

The Spectra Uprooted

The Spectra Uprooted

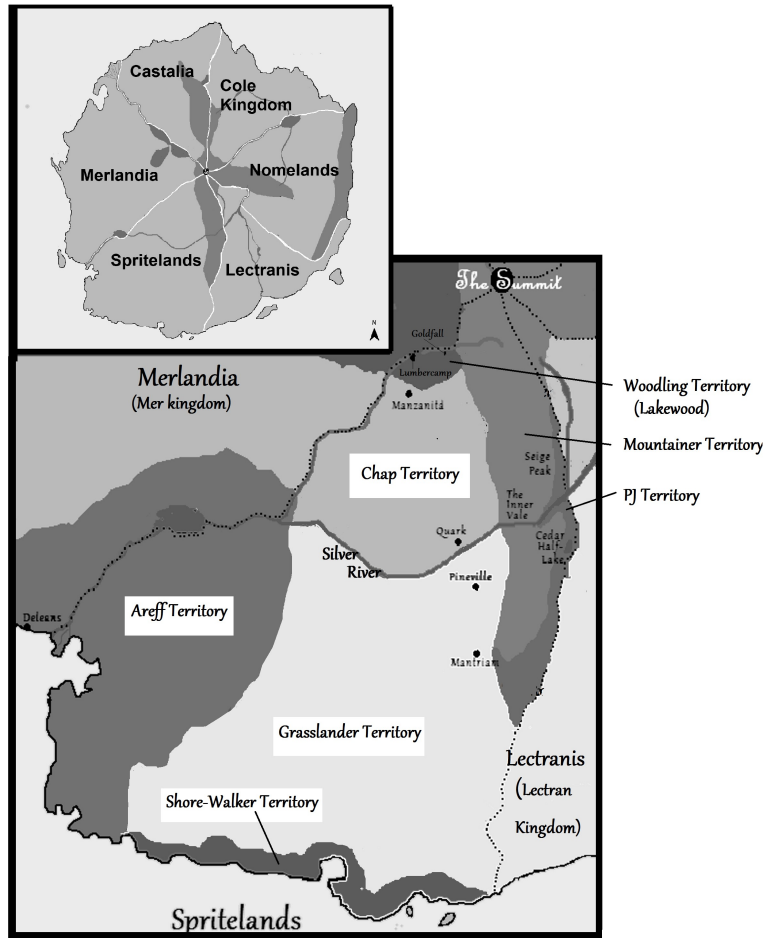


Christie Valentine Powell

Copyright © 2017 Christie Powell

Map of Spritelands

and tribal territories



Chapter 1: Equinum

Keita Sage wondered why she felt alone among people who looked so much like herself. She stood among a crowd, watching two men wrestle atop a wooden stage. Their skin glistened under the autumn sun. The moves were unfamiliar, and her thoughts wandered to other festivals lost to time.

The crowd's cheer made her whip around. One of the men had fallen. The other jumped on top of him and wrapped his well-muscled arm around the other's neck.

Keita lurched forward to help. The crowd ignored her, still cheering, as the man's frantic squirming slowed. She'd almost reached the front when he fell limp against the wood. The crowd roared its approval, and a green cast spread up his skin.

She stopped.

Of course. He had gone dormant. He would wake up in less than an hour, embarrassed but unharmed. Keita had been away from home too long. If the man had been born into one of the other five clans he would be dead, but Sprites healed fast in sunlight.

The crowd dispersed and Keita caught only one more glimpse of the hurt man, his skin now bright green, being dragged from the stage.

For three seasons she had traveled through other kingdoms, other clans, other cultures. She ought to feel at home, but prairie grass stretched across the land unmindful of the Spriteland-Lectranis border. A small grove of cottonwoods sheltered the company, no different than the trees that shaded Lectran waterways. At least the people were Sprites. They were her height—short among humans but average for Spectra. They wore their dark hair loose, their skin was a maple red-brown, and their clothes had the sheen of leafskin. Because these were of a different Sprite tribe, grasslanders instead of mountainers, the cloth had a yellow-green cast.

Flute music drifted from the clearing where couples danced. Their bare feet thumped the earth in enticing patterns. In their speech and movement and in more undefinable ways the Sprite band showed their allegiance to each other. From babies to childlings to children, adlings like Keita to full adults, they formed a tight-knit community that she was not part of. They couldn't reject her on Equinum, the autumn equinox, but her strangeness fit like a garment she could not remove.

This was not what she expected when she left her companions. They were her friends, but the group was too large, too noisy, too busy. They weren't interested in celebrating Equinum and even her twin brother ignored

her attempts to organize an event or two. Finding a local group without them had been her only option.

"Had food yet?"

A round, friendly-faced man offered a turtle-shell bowl of thick stew. A refusal was halfway out Keita's mouth when she remembered to bite it back. Not today.

"Thank you," she said. Her hands shook as she took the bowl.

"Name's Bract. I do food for the childlings... and all else, for my three." He pointed to a trio of youngsters in the branches of the nearest tree. Bract waited, perhaps for Keita to introduce herself, but she said nothing. At last he asked, "This your first meal in a season?"

"Thereabouts," Keita said. Her last meal had been just like this. The day was cold but crystal clear, and the stew sat warm in her stomach. Trees towered over their valley home, unscathed by the fire of future weeks. Her father—strong, busy, alive—threaded through crowds while dancers proved that though winter came and Earth slept, life would come again. Now the whole valley slept, and Keita had been gone three seasons. Nine months. No food.

The man was watching. Keita attempted to smile as she scooped a square of root vegetable into her mouth.

Warmth. Crunch. Salt. Savor of summer richness, of festivals gone by, of happy days that would never come back. The bowl slipped from her fingers and

thudded to the ground. Warm gravy splattered her toes. The children gasped, and Bract's eyes widened. Waste of food was sin.

Keita ducked to rescue it, lost her balance, and found herself on hands and knees in leaf litter. Her head spun and her stomach contracted with pain. She heaved, heaved again. Someone's hands had her shoulders, pushed her to a sitting position, and leaned her against rough bark. She took a deep breath and, as the pain ebbed a fraction, looked at Bract's face.

"We eat each festival for a reason, adling," he said. "You skipped. I can tell."

A meal was an important part of the season transitions. It showed that they could not escape their connection to the world, that even Earth's people depended on the web that connected all life. She hadn't realized the meal was more than symbolic. She ought to have known. She ought to have known a lot of things, but knowledge was scarce when your childhood tutor worked for the enemy.

Bract handed the bowl back. "Ease into it," he said. "A bit of gravy to start."

A bit of gravy was all that remained, clinging to the sides of the bowl. Keita scraped a finger against one side and licked it off. Still warm, still overwhelming, but it remained inside and the pain was not quite so bitter. She cleaned the bowl and then handed it back. She wanted to

get up and walk away, leave these people who had seen her weakness, but her head still buzzed and she didn't think she could support herself.

"I'm going to eat even when I get my powers," one childling, the only girl, announced.

"Me too," answered the oldest, a dark-eyed boy.

All three laughed. Keita didn't understand why until Bract said, "Crossover."

"Ah." He wasn't a childling then, just a child with different abilities. Occasionally children with characteristics of the other six clans were born to Sprites. This boy's darker features said he was probably a Mer like the water-people to the north. He sat among the other children and no one even glanced his way. No snubbing or scorning, like foreigners were treated in the Lectran kingdom. No threats, no concealment, no abandonment or killing like the Nomes did with their crossover children. In this way at least, she had come home.

A shrill whistle broke the moment. Somewhere out of sight, a Sprite screamed. The color drained from Bract's face.

Keita leapt to her feet. At least, she tried. It turned into an awkward lunge that left her standing, but with her feet splayed for balance.

The children jumped from their perches and landed in a puff of dust. The smallest boy gripped Bract's arm.

"Don't leave us, Papa!"

"What is going on?" Keita demanded.

"No time. Watch them!" Bract said, and before his words had even registered in Keita's mind he had dashed up the steep bank and was gone.

She took a step after him, but her legs wobbled and she had to stop. "He made a poor choice of guardian," she muttered.

The young girl peered after her father. Keita couldn't stop her if she ran off. The Mer crossover had his arm around his younger brother.

At least she could sense what was going on. Keita leaned back against the cottonwood and closed her eyes. She let her mind relax until she felt the connection with living things. She felt the tree behind her, its roots intertwining with other trees, sheltering grubs and mice and other small burrowing things. The children still huddled together, though the girl now faced her. Keita expanded her range over the ridge into the long prairie grass, and then she felt the other Sprites. Bract was the only one she knew by name, but she'd been among the group long enough to recognize that only two were newcomers. These were running hard. Soon they were gone.

Keita opened her eyes.

"Well?" the girl demanded. "What'd you sense?"

"There were two strangers, but they're gone now.

The others are still chasing them."

"Good."

"Do you know who they were?"

"Raiders."

A Lectran, or any of Keita's friends, would have explained properly. Keita tried again. "And raiders do what?"

"Collect tokens."

"And those are...?"

"Ears."

Keita blanched. She'd heard of the practice of cutting off ears as proof of victory. The ears would grow back, of course, but nobody would allow it unless they'd gone dormant. Her grand-uncle had outlawed the practice years ago, but the new king, her cousin Felix, wouldn't mind. Not after he'd killed her father and stolen the throne.

"Do you know why they collect tokens?"

"It shows they're good fighters. The king likes good fighters. They help him and he keeps their friends safe." Her voice had a ring of pride in it, and Keita suspected she had found her information through forbidden means. The king keeping people safe, that was all nonsense. Felix didn't help people. He destroyed them.

"Papa's coming," the smallest boy announced.

Keita heard trudging footsteps before Bract came into view. His face sagged, his breath heavy. The signs

weren't obvious, but for a stoic Sprite they meant trouble. "I felt the two raiders," she said.

"Six to start with."

Keita blanched. "You don't mean you killed..."

"Killed. Yes. Not just sent dormant. Killed. It was mostly Bailey Avena. An adling tracker. Good boy. Took down three before they got him. I shouldn't've finished off the fourth one, but... Bailey!"

Keita edged backward, fighting a much worse pain in her stomach. This man had killed. Five Sprites—or more—lay dead. And on Equinum!

"Two got away," Bract said. "I should be gladder of it. We freed a prisoner of theirs, but they're off telling other raiders where we are. We'll have to..." He glanced at his children and stopped. Three pairs of eyes were wide with fear. "We'll be all right," he said. "Want to meet our new guest? You'll be surprised."

"What new guest?" the crossover boy demanded.

"What new guest?" his tiny brother echoed.

The girl didn't say anything. She was squinting at her father as though she could make him continue his earlier conversation.

"Come on," Bract said. He began walking down the bottomlands and they all fell in line. Sprites crowded into a clearing ahead, but they parted for Bract and his children and Keita slipped in behind them.

A young woman perched on a stump in the center.

Her bright blue dress stood out like a beacon among the greens and browns. It emphasized her darker features, and Keita was not surprised that male adlings pressed closest to her. Her face seemed calm, but Keita knew her well enough to see she was uncomfortable. Sprites would see nervousness as a sign of weakness. Azura Neried, Zuri for short, had been studying Sprite culture with more zeal than the others, and with good reason—if their plan succeeded, she would one day be queen of Keita's kingdom. She tried not to think about that.

Zuri's huge eyes darted through the clearing. Then they met Keita's and stopped. Her shoulders relaxed, and the tension leached from her muscles. "Oh, Keita!" she called. "Keita Sage, I am so glad to see you!"

Keita winced. A second later, Zuri realized what she had done and threw a hand over her mouth. The grasslanders' eyes left her and pinned Keita to the new center of their circle. Her name became a breeze rustling through the crowd.

"You're right, Papa," Bract's daughter said. "I *am* surprised."

Bract didn't even smile. His gaze moved from Keita to Zuri. "You're that Merlandia princess. Betrothed to the former prince?"

A smile played about Zuri's lips, but Keita did not like his emphasis on 'former'.

"That's why you've got your ears." He examined the

two girls. "Quite a bounty on the old royals. Enough for our whole village."

"If you think Felix will keep any sort of promise..." Keita burst out, but the ring of spectators closed in. Vice-like hands grasped her arms, her shoulders, pushing into her back. "Bract!" she shouted over the noise. "It's Equinumn!"

Her captors' hands hesitated. Then Bract raised his hands and the noise quieted. He must have been more important than she realized.

"She's right," he said. "No violence on Equinumn." His face did not change, but Keita remembered the raider he had killed. He'd blamed it on revenge for a comrade, as though that made it any better. She stepped toward Zuri, ready to disappear the moment the grasslanders made room, but Bract hadn't finished.

"You celebrate with us," he said. "At sunrise, the truce is over."

Chapter 2: Raiders

Keita stood stunned as the crowd dismantled. The grasslanders no longer gripped her arms, but she felt eyes watching her every move. She'd been chased by Lectran thugs and Nome soldiers, but she thought Sprites were different. Holding her and Zuri captive on Equinumn was unthinkable no matter how Bract phrased it. How had Felix changed her people so quickly?

"I'm sorry."

Though Zuri spoke quietly, Sprite ears might pick up her words. Keita tried to signal this but her friend didn't seem to notice. "I shouldn't have yelled your name. It's so obvious now what a dumb thing it was. I knew there'd be a reward out for us, there always is..."

True, the girls had encountered bounties before, but they shouldn't have found one in Spritelands. They had planted rumors that they were still hiding in Lectranis, the Lectran kingdom. If Felix set bounties as a precaution only, he would find out soon that they'd crossed the border.

"You couldn't have known they'd turn on us," Keita said.

"Yes, especially on Equinumn, but that's no excuse for not thinking!"

More proof that Zuri had been studying Sprite culture.

"I was so relieved to see you," she went on. "I couldn't find my way in the tall grass! Those awful raiders found me and I was sure they would take me to Felix... and Keita., they had *ears*!"

Despite herself, Keita shuddered. "Tokens," she said. "Felix will protect your family if you show him enough of them." How many ears were she and Zuri worth?

"Protect your family from people like themselves?"

"Exactly." Acting on Felix's threat forced it to come true. Why couldn't others see that? If all the Sprites stopped raiding, they wouldn't need protection. They wouldn't need to betray their princess or capture visitors on Equinum. And why would anyone trust Felix? Because of her sabotaging tutor, she hadn't known what a Stygian was until she met the other royal heirs, but other Sprites ought to have at least heard of them. Felix and the other four Stygians had taken unbreakable oaths and committed a royal sacrifice. In return, they'd gained the abilities of all six clans—Coles, Nomes, Lectrans, Sprites, Mers, and Muses—making them nearly invulnerable.

Zuri seemed to calm down. "I wouldn't wear one myself, but I like the look of those sashes with your leafskin clothes." She pointed to a group of adults, who

wore a dark green sash around their middles. “Why don’t you make yourself one?”

Keita stiffened. “Excuse me?”

“I’m sorry. Did I...”

“You know lots about Spritelands, but you don’t know that?”

Zuri shrugged.

“Only adults wear sashes. They’re gifted from an older relative when you reach adulthood. So no, I can’t make myself one. I have to wait until someone gives one to me—and that’s only after proving I’m an adult, which I obviously haven’t done yet.” She’d pondered before what she might do to earn one, what niche she might fill and how she could prove she’d matured. She’d also worried about who would give her one when her parents were missing and her other relatives dead or captured.

Zuri must not have noticed her mood. She pointed to Bract’s children. “But don’t the kids wear sashes?”

“Just childlings who can’t make leafskin yet. And parents give them those too.”

A change had come upon the bustling Sprites. Most were climbing out of the hollow. Keita opened her mind to her surroundings. The rodents, the insects, the bigger creatures all appeared to her searching mind. She expanded her range and the other Sprites captured her attention. The group was moving northward. Most of them crept along the tops of ridges, while mothers and

childlings kept to the lows. Keita admired the organization before she returned her attention to Zuri. "They're leaving."

"Will they force us to come with them?" Zuri whispered.

"Depends how you look at it," a voice answered. Both girls whirled. An adling boy had drawn near. Keita recognized him as one of the boys who had been trying to impress Zuri earlier, though now his cocky stare examined them both.

"All right, let's hear it," Keita said. "How are you justifying this?"

His eyes smiled though his lips did not. "We've seen raiders in the area, raiders who know who you are. For your own protection, you'll have to come with us."

"We'd be safer alone. Groups are easier to track," Keita countered.

"Easier to track, also easier to defend."

"In which case we're doing you a favor."

"Exactly. It's a win-win situation."

Zuri looked from one to the other. At last she burst out, "You call this a win-win situation?! Your leaders want to sell us to Felix! Do I have to remind you that Felix wants to kill us?"

The boy stiffened. His eyes narrowed—in annoyance? Regret? Keita felt both, for she had forgotten, just for a moment, the broken truce.

"I'm s'posed to guard Keita so she can concentrate on sensing. Mountainers like her have a better sensing range than us."

"Why would she help you?" Zuri demanded.

"Because I don't want the raiders to find us," Keita said quietly. Then she turned back to the boy. "I'll help, but I hope you're proud of your people."

He stiffened. "Grasslanders don't all..."

Keita turned her back on him.

"Who's the Grasslander leader?" Zuri asked. "We ought to appeal to him."

Keita rolled her eyes. "There isn't one. At least, not in the way you're thinking."

"I don't understand."

"Sprite tribes are not the same as Spectra clans. It's just regional differences—little things like sensing ranges and the shade of their leafskin. There's no special organization with regions and governors and all that stuff. Even the king's not universally obeyed."

Zuri frowned. "If the tribes aren't important, why did I have to memorize them?"

"I didn't say unimportant," Keita protested, but Zuri still looked annoyed. She ought to be grateful, Keita thought. Her friend had received the best tutors in all sorts of useful subjects. She wasn't the heir, or even the oldest, yet she'd prepared to be a leader. Keita had prepared for adulthood too, but her goal of becoming an

ordinary Sprite had died seasons ago.

As they began to walk, Keita opened her mind. How comforting to ignore everything going wrong. She reached further and further until she reached the end of her half-mile range. The Spectra stood out but she focused on the other living things: songbirds, a prairie dog colony, a weasel slipping through the understory of a grass forest.

The Sprite boy must have done a good job, for she was interrupted only once. A small voice cut across her concentration. "Are you really Keita Sage, the princess?"

Bract's daughter had pronounced her name differently, Keeta instead of Kayta, but she nodded anyway.

"I knew it!" the girl said. "My name's Keita too. I was named after you!"

"Not the way your dad tells it," the guard boy said. "Anyway, she says it wrong."

"I do not!" Keita said. "It's a modern pronunciation, but Mother liked it." Actually Keita had hated its similarity to the human name Kate, a fact her little sister took full advantage of, but these traitorous grasslanders had no right to criticize anything. Her mother, a Lectran royal before her marriage, was more comfortable with humans than most Sprites. She'd disappeared during the takeover, when Felix took the Sprite throne at the same

moment his Stygian cronies attacked the other kingdoms. Keita hoped someone in Spritelands would have news of her mother.

"Are you sensing?" the boy asked.

"Mind your own business!" Keita snapped, but she returned to feeling for danger.

They traveled several hours before the sun reached the horizon, a straight line of grass and sky. Then they stopped in a hollow like the one Keita had found them in, though this was smaller and without a pond. Many of the Sprites reappeared from the tall grass. As soon as their guard was out of sight, Zuri sidled up to Keita. "If you can escape, don't hold back on my account," she whispered.

Keita half-smiled. "I have done that several times, but this isn't one of them." Among the other kingdoms she was faster, stronger, able to squeeze through tiny holes or fly over any wall. Here, she was ordinary.

Zuri's face fell. "I hoped you could bring help. What do we do now?"

Keita shook her head and mouthed the words, "Wait for nightfall." None of the grasslanders seemed to be listening, but she suspected them anyway. She suspected everyone.

Bract's crossover son paced across the little vale while a trio of grown men watched his every move. Keita was still trying to guess what they were doing

when the boy stopped and pointed down. Two of the men dropped and began to tear up grass and roots by the handful. The third stood bare-chested in the last of the sunlight. His body shimmered and then began to change. He dropped to the ground, hair growing across his skin. Keita caught a glimpse of a furry face with a white blaze pointing to sharp teeth. Badger, she realized. None lived in her mountain home but she'd seen them in Lectranis.

Zuri had seen too. "He found the best spot for a well," she said. "I guess Sprites know how to take advantage of crossovers instead of abuse them."

"Nomes are weird," Keita answered. "Crossovers do fine in the other kingdoms they occur in."

"They would be welcomed in Merlandia. It's too bad we can't have them—I think it would be cool."

Unsurprising, Keita thought, for a Mer betrothed to a Sprite, but she didn't say it aloud. Neither did she point out that Mers could have crossovers in taboo marriages. Zuri changed the subject whenever Keita tried to explain inheritance patterns.

Other Sprites pressed their hands to the earth. Trees shot out of the ground. Branches and leaves reached skyward with exaggerated speed. Before sunset the whole vale was shaded by cottonwoods. The trees grew naturally along waterways, so they didn't look out of place, and they would provide shelter and lookouts for the village. Keita's family grew temporary shelters the

same way when they traveled, with pines and maples instead of cottonwoods.

As the sky grew dark, the others found space on the ground. Many grew willow bushes around their own patch for privacy. Keita considered doing the same, but the seed collection hidden in a sealed pocket on her leafskin dress contained no willows. Instead she reached for the nearest cottonwood. It sent up baby trees from its roots in a waist-high circle. She grinned and crouched inside of it. Zuri followed but she did not seem impressed by the accommodations.

"Can we talk now?" she whispered.

The trees rustled and then Bract loomed over them. "You're not planning to spend all night here," he said.

The girls looked at each other but said nothing.

"Don't try. We could have you spend the night dormant, you know."

"You wouldn't do that." The words escaped before Keita had thought them through, but she meant them. He'd been so nice to her when she'd collapsed. He took care of his kids—alone, as far as she could tell. He wasn't the sort to...

"I killed a man on Equinumn," Bract said.

Keita flinched. A faint smile played on his mouth as though he enjoyed her reaction. Though Sprites fought often, they rarely killed. Forcing dormancy was enough. Even Talon, the combative king before Keita's father,

honored the Equinumn truce.

Without a word Keita began weaving branches for a sleeping platform off the cold ground. The trees faded into blackness so that only the stars appeared between branches. Even without sight she sensed Bract with his back to a tree, face set in their direction. Sprites avoided night activity if they could help it; they had to rely on stored energy until dawn. She'd used less energy than Bract today. She could outlast him. Keita lay still, pretending to sleep, fighting a hint of fuzz in the back of her brain. This would be a long night.

As she waited she sensed the rest of the group. Most of the grasslanders huddled inside groves. Guards stood around the camp, but the gap between Bract and the next guards was larger than the others. She ought to be relieved, ought to be pleased that she had only one to deal with, but she couldn't help noticing how much trust they placed on Bract's skills.

Once she sat up to look around. The hollow and the darkness hid the world from view but she made out Bract's shape against paler bark. He shifted—not a lot, but enough to let her know he was watching.

The wind rustled the leaves of her baby trees. From where she lay they seemed as tall as their elders. Cold crept into the air, requiring more energy to keep herself warm. Surrounded by trees, in Spritelands, memories ambushed her: a family outing to Cordon Peak, a

campout with her visiting cousins, eavesdropping on lessons from her aunt. She tried to shake them off. Brian had warned her—in awkward detail—that coming home would trigger memories. At the time she'd dismissed this as sentimental

Keita sensed her surroundings, then stiffened and tried again. Bract had slumped, his head crooked against his shoulder. She smiled her triumph and whispered, "Now we can talk."

No answer. Zuri was a mound of darkness except for a blade of grass entwined in her thick black braid. Keita poked her arm.

Her friend shot up. "What time is it?"

"No idea. Let's get out of here."

"Right now?"

"Did you want to wait for daylight?"

"Of course not, but... we ought to have a plan, don't you think?"

"I do have a plan. Run out of their range and rejoin the others. Now come on."

Zuri sputtered, but Keita didn't give her friend time to argue. She rose to her feet, feeling the cold through her bare feet, and slipped through their tiny grove. The camp was a city of shadows, filled with faint breath and breezes that rustled the tops of the trees. She waited for Zuri to reach her side and then climbed the shallow slope.

At the top, they stopped. The fields of grass stretched to the horizon, its edges glowing silver in the quarter moon. Without the cottonwoods, their view of the stars stretched into eternity. The Great Mountains were a jagged edge of black on the eastern horizon. And in between the girls and the mountains, a faint orange light glowed.

Fire.

Sprites were afraid of it—Keita especially, after traumatic experiences. Sprites didn't travel at night, but that was the wrong direction to be their friends. She squinted, and then closed her eyes to sense. She felt them at once. Many, too many to count, running faster than any non-Sprite.

"Get up!" she screamed. "Everyone, get up! Raiders are coming!"

Zuri flinched. "Keita, we have to go! Let the raiders and these grasslanders both..."

Keita shook her head. "Safety in numbers."

"But if we..."

A pair of men burst from from the grass, brandishing torches. Their faces glowed orange in the light, their eyes black hollows. Zuri screamed. She lost her balance and toppled into the grass. Keita ducked as a guard swung a jagged knife. Then Bract was there, with several villagers after him. His face matched the raiders' in animal ferocity. An arrow from somewhere out of

sight drove into his gut. Keita leapt forward and pulled it out. The wound closed over, slower than it would have done in proper light. He nodded his thanks and then raised a thick staff. Keita shrank back as the other Sprites surged forward. She'd never been a fighter.

Another raider burst from the grass before her. She ducked his first blow, then struck his arm before he could slash again. He dropped the knife but the impact sent her sliding down the slope. She hesitated in the hollow but the raider charged after her. She saw the animal look in his eye and realized what she had to do. She was no fighter, but she could tap into other instincts.

Her body changed too fast, releasing white light through the darkness. She heard men cry as it burned their eyes. Then her great bear claws gripped the matted grass. Smells sharpened.

Her eyes fastened on the raider. She charged, teeth bared. Her paw swiped moving flesh. The smell of blood joined the sea of smoke and fear. Screaming stopped. His skin darkened. Alive, but no longer a threat.

Screams came up from the hollow. Her instinct said to flee the commotion. She did not. The air was heavy with smoke, stinging her eyes, clogging her nose. Black shapes in the smoke could be friend or foe. Was the enemy raider or traitor?

The ground rumbled. She should know what that meant—what did that mean? Then a wall of water

erupted from the ground. The shock broke her concentration, and she found herself on hands and knees in a puddle. Zuri was next to her, her legs trembling but her face determined. She favored one shoulder which seemed lopsided—dislocated, Keita realized.

Their eyes met. A strange feeling of connection passed over her. Zuri's shoulder repaired itself with an audible pop. The water crept up Keita's body, shielding it from the flames. For minutes, hours, perhaps eternities, they stood still among the commotion, centered by walls of water. Any weapons that tried to reach through were swept away. Any damage to the girls' bodies healed instantly, though it left Keita trembling in the darkness.

The first beams of sunlight appeared from behind the mountains. Zuri let her walls drop. Keita faced the sun as new strength poured into her body. The commotion had ebbed. The grasslanders around her turned eastward with the same eagerness. Some lifted their dormant companions out of the grass's shadow. In the sunlight their green skin faded to brown, and then they were awake and joining the search.

"Our chance of escape is gone," Zuri said, "but we kept our ears."

The girls had found out seasons ago that they could unify—conjure a connection so strong that they shared their defenses. If members of all six clans unified

together, they created a spectrum, so powerful that even Stygians could not stand against it. The royal exiles had come to Spritelands to face Felix, believing they could harness that power. No Lectran would leave their kingdom to join them, but Lectran crossovers lived in Spritelands. Keita did not dare voice her hope but her mother, missing since the Stygians took over, was a Lectran too.

"Where's Zea?"

"Has anyone seen Feldan?"

The grasslanders were sorting themselves into family groups. Once they had found everyone they huddled together, not speaking, just holding each other close. Keita's heart clenched. This reminded her too much of the Stygian takeover. Some of the royal heirs had escaped to the Summit, a walled enclosure that no Stygian could enter. They trickled in one by one, reporting what they knew until the survivors understood the scope of the attacks that had destroyed their homes and families.

Bract tore past, nearly knocking Keita over. "Bracken's not here!" he screamed. "Help me look!"

Keita closed her eyes.

"I already sensed! Don't think I didn't..."

"He's the crossover, isn't he?"

"So what if he is? If you think that makes one bit of difference..."

"Not to his worth, of course," Zuri said. She strode to the pool and raised her hands. The water parted, showing a small muddy boy at the bottom. "It does make a difference to his hiding spot."

Bract lurched past them and yanked the boy from the mud. He held the squirming body against his chest, his face nestled in the boy's black hair. A tear leaked down one cheek. Somehow a hundred other stories of finding and losing were woven into that hug. Keita turned away, but she heard Bract whisper, "We've got to reach the safe camp."

How could she fault him for clinging to any hope of a safe place?

Chapter 3: The Earthmarked Grove

Keita forced herself to walk as the girls wandered on into the prairie. The other Sprites still milled about, still consumed with worry and shock, but running would have called instant attention to the escape. She was the key to their safe camp, and her words could not convince them otherwise. They would not change unless they turned her in and saw for themselves the atrocities Felix was capable of, and then it would be too late for all of them.

If only her friends were here. The Coles, Carli and Griffin, controlled heat. They'd scare off these grasslanders in a heartbeat. Keita peered across the endless expanse of grass. She had to call for the others anyway to find them. She pictured her brother, somewhere south, and thought his name.

No answer.

Not surprising. He had to be out of her siblink range. All Spectra siblings could communicate mind-to-mind, but most were limited to a short range. Keita had one other option. Her friendship with Brian, the Muse in their group, meant that she could unify with his communication abilities—and unlike the other clans, Muses weren't bounded by distance. Useful, but she'd

been avoiding it lately. Not only because he would surely disapprove of her sneaking off, but somehow that new part of her life didn't seem to mesh with the old one.

She didn't see another option now. She took a deep breath and thought of Brian. Immediately his voice rang in her head. *We haven't seen you for days! Where are you?*

I don't know exactly. Further than a mile, or I could reach Glen.

She felt his annoyed sigh. At her not knowing? More likely because she'd tried her brother first. *We had a... disagreement with grasslanders. We're leaving them now. So far they haven't seen us, but... we ought to get back to you sooner than later...* She was trying to use filtered language, which was difficult in mind-to-mind communication. Words she didn't want to share tended to slip out.

Can you tell us where you are? Brian asked.

Keita stared across the plain. How did grasslanders find their way around? She couldn't tell him any landmarks or road names. She hadn't realized that returning to her friends would be difficult, although maybe she ought to have known when Zuri got lost. Zuri would not have wandered from the group on purpose, not if Glen was in it.

Brian must have read something into her silence.

You can come find us. We're on a ridge with lots of grass.

Keita snorted. Zuri gave her a strange look, so Keita repeated the comment. Zuri laughed too. "What about Sienna's sense of direction?" Zuri asked.

"Brian says that Sienna says... this is going to give me a headache. Anyway, Sienna says that they are twenty-three and a quarter miles to the north of where I left them."

"That's not much use either, is it?"

"Not at all."

They pushed through the tall grass. The prairies might be nice for a visit, Keita thought, but Earth made her for mountains. The land seemed flat from a distance, but it rolled and dipped under the grass, so subtle that you couldn't tell until you noticed your legs tiring. From the highest rises the circle of prairie seemed to expand.

"I asked one of the men where the raiders are supposed to turn in their tokens," Zuri said. "They report to Felix at Cedar Half-lake."

Keita stopped in her tracks. "He said... Zuri, why didn't you tell me earlier?"

"Is that important? I mean, of course it is, we need to know where Felix is, but... you actually know this place?"

"I've seen heard of it. Now hurry."

Keita set off again, shoving grass aside. Zuri

struggled behind her. “What’s wrong with... that place? Is it... PJ territory?”

Their group had traveled miles south to avoid the PJ tribe, where Felix's influence was strongest. Zuri had known, without Keita or Glen telling her, all about the schism between the PJ and mountainer tribes—a trait Glen found endearing and Keita unsettling.

“Yes, it’s in PJ territory,” Keita called over her shoulder. “It’s also right on the Lectran-Spriteland border—across from the city-region of Telosa and less than fifty miles from my sister’s court.”

Zuri paled. “Then this army of his... he means to attack Lectranis, doesn’t he?”

“That’s my guess.”

Felix had sent troops to find the royal exiles in Lectranis. He’d called them back when the royal family regained power, but Keita had no doubt he’d try again. The kingdom was still recovering from the Stygian attacks, when its northern cities had been demolished. Keita had family, including her little sister, in Lectranis. She would not allow another war there.

“We’re far enough from the grasslanders. We can run now,” she said.

Zuri sped up. At least, her breath came faster and the grass rustled more. Keita couldn’t take more than three running strides before her friend fell behind and she had to wait. Too slow. Just like last time. Always,

too slow.

Seasons ago, Brian and his brothers had helped her discovered the Stygians' plans. They warned their older brothers, scattered among the kingdoms, but Keita's link with her siblings was bound by distance. While the boys organized escapes from a safe distance, she was running, running until every step was a clap of thunder shaking her body. One hundred and fifty miles was a meaningless number, time was meaningless, nothing existed but the fact that her home was in danger and she must reach it.

She was too late. Long before she arrived, she saw the pillar of black smoke like an arrow against the pale winter sky. She ran until the smoke threading through snow-frosted trees stung her. She'd been far short of her goal when she met Glen in horse form, his flanks streaked with sweat and soot, carrying Zuri and Avie to safety. She'd taken Avie halfway to the Summit, then turned back. Her father was crammed among rocks, blistered, injured, dying. She'd only glimpsed Felix, framed by flames that consumed the innocent trees. All that running, all that pain, and she was too late. Too slow.

"Can you... sense again?" Zuri panted.

Keita rolled her eyes. Zuri had to be asking so that she could rest. The prairie behind them was full of peaceful sounds: the swaying grasses and the buzzing

chirps of blackbirds. The cottonwood hollow was far beyond Keita's sensing range. She shrugged and then closed her eyes to concentrate.

They snapped open. "Move!" Keita cried.

Zuri's moved a little faster. "What is it?"

"Bract."

She stumbled. "How?"

"I don't know. I don't think he can sense us yet, but he's headed this way."

"If I'd known... how my life... would go... I'd have trained... as a runner," Zuri panted.

Keita said nothing. She she would have picked up a lot of skills had she known: fighting, healing, Sprite history, not freezing up when you had to hurt someone...

They climbed a rise, and the gentle rolls and dips of the prairie reappeared. Keita saw no trail they might have left, but grasslanders might have different skills than her. She scowled and added 'tracking' to her list. Ahead, a smear of dark green caught her attention. Another wooded hollow, though too dark for cottonwoods. She headed toward it. If they had to face Bract, she'd rather be in a familiar environment.

Cold. Wet. Her foot sank into the ground and she was falling. She landed in thick mud that glued her in place while the inch of pure water on top exploded in a shower that peppered every inch of her. Zuri stopped a few feet away and eyed the thick mud. "Do you need my

help?” she asked.

Keita wrenched herself from the mud. It clung to her clothes and skin, coated her feet in muck that was already drying. “I’m fine,” she said. “Come on.” She started to run, but the layer of mud chipped off in tiny bits, sending clods raining around her. She settled for a fast walk beside Zuri, who did not seem to mind the pace.

“What was that?” she asked.

“Bosent wallow, I think.”

Keita had often seen herds in the distance in Lectranis, where the flat prairie allowed them to see for miles. She froze as a new thought entered her mind. Bract didn’t have to sense them. He could see from miles and miles away. Keita tried to speed them on, but the caked mud made her skin itch and tingle.

At last she could bear it no more. “Will you spray this stuff off?”

Zuri collapsed. The grass grew right above her head, hiding her from view. That might help, Keita thought, and crouched down beside her. “I can... clean you... from down here,” Zuri said. She raised her arms. Freezing water shot from the ground below Keita’s feet, spraying her skin. Clods of mud plopped to the ground beneath them. At last her skin was clear, raw but warming to the sun’s caress.

“Thanks.”

From their hiding spot, Keita could see no more than a foot in any direction. She sensed Bract, still marching through the grass but angling too far westward. Zuri needed the rest, she decided, and leaned back among the stems. Equinumn was over. On the day after, if this were a normal year, preparations for the Summit Council would begin. She mentioned this to Zuri.

“Yes,” Zuri said softly. “I remember.”

Every year, Father and Glen met with the other kings and heirs, and Glen would return with exciting stories about people and places Keita didn’t know. Two years ago he had reported that a new Mer princess had come. Last year, Keita had gone instead to prepare for an unwanted betrothal. This year, the Summit was empty.

“Eight more days,” Zuri added.

“What?”

“In eight more days, we’ll have been betrothed for a year. That’s the minimum before marriage, you know.”

Now that was a strange thought. Keita would be preparing to become a Muse princess—and one day its queen. Her family would be alive and well, yet she wouldn’t see them. She wouldn’t have seen the Nomelands, or most of Lectranis, or even Spritelands beyond the Inner Vale. She wouldn’t have seen her little sister rise to become the hero of Lectranis, wouldn’t

have met her mother's relatives or played with abandoned crossovers in the Nomelands. How strange, Keita thought, that she had so many positives after such a horrific event. Turning away from complicated thoughts, Keita closed her eyes to sense.

Bract was making a beeline toward them, faster than either girl could run. He had to be sensing them now.

"Get up!" Keita screamed. "Now!"

The girls scrambled forward. They had reached the top of a little rise, and the dark grove lay at the bottom.

A yellow-green streak shot around them. Bract stopped between them and the grove. He eyed Zuri's heaving chest with amusement. "Hoped you'd be worn out," he said. Then he looked at Keita and added, "Should have figured on you slowing for your friend."

"Even if I was tired, you couldn't drag both of us off on your own," Keita retorted.

He raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

Something tickled her calf. She stamped, but it didn't go away. Puzzled, she looked down.

Grass was twining up her legs, snaking around her like a sentient animal. Zuri screamed, but Keita couldn't help her. She yanked back. The grass rhizomes sliced her skin before they broke. Her left leg was still caught. She kicked, lost her balance, and fell into blades that writhed like a carpet of snakes. She caught a glimpse of

Bract's hands brushing the grass. Rage coursed over her. She bolted, scrambling with every ounce of strength. For a second the tightening grass scraped against her, but then she was free, running, running through grass that tried to hold her back. The earth swayed everywhere she looked, no surface safe. Her eye caught on the hollow below. The second's hesitation cost her; a stem wound around her calf. She lost her balance but her momentum carried her down, sliding, rubbing across leaves like razors. She reached bare ground, and everything changed.

The grass was gone.

The bare earth was cool, the light dappled. Her body had come to rest against the trunk of a great tree. Keita didn't recognize it. The bark was smooth, reddish-brown. Mist filtered through the grove, turning further trees into shadows.

The grass ought to reach, yet a sharp line divided the grove from the prairie. Snaking rhizomes pushed only a few inches into the shade. Up the hill, Bract had frozen. His eyes were huge, fixed on the trees. He did not stir as Zuri slipped past him. Mist played around her skin in little swirls. She leaned over to examine odd splotches on the nearest trunk, a trio of ovals somewhat leaf-shaped. Keita stiffened and whirled around. The splotches were everywhere, on every tree, in the same pattern.

Grass rustled. Bract had fled. He would not be welcome here.

“What is it?” Zuri whispered.

“This is an Earthmarked grove.”

Zuri mouthed the word but said nothing—the peaceful grove demanded silence. Keita took a step deeper in. Birds sang and water bubbled. A spring? Keita had seen no stream coming in or out of the grove.

“Should we stay?” Zuri whispered.

A flutter of wings made Keita glance up. A male kestrel, his blue-gray wings lighter against the dark leaves, had landed on a nearby branch. His beady eyes met hers. “I think...” she said, “we can stay. At least a little while.”

Christie Valentine Powell

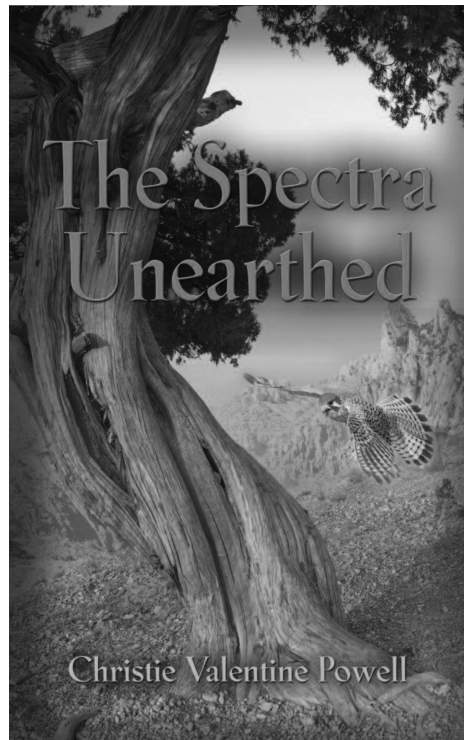
The Spectra Uprooted
Christie Valentine Powell

Books in the Spectra series:

The Spectra Unearthed
The Spectra United
The Spectra Uprooted

Find out more about the Spectra world at
www.TheSpectraBooks.com and look for updates about
the next installments.

Don't miss the first book, *The Spectra Unearthed*



Exiled and hunted, former princess Keita Sage cannot be safe without confronting a friend-turned-enemy who fears everything except her.