

THE TERROR OF PRISM FADING



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Also by KE Stapylton

Books 2, 3 and 4 in the Prism Series:

The Deeper Darkness
Phantism
The Wood at World's Edge

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THE TERROR OF PRISM FADING

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For Tim, who deserves a better book than this

and

Nathaniel, the first boy ever to travel to Prism.

PROLOGUE

As she walked between the people, desperate faces appeared briefly through the mist. The fog would part for an instant, and she'd catch a glimpse of a face - sometimes someone she knew, sometimes a stranger - then they would disappear, carried away by the crowd or sinking back into the murky grayness. Hands reached out to touch her, grab her, and she reached back to them too. But always before her hands could connect with theirs, they would fade into nothingness. Always as she struggled near, they'd be sucked further away. The throng pushed and jostled around her, all calling her name and, frantic now, she reached out to them. Inevitably they'd be dragged away from her into the mist. She felt like she was wading through something thick that wouldn't let her legs move normally, and she was very cold. She heard her parents calling her, and she saw their faces briefly. But in the tide of the crowd, she couldn't stop. She strained towards them as she was forced forward by the swirling mass, but they too were carried away. Over the moans of the people she heard her mother sobbing and her father crying out her name. She tried to touch everyone, but felt no one. The harder she tried, the faster they turned to mist, fading in her hands just when she thought she had them, their faces stricken as they saw themselves turn from solid to a murky transparency.

"Why can't I help them?" she screamed and, as she did, a chilling laugh rose above the cries and groaning.

"Help them? How could YOU help them? Look at yourself!" the evil voice commanded.

She held out her hands to look, and saw they were gray to the wrists. She turned to run, but found she couldn't move and, looking down, realized her feet were transparent now and disappearing even as she tried to escape. She felt a cold breeze blow through her, carrying away what was left of her body, and with her last strength screamed,

"NO!"

– Chapter One –

SNATCHED

“IF you do not line up in pairs, YOU will be sent back to the bus! And you will STAY there until the excursion is over and it is time to LEAVE! DO I make myself CLEAR? RAISE your hand IF you are TOO STUPID to understand THIS!”

Staring fixedly at Mrs. Dunn, her chin in her hand, Rabbit was fascinated by the way she spoke. It was like her teacher chose which words to stress at random. She emphasized so many words in any one sentence that her conversation was in danger of dissolving into uninterrupted yelling. Which was pretty much the case.

“And why she bothers to tell us is beyond me anyway”, murmured a boy walking past Rabbit to the newly forming lines, “since she’s just going to....”

Even as he spoke, Mrs. Dunn’s long, thin arm snaked out towards him, grabbed him by the back of his sweater, and dragged him into an appropriate place next to another student. His point, though unfinished, was well made, as it was obvious Mrs. Dunn was a woman who left nothing to chance. Rapidly she was circling the car park, grabbing and shoving students who had tried to escape back into the queues now forming alongside the bus in which they’d arrived.

Despite the intervention of their teacher and her aides, most of the Year 7 students from Hazelbrook High School were looking optimistic. This was the long awaited trip to the Central Coast, where fresh water lakes ran alongside ocean, and most of those present were anticipating a day swimming, paddling canoes, and ultimately having the sort of lunch that would have made their parents ‘despair of the school system in this country!’ (barbequed sausages in white bread, followed by Mars Bars and sodas).

“You will stay WITH the person with whom you have been PAIRED all DAY. IF you use a canoe, you will use it with THAT person and ONLY that person. If you go SWIMMING you WILL do so with that PERSON also! You will NOT let that person out of your SIGHT. Is

this CLEAR?”

This announcement was met with general groans, though not as many as might have been expected. Few present doubted their ability to work around this particular rule. Friends were looking for each other up and down the lines, and some were already pointing and mouthing things like “I’ll meet you over *there*”, while others were whispering to their assigned partner and making arrangements to separate. Most looked hopeful. Rabbit did not.

She looked at her partner – Rupert Everinham – and sighed. Unfortunately, Rupert was about as popular as she was, meaning not at all, and neither had any option to staying together other than spending the day alone. Between them, they had no other friends, and people were already snickering as they walked past and saw the unfortunate pairing of the year’s two least popular students. Rabbit might have preferred the day alone, but Rupert’s first words dispelled this thought.

“Look, I know I’m not your first choice. And you must know you’re not mine either. But we need two to get a canoe, and I want to look around and paddle over to the other side of the lake, and anything’s better than spending the day in the bus, so – how about it?” Rabbit might not have been popular, in fact this was an understatement, but she knew that her answer to this question had to rest on one thing and one thing alone.

“Did you bring a swimsuit Rupert?” Rupert immediately saw the point of this question, and held up a pair of quite acceptable black board shorts.

“OK, now you”, he said. Rabbit showed him a plain, somewhat old, red one piece. He considered this then nodded.

“OK. Borderline, but OK.”

Without speaking, they separated, went to their respective change rooms attached to the toilets in the park, and met back where they’d started a few minutes later.

“So, now what?” asked Rabbit.

“Well,” said Rupert, “if we want to get away from this lot,” he nodded towards their classmates, “we’d better get a canoe quick smart. There’s not enough to go round, and they’re going to go fast.”

As the words were leaving his mouth, Rupert turned and was already jogging towards the lake and the man handing out canoes to a clamoring line of students. Rabbit raced after him, and had caught him

before he got to the lake. Arriving together, they joined the line, moving forward till it was their turn for a boat.

“Well, you two are lucky! This is the last one!” The man in charge of the canoes had turned around, reaching behind him to get their canoe, when a familiar and hated voice broke over the noise.

“I don’t think you’ll be needing that. In fact, I think the two of you are about to change your mind about canoeing altogether, don’t you?”

Inwardly, Rabbit groaned, and she felt Rupert tense next to her. Michael Masters was standing beside them, his group of followers with him. A tall, athletic, good looking boy of thirteen years, Michael Masters was the year bully. His bullying was of a specific kind, and Rabbit remembered over-hearing Rupert once say, “It’s not as if he’s a hitter. If he just hit you, it wouldn’t be so bad. It’s just that he makes your life such a misery, you end up hating yourself for not being able to do anything about it.” Unfortunately, as well as being good looking and good at sport, Michael Masters was also rather bright, meaning that he was somewhat of a teacher’s favorite. Meaning that he never got into trouble. Meaning that he was never caught. Looking at him now, Rabbit felt her hopes for the day going up in smoke.

But help sometimes comes from unexpected sources, and the man handing out the canoes was obviously smarter than their teachers. Sizing up the group of threatening looking students, then glancing back at Rabbit and Rupert, he said, “You two want to go canoeing?” Rabbit and Rupert nodded. “Then I believe this is yours. And you,” he said looking at Michael Masters “can give me a hand organizing the boat shed. Shouldn’t take long – maybe thirty minutes or so. That ok with you, Mrs. Dunn?” This last comment was directed over the children’s heads to the teacher now engaged in trying to organize children who obviously didn’t want it.

“What? Oh, yes, of course,” said Mrs. Dunn distractedly, and resumed her general yelling at anyone who would listen.

“Ok you two, get going,” the boat master said to Rabbit and Rupert with a smile. “And you come with me,” he said to Masters and the kids standing closest to him. As they walked away, Rabbit could feel Michael Masters and his friends shooting looks like daggers through her back. Part of her was scared, knowing that she and Rupert would pay for this reprieve. But another part of her.... She looked sideways at Rupert and saw him grinning widely, and her face split into a smile and

they started to laugh, jogging towards the water with their canoe.

“Right. Where do you want to go?”

Rupert held his hand up to shade his eyes, and squinted out across the water to the far shore of the lake. “I’m thinking about as far away as we can get. How about over there,” he pointed, “and maybe we can get out and have a look around those trees.” They splashed their bright yellow canoe into the water, pushed out confidently and started paddling. They both took one deep stroke on the same side – and immediately fell out. “Ugh!” said Rabbit, standing up and flicking her long mousy colored hair out of her eyes.

“Come on”, said Rupert. “Let’s give it another try.”

They climbed back in and started again, more gingerly this time. But something was clearly wrong, and the boat started to wobble. They took a few firmer, more desperate strokes, till the canoe started to rock wildly, and ended by tossing them back out into the shallows. Two more attempts ended the same way.

“Boy, Rupert, this is fun!” said Rabbit sarcastically.

“Rabbit – you’re sitting in the back – tell me what you’re doing. Are you taking your strokes on the same side I am?” Rabbit nodded. “Well, you’re not s’posed to! You’re meant to take them on the opposite side to me, so it balances us out! Gees – women!” Rabbit flushed with anger at this, and went to snap a retort. But Rupert, quickly seeing his mistake, shoved the paddle into her hands and jumped back into the canoe. “Come on! Try it again.”

This time was much more successful, and slowly they glided out onto the water, away from the shore. They moved timidly at first, and Rabbit watched her paddle with every stroke. But as they took more and more strokes and remained upright, they gained confidence and were soon paddling – more or less smoothly – out across the water. The sun was glittering off the lake, the sky was a deep clear blue, and the teasing and bullying of their classmates seemed a long way behind.

One thing they learnt quickly, however, was that paddling is hard work, and they hadn’t gone very far before their arms and shoulders started to ache. “Can we just sit and drift for a minute, Rupert? We’re in an enclosed lake – it’s not like we’re going to go anywhere, and there’s no current.” Rabbit sat, dangling her hand in the cold water, looking aimlessly into the depths. Somewhere down deep, something flickered. She sat up a little and looked more closely. There! She saw it

again.

“Rupert, did you see that?” she asked.

“No. But I can see that,” he responded, and pointed back to where they’d started. The breeze must have been blowing them towards the shore, or perhaps the canoe had a mind of its own. But not more than a hundred yards away, Rabbit made out the shapes of Michael Masters and his two biggest, meanest friends, Piggy Sommers and Andy Stackhouse, swimming fast and bearing down on them with every stroke.

“Quick! Paddle!”

Somewhere out of the corner of her eye, Rabbit saw the glittering in the water again, and was vaguely aware that it seemed to be getting either closer or bigger - maybe both. But escape was the main thing on her mind, and she grabbed her paddle and started thrusting it into the water.

“Put your back into it!” yelled Rupert. But, whether the canoe indeed had developed a will of its own, or whether fear had removed whatever little skill they’d had, every stroke they took seemed to spin Rupert and Rabbit into ever tightening circles. “Not this way – THAT way!” bellowed Rupert. But Rabbit seemed unable to balance his strokes and, inevitably, the boat started to wobble.

BANG!

Something hit the side of the canoe, and hit it hard. Somewhere in the back of her mind Rabbit thought, “They can’t have caught us yet – still too far away...” Another crash sent them reeling, and they both dropped their paddles into the water and gripped the sides of the canoe as it began to flip sharply from side to side.

“Can you swim?” yelled Rupert.

“A little. But I don’t...”

Another loud crunch on the side of the canoe, and Rabbit’s mouth was suddenly filled with water as she hit the lake. Somewhere she was dimly aware that Rupert was sinking next to her, thrashing about, trying to get to the surface. But just as she should have been bobbing up for air, something close beneath her feet twinkled again and she felt her ankles grabbed and pulled down with tremendous force. Instead of floating upwards, she was whooshing down, down, down. Something smacked the side of her head, and she glanced over to see Rupert, flailing with both arms, trying to break free of whatever it was that

clearly had his legs also. “This is crazy,” thought Rabbit, as she was dragged deeper and deeper. Finally, when she felt like her lungs were bursting and she could no longer hold her breath, she gave up to the inevitable and opened her mouth. Water rushed in, and she thought to herself, “Never thought I’d be drowning when I got up today.” The world above her went dark, the water closed in, and everything went black.

– Chapter Two –

A FADING LAND

A gentle breeze ruffled the curtains as it blew through the window. Apart from this soft fluttering, all was quiet in the large, stone floored room, the only other movement coming from somewhere in the middle of a large, canopied bed sitting in the center of what was an enormous bedroom. Underneath a tangle of silk throws and woolen blankets, a small girl lay sleeping soundly, her chest rising and falling rhythmically, indicating that she was deeply asleep. Through the window shone the pale, golden light of a clear, early morning. Silently, across from the bed, the door to the room opened and a gigantic, dark form appeared in the doorway. It moved smoothly into the room, a strange collection of clicking footsteps sounding as it approached. A huge head bent down towards the little girl, their faces drawing closer and closer together till they were touching.

Out of the depths of sleep, Aden stirred without opening her eyes. Slowly she smiled, and her arms reached up and encircled the thick, sinewy neck of the beast above her, nuzzling her face in deep.

“Hallo Taw,” said a muffled, just-woken-up voice.

“Good morning, princess,” said a deep, throaty voice. “How did you sleep?” The voice came from the mouth of an enormous golden-red bull with a gleaming coat and muscles that rippled beneath tightly stretched skin.

Giving one last, tight hug, Princess Aden Justice slid back in the bed and sat up. When her long, dark hair had been pushed out of her face, it revealed a beautiful looking girl of thirteen years. She had an expressive face with huge dark eyes, a ruby red mouth, and clear, white skin. While the whole effect of Aden’s face was captivating, what immediately drew people’s attention was the image of a diamond, or crystal, apparently tattooed low on her forehead, between her eyebrows. This was framed by the thick, wavy hair that fell to her waist. “I had that nightmare again,” she said. “I saw the people again, and they were fading and screaming and I couldn’t help them.” Her

beautiful face held a deeply troubled look.

“Aden, you’re young. Some would say a child.” Taw ignored the look that came from Aden at that comment. “You might be the princess, but you’re not an adult yet. Nobody expects you to save the entire country at your age - or at any age, for that matter!”

“I don’t care, Taw. They’ll be my people one day, if Prism is still even here by then! And I know my parents are the king and queen, but it seems to me they’re already doing all they can do, and so far it’s achieved nothing! I can’t just sit here waiting till I’m older and the whole land has been devoured!”

Seeing Aden’s troubled face, Taw smiled and said gently “I know, dearest. I know. But everyone is doing all that can be done. Your parents have sent out mission after mission, and the centaurs have gazed at the stars and tried to see into the future till they’re cross-eyed!” Aden smiled a little at this picture of Prism’s wisest, noblest creatures, but said nothing. “Ships have sailed to the farthest corners of the oceans. Men and noble creatures have gone on horrible, difficult, dangerous quests, and nobody has had sight of even one of the quadrants, much less the entire Crystal. But don’t lose heart, Aden,” said Taw quickly, seeing the discouraged look on Aden’s face. “Something will happen. Something will come of it. Help will come....”

Just then there was a rapid thudding on the door, and it was flung open. Rushing in without waiting to be invited came a blond haired boy with freckles and a face red from running, panting from lack of breath.

“Aden! Taw! You’ve got to come and see this! Kids – down on the beach – boy and girl – thrown up in the waves...” Suddenly he broke off and looked at Aden sharply, as though noticing her for the first time. “Man, you look awful first thing in the morning, Aden! Anyway, get up quick! There’s something strange about them – you have to come look.”

Taw knew better than to ask Jasper Arrowsmith to wait outside while the princess dressed. Thrown together since babies, this pair had the easy-going behavior of brother and sister, and neither saw anything unusual about bursting in on each other’s privacy. Even as Jasper was finishing speaking, Aden was up and throwing on trousers and a fine linen shirt. She pulled on her boots, quickly twisted her hair up on her

head, and headed for the door.

Jasper was ahead of her all the way, urging her to catch up. “Come on! They’re down on the beach. They were thrown up out of the waves only a few minutes before I came to get you. They’re strange – not dressed like us – and they sound kind of funny too – and they must have been bumped on the head because they keep saying the weirdest stuff – come ON!” There was something urgent in Jasper’s voice that made Aden quicken her pace until they were both running flat out down the corridors of the castle and heading to the back of the palace. They passed guards standing at attention with almost every step, but if the guards saw anything strange about the princess of the land pelting helter skelter through the grandest palace in all of Prism, they didn’t show it by a look or the flickering of an eye. Both Aden and her parents were much loved in their land, and the palace guards had seen Aden grow up from a baby into a beautiful, passionate girl whose love for Prism and all its people was surpassed by nobody. Aden and Jasper raced through the palace grounds, Taw at Aden’s side, passing quickly across lawns and between huge, old flowering trees, until they reached that part of the palace that sat on a cliff top overlooking the ocean. The view from the palace grounds was spectacular. Built on a promontory, the royal palace of Prism had the effect of being situated on the peak of a triangle. This meant that the palace had views out over water to the west, south and east, and small islands, some uninhabited, could be seen dotting out towards the horizon.

Cut into the cliff was a steep, stone set of steps that ran all the way down the face of the cliff to the beaches that ran backwards down both sides of the promontory. It said a lot about Prism, and the relationship between people and ruler, that these beaches were open to the general public. Although sentries stood guard both at the top and bottom of the imposing staircase, people were free to use the beach as they so chose. However, since the beach was mainly covered with pebbles and had only a small sandy area, it was rarely used for swimming and sunbathing, and as it had no access to the working boat docks, it was seldom used by fisherman. Consequently, its main use was by children, brought there by their parents to collect shells, or by fishermen blown off course.

So it was no surprise to Aden that most of the group surrounding what looked to be a wet pile of tangled clothing were actually her own

guards. A few interested bystanders of varying ages completed a clamoring group of about twenty people. As she approached, Aden heard a firm voice say “Now back away from them, folks! They’ve obviously had some kind of ordeal, and clearly they don’t know where they are. Back off and give them some space! Ahhhhh, Your Highness!”

Crouched in the center of the group, holding up the head of a young girl wrapped in a blanket who looked to have fainted, was a stocky looking soldier with a kind face and a nose that had obviously been broken more than once. The gold markings on his shoulders indicated he was a soldier of some considerable rank, while the scars on his legs and arms spoke of many battles. It was he who now addressed Aden.

“They washed up here about fifteen minutes ago, Princess, obviously knocked out of a boat somewhere. But I can’t get a sensible word out of them, and there’s no sign of the boat. And this young lady,” indicating the girl in his arms, “keeps fainting!”

As the soldier spoke, the girl in his arms stirred and moaned. Aden looked at the soaked boy sitting on the beach next to her and said, “Are you alright? Where’s your boat? What’s your name?” The boy was looking around with a bemused expression, seemingly unaware of the seaweed hanging out of his hair and down one side of his nose. At Aden’s words he swung his head round to face her and looked at her in a dazed kind of way.

“My name’s Rupert. And I think I’m dreaming. Either that or I’m dead. But I don’t *think* I’m dead, because nobody ever said anything about it being wet!”

“See what I mean?” Jasper whispered.

Aden ignored this interruption. “Well, you’re definitely not dead, because I’m talking to you. Where are you from, Rupert?”

“I’m from – we’re both from – Hazelbrook High School. We were on an excursion to the lakes and something hit our boat and we capsized and ended up here. I don’t know how. Is she,” he nodded towards Rabbit, “going to be alright?”

“Yes, I think she’s fine,” the soldier nodded. “She’s just had a bit of a shock and a bump on the head, but she seems to be awake now. How do you feel, little lady?”

Rabbit’s eyes fluttered open and she looked around. She saw the man holding her in his arms, saw the soldiers surrounding her, saw Aden

and Jasper. Then a voice said, “I think we need to take them back to the castle, Aden.” At these words, Rabbit looked over her shoulder to find the deep voice which had spoken behind her. At that, she came face to face with the enormous head of a bull.

“Did he....? Was that him who....?” Her eyes rolled back in her head again and she was out cold.

“Man! She’s not much use, is she?” said Jasper.

Aden scowled at him and addressed the soldier who was in fact the captain of the palace guard. “Conor, whatever happened, there’s clearly been some kind of boating accident, and we need to take them up to the palace immediately so we can give them something hot to drink and find them some dry clothes. Then we need to work out where they came from.”

“Yes, Your Highness. Can you walk, lad?” he said to Rupert.

“Yes, I think so.”

“OK. I’ll carry your friend.” Feeling utterly baffled, Rupert walked behind Aden and the soldier she called Conor, and was in turn followed by two of the palace guards. Next to him walked a boy with a mischievous face and an open, lop-sided grin. “I’m Jasper,” he said. “You’re not from round here, are you?” Rupert shook his head. “Aha! I knew it! You’ve come over from Jereboth, haven’t you! No? Calonica? No?? Hmmmm. Well, they farm hazelnuts on Calonica, and I thought you said...” He broke off when he saw Rupert shaking his head.

“I don’t *think* I’m from anywhere round here,” Rupert said.

“You don’t think you are? Well, then where on earth...”

Before he could finish his question Aden cut him off. “Leave him be, Jas. We’ll find out all about them when they’ve rested a bit. They look exhausted.” Rupert nodded at this, and Rabbit was stirring uncomfortably in Conor’s arms and moaning softly. Jasper bit his lip then, and was silent.

The four children, three soldiers, and the bull climbed the stairs back to the palace grounds. When they reached the top Rupert looked round and his jaw dropped open. They had arrived at what seemed to be an enormous private park. Gigantic, ancient trees were set in perfectly groomed sloping lawns, and here and there ponds and fountains glittered in the sunlight, spouts occasionally shooting out of the mouths of gargoyles and other strange beasts Rupert didn’t recognize. Banks of flowers, some of which he knew and some which were unlike anything

he'd seen before, bloomed in huge garden beds edged with ancient looking stone, and everywhere birds and butterflies flitted from plant to tree and back again. Across the lawns strolled the occasional peacock, and squirrels and chipmunks were busy collecting acorns, building nests, or simply chasing each other round and round. Set amongst groupings of trees, Rupert saw heavy looking seats of stone and more than one statue. It was clearly a garden meant to be enjoyed. And there was something else about it too, something Rupert couldn't quite put his finger on. Something different from what he was used to. Something better. He couldn't figure it out, though, and there was so much else to see. Right at the point of the grounds, overlooking the ocean and open to the sky, was a large pergola made from twisted columns that seemed to be inscribed with markings Rupert couldn't make out, and draped with flowers. He was about to ask what it was when a voice interrupted him.

"Good morning, Princess Aden Justice." Scurrying past them was a large beautiful peacock. "Good morning, Beaufeather," replied Aden, seemingly to the peacock, while continuing to stride towards the palace. Rupert looked at Jasper in a confused kind of way. "Palace messenger, very trustworthy. MUCH more reliable than the viffles," replied Jasper, as though this explained everything.

But even the problem of talking peacocks who seemed to have day jobs was wiped from his mind when, set at some distance, Rupert saw the most beautiful palace he had ever imagined. Rupert had been sent to Europe over the Christmas holidays to visit some of his relatives in England (an experience he preferred to forget), but none of the castles or old houses he'd seen there prepared him for the castle he was looking at now. It was low, but rambling, and seemed to be constructed in a series of interconnecting diamond shapes, some overlapping and some set point to point. Although built from stone, there were huge walls of glass, some running the entire height of the three storey building. And everywhere he could see glass, Rupert could see color. Stained glass was everywhere. "This must be spectacular from inside," thought Rupert. Around the parapet that surrounded the roof was a series of flags, repeated over and over again round the entire perimeter; one pale yellow with a golden sun in the center, one white with a series of curved blue lines, another white one, this time with four green leaves – one in each corner, and one blood red with a golden crown set

in the middle. A fifth, much larger flag, completed the series. It was in the shape of a square set on an angle, and divided into quarters, each quarter forming a diamond, each diamond a different color; red, yellow, blue and green. But all of this was nothing to the roof of the palace's central building. This roof was shaped like an enormous pyramid – but not *just* a pyramid. This one was made from what looked like crystals, and as the sun rose and hit the roof, so the roof in turn shot out millions upon millions of colorful tiny rainbows – spectrums – each seeming to dance in the air or reflect off the ground. Rupert was dazzled and he looked at Aden and said the first thing that came into his head....

“You live here?”

Jasper let out a burst of laughter and said, “You *really* aren't from here, are you? Welcome to Chalice!”

While all this had been going on, Rabbit had slowly been coming to her senses. As they reached what appeared to be the back entrance to the palace, she said to Conor in a quiet voice, “I think I'm ok now. You can put me down.”

As they entered the palace, Taw said “Aden, I'm supposed to be at a council meeting this morning, dearest, and it's very important. Do you mind if I leave you for a while?” Aden shook her head. “I suggest you take them to the private kitchen for something to eat – I think some food might help the situation. I'll be back this afternoon.” With that, Taw turned and trotted away down one corridor, leaving the children and the guards together.

“Conor, I think we're ok from here,” Aden said. “Thank you for your help, I'll call you if I need anything.” Conor and his men saluted the young girl and turned and left the palace again.

“Come on, I'll take you to the private wing. There's a kitchen there,” said Aden, and proceeded to lead Rupert, Rabbit and Jasper down a baffling series of corridors, up and down staircases, across open areas, till at last they reached a part of the palace without guards. Aden threw open a heavyset door, and the children found themselves in a huge kitchen. Jasper, who had obviously been here before, headed straight to another door which, when opened, revealed what looked like a walk-in freezer. Cold air poured out and swirled round his feet like mist. “I think...hmmm...one of my special sandwiches...”

Aden rolled her eyes but said nothing, and sat at the big table in the

center of the kitchen, motioning Rabbit and Rupert to do likewise. “So,” she said, “where are you from and who are you?”

Rupert’s head had cleared more than Rabbit’s, and he now took the lead. “Princess, I don’t think we’re from here. In fact, I have a feeling we’re not from your world at all. We’re from a country called Australia, and we go to school there, which is why we were together, and we were on a school excursion – you know – a day off where the teachers take the students out for a day to show us things we’re supposed to be learning about. Mainly they’re just a bit of a bludge – you know – not real work. We’ve been studying lakes and waterways in geography, and we went to a place called the Central Coast and we were out on the lake paddling a canoe when something hit us and we fell out. But instead of floating to the top of the water, something grabbed us and pulled us down, and the next thing we knew, we were on your beach and talking to your guards. My name’s Rupert Everinham,” Rupert gave Jasper a tired look when he choked back a laugh, “and this is one of my classmates, Rabbit. I don’t know how we got here and, more to the point, I don’t know WHY. Do you?”

Aden and Jasper exchanged looks Rupert couldn’t understand, then Aden answered in a guarded way. “I’m not sure, Rupert. And please, call me Aden.” Rupert nodded, saying nothing, and Rabbit stared intently at Aden, sensing there was a lot more to come.

“You know nothing about Prism, do you?” Rabbit and Rupert shook their heads and Aden sighed. Jasper said “Unbelievable!” his head still in the kitchen cupboards fishing for food, but was otherwise silent. “Ok. Well, this is Prism – you’re in it – the land of Prism. And this is the land of my family – of Jasper’s family too. And currently you’re sitting in Chalice, the royal castle of Prism, home to centuries of monarchs. The current rulers of Prism, King Rohannan and Queen Ardentia are my parents...”

“They’re a wonderful king and queen,” Jasper broke in. “Everybody loves them, and everyone says Prism has never had better rulers. Nobody thinks what’s happening is their fault and everyone in Prism knows full well they’ve done everything humanly possible to try to fix it.”

“Um...what IS happening?” said Rabbit. She’d already noticed that, as Aden spoke, she spoke almost entirely to Rupert, blocking her out of the conversation, and Rabbit was not pleased. She had a pretty low

opinion of very beautiful, popular girls who came from rich families and ignored other girls who, through no fault of their own, were not as beautiful or popular and couldn't help the fact that they had no family to speak of! And in Rabbit's opinion, the fact that she didn't have flashing dark eyes, or hair the color of midnight that fell to her waist should *not* be held against her. Consequently, her tone was not perhaps as friendly as it could have been.

Aden looked at Rabbit for a few seconds, saying nothing, then resumed her story. "Well, the heart of Prism is the Crystal." (Blank stares from Rabbit and Rupert.) "You really don't know anything, do you? Ok, I need to start a lot further back. Get comfortable, and Jas – hurry up with those sandwiches and take a seat so I can do this uninterrupted or you'll have to do without." At that, four huge sandwiches were slapped down on the table by Jasper, who was looking pretty pleased with himself, and four equally enormous mugs of milk followed them.

"Right – the Crystal. This is the history of the Crystal as I was taught it, and I was made to memorize this almost as soon as I could talk. And to be honest, I don't understand all of it. But here we go..."

"Legend has it that when Prism was first formed, the Creator of Prism also made four crystals, one yellow, one red, one blue and one green. The four crystals fit together, and make one large crystal, THE Crystal, and it's the Crystal that's the heart of Prism. The yellow crystal was formed from a combination of fire taken from the newly formed sun and from pure light, and in Prism the yellow crystal represents all joy and happiness. And everything yellow gets its power from this crystal. The blue crystal was formed from condensed water from the Ceruleus waterfalls in the far north and the Azure Sea, and it represents – or generates, if you like – love in Prism. And it makes everything that's blue...well...blue! The green crystal was made from the forests that legend has it were planted from the Creator's own garden, and this crystal maintains wisdom and peace in Prism. And..."

"Let me guess," interrupted Rabbit dryly. "It makes everything green, green..."

"Right!" said Aden, who had failed to notice Rabbit's sarcasm. "And the red crystal was made from the blood of the first ever king of Prism, and it's responsible for maintaining passion and courage in the land, the same as came from the heart of the first king. And everything red in

Prism comes from the red crystal.”

“So they’re like a symbol,” said Rupert.

“Nooooo! Not just a symbol! Much more than that. They maintain the hearts of the people in Prism as well as all the color in the land. Don’t you see?”

When he was growing up, Rupert had read some Greek and Roman myths and legends and had heard concepts like this before, so he had some idea what Aden was talking about. But Rabbit just looked totally blank. “What do you mean they ‘maintain their hearts’? How do crystals do that? And what’s color got to do with it? Where we come from, there’s no such thing as magic crystals. This sounds dumb to me.”

“How dare you!” said Aden leaping up quickly, and Jasper too had flushed with anger and closed his mouth hard. “This is our home you’re talking about! And our history! And I know I’m not doing a good job explaining it, but…”

Luckily at that moment there was a knock on the door and it swung open. Standing in the open doorway was an extremely old man with a white beard to his waist and long hair that fell down his back. He was dressed in all white robes, held together with a sash of red, blue, yellow and green tied round his waist. Rabbit noticed he wore no shoes. He smiled as he noticed Rabbit staring at his feet and said “The privilege of an old man, my dear. And the floors here are smooth and cool. Good morning, Aden Justice, Jasper. You seem engaged in some debate.”

“Debate now, but it was going to be a full on punch up pretty soon,” muttered Jasper, who had come to his feet.

“Good morning, Origen,” said Aden, and Rabbit noticed that her voice had taken on a respectful tone.

“And are you going to introduce me to your friends?” said Origen. Aden gave Rabbit a look that said she was anything but a friend, then responded. “Origen, this is Rupert Everinham and his friend Rabbit. Rupert, Rabbit, this is Origen, my tutor, and my parent’s tutor. And their parent’s tutor too.”

Origen laughed at the looks on the children’s faces. “Yes, a very old man,” he said, seeming to read their thoughts. “Hallo Rupert. And hallo Rabbit – might I say I’ve always been particularly fond of rabbits?” Origen smiled warmly, and Rabbit felt herself responding in the same way. Origen’s eyes crinkled in a way that was difficult to

resist, and his mouth twitched so that it made Rabbit want to laugh for no reason she could think of. “Your discussion,” Origon went on, “was rather – ahem! – enthusiastic, and I heard you talking about the Crystal.”

“I’m trying to explain the legend, Origon,” said Aden, and Rabbit noticed a brief frown crossed Origon’s face when Aden said ‘legend’. “And I’m not doing a very good job of it. You wouldn’t be able to help me, would you? Do you have time?”

“My dear, what is more important than the heart of our land?” And with that Origon pulled up a chair and began.

“I can’t say ‘many years ago’, because this started before time was created, but suffice to say before this world began, there existed somewhere in the cosmos a group of beings. We would perhaps call them gods, for they existed as pure light in the heavens and they were powerful beyond our imagining.”

“Were they stars?” asked Rabbit, interrupting. Aden frowned, but Origon smiled.

“No, Rabbit, they weren’t stars. They were beings made of pure energy and light, but they had souls also. Perhaps our feeble eyes would have been unable to see them, and our brains too dim to comprehend them. Certainly their beauty surpassed what we see and understand, because they were pure, flawless. Pure energy, pure light, and they were known as the Alellii. And by nature the Alellii were creative and good, and they worked hard to reproduce themselves throughout the cosmos, and to maintain the universe as beautiful and full of light. There was nowhere in the cosmos where they could not go, and no place that they could not touch with beauty and color. These beings had four main peoples, firstly the Soeillestia, who existed as yellow. These beings generated the color yellow throughout the universe, and along with it all joy and happiness. This was the nature and the purpose of the Soeillestia, and they were a joyous, laughing people, and the touch of their hand in any world was treasured and sought. They made suns in all the solar systems and controlled the hot seasons, keeping them in balance, and in all the worlds where plants grew they placed daffodils, and primroses, wattle, and beautiful gems like topaz and the precious metal, gold. And all things yellow flowed out of their being, and with it joy and laughter. And the Soeillestia were much loved. And wherever people saw yellow, they smiled, and

knew that the Soeillestia were at work.”

“The next people were the Azurim, and they were pure blue. They were treasured, you might say worshipped, to the same extent the Soeillestia were, because from the Azurim came water – lakes, oceans and rivers – and flowers like plumbago and periwinkle and iris – and precious gems like sapphires and stones like turquoise. And the Azurim controlled the cold, rainy seasons, and the snows, keeping them in balance, and in their right place in nature. And the heart of the Azurim was love. And wherever the Azurim went, there was kindness and compassion and the ending of wars and hatred. And so friendship and allegiances were maintained across the universe, and husbands and wives loved each other, and families were close and harmonious because of the work of the Azurim. And the Azurim worked hard to spread blue throughout the universe and to maintain love for all people.”

“The third people of the Alellii were the Verde, and their nature was wisdom and peace, and they were the color green. Wherever the Verde went they brought lushness, order, growth, and all trees and plants sprang from their being and all of creation existed in peace and prosperity. And the seasons of new growth belonged to the Verde. Rulers governed their lands wisely because of their touch, and judges made right decisions, and conflicts ended whenever worlds were touched by their hand.”

“And finally the Sangari, who were the color red, and whose nature was courage and passion. They brought the turning of the colors of nature when the weather begins to cool after the hot season, and they worked with the Soeillestia, the Azurim and the Verde to maintain the seasons and protect nature. And they brought the rose, and the poppy, and the gemstone, ruby. But most importantly of all, from them sprang the blood that runs through the hearts of men, giving them courage, and strength, and a passion for all that is good, and the willingness to stand against all that is evil. And red is the color of their work and their being.”

“And so the Alellii worked in harmony, forming all the colors of the world and maintaining all nature. And from their being flowed joy and love, peace and wisdom, passion and courage. And all that was good and colorful in the universe sprang from the Alellii and was protected by their ongoing work.”

Rabbit had had a difficult day. Sitting now with her elbow on the table and her head propped up on her hand, she struggled to stay awake. Origon's voice was so soothing, and the story he was telling seemed nothing but peaceful and pleasant. She sneaked a look at Rupert and Aden and wondered if they'd notice if she nodded off. Consequently, she almost missed the note of tension that crept into Origon's voice as he continued to speak.

"But one day one of the Alellii returned from his passage across the cosmos with disturbing news," continued Origon, very grave now. "On the edge of the universe he had seen a great spreading shape, and its nature was Nothingness. And Nothingness was spreading across the universe, consuming all that it touched - color and creation and all the work of the Alellii. And the Alellii fought the Nothingness, and worked harder and harder to protect the cosmos. But slowly all creation began to fade. And the peoples of all the worlds were less happy, and wars and conflicts began to break out. And the seasons began to change, and run together, and nature was no longer as healthy as it had been before. And still the Alellii fought to preserve what they had created."

"But there came a time when the Alellii knew they could no longer hold back the Nothingness, and they held a meeting of the great High Council. And after hearing all the suggestions and concerns of the Council, Illusta of the Verde spoke and said:

"Members of the High Council and people of the Alellii, although we are powerful and strong of heart and pure in spirit, it is clear to me that we cannot fight the Nothingness by the means of evil. We who are pure and gentle by nature cannot become what we abhor and pick up weapons to fight. And how do we fight that which is not and has no being? Yet surely we believe that our hearts are equal to our task in this universe, which is to protect it and to share our goodness with it and to bring all creation into being through the color of ourselves. We are indeed able to stand against this foe, but we need a way that does not make us less than we are or costs us our nature and our nobility. Therefore, this is my plan. From the heart of the Alellii I will make a new world. And into this world we will pour the power and strength and essence of our beings. And I will place this new world in the center of the universe. And this new world will strengthen all that we have already created, for its very existence will stand as proof against

Nothingness. And it will be the jewel in the crown of our creation, and we will stand against this Nothingness through the purity of our creation in its most perfect form. For how shall Nothingness prevail in the face of color, and creation, and goodness of heart? And should the rest of the cosmos fall, so long as this one world stands, so there is hope for the future and our work will be preserved.”

“And all the people agreed, and so Illusta set about creating the most colorful of all the worlds. And in that world he created a people so joyous, so full of love and wisdom, and so passionate about their land, that they, more clearly than any other creation, reflected their creator Illusta, and his people the Alellii. But Illusta did not wish to leave his creation without defenses. So he decided to make for them a gift in which was concentrated all the power of the Alellii; a crystal, so powerful that it could protect his new world against any foe. So he took part of the sun from his new world, and gave it to the Soeillestia, who blessed it, and instilled it with all the power and knowledge and joy and laughter of their people, and condensed it all together into a beautiful yellow crystal. And from the waters of his new land he took salt water and fresh water, and gave it to the Azurim, who blessed it and poured all of their power and love into it, and the blueness of their nature, and all this they fused into a perfect blue crystal. And to the Verde he gave leaves from the four giant forests of his new world, and into those the Verde poured the greenness of their spirits, and their wisdom and peace loving hearts, and returned to Illusta a flawless green crystal. And to the Sangari Illusta gave one drop of blood from the palm of the king of the new world. And the Sangari blessed the king and all of his line to come, and infused into his one drop of blood all of their passion and courage, the redness of their beings, and gave back to Illusta a blood red crystal.”

“And Illusta took the four crystals, and fitted them together, and all the Alellii blessed them, and the new world to which they were to go. And Illusta gave the Crystal to his new creation to guard, and to bless them and to keep them strong. And while ever the Crystal exists in the land, the land will know all of the colors, and all the health of nature, and all the nature of the Alellii. And the land will be safe, and creation will be preserved. And the name of that land is...”

“Prism!” burst out Rabbit.

Origon smiled. “That’s right, Rabbit, Prism. This land and this

people.”

All through the story Rupert had been silent, with a look on his face that said his mind was working hard, and for the last few minutes he'd been fiddling with his own hair, pulling down his fringe and trying to look at it. “You know, since we arrived here, something has been bothering me. Something here is different to home, and I've just put my finger on what it is.” All the children and Origen looked at Rupert questioningly. “Well, it's your country – you – everything! You're...well...you're brighter! You're more colorful than we are. No, no, I don't mean that we're not as colorful as you now. Perhaps if that were the case I'd have seen it more quickly. But things here are all more colorful, and I'm more colorful since I came here. Look at yourself, Rabbit!” At this Rupert leapt up and grabbed a highly polished pan and held it up for Rabbit as a mirror. “Look at your face, your hair – look at me! We're brighter than we were. Your hair was a mousy color back home. I'm sorry – but it was! It was mousy! And mine was a dull kind of orange color. But now yours is a rich kind of brown, and mine is – well, it's different. And your eyes are bright blue, and your lips are redder. We have more *color!*”

If Rupert and Rabbit had become more colorful, as Rupert spoke Aden had grown more pale. “So it's true then...” She looked questioningly at Origen.

“Well, it's your world. Surely you believed it!” said Rabbit.

“I...I...yes of course I believed it! It's just that...I don't know, I suppose I'd always thought of it as legend, a story I've been listening to so often since I was born that I guess I'd almost stopped realizing what it said. But, Origen, if they come from a world where things are more faded than ours...” Aden stopped, unable to continue.

“That's right, Aden. If these children come from a world less colorful than ours, it means that the Nothingness is indeed spreading, and the outer worlds are fading, and time grows short.”

“But – hang on – I don't mean to sound heartless,” said Rabbit, “but didn't the Nothingness exist before your world was even created?” Aden nodded. “So doesn't that kind of mean that this Nothingness is growing really slowly, and that all of us will be long gone before anything really bad happens? Like, hundreds and thousands of years? So where's the rush? And so long as you have the Crystal, isn't everything going to be fine anyway? I mean, wasn't that the whole

point of the Alellii giving you the Crystal in the first place? To make sure you, and all the universe, didn't fade away?"

At this, Jasper broke in. "Yeah, well, we have a problem nobody's mentioned yet."

Origon, Aden and Jasper exchanged looks and Rabbit felt a sense of dread as the silence lengthened. Finally Aden said, "The Crystal's been stolen. Prism is fading."