow sky.

"Why is it yellow?" she asked.

"It's the air," the man answered. "The reflection of the fire. It comes from the ground, the ocean, the air – everything – and reflects off the roof above. Everything in Phantism has at least a hint of yellow," he said, and the gold flecks in his rich brown eyes twinkled with mirth. Seeing them staring, he added, "Not least of which, its people!" He grinned broadly then, and Rabbit gasped when she saw him shimmer, his outline wavering in the light.

"Who are you?" she said, simply.

"My name is Ferrick, smeltergeist of this village. I read the earth and the soil." Seeing their blank looks, the smeltergeist tried to explain. "I find the metals we need to live and to make our tools. And I see the roots of all the plants and trees as they lay in the soil, and can gauge their health."

"You're not solid, are you?" asked Jasper, who suddenly realized what was wrong with the way Ferrick looked.

"Not entirely, no. This is the smeltergeist's gift. We travel through the ground, passing through metal and soil. Most in Phantism communicate through the earth, but only the smeltergeists travel through the ground, as fast as thought. Well, the smeltergeists and the Firestals. But nobody has seen the Firestals for many years, so when it comes to reading the ground, we are a village's best hope."

Everything that came out of Ferrick's mouth was so incomprehensible, it seemed pointless to ask who the Firestals were.

"Why didn't we burn?" asked Rupert. "It must be over a thousand degrees down here!"

"Ah! Well, that would be the diamond juice!"

"Diamond juice? Seriously?" said Aden, sounding skeptical. "You get juice. From diamonds ..."

"Absolutely! And highly prized it is, too, though very rarely needed. A prized plant it is, the diamond tree, and the juice of its fruit is like liquid fire. Once drunk, it protects you from the extreme heat of this world."

"How does it do that?" asked Jasper.

"It takes the fire into your body. It turns your blood to flame."

Rabbit, Rupert, Jasper and Aden instinctively looked at their hands,

and Rabbit gasped. Sure enough, her veins stood out through her skin as though they'd been changed to tiny rivers of light and, turning to look at the other three, saw that their eyes were shining and their skin was glowing as though they, too, were lit from the inside. Taw's veins weren't visible, but his coat glowed like the brightest days of summer.

Aden saw Rabbit stare at her Chosen, and turned to the bull at her side. "You look beautiful," she said. "You're glowing. I'm glad you came," she added warmly, and rested her hand on his back.

"I wasn't going to let you go without me this time," he said, smiling into the princess' eyes. "I wouldn't be much of a Chosen if I did!" Looking then at the smelteacher, Taw said, "You probably want to know why we're here."

"Yes, but you're not the first to fall through from the world above," said Ferrick. "Windstorms are rare, and the sky of Phantism is largely closed. But if you were to delve back far enough into our history, you would find stories of visitors from the lands above. And occasionally fissures and cracks form in your earth which, while deep, are not of the magnitude of a full sky opening. This has sometimes brought us visitors from above, though they are normally more surprised to see us than we are to see them. We're not like you," said Ferrick, stating the obvious, "and few know of our existence."

"You can say that again!" exclaimed Jasper. "I've lived in Prism all my life, and I've never heard of you. Who are the stretchy looking guys who caught us?" Normally this means of describing their hosts would have drawn a rebuke from Taw. But even he was looking from left to right, somewhat dumbfounded by the place where they now found themselves.

"Well, we're not a very mechanical people," explained Ferrick. "We live from the land, drawing our food and iron from the earth. Our two main industries are mining and farming. The ... er ... guys who caught you were some of our sprouts. The sprouts are our farmers. They can utilize and re-form their bodies as they see fit – shrinking into squat-shaped balls that can work with the soil for hours at a time without the aching backs or stiff knees you would experience were you to do such work. But they can also stretch, allowing them to pluck the fruit from even the highest branches. This ability is beyond valuable in the sort of work they do, and they do it well and tirelessly. Their skill in working with the soil is legendary and no job is too exhausting or

detailed for them. They can draw life from the most unforgiving earth, though in general the soil of Phantism is rich and lively.”

“Sprouts, you say?” asked Jasper, a twinkle in his eye. “I don’t suppose you have one here called Brussel, do you?” This drew a blank stare from Ferrick and a frown from Taw. “You know,” Jasper persisted, “Brussel, the sprout. Brussel sprout. It’s a ...” But at this he caught sight of Aden’s face, her brows pulled down hard and her lips pursed. “Oh, never mind,” he said, his voice fading away.

“The other folk you see,” continued Ferrick, “are the trowels. They mine the earth with their massive shoulders. Your dwarves are their descendants, but it’s the trowels who were the original miners of the earth, swarthy and strong and as earthy as the dirt itself. The metal they mine has – over the centuries – been absorbed into their bodies and bonded with their muscles, making them powerful far beyond their size. When we say that the trowels are made of steel, we don’t exaggerate.”

“I’ll bet Ruckwood would love to meet these guys,” whispered Rupert to Rabbit, and she smiled silently in return. It hadn’t been long ago that it would have been Rabbit muttering jokes under her breath, or making fun of the sprouts’ name, or even complaining that she wanted to go home, and it occurred to Rupert how much she’d changed in the time since they’d entered Prism. Taller and far stronger now, she’d changed considerably to look at. But it was the warmth in her eyes and the stillness she’d learnt while in Gras Uir that had changed her most, and Rupert thought that she’d be almost unrecognizable now to the people who had known her back in their world. Her long brown hair and bright blue eyes were striking, but it was her calm and confident bearing that made Rupert think to himself; “Queenly. She’s almost queenly. I suppose that’s what happens when you’re the Chosen of the king of all the beasts.” Rabbit saw Rupert’s eyes turned in her direction, and smiled and raised her eyebrows. He shook his head, and forced himself to listen once more to Ferrick, who had continued explaining his land.

“... most of the same animals as in your world. But many that aren’t as well, such as the sparks – annoying little bursts of fire that pop up when you least expect them – or want them, for that matter. Be careful of them; they rarely do harm, but they’re full of tricks and hugely annoying. There are giants, of course, which should be obvious. But

perhaps you have them in your world also? And then there are the salamanders, who actually live in the fire of the Ocheron Sea. Apparently they sprang originally from Firefall, the legendary and perhaps mythical waterfall of fire that guards the home of the Firestals. Almost impossible to see them, though – they take on the physical appearance of the fire and when they speak they hiss.”

“What are the Firestals?” asked Aden. “You’ve mentioned them a number of times.”

“Aaah,” said Ferrick, in a way that made all of them prick their ears. “The Firestals are unlike anything in your world. Or in any world. They reside in Phantism, and are perhaps from this land also. But unlike virtually any other creature, they can pass from one world to the next. And they can do it by traveling through any element of their choice.”

“I’m sorry – I don’t understand,” said Rabbit.

“Well, I’m from Phantism. And you’re from Prism. Then there are the oceans and their many people. And of course there’s the cosmos, home to the stars and to the Alellii. And most of us stay in our own worlds. But the Firestals pass regularly from one to the other. They travel as fingers of fire, passing through earth or air or water. And they can enter the cosmos also, reaching into the home of the Alellii. It’s believed, though nobody can prove it of course, that the Firestals can speak to the Alellii and that they are wise beyond comprehension because of it. The priestesses leave Phantism via their power, traveling in their heat. They can only leave once in this manner, however; this is the Firestals’ gift to the matured Phantism priestess who leaves to serve the land. The High Priestess, of course, comes and goes from her home as she will, and the Firestals make themselves available to her as she so needs. We’ve seen this in the distance of course – lightning on the horizon of Phantism, which says the Firestals are on the move – most probably at the bidding of the High Priestess. But none of us have seen this in our presence and so many generations have passed since any of us had first hand experience with the Firestals that some of the younger sprouts and trowels and animals here have come to question the Firestals’ very existence. But this is a sign of ignorance, and all of us who have any experience know that they ... what? What have I said? What’s wrong?”

Ferrick looked at the staring eyes and open mouths that surrounded

him. Jasper shook his head as though it was impossible to take in what he heard, and Rabbit's lips were pursed shut, her eyebrows lowered. Rupert stood with his mouth opening and closing, and it was Aden in the end who gathered her wits sufficiently to speak.

"Are you saying the High Priestess lives here?" She spoke as though the idea was preposterous.

"Why yes, of course! She was one of the Soeillestial priestesses, who all pass through many decades of training in Phantism, though they are generally born in your world. When the mature priestesses leave, they leave for the rest of their lives. But the High Priestess, of course, is not bound by this rule, and comes and goes as she wishes – which is often. All the high priestesses spend considerable time in Phantism ... I mean, how else would they find the joy to carry out their work and bear the burden of their office which is greater than any of us can comprehend? But should the High Priestess be from the line of the Soeillestia, she always maintains a permanent home in Phantism. She has a home above the ground, of course, but I should think that nothing will ever be home to her as will Phantism!" Seeing the looks on their faces, Ferrick became concerned that his words might have offended his guests and tried to politely explain. "She is the high priestess, of course, and few of us are privy to her world. I understand that being above-ground dwellers, it might not occur to you that she has other realms more personally dear or ... or ... familiar to her. And this is not to say that she does not equally value all realms! This is her role and responsibility as high priestess. Please! Forgive me if I have offended you! Few of us know her even a little, and her comings and goings and far beyond us all."

"I'm her son," said Jasper baldly, and it was Ferrick's turn to stand with his mouth open. "Are you saying that all the Soeillestial priestesses know of Phantism? That's ... that's a quarter of the entire priesthood! Why is Phantism not more widely known?"

"The Soeillestial priestesses don't just know of Phantism! They're born above ground, but they're raised in the joy of Phantism's fires and it burns into their souls in a way which cannot be extinguished – not even by the travails and sorrows of many generations."

"Many generations?" questioned, Rabbit. "What do you mean?"

"Why, the priestesses are gifted with extraordinarily long life – you of all people must surely know this! And the high priestesses most of

all. They live for centuries – sometimes a millennia or more, though this is rare.”

“How old is my mother?” asked Jasper, his head spinning at Ferrick’s words.

“At least three centuries that I know of,” said Ferrick. “By high priestess standards, she is still young.”

“So she will live to see me grow old and die? And my father also? But ... wait! If she’s been alive for so long, is he the only husband she’s had? And - for that matter – has she had other children? What the hell is going on?” Jasper grasped his head and closed his eyes, trying to block out Ferrick’s words.

“As far as I know, your mother has had one spouse only. She lived over two hundred and fifty years below ground while she matured in the ways of the Soeillestia and drew in the joyous fire of Phantism. She has started to age only after passing into the overland, though she ages slowly, as do all the high priestesses. More than this I cannot tell you, and I apologize for my lack of knowledge and the distress my words have brought you. I am only one smeltergeist of many, and my knowledge of the High Priestess is no more than that of all those in Phantism. However, we are honored beyond words to have the son of the beloved lady in our midst.” Ferrick looked unhappy at the effect his words had caused, and it was Rabbit who spoke, trying to soothe the smeltergeist’s concerns.

“And we are honored to be here,” she said. “And we appreciate your honesty and the information you’ve shared. We have much information that we must share, also. But,” and here she hesitated, casting a keen glance at Jasper, “we would appreciate a chance to sit with you all and discuss our situation at greater length.”

Ferrick, rightly reading her tone, turned immediately to the people congregated behind him. “Bring food and drink!” he called, and sprouts and trowels and dozens of animals hurried away and into the mud domed huts that dotted the hills around them. At any other time, Jasper would have been fascinated by the provision of food in this oven-like climate. But now he walked silently behind Ferrick as they filed between well-tended mud-domed houses with gardens and the occasional orchard. A short time later they reached a large, open stone-paved area that had its back to the orchards and houses, and its front to the sea. The trowels moved quickly, carrying plates and

baskets of food, but the sprouts seemed to roll forwards, though their heads remained at the top of their bodies. Rupert tried to watch without staring.

“Blowed if I can work out how they’re doing that,” he said to Rabbit, speaking quietly.

But Rabbit was looking upwards. “You know, I think, if you really concentrate, you can see the underside of the world above. I’m sure I can see a crevice – like the one we fell through. But they’re upwards-going crevices, not downwards like they are in our world. Well, I suppose these are the chasms and sink holes in the earth in our world, but here we get to see them from the underside.”

Rupert nodded. “I think I can see it – though it’s hazy. Everything is yellow.”

Rabbit stood, gazing at the cavernous roof, but Rupert knew she had become lost in her own thoughts. And this was hardly a surprise; the group from Prism had been given so much information in such a short time, it was hard not to feel overwhelmed. Rupert could only imagine how Jasper was feeling, and cast a worried look in his direction. But Jasper stood with his back to them all, staring out over the Ocheron Sea, his arms wrapped around the front of his body, as though holding in some great ache. Rupert frowned and shook his head.

It wasn’t long till the food was laid out and Ferrick gestured them to sit. “I’ll bet they don’t have to worry about their dinner getting cold,” muttered Rupert under his breath. Sitting next to him, Rabbit smiled.

“They’ve probably never had a cold drink here,” she said, “much less ice, or ice cream!” It was Rupert’s turn now to shake his head; the idea seemed both depressing and preposterous.

“Before we start our meal,” commenced Ferrick, “let us give thanks to ...”

“We need to find the yellow crystal quadrant,” said Jasper, interrupting rudely. Aden made a disapproving sound under her breath, but Jasper continued as though she hadn’t spoken. “I don’t mean to be rude,” said Jasper, “but we really don’t have time for this sort of thing. We have to get the crystal and get back. There’s a lot to talk about when we return home and we need to get back as soon as we can. Can you give us any information to help us find it? Do you know where in Phantism it is? Where should we ...”

Aden cut him off then, speaking loudly and pointedly.

“I apologize for my friend,” she said, casting Jasper a forbidding look. “Clearly the information about his mother has been a shock for him. We are extremely grateful for your hospitality and will partake of this meal gladly. However, to soothe our concerns, perhaps we could talk and eat?”

Jasper made a disgusted grunt which told them all what he thought of such pleasantries, but didn’t interrupt again. When Ferrick nodded understandingly, Aden smiled gratefully and Jasper had sufficient good manners to eat what was put in front of him. Sprouts and trowels passed between them quietly, handing out bowls filled with glowing fruits and vegetables, refilling them if they stood empty for more than a minute or two. The food was hot, not surprisingly, and tasty, and Aden gave it no more than a glance before absently forking it into her mouth as Ferrick spoke.

“Ah! The crystal! Yes, of course we know of the crystal and the four quadrants that make it. And we know of its theft by the Dreaded One. Likewise, we have heard tell of the restoration of both the red and blue quadrants, though not in detail. So naturally we began searching in Phantism for the quadrant which must, inevitably, be hidden here.”

“And did you find it?” asked Jasper, his bowl now lying on the ground next to him. A small trowel stood at his shoulder, enthusiastically refilling it every time Jasper took a spoonful, till Jasper, who’d had no appetite to start with, eventually gave up and laid it aside.

Ferrick sighed. “No. We didn’t. And it wasn’t for lack of looking. But we’re hampered in ways others aren’t.”

“What do you mean?” asked Rabbit, speaking for the first time.

“The people of Phantism are connected to the land in which they live. No, no,” he said, seeing their confusion, “I don’t mean to the country in which they live. I mean they’re attached to the specific land. Ground. Dirt. We each have our own patch – our own region, if you like – and we live and die with the ground that we know. I, for instance, would be ineffective trying to read the soil of a different place in Phantism. I was born where I now live, and I know this earth. I will die here, too, and be buried with my fathers. We don’t wander far from that which is familiar to us. Asking the sprouts, or the trowels, for instance, to search outside their own region, would be like speaking to them in a foreign language. They just can’t do it.”

“I don’t believe you’ll be asked to search,” said Aden. “In fact, that may well be why you couldn’t find the crystal in the first place. It’s not your task.” Ferrick lifted his eyebrows questioningly and Aden looked him in the eyes, though Rabbit noticed she blushed slightly. “We found the first two crystal quadrants,” she said. “And it’s our belief that we’ve been drawn into Phantism to find the next quadrant also. This is our task, Ferrick. We are the four of the Quest.”

Ferrick looked from one to the other politely, and in the silence there were a few quiet coughs and a number of averted gazes. Rupert thought he heard a snicker, and Ferrick frowned heavily in the same direction.

“I know what you’re thinking,” said Jasper flatly. “You think we’re kids and you’re wondering what earthly use we could be. Well, you should know that Aden” and Jasper nodded in her direction, “is the princess royal of Prism. Her parents are the king and queen. Single handedly she went down into Dansrien, the land of the dead, and retrieved the red crystal quadrant. She’s also the bravest person I’ve ever met. And Rabbit, despite coming from another world, is almost certainly a priestess. Not only did she retrieve the blue crystal quadrant from the slurry ...”

“The kaffaljidma, Jas,” corrected Rabbit.

“... yes, well, whoever they are – not only did she do that, she saved all the babies of Undersea and basically saved the entire ocean! And as for Rupert ...”

“Yes, yes, alright,” interrupted Rupert. “I think he gets the point.”

“... the point being,” continued Jasper relentlessly, “that we’ve been called to this task! Whether we like it or not – and most of the time we don’t! – we’ve been called to this. And we’re going to finish it whether you, or the people from Undersea, or the mer-people or anybody are on our side or not!”

Jasper was breathing heavily by the end of this speech, and an uncomfortable silence had settled over those assembled.

“Yes, well,” stuttered Ferrick. “Of course we’ll support you all we can. And I didn’t mean to criticize or question you.” Jasper snorted rudely at this. “You’re just not what we had expected. Not that we expected anybody, if it comes to that! The truth is, we’ve seen some changes in Phantism – worrying changes. But it never really occurred to us that help would come. People don’t come here, you see, and

Phantism is rather ... cut off, if you like, from the other parts of the realm. And as you said – on the whole, people don't even know we exist! So help was the last thing we expected. It's clear to me," and Ferrick's tone became very gentle, "that you've achieved miraculous things for this kingdom. And – between having a princess, the son of the High Priestess and two visitors from another world in your group - nobody could question your right to take on this quest. Forgive me, Jasper, for my lack of faith. Would that I was as good at reading the hearts of people as I am at reading the soil!" Ferrick smiled ruefully at this, and looked embarrassed.

It was more than a naturally friendly boy like Jasper could do to resist such a sincere apology. Despite the questions swirling in his head, he nodded and tried to smile back. "I'm sorry I lost my temper. I have a lot on my mind."

"Of course," said Ferrick warmly. "So, how can we help?"

"In the past," said Taw, and all eyes swiveled to the magnificent, glowing red-gold bull, "we've had at least a little direction. I should say – I wasn't with the Quest when they descended into Undersea, and from there into the home of the mer-people, and then to that of the kaffaljidma. However, in regaining both quadrants of the missing crystal, at least some direction and help was given. The first quadrant lay in Sangcoeur, and the prophet centaurs pointed us on our way there. In Undersea, the Quest was met almost by scouts as soon as they descended into the waters, having seemingly been called there by the people of the deep. But this time ..." Taw's voice trailed off and he looked from left to right as though lost. "I just don't know," he ended simply.

"So really, any help you could give us would be the only direction we've got," continued Aden. "Clearly, Phantism is unknown to us, and where we go from here will largely be at your suggestion."

"You said you've seen changes in Phantism?" queried Rupert. "What sort of changes?"

Ferrick's tone became grave. "In the land of Phantism, fire and heat are the heart of our existence. Coldness to us is the same as death. Anything that doesn't radiate warmth is foreign to us, and a sign of illness. But in recent times, smoke has been seen in the Ocheron Sea and in parts of the Berne Mountains."

"Smoke?" asked Rupert, and Ferrick nodded slowly.

“Smoke. The fires are going out.” Around them sprouts and trowels muttered and shook their heads. “You don’t live in Phantism, so you can’t possibly understand. But suffice to say, if the fires go out in Phantism, the ramifications will be much greater than for this world alone.”

“How so?” asked Rabbit.

“If the fires go out, Phantism will grow cold and all here will die. We can’t live above ground, so if this world ends, so do we. But more than that, should the fires of Phantism be snuffed out, it will be the end of all joy for Prism. Both land and hearts will grow cold, and it would not be long before all of Prism followed Phantism into death. And were Prism to die ...” Ferrick’s voice trailed off.

“If Prism dies, Addreadon has won and the cosmos is destroyed,” said Taw flatly.

“Which pretty much brings us back to what I said,” interjected Jasper. “We need to find the yellow crystal and get back to Spectra so the crystal can be put back together. Well, three quarters of it, anyway.”

“So given how critical this is,” continued Aden, “somebody from Phantism must have been looking for the yellow quadrant, surely? I understand about not being terribly mobile, and not being able to read any of the earth which isn’t specifically your own. But somebody must have tried.”

“Well, yes, I suppose so, in a way. Word has been sent out from village to village, and every town and region has been searched for any sign of the yellow crystal. And all of Phantism has been keeping an eye out, should Addreadon try to enter our realm to place the crystal here. But the more time that goes past, and the more changes we see, the more many of us have come to believe that the Dreaded One has already passed this way, that the crystal is already hidden, and that we somehow missed his passage through our land. So we’ve just been looking for the crystal itself. But ...” and Ferrick’s voice trailed away.

“But what?” pushed Jasper.

“But – well – can you even imagine how hard it’s been to locate one small crystal in an entire realm? When you have no idea where it might be? No hints and no clues? The townspeople here have searched and searched, and I can only imagine that every other town has also. But nothing has been turned up – not even the tiniest sign as to where it might be. So we’re largely at a loss.”

Ferrick's words were hugely discouraging, and all sat in silence on the hot stone paving for some time, till finally Taw spoke.

"Well one thing's for certain," he said, and all those present looked at the large bull hopefully. "Nothing will be achieved if we just sit here. We might not have much to go on, but we need to formulate a plan."

"Oh, we have a plan," said Ferrick. "We just don't know how to do it."

"I'm sorry, I thought you said you had no idea where the crystal might be?" said Aden, and Rabbit could tell she was trying to keep her temper. Ferrick, too, seemed to feel her frustration, and his outline shimmered and wavered, as though he wished he was somewhere else and was only half a step from disappearing into the soil on which he sat.

"I'm sorry – I don't mean to be purposely confusing," said the smelteacher. "And it's not so much a plan, as such. We don't know how to find the yellow crystal - but we do know who we should ask. We need to go to Firefall and ask the Firestals."

"They're the guys who transport everybody around, right?" asked Jasper.

"Yes, they are. But far more than that. They're very old – as old as Phantism itself. And they're wise beyond imagining. Given that they can communicate with the Alellii – who would definitely know where each quadrant of their crystal was at all times – they could, if they chose, communicate that to the Firestals."

"Who could in turn tell us," finished Aden. "Yes, I see. So why is this so difficult?"

"The Firestals live in the fires of Firefall," said Ferrick. "The people of Phantism can withstand heat, but we can't enter the pure flame. We're not made for that. Almost nobody is."

"Almost?" queried Rupert.

"Almost," answered Ferrick. "The sparks could go – but to be frank, they're not much inclined to be very useful. No, the people you want are the geonauts. The geonauts are the pillars of Phantism. More I cannot say. If they choose to reveal themselves to you, they will. The geonauts make themselves available to all in Phantism, but for reasons of their own, they have never been known to communicate with men. Whether they will help you is anyone's guess. But my best suggestion would be to go in search of them and petition their help."

Looking at Jasper, Rabbit could see that all this talk of geonauts, and Firestals and even the Alellii had frustrated rather than encouraged him. Gazing out over the Ocheron Sea, she wondered what would be expected of them in this strange land before they could find and return the yellow crystal to its rightful home.

“Although ... perhaps this is its rightful home,” she pondered, and realized how very little she knew about this curious world. Looking at the sprouts and trowels, who hovered politely behind her, and seeing the look on Ferrick’s face, it suddenly occurred to her that they were waiting for something.

“I think it’s the best plan any of us have got,” she said. “We would appreciate any help you could give us and we’ll be grateful for it. Thank you, Ferrick.”

Ferrick smiled broadly, and all the trowels and sprouts sagged in relief. The trowels seemed to wilt a little, their muscles unbunching, and it surprised Rabbit to realize they’d been nervous. The sprouts, too, seemed to breathe out, and became even more blob-like, their heads bouncing around on their short, stumpy necks.

“You’re welcome,” said Ferrick. “What would you like to do first?”

“I think the first thing we need to do is tell you our own story,” said Taw, and everyone nodded.

And so the next few hours were spent with Aden, Jasper, Rabbit and Rupert – with help from Taw – recounting all the events of the last year and beyond.

“And so then the floor in the Crystarium split open and we fell through. And found ourselves here,” ended Rupert some time later.

“Hey! Where’s the light gone?” asked Jasper.

So engrossed had they all been in the story of the recovery of the red and blue crystals, they had failed to notice that the light had dimmed and they were no longer sitting in blazing yellow but, instead, a soft pale golden glow.

“We don’t have night here as you know it,” explained Ferrick. “But the light pales in the evening hours and stays that way till morning. These hours are cooler, also, and are the time when all our trees and plants grow. The fire in your veins cools as well, allowing you to rest, and this I would recommend you do. It will not be easy to enlist the help of the geonauts, and strength will almost certainly be needed.”

Rupert had a strong sensation of not wanting to know what Ferrick

meant, and instead asked about the sleeping arrangements. “Where should we go?” he asked.

“The trowels sleep in the earth,” said Ferrick. “But I don’t recommend this for you, your bodies being new as they are to our heat. The sprouts will take care of you, and show you what should work best for you. And then in the morning we can ... yes, what is it, Agnora?” As Ferrick spoke, a small humming sound had grown louder and more persistent, and Rabbit saw a minute bug flitting around Ferrick’s face.

“I’ll show them!” said a tiny voice. “I’ll show them where they can sleep!”

“Agnora! Don’t be so annoying and leave Ferrick be!” said a stern sounding buzz. Looking carefully, all those present saw another bug fly out of the ranks of the trowels, and up to the owner of the first tiny voice. “I’m so sorry, Ferrick,” said the second flying insect. “I’ll take her away! Agnora! Come here! This instant!”

The two tiny insects began to flit away together, but Ferrick interjected.

“Oh, it’s alright, Flyte. If nobody objects, Agnora can stay.” Ferrick cast a glance around the group, and when nobody spoke, nodded in the little bug’s direction. “You can help, Agnora, so long as your mother says you can.”

An excited buzzing sound broke out then, and a tiny light appeared to the rear of the humming insect. Clearly, Agnora was a firefly! Rupert, Rabbit, Jasper, Aden and Taw began to laugh, but Ferrick quickly lifted his finger to his lips and shook his head, and the group stifled their chuckles. Confused, they looked from one to the other till a sprout standing next to Rabbit leant forward and whispered in her ear.

“Comes on whenever she’s excited. She’s never seen herself from behind, though, of course, so she doesn’t know. Has no idea, in fact. Very handy thing – we can always tell when she’s upset or just making it up – which is most of the time!” Rabbit’s lips twitched, but she managed not to laugh.

“Thank you for your hospitality, Agnora,” she said sounding grave, but her eyes danced with laughter. “Perhaps you could show us where to sleep?”

Rabbit, squinting, could have sworn Agnora puffed out her chest with pride, as she grandly said, “Follow me! I’ll lead the way!”

Turning back to Ferrick, Rabbit bowed her head briefly to the

smeltergeist. “Thank you for your help. And for your generosity to us, who are strangers in your land,” she said formally.

“Be welcome in Phantism, and may the fires bless your Quest,” he responded.

– Chapter Two –

PHANTISM

Following Agnora was more difficult than might have been imagined. Despite her best intentions, the firefly was a tiny insect and her progress was slow. When Agnora spoke and Rabbit noticed she was puffing for breath, it was obvious that she was in fact traveling as fast as she could fly. But with flitting back and forth, this way and then that, stopping to tell anyone they met about her important guests – and her role in their progress, it became rapidly apparent that accepting Agnora’s help was not ideal. Aden was looking annoyed and Jasper was twitching with impatience when they finally reached a group of trees, glowing deep emerald green in the slightly muted light.

“Wait right here; I’ll go ask!” she squeaked, and dashed upwards into the branches.

When she’d disappeared, one of the trowels who had walked with them turned to the group. “We could do it much faster without her, of course. But she’s all enthusiasm and we don’t like to discourage her. The younger fireflies live with their parents in their own homes till adulthood normally. But Agnora is ... special, and we’re fond of her,” he ended simply.

Rabbit smiled kindly. But before she could respond something moved in the front of her robes and a small head poked out of her vest. “Hallo! You’re awake I see,” she said.

Viff’s tousled head peered sleepily around the group. He was clearly disorientated.

“He sleeps because of the diamond juice,” explained the trowel. “The juice is rich and potent, and the changes it makes are strong. Taken by smaller animals, the effect is generally sleep, though taken in very large amounts the end result is unconsciousness and often death.” Viff growled at the trowel’s words, but it turned into a yawn and a paw snuck up to scratch behind his ear.

“I’ve asked them, and you can stay! Now all we need is for the trowels to ...”

Snap!

Agnora had flown close to Rabbit's face, and Viff, who had not yet met the little firefly, saw the fluttery movement, heard the buzz, and closed his jaws down on her hard!

"Viff! NO!" yelled Rabbit, and grabbed the viffle by the snout. Ignoring the shocked look on his face, she prized his jaws open and Agnora flew out, wiping her legs and wings and looking very offended.

"Well, I never!" she said. "If that's the way he treats hospitality, he won't be very popular here!"

"Viff," said Rabbit calmly, "this is Agnora. She lives here in Phantism and she's taking us to where we'll sleep tonight. She's a friend. I think you should apologize, don't you?"

Viff looked embarrassed and covered his face with his paws, peeking out shamefacedly between his toes.

"Would you like me to help you?" asked Rabbit, and Viff nodded. Rabbit looked at Viff closely and spoke. "Agnora, I'm very sorry. I didn't mean to eat you," said Rabbit to the viffle. Viff was very still for an instant, then nodded. Rabbit took him out of her tunic then, tipped him on his back and began to tickle his tummy. "Come closer, Agnora," said Rabbit. "Viff has something he'd like to say to you."

Cross but curious, the firefly drew slightly nearer. Her little mouth dropped open when Viff began to speak.

"Agnora, I'm very sorry. I didn't mean to eat you." Viff repeated the words Rabbit had given him perfectly, then closed his mouth and looked at Agnora sadly from big, velvety brown eyes.

"Well, I suppose I have to accept your apology," she said, sounding disgruntled. "But I'll be keeping an eye on you! And if you do that again, don't expect me to forgive you twice!"

Agnora sounded very upset, and Rabbit went to speak in an attempt to sooth her temper. But before she could, Agnora turned her back on them all, and it became apparent to everyone that she wasn't nearly as upset as she would have had them believe.

"Yes, I see what you mean," said Rabbit to the trowel. "Very useful!"

A group of the sprouts descended from the stand of trees then, moving down seamlessly, as though their limbs became one with the trunk they climbed. Wordlessly they grouped together and one of the sprouts stretched his arm out to Aden. "Come," he said.

The princess walked towards the sprouts till she stood in the center of them all. Then, without quite being able to see how it happened, legs intertwined, arms stretched out, and Aden was suddenly lifted into the branches of the huge tree and placed gently on the outstretched limb.

“Hey! This is great!” Aden called down. “Wait till you see it!”

Rabbit, who hated heights, had a momentary burst of nerves and would have liked to refuse. “Chosen ... I’m the chosen of a king,” she said under her breath, and when it came her turn to be hoisted into the trees she was able to grasp the outstretched hands with a smile.

“Thank you,” she said, and suddenly the ground fell away and she was high in the air, being placed tenderly next to Aden. “Oh my word,” she gasped.

Filled with a softer light than when they’d first arrived, the trees still glowed with more color than either of the girls had ever seen. Each leaf was like a bright, deep green light that twinkled around them, as though they floated in a sea of emeralds. The sprouts, who had seemed almost colorless when on the ground, were now a rich forest green, reflecting the hue of the trees they inhabited. Climbing effortlessly out towards them along the branch was a single sprout. He moved by wrapping each of his limbs around the branch, as if he embraced the tree with every step. Reaching the girls he stood up, taking on a not quite human form.

“Welcome to our home,” he said with little expression.

“Thank you,” said the girls, and each did the sign that was the formal greeting of Prism.

“I am Frond, and this is my mate, Furl.”

Surprised, the girls spun around, and realized that behind them stood another sprout which neither of them had seen when first entering the tree. So well did they blend into their chosen homes, it was almost impossible to see them if the sprouts did not wish to be seen. Aden gasped, and would have fallen had not Furl’s arm shot out to steady her.

“I apologize for the subtlety of my appearance,” she said. “The sprouts who live always in the trees take on the appearance of our homes. It is not our intent to deceive. Rather, it reflects our love of all things living.”

“Of course,” said Rabbit politely. “We perfectly understand.”

Aden gave Rabbit a look which said that she didn’t understand at all,

and Rabbit lifted her brows slightly in reply. It was difficult to know how to respond to these quiet, private creatures.

“We sleep here,” continued Furl, and the girls saw that she was pointing to a collection of woven pods that hung like huge lanterns from the branches around and above them. “They’re called balancoils.”

Looking closely between the branches, Rabbit could see dozens of balancoils, all the way up into the highest branches, each hanging from a long, thick cord and some swinging gently. The air of Phantism moved continuously, stirred by the rising heat that hit the roof above, cooled, and cycled back down to be heated again. With Frond and Furl’s help, the girls were able to maneuver out along the branches. Once above their pods, though, they looked at them blankly, wondering how to get from where they stood into the little woven huts below them.

“It’s easy for us,” said Furl, and she swung off one of the branches with her arm stretched out and into the balancoil’s opening. She reappeared in a second, levering herself effortlessly back onto the branch, her shape adapting to the movements she made.

“I’m not sure I can do that,” said Aden.

“Well, I’m sure I can’t!” said Rabbit, her nerves almost defeating her.

“No. I suppose not,” said Furl. “Well, how about we try this? Use the cord to pull it up and we’ll rest it on the branch. Then I have an idea.”

Rabbit and Aden looked at Furl doubtfully, but did what she suggested. When the balancoil was sitting precariously on the branch, Furl motioned for Rabbit to climb in.

“Hold on!” she called, and Rabbit grasped the woven sides of the pod.

“What are you going to doooooooooooooo!! Eeeeeeeeeeeeeee!”

Once inside, Furl had simply pushed the balancoil off the branch, and it swung wildly in the air, Rabbit inside. She squealed and yelped as the pod swung, and glimpses of Rabbit could be seen as the opening spun past the onlookers. Furl started to laugh.

It was a soft sound at first, a rich, gentle chuckle. But it grew and grew till it became a deep belly laugh, louder and louder. Around them, the inhabitants of the trees picked up the sound, chuckling at first, then growing louder in their appreciation till sprout upon sprout

grasped their bodies, laughter peeling through the air of Phantism.

For an instant Aden was shocked. But when she realized that the balancoil was perfectly safe, and Rabbit's face, as it flashed past while the pod spun, was more taken aback than afraid, the princess began to giggle also, till her laughter pealed and rang and bounced off the roof of the underground world. When Furl motioned for her to enter her pod, she did so willingly and said to Furl, "Push hard!" Furl swung her off the branch and she careened wildly for an instant, swinging left and right and spinning on the end of the pod's long cord. Aden laughed for the pure joy of it, and when the guffaws and giggles of the sprouts had subsided felt better than she had felt in months.

Rabbit's head popped out the opening to her pod. "I like it here," she said, grinning broadly.

"Me too," said Aden "Sleep well."

Inside their balancoils were multiple pillows of various sizes. Staying warm at night was no problem in Phantism, so there were no blankets. Instead, both girls closed the heavy curtain which kept out the yellow twilight, curled up in their circular pods, and slept.

In the tree next to them, Jasper and Rupert also slept, and it was hours later that Rupert was the first to wake. The light was once again at full force and poured through the cracks between the curtain and the entrance to the balancoil. Sticking his head out the opening, he saw Taw standing stock-still, looking out over the Ocheron Sea, apparently lost in thought. The magnificent bull glowed orange-red and his muscles stood out through his coat.

"Would you like some breakfast?"

Tuft, the sprout who had shown the boys to their sleeping quarters the previous night, seemed to appear from nowhere. His hands were full of glowing red fruit that Rupert didn't recognize.

"Yes, thank you," said Rupert, suddenly hungry. The fruit in Tuft's hands let off a gorgeous aroma. "Somewhere between the smell of warm earth and plums," thought Rupert, and took one happily.

Tuft, too, took a fruit and lifted it to his mouth. "These are maphlam fruit. They'll be hot in your mouth, so be careful. But they fill the belly and strengthen the spirit," explained Tuft, and took a bite.

Rupert didn't hesitate, but bit in immediately. The fruit was rich and delicious and the juice ran down his chin. It took an instant for him to realize that, although it was sweet, it was also hot like chilies, and Tuft

laughed when Rupert started fanning his mouth and sticking his tongue out.

“Ow! Iss delisshhhuss – ow! Iss vewwy hop ... oohhh is soo goob! Oww!”

“Here, try this,” said Tuft, and handed Rupert a small bowl. “It’s sandstone cream – it helps with the heat.”

Rupert drank thirstily, wiping the cream from his mouth when he’d finished. “Sandstone cream? What do you mean?” he asked.

“You see sandstone only as it appears above the earth – dry and dead,” said Tuft. “But stone has its roots below the earth; follow it down far enough and you’ll find the living feet of the stone. If the stone is sandstone, these feet can be carefully pruned and squeezed, and the cream is delicious, as you can see. It’s also good for maphlagm-melt – the burn you get from the maphlagm fruit. We eat maphlagm a lot in Phantism, so best to learn how to deal with its heat.”

Rupert stood, alternating the maphlagm fruit with the sandstone cream, nodding appreciatively. It wasn’t long till Tuft chuckled. “You’d best go easy on that,” he said. “The combination is very rich and these foods are new to you.”

Next to them, Jasper appeared, balancing on the branch behind Tuft.

“Here, try this,” said Rupert, handing him the fruit and the bowl of cream.

But unlike Rupert, Jasper had no trouble with the heat, and scoffed down the maphlagm hungrily.

Bemused, Rupert watched him eat. “Can’t you feel that? Doesn’t it burn?” he asked. But Jasper shook his head.

“Can’t feel a thing,” he said. “Well, maybe a tiny tingle, but nothing to speak of. These are delicious!” Jasper wiped his mouth and handed the bowl to Tuft. It occurred to Rupert that the sprout seemed somewhat concerned and even more quiet than normal. But Tuft’s face, largely without features, was hard to read and Rupert decided he must have been mistaken.

“How do we get down?” asked Rupert, peering through the branches at the ground far below.

Tuft let out a low whistle between his teeth, and suddenly sprouts appeared in the trees, having stretched up from the ground towards them. “Same way you got up,” said Tuft, and hands reached around both boys, forming an all-encompassing elastic band. Before they

knew what was happening, the sprouts lifted them off the branch and placed them safely on the ground once more. Beneath another tree, Rupert saw Aden and Rabbit speaking warmly to a female sprout, smiling and nodding.

“Yes, we will. And thank you so much, Furl,” said Aden. Rabbit reached out to Furl and hugged her, and the sprout’s arms snaked around the girl, molding themselves to her form.

Turning around then, both girls saw Jasper and Rupert standing nearby, and Rabbit walked over looking relaxed and happy. Aden waved briefly and went to greet her Chosen, standing with her arm draped round his neck as they gazed out over the sea of fire.

“This place is wonderful,” said Rabbit, smiling, before she’d even reached Jasper and Rupert. “How did you sleep?”

“Great!” said Rupert. “I think there must be something in the air.” He would have said more, but they were interrupted by a persistent buzzing, and, squinting, saw Agnora hovering in the air between them.

“Good morning!” she squeaked, and the light in her tail flashed briefly. “Ferrick would like to see you. We’re to set off immediately – and by ‘we’ I mean me too. I’m coming with you!”

Rupert, Rabbit and Jasper exchanged glances that said they weren’t entirely sure this was a good idea, but Rupert managed to smile politely, and Jasper said drily, “What fun.” Rabbit looked at Jasper, surprised. It wasn’t like her normally humorous friend to be less than enthusiastic, whatever the circumstances.

Joined by Aden and Taw, they returned to the meeting place where they’d sat the previous evening, and saw they were the first to arrive. But before anyone could ask the whereabouts of the smeltergeist, they all felt a strange tingling in their feet and, without warning, Ferrick rose from the stones in their midst.

“Good morning,” he said. Despite the smile on his face, he sounded tired.

“How did you sleep, Ferrick?” asked Rabbit. “In fact, do you sleep?”

“Oh yes, all the smeltergeists sleep. We’re not entirely formless and must care for our bodies in much the same way you do. But I’ve spent most of the night mustering provisions and leaving instructions for those who will care for our village while we’re gone.”

“How long should this take?” asked Rupert, surprised.

“I’m not sure,” said Ferrick. “And that’s why it’s difficult. It’s possible the geonauts will reveal themselves to you immediately. But it’s more likely it will take some time to persuade them.”

“When you say time,” said Taw, “you mean ... how long?”

“Days, weeks, months – who can say?” said Ferrick.

“Months!” exploded Jasper. “Prism doesn’t have months! We need to get this crystal and get back! We need to return to the Council and I, for one, need to speak with my mother! Do you know how much damage could be done in months?” Jasper was breathing heavily.

“Jas ...” started Rabbit, placing her hand gently on Jasper’s arm.

“Oh, it’s alright for you!” he said. “You’re the Chosen of a king. If all else fails, you’ll go live with the lions and I’m sure they’ll protect you! But what about the rest of us? What will we do when you’ve gone?” Jasper broke off suddenly and it was obvious that he was no longer talking about the threat to Prism.

“As I said,” repeated Ferrick, “the geonauts may reveal themselves immediately. I cannot say. If they see our need, they are not insensitive and I believe they will come to our aid. But you must understand – what you seek is a powerful thing. In the wrong hands, the yellow crystal would be a weapon of the highest magnitude. To remove joy would be to cast a universe into despair and cause endless suffering. The geonauts will want to be sure such power will be guarded and used wisely – for good. Not for ill.”

“For ill?” gasped Aden sounding almost as outraged as Jasper. “Have you not heard our story? We seek to return the yellow quadrant to its rightful home! We don’t want its power! We want to put it where the Alellii said it should go – with the people of Prism to sustain their world – the world which belongs to all of us!”

“And if that’s the case,” said Ferrick patiently, “I’m sure there will be no issue. And please do not think that I speak for the geonauts. I do not know their minds. I just know that their commitment to Phantism and to the joy of all those in Prism is strong and pure. They’ll make their judgments themselves, as you will see.”

“So – when do we get going?” hummed Agnora, dancing at eye level in the air. “I’m packed!” Looking carefully, Rabbit saw the firefly had a tiny pack strapped to her back. Viff also had noticed Agnora, and he made small whimpering noises in her direction, but she ignored him pointedly.

“We go now,” said Ferrick. “Provisions have been made and packs assembled for each of us.

“You’re coming with us?” asked Taw.

“For this part of your journey, yes,” answered Ferrick. “After this, though, you’ll be on your own. But for now, we travel together.”

“Where exactly are we heading, Ferrick?” asked Aden.

“We’re bordered on one side, as you can see, by the Ocheron Sea. So I thought we’d head along its coast and slightly inland. You’ll meet some of the people of Phantism that way, and also get a feel for the lay of the land.” As he talked, Ferrick started hoisting packs onto his back. He was obviously very strong, and he lifted far more than Aden, Jasper, Rupert or Rabbit could have carried.

The other five followed suit, Taw picking up all the remaining pieces after everyone had taken as much as they could manage. The great bull hoisted pack after pack onto his strong shoulders, lifting them as though they were weightless.

“Everybody ready?” he asked when the last packs had been laid across his back. Everyone nodded. “Well, lead the way then, Ferrick!”

As they began to walk, Rabbit looked around the land. Her eyes had quickly grown accustomed to the brightness of the yellow light, and after drinking the diamond juice she no longer felt the heat at all. What she was aware of, however, was a sense of gladness from this lush, glowing, radiant land. It seemed to sink up through her feet and she wondered if she was the only one who felt it. She looked at the ground, and was surprised to see that where she walked, the earth was a warm orange color that seemed to run through the dirt like arteries. She turned to speak to Rupert, and found he was already nodding.

“Yes, saw it,” he said before she could speak. “I have no idea. You?”

“None! But it feels like ... feels like ... you’ll think this is crazy,” she said.

“It feels like joy?” asked Rupert, and Rabbit nodded. “I thought so too. What is this place, Rabbit?”

“Ferrick,” she called ahead to where the smeltergeist led the group forward. “What are the orange ... well ... veins, I suppose you’d have to call them ... that we’re walking on?”

“Aahh!” said Ferrick, and his face broke into a grin. “I can always feel the earth, you see, so I forget that others can’t. What you’re seeing

– and feeling, too, I’m guessing – is the work of the geonauts. Their arms stretch up to our sky, supporting your world from below. But their roots sink into our earth, and where they stretch and run through the ground, they send out fingers of joy throughout Phantism. It is the digijoidi, and all in Phantism are familiar with its touch. People are rarely sad in Phantism. But if they are for some reason – a lost loved one or concerns of some kind – they will go and stand on the digijoidi. The trowels, in fact, will sort of burrow into it till they feel better, and the sprouts value it highly. It’s very fertile and can support crops, so the sprouts will plant their seeds there. You’ve tasted maphlagm, I understand.” Rupert and Jasper nodded. “Well, you wait till you taste maphlagm grown in soil touched by the digijoidi. It’s great! Always makes a mess though. Runs down people’s chins all the time because they’re grinning so hard when they eat it!”

Ferrick laughed at this, and Rupert couldn’t tell if he was teasing them. In the end he decided that he probably wasn’t. “Because if there was ever a place where anything was possible, this would be it,” thought Rupert.

Glancing over at Jasper, Rabbit saw that even he seemed to have a small smile on his lips, and she was relieved. She knew he was still coming to grips with the idea that there was so much he didn’t know about his mother, and Rabbit’s heart went out to him. For completely different reasons, she didn’t know a lot about her mother either, and she knew what it was to feel disconnected from the people to whom you were supposed to be closest. So she moved to where Jasper was walking, and spoke to him softly.

“How are you doing?” she asked, her hand on his arm.

Rabbit could see that Jasper wanted to pull away, and for a second a frown passed over his face. But the effects of the digijoidi were irresistible, and his frown melted away quickly and he smiled.

“Pretty good, actually,” Jasper answered. “This orange stuff in the ground is powerful! I didn’t think I’d be smiling an hour ago.”

“No, I know what you mean,” said Rabbit. “I can’t seem to stop grinning. And despite nobody knowing where the yellow crystal is, I can’t help but feel optimistic.”

“Me too,” said Jasper. “I have no idea what we’ve got to be optimistic about, but everything just doesn’t seem so bad down here. I can’t seem to worry about anything going wrong – though of course I

know there's heaps of stuff that could. It's so odd."

"I have to say, I agree with Ferrick," said Rabbit.

"In what way?" asked Jasper.

"Well, the part about all Prism failing if Phantism falls apart. Imagine if there was no joy in the world. Imagine the opposite of this!" And Rabbit swept her arm wide to indicate all the land.

"Cold and gray. The opposite would be cold and gray. And dead as well, I suppose." Jasper sounded momentarily sad. "I've always enjoyed a good laugh – you know that," and Rabbit nodded. Jasper's sense of humor was legendary amongst those who knew him. "But this isn't like anything I've ever experienced. This isn't just funny – though there's obviously plenty of laughing going on here. This is more like joy, gladness. I don't know – I can't explain it."

"I know what you mean," said Aden, who had walked up behind them. "This place is marvelous! I wonder why more people don't know about it? All of Prism could benefit from a stay here, surely?"

"Perhaps," said Rupert, who had seen Aden join Jasper and Rabbit, and now fell into step with them himself. "But this place is special, and the work they do is important. I wonder if they want to keep it from being polluted?"

"Well, I think that's a bit insulting to the people of Prism, Rupert! It's not like we'd all come down here, leave our trash about, and wreck the place!" said Aden, somewhat offended.

"I don't think that's what he meant," interjected Rabbit. "You're talking about the priestesses and their training here, right?" Rupert nodded.

"Right. Maybe their training is so finely balanced or something that they can't risk anyone else coming here," he said.

"Which kind of inevitably makes you wonder what sort of effect we're having," said Jasper.

"Yeah – that's a worrying thought," said Rupert, his smile quickly fading.

"But remember, we're supposed to be here," said Rabbit. "We're not like anyone else. We have a specific task to do. I don't feel as though we'll cause any harm."

"What do you mean – you don't feel as though we will? What can you feel?" asked Aden.

"I'm not sure, but ... can't you feel it through your feet? Not just joy

– but ... oh this is ridiculous! I can't possibly be feeling things through my feet!"

"If you can feel joy – and we all can feel the joy coming up from the ground, Rabbit – if you can feel joy, then there's no reason to think you can't feel other things too. Nobody has ever really pin pointed why you and Rupert are here," said Jasper. "There's no reason to think that your job isn't something like Ferrick's. Maybe you're meant to read the earth. Maybe that's it." It occurred to Rupert that Jasper sounded hopeful, and he sensed that Jasper would be quite happy to have Rabbit stay in Phantism and away from Gras Uir and the lions there. Even in the glorious land of Phantism, Jasper was still clearly jealous of Rabbit's Chosen.

"Well, maybe ... I guess." Rabbit was too gentle to say that she believed her job would always be caring for the sick and dispossessed that came to her in the home of the lions. But seeing her hesitation, Jasper seemed to know what she was thinking.

"I need to get off this damned orange stuff! Maybe I don't feel like being happy!" he said, and sprinted a short distance to one side till his feet were no longer touching the digijoidi. His face took on a scowl, then, which was becoming more and more familiar to those with whom he traveled.

Rabbit sighed and Rupert shook his head. "Oh for goodness sake!" exclaimed Aden, but left it at that.

"What's wrong with him? Jasper! What's wrong with you? Don't leave the digijoidi!" buzzed Agnora, briefly rising from where she sat between Taw's shoulders. But Ferrick put his hand towards her, shaking his head.

"Come, little one," he said. "Jasper indeed needs the joy of Phantism, but for now he needs his own company more." Agnora settled on Ferrick's hand briefly, before humming towards his head, where she perched confidently. But the light in her tail was not on.

As the group continued to walk, they drew closer to the sea, and it wasn't long till they were almost at its edge and could see the waves lapping against the shore.

"My word!" exclaimed Rupert. The waves of the Ocheron Sea were pure fire, and they hissed and spat as they touched the sand and slid away. The sand, bright yellow at any time, lit up like hot coals when the waves touched it, till its heat cooled and the fire went out. This

was repeated with each lick of fire against the shore, and caused ribbons of iridescent orange as far as the eye could see up and down the coast.

“What happens if you touch it?” asked Rupert, curious.

“It’s too hot, even for me,” answered Ferrick. “I can withstand most heat – some of the heat under the ground in Phantism is close to boiling. But this is beyond hot, beyond fire, even. And if you were to step into it, you’d die immediately. The diamond juice protects you from heat, but it doesn’t make you impervious to flame. You would not be the first people, though, to be mistaken by its beauty.”

And indeed, the Ocheron Sea was very beautiful. The flaming yellow waves put up spray after spray of orange sparks, fizzing and falling like showers of sunshine. A neon orange band edged the coast, forming and reforming with every wave. Drawing closer, Rabbit thought she smelt a fragrance, so fresh and wild and sweet that she didn’t know whether she wanted to laugh or cry.

“What is that smell?” asked Jasper, before Rabbit could speak. He was sniffing the air, not looking altogether pleased.

“That’s the sea. Fire in Phantism has a wonderful scent,” answered Ferrick.

“Fire in our world just smells like smoke,” said Rupert. Ferrick looked somewhat horrified and Agnora buzzed disapprovingly.

“That’s smoke. Not fire. Smoke is dead fire, it’s the absence of fire, or fire which has grown cold. To smell smoke in Phantism is to despair,” said Ferrick gravely.

“Have you ever seen smoke in Phantism, Ferrick?” asked Taw.

“As I mentioned earlier, there have been reports. But no, I never have. And I never wish to,” said the smeltergeist, looking out over the ocean. He was silent for a moment, then smiled as though he’d shaken off his sad thoughts. “Come on,” he said. “Enough of that! Phantism is full of joy, and there is much to see. We’ll head away from the ocean here and up into the hills. That will give you a better view of the lay of the land and a chance to meet some other inhabitants.”

With a last look at the Ocheron Sea, the group moved away from the sand and back onto the grass that bordered the coast. They no longer walked on the digijoidi, but the scent of the sea seemed to follow them, wafting deliciously on the breeze. For the rest of the day they traveled inland, passing through trees and between fields. Occasionally they

would see the glowing fingers of the digijoidi, and everyone except Jasper would jog towards them, following their path till they disappeared, deep into the earth. Frequently they came across sprouts and trowels and various animals at home in Phantism's heat and, since they had no time constraints and seemingly no particular destination at all, would stop and chat. All were friendly and welcoming, and the group told the story of their fall into Phantism dozens of times. Often Agnora would recount the story for them – or a version of it. Most often Rabbit overheard her, and it became apparent that Agnora's recital of events was becoming more and more outrageous with every retelling. By the time she heard Agnora say, with all seriousness, "Yes, I do think they're powerful beings from another land! Perhaps its creators! Maybe in league with our very own Alellii!" Rabbit knew it was time to intervene.

"Er, no. Definitely not in league with your Alellii. Nor are we powerful beings in our own world, either. In fact, two of us come from Prism, directly above you! Although, I have to say, one of them is the daughter of the king and queen, and the other one is the son of the High Priestess."

But if Rabbit had hoped to temper the awe being directed towards their party by all to whom Agnora spoke, she had gone about it in the worst possible way.

"High Priestess? The son of the High Priestess? My word! Tell everybody - quickly! And bring food! Drink! Bring everything!"

"No! Wait! I didn't mean ... he wouldn't like ... oh gees." Rabbit's voice trailed away as she realized she was speaking to thin air. It seemed like only seconds later that a large lizard, standing upright, came waddling towards Jasper, only just managing to balance a very large bowl between his front feet.

"Sire," said the lizard, placing the bowl carefully in front of Jasper and bending low. "All hail to you and your party, and welcome to our humble realm!"

Baffled, Jasper looked about him from one person to the other till he encountered Rabbit's apologetic face.

"I mentioned that Naian was your mother," she explained. "Sorry." Rabbit was afraid that Jasper's bad mood would extend to these warm hearted people in general, and to the courtly lizard bowing in front of him in particular.

But despite his recent internal struggles, Jasper was at heart the friendliest of people. He bowed politely in return, and lifted the bowl to his lips.

“I thank you,” he said, grandly, and drank deeply.

Rabbit, who knew him, could see Jasper was suppressing a cough. But to the enthusiastic people of Phantism, his receipt of their gift was reward enough and a cheer went up. Aardvarks, armadillos and badgers ran towards him then, catching his hands and bowing. Groundhogs, meerkats, moles and gerbils pushed them out of the way to try to touch him. Dozens of lizards and reptiles milled around him, snakes wove between his feet and insects buzzed around his face, some settling in his hair. Neither Viff nor Agnora liked this turn of events, and Viff growled crossly, while Agnora flew around saying things like “Hey! Get away! He’s my hinterlopper ... pinterloper ... winterflopper ... oh, get away!”

“I think she means interloper,” whispered Rupert to Rabbit.

Agnora flapped her wings as menacingly as someone her size could, eventually getting rid of most of the insects. “Sheesh!” she said, disgruntled, and finally set down behind Jasper’s left ear.

“Thank you, Agnora,” said Jasper politely, and Agnora’s tail lit up and she gave a mollified hum.

“People have no boundaries,” she grumbled, wriggling into the curve of his ear.

After that there was no time to talk, as bowl after bowl of food and drink were brought before them. Lining up in what seemed an almost never-ending queue, the animals brought a parade of the finest produce Phantism had to offer.

“This is distle. It’s sweet and a bit fizzy and comes from shale rock.”

“This is ruby juice,” explained another, offering a bowl of deep red liquid. “It’s warm and cool all at the same time! Be careful not to drink too much, though; it’s very rich!”

“This is sapphire melon – the yellow kind. It’s tart and zingy, and the girls love it because it doesn’t make you fat at all!”

Cool foams, frothy drinks, rich liquids, and fruit and vegetables, both crisp and light and heavy and filling, were passed around. Some foods seemed to have come from rocks and soils. While not being gritty as such, these had a very earthy flavor, which was not unpleasant. The sweeter foods seemed to have been distilled from living gems, and

Rabbit noticed that the richness of the color indicated the taste. Ruby juice, for instance, was very rich, like drinking blackcurrant-flavored liquid chocolate. Aden in particular loved the ruby juice and drank it till her lips were stained red and her cheeks were flushed. But diamond water was light and clear and sweet, and cleaned one's mouth of any other taste. Rabbit felt like she could have drunk the diamond water forever without becoming sick or full. The fruits and vegetables often had a tangy bite to them, like chili or lemon or both, while some had a very homey, familiar taste, like potatoes or turnips. It was a meal unlike the group from Prism had ever eaten, and they enjoyed it very much. "Although you'd have to be careful how much you ate," said Taw, "or you'd end up the size of a house."

The light from the Ocheron Sea had dimmed by this time, and sprouts took Aden and Rabbit, Jasper and Rupert to two separate balancoils to sleep. These were slightly different to the ones in which they'd previously slept, being more like suspended tents. The lights inside shone through the canvas softly, giving them a warm, inviting appearance, and Jasper let out a huge yawn. They entered their pods as they previously had – helped into the trees by the sprouts, then swinging off the branches once they were safe inside. The two boys shared one hanging tent, while Aden and Rabbit shared another. From where he sat in the balancoil with Jasper, Rupert was able to hear both girls squeal with delight as they were launched off their branch and swung crazily in the air, before coming to settle, suspended, below. Rupert, too, laughed when the boys' tent was tipped into the air, but Jasper barely smiled, and it was clear to Rupert that he was upset indeed. When they'd stopped swinging and the laughter had died, Rupert looked at Jasper quizzically.

"What is it, Jas?" he asked.

Jasper was silent for long moments and Rupert didn't know if he was going to respond.

"I don't know why it's bothering me so much," he finally said. "I mean, it's not like I want my mother to die – of course I don't! But I just thought ... I thought ... I don't know – I guess I thought I'd be with her as she aged - with her and my father together – as a family ... well, at least at some point, anyway. I've seen so little of her, and I've always understood that was her role. Her responsibility. I get that. But I thought my father and I would get to have her to ourselves before

she died, at least. Thought that I'd marry ... I mean, eventually ... and have a family, and she'd be around. I think I thought, at the end of it all, that she belonged more to us than to Prism. She's my mother, Rupert!"

Jasper sounded so heartbroken, and his face looked so sad, Rupert had no idea what to say.

"But now, not only will she never age – well, not that I'll ever see, apparently – but she'll never come back and be fully ours! She'll always belong first and foremost to the land! My father must know this - how does he stand it? He gets such little time with her – we both do! It was something I was willing to do, believing it would finish some day. But now it appears that she doesn't even live in Spectra with us! She lives here - under the earth! This is her real home. Oh, they know all about her here! And we're just some tiny deviation from her work schedule – what a bother we must be!" Jasper spoke so bitterly that Rupert barely recognized his voice.

"Jasper," said Rupert firmly. "I've seen your mother with you. And if there's one thing I can tell you for certain it's that you're no bother to her. And nobody owns her heart like you and Thaddeus do. I've never seen adults look at each other like your parents do. Whatever she does, I know that being apart from you must hurt her horribly. And despite her time away from you and your father, I know for sure that you're never out of her thoughts for one second! I don't believe that she'd let even her responsibilities as high priestess come between her and you if you truly needed her. She loves you, Jas. I've never seen a mother love her son more than she loves you."

Jasper looked at Rupert miserably, and the flicker of hope in his eyes at Rupert's words was so raw it almost hurt to see. But Jasper looked away quickly and his voice was flat when he spoke.

"I don't know, Rupert. I don't know anything any more. We need to sleep," he said, and without another word rolled over to face the wall of the tent.

Rupert sighed and shook his head in the dim. He covered the light that glowed in the center of the tent, and a gentle darkness filled the space. Outside, soft laughter floated on the warm night air. Chuckles rich as music swept from one tree to another and round again, moving away faintly, and both boys slept.

Morning commenced abruptly with a sprout digging each boy in the

bottom with a broken branch from below their suspended tent. “Wake up!” he shouted, and Rupert and Jasper sat up quickly.

“Ow! We’re awake! We’re awake,” Rupert yelled. “No need for that!”

The sprout guffawed and swung himself onto the branch above them, dragging their balancoil back up to branch level so the boys could climb out. They were lifted down then by the sprout’s stretchy arms, and landed almost simultaneously with Rabbit and Aden. Agnora, who had decided that Jasper was her special charge, buzzed down with him. It was interesting to Rupert that Jasper, who seemed unhappy or annoyed by almost everything in Phantism, was patient with Agnora’s attentions. Once on the ground, he held out his finger for her to land, then settled her gently on his shoulder. She hummed for a bit, her tail alight, until Ferrick rose out of the ground before them, and Jasper’s brows descended into a scowl.

The sprouts, trowels and animals who surrounded them grew quiet then, and some of them bowed slightly. While not as revered as the High Priestess’ son, the smelergeist was clearly held in high regard, and it occurred to Rupert that not every region in Phantism may not have had a smelergeist of their own. Rabbit, too, bowed her head to Ferrick, who dipped his head in return. Rupert wondered what it was Ferrick could see in his friend which he could not. “Perhaps better not to know,” he thought.

“We leave again immediately,” Ferrick said, and began loading packs and provisions onto his back. Sprouts and animals placed food near sacks for others to stow, and the trowels helped the visitors buckle belts and tighten straps for the journey ahead. But a small group still hovered around Jasper, till in the end he stopped what he was doing.

“Yes? What can I do for you?” he asked, trying not to sound as cranky as he felt.

“Sire, we’d like to offer you these gifts. Some are for you and some, if you are willing, are for the high priestess.” At this, Jasper’s brows came down hard and he opened his mouth for a sarcastic retort. But catching Rupert’s eye, he cut off his words at the last minute and forced himself to smile.

“Thank you for your generosity,” he said.

Before he could get another word out, an armadillo waddled forward.

“We saw how much you liked the sapphire melon, so we’ve packed

you extra,” he said. He would have said more, but was elbowed out of the way by a collection of small burrowing creatures - badgers and moles, and a number of lizards.

“And here are some of our best gem fruits for your journey,” said an enthusiastic lizard with an earthy sounding voice. “Emerald leaf, and some more diamond juice of course, and ... ow! I wasn’t finished!”

An overly enthusiastic aardvark shoved the lizard aside, speaking hastily. “And this is clay oil. It’s not much to look at, but it’s wonderful for burns, or chaffing, or anything that itches. I think if you ... hey! Put me down!”

A group of trowels had surged forward and one lifted the aardvark bodily out of their way.

“This is a digijoidi rod. You can use it to find digijoidi. You hold it out, so ...” and the trowel held what looked to be a large twig parallel with the ground. “And then you wave it around like ... so ... and when it finds the digijoidi, it will start to quiver a little and pull you in that direction. You’ll need to keep it wrapped in this cloth; if it’s not kept covered, the pull on it from the digijoidi can be so strong that the rod can be pulled out of a pack and lost.”

Jasper looked skeptical. “So why isn’t it quivering now?”

“There must be no digijoidi nearby,” the trowel said simply.

Jasper took the rod politely and placed it with the other provisions that were being packed. “Thank you very much,” he said, but Rupert knew he didn’t believe what the trowel had told him.

The muscular little men turned aside, smiling proudly. But under his breath, Jasper muttered. “Why you’d want to find that horrible stuff is beyond me.” Aden, who heard his words, frowned disapprovingly, and Jasper gave a rough-sounding laugh. “I’m just kidding,” he said. “I’m sure it’s wonderful stuff – if you like that sort of thing.” Luckily, the trowels had moved away and didn’t hear Jasper’s unappreciative words.

The day was like any other in Phantism; warm and beautiful, and colorful almost beyond bearing. The light from the sea lit the world like day, and Rabbit thought to herself that this was how all the world should be. Although Phantism was largely a farming community, it supported many people, and the group passed a number of Phantism’s occupants, some of whom joined them for a short time. Apparently nobody from this underworld land worked terribly hard; nobody

seemed to be in a particular hurry, or had any business that would keep them from joining a leisurely stroll through the countryside. Rabbit found herself laughing often, and heard Aden and Taw chuckling a short distance away. Ferrick walked from one to the other, telling them stories of Phantism, often assisted by Agnora who added her own style of commentary. Rupert was highly amused by Agnora's interpretation of events; even something so simple as a new member to her village, or a crop harvest, or the building of new balancoils was a wondrous event to her. Rupert guessed that for someone Agnora's size, almost any event was huge indeed.

But as the day wore on, Jasper grew more and more irritated. Looking at him out of the corner of her eye, Rabbit saw him bunching and unbunching his fists. When the group reached a shady stand of huge trees that reached from ground to ceiling, Ferrick suggested they stop for lunch and Agnora began asking each person what they would like best to eat. But Jasper could stand it no longer.

"This isn't a picnic!" he said, exasperatedly, his face red with frustration. "Have you all forgotten why you're here? Am I the only one who has remembered that Prism is in danger? What's wrong with you people? We need to get this crystal and get back! Immediately!"

Ferrick looked at Jasper sadly, and Rabbit realized that in criticizing the joy of the smeltergeist's land, Jasper had attacked that which Phantism held most dear.

"What would you have me do?" he asked Jasper, humbly. "Name it, and I will try."

"I want you to ... I ... we need ... oh for Pete's sake, I'll do it!" And with that, Jasper took a deep breath.

"Geonauts! Come out! Show yourselves," Jasper bellowed. "If you care about this world, this land, these people – prove it! Prism is dying and where are you? What use is being happy once we're all dead? Get out here and HELP!" His words ended on a bellow, and a shocked silence rang through the air, which vibrated with his anger.

"Nice one, Jas!" said Aden, very annoyed. "Nice way to show some respect! Like they're going to come out now!" Beside her, Jasper panted angrily.

"Ha! You see? This is rubbish!" he spat. "There's nothing here! These geonauts, or whatever they are, aren't going to help us! Nobody cares about us – not this guy," and here he pointed at Ferrick, " ... not

this land, or these people! Or even my damned mother! NOBODY CARES! We need to stop this stupidity, and we need to go home – RIGHT NOW!” Jasper was almost screaming in rage.

Horrified faces surrounded him and Ferrick winced with the pain of Jasper’s words. But before anyone could speak, a great creaking sound filled the air, so loud, everyone covered their ears, pressing their hands against their heads to block out the noise. Rabbit’s eyes were wide with shock, but they became pools of terror when behind Jasper, one of the massive trees which ran from ground to ceiling, supporting the very foundation of Prism above, began to slowly untwist. Enormous limbs were torn out of the roof, and dirt fell in torrents as roots were ripped away, both from ceiling and floor, and the tree began to writhe. Slowly limb disengaged from limb, and shorter branches appeared. Only moments later, the tree began to fall to pieces, seemingly throwing parts of itself onto the ground. Rupert stood, immobile and staring, wondering whether running would help. But before he could get out more than a squeak, the tree fell apart completely and the branches on the ground stood and shook themselves, some yawning as though after a long nap.

“They weren’t trees,” said Aden, her mouth dry with fear and clutching tightly at Taw’s coat. “They’re giants.”

It was not possible for Rabbit’s mouth to fall any further open, and she stood, mesmerized, her eyes locked on the band of two dozen or more giants now approaching them. And so it was that she almost missed the lithe, graceful figure dressed all in white in the center of the gigantic group. A very young woman - perhaps only a girl - with long, golden hair, and a yellow sash around her waist, walked towards them and ultimately stopped, directly in front of Jasper.

“We are the geonauts. Why do you seek us?”

Flanking the young lady on either side were the giants, previously intertwined and standing, apparently, on each other’s shoulders. Now that they had separated into their individual members, Rabbit could see that their limbs were covered in moss and dirt, and they were dressed in tunics, which most closely resembled bark. When all were twisted together and on each other’s shoulders, they looked so much like an enormous tree that it was impossible to tell the difference. The giants who had balanced at the very top, their arms outstretched and their hands sunk into the soil above, were most swarthy of all, still dripping

dirt and ripe with the smell of rich, black earth. Viff, confused by the noise, stuck his head out briefly from the front of Rabbit's tunic, gave a horrified squeak, and burrowed back into Rabbit's chest as quickly as he could manage. He wasn't there long, however, before the dust and debris got the better of him, and he began to sneeze. Trying hard to suppress the sound, his sneezes turned into a small series of burps which, at any other time, would have been adorable. "Coward!" said Agnora, disgusted, then squealed and retreated to Jasper's ear when one of the giants looked in her direction.

The ground shuddered as the giants walked towards them. Coming to a halt only a few feet away, it became apparent that the girl in the robes was very beautiful, and she was smiling.

"You're a priestess, aren't you?" said Jasper.

"I am," she answered calmly, and smiled again. "The geonauts represent the union of giant and priestess. We of the Soeillestial priesthood are born above ground, but come here to grow and to serve the land of Prism. We bond with the giants of Phantism, and together we form the conduit between the pure joy of Phantism and the land of Prism above. Prism rests on our shoulders, and it is our joy that nurtures it. It is from our fingers that the digijoidi flow, fed by the laughter of our spirits. My name is Aurire, and I know your mother."

"You know her? Have you seen her? Is she here?" asked Jasper, the questions tumbling out.

"No. She has not been here for many months, but I suspect she will not be long in coming, now that her son travels to Phantism. She speaks of you highly, Jasper," said Aurire, and Aden, Rabbit and Rupert were each glad to see that Jasper looked somewhat mollified. "She has often mentioned your ..." Aurire broke off suddenly and stood, staring at Rabbit. "My lady," she said, and bowed low.