

Keita's Wings Book Six

The Spectra
UNDAUNTED

Christie Valentine Powell

Copyright © 2020

Chapter 1: Sage and Kelly

A voice whispered at the edge of Keita Sage's awareness. She stopped moving, startling the horses behind her. They shied sideways as they passed, blocking her view of the mountain terrain. She ignored them and concentrated on the voice.

"Keita?" Brian, her betrothed, dismounted and walked back to her side. He gripped the sword at his belt—he must have sensed her alarm.

"I heard someone in my mind," she said.

His eyes widened in understanding. The only mind-voices she could hear besides his were her brother and sister's. With assassins after them and all other royalty, she couldn't be certain that her siblings were even alive... unless she had heard their voices.

Keita closed her eyes and reached out with her Sprite sensing. The lifeforces of mountain wildlife appeared to her mind in perfect precision, from great pine trees to mice burrowing under their roots. Just at the edge of her range, too far away for more than vague details, she sensed someone familiar. Her sister? Maybe, but she was running hard in the opposite direction. Avie, slower than the Sprites she grew up

with, never bothered running unless she was in danger. Keita concentrated, feeling for a chaser.

The rider behind her pushed past. Keita had to jump aside to avoid his horse.

“I don’t mean to interrupt,” Brian said, “but you may want to move out of the road first.”

She leapt off of the narrow mountain trail and sensed again.

Whatever she’d felt before was gone.

Brian’s hand was on her shoulder before she registered her own disappointment. She’d have to search. Her sensing range was just under half a mile, and the voice must have been right at the edge of her range. If she ran...

“What’s the holdup?”

King Tanner of Nomelands had ridden back. The horse and his stiff posture gave him extra height, which he used for full effect. He and Brian both wore ornate jackets over their traveling clothes, as though they couldn’t stand to be taken for common guards.

Keita blocked the critical thought before Brian could read her emotion. “I need to scout.”

“Should we assume a defensive position?” King Tanner asked.

Why did he have to talk so formally? Only his family and guards were listening in, and he knew perfectly well that Keita didn’t care.

“Don’t bother,” Keita answered. “We’re within a day’s ride of the Summit. Just hurry ahead.”

Tanner's brow furrowed. "You can't leave us. You're our escort."

She didn't have time for this! Keita would have darted away, but she didn't need Tanner's guards slowing her down. "You know the way just as well as Brian and I do. Better, from this direction."

"That's not the concern," Tanner said. "Assassins have been sent after all of us, and our danger only grows as we near the Summit. We may need each other."

Keita hadn't seen any sign of strangers, assassins or otherwise, since they began their flight through the mountains. Tanner, highest ranking of the escaping royals, had created a host of annoying rules, from avoiding flashy abilities to noise restrictions. She couldn't blame him too much—he traveled with his wife and several young wards—but the pressure rankled.

"I thought I sensed my sister," Keita said. "I think she's in trouble."

"You can't just..." Tanner began.

"This isn't just sentiment. We need her! We can't defend ourselves without representation from each clan."

Tanner dismounted. Keita had once found him attractive, though too harsh. He was tall for a Nome, but Brian was several inches taller and several shades darker. Both were muscular. Tanner's only advantage had been his brown curls, but they were now mercilessly cropped.

"We need to ensure that the other representatives join us safely," Brian said. "Most likely, we'll resolve this quickly and rejoin you within minutes."

We? She could move faster without him.

Sorry, Kae, he sent her, but King Tanner is right about the danger.

Her eyes flicked to the sword at his belt. She wasn't a fighter, but she could outrun just about anyone—except for other Sprites.

Tanner and Brian exchanged a look Keita couldn't decipher. Then Tanner nodded. "We'll meet you at the Summit, then. I'll send guards after you if you aren't back before sunset."

Brian took off at a trot. Keita moved right behind him, though every instinct urged her to speed on. Her sister was out there! At least they were moving.

Keita examined the landscape for signs of people. They were climbing around the greatest jags in the mountains. Shrubbery with new summer growth surrounded pale boulders. They moved slowly enough that she could concentrate on sensing, but they hadn't yet caught up with the person she'd sensed. Whoever it was must be moving fast, and in the same direction they were.

A brown shape near the base of a shrub caught her attention. Keita darted toward it, leaving Brian behind. A pair of scuffed shoes stood abandoned beneath a scrubby pine tree. She cried out and held them up. The size and fancy stitching gave away their ownership, even before she noticed the letter S embroidered in the heel. Avie was alive!

Keita took a deep breath, trying to slow her frantic breathing. Her sister's mind-voice had been at the very edge of their siblink range—under half a mile from where they'd

left the others—but they must have shortened that distance. Avie, a Lectran like their mother, was no runner.

Crashing behind her told her that Brian caught up. She must look ridiculous, clutching old shoes. “I told you I sensed her!” she said.

He didn’t have to ask who. His perceptiveness once made her uncomfortable, but it was convenient not having to spell everything out.

Keita gripped the shoes in one hand. Her sister hadn’t been sacrificed. She tried to block the remaining question: then who had? At least one of the Lectran royalty had been killed, and that person was almost definitely Keita’s relative.

“Listen!” Brian said.

In the distance, someone was yelling.

Keita bolted toward the sound.

“Wait!” Brian yelled, but his voice faded behind her. Keita ran through brush. On contact with her skin, the wood shaped away from her, but not fast enough. Branches cut her leafskin dress. She barely felt it.

She burst into a small clearing. There! Someone was moving through the brush on the other side. For a moment she registered only shapes of yellow and green. Then she realized that a stranger clad in Sprite leafskin was running away from her, and her sister Avie—yes, Avie!—was draped over his shoulder. She pummeled his back with both fists, but it didn’t slow him down. The Sprite was several times her size. Neither had noticed Keita yet, but any second now the Sprite would hear or sense her. What if he snapped her neck before Keita caught up?

I'm coming! Keita sent her sister.

Keita? For a second, Avie stopped moving. Then she thrashed with renewed vigor. *Keita, help me! I have to get away!*

The gap was closing too slowly. Keita concentrated on kestrel form and changed in a flash of light. A faint breeze caught her wings and she soared after her sister.

The man's head appeared in view. She shot toward it.

Her claws raked the back of his neck. He cried out and let go.

Avie fell to the ground. "Keita?"

No time for speech. Keita dived again. The man covered his eyes. Her claws broke the skin of his hand. Blood appeared, but the scratches healed in an instant.

The kestrel was too small. She landed and flashed back to true form. The speed made her waste energy and she steadied herself against the nearest boulder.

"What are you doing?" the stranger demanded.

No. Not a stranger. She knew him somehow.

It didn't matter.

"Leave my sister alone!" Keita shouted.

"You don't understand..."

Avie bolted into the brush. The other Sprite swore and dashed after her. Keita followed. He was faster, but he didn't have her talent for shaping wood and the brush slowed him down. Keita touched a shrub. Its branches stretched out. One wrapped around the man's leg, and he cried out as he slammed to the ground.

"Stop!" he yelled. "I'm trying to help!"

Keita ran past. Where was Avie? This man might not be the only enemy.

A shout behind her told her that he'd gotten free. Keita surged forward.

Avie appeared. Her heavy breath said she was running hard, but her pace seemed comically slow. Her short brown hair bounced with each step.

The other Sprite burst through the brush. Keita tried to move faster but he passed her with ease and grabbed Avie's shoulder. Her sister lost her balance and slammed her head against a tree trunk. He grabbed her again.

Keita jumped between them. She grabbed a stick from the ground and it shaped itself into a quarterstaff. "Don't touch her!"

"I was healing!" he protested.

Avie's face was uninjured despite her mishap, but her blue eyes were huge and her jaw hung open.

Keita held her staff between them. She had little training with the weapon, but he didn't need to know that. "You can't kidnap my sister."

"I'm not kidnapping, Amber's daughter! I have a mission from my queen."

Wait. Amber's daughter. He'd promised not to call her that. Keita's eyes widened as she finally recognized him. "Kelly Arden," she said. When had the Lectran's royal healer turned against them?

"Yeah, and I have to..."

"I don't care! You don't carry my sister like that."

"It's not how it looks! I have orders..."

Avie started to run again. Arden moved to follow, but Keita swung her staff. He dodged the blow, but it threw him off course. Keita darted between him and Avie. She just had to hold out...

What was she doing?

She didn't like fighting.

Talking things over made more sense.

She set her staff down.

Then Brian emerged from the brush, and Keita realized what had happened. Was he muting Arden's emotions too? Keita couldn't tell.

The two men exchanged nods in greeting. They'd been friends when they'd last seen each other. Keita and her company had spent almost three weeks with her family in Lectranis, and Arden had been there as both guard and healer. Keita sent Brian the image of him carrying Avie over his shoulder. Immediately, Brian scowled and shifted several inches away from him.

For a second, the hills were silent. Then Avie crashed back toward them. "Let them go!" she yelled at Brian.

He jerked back, and Keita's calm vanished. She whirled on Arden, but he stood still, his eyes whipping from one person to another while one hand dug into his hair. Brian was backing up, trying to dodge behind trees as Avie ran at him. Her blue eyes were so bright they seemed to glow, and sparks popped from her fingers.

"Avie, wait!" Keita cried.

No one waited. Keita almost wished she could calm people like Brian had—including Avie, who was immune to his abilities.

“Everyone, calm down!” Keita barked.

Ironic, she knew—her yell had been anything but calm—but it had the desired effect. Avie hesitated. Brian stopped dodging. Even Arden was white-faced. Was her yelling really that shocking?

Then Arden pointed at the trees behind them. “We’ve got trouble.”

All of Tanner’s warnings flashed through her mind: no noise, no dramatic flashes, sticking together as a group.

Keita sensed in that direction. More people than she could easily count were speeding in their direction. They were diverse in age and gender, no official army, but they moved as a unit.

Arden extended a hand. “Truce?”

Keita hesitated. He’d fought on their side before. “You didn’t summon those people, did you?”

“Of course not. I’m trying to keep Savanna safe.”

Keita didn’t believe it. Only a stranger would call Avie by her full name.

He trailed off. Keita sensed the enemy speed up. They’d been seen.

“I’ll explain later,” he said. “Right now, we need each other.”

“All right, truce,” Keita said, “but I want the whole story as soon as we’re safe.”

“Deal.”

Keita took a second stick from the ground, shaped it into a staff, and handed it to him. “Then let’s get started.”

Chapter 2: Lightning

The strangers approached the last hill between them and Keita's company. Keita exchanged looks with Arden. Within minutes, the two groups would catch sight of each other.

Keita nodded toward the hill. "Who are they?"

"It's a mixed group," Arden answered. "They've been on our tail for days. Most are Lectran or human."

"Human?" Keita repeated. "Do they know what we are?"

"Yep." Arden's expression was grim. "They know that they can gain Spectra abilities if they murder a royal." He met Keita and Brian's eyes and looked away again. Unlike them, he was not a target.

Keita's eyes flicked over her friends. Brian had drawn his sword. He could emotivate six soldiers at a time if he was concentrating, or around three while still fighting. She didn't know Arden's abilities well, but like her, he'd trained in healing, not warfare. Avie was considerably smaller than all of them and held no weapon, but she was the only one who could fight large groups at a time.

"You're in charge," Keita told her sister. "They'll crest that ridge any second now. How do we do this?"

Avie stepped out from Arden's shadow. "I need them on top of a hill—taller than that ridge, please—and I need the rest of you off of it."

Sun glinted on steel as the first people crested the ridge. The first line was all humans, carrying huge guns over their shoulders.

Keita scanned the landscape. An isolated hill stood between the ridge and their group, too far south to be directly in between, but close. Its rounded top was bald of shrubbery, but short grass still grew.

“We need a decoy,” Keita said. “They want a royal, and we need someone who can get away fast.” She pointed out the hill. “Avie, there’s your target. Brian, watch her for me?”

“Yes, and Arden’s watching you.”

Keita didn’t have time to argue. She concentrated on kestrel form. The mass that kept her earthbound disappeared, and she launched into the sky. A couple of humans cried out, their distant voices echoing across the land between them. The noise disturbed small prey-birds. They too launched skyward, darting this way and that, and Keita’s falcon eyes followed each motion.

With effort, she returned her attention to the approaching enemy. She landed on the slope of the hill closest to the invaders and returned to true form.

That got their attention. The closet attackers slowed. “What do you want?” she yelled.

They stopped. Stared. Murmured together. They must not have expected prey that talked back. Keita held out her arm so that the golden links of her betrothal bracelet caught the sunlight. “Hello. I’m Sprite Princess Keita Sage.”

A few eyes dropped, but most of them gripped their weapons more tightly. It was too much to hope that showing

them humanity would dissuade them, not when they'd been chasing Avie for days.

Keita tried a new angle. "You don't really want Stygian abilities. The power overload destroys your conscience... and makes you a target." She thought about adding that the nearby royals had the resources to defeat a new Stygian, but decided she didn't dare reveal how close they were to the Summit.

No one budged.

"That's assuming that you manage to kill one of us," Keita added. "Most of you wouldn't survive the attempt. This is your last warning."

Several people sniggered, but a few hesitated.

One of the humans drew a gun almost as long as Keita was. She bolted for the cover of a nearby shrub. Behind her, people yelled and charged up the hill. Hopefully at least a few had listened. It would save their lives.

Something exploded behind her. Not loud enough for Avie's... Keita hadn't finished the thought when pain shot through her hip. She stumbled and landed on one knee. She sensed her injury. A stone—no, bullet—had grazed her hip, leaving torn flesh. It wasn't bad, just enough to knock her off balance. She got to her feet.

One of the enemies cheered.

Keita! What happened? Brian demanded through their mind-link.

It's not bad.

How had such a tiny projectile caused that much damage? A slingstone could have done similar injury, but the bush would have stopped it or at least slowed it down. She

scrambled for the hilltop before they could shoot again. The wound, still healing, stung with each step.

The rest were scrambling toward her. Several had drawn knives or swords. If she went dormant, would they know they had to keep attacking to kill her? They weren't Sprites themselves, but the Lectrans had fought wars against her people.

She reached the top of the hill and dove to the ground. A second gun blasted as a bullet zipped over her head.

Shouts from below told her that the humans were storming up the hill.

That's it! Avie's voice rang clear in Keita's mind. Now just get out of the way!

Keita bolted. The wound in her hip had mostly healed, but the ache still slowed her down.

Ready? Avie asked.

The enemy had reached the top of the hill. Keita glanced back. One of the humans was aiming a gun. Keita was only halfway down the slope, but time was gone. She dove to the ground and half-rolled, half-crawled down the slope. *Ready.*

The world exploded.

The sound of Avie's lightning strike pounded against Keita's ears. Her body left the ground. She flew several feet and slammed back down. Pain cracked through her shoulder which had taken the first impact.

An unearthly silence fell over the hillside—or was that Keita's still-buzzing ears? The air, suddenly muggy, stank of rotten eggs. Her body didn't want to move. She felt nothing. At least the pain was gone.

A warm hand touched her brow. Energy flooded her limbs, accompanied by a faint tingling as her senses returned. Her chest was less constricted and she drew in a deep breath of the foul air. She gathered her legs beneath her and stood up.

Arden was crouched beside her. One hand still reached toward her. The other stabilized Avie, who was draped over his shoulder.

Keita lunged for her sister, but Arden twisted out of her way. “She’s unconscious. My healing didn’t help.”

“Brian can...”

“It’s not brain damage either.” Arden stood, still supporting Avie with one arm. He didn’t sound concerned, though with stoic Sprites it was hard to tell “She overdid her abilities. She needs a Lectran to help her heal. Otherwise, she’ll recover on her own, but it’ll take hours.”

Avie had trained with their mother, the only other Lectran at the Sprite capital. Keita hadn’t paid attention to those sessions. How did Arden know so much? Was it because he grew up among Lectrans, or were he and Avie closer than she realized?

“Some of King Tanner’s wards are Lectrans,” Keita said. “They’re not trained, but I bet they can help.”

“They’re inside the Summit?” Arden asked.

“By now, probably,” Keita answered.

He nodded. “Good. That’s where Savanna needs to be.”

The hilltop behind them was black and bare, contrasting a sky free of clouds. Keita reached out with her sensing. A few people were climbing back down the hill. Those would be the

Lectrans, the ones immune to Avie's lightning strikes. She couldn't feel the humans at all. Their life forces were gone.

Careful footsteps told them that Brian had joined them. His eyes were wider than normal, and his smile was forced. His hands trembled—lightning was an innate fear for him and all Muses—yet his attention remained on Keita's face. "You're taking this well."

Keita had seen war before. She'd killed before, and it hurt every time. Should she feel worse about the humans?

"Don't feel guilty about not feeling guilty!" Brian protested. "You gave them fair warning, and they were on their way to kill us!"

She waved him away. "We just advertised our presence for miles. Those Lectrans aren't chasing us anymore—I bet they're waiting for reinforcements."

He failed to hide a wince by turning toward Arden. "I suspect your disagreement earlier had to do with the Summit."

Arden nodded. "Queen Solana ordered Savanna to go to the Summit. When she refused, Queen Solana ordered me to take her there."

Keita hesitated. She understood the need to keep Avie safe—but she also knew how it felt to be forced into someone else's idea of safety. No wonder Arden looked so conflicted. He shifted Avie so that she was cradled in his arms. "Queen Solana says one thing, Savanna says another. I want her safe, our kingdom needs her safe... but she's going to hate me forever."

"I'm not so sure," Brian said.

Arden acted like he hadn't heard. "I agreed with both, but I had to choose... how do you keep your head from exploding?"

Brian shook his head. "I'm not sure I can help you. Social pressure doesn't bother me as much."

Arden held Avie closer. "I don't actually know how to find the Summit. Queen Solana just said to go north."

Keita had to lead, which meant that she would have to move slowly, leave Brian behind, or carry him.

"I'll wait here," Brian offered.

"Awkwardness is better than danger."

Arden was shaking his head. "If you're killed, we'll have an incredibly dangerous enemy on our hands."

Brian cringed. Keita slipped into pony form. Instantly the scent of bad eggs increased. A dangerous smell. Her hooves pranced against the firm mountain soil. They needed to leave. She waited until Brian was in place on her back, and then charged.

Motion and thudding footsteps told her she was being chased. Some part of her mind knew it was Arden, but she didn't like being chased. It urged her on, faster than was safe through the rough terrain.

"Into that ravine," Brian called.

He'd explored the Summit's surroundings more than she had. She dropped down into the lower land. The sloped earth on either side bothered her. Were there predators above?

The ravine opened ahead, and Keita glimpsed a flowering apple tree. They were close!

Another sound caught her attention. Behind Arden, someone else was coming. If she could sense them...

“Hey!” Brian cried.

She slammed into the dirt. Her body had shifted back when she lost concentration. Hard ground tore her skin as she slid several feet. She lay still a moment, and then leapt to her feet. Brian had been thrown into the path ahead. She rushed to him and transferred her life energy into him.

Brian sat up. “Ouch!”

“You healed too fast,” Arden noted. “It hurts the patient if you...”

“I know!” Keita straightened. She saw nothing but mountain slopes behind them, but the hill where Avie had called lightning was still within her sensing range. Its top was bare of life, a circle of nothing. Between it and them, a mass of people surged forward. The Lectran reinforcements had arrived.

“We’re not far,” Arden said. “Hurry.”

Keita and Arden broke into a jog. Brian sprinted to keep up. Every few seconds, Keita eased a drop of energy into him, allowing him to hold his pace. He tried to smile thanks but a hint of annoyance flickered in his eyes. *It’s not your fault you aren’t a Sprite*, she sent him.

Yes, I realize that. He probably didn’t mean to sound as annoyed as he did.

Their pursuers found the ravine. Even if Keita’s company reached the Summit first, the attackers would be able to find it. The traps and barriers that once surrounded it were all but gone.

The slopes opened up into a plain grassy valley. Gleaming white walls rose from the grass in the dead center of the valley—like stone, but impossibly smooth, impossibly white. From this distance, the apple tree looked closer to the walls than it was, but it still towered over them.

Arden pressed Avie into Keita's arms. "What are you doing?" she demanded as she stabilized her sister.

"We need to slow down those forces until the people inside are ready for them. Take Avie and run ahead. Get into the Summit and send reinforcements."

"Why me?"

"Because my attackers won't turn Stygian if I'm killed. And because I can defend Brian better than you can."

Her eyes narrowed. "That is not your reasoning, Kelly Arden. You're hoping I take the blame for forcing Avie inside the walls."

Arden hesitated a second too long.

"She'd be trapped inside, maybe for months! I know what it feels like when other people force you into their ideas of safety!"

A cry made them all turn. Their attackers had reached the end of the ravine. "We don't have time for this!" Arden yelled.

"This is bigger than you and Avie," Brian said. "We have to keep these people away from the Summit. Two fighters can't do that alone. You need to warn the Summit, send out fighters, and keep Avie safe. She can't stay in the middle of a battle while she's unconscious."

"And you're trying to protect me."

"Partly," he admitted.

A gun blasted, but the shot missed. Arden was right—they didn't have time to argue.

"I'm coming right back," Keita said.

Brian hesitated.

"Brian! I want permission to leave the Summit, or I'm not going in!"

"All right, all right, you have my permission to leave."

She started jogging.

"But you could just stay there..." The rest of his words were drowned out as she increased her speed.

The walls seemed to grow as Keita ran toward them. Avie's head bounced despite Keita's best efforts to hold her still. The motion slowed her down. Somewhere behind her, a shot rang out. A voice screamed. Brian? As Keita tried to sense, her bare foot hit an uneven patch of grass and she pitched forward. She caught herself in time, but the grass blades stung at her knees and Avie's head slammed into Keita's arm.

Voices grew louder. Keita had left Brian and Arden to face an army alone. This was madness!

The walls loomed overhead. Keita reached the base, but the smooth surface was impossible to climb, even for her. Her elbow bumped the wall. The stone was unnaturally warm. Keita followed the walls at a trot, squinting at the whiteness.

She rounded two corners of the polygon before she found handholds, perfect ovals carved into the whiteness. Her hands tingled as she grabbed them. She swung her sister over her shoulder and scrambled up as best she could.

Steadying her sister took most of Keita's focus and blocked her vision. She didn't realize she reached the top of the wall until her hands reached empty air. She tumbled forward, trying to twist so that she'd land beneath Avie's body.

Her back slammed into the dirt. Avie's full weight crashed down on top of her.

Chapter 3: Defense

Keita struggled to sit up without jarring her sister. She glimpsed a simple meadow dotted with thatched huts, but then her vision was covered as Mer guards hurried to help her. She didn't see their ruler, Queen Marsha, but her husband Tide, Brian's older brother, was first to reach Keita. Last time Keita had seen him, he'd been dirty and exhausted, a prisoner of the Stygians. Now his clothes and hair were immaculate, but he wore the same shadows around his eyes.

"What's wrong?" Tide demanded.

"Lectrans and humans attacking," she said. "Brian and Arden need backup."

Tide turned to the crowd and began pointing at the assembled guards. "You, get out there! You two, go to Fiske Fort for additional soldiers. You..."

Soldiers jumped into action at Tide's command. Keita glimpsed Nomes among them. King Tanner's party had already arrived. She closed her eyes and listened. Sure enough, the piping of small voices reached her ears. She cradled Avie in her arms and followed the sound.

King Tanner was standing between two small huts, trying to organize his wards. Most of the children ignored him. The two caretakers Tanner had brought to help had a little more luck. The children, except the one Tanner had officially adopted, weren't royals and therefore weren't in danger of sacrifice, but Tanner had insisted on bringing all of them.

Tanner's eyes widened as he saw Avie. "Your sister really was out there."

"She overextended her Lectran abilities." Keita knelt down and set Avie gently on the meadow grass, then looked at the children. "Can you help her?"

Amber, a young Lectran, stepped forward. Keita always remembered her name, which was the same as her mother's. The girl knelt at Avie's side and placed a hand on her chest.

"I need to get back," Keita said.

Tanner's expression was grim. "You need to stay safe, princess. The Sprite delegation hasn't arrived yet."

Keita bit her lip. They needed at least one member of every clan present, and right now she was the only Sprite. Worse, the delay might mean that her brother, Spritelands' king, was in trouble.

"She does not need to stay safe!"

Tanner's wife, Opal, stormed toward them, followed by Princess Rosalin of the Cole Kingdom. Both women were wiry and pale, but Opal's short black curls and rigid stance contrasted Rosalin's bouncy nature and long blonde hair. "The walls won't keep out soldiers," Opal said. "We need every fighter we can get—Keita included."

"We?" Tanner sputtered.

Suddenly Avie opened her eyes. "Did we win?" she asked brightly.

"We will soon," Keita answered.

Avie stood up without effort. She started to smile, until her eyes fastened on the Summit's gleaming walls. The color drained from her face, and she sat back down.

Keita didn't have time to help. She joined the other two women, and they scrambled upward. The walls ended in a flat, narrow walkway, unnaturally smooth, where someone with decent balance could walk. Opal jumped down. The ground seemed to soften as she hit, the surface rippling and bouncing like liquid.

People churned in all directions, a frothing sea of angry humanity. Nome and Mer guards had already emerged to defend the Summit. Rumbling earth and spraying water joined the cries and bangs, the horrid song of war. Keita couldn't spot Brian and Arden.

Rosalin had climbed down while Keita searched. Keita leapt and landed beside her. On the ground, mist and dust cluttered their vision, turning everything into greater confusion.

A group of attackers charged out of the mist. Rosalin raised her arms. Flames burst to life. Flickering light glinted off of the mist, so that Keita could not hide from it. Heat blasted her face. Not this!

"Keita?" Opal asked.

Keita raised her head. Rosalin was still summoning fire, but she had moved farther away. Keita realized that she was cringing against the ground, and leapt to her feet. "Sorry."

"Do you need to go back inside?" Opal asked.

Keita avoided her eye as she brushed grass from her skirt. "I can handle this. I'll make myself useful." Another burst of fire made her cringe. "Just... maybe not right here."

She slid into kestrel form. The bright flames were just as captivating to her falcon eyes, but at least she could get away.

The rising heat created perfect updrafts that sent her soaring skyward. The dust and mist were no hindrance to her falcon eyes.

Opal pressed her hands against the ground. The earth split apart. Men screamed as they fell into a huge crack. Keita hovered overhead—what if their people had fallen in?—but the Nomes and Mers who guarded the Summit broke out easily, leaving the attacking Lectrans and humans trapped.

A huge gray wolf leapt over the crack. His paws hit the ground and instantly he changed direction, slamming him into the nearest attacker. His jaws could have torn the attacker's throat open. Instead he sliced into the shoulder. The attacker screamed and ran. So did several people standing nearby. The wolf chased them several feet, only to turn with lightning swiftness and shred the leg of a woman who had been exchanging blows with a Mer guard. The wolf was Arden, Keita was almost positive, and if she could have spoken with him in animal form she would have demanded he tell her about Brian. But she didn't dare interrupt the fighting and force him to return to true form to speak.

Keita began a controlled drift so that she could concentrate on sensing. Immediately she felt Brian near the edge of the fighting. He was sitting on the ground, head propped up in his hands. Injured? No, she didn't sense anything wrong. No one stood within six feet of him, but just beyond, a group of humans ran in total confusion. A pair collided. They stood still a moment, blinking slowly, and then joined the chaos. The people were packed close together, and

the ring of frantic motion created a sort of living shield around Brian.

A large man stumbled into Brian's circle. Keita soared toward him. Before she could arrive, the man's sword slipped from his hands. He stared wildly in all directions, and then backed into the ring.

Keita landed beside Brian and returned to true form. He smiled at her and stood up. The squabbling enemies moved further away, increasing the size of his circle.

"I'm not sure you need me," she said.

"No, I need you," he said, "and not just because..."

Three thin, blonde men broke through his circle. Brian stepped back. He still held his sword, but his eyes were wide and his arms trembled. Immediately Keita understood. The human wall had been to deter Lectrans. They couldn't be emotivated.

Keita lunged before she knew what she was doing. Her elbow crunched into the first man's ribs, which cracked. The heel of her other hand pushed another man's chin up and back. He staggered back, and Brian's blade entered his chest. The third lay at his feet.

For a moment, Keita just stared. She'd practiced those moves before, but not with real enemies.

Brian's arm encircled her shoulders, and the shock faded. "I need you," he said again, "and not just because I want you nearby."

She tried to smile. "Griffin taught me those moves."

One of the injured men was still alive. He was crawling, trying to get away from her, moaning with each motion. What

had she done? And the two Brian had finished off still lay at their feet, and her mind forced her to see their wounds, to see what body parts were broken and where they should have been.

Where had the calm gone?

Then she understood. Brian's eyes were closed, and a vein in his neck throbbed. He couldn't emotivate unless his own emotions were under control, and he'd lost it when she mentioned his slain brother. She wouldn't have mentioned it so casually if he hadn't been muting her shock.

The humans were shaking their heads. Their dazed expressions cleared, and they stopped circling. Soon they would advance. Keita looked for a branch to shape into a staff, but saw nothing. She couldn't run away, not when Brian was behind her, still struggling to control his emotions. Shifting to bear form would give her useful instincts, but it would make her a larger target.

With nothing but her empty hands, she planted herself between Brian and their enemies.

The nearest human moved toward her slowly, carefully, and his eyes were fixed on her with a hungry look as though he desired her, not her death.

Maybe hurting people wouldn't be so difficult.

The man lunged. She sidestepped and wrapped her arms around his head. Then she twisted. His neck snapped.

She didn't have time to watch the body fall. Two men swung swords in tandem. She stopped one, but the other hit her ribcage. No vitals. The sun was up and her skin would heal itself. She moved toward her attacker, but he had already

fallen, stabbed by Brian's sword. His eyes were deadly intense—too emotional for emotivating, but he could still fight.

A bare-headed woman with long blonde hair lunged for Brian. Keita leapt between them. The woman's fist hit her shoulder. A force like a battering ram threw Keita into the air. Her arm tingled and she couldn't control its motions.

She'd forgotten Lectran abilities.

A gray blur flashed through the crowd. The monstrous wolf that was Arden sank his teeth into the woman's arm. Sparks flew as he was thrown back, but it gave Keita the opening she needed. She darted at the enemy and hooked her ankle around the woman's leg. Something cracked, and the woman fell, screaming.

Arden darted to Keita's side. His wet nose touched her arm, and she could move it again.

There were more fighters. There were always more.

Keita acted. She reacted. Motions became automatic. There was no time to ask what she was doing, or why, or if there was another way.

Then Brian's hand fell on her shoulder. Keita stopped moving. The attackers had stopped coming. Cries faded away.

It was over.

The air was still unnaturally sticky and did nothing to dry the sweat built up on her skin. Horrible scents clogged the air, from smoke to blood.

Keita's whole body trembled. A cut knit back together. She didn't remember getting it. A faint tinge of green spread down her arms. She'd used more energy than was healthy, but

the sun was bright and she'd regain it quickly. There were bodies across the field, many of them, but she couldn't react. She must be a monster, for she couldn't summon the energy to care.

"Kae?"

The hand on her shoulder was Brian's, of course.

"Over," she mumbled.

"Yes, it's over." He just barely touched her, keeping a foot away, as though he wasn't sure if he should pull her close or run away. "I'm sorry. I lost control. You shouldn't have had to fight like that."

"I don't blame you. I miss Griffin too."

He shook his head. "That was the trigger, but then I was watching you. You..." He stopped. "I know, you don't like sentimental."

She inched closer. "Go ahead."

"It's just... you never fight like that, and you were doing it for me." His eyes were too wide. Was this really sentimental, or did he feel guilty? She couldn't tell her own emotions, much less his.

He pulled her in slowly, as though afraid his hand would go through her. She drew close. She thought he would kiss her, but instead he rested his forehead against hers.

A shout returned her to awareness. Rosalin was yelling at one of the Nome guards, smoothing back her strawberry-blond hair as though she did this every day. Beside her, Opal faced the battlefield with pinched lips. Keita turned to see what she was staring at. Arden moved through the fallen, and everywhere he went, bodies that had been still or writhing

became whole. Most of his patients ran immediately. The rest only needed a muttered word that Keita couldn't decipher from this distance.

"Are you okay if I go join him?" Keita asked.

Brian's wave could have meant anything.

Keita touched the fallen as she moved across the field—with her bare feet or her hand, it didn't matter. She was too exhausted to measure out her energy properly. Most of them cried out when she misjudged. At least she didn't need to threaten them—after the painful healing, a single glare was enough to send them running away. No one stopped to thank her, but it didn't matter. As the people regained their strength, her numbness faded.

At last she reached the edge of the meadow. Arden was already there, watching the last survivors escape. "They know our location now. We probably put the Summit in danger."

"We had to," Keita answered.

He nodded. "Other Sprites call me soft-hearted. They blame it on my upbringing in Lectranis. I guess you get yours from your mom."

Keita smiled. Her mother had sent Arden's parents to Lectranis to cure a deadly disease, and became a hero to her childhood home—and Arden. "I guess so."

Brian hadn't moved. Keita trotted back to him, dodging Nome guards who were sinking the battlefield into the earth. Fresh, sweet-smelling soil covered the meadow and the remains of battle. In a few days, the grass would regrow and no hint of the attack would remain.

Brian gestured to Arden, who had crossed the meadow and almost reached the Summit wall. “You match.”

Keita shrugged. They both wore leafskin, which allowed them to harvest sunlight, and both had bronzed skin and dark hair. Were Arden’s eyes also green? She hadn’t noticed. “I guess we both heal. He’s way better at it though.”

“You both have Sprite strength. And speed.”

Keita shrugged. “So? He’s not you.”

Brian stopped walking. He stared as though he’d never seen her before. Had she been too sentimental now?

“I’m not sure what’s more amazing,” he said. “That you said that, that you mean it, or that you’re not embarrassed for saying it.”

She smiled and took his hand. “We’d better check in with the others inside the Summit.”

The gleaming white walls demanded attention. Even knowing that she could climb back out and wouldn’t be trapped like her sister, she had to force herself to go near them. “There’s another problem with Arden,” Keita said. “He has to stay here. We’ll be the ones saving the world.”

Brian hesitated just a moment too long. “Let’s get inside,” he said finally.

Keita's Wings Book Six

The Spectra UNDAUNTED

Christie Valentine Powell

Castalia has never felt like home, but Keita Sage is supposed to be its queen—if she survives long enough. Keita and other remnants of the royal families have fought the usurping Stygians and their assassins for over a year, but the only way to be safe is to confront the Stygian leader Donovan. Poverty and war result from Donovan's bigotry, endangering everyone on the continent. Keita needs the support from the people who should have been hers, but they've been taught that she and other foreigners caused the last king's death. A secret new ally might give Keita the edge she needs, if she and her friends can cross the kingdom without being captured. Defeating Donovan will take every connection she can forge and every skill she's learned.

Copyright © 2020