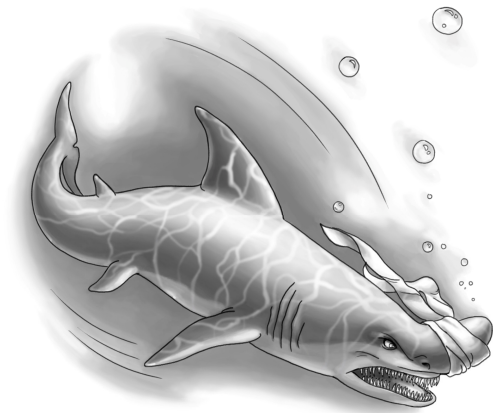


# *THE DEEPER DARKNESS*



K.E. Stapylton

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– Chapter One –

## *AN UNEXPECTED TURN OF EVENTS*

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

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

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

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

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

"Help him!" she cried.

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

"Breathe!" he said.

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

"Viff," said Rabbit, "you must breathe! If you don't breathe, you'll drown!"

Breathe!” Rabbit tore another pearl from the necklace she wore and again held it under the struggling viffle’s nose. Again Viff shook his head vehemently and Rabbit saw his face was turning purple.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Aniel smiled again and kept swimming.

On and down they swam, always further away from where they’d entered the water, till Rabbit had no idea how far they’d gone or even how long it was since they’d left Spectra and the palace. She had a million questions, but the further they swam, the less important they seemed. Already it was as though the farewell from King Rohannan and Queen Ardentia and all the people of Prism had never happened, and that life above the water was a fading memory or a dream. The water grew darker, going from cobalt to a rich kind of stained glass blue, a color Rabbit had seen so many times in Chalice. In the end it was a deep blue-green and the sunlight was barely visible above them. The scouts

who held Rupert, Aden and Jasper grew difficult to see then, and Rabbit almost felt as though only she and Aniel swam through the belly of the ocean.

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

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

Rabbit had no trouble believing him.

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

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

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

"You're quite close to the surface here," said Rabbit.

"Yes," responded Aniel. "We don't live in the depths. In terms of those who live in the sea, we're surface dwellers. We like the light and the shallows and the currents from the waves above. And if ever any are called to go on land, or to speak with your kind, they ask us. Of all those who live in the ocean, we're

most like you; although it's many centuries since we lived on land, we can still manage it if the need occurs."

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

"Rabbit! No, wait!" called Aniel urgently. "You can't do that!"

"Why not?" asked Rabbit.

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

"So we're here for a while, then," said Rabbit, and Aniel nodded. She paused for a moment then asked,

"How do you know my name?"

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

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

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

Rabbit gave an involuntary shiver. If the people of the ocean's shallows had known to expect them for over a year, then even when Rabbit was back home, that meant....well, what did it mean? Had somebody been preparing her for this all along? Somebody good? Somebody evil? And who? Rabbit's head spun with the possibilities. For some time now, Rabbit had given little thought to the treachery the centaurs had prophesied. They'd said it existed somewhere in the quest to find the four stolen quadrants of Prism's sacred Crystal. Now, for some reason, it seemed so much more possible and real, and Rabbit wondered again whether it might indeed have something to do with her.

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

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

upright in the water.

“Aniel! It’s..it’s beautiful!” she gasped.

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

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

“Wow!” said Jasper, who was staring and half shielding his eyes from the light the palace reflected. Next to him Aden was staring also, though quiet. Rabbit wondered if she was thinking about Chalice, the castle of her parents, which she had left behind so unexpectedly. The four children hadn’t had a chance to talk since being pulled underwater, and for the first time as she stared at Jasper, Rabbit remembered the completely unexpected kiss he had planted on her mouth in front of all the people of Spectra. She remembered the smile on his lips and the laughter of those around her, and she felt her face turn red despite the cool water.

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

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

“Rabbit, I...,” he started.

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

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

“Although,” he said to himself, “no guy is going to discuss it with his friends every time he wants to kiss a girl, especially not someone like Jas! I wish

Rabbit would go a little easy on him.”

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

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

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

For a second Rupert wasn’t sure what he meant. Then it dawned on him that arriving in the palace of the underwater Emperor strapped to a sea person who was obliged to drag him along like a dead weight wasn’t going to add to his status in anyone’s eyes. He glanced back at Barney and realized that he had foreseen this problem. “Thanks,” said Rupert. “I’ll take it from here. In fact... Jasper, Aden, Rabbit!” he called. “I’m thinking we might like to swim the rest of the way. We’re going to be arriving at the palace shortly and...well...I thought it might look better if we arrived under our own steam.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh no!” said Barney who still floated next to him. “The shells close at night. The pearls need sleep of their own!” Seeing Rupert’s face, Barney explained, “Ahhh! I’ve heard about your world - dead pearls! I thought they were just making that up! You won’t find anything like that here; our pearls are alive - and often bad tempered in my opinion! - so be careful what you say and to who! You’ll find your toes nibbled in ways you don’t like if you offend them! And the Pearl Pathway of Light is honored amongst the sea-people, so treat it with respect or you’ll find they can be heavy handed!”

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

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

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

“How do you know who I am?” asked Aden.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Don't be afraid, Rabbit, it's going to be fine. Be respectful - but don't let

them intimidate you.” Aniel squeezed Rabbit’s hands then swam up to the arch.

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

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

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

And then there was only Rabbit.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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