

The Spectra  
UNFURLED

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## Chapter 1: Across the Border

Keita Sage crept up a steep ridge, desperate for one last glance of the Great Mountains that had been her home. A chilly wind whipped through the trees, and the long sleeves she'd grown over her arms did little to deflect its bite. Snow and gravel slipped under her bare feet, making tiny avalanches. The unfamiliar trees, the gray winter sky, the land that stretched on without a single mountain in sight—all of it reminded her that from now on, her only home was what she took with her.

A voice intruded on her mind. *Do you want to talk about it?*

Brian Pensier could send her thoughts, but he wouldn't understand. *No, I don't want to talk about it,* she sent back. Somewhere behind, her friends were negotiating passage across the river. Once they crossed, Spritelands would never be her home again. Her brother could only hold the throne if she left, but still she struggled against the desire to slip into the forest and disappear.

The scent of rich, moist earth from the forest below hid the familiar smell of the evergreens. Snow heaped in the tree's shadows. Snow fell in her home too, but here the cloud cover never lifted. As a Sprite, one of six Spectra clans, Keita could survive months without eating—but only if her leafskin clothes absorbed enough sunlight.

The top of the ridge appeared. Keita scrambled over. She hesitated a moment, catching her breath. Then she looked eastward. She saw nothing but low, gray clouds.

Her energy leeches away as she stares at the hazy horizon.

*Keita!* Brian's mind-voice returned, loud, panicky. *Help please!*

She whirled toward the border. The shining river appeared in the distance, but her friends were too far to see. She slid into kestrel form. She shrank down to the cliff edge. Bare toes hardened to tiny talons. Feathers grew. She flapped once, testing her wings, then launched.

Gravity drew her down the ridge. Her wings flared, and she rocketed toward the river. Prey-birds were mere distractions as she passed. She found the bridge first, a large wooden structure over the frothing current. A crowd had gathered on the beach, surrounding three immobile people. She hovered, analyzing the situation. Her friends Carli and Sienna were prone on the ground, motionless, their red hair contrasting the snow. Brian sat upright, but his wrists were bound and mouth gagged. Despite that his face was controlled. His brown eyes searched the sky, and found her.

Keita dove. She changed to her true form in midair and landed on one knee in front of her friends. "Leave them alone!" she shouted.

Several people gasped. The crowd was split between two clans. The Sprites wore leafskin, distinctive green clothing which they grew with their abilities. The Mers, water shapers, wore woven cloth. All were shorter and darker than Keita's friends. Keita wasn't a foreigner in either kingdom—Mers and Sprites were closely related, and frequent allies—but her friends were.

The Sprites muttered among themselves. Keita couldn't fight so many. She could flash back to kestrel form and escape—not many Sprites knew flying forms—but she wasn't leaving her friends.

*Tell the Mers who you are.* Brian's gag didn't make a difference to his mind-voice, part of his Muse abilities.

*If they cared about titles, they'd have left you alone,* Keita protested.

*I don't have a title as long as Donovan is king.*

She understood the pain in his mind-voice—Donovan had killed Brian’s father to get the Muse kingdom’s throne.

If Keita was going to play up the royalty title, she would do it right. She turned her face toward the closest Sprites so that her thin white scar was clearly visible. Then she pictured her father, the deceased king of Spritelands, and straightened to her full height. “I am Princess Keita Sage, older sister of the Sprite king, and I insist that you release my escort and leave us alone!”

The Sprites hesitated. “You’re the Earthmarked princess,” one said.

Keita had hated how much attention the scar gave her, but it sometimes proved handy. The mark meant that Earth approved of her. Sprites had respected her all through their journey down the river.

One of the Mers bowed. “I apologize that we didn’t recognize you.”

He leaned forward and untied Brian. Keita tried not to show her shock.

The Sprites were still muttering. “Your scar doesn’t look like an Earthmark anymore,” a man said. “You delivered Earth’s message. Perhaps her work for you is done.”

Being Earthmarked was supposed to be a huge honor, but it made her a valuable hostage. If the Stygians gained control over her and the people still saw her as a religious figure, she would put her entire kingdom in danger.

“I think you are right.” She had to force the words out. “I am no longer Earthmarked.”

Then she stepped around him and reached for her other two friends. She placed a hand on the forehead of each girl and pushed a drop of life energy into them. The girls’ eyes popped open. Sienna, small and pale, lay in a pile of rock shards that had once been ropes. Carli leapt to her feet. “Where are they? They snuck up on me! Let

me at them, and I'll..." She raised her hands, already glowing hot.

"Stop," Keita ordered. "No need for that."

Carli dropped her hands but gave Keita a curious look.

A Sprite boy, whose adult sash looked brand new, gestured to Keita's hands, which were streaked with green. "That form change took a lot of your energy," he said.

In the excitement, she had barely noticed.

"May I?"

He touched her hand. Energy surged through her, warming every part of her. Her brain felt more alert. She examined her hands as the streaks of green vanished. "Thank you."

He bowed. "It's an honor, Princess." His hands and face were still bronze—he had plenty of energy left. "This is a hard season to visit the Sodden Forest. You should see it in summer."

"I doubt I'll still be here in summer."

"I could fix that."

She blinked. What was he offering, exactly? He seemed to be waiting for an answer, and she had no idea what she was supposed to say. How could she answer if she didn't know what he was asking?

A figure stepped between them. Brian's eyes were stern. "She said she won't be here."

The Sprite sputtered and backed into the crowd. Brian turned toward her. He was a few inches taller than the Sprite boy, and more muscular—Sprites didn't build muscle easily, since their energy gave them extra strength. She'd found him a bit stuffy when she first met him, but months of exile had faded his fancy clothing and tanned his skin.

"Well," he said, "I'm glad I'm not the only one who makes you uncomfortable."

Even if she knew how to respond, she wouldn't in front of an audience. The golden bracelet signifying that they were betrothed

had clung to her wrist for over a year, but she'd spent most of her time since escaping Stygians.

The Mers still stood in front of the bridge. She'd have to deal with that first. "We're going to Merlandia," she said. "We need to cross."

The Mers looked at each other. "I wouldn't recommend that," one said. "We can't do a thing with you in your own kingdom. If you cross, we have orders to take any visiting royalty to the Overseer in Jaladi, along with your foreigner escort."

Apparently negotiating to cross had been enough for the Mers to attack her friends—or the Sprites had agreed to help. Keita sighed. The man had no idea how much she wanted to stay in her own kingdom. She waved to her friends, and they turned northward.

As soon as they rounded the riverbank and out of sight, Keita let herself relax. She turned to her companions, only to find three pairs of eyes on her face. "What?" she asked.

"I've never seen you act so formally before," Brian said.

"Seriously," Carli said. "What did you do to Keita, and can I have the old one back?"

"That's not what I meant," Brian protested. Though he spoke to Carli his eyes were still on Keita, and she found herself squirming under his gaze. What was he thinking? Comparing her to how a queen ought to be? Somehow she didn't think she'd do well.

*That is not what I was thinking,* Brian sent her.

Keita winced. Another downside of being able to communicate mind-to-mind with Brian was that things she did not want him to know sometimes leaked through. She hesitated, then asked, *What were you thinking then?*

*I assure you it was complimentary.*

She felt herself coloring and turned to Carli. "What happened back there?"

Carli rubbed her head, which tousled her red curls. She was

taller than the other two girls, though an inch shorter than Brian, with freckles like sparks across her pale cheeks. “I don’t remember,” she said.

The light-heartedness faded from Brian’s face. “They knocked the girls out right away. I lasted a little longer.”

Carli bristled. “I am the greater threat, thank you. That’s why they left you for last.”

Brian’s fists clenched, though his voice remained calm. “Yes, I should have said that they targeted you first because they fear your fire. I apologize.” He took a deep breath, then added, “Honestly, I’d rather be unconscious. I’ve been held prisoner too many times.”

The pain in his face was no longer hidden from onlookers. *I’m sorry*, she sent him.

*You shouldn’t be. You always come back for us.*

His eyes caught her gaze and wouldn’t let go.

“Where were you?” Sienna’s voice broke the moment. Her slumped posture made her look even shorter, though her baggy tunic hid how scrawny she was.

“I...” Keita sputtered. “I was...”

“Saying goodbye,” Brian filled in for her. He met her glare without flinching. “We all have home kingdoms. We know it’s hard for you to leave. You don’t have to hide it.”

Something inside her broke, and Keita whirled around before any of them could see the tears sneaking down her face. Tears were embarrassing. Sprites did not show weakness.

Plodding footsteps and the smell of wet fur warned Keita that their two horses had caught up. Eyrie, her dapple-gray pony, trotted to her side and thrust his big head over her shoulder. Keita half-smiled. He had an uncanny ability to find her no matter where she was. He had probably missed the fight trying to follow her into the forest. Dusty the gray mule trotted after him, making the burdens on his back bounce. When he saw Sienna, his head went up and he



hurried over for a nose rub.

Keita had regained control. She ducked out from under her pony's head. "We'd better keep moving."

The river foamed with white water, a formidable border. Even Keita's Sprite cousins would have hesitated to swim it. The Mer guards could manage, but Keita doubted they expected those from another clan to be able to cross.

After a few minutes of walking, Brian held up his hand and pointed to the river. "I don't think we're going to get any better than this."

This stretch had no rapids but the murky water surged past with significant power. Sienna stepped behind her mule. "I'm not going in there!"

"I can carry someone else with me," Carli said, "but I can't pick up horses."

Her ability to create winds was unusual even among heat-shaping Coles—the Mers wouldn't know that she could fly.

"You three fly then," Brian said. "I'll take the horses."

Whether or not he was being awkward, Keita was not going to let him ford the river alone. "Eyrie only follows me," she said. "I'll wade with him."

Carli nodded. "I'll warm you up when you get over." Then she lifted her arms. Winds swirled around her, turning into a white spiral as it picked up snow. Sienna grabbed Carli's hand and shut her eyes. A second later, their feet left the ground. The two girls rose into the sky.

"Are you sure about this?" Brian asked Keita.

In answer, she marched to the river. Water raged in front of her. She looked back. Brian held Dusty's harness. Eyrie wore no harness or other gear. She slipped a hand over his neck, and together they walked into the water.

On her first step, cold cut her bare foot like a knife. She splashed

on, pretending not to notice, carefully feeling for each slippery step. Water reached her knees. By the time it reached her waist, her feet were numb.

She'd reached half-way when she realized what was happening. She was leaving. She whirled around to look at the other bank, slipped on a rock hidden in the sludge below, and fell.

Her arm slipped from Eyrie's neck. She had one glimpse of her pony charging after her, leaving the ford, and then her head went under. For a moment the shock of the cold kept her still. Then she struggled, flailing with both arms. Her lungs burned and she fought with all her energy to find air. The current whipped her around—which way was up? She could concentrate on nothing besides the pain in her chest and her flailing limbs unable to fight the raging current.

Suddenly her course changed—she was rising fast. Her head broke the surface. Keita gasped in air and spray, and heard a voice behind her do likewise. An arm that wasn't hers extended in front of her, grasping a rope. Keita's brain took a moment to process what was happening. Brian was behind her, his arm wrapped around her waist, keeping her snug against his chest. Her entire body was tingling so badly that she could barely feel his touch—from the cold, she was sure.

On the shore, Carli pulled the rope. Keita kicked, trying to help. *Let her pull us in*, Brian sent her. The river was too loud for speaking. *Just relax*.

How was she supposed to relax with his arm around her? Not to mention the current trying to pull her downstream? The cold, fresh air stung her nose and lungs. The current still tugged, but its efforts took them nearer to shore.

Keita's feet sank into mud, and she caught her balance. Before they had even reached the shore, warm wind whipped around them, drying them off.

“All the times...” Brian panted, “we’ve been around water... you could have mentioned... you can’t swim.”

Keita didn’t answer. The Silver River that passed through her home was too fast for swimming. She stepped forward, then realized that Brian’s arm was still around her. “Please let go.”

He did at once.

She turned to face him. His ankles were still in the river. Over his shoulder, she saw the other bank, abutting trees that stretched as far as she could see. The forest continued on both sides of the border, but her beloved homeland was behind them.

## Chapter 2: Energy

Sienna caught up before Keita was fully warm. She came trotting up the bank, holding Dusty's bridle while Eyrie trailed behind. Water streamed down their bodies, and both plodded with heads drooping. How long had Eyrie followed before he'd given up and reached the bank? And had Dusty followed him into the swifter water?

"Good news is," Sienna said, "everybody's across. Bad news is, all our stuff's wet. Food's gonna go bad."

Carli groaned and Brian winced. Keita watched them, stomach sinking. This was her fault. They'd be hungry because she slipped in the river. She was stronger and faster than non-Sprites. She could change to five different animal forms. She could heal. She'd been learning to use a quarterstaff... she should not need to be rescued, and her weakness had hurt them.

"This isn't your fault," Brian said.

Had she sent him thoughts again, or was he reading her emotions? She didn't like either option—to Sprites, emotions were private.

"If anything, it's mine," Brian went on. "I should have thought ahead. We should have had Carli ferry the packs over after she took Sienna."

"That would have been smart," Carli agreed.

Brian ignored her. "I was a bit distracted. I know what you just did."

He met Keita's eyes, but she squirmed and looked away. She'd chosen to leave home—did that mean she'd chosen to accept his? Thoughts swirled in her mind, muddled as the river, until she gave up. "We'd better keep moving."

“We’ll be fine,” Brian said. “Carli and I still have money. We’ll purchase supplies at a Mer village.”

Carli raised an eyebrow at him. “Ask nicely.”

Brian sighed. “All right. I suggest we get moving. Will you please help me purchase supplies at the next village?”

“Much better,” Carli said. “Yes, I will.”

As they began walking, Sienna kicked aside a layer of snow with thick, furry boots. “What’s worse than cold and wet?” she grumbled. “Both together.” She normally wore sandals specially designed to allow her to touch the ground. Without that contact, her earth abilities were hampered, but removing shoes would freeze her feet.

Keita didn’t usually mind cold, but the overcast sky kept her from reenergizing. Even after the Sprite boy’s help, her hands were turning green. If she ran out of energy completely, she would go dormant. Her skin would turn as green as her clothing. She would be unconscious, helpless, no better than baggage until she reached proper light and regained the energy she needed.

Carli stepped between Keita and Sienna. Instantly, the temperature rose. Keita stopped shivering—she hadn’t realized she was shaking. “Wow,” she said. “Thanks.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Sienna echoed.

Carli wrapped an arm around Sienna’s shoulder. “We desert-dwellers have to stick together.” Then she seemed to realize she’d left Keita out. “And mountain-dwellers,” she added quickly.

“We’re all nobility,” Brian suggested.

Keita made a face. “We’re all survivors.”

Carli saluted. “I’ll take that one.”

Sienna reached into the packs without breaking stride. “Haracker’s all wet,” she said. “Better eat it now.”

Normally, their traveler’s bread was baked in thin ovals. Now Keita’s friends took handfuls of soggy mush. Brian held out a

handful for Keita. “What?” she asked.

“With the sky this dark, eating would probably help.”

She’d eaten only a few days ago. At Solster, the Sprite winter festival, she had taken a bowl of stew with everyone else. Her aunt Laurel gave the traditional speech. All food came from living things. All life was built on sacrifice. Were you making the sacrifice worth it?

“I’ll manage,” Keita told him. “It can’t stay cloudy forever.”

“The food will spoil if we don’t eat it today,” Brian answered. “That would be a waste. Waste of food is sin.”

He’d been at the festival too. Keita sighed and joined her friends. Normally haracker was hard, crunchy, and flavorless except for a hint of herbs. Now it was soggy and tasted of mud. She took handfuls as she walked, avoiding anyone’s eye.

The Sodden Forest was still in view, but the road traveled along the top of a series of hills—Keita would not call them mountains—that divided the forest from the high plains. Stretching out north of them, the hills rose and fell in neat slopes. Thick bushes dotted the land.

“That Mer guard kept saying ‘the Overseer’,” Sienna said. “What’s an Overseer?”

“In this case, it’s a person taking over when the queen is incapable,” Brian answered. “Overseer Isobel is the Stygian in Merlandia. Unlike the other Stygians, she didn’t bother to take the throne directly. Marsha is still queen.”

A chill went down Keita’s spine. The Stygians had been targeting royals even before they usurped the thrones. Defeating them was the only way for Keita and her friends to remain safe and restore the kingdoms. Donovan, their leader, had two allies left: Isobel and the Cole queen.

“I thought all the rulers were killed when Stygians took over,” Sienna said.

A hush fell over the group. Keita, Brian, and Carli's fathers had been among those rulers. At last Keita said, "The previous Mer queen was killed four seasons ago during the Stygian Takeover. The king and most of the children died several years before—they were probably the sacrifice turned Isobel into a Stygian." The sacrifice of a royal would give any Spectra the abilities of all six clans, but it also destroyed their sense of morality.

"The oldest surviving child became queen after the Takeover," Brian said. "That's Marsha, who married my oldest brother Tide."

Sienna rolled her eyes. "You royals and your political marriages."

"Tell me about it," Carli agreed. She fingered a white scar on her wrist, where she had tried to remove her betrothal bracelet on her own.

"Anyway," Brian said quickly, "Isobel captured Tide and Marsha a few months ago. They seem to be safe, but I need to get them out of there." His mental link with his brothers lasted over any distance—he had been gathering information from Tide for days.

"If Isobel is capturing royals instead of killing them," Carli said, "maybe she can be reasoned with."

"Reasoned with?" Keita repeated. "She murdered a three-year-old."

Everyone cringed. Carli's face turned ashen—that little girl had been her best friend's sister.

Within a few minutes, the village came to view: a small collection of log homes. The largest was some sort of outpost, its open door facing the bridge they had tried to cross, where soldiers stood at arms.

"No shopping there," Sienna said.

"There are villages all along the main road from here to Jaladi City," Brian said. "We can try another."

They retreated into the hills. As soon as they found a clear spot,

Brian took a crumpled mass of canvas from the packs. The tent was still soaking wet. Keita grabbed the other end and helped stretch it over a bush. Brian smiled his thanks and then began smoothing out folds.

He'd rescued her. While she'd been panicking, unable even to process how to get out, he'd found a rope, cooperated with Carli, and swam after her. He'd known what to do and he'd been able to do it. And he'd held her... Keita felt herself coloring and looked up quickly. Brian was inspecting the canvas with determined concentration, but the corner of his mouth was twitching.

A gust of wind picked up from nowhere. The canvas flapped off the bush. Keita jumped back as warm air brushed her face. Carli grabbed the tent from midair. "There," she said. "It's dry." Carli stretched it out on the ground and began fiddling with ropes and poles, ignoring the dirty look Brian was giving her.

Keita turned to Sienna, who was pawing through packs. "So, how are we on food?"

"Jerky will last 'til tomorrow. We ate all the haracker and grains." Sienna pulled out a sack and turned it inside out, brushing off crumbs that disappeared into the snow.

Brian took a slingshot from his pocket. "I'll see if I can catch something."

Keita hesitated. The food shortage was her fault. She should help fix it. "I can help you," she told Brian.

He had been turning to leave, but he whirled back around. "You'd help me hunt?"

She bit her lip. "I can sense where animals are. Then I can tell you where to look." Sprites could sense living things around them. She would also be able to feel when animal lives went out, but she didn't mention that part. She'd seen Brian and his brother Griffin bring back game before. This shouldn't be much worse.

"You don't have to do that," Brian said.



“Would it help?”

“Yes, but...” He stopped, then said, “I’d welcome the company.”

Behind him, Carli snorted. Keita ignored her and followed him off the trail.

For a few minutes they walked in silence. Then Keita stopped to open her mind to her surroundings. The brushy trees felt like pillars of golden light. Mice scurried through burrows under the snow, unaware of a fox creeping a few feet above them. Cottontail rabbits were everywhere. Keita pointed one out to Brian, then let go of her sensing.

She couldn’t feel the lives anymore, but Keita heard a stone slice through the air. It thudded on impact. The rabbit gave a horrible scream, and claws scraped the ground as she thrashed.

Then all went still.

“Are you all right?” Brian asked.

Until he asked, she hadn’t realized she’d reacted. Her heart felt solemn and heavy, not the crying kind of sadness but something deeper. “I’m fine.”

“I need to clean it now. You don’t have to watch.”

“I’ve trained as a healer. I’m not squeamish.” She still didn’t turn around as Brian retrieved the rabbit. Instead, she stared over the landscape. They were high enough in the hills that they could see the river which stretched back the way they had come, back through the chaparral and into the Great Mountains where it and Keita were born.

All food came from living things. All life was built on sacrifice. Was your life worth it?

“I think your life is worth it,” Brian said.

Keita flinched. How often did he do that?

“I didn’t do anything. You sent me the thought.”

“I didn’t mean to!”

“Well, on some level you did. That’s how thoughts and

memories get sent—some part of you wanted me to know.”

Every time she’d sent him an embarrassing thought, she’d done it on purpose? What was this part of her, and how could she get rid of it? At home, she’d been able to speak mind-to-mind to her brother and sister through their siblink. She could speak to one and block the other, but she didn’t know how she’d done it.

“Here.” Brian stepped forward, then looked at his bloody hands and backed up again. “If you concentrate on not wanting me to hear you, I won’t. That’s especially useful if you’re thinking about me yet don’t want me to know what the thoughts are, or if you’re talking about me to someone else. Unifying without meaning to usually happens if we both happen to be thinking about each other.”

“But I’m able to reach you every time I try...” She stopped as the implication set in.

“Is it so hard to believe that I’m always thinking about you?”

The thought made her squirm so she hurried on. “Why are you teaching me this?”

“Because you want to know.” Though she wasn’t looking at him, she heard Brian’s grin in his voice. “Feel free to ignore the advice—I rather enjoy hearing your thoughts.”

She colored, then leaned against a tree trunk to sense for another rabbit. Something bigger caught her attention. Just inside her sensing range, a group of men were charging in their direction.

“We have trouble,” she said.

Brian dropped the rabbit. “What?”

“The people from the bridge are coming after us.”

Keita ran through the brush, back toward her friends. The strangers were coming straight down the road, so she could not tell if they were Sprites or Mers. Sprites could sense the same way she could—to lose them, they would have to stay ahead by at least a mile. Mers would be easier to avoid. Either way, they couldn’t let

themselves be caught.

Carli had her tent half-set up. "What's wrong?"

"The people from the bridge are on their way," Keita answered.

Sienna leapt to her feet. Carli, though, yawned. "Well, order them to bring us some dinner."

Brian caught up. "We don't even know if they're friendly. Let's hear what they have to say."

Had he forgotten how many times they'd had to run from people? Strangers almost always turned out to be dangerous. "They told us what they had to say at the bridge," Keita said. "We're in Merlandia. They have to take us to the Stygian."

"I'd rather stand and fight than risk getting ambushed again," Carli said. "How many are there?"

Keita sensed again. "Six still following the road. Another four circling around behind us... I'm guessing those are the Sprites. They aren't here to bring dinner."

"Cool." Carli turned to Sienna. "How about you and me handle the Sprites? Those two can take care of the Mers for us."

Keita couldn't protest. Nomes like Sienna feared water, making them almost useless against Mer soldiers.

The oncoming party was too close for them to run now. Keita forced herself to remain still.

The men approached. "You were not supposed to cross the river," a Mer said. "This isn't your kingdom."

She didn't need the reminder.

Brian opened his mouth to speak. A jet of water shot from the ground below his feet. Sienna screamed. Brian was thrown backward, but he landed on his feet. Flames shot from the top of the hills, and Keita heard the screams of the Sprites that had tried to circle them.

Something rough touched her shoulder. Keita whirled. Brian offered her a long stick. She took it and he ran at the soldiers with

empty hands. She didn't have time to process what he had done. Under her hand, the wood grew smooth and straight, becoming a long staff.

A soldier came toward her. She swung the staff. He raised a glinting sword and they met with a strange clack. For a second she looked into his face. Then she swung. The back end of the staff thrust into his stomach. He jumped back, softening the worst of the blow. A faint noise warned her of danger. She whirled around, swinging her staff with her. It caught the shoulder of a second soldier. He staggered but didn't retreat.

The first soldier had recovered. A sword swung at her face. Keita leapt back. The soldier tried to follow, and tripped. The earth beneath him had surged upward, trapping his feet. Keita jammed the butt of her staff against his ear, and he crumpled. She turned to nod thanks to Sienna, who crouched behind her with her hands jammed into the earth.

"Stop!" Brian's voice rang with authority.

The soldier she had been fighting froze. Keita caught her breath as she took stock. Had Brian been fighting four at once? Two had stopped moving at his command. The other two were on the ground. One held a bloody wrist to his chest. Even now Keita fought the urge to go heal him. A Sprite edged toward the others. The other three must have gone dormant, for Carli approached calmly.

Brian stepped forward, a sword gripped in one hand. "Your companions are hurt. There is no shame in stopping to care for them."

One man covered his ears. The other three stared at their fallen companions.

"What if the four of you followed us, and wild animals happened along?" Brian asked. "Your friends would be gone. You would be gone, your bodies spread out through the hills along our trail. Even if you survived the fight, how long would you last against

the cold?”

The man who had tried to cover his ears whimpered. Two others were on their knees, scooting backward through the snow. The last, the Sprite still conscious, gave Brian a curt nod. “Go,” he said. “We won’t follow.”

No one else spoke. They turned back into the hills. Keita’s legs trembled. What right did she have to be tired? She’d only fought two, one with Sienna’s help. All of her friends walked more slowly than usual. Keita sensed the men until they left her half-mile range. Then she nodded, and the others relaxed.

“They’ll be all right,” Brian said. “The remaining Sprite can heal the others, once he stops and thinks about it.”

She hadn’t realized that she’d been worrying about the soldiers until he spoke. “I know.”

“I have to admit, I prefer fighting Sprites,” Carli said. “They go dormant. Less guilt.”

Keita winced, then looked at Brian. “Why did you wait to emotivate them?”

He shook his head. “I was emotivating them the whole time. They’re well-trained soldiers—they ignored their emotions until I had a sword and their primal fear came through.” He held it up. “I prefer fists, but this might come in handy.”

The motion revealed a slash through his shirt. Keita reached for the wound, but he grabbed her hand. “It’s not deep.”

She looked up at him. “You gave me the staff..”

“I knew you could handle it.”

Once, he and his brother Griffin had fought off a street gang. She’d had to pretend to be helpless lest the humans realize her strength was unusual. That time he’d warned her back, leading the fighting away. Her own brother had tried to stop her from learning quarterstaff. Even her cousin who had tutored her insisted that she learn only enough to hold off an attacker until someone more skilled

could defend her. Among Sprites, she wasn't particularly fast or coordinated. But Brian had let her fight.

Carli approached, still cradling her arm. "Twisted wrist," she told Keita.

Keita reached for it.

"Wait!" Brian protested. "It's still cloudy."

Healing took energy she didn't have, but it didn't matter. They were hurt. Brian was still holding her hand. She touched Carli with the other, and concentrated. For a moment she felt their wounds healing. Then she dropped.

## Chapter 3: Titled

Sunlight played across her skin. Keita's eyes shot open. She was staring up at a patch of blue sky. She sat up and studied her arms. Her hands were still streaked with green, but the color was fading. The sun was nearing the western horizon, low enough to escape the ceiling of clouds, yet higher than it had been before the battle. Had she been dormant a full day?

The two animals grazed nearby. Dusty's packs had been removed. A firepit was littered with black charcoal, leaving the scent of smoke hanging in the air. Squirrels scurried in the brush near the edge of their clearing, but otherwise Keita saw no one. She sensed the area, then relaxed. Sienna was lying on her stomach, just out of sight.

Keita walked over, and realized why she hadn't seen her friend. Sienna lay inside a cave she must have formed with her Nome abilities. Snow covered the top, but the walls and roof were sandstone. She looked up from a large map which was stretched out half beneath her. "You're awake!"

"Yeah," Keita said. "Where's Brian? And Carli?"

"Shopping. We're half a mile southeast of Tealan village, twenty-two and a quarter miles northwest from the bridge."

Keita didn't doubt Sienna's sense of direction. "How did you carry me so far?"

"Brian rode Eyrie and held you. Carli would've tied you on, but Brian said that wasn't safe."

For a moment Keita just stared at her. Then her stomach churned so badly she thought she'd be sick. He'd held her for a full day? Dormancy was embarrassing enough without being carried like baggage or touched so much.

Sienna didn't seem to notice Keita's discomfort. She was staring down at her map. "Sodden Forest, Bitterna Marsh, Lakewood... a lot of wet."

Keita welcomed the distraction. "Would you rather be back in Nomelands?"

"I like the desert more, that's for sure." Sienna unfolded an edge of the map so that Nomelands appeared. "I'm not going back, though, not now everybody knows I'm nobility. How'm I supposed to live my own life with that stuff hanging over me? And I've got work here. We've got to stop that Mer Stygian from sending troops to the war. Their water abilities would destroy my kingdom."

Keita nodded. Nomelands had been at war with the Cole Kingdom ever since the Nomes defeated their Stygian ruler. Spritelands and Merlandia might do the same, unless Keita stopped Isobel.

Sienna returned to studying her map. "Go sit in the sunshine or something."

Had she just been dismissed? Sienna had come a long way from the abandoned child in the desert. Keita did need to get back to the sunlight. She left the cave.

Keita found a small tree and climbed to a sturdy branch. She faced the sun, letting the energy warm her.

*I'm glad you're awake,* came Brian's mind-voice.

She whirled around, grabbing the branch to keep her



balance. Brian was walking toward her, though something in his gait seemed off. He must have purchased a scabbard, for the new sword hung at his side. Behind him, Carli ducked to look inside Sienna's shelter.

Keita shifted in her tree. He'd already seen her. She was too late to climb into thicker cover. She concentrated on not wanting him to hear her thoughts.

"What?" Brian asked.

Muses could sense emotions. He probably felt her embarrassment.

"Are you still worried about being weak? Keita, you used your last bit of energy to heal Carli and me. That's not weak by any definition."

The sun hadn't set yet—she could grow branches to hide in and still rejuvenate before nightfall.

"I was dormant," she said, "and you carried me."

"Oh." He stopped underneath her tree and leaned against the trunk. "Glen warned me about that. Touching leafskin..."

"Is like touching bare skin," she filled in quickly. Though she couldn't feel with her clothing, the fact remained that she'd grown it, that it was a part of her. "And seeing someone dormant is extremely embarrassing. It's like seeing someone unclothed."

A faint tinge of pink appeared on his face, though his expression and voice were unruffled. "I've seen you dormant before. In fact, I've carried you dormant before. When you first arrived at the Summit after the Stygian Takeover..."

Keita remembered running through the mountains, climbing into their safe fort... and then waking up alone in one

of the simple huts. “Glen said he caught me and hid me before anyone else noticed.” Which was worse—that her brother had let Brian carry her, or that he’d lied about it?

“Glen’s on my side. You should know that by now.”

“Are we on different sides?” Keita asked.

“I hope not. Can I come up?”

“You can try.” She was leaning against the trunk, blocking the easiest way on to her branch. He considered a moment, then grabbed her branch, further off. He kicked off the trunk with his legs, swung around, and landed neatly beside her. Keita realized she was staring and looked away again. His knee was touching hers. It shouldn’t matter, not after he’d been carrying her all day.

“Happy birthday, by the way.”

“It’s my birthday?” She’d already celebrated her birthfest with her twin a few weeks ago.

“Yes. I asked your sister when we were in Lectranis—Glen didn’t know the exact day either.”

“Exact,” Keita snorted. “You say I’m seventeen. That’s not nearly as exact as sixty-eight seasons.”

“You’re going to get strange looks if you tell non-Sprites you’re sixty-eight.”

“So? I am a Sprite, and I count in seasons. I am sixty-eight.” She fingered the dark green sash around her waist, which her grandfather had given her only weeks ago. “It doesn’t matter once you’re an adult anyway.”

He reached into his pocket and then handed her a small leather pouch. She opened it, then smiled at the square seeds inside. “Wild rose.”

“Yes, from the Inner Vale. They grow in Castalia City too. Actually, most of the wildlife from your home also lives further north.”

His intense stare warned her that he meant more than he said. Normally she would make an excuse and get away. She supposed that they needed to talk about his kingdom sometime, but she was still chafing at the thought of being carried. She slipped the pouch into her seed pocket, then met his eye. “So, what did you find in the village?”

“If I don’t let you change the subject, you’re going to run away, aren’t you?”

Actually, she’d fly away.

Brian sighed as though she’d answered out loud. “We were scouting out an inn. We didn’t see any soldiers, so we thought we’d rent a couple rooms.”

Sienna and Carli had come close enough to hear. “I was outvoted,” Sienna grumbled. “Who needs inns?”

“I’d have voted against it,” Keita said.

“Uh huh,” Sienna said. “You could’ve convinced Brian to switch too.”

Brian grinned. “It depends on how she asks.”

“Yeah? How’s this?” Keita challenged. “The last time I stayed at an inn, my sister was kidnapped.”

He winced. “Yes, that’s convincing.”

Carli tossed her head, making her red curls bounce. “It’s too late to change now. I have good timing.”

Keita huffed and then slipped off her branch. She landed neatly on her feet, then turned back. Brian followed. He landed upright, but his grimace suggested he’d hit the earth

hard. He stumbled after Carli, and Keita realized why he was walking oddly. He'd been riding bareback all day, probably in an odd position. She touched his shoulder and transferred energy into him. Immediately he straightened. "Could you afford that?" he asked.

The sun was minutes from disappearing. "I'm the reason you were sore," Keita answered.

"You're the reason my ribs aren't slashed open."

"You're the reason I'm not still in the river." She took a deep breath. "Thank you, by the way."

"I rather enjoyed it." He grinned. "So, did you reenergize me so that I can keep carrying you?"

"Definitely not!"

Sienna, who had been walking slower and slower, spoke up. "You can carry me." She grinned at their dumbfounded expressions. "You're on my list of people I trust." Her eyes traveled from Brian to Keita to Carli, and then she added, "It's about three people long."

"I'm flattered." Brian lifted her into his arms. Keita looked for Eyrie but Brian walked right past the pony. "You're heavier than you look, but you're still tiny," he told Sienna.

"Stop talking," she answered. "It makes your chest move."

Keita gaped at her friend. She was completely unashamed to be in his arms. Keita told herself that she was not jealous, and that she definitely did not want to feel his voice through his chest.

Carli was several feet ahead of them. She turned back with an exasperated sigh. "Some of us would like to arrive before

dark. Can we cut the nonsense and get moving please?”

They sped up. In only a few minutes they reached a loose cluster of log cabins. Larger buildings of sawed boards lined the main road. Brian set Sienna on her feet. She grinned her thanks.

A ragtag group of human children played in the snow. As Keita watched, one tripped. He fell on his face in the dust and howled, rubbing his twisted leg. Keita hurried over. Humans didn't know about Spectra abilities, so she slipped energy into him as she picked him up by the shoulders. The boy gasped, then stood upright. His body had stopped trembling. He grinned his thanks and then ran off toward the others. Keita tried to wave, lost her balance, and fell on one knee. Startled, she stared down at her hands. Green streaks were growing across her skin.

Brian helped her stand. “Are you all right?”

“I forgot... less energy.” She wasn't used to rationing her healings.

Carli stared after them. “Let's not order them to feed us. Those kids are much too skinny.”

“We can still purchase supplies,” Brian said. “That will help both parties.”

He gestured to the store. Sienna went in, and Brian followed. Keita hoped he didn't intend for her to follow, because she had no interest in shopping.

Keita reached for the sealed pocket of her leaf-green dress. It opened at her touch, revealing a small collection of seeds. She fingered an apple seed.

“Are you sure you can do that right now?” Carli asked.

Keita and Carli had worked together in the kingdom of Lectranis, cleaning up after war. Growing apple trees from sprouts was one of Keita's main jobs. Her smile faded as she looked at her greening hands. "I know I can't. Not without risking dormancy."

"Apples don't grow true from seed anyway," Carli said. "The only thing those would be good for is hard cider."

Keita frowned down at the seed. She'd grabbed it on a whim from an orchard where her father had grown up. She sealed her pocket again. "My cousin Hunter said I should curl up in a cart and hibernate through the whole trip. I thought he was joking."

"Eyrrie's not trained to drive," Carli reminded her. "I'm not sure I've got enough to purchase a cart horse..."

"I don't really want to do it," Keita said, "but thanks."

Voices caught her attention. "...not their fault they don't have fruit this time of year," Brian was saying. "We're lucky we found anything."

Keita groaned, too quietly for them to hear. From the sound of it, their shopping trip had not gone well. They'd have to rush to the next Mer village, hoping for more options before they ran out of food.

Carli led the way to a huge building with light spilling out of its windows onto the darkening street. The inside room was filled with tables, though only a few were occupied. A cluster of human loggers in bright striped shirts crowded in a corner, their booming voices filling the entire room. A roaring fire in the hearth and lamps along the walls gave the room a yellow glow. Savory smells wafted from a back door, almost covering

the smell of the men.

A pale girl hurried up to them. “You’re natives,” she said. “So, that’ll be the venison for you, sir, and the stew for the redheads, and your friend will skip eating. Am I right?”

Keita had no idea how to respond. Sprites and humans didn’t mix, and she’d met only a few humans who knew that the Spectra clans existed. Some clans lived side by side with humans, but none revealed their abilities.

“That sounds about right,” Brian said, “but we’ll want to see about rooms first.”

“You’ll have to talk to Jon about that. And Ahern can settle your horses. He’ll be in the courtyard.”

As Brian and Carli followed the girl, Keita and Sienna slipped back outside. A man was already beside the two horses, running a hand along Dusty’s side. Keita relaxed when she saw his dark features and smooth green tunic—another Sprite. “This fellow journeyed far,” he said.

“From Lectranis,” Sienna agreed.

The man turned to Eyrie. “And he’s from the Spriteland mountains, though raised somewhere tamer. He never wears tack and he’s not often ridden. That’s an expensive pet.”

“Do we need to pay you for stabling?” Sienna asked.

Keita should have asked the other two about money before they’d split up. Sprites, especially sheltered princesses, had little use for money.

“Comes with your rooms,” the man said. “Come along then, fellows.” He tugged on Dusty’s lead rope, and both horses followed him.

Keita turned back toward the inn and noticed a circle of

women staring at her. They wore long dresses covered in embroidery, split in front to reveal layers of lace, and all in different shades of blue. Their black hair was pinned up in identical circlets around their heads, and all three held their heads high and noses pointed down.

“Did you want something?” Keita asked.

“Who are you?” one woman asked.

Their features were dark and they stood shorter than humans, but she couldn’t tell for sure if they were Spectra. “My name is Keita,” she said.

“Like the Sprite princess?”

Definitely Spectra, Keita thought. “Yes, like that.”

“You want to dress your lady’s maid better.”

Sienna looked down at her large, ragged tunic, and shrugged.

“It’s so hard to tell the rank of Sprites,” another said. “You all wear that traditional dress thing. But your bracelet’s solid gold. You can’t be nobody.”

Keita forced a polite smile. If she’d thought of it in time, she could have hidden the bracelet.

A cry interrupted. Another girl emerged from the inn. Her dress was just as fancy, but the fabric was worn. “You’ll never guess who’s here!” she said. “It’s one of the Castalia princes. And I’ll bet anything the woman with him is royalty too—Cole, maybe.”

Keita rolled her eyes as the women gathered around the newcomer, muttering gossip. She turned to slip past, but found one of the women in the way. She was thinner than the others, with a distinctive bonnet over her hair. “That’s who you are,”



she said. “You’re royal attendants.”

“Yeah, sure,” Keita said.

The women wore looks that said ‘you are weird’ so clearly they must have been tutored in the subject. “Well, tell us then,” one said. “Who’s the Cole girl?”

Would Carli care if Keita told them who she was—Princess Scarlet Kelvin of the Cole Kingdom? Just in case, Keita answered, “I have been ordered not to reveal personal information. However, I would be happy to pass on any information you would like to give them. Especially about the recent soldier activity in the area.”

The women sniffed. “If you want to know about soldiers, you can ask. Most of them are already tied down, but you might find one who can help you advance your station.”

“I would enjoy tying them down,” Keita muttered to Sienna, “with a thick rope. Or chain.”

Sienna had already been fighting a smirk. Her choked-off laugh became a strangled squeak.

The talk swirled on, all about titles and parties and other things that Keita found not the least bit interesting. They reminded her of people from Castalia, Brian’s kingdom. She’d spent most of her time there avoiding people like this. Even without sensing emotions like they did, she knew she wasn’t what the Muses expected of a foreign princess.

“The soldiers won’t be here long,” a woman said, and Keita whipped back to paying attention. “Everyone knows the queen plans to deploy them to the Nome wars.”

Keita and Sienna gasped. Everyone turned to look at them. “Sorry,” Keita said. “We’ve been traveling. What about

the Nome wars?”

No one answered. Their eyes were narrowed. One at the back whispered something to the girl with the faded dress, who turned and ran for the inn. That couldn't be good.

“You are no royal attendant,” the woman in the bonnet said. “I could tell at a glance. I say you're a spy. And that—” She pointed at Sienna. “—that is a Nome.”

The ground rumbled. Keita and Sienna leapt back a second before a spray of water shot from the ground where they had been. A dark streak shot from the stables. Eyrie drew near. Sienna climbed on, and then Keita and the pony darted into the hills. Keita wasn't worried about the Mer women in their fancy dresses, but the Sprite stablemaster could follow. She sensed him inside the stable until several minutes of hard riding took them out of range. At last Eyrie slowed to a walk.

“Well,” Sienna said, “we didn't want to stay at the inn anyway.”

Keita chuckled. “I should warn the others though.” She reached for Brian with her thoughts.

His answer was immediate. *Where are you?*

Keita asked Sienna, then repeated her friend's answer. *A mile north-northwest of the inn.*

*I suspect this has something to do with the young ladies who just burst in to warn me that there are spies coming after me.* Brian's mind-voice seemed even but had layers of meaning she couldn't define.

*It does,* Keita admitted.

*They claim that the spies were muttering to each other, had bad posture, asked suspicious questions, and could not*

*possibly be connected to royalty.*

Eyrie's plodding hoofbeats filled the dark world. Keita shivered—the temperature was dropping fast. *If they can't tell who I am, they can't tell the Stygian I'm here. Or kidnap me, or assassinate me, or act with awkward formality, or pretend to be polite so they can seek favors, or...*

*I get the idea.*

He didn't usually cut her off.

*Sienna and I are camping in the hills. We'll meet you tomorrow morning,* she sent him.

*Fine.*

The curtness of the reply startled her. She thought she'd have to reassure Brian that they'd be all right. Their supplies were back at the inn. So was Carli, their main source of warmth. Keita had regained energy in the sunlight, but she'd be limited until the next morning—assuming the cloud cover would break again.

“What'd he say?” Sienna asked.

Keita forced herself to sit tall. “He trusts us to take care of ourselves.”

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Keita needn't have worried about the temperature. Sienna created a burrow just big enough for the two of them and Eyrie. Their body heat filled the small space. They emerged the next morning fully rested.

“Underground is the way to go,” Sienna said. “Warm in winter, cool in summer...”

“And extremely smelly,” Keita said. Until they'd emerged

into clean air, she hadn't realized how much they smelled like horse. "We would never be taken for royalty, that's for sure."

"That a bad thing?"

"No, it's a good one," Keita said, though she knew Brian disagreed. "Royalty gets taken to unpleasant places. Like dungeons. And boring meetings."

"Both unpleasant," Sienna agreed, nodding.

"That Mer lady had one thing right. I can't be nobody," Keita said. "It's too bad the bracelet gave me away." Though Keita had grown her sleeves down to her wrists, the bracelet rested on top, glinting with false innocence. It was part of her true form now—she could change her appearance, but only as long as she could concentrate on it, and it would always come back. Though Keita had hated the bracelet at first, it was normally more help than hinderance—it kept Stygians from touching her.

"Are all Mers snobby?" Sienna asked Keita.

"Zuri isn't so bad, and she was their princess."

"You're the Sprite princess, and plenty of Sprites aren't like you."

Keita frowned. Before she left Spritelands, she'd told her brother that home was something she could take with her wherever she went. If she wasn't acting like a Sprite, had she already lost home?

*Keita? How can we find you?*

Brian's mind-voice sounded normal again. Keita hadn't realized that she'd worried until the tension eased from her shoulders. She gave him directions. Within a few minutes, she sensed Brian and Carli approach. Sienna ran to her mule and

inspected each pack on his back.

Carli wrinkled her nose. “You used that pony to stay warm, didn’t you?”

“It worked,” Sienna said. “We were just as comfortable as you.”

“Only because you two are weird,” Carli said, but her smile meant she was teasing.

*Could not possibly be connected to royalty.*

Keita guessed from Brian's controlled expression that he hadn't realized he'd sent her the thought. “I am connected to *Sprite* royalty,” she said. “We don’t need fripperies and fakery. We don’t flaunt titles, we don’t need inns. It’s not my problem if Mers do—or Muses either!”

He took a step back. “I’m not arguing.”

She was about to point out that he wasn't agreeing either when a distant rhythmic pounding caught her attention. She held up a hand and everyone went silent. She closed her eyes and focused on sensing. “Men traveling in formation on the road,” she said. “Heading toward the village you stayed at last night.”

“Tealan,” Sienna informed her.

“Are they Mers?” Brian asked.

“I can’t sense clan. I hope they’re Mers, because we’re well within my range, and the Sprites from the forest probably have a larger one than I do.”

“They can’t sense clan either,” Sienna said. “We could be nobody.”

Keita half-smiled. “To complete strangers, yes, but the Sprites who met us by the bridge can recognize us by feel.”

She checked again, then added, “I don’t recognize them, though. They’re not acting like they’ve noticed us—they’re still on course for the village.”

“Can you keep sensing while you walk?” Brian asked.

“Yeah, but I can’t concentrate on where I step while I do it.” Keita reached for Eyrie and dug a hand into his mane. They hurried onward, angling away from the road. Within a few minutes, the soldiers were outside of Keita’s range.

“Good thing you caught up when you did,” Sienna said. “If you were in that inn, they’d have caught you.”

Carli exaggerated a stretch. “It was worth it.”

Brian looked up at Keita. “We probably would have left slower if we weren’t coming to find you.”

“And,” Sienna pressed on, “they probably knew where we were because you spent the night there. So, no more inns.” She gave Carli a triumphant smirk.

Brian nodded slowly, though he was still looking at Keita instead of Sienna. “Good call,” he said.

Keita half-smiled, and they hurried on.

This has been the first three chapters of The Spectra Unfurled. Find the rest on amazon [here](#).

Exile from her beloved home kingdom throws Keita Sage into a bewildering new world. The Stygian Isobel has taken the queen of Merlandia captive instead of killing her, requiring an entirely different kind of war. The enemy Stygians stifled her education and left her unprepared for the complicated world of titles, status, and court life. As a foreign princess with family ties to two kingdoms, Keita will be a valuable pawn unless she learns to play their games. Her betrothed Brian Pensier and best friend Scarlet Kelvin could help, but both are keeping secrets that pit them against each other. If Keita cannot trust her friends, she cannot be safe from the Stygians' combined abilities.

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