

THE WOOD AT WORLD'S EDGE



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Also by KE Stapylton

Books 1, 2 and 3 in the Prism Series:

The Terror of Prism Fading
The Deeper Darkness
Phantism

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For Wendy and Deb – who have endured as my stars in the night sky,

and

Eddie – the original Bane;

*And with eternal thanks to Beth
– the blossom across the street –
for her unwavering enthusiasm and support.*

– Chapter One –

FRIENDS, FOES AND BAD DECISIONS

The ground was brown and dry, lying under a murky sun, slowly baking. A fly, obviously lost, buzzed past in search of food, or water, or both. Finding none, he continued on his way and the air lay hot and still on the earth that crumbled beneath it. In the distance the outline of the edges of a city were barely visible, and far above, in the sickly blue sky, arched a huge gray stain. It stretched from east to west, moving and bunching and reforming again, each rolling convulsion bringing it ever closer to the city beneath. Gray fingers of nothingness crept from the twisting ribbon of darkness towards the ground, as though an evil hand reached down from the heavens. It was all that moved in any direction, and the earth lay beneath it, dying.

Out of nowhere a breath of wind stirred the air and dust swirled, rising from the ground. Quickly the wind picked up speed, and the breeze turned rapidly into a small tornado-like funnel that lifted dirt and debris in great clouds as it spun. In seconds it had grown to the size of a house and a sudden crack of lightning would have blinded any onlooker who had been there to see it.

But as quickly as it started, it died away again, and when all the dirt and leaves and small, uprooted dead bushes had fallen to the ground, a group of four people were left standing in its wake. On either side, majestic and terrifying, were two mighty dragons, one of whom stood ruffling its wings, while the other seemed for all the world to be picking debris from its teeth.

“Good grief,” said a red-headed boy who looked to be about fifteen or sixteen years of age. “Do you ever get used to this?” He stood, brushing the dirt out of his hair with his hands, and in the end gave his head a violent shake.

“It’s easier than walking, Rupert,” said a beautiful, dark-haired girl standing next to him. She brushed the dirt from her eyes and looked around. Immediately, she frowned. “This isn’t good,” she said,

looking in the direction of the city. All four swung around then, only the dragons ignoring the direction in which Princess Aden Justice pointed. “What do you make of that, Rabbit?”

A slender girl with pale skin shielded her bright blue eyes and gazed into the distance. “Things have changed while we’ve been gone,” she said.

“And not for the better,” said the last of their group, a tall athletic looking boy with blond hair and freckles who stood next to Rabbit, surveying the parched and barren land that surrounded them. Rabbit turned to the dragon next to her.

“Thank you for your help,” she said. “Prism is, as always, indebted to the firestals of Phantism.”

The firestal left off cleaning its teeth, and turned its intent gaze towards Rabbit. “Lady,” it said courteously, “are you sure you do not wish us to transport you to the city? We are willing to offer what aid we can should you so desire it.”

“It’s a thought, you know, Rabbit,” said Jasper. “By the looks of that, they could do with our help,” and he pointed to the ugly stain that stretched across the sky.

“I don’t know, Jas,” said Rupert. “I’m not sure what we could do, though Rabbit, of course, is full of surprises these days and might have something up her sleeve.” He looked questioningly at Rabbit, who pursed her lips and shook her head. “But I think what’s more likely,” he continued, “is that we’d somehow end up getting stuck there. Or worse.”

“We can’t just abandon them!” said Aden firmly. “Our families are there – Jasper’s and mine. I don’t mean to be rude or anything, but neither of you have family in Spectra – or even in Prism. It’s far easier for you to walk away. But it’s different for Jas and I. Very different.”

“Aden,” said Rabbit quietly. “The only family I’ve ever really known lives in the heart of Prism and is probably more at risk than any other of its subjects. More will be expected of the lions of Gras Uir, and of Argent in particular, than of anyone.” Aden blushed slightly and looked abashed. “But that’s irrelevant,” said Rabbit. “Our calling – the task given to us by the centaurs and also by the Alellii – was never to fight battles or to reverse the work of Annihilo. Our job is to find the crystals or to die in the attempt. That’s our job. Believe me, I want to go running to Gras Uir the same way you want to go to Spectra

and your parents. Part of me can't help but think that Argent and I, together, might be a force to be reckoned with as the Nothingness approaches. But that's not what we've been called to do."

Aden looked at Rupert, who shrugged, then at Jasper who shook his head slightly, and sighed. "You're right. Our quest is to find the crystals."

Rabbit nodded briefly, then turned from one firestal to the other. "Thank you for the offer, but we're going to stay here," she said. "We're not really allowed to accept your help. But Phantism needs you, so please return home and let everyone there know that we're pursuing the quest, and will continue to pursue it for as long as needs be. Or until we die. One or the other. Please also tell the people there that Prism depends on Phantism for warmth and joy. All of Prism needs the underworld to burn as hot and as brightly as possible. This is Phantism's task, and it will take all the firestals' power to support the world that rests on you from above." At that, Rabbit made the sign of farewell, touching her hands to her forehead, then her heart, then stretching them out, palm down.

The firestals bowed their heads in respect. "Till you call us again, High Priestess," they said, and with a flash of lightning were gone.

"It really was the right thing to do," said Rabbit apologetically when everyone could see again after the firestals' blinding exit. "The centaurs made it pretty clear that we're not allowed to accept any more help than is absolutely necessary."

"Some might argue that it's pretty necessary right now," said Rupert wistfully. "No, no, I know – you're right. You were right to send them away. This is our job – no one else's."

"Great," said Jasper. "I'm glad we all agree on that. So...um...any thoughts on how we might do it?"

Rabbit smiled wryly. "Do we ever have a plan?" she asked.

"Nope. Never," said Jasper, and grinned.

"Well in that case, we're perfectly prepared," said Aden, and smiled briefly. But the smile passed quickly. "I didn't expect it to get so bad so fast," she said. "We've only been gone – what? A year? Less maybe? The Prism I've always known was lush and colorful. But this is...is..." Her voice died away as she searched for words.

"It's like the gray is winning," said Rupert, looking around. The landscape that surrounded them, previously green and teeming with

life, was now dead and colorless. Above them, the ill-looking sky had a drab red tint to it, and was further darkened by the ugly, gray scar that divided it from side to side. Even the air had a murky hue, casting a sickly pall over the entire land.

Without speaking, Rabbit bent and thrust her fingers into the earth, closing her eyes and concentrating hard. "It's dying," she said eventually. "It's still speaking, but it's very quiet. It's gasping for water and for clean air and it's very sick, and only just clinging to life." Rabbit stood up and stretched her back. "The color is draining out of it, and when the color goes, Prism will disappear as easily as a puff of smoke."

"The digijoidi has got to be helping though – surely?" asked Jasper.

"I'm guessing that the digijoidi and the warmth and color in Phantism are the only things holding the land together," said Rupert thoughtfully.

"That and the oceans," added Aden. "I know that Aniel is doing all he can. And Merrai won't go down without a fight."

"That's true," agreed Rabbit. "But the threat is now surrounding Prism. The more that stain spreads in the sky, the closer Annihilo comes. And it's not the land that's losing heart. It's the people. The theft of the crystal quadrants has thrown the whole land out of balance, and even though we have three back, it counts for nothing unless we have the fourth."

"It's like a chair with four legs," said Rupert thoughtfully. "If you cut the legs off a chair and put three back, that's no better than if you only put one back – or none. Anything less than four, and the thing falls over."

"Your mind works like nobody's I've ever met," said Jasper, looking at Rupert and shaking his head.

"So what do we do?" asked Aden. "We can't just sit here."

"What we do is pretty obvious," said Jasper. "There's nothing here, so we have to start walking. The question is – where?" Jasper surveyed the landscape for inspiration.

"Well, we can't go south, that's for certain," said Rupert. "We'd hit ocean almost immediately, so that's no good. And we could go a little way east, but then we'd reach coastline there, too. That leaves us with west or north."

"So we start walking and hope we stumble over the green crystal, just lying about somewhere?" Jasper sounded skeptical.

Rabbit went to answer him, but a sudden movement in the front of her tunic cut her off.

“Hallo,” she said, and pulled a tousle-headed, sleepy looking animal out from her shirt. “Nice nap?”

Viff chattered sleepily, and gave a large yawn. He looked around blearily and his eyes opened wide when he saw he was above ground for the first time in months, and in a place he didn’t recognize at all.

“You’re in Prism, Viff,” said Rabbit. “Look! There’s the city and the palace over there.”

Viff peered for a moment, but movement in the sky caught his eye, and his head jerked up as he saw the arching strand of darkness far above them. His sleepy chatter turned into angry nattering and he hissed to show his disapproval.

“Yes, well, I agree with you,” said Rupert. “But to get back to the problem...if we head west, I’m not sure where we end up. Aden?”

“My grasp on geography is useless at the best of times,” answered the princess. “But as far as I can remember, if we head west we could go on almost indefinitely. Ragulan is in that direction, so there’s every chance we could encounter the Rogues again.”

“Rather not,” said Rupert shortly, and Jasper and Rabbit nodded.

“Oh, they’re not the only people in that direction. There’s the Gorgothes – tall, strong, proud people, with jet black skin.”

“I think I saw one at the palace once,” said Jasper. “Intimidating looking bunch.”

“Yes,” continued Aden. “They’re nomadic and live in the desert and are renowned hunters.”

“Seem like the wrong sort of people to have the green crystal, wouldn’t you say?” said Rupert.

“True,” agreed Aden. “Well, if you make it through the desert you’ll hit a huge wilderness area full of bare mountains and an enormous underground cave structure. The Sitkaans live in the caves and are a barbarous people.”

“Oh good,” said Jasper, wryly.

“Beyond that, I’m not sure. The Oafas, perhaps? Large beings with two heads. I’ve never seen them, but they live in the higher mountains where there’s snow almost all year round. Then, of course, there are the Ballyhoos. They’re famous for their palaces and hospitality and gracious manners.”

“Now you’re talking,” said Rupert.

“Unfortunately, they’re also known for their ability to talk,” continued Aden. “For days. Many a person has gone into their palaces gratefully, only to emerge screaming after months and months of boring, non-stop stories. They don’t sleep, you see, so can talk without stopping, well, more or less continuously. Then there’s the Rogues, of course...”

“Then we’re going north,” said Rabbit abruptly. “We can’t risk running into all these people, or getting lost in a desert, or mountain caves, or getting stuck for months listening to somebody’s life story. And Therasse is north. I’m hoping the priestesses there might know something they can tell us about the green crystal, or at least where to start looking. North has always worked for us in the past, so that’s where we should go.”

“Rabbit,” said Rupert thoughtfully, “we’ve already found one crystal in the north. Sangcoeur is north. Do you really think Addreadon would hide two crystals in the same direction? And we need to leave the land. The centaurs said that the last crystal would be outside the land. We’d have to go a long way north before we left Prism.”

“Not just Prism. We don’t just have to leave this land,” explained Aden. “That much would be simple! The centaurs were clear. We have to look for a wood at the edge of the world. We don’t just have to leave Prism – we have to find the very edge of the world as we know it.”

“Perhaps we might just start by leaving here,” said Rupert drily. “Start with something easier, y’know? Should we head for Profunda? That’s the main road north.”

“I think so,” said Jasper. “But if armies are assembling in Spectra, they’re probably forming in Profunda as well. So maybe we should go around the city, rather than through it.”

“Has anyone got any food this time?” asked Aden. “I don’t fancy trying to steal our dinner like last time – especially without Taw to help us.”

“I’ve got water,” said Jasper, quickly moving the topic away from Aden’s lifelong friend who had been killed in battle.

“Me too,” said Rupert. “And a little bread.”

“I brought esthiop seeds,” said Rabbit, surprising her three friends.

“Really? That’s great, Rabbit!” exclaimed Rupert.

“I can’t take credit for it,” admitted Rabbit. “Furl gave them to me just before we left. I might be the next high priestess – which still seems unbelievable to me, just by the way – but I’m useless when it comes to packing a suitcase!”

“Then we have food and water,” said Rupert. “Not much left now except to get going. Packs on shoulders, folks, and off we go.”

Everyone hoisted the sacks they’d brought from Phantism onto their shoulders, and Rabbit thought how much more difficult the trip was going to be without Taw to carry the majority of the provisions. But Jasper traveled next to her, chatting from time to time and smiling warmly whenever he looked at her. Rabbit knew she was the next high priestess, and she was well aware that she was the Chosen of the king of all the animals, and that it was her calling to persevere and give her best to whatever task came her way. But mostly she wanted Jasper to be proud of her, so she kept her chin up even when the road was rocky and the straps of her pack began to chafe the skin away from her shoulders.

They walked all morning, the stain across the sky twisting and writhing throughout the day. Occasionally it shot out long talons towards Profunda, stopping just short of the town.

“What do you think it means?” asked Jasper, looking skyward.

“The centaurs said that Annihilo has come,” answered Rupert. “I’m not entirely sure what that means, but it’s got to be him doing this. And it’s also got to mean that he’s closer than he’s ever been to Prism before. Annihilo has been hunting Prism ever since it was created, but the Crystal has kept him at bay. And even since it was stolen, he’s still kept his distance. My guess is that it’s actually the return of the quadrants that has allowed him to get this close.”

“It’s the imbalance,” said Rabbit. “In an odd sort of way, when all four quadrants were off the altar, there was still a kind of balance. Returning three has made the imbalance more obvious, if anything. I have to believe that they’ve been retrieved in the right order. But even so, not having the quadrant that generates wisdom and peace in Prism is hugely dangerous. It seemed easier to cope with having no courage, or love, or even joy than to handle all out war.” There was silence for a moment, and Rabbit felt Viff’s warm body where it rested in her shirt and knew he was trembling. Even the little viffle knew the risk they were taking.

“If we live or if we die,” said Aden, breaking the silence, “we die defending Prism and all the things we hold dear. And if we have to die, there is no better reason than that.” Rabbit, Rupert and Jasper nodded in agreement, and together they continued their journey.

It was evening by the time they called a halt. That they had been able to hike almost all day was testament to how much Rupert and Rabbit had changed. Almost three years had passed since their arrival in Prism, and both of them had grown far taller than they had been the day the waves had thrown them onto the beach. Rupert, who would have been described as pudgy at best, was now strong looking and his chest had filled out considerably. Rabbit, while still slender, now moved with the grace one might expect from a girl whose family was a pride of lions. Her hair hung down her back in a rich brown curtain, and her skin was clear and pale, broken only by the crystal tattoo that had appeared mysteriously some time ago on her forehead. Jasper suggested making a small fire, but in the end it was deemed too risky, and none of them wanted to betray their position to enemy forces that might be nearby. So they huddled in the cool night air, wrapped in the blankets they'd brought, sharing their water sparingly.

Viff snuggled into the curve of Rabbit's neck and snored lustily into her ear. She didn't have the heart to move him, though, and was comforted by his presence. She found it hard to sleep and, whenever she dozed off, dreamt of griffons flying overhead or of howling wolves. She woke a number of times, and wondered if the noises had in fact been a dream, and once she could have sworn that howls were still ringing in the air. She seemed to have slept for barely minutes when Jasper's voice penetrated her dreams.

“Rabbit...Rabbit...” he whispered softly. Rabbit smiled and rolled over.

“Rabbit! Wake up!” Rupert's urgent whisper now reached into her sleep. She moaned softly, not wanting to wake, and was jerked abruptly into consciousness by Rupert's hand pushed firmly over her mouth. “Look!” he said, pointing skyward.

Low overhead was the sound of heavy beating wings. Rabbit blinked to clear her vision, and saw the enormous bodies of a dozen griffons flying towards their camp.

“Have they seen us?” she hissed quickly.

“Don't think so,” whispered Jasper in return. “They're not heading

directly for us. See?”

Rabbit nodded, watching the griffons veer slightly away from the group and head more eastward than north. By this time, Rupert had woken Aden, who sat up groggily, yawning, till Jasper told her sharply to be quiet.

“Well, that decides it then,” said Rabbit. “No way we’re going east. If those griffons aren’t flying north it can only be because their base is no longer there.”

“I don’t know that’s necessarily the case...” started Rupert doubtfully. But Rabbit cut him off.

“Rupe, we don’t know *where* we’re going! All we can do is try to stay as far away from trouble as we can and hope for the best! And we need to get going,” she added, looking towards the horizon and seeing the light streaking out from the dawn. “The priestesses at Therasse will be able to tell us something – I’m sure of it. We just need to get there.”

“In one piece,” mumbled Jasper.

All four were standing, packing their things hurriedly, when voices sounded behind them.

“Drop!” said Aden, and the four fell face down, pressing themselves against the earth as gruff voices, quiet at first, grew louder and louder. In what seemed like only seconds, the stomping of boots grew close and the four peeked out from behind the scrub that concealed them from the road a short distance away.

“Keep up! Keep up!” commanded a voice roughly. “I want to get to Profunda today – not next week! And if you lot have a hope of hot food and a warm bed tonight, you’ll lift your feet and look lively!”

A troop of twenty men strode along the road. They each wore helmets with a spike in the center, and from each spike fluttered a miniature flag. As the men drew level, Rupert, Jasper, Rabbit and Aden were able to make out the gray, square insignia of Addreadon’s house printed on each of the small flags. The four of the Quest pressed themselves deeper into the dirt and lay as still as possible, stifling their nervous breathing as best they could. But the dust from months of dry weather rose like a puff of unwanted smoke and traveled, inevitably, up Rabbit’s nose. Before she realized it was coming, she let out a sneeze, then covered her mouth immediately. Her eyes were wide and scared as the marching came to a halt.

“What was that?” snapped the captain.

“Wasn’t me,” said one disgruntled soldier.

“Me neither!” said a second soldier, and more voices were raised in agreement.

“I know it wasn’t you, idiots! Who’s in those bushes? Come out! I command you in the name of The Dreaded One, Addreadon Le Gris!”

Panicked, Jasper, Rupert, Aden and Rabbit looked from one to the other. But before they could move, a small figure leapt through the scrub in front of them, and scampered heroically to the road. Viff now stood, looking up at the captain, giggling uncertainly, and throwing in a sneeze or two for good measure.

“Oh *no*! What’s he doing?” whispered Rabbit, and went to stand up quickly.

But Rupert grabbed her hand and held her down. “Wait,” he said.

“Hmmm. Who are you, then?” asked the soldier. “Speak up! And no lies either! Was that you sneezing and scuffling about in there? Was it? *Was it?* Speak up!”

But Viff just giggled nervously and hid his face behind his paws.

“Well, you’re coming with us, whoever you are!” exclaimed the captain, and bent down, scooping Viff up, and dropping him into his backpack with one smooth movement. For an instant, Viff’s head appeared over the edge of the pack, as he struggled to jump out and escape.

“Oooh no you don’t!” exclaimed the captain, and shoved the viffle’s head back down, lacing the pack tightly. “This is one of the palace’s messengers, this is,” he said to his men. “I’ll be taking him to the commander and either he’ll get some information out of him or I’ll be having a rodent supper later tonight!” The other soldiers laughed. “Come on! Step lightly!” The small platoon of men moved off again, and Rabbit could see desperate wriggling in the pack as Viff discovered he was unable to escape.

When the air was still and silent once more, Rupert, Rabbit, Aden and Jasper sat up quickly. “We have to rescue him!” said Rabbit.

“Of course we do,” said Rupert, trying to speak calmly. “But we can’t chase them down and fight them all. We’ll have to go to Profunda and find them and take him back while the soldiers sleep.”

“But their leader said he was going to eat him tonight!” said Aden. “I’m with Rabbit on this one! I say we go get him back right away!”

“I don’t believe they’ll eat him,” said Rupert. “In fact, I don’t think there’s a single chance of that. Think it through,” he said to the three faces watching him worriedly. “If there’s even a chance that Viff can tell them anything, there’s no way they won’t take him to Addreadon, and that captain said nothing about him being in Profunda. If he was, they’d be taking Viff straight to him, but since that wasn’t even suggested, I can only assume Addreadon is elsewhere. Addreadon can travel by griffon, but he can’t travel by firestal, so he can’t show up instantaneously. Viff is safe, at least for a day or so.”

Grudgingly, the rest of the group acknowledged that this was probably true. “I want to get there as soon as I can though,” said Rabbit. “I want to be ready to snatch him as soon as it’s dark.”

“Then in that case we’d best get moving,” said Jasper, shoving the rest of his things into his pack. “It’s going to take the best part of today to get there, and we need to arrive before the gates shut.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Aden. “I hadn’t thought of the gates! How are we going to get in? After all that’s gone on, there’s no way they won’t recognize at least one of us – maybe more.”

“And more importantly,” added Jasper, “who is in charge of Profunda now? Those soldiers make me think that Profunda has probably already been taken by enemy forces. There’s no way of knowing till we get there. We’ve all been so focused on Spectra, I haven’t thought to ask about Profunda and the rest of Prism. Have any of you?” Aden, Rabbit and Rupert shook their heads.

“When we were in Phantism, all I ever thought about was getting back to the palace and my parents,” said Aden. “It never occurred to me to ask about the rest of the land. I just assumed it was safe.”

“Doesn’t look like it now,” said Rupert. “I think we’d best be ready for anything.”

“I wish we could bring back the firestals,” said Jasper. “We’d be in and out of there – literally in a flash!”

“Have we got anything we could make a ladder with? Rope? Anything?” asked Rupert, now walking alongside Jasper as they trudged behind the girls in the direction of the city.

“No rope,” answered Aden. “But at a pinch we could try slicing our packs into long strands and tying them together.” The princess sounded doubtful.

“That wall has got to be at least twenty feet, Aden,” said Jasper.

“We’d need twenty feet of rope to get up, and another twenty feet to get down the other side – unless we wanted a pretty big jump at the end. If we can’t think of anything else, though, I’m willing to try it. We have our blankets, too. But I’d rather cut up our packs. We won’t last long at night with no warmth at all.”

“I can’t slice up my blanket,” said Rabbit. “I’ve been using Elyssa’s cloak as a blanket since the Verdalis Hills. I can’t cut that up.”

“Surely she’d understand?” responded Aden. “I mean, this is a pretty unusual situation.”

Aden, Rabbit, Jasper and Rupert continued to discuss the matter as they traveled, and no better plan had been devised by the time they stopped for a rest in the middle of the day. They had reached the point where they were considering mixing some of the red colored clay from the road with part of their water supply and painting their skin to try to pass themselves off as people from a different land and had just decided that this, too, was doomed to failure when a faint noise arose from the direction they’d come.

“Hide!” cried Jasper, and all four leapt for cover, diving under bushes and hiding behind the trunks of the few, old trees that lined the road. Peering back the way they’d come, they saw two donkeys, one behind the other, and together they pulled a cart. It was driven by an elderly man and it carried an enormous load of hay.

Rupert looked at Jasper and raised his eyebrows. Jasper nodded briskly and looked at Aden and Rabbit. “It’s our best hope,” agreed Rabbit softly, and Aden nodded. They waited till the cart had drawn slightly past them, then Aden prodded Rabbit in the ribs. “You first,” she whispered.

Without hesitating, Rabbit darted out from where she hid and caught the back of the cart, climbing hastily into the hay. Aden and Rupert went next, Rupert grasping the cart and Aden clasping Rabbit’s outstretched hand. Jasper, the fastest runner of the four, went last and had to sprint a short way to catch the moving vehicle. He dove headfirst onto the top of the pile, and sat, panting, in the middle of the other three. Aden put a finger to her lips, then pointed into the hay and the others nodded their understanding. Silently they dug their way downwards until only their faces showed through the scratchy yellow grass. This proved not to be a moment too soon, as two men in uniform and on horseback trotted proudly past.

“Get along, old man!” said one rudely, and the other laughed. His horse tossed its tail and snickered in disapproval at his rider’s lack of manners, and Rupert guessed that the horse had been forced into this service against its will. It was a rare thing to see anyone ride an animal in Prism, and Rupert was shocked by the sight. Glancing over, he saw that Aden’s face was fuming, while Rabbit looked pained by the sight. Rabbit’s perception of the land and all its people had grown to such an extent that even a single horse in captivity caused her distress. He reached his hand out to her through the hay, and squeezed her shoulder encouragingly.

As the hours went by, the sun began to slide down towards the western horizon, and the cart passed more and more traffic on the road. The number of soldiers, obviously in Addreadon’s employ, made it clear that Profunda had indeed been taken by enemy forces, and Rabbit thought to herself that retrieving Viff was going to prove no easy task. Just as difficult was how they were to extricate themselves from the cart. Climbing out was sure to be more complicated than jumping in, and how to do that stealthily was a problem to which she saw no solution. The sun was just going down when they passed through the city gates, and Rabbit, Rupert, Aden and Jasper all held their breath. But Addreadon’s soldiers waved them through with only a cursory glance, and they breathed a momentary sigh of relief. But the cart continued through the city without stopping, and the four were just beginning to panic when the cart-driver softly spoke.

“I know you’re there,” he said quietly, apparently into the air before him. “And I know who you are. Profunda has been taken by Addreadon, but the city is still full of your friends. Stay out of sight, and I’ll take you somewhere you can get out without being seen.”

Rabbit paused for a moment. “Thank you,” she said softly, and the driver nodded once to show he’d heard. They trotted along a little further, around winding corners and between buildings, till the light went dim, and the four hidden passengers realized they’d entered a barn.

“You can come out now,” said the driver, and one by one Aden, Jasper, Rupert and Rabbit emerged, each pulling strands of hay out of their hair and off their clothes. “I know you, Princess,” said the man, looking at Aden and dipping his head respectfully. “I’ve been to the palace more than once and I was there when the four of you were

chosen for the Quest. And apart from anything else, you're the living embodiment of the queen."

Aden blushed slightly, pleased by the comparison with her beautiful mother. "Thank you," she said. "What's your name?"

"I'm Jordan," he answered. "I sell hay in the city. Business has been booming lately," he added ominously, and frowned. "Our city is teeming with Addreadon's men, idiots one and all, throwing their weight about, bragging and pushing people around. And the people are pushing back, taking stupid risks, in my opinion. Supposedly, we're not prisoners. Supposedly! Addreadon was here some weeks ago, going on and on about how magnanimous he was and how Profunda was still a free city, and would remain free under his rule – although what the difference is between this and being prisoners I can't for the life of me see! His troops keep a tight rein on themselves at Addreadon's orders – no doubt because Profunda is meant to be a model of what the new rule will be like. But the city is ripe for war, Princess. What every man and woman wants is to get out of here and go to Spectra and join Prism's armies. Until recently, we've been a peace-loving people. But things have changed, it seems. People in Profunda – and in Prism at large – aren't what they used to be. Foolhardy, that's what they are. Rushing into battle to a man! And no good will come of it, I can tell you. No good at all!"

"Jordan, can you help us?" asked Aden, and the man nodded. "We need to find a friend of ours. He's only small...he's a viffle, in fact. But he's helped us out more than once. He was taken by a group of soldiers when we were on our way here. We don't know who exactly has him, nor where he might be. Do you have any idea?"

"Miss, the troops are everywhere, and your friend could be with any of them. But your best bet would be to get to the town hall. Addreadon's men have overrun it and are now using it as barracks. Most of them are sleeping there at night – though I should warn you, there's over two hundred of them and more joining every day. Profunda has become Addreadon's chief outpost."

"More than two hundred?" repeated Jasper. "I'm game for anything, Rabbit, you know that I am. But two hundred? What can we possibly do that won't just get all of us killed in short order?"

"I might have an idea," said Rabbit.

Jordan was watching Rabbit carefully as she spoke. "You're the one

they're saying is the new high priestess, aren't you? The Chosen of Argent, king of all the animals?" Rabbit nodded, and for the first time a smile broke out over their new friend's face. "May the Alellii bless you, young lady!" and before she knew what was happening, Jordan had grabbed her hand and was bending low over it.

"Oh please – stop it!" she said uncomfortably. Jordan dropped her hand immediately, and looked at her, confused. "His mother was the High Priestess Naian," said Rabbit, nodding in Jasper's direction. "She was the real deal. I'm sort of the untried version. We don't really know what I'm capable of yet. I'll do my very best – I promise I will. But I wouldn't be telling people you've seen us, or getting their hopes up. I'm...I'm very new at this." Rabbit's voice trailed off awkwardly, and nobody knew what to say. Jasper reached out and took Rabbit's hand in his, squeezing it encouragingly, and Rabbit looked at him gratefully.

"Ah! So that's how it is, is it?" said Jordan, looking closely at Jasper and Rabbit as a grin spread across his weather-beaten face. "Seems to me that the Alellii and High Priestess Naian knew exactly what they were doing when they picked you, missy! I'll be careful not to get anyone's hopes up, but between you, me, and the bedpost, I think you're going to do just fine!" Jasper grinned and gave Rabbit's hand another squeeze, and Rabbit inwardly groaned, seeing the hope in Jordan's eyes.

"Thank you," she said finally. "I'll try not to let you all down."

"The sun's almost set," said Aden, peering out the barn door. "How long do we have to wait before we can try the barracks?"

"I'd leave it an hour or so," responded Jordan. "Then you might be wise to make your way there before lights out to try to see your particular soldier and find his bunk. You won't be able to do that in the dark. They won't be going to sleep for a few hours yet, but they congregate in the barracks, and if you can find a window to look through without being seen you might be able to spot him in the crowd. Did you get a good look at him? Did you hear his name?"

It was only then that Aden, Rabbit, Jasper and Rupert realized that nobody had gotten a good look at the captain of the troop, and certainly nobody knew his name. After Aden described him as dark haired and Rabbit swore his hair was red, the four of them realized that they had no idea at all how to pick him out of a crowd. They were starting to

panic when Jordan broke off their worried conversation.

“It’s going to be easier than you think,” he said. “He’s going to be the one with your viffle. And if you think a great lug like that will keep such a treasure hidden, you don’t know Addreadon’s men! I’m pretty sure he’ll have your friend out, parading him around for all to see! Go to the barracks and keep watch. You’ll see him, I’m sure. But in the meantime, can I get you something to eat?”

Half an hour later the group was sitting in a circle in the barn, finishing their food and packing the provisions Jordan had given them into their sacks. The barn was attached to his home, and he’d raided his own kitchen, assembling provisions for Aden, Rabbit, Jasper and Rupert to take when they left. “Best land in the world, Prism!” said Jasper enthusiastically, wiping his face with the back of his hand. “Where else could you find yourself in the middle of a war and still be eating food like this!” Aden rolled her eyes and Jordan smiled. Even the donkeys, who stood in their stalls chewing their food, looked backwards over their shoulders at Jasper and tossed their heads.

“Jordan, thank you for all your help,” said Aden, standing and shaking the crumbs from her clothes. “I think we need to get going now.” Rabbit and Rupert nodded, though Jasper looked longingly at the food which he had not yet consumed and which he would be forced to leave behind.

“You’re a great cook, Jordan. As good as my father – and that’s saying something. One day, when all this is over, you must come visit us in Spectra.” Jasper looked so hopeful at this idea that they all laughed.

“I’ll walk you as far as it’s safe,” said Jordan. “After that, the less of us in the one place, the safer you’ll be.”

They snuffed out the lights and together left the barn, creeping into the darkness and following Jordan closely. A number of times they had to press themselves against the walls of buildings, or dart into doorways to avoid being seen, and more than once they were sure they’d been spotted by townsfolk from Profunda. But whenever that happened, Jordan would raise his finger to his lips, and the townsman or woman would nod silently and continue on their way, acting as though they’d seen nothing out of the ordinary. It was apparent that what Jordan had said was true; Profunda was still full of people loyal to Prism.

“I can’t go any further than this,” said Jordan when they’d reached the corner of a building that lined the city square and looked out onto a well-lit area. “Over there is the town hall, and there’s the entrance. I wish you well, friends of Prism!” Jasper and Rupert clasped Jordan’s hand in thanks, and Rabbit and Aden both quickly kissed his cheek.

“Thank you,” said Rabbit, and Jordan nodded briefly, before disappearing back into the night.

He crept home slowly, avoiding the soldiers that seemed to be around every corner. Reaching his barn, he slipped inside and noticed immediately a distinct perfume in the air. A low light rose from the ground, revealing a figure in a dark cloak that reached to the floor, stained with the dirt of travel.

“I’ve done all you asked,” said Jordan. “I’ve taken them where you wanted them to go. The rest of it is up to you. They suspect nothing. I didn’t betray you and they don’t have the slightest clue you’ve been watching them since the moment they returned to Prism.”

“Well done, Jordan,” said a quiet voice. “You will be well repaid for your services.”

The man nodded, and the light snuffed out. Jordan went into his home and closed the front door behind him. The figure in the barn seemed to hover for an instant before evaporating into the night air, the perfume left behind the only clue they had ever been there.

– Chapter Two –

A BEWITCHING RESCUE

“So does he speak?” asked a gruff voice over the general babble of noise in the newly converted army barracks.

“Nah. He has no message. I tried getting him to talk, but he started to go red in the face – as they do, you know – and I didn’t want to risk him popping. I think he’s empty.”

“Cute little fella, isn’t he?” said another voice.

“Don’t get too attached,” said the same voice that had answered before. “If Addreadon’s got no use for him, I’ll be barbequing him and shoving him down my gullet with a large jug of ale! Not much meat on him, mind, but he’d make a tasty snack!”

Viff stood in the troop leader’s hand, trembling with fright. When the man declared his intention to eat him, Viff covered his little face with his paws, and all the men laughed. Viff’s abductor stood in the center of a large crowd of soldiers who had finished their duties for the night and were looking for entertainment. They guffawed and prodded the viffle, and more than once he was picked up by his tail, which made him yelp and feel rather sick. But so far he was still in one piece, and he glanced at the door, anxiously and often, hoping for rescue.

“I wouldn’t bother looking for your friends,” said his captor. “They ain’t coming.”

Viff looked miserably from one face to the next that surrounded him, and let out a sad, scared whimper, and the men laughed again.

“Hey, Bruten,” called a soldier to the man who had Viff pinned in his hand. “Have you heard when Addreadon will be here?” The man tried to sound offhand, but it was obvious from his tone of voice, and the reaction of the crowd of soldiers, that Addreadon was viewed with a high degree of fear, even by his own men.

Bruten frowned. “I don’t know. And it’s nobody’s business except his own. Now go to bed all of you! And if I catch anyone trying to steal my viffle during the night, I’ll be handing him over to Addreadon as well!” Nobody was laughing now, and the men shifted

uncomfortably. “Well? What are you waiting for? Go to your bunks!” The soldiers dispersed quickly. “And you can stay in here,” he said, sliding Viff back into his pack.

Looking down from a parapet, high in the town hall’s wall, four faces peered over the stone balustrade. Up in the roof where no lanterns reached, Aden, Jasper, Rupert and Rabbit were shrouded in darkness and well concealed. Reaching the town hall, the four had stealthily climbed the bell tower using the steps outside the building, which took them to an enclave that looked down over the entire room. When the soldiers had each gone to their beds, Rupert, Rabbit, Aden and Jasper slid down onto the floor to talk.

“How dare they!” said Aden in angry whispers. “What a horrible man! They’re bullies, all of them!”

“Being bullies is probably all they know how to be,” said Rupert.

“Well, kindness certainly isn’t in their repertoire,” said Jasper, disgusted by what he’d just seen. “How are we going to get him out of there?”

“I have a plan,” said Rabbit, thoughtfully, “if Aden will go along with it, that is.”

“You know I will,” said Aden emphatically. “What’s the plan?”

“On the way here,” said Rabbit, “we passed some fruit vendors and their carts. They’ll be closed soon, and their owners gone for the night. How would it be if we stole some baskets, filled them with fruit, and took them into the barracks and pretended to be people from the market?”

“Rabbit!” exclaimed Jasper, and Aden and Rupert shushed him quickly. “Rabbit, you wouldn’t stand a chance! They’d capture you immediately and that would leave Rupert and I to rescue the three of you!”

“Jas,” said Aden, thoughtfully, “it might work. We could pretend we were there to...to...see the men, if you know what I mean. We could...flirt a bit, smile and wink and pretend we were interested in them. That might let us get close enough to Viff so that one of us could distract them and the other one could nab him while nobody was looking.”

“Aden, I don’t mean to put a dampener on your plan or anything, but, the truth is, I can see Rabbit pulling this off – maybe! Just maybe! And just to be clear, I’m not happy about it and if we can come up with

any other plan, I think we should go with it! But if we don't, I can perhaps see Rabbit getting away with this...because she's pretty and charming and all. But you...you're...you're..." Jasper scratched his head for the right words.

"I'm like your sister. And you can't imagine anybody finding me attractive. Yes, thanks very much – I get it!" said Aden drily.

"Jas," said Rabbit softly, "She's very beautiful. Everybody thinks so – not just me."

"Really? She is?" Jasper said, sounding baffled. "Well, if you say so. Can't say I've ever seen it myself." Jasper looked over at Rupert, questioningly, and Rupert nodded his head firmly. "There's no accounting for taste, I suppose. I still don't like this plan, though."

The four discussed their options till a few of the men began turning out their lights.

"If we're going to do this, we'd better do it now," said Rupert, looking into the hall. Most of the men were still chatting, or sitting on the edges of their beds, but the mood had quieted and they were clearly getting ready for sleep.

"Come on – now or never!" said Aden, and quickly she and Rabbit moved stealthily down the stairs, followed by Rupert and Jasper, and out into the night air. Sure enough, a number of barrows sat around the outside of the hall, their vendors gone and their produce covered for the night. Rupert and Jasper ran silently around the square, blowing out lanterns, while Rabbit and Aden picked at the knots that sealed the wagons, working them loose as quickly as they could.

"Cheese," said Aden doubtfully, staring at the contents of her barrow.

"Fish," said Rabbit, less enthusiastically still.

"We've got these baskets," said Jasper, running up to Rabbit, his arms full. "Oh! Cheese? *Fish?*?" he said, looking from one girl to the other.

"It'll have to do," said Aden, filling her basket as quickly as she could. Rupert held Rabbit's basket while Rabbit shoveled in the cold, dead fish, covering it with ice as she went.

"Gotta go," said Rabbit briefly, and turned to walk to the open, well-lit entrance to the hall-turned-barracks. But before she'd taken a step, Jasper grabbed her arm.

"Be careful," he said, looking into Rabbit's upturned face. He planted a quick kiss on her forehead and let her go. Rabbit

remembered the last time he'd kissed her – on the cliff in front of all the people of Spectra – and decided that she liked it a great deal better now.

“Come on,” said Aden impatiently. “This is more important than your love life!”

“She wouldn't be saying that if it were Aniel doing the kissing,” said Jasper, and grinned when Aden flashed him an angry look.

Together, the girls walked swiftly towards the town hall. “Remember to act friendly. Smile a lot, batter your eyelashes. Try to act...to act...oh good grief, I don't know! Just *act!*” finished Aden lamely. Rabbit nodded, and placed her hand on Aden's arm, giving it a quick squeeze. “Ok. Now or never!” said the princess, and both girls walked through the door.

“Good evening, gentlemen,” said Aden loudly and confidently. Every head in the room swiveled in their direction, and a number of the soldiers who had been laying down now sat up quickly. “We thought you might like something to eat – something to take on your travels.” Aden smiled broadly and flicked her hair over her shoulder.

“Oh ho!” said one of the soldiers standing nearby. “Wanted an excuse to come visit the barracks, did you?” He made a lunge for Aden, but she dodged him artfully, smiling even more warmly.

“Perhaps! And perhaps not!” she said coquettishly. “Depends how much of our produce you buy!”

“And what do you have, missy?” called another voice.

“The finest cheeses in all of Profunda! They're fresh, they travel well, and they'll keep you strong during long marches! In fact – they're just like us! Smooth and tasty...with a bite at the end!”

The men in the room roared with laughter.

“And what do you have, young lady?” called a soldier to Rabbit.

“Fish!” she said, trying to sound as though it was the most natural thing in all the world to be selling fish to soldiers late at night.

For a moment the room went silent, and Rabbit thought their plan was over. But then the men broke into bawdy laughter.

“You must *really* have wanted to see us, girlie, if that's your best excuse for being here!”

Rabbit smiled, and tossed her hair saucily and winked as though she knew what she was doing.

“And why wouldn't I?” she asked. “A bunch of big, strapping,

handsome men like yourselves! What girl wouldn't want that?"

"Well come on! Come and show us what you're selling," said the man who had spoken to Rabbit. "Let's see if you really are here to sell us...only fish!"

Rabbit blushed at the man's tone, but showed him the contents of her basket. When he saw that it truly was fish, he was taken aback. "And why would I want fish? It'll spoil before the next day is out! I don't want fish!" Rabbit noticed that the man was looking baffled and more than a little suspicious. She sidled in close to him, and looked up into his face, her eyes boring deep into his.

"Of course you do," said Rabbit. "You want fish more than anything else in the whole world. Haven't you just been thinking that very thing? You will eat it for your breakfast and consider yourself lucky to have it." Rabbit spoke slowly and softly, her eyes never leaving the man's face. He stared back as though in a trance.

"What's she doing?" whispered Jasper to Rupert from their vantage point in the bell tower.

"I *think* she's enchanting him," said Rupert. "Look at his face!"

The soldier stared at Rabbit, bemused. "Yes, yes, you're right," he agreed. "Fish – that's the ticket..." He pulled out his drawstring pouch and gave her some coins. Rabbit handed him a large fish.

"You had best go find some ice for that," she said, and the man wandered off in search of a way to store his new purchase.

Up in the bell tower, Rupert and Jasper breathed a sigh of relief. They watched as, one by one, soldiers approached Rabbit and she sent them away, confused but happy, with their fish in hand. But on the other side of the room, Aden gathered more and more men to her, laughing and teasing, skillfully dodging the hands that reached out to grab her. All the while she kept one eye on Rabbit, who moved little by little in the direction of Bruten's bunk. He had long since abandoned his sleeping place in the hall, and joined the throng that now surrounded the princess.

When the last few men who had approached her had wandered dreamily away, Rabbit crept the final steps towards Bruten's pack. It lay next to his abandoned bed and Rabbit bent down stealthily till her fingers reached the knot that held it closed.

"Viff!" she called softly, and sudden movement jerked at the top of the sack. "You have to help me," she whispered. Glancing at the large

crowd on the other side of the room, Rabbit slid her fingers into the knot, pulling at the ends and easing the rope apart. From inside the sack, little paws pulled and tugged, worrying over the ties as Viff used his teeth to gnaw through the rope.

“What are you doing?” asked a heavy, suspicious voice.

Rabbit spun around and found herself face to face with a large, burly soldier who watched her accusingly.

“I’m leaving your captain some fish,” she said brightly, smiling back in a friendly manner.

“He ain’t asked for no fish! If he’d a’wanted fish, he’d a’asked for it!” said the soldier.

Rabbit smiled and moved in closely.

“But he did ask for it,” she said sweetly. “He asked for it and he asked me to place it in his sack. But I can’t seem to untie these knots!” Dazed now, the soldier looked from Rabbit to Bruten’s pack, then back again. “I would love it if you helped me – and I would tell him how helpful you’d been, too,” cajoled Rabbit, bewitching the man more and more deeply with the sound of every word.

The soldier looked at the pack again as though he’d never seen one in his life, then back at Rabbit. “Yes, alright,” he said, resignedly. Without thinking, he pulled out his knife and, reaching down, sliced open the entrance to Bruten’s sack. “Don’t know how he can use it now,” he said sadly, looking at the gaping hole he had made.

“Thank you!” said Rabbit warmly. “Please – take this fish with my thanks.” As she spoke, Viff leapt out of the sack and climbed onto Rabbit’s shoe, clinging to the leg of her trousers. “You know how much you love fish,” she said.

“Do I?” asked the soldier, confused. “Yes, I suppose I do.” He was reaching out both his hands to take the large dead fish from Rabbit when a voice yelled out from across the room.

“Oy! What you think you doing? That’s my bunk, that is!” Bruten, not as captivated by Aden as Rabbit had hoped, had spied the girl standing next to his bed and his soldier hovering there also, a knife in his hands and arms now outstretched. “Don’t just stand there...grab her!”

The soldier looked at Rabbit, bemused, but didn’t move. Rabbit looked at Aden, ignored now, as the soldiers pelted across the room, leaping over beds, to reach her.

“Run!” she cried to Aden. “RUN!” Aden hesitated for a moment, then turned and bolted for the door. Jasper and Rupert, who had watched the plan unraveling, left the bell tower, racing down the steps to help, and met Aden at the door.

“We have to help her!” cried Jasper.

“No. We have to do what she said,” said Rupert emphatically and, grabbing both Aden and Jasper by one arm each, dragged them away from the town hall and in the direction of the road north. “She knows what she’s doing,” said Rupert firmly. “It will only be worse if we get involved. We have to run!” Reluctant, Jasper turned in the direction Rupert dragged him, his feet following unwillingly.

Back in the barracks, Rabbit was quickly surrounded by men.

“Who are you and what do you want?” demanded Bruten. “Have you been robbing me?” Rabbit watched as realization dawned across the soldier’s ugly face. “You’re stealing my viffle!” Bruten took a menacing step towards Rabbit, hands outstretched towards her throat.

But before he could touch her, Rabbit swung Elyssa’s cloak – always draped from her shoulders – around her whole body, pulling it low over her head.

“You don’t want me,” she said quietly, as Bruten froze in his tracks. “You never wanted me. And you never had a viffle. You need to go to bed now. You’re very, very tired.”

Suddenly Bruten yawned. “Where’d she go?” asked one of the soldiers.

“Who?” asked a soldier standing behind Bruten, a confounded look on his face. “What are we all doing here?”

“She’s standing right there! Can’t you see her?” said a voice behind her. Rabbit turned quickly.

“No. He can’t see me. And neither can you. You should be sleeping. You should be in your bed, your head on your pillow.”

“Perhaps you’re right. Good night, little girl with fish,” said the soldier, suddenly vague. He turned slowly and headed in the direction of his bunk.

“Little girl with what?” asked another soldier who stood nearby.

“I don’t know. What did I say? Fish?”

Some of the soldiers drifted away and most seemed unable to see Rabbit at all, bumping into her as they passed. “I’m sorry,” they said to the air, then rubbed their eyes as though trying to clear their vision.

Bruten stood, yawning in the middle of the room.

“Go to bed now,” said Rabbit softly.

“I might go to bed,” said Bruten to nobody in particular, and Rabbit hopped out of the way as he moved towards his bunk.

“Sweet dreams,” she whispered, and turned for the door. She walked swiftly, Viff clinging to her boot. But before she was able to disappear into the safety of the darkness outside, she heard a voice from the middle of the room.

“Where’d this stinking fish come from?”

“I don’t know, but I’ve got one too!” said another voice, confused and angry.

“Fish...that girl! Both those girls! There were girls here!”

“And one stole my viffle!” bellowed Bruten. “There she goes – out the door! Get her!” By the time Rabbit reached the entrance to the town hall, dozens of men had leapt from their beds and were looking in her direction. Some rubbed their heads as though they had a bad headache, while others squinted as they regained their vision.

Rabbit ran. Outside the hall, she pelted north through the city, ignoring those she passed and the occasional voice that called out behind her, demanding to know what she was doing and where she was going so late at night. Horn blasts rang out from the direction of the barracks and it occurred to Rabbit that Profunda now almost certainly had a curfew, and that she was probably out and about well after it. In the back of her mind, she wondered why Jordan hadn’t warned them. But mainly she concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other. As fast as she could, she raced to the northern exit of the town till at last she saw the main road and, not far ahead of her, Jasper, Rupert and Aden.

“Use your weapons!” yelled a voice behind her, and Rabbit realized that the soldiers had seen her and were closing in fast. Ahead of her, Aden, Jasper and Rupert had swung about and were heading back towards her as fast as they could run. Rabbit ducked and wove as one arrow after another zipped past her head till a voice right behind her called out, “It’s ok. I’ve got her!” Glancing over her shoulder, Rabbit saw a member of Bruten’s troops ready to dive in her direction and, with all her strength, propelled herself forward to dodge his reaching grasp.

A blinding flash of light and a yell brought Rabbit to an abrupt halt,

and she wheeled about, uncertain what she'd see. Behind her, covering the road from side to side, was a glowing wall of white fire that hung in the air, shimmering. On the other side, just barely visible through the fire, stood two shining figures, their heads bowed. They sang as they stood, a song the four of the Quest had heard before.

*“To go to the east does not always mean peace,
Here the roads part, you've chosen the Heart.
Be sure what you choose – those who gamble will lose,
Hard lessons you'll learn if you take the wrong turn.”*

The soldier, caught on the other side, was yelling a warning to the troops that followed him, telling them to stay back.

“Quickly! Before they work out it's only an illusion,” said Rabbit to her friends. They had seen the wall of fire with its eerie singing figures once before, and had found themselves that time on the other side, as the soldiers were now. An arrow whizzed through the fiery curtain, narrowly missing the group. Together they turned, ready to escape down the exit from Profunda that would take them to the north. But before they'd taken a step they saw faint lights in the distance that grew closer with every passing second.

“What is it? What's that light?” asked Rupert, turning quickly from side to side.

“Ambush! They've been called by the horns – it's a trap!” cried Aden, and as she did, the lights drew close enough for the group to see that they were carried by a large troop of men, marching down the northern road into Profunda. Spinning around in panic, Jasper saw the road which connected the north exit to the eastern exit.

“Quickly! We have to!” he yelled, and inside Rupert groaned. They'd taken the eastern exit last time they had passed through Profunda, and the journey had become a nightmare.

But there was no choice to be made, as the large platoon of soldiers came closer with every step. “We can still make our way north – once we leave the city,” called Jasper, and the decision was made. Together they veered to the right, running breathlessly, till they came to a second exit; the road east. Voices and pounding footsteps followed them, and they sprinted through the gates. They continued to run as fast as they could, and eventually passed the place where previously had sat Riddle Rock. But the space now lay bare.

“Perhaps they've cleared it away?” panted Jasper, as all four ran past

the now vacant space.

“Have to get off this road,” puffed Rabbit as she ran. “Keep running.”

In the distance the group could see the northern road, as it stretched away into the darkness, and between the two roads, a great chasm, uncrossable and ugly. “Hide!” said Jasper, and all four leapt off the road, scrambling down the face of the canyon, concealed from the road they’d been on. Had it been day, this plan would have failed immediately, as they were completely exposed from behind and would have been visible to anyone walking down the northern road. But as it was, the soldiers had passed into the town and darkness shielded them from searching eyes. Only seconds later, marching feet began to pass by, voices calling and commands yelled over the top of the noise.

“Keep going! We have to find them!”

The noise passed by, only to return again and again over the following hours, and more than once eyes peered over the edge of the chasm and the four thought they’d been found. But the soldiers were unable to thoroughly search the sides of the chasm in the dark, and none of them seemed keen to climb down for a better look so, when the night was at its coldest, a voice rang out from some distance away.

“Back to the barracks men – we’ve lost them!”

Footsteps thudded past again, this time heading back into the town, and, after a few more minutes to be sure the soldiers were gone, Rabbit, Rupert, Aden and Jasper pulled themselves back up the face of the chasm and lay, panting heavily, next to the road.

“What now?” asked Aden when, finally, she had enough breath to talk.

“I can’t believe we’re here again,” said Jasper. “What do we do now?”

Rupert, who had the best sense of direction in the group, looked about thoughtfully. “This road led us to Sangcoeur last time, right?” Aden, Jasper and Rabbit nodded. “And Sangcoeur is more or less north-east, correct?” All three nodded again. “And Therasse is even more north than that – and we reached it by originally traveling on this road. So at the very worst, were we to travel the exact same path as last time, we’ll end up at Therasse eventually! And before that, if we’re lucky, we’ll hit the Verdalis Hills. Just think – good food, baths, and a catch-up with good friends!”

“But Rupert,” said Rabbit whose head spun with questions, “we don’t have that sort of time! Reaching Therasse isn’t finding the crystal! It’s just getting a little help – maybe! And if we have to travel the same path as last time...well! Firstly, I don’t think we could find it. Between the route taken by the Rogues, and the trip via Sangcoeur, then being taken from there half asleep, in our case, or unconscious, in Aden’s, none of us could remember how to do it. And even if we could remember it, I don’t think the Quiver Mountains have gotten any easier since we were last there. And as for the Mordant Plains...and given that we don’t have Taw...Rupert, there’s just no way!”

Rupert acknowledged that this was probably true. But next to him Jasper was rubbing his head as though trying to help himself think more clearly. “But here’s the thing,” he began. “We don’t even know if Therasse is where we should be going! They may – or may not – know where the wood at the edge of the world is. I know you’re hoping for help from the priestesses, but what if we go there and it proves to just be a big waste of time? If that’s the case, we could head east just as easily as north...or south for that matter! Or west! If we don’t know where it is, we have no idea where to go.”

Everyone was silent as the truth of this sank in. “Does anyone have any better idea?” asked Rabbit eventually. Everyone shook their head. “And does anyone know of anyone else who could help us more than the priestesses at Therasse?”

“Perhaps the centaurs of Greenspan,” said Aden thoughtfully. “And that’s in the east.”

“Then that’s our back-up plan,” said Rabbit firmly. “Tomorrow we try to get back to the northern road. If we can – great. And if we can’t, after we’ve given it our very best try, and *only* after, then we’ll head east.”

“You remember the riddle?” asked Rupert suddenly. “ ‘To go to the east does not always mean peace.’ If we’re after the green crystal quadrant, then we *definitely* want peace. I think Rabbit’s right. We should be going north.” That seemed to settle it, and all four decided that, if they were to get any sleep at all, now would be as good a time as any. They hoisted their packs and crept stealthily along the road, looking, as best they could in the dark, for cover. They hadn’t gone far when a mournful sound rang through the night air. Somewhere in the distance, a wolf howled at the moon, and Rupert shivered as the hairs

on his arms lifted at the sound.

But next to him Rabbit listened intently. “I hear it differently now,” she said. “Before I was just afraid of them. But now I hear their sadness, their loneliness. He’s calling for someone. I don’t think even he knows who it is.” Rabbit sounded so grave when she spoke that Rupert wondered how hard her role as high priestess must be, feeling all the health and sickness and joy and evil of the earth and everything that lived in it.

“I...I don’t think he’s as bad as everyone says,” said Aden suddenly. “He’s saved my life at least once. And he could have attacked us any number of times, and didn’t. Perhaps we don’t understand him as well as we think.”

“Perhaps we don’t,” agreed Rabbit.

It was the best part of an hour before they found cover close enough to the road to be able to see it in the dark. Pushing into the thatch of trees, they lay down quickly. “Two hours, no more,” said Rabbit firmly. “We need to be up and moving before dawn.” Without another word they each lay down, and Jasper and Rupert were asleep almost before their eyes were closed. But Rabbit lay in the dark, tossing and turning as though both comfort and sleep eluded her. After an hour had passed, Aden rolled onto her side, facing the young high priestess who lay next to her.

“What’s wrong, Rabbit?” she asked. “Don’t pretend it’s nothing. I can hear your breathing and you’re sighing – a lot.”

“I’m sorry,” responded Rabbit softly. “I don’t mean to be keeping you awake. It’s just that...” Her voice trailed off in discomfort.

“What?” persisted Aden. “What’s wrong?”

“I didn’t want to say anything – because I can barely tell what’s worrying me. And so much is wrong with this Quest, it seems dumb to say that something doesn’t feel right! But Aden...”

“What?” pressed the princess again.

“Something is wrong with the *ground*. Really, really wrong. I can feel it. It’s like the whole earth is crying out in pain! I need to get out of here as soon as we can leave – I can barely stand it!”

“Do you want me to wake the boys?” asked Aden immediately. “We can leave right now if you need to.”

“No...no. I can wait till morning. And I suspect I won’t sleep better anywhere else. Try to sleep, Aden – I’ll be quiet.”

“If you change your mind,” said Aden, “and you want to leave, wake me and we’ll be out of here, ok?” Rabbit nodded and Aden rolled over and closed her eyes.

But Rabbit lay in the dark, her hands gripping the earth that cried out beneath her.

Morning dawned, gray and dreary. Aden rolled over to see if Rabbit had managed to fall asleep, only to find the space next to her empty. A few steps away from the camp she saw Rabbit, her back to them, staring off into the distance. Something seemed wrong with the scene, but Aden, still groggy from sleep, couldn’t work out what it was. Overhead the ribbon of darkness still writhed and twisted across the sky, reaching out to Spectra with every ugly pulse. Aden rubbed her eyes, trying to clear her vision, and shakily threw off her blanket and stood up. Her feet bare, she walked gingerly over to Rabbit, who sensed her presence before she’d reached her. “Look,” said Rabbit, her voice grim, and pointed out to the scene before them.

Not far in the distance were the soft rolls of the Verdalis Hills, braided together as they ran across the countryside. But instead of the lush, vibrant green they had seen during their last visit, the hills were now stripped bare. Trees and plants were gone, though a few twisted trunks still stood where they’d died. There was no sign of grass, and even the soil looked ill; rather than the rich brown they were used to, it was now a depressing gray. If the ribbon overhead was a deep, murky mass, then the ground was a paler version of the same thing, as though the colorlessness had come down to earth and mixed itself with the very soil.

“This is what I felt last night,” said Rabbit flatly. “It’s dead – so much death! There’s nothing left here. Oh Aden,” exclaimed Rabbit turning suddenly to the princess, “I sent so many animals here from Gras Uir – from the hospital! I’ve sent them to their death!” Rabbit broke into sobs, covering her face with her hands.

Immediately Aden placed an arm about her. “No! You don’t know that’s true,” she said encouragingly. “You don’t know where they’ve gone. They could be anywhere – and all still alive! You don’t know for sure.”

Awakened by the sound of Rabbit’s sobs, Jasper and Rupert now joined the girls as they looked out over the denuded hills. Wordlessly, Jasper motioned Aden to move, and wrapped both his arms about

Rabbit, pulling her close. Without looking up, Rabbit turned towards him and sobbed into his chest.

“We have to go and look – see if there’s anyone left,” said Rupert, and Aden nodded grimly. “You might not want to come,” he suggested to Rabbit. But Rabbit shook her head firmly and wiped her nose.

“Let’s get our stuff first,” she said. “I don’t want to be caught without the few things we have with us.”

Quickly, the four went and packed their sacks, shoving their blankets in hurriedly and hoisting them onto their backs before setting off immediately for the hills. Everything they passed was dry and barren, and not so much as an insect chirped or buzzed past. It wasn’t long till they were at the foot of the hills. They climbed them as fast as they could, heading all the while for the place where they’d first sat with the hills’ inhabitants almost three years ago. It wasn’t long till they noticed another fundamental change.

“The streams and river have gone,” said Aden.

“Not gone completely,” corrected Rupert. “You see that dark gray sludgy-looking thing over there? And there...and there?” Rupert pointed as he spoke. “I think that’s all that’s left of it.” With a final effort, they reached the top of the central hill of Verdalis and looked down onto the once verdant land.

Scattered over the hills were skeleton after skeleton, animals who had died trying to escape or simply for lack of food and water. Patches of burnt dirt could be seen from place to place, and the four looked over the scene, aghast.

“Dead? All dead?” asked Rupert, appalled. Next to him, Rabbit had gone white as a sheet and Rupert could see she was sweating heavily. “What is it?” he asked abruptly.

Rabbit spun around and ran towards the top of the hill.

“Rabbit! Wait!” called Jasper, then pelted after her, Aden and Rupert following in his wake. Just past the summit, Jasper found her kneeling, her hands flat on the ground and a look of such distaste on her face that Jasper wondered what, even in a landscape as ugly as this, could have caused her reaction.

She lifted her hands as Jasper, Aden and Rupert approached, and they saw they were stained a deep red-brown – a brutal color – and Rupert, who could not believe it was possible, began to shake his head in utter

disbelief.

But Rabbit confirmed his worst fears. “It’s blood,” she said. “Old, rancid, poisonous blood. It’s from Sangcoeur – got to be. He’s found a way to draw it out of the earth and force it into water supply. Addreadon has poisoned the Hills of Verdalis. Aden, is this what you were in?” asked Rabbit, swinging round towards the princess. “When you dived into the pool? Was it this?”

But Aden was shaking her head and backing away, horrified. “I can smell it,” she said. “I can smell it from here. Don’t make me come any closer, Rabbit. I...I...can’t.” It flashed through Rupert’s mind that it was the first time he had ever seen the princess’ courage fail her.

“But didn’t Naian drain it dry? I thought it was gone,” he said, baffled.

“She drained the pool, Rupert. But she wasn’t able to cleanse the earth it had sunk into. And from there it went into the underground water supply to pass into the rivers and springs,” said Rabbit shakily. “I need some water, Jasper. Right now. Have to get this off my skin,” she said and there was a panicked tone to her voice. Jasper whipped his water bottle from his pack and Rabbit stretched out her hands for Jasper to wash them clean. Watching Rabbit swaying on her feet from the strength of the poison on her hands, Jasper was suddenly filled with anger.

“There was no reason to do this! Addreadon did this for fun! Because he’s evil!” As Jasper said the word ‘evil’, fire crackled at the ends of his fingertips. The other three, all of whom had secretly wondered whether Jasper would remain the Flamewielder once above the world of Phantism, stepped back involuntarily.

“Jasper,” said Rabbit. “Don’t.”

But Jasper ignored her. “Have to,” he panted, shaking with rage. “Have to.” With a flash of light, Jasper’s arms, raised to the heavens, ignited the air with fire. Flames reached out into the cosmos, shooting skywards towards the black stain that arched across the sky.

“Jasper! No!” screamed Rabbit. “You’ll make it stronger! Stop!”

But with an effort that seemed gargantuan, Jasper shook his head and slowly lowered his arms, pointing them towards the deathly trickle that oozed from the hills where the crystal clear springs used to be. His fire exploded in a shower of sparks and lightning as Jasper’s flames collided with the evil of Sangcoeur, igniting the blood and burning

back into the earth. For long seconds, the Flamewielder's fire glowed a sickly red, but eventually, the merry yellow fires of Phantism prevailed, beating the blood backwards the way it had come. But still Jasper continued to burn, sending his power back through the underground river, back to the heart of the land, to the place where Addreadon had first corrupted the earth with the blood of his victims. Sweat pouring from his face, Jasper held his ground, till the entire hillside glowed yellow. And then, with incredible self-control, Jasper extinguished his fire, his knees sagging as he sank to the ground.

Running, Rabbit, Aden and Rupert all reached him together. Rupert held him upright, while Rabbit and Aden pulled water from their sacks for him to drink. Rupert and Aden looked doubtfully at their friend, remembering a previous time when Jasper's flame wielding fires had almost destroyed an entire land. But Rabbit, who had taken his hands in hers, shook her head at them.

"He's fine. I can still feel the joy in him," said Rabbit. "He's destroyed the blood – beaten it back to Sangcoeur – I don't know how far. He might have destroyed it all, I'm not sure."

Still on his knees on the ground, Jasper nodded. "It's gone," he said. "Filthy, ugly, horrible thing. Such pain and suffering! It evaporated under the joy of Phantism."

"Not just Phantism, mate," said Rupert. "Your joy. The Alellii didn't make a mistake when they chose you as the Flamewielder!"

Jasper smiled weakly, and struggled to his feet. Before he could respond, a soft whinny sounded behind them.

"Rhinehart!" cried Rabbit, racing towards him. The previously beautiful stallion was thin and exhausted, his hair missing in large patches and his skin hanging loosely from his all too obvious skeleton. Rabbit wrapped her arms around his neck.

"I'm so glad to see you," he said. "We've had some news, but not much, over recent times." Rhinehart's voice sounded dry and sore, and Aden and Rabbit immediately offered him their water bottles. "You don't have enough," he said. "I would rather die than take your last water."

"Rhinehart," said Rabbit, and all heard the authority of the high priestess in her voice, "take the water. It's our gift to you for all you've done. You must drink."

For an instant, Rhinehart looked taken aback by the young girl

standing in front of him who he suddenly did not recognize. But he nodded and tipped back his head as Aden and Rabbit poured their remaining water down his throat. He coughed and spluttered a little, but when next he spoke, his voice sounded far more like his own. "Thank you," he said. "I'm not sure what help it will be, as I will surely die as have so many of my friends and family." He whinnied sadly and tossed his head, his patchy mane rippling behind him.

"Rhinehart," said Rabbit. "Where is everyone?"

Rhinehart's eyes looked back at Rabbit sadly. "Most of them left. Some went to Gras Uir. Some to Spectra. But many of them tried to stay and fight. We knew immediately that we were not to drink from the Blood Fountain. We watched the trees die and the grass wither and all that was good and beautiful from the Verdalis Hills die a horrific and painful death. But we stayed, hoping beyond hope that we might somehow be able to protect this wonderful gift that we had been given. But we failed, Rabbit. We failed horribly."

"Most of those who remained died. Rosewood...she starved in the end and died only days ago before my very eyes. Some, in their desperation, drank from the fountain and were sent mad. Some of those wandered off and I believe have tried to find Addreadon's troops. Some we killed in their madness. Some very few remain, and we have done all we could to preserve what we have left. We...we've saved some few plants. A little grass. We had not much water, but it was Leo and Koo and Duggles and Merallyn who thought to dig and preserve some of the life from the hills before it was too late. We've used whatever water we had left to keep the plants and grass alive, but our supplies ran dry two days ago, and it will be only days – perhaps hours – till they begin to die too, and us along with them." Rhinehart sounded so broken hearted that tears ran down Rabbit's face as he spoke.

"Rhinehart," she said eventually. "When we were here before, you gave us a great gift. Elyssa's cloak saved us many times, while her stone healed an entire people. The soil she gave you, which you gave us, allowed us to heal a whole land, and there are more people grateful to you than you have any idea. Elyssa's gifts were never ours to keep. They were ours to use."

Rhinehart nodded, proud that the gifts they had guarded for so many years had proved to be of such worth.

“And so,” continued Rabbit, “it seemed to me right to keep just one last grain of her soil, so that I could one day return it to the people who had been so generous towards us. I...I never envisioned this, Rhinehart. I never thought it would be used in such dire circumstances. But one thing I know for sure; neither Elyssa nor the Alellii would want the servants who had been so faithful to suffer so harshly for their service.” Rabbit reached down to her belt and took the pouch she had carried since her first time in the Verdalis Hills.

“I believe this is for you,” she said, opening the pouch and tipping one final grain of soil into the palm of her hand, as those around her gasped. “If you would allow me,” she said, “I would like to try to help you.”

Tears welled in Rhinehart’s eyes as he looked sadly at the girl who stood before him. “I’m not sure what you can achieve with something so small,” he said, “but we would appreciate any help you could give us. Any at all.”

“Come with me,” she said, her voice very gentle. Rhinehart, Rupert, Jasper and Aden climbed the hill behind Rabbit till they all stood on its summit. “I’ll need your help, Jasper,” she said, and Jasper nodded. Closing her eyes, Rabbit raised her hands towards the skies.

“Alellii! Creators and healers of all hurts and injuries! We thank you for your gifts to us – for life, for love, for the bounty of your earth. And we humbly ask your blessing on this last grain of soil – so small, yet potent with your love for this land, your creation. Please bless it and make it powerful, that we, your servants, might heal your land.” When she’d finished speaking, Rabbit knelt on the ground, pushed a small hole into the dry, ill earth with her thumb, and placed the grain of soil into it before covering it carefully. “Now, Jasper,” she said, and Jasper nodded in reply.

Naian’s son reached out one hand, and placed it on the exhausted pony who stood next to him, closing his eyes and concentrating hard. He frowned, as though what he felt revealed to him all the hurt the Verdalis Hills had experienced, and the fingers of his other hand started to twitch, opening and closing till the familiar sparks danced at the end of his hand.

On Rhinehart’s other side, Rabbit placed her hand on his back, her lips moving silently and her other hand raised once more to the heavens. And suddenly, like a bolt of lightning, a pure blue light shot

through the clouds and into Rabbit's up-stretched arm. Next to her, Rhinehart's eyes opened wide as the light passed through him to Jasper, whose fingers pointed at the small mound Rabbit had made in the dirt. The blue of Rabbit's light, and the yellow of Jasper's fire melded together immediately, and a green, verdant flame poured from Jasper's hand where he pointed it at the earth.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then Aden gasped as the earth around the planted grain of soil turned softly green. Like the first blushes of spring, the green raced out in ripples from the hilltop, down its sides, and out to the surrounding valleys. Quickly it ran up and over every peak and summit, and Rupert saw bushes and small trees immediately sprouting, their new leaves rippling in a light breeze. Aden tipped her face upwards into the fresh, clean air, sniffing its delicious scent, and feeling its cool touch on her face.

Down in the valleys, water welled from the ground, and slivers of brooks appeared, then streams, and finally one great silver-blue river that snaked through all Verdalis. Springs ran down the sides of hills once more – icy clear and blue – and tall grass swayed elegantly from side to side everywhere they looked. Jasper dropped his arm, exhausted, and Rabbit's lips stopped moving as they knew they had given all they had to give. But most astonishingly of all, where before had oozed the Blood Fountain, there was now a small trough of the purest silver.

"What's that?" asked Rhinehart, his voice filled with awe.

"I'm guessing that's a special gift from your friends under the earth," said Rabbit slowly, sounding exhausted. "Phantism is still alive and well, and supports all of Prism. This is a gift from them, and will sustain your people and make them strong, healing their wounds and lifting their spirits. You must all drink from it. But be careful – it's potent!" Rabbit was smiling tiredly at the look on Rhinehart's face.

"Rabbit," he said, amazed, "you have changed much!" And then, overwhelmed, Rhinehart sank to his knees and cried with relief. One by one, the remaining animals of Verdalis began to appear, making their way to the hill on which stood the members of the Quest. Hands were nuzzled and snouts were kissed in greeting and gratitude, while Rupert, Aden and Jasper passed around water as quickly as they could. They washed the wounds of the remaining animals of Verdalis and tore them handfuls of the newly grown grass, passing out tiny cups of silver

and drizzling a few drops into each open mouth.

“It will be your job to restore Verdalis,” said Rabbit, when she had caught her breath. “But with the clean water supply and the fresh grass I think it can be done. The silver stream will be particularly useful. I’m sorry to task you with such a heavy load,” she added, looking at Rhinehart ruefully. “But I don’t know how else it can be done. By the way, where are Leo and Koo? And Duggles and Merallyn? The four of you deserve all our thanks,” said Rabbit to the thin, exhausted looking rabbits and the beavers who now stood with Rhinehart having climbed warily to the top of the hill. “Your contribution will never be forgotten. The Verdalis Hills will survive. And they will survive because of you!” Tired though they were, the bunnies’ ears twitched just a trifle, and the beavers’ tails perked up ever so slightly.

“How long can you stay?” asked Rhinehart.

“We haven’t talked about it,” said Rupert, looking around at the others. “But I think just one night.”

“We need to keep going,” said Aden firmly. “We’re already somewhat off course and things are getting worse and worse back at Spectra. Profunda, as you probably know, is overrun by soldiers, and you can’t have missed that thing in the sky.” Aden looked up as she spoke, the disgust apparent in her voice.

“We’ve all seen it – how could we not?” said Rhinehart, sadly. “It desecrates the sky. Rosewood hated it – it made her shudder every time she looked at it. It was the last thing she saw as she died, and I will fight Addreadon till my last breath for filling my wife’s dying moments with despair.” Rhinehart seemed to be watching something far away, and Rabbit knew his memories were reliving the death of his wife.

“Rhinehart,” she said gently, “look around you. Because of your sacrifice – because of Rosewood’s sacrifice – Addreadon hasn’t won. Verdalis will live and prosper because of you. It will be lush and green and full of peace. Hold onto that thought.”

“I will. And I hope Addreadon chokes on it,” said Rhinehart, and Rabbit was taken aback by the hatred in his voice.

“Come on, let’s sleep,” said Jasper. “We have a long way to go tomorrow, with no clue where we’re going or how to get there. So we’d at least best get what rest we can.”

“Rhinehart,” said Rupert thoughtfully, “have you ever heard anyone

mention the Wood at World's Edge?"

"Yes, I have," answered Rhinehart, and all four members of the Quest stared at the stallion hopefully. "Everyone here has. From the stories we've heard, though, it's a mystical, moving place. It has to be a legend, though it's one popular with all those who love the lushness and beauty of nature. Why do you ask?"

"We're looking for it," said Rupert. "We think the green crystal quadrant is hidden there."

"Oh," said Rhinehart, apparently lost for words. "Well...er...good luck." The horse looked away, avoiding eye contact, and shuffled uncomfortably.

"You think we're wasting out time, don't you?" said Aden, discouraged and more than a little cross.

"Princess," said Rhinehart, lifting his head and looking Aden directly in the eyes, "I would have thought the restoration of the Verdalis Hills an impossibility only hours ago. Yet here we have grass and water and hope. Clearly, you know more than I and have powers I cannot even comprehend. If you're looking for the wood at the edge of the world, I'm sure you have good reason to do so. Don't take my ignorance as anything more than that. We here in Verdalis are gardeners and groundskeepers, not seers or priests."

Slightly mollified, Aden said good night and went to unroll her sleeping pad and lay down for the night. A short time later, when Rabbit had joined her, she rolled over and whispered quietly, so no one else could hear.

"Rabbit," she said, "if you and Jasper can heal Verdalis and burn that foul blood from the ground, why can't the two of you heal all of Prism?"

Rabbit sighed resignedly as though she had been expecting this question. "Aden, I've wondered the same thing. But I think I know the answer. I can't heal what I can't feel. I can feel the land I touch with my feet, or smell with my nose or even see with my own two eyes. I can even feel the land somewhat beyond that – past my senses and into the distance. But I can't sense anything beyond that, so whatever power I have stops right there. I suspect Naian could feel a great deal more than me – perhaps even the entire land. But my reach is small compared to hers."

"If that's so – that Naian could feel the whole land – why didn't *she*

heal it? When she was alive, I mean,” persisted Aden.

“Aden, even Naian had limits. I have wondered whether I shouldn’t just pour out any power I might have and heal what I can. But it would be the end of me, I believe. And even Naian, with all her powers, would almost certainly have been destroyed if she’d tried anything so enormous. Power works both ways, Aden.” Rabbit stretched out her hands and showed them to the girl laying next to her.

Aden gasped when she saw the scars and burns that covered Rabbit’s palms and reached up her forearms towards her shoulders. “Oh Rabbit! That’s awful! Are Jasper’s hands the same?”

“No,” answered Rabbit. “He’s the Flamewielder. Fire will always be as natural to him as breathing. The thing is, Aden, I could probably heal a part of the land – and with Jasper’s help could probably heal even more. But it wouldn’t be enough. It wouldn’t heal everything, and sickness and disease would come flooding back. With no high priestess to stop it then, it would overtake this land in a heartbeat, and all would be lost. I know I’m nowhere near as strong or as powerful as Naian. But I also know that I’m the only high priestess Prism has right now, and I can’t think my death would be a good thing. Apart from which,” and here she smiled wryly, “I’d really prefer not to die!”

Aden nodded wordlessly, and Rabbit rolled over, exhausted, and slept.