

The Spectra UNITED



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Princess Keita Sage is trapped in the rival kingdom of Lectranis, which was ravaged in the same attack that tore her family apart. Only finding the true heir will allow her to return home. One of the late king's children can claim the throne, but all seven have dispersed across the kingdom. Keita will have to rely on her companions: her little sister, who she would rather protect than depend on; her best friend, who won't take orders from anyone; and an uncomfortably perceptive boy she was once required to marry. Gangs, lured by the bounties on any former royal, dog their journey. Restoring peace to Lectranis will require more than her unique abilities, but how can Keita give this distasteful foreign culture her whole heart?

Chapter 1: Oleander Valley

For Keita Sage, crossing the valley floor without detection was the easy part of the rescue. Her feet, so sure among the brush despite the predawn darkness, now trembled inside their awkward, bulky shoes. She pressed a shaking hand against the stone wall of the enemy camp and repeated her sister's instructions under her breath.

The sentinels before the gate were a patch of black against the gray stone. They drooped against the wall in sleepless stupor, eyes fixed on nothing. Keita compared their black uniforms with her own before she took a deep breath and stepped into the light.

The soldiers jerked upright. "State your business," the largest demanded.

Keita forced all hesitation from her voice. "I've got information for the captain."

"Password?"

"Nighthawk."

The guard nodded and signaled to someone out of sight. The great iron gate swung open with a grating noise that stabbed her ears. For half a second Keita looked back into the gloomy valley. Had her friends made sure she could get inside before they began their own roles? She

saw nothing but mist, so she squared her shoulders and strode through the gate. The soldiers resumed their mechanical slouch behind her.

The collective sighs of sleeping men drifted through the night air. Towering cabins stood at attention in strict rows, their dark windows staring down as if they knew she shouldn't be here. A Lectran flag drooped from its post, so faded that only the faint yellow hue hinted at its identity. Once Lectranis and Keita's home kingdom of Spritelands had been rivals. The Stygian takeover that had resulted in the deaths of all six rulers forced the remaining royals to work together, but old prejudices were hard to shake.

Keita turned her attention to the task at hand. She closed her eyes and opened her mind. The life-forces around her pulsed with golden energy that she could feel with a sense unknown by those not of her clan. She ignored the faint glow of the sagebrush, the pricks of insects and rodents and other night-creatures, and instead focused on the people. A trio of them stood at attention behind the first cabin's door. She opened her eyes, and might have grinned if she weren't so nervous. The camp lay in the corner of the kingdoms, yet its designers had ignored the abilities of their neighbors.

The door swung open at her lightest touch. The three men leapt to their feet. Keita kept her eyes fixed on the leader, strong and well-built for a Lectran, who too often

looked like walking scarecrows. She drew a large envelope out from under the bulky black coat. “I have a message for Captain Berk.” Her voice came out wrong, too quiet, too hesitant.

The soldier’s yellow necktie marked him as a lesser officer. He reached out, palm open.

“It’s for the captain. I’m to give it directly to him.”

Caution crept across his face. “The captain allows no one into his chamber before sunrise.”

Keita leaned forward. “The Muse king is not pleased with the security of the prisoners,” she whispered.

The man flinched, and she didn’t blame him. She’d met Donovan, the lead Stygian who now called himself the Muse king, and he was not someone you wanted to displease.

“I’ll take you to him,” the officer said.

“You’d leave your post? I’ll go alone.”

The officer hesitated. Keita slipped the envelope back into her pocket and faced the men with the fiercest expression she could manage.

One of the common soldiers broke first. “His quarters are on the third floor. Up those stairs.” His officer glared at him, but Keita was already moving. She brushed past the desk, entered a gloomy stairwell, and slammed the door behind her.

No light penetrated the darkness, and though Keita’s skin was starting to tingle from lack of sunlight she

welcomed the protective shadows. She pressed an ear to the pine door and listened in as the guards agreed to let her face the captain's ire alone. A smile crept across her face. The Lectrans might brag about superior organization, but you couldn't deny that it left several convenient loopholes.

The hard part was done. If the plan worked, she would not need to confront the soldiers directly again. She kicked off her heavy shoes and welcomed the smooth grain of the wood under her feet. She climbed, passing three landings before the stairs ended in a long, dim hallway lined with doors. Keita's lips twitched as she counted them. She sensed nothing alive inside these rooms except for a troop of mice making war on the soldier's food supplies, and the man who must be the captain. He sat up in bed, his head swiveling in her direction as though he could see her through the thick log walls. On tiptoe, Keita slipped past his room and ducked through the next door.

The room was empty.

She turned to go, cursing her miscounting, but tramping boots echoed up from the stairwell. Keita flinched. Her frantic eyes scanned the walls and stopped on a rune carved in a corner. She didn't recognize it—Spectra runes had not been a part of her education—but she had no time for doubt. She sprang across the room

and pushed at it. A small panel sunk into the wall, and a square in the ceiling dropped.

With the soldiers' footfalls drowning out her racing heart, Keita leapt. Her fingers caught the edge of the open hole, and she heaved herself up into the darkness. She pulled the trap door closed as the men clattered into the room. Keita sensed them—the three men from the entrance hall, plus two others.

“No one here, sir.” The rough voice almost made her jump.

“You're sure?”

“Positive, sir.”

Keita held her breath. According to her sister, the common soldiers weren't told about the attic room and its contents. Did the officer know?

“All right,” the man said finally. “Assemble the seventh squad and send a messenger to the captain. I want a full search of this building.”

Their footsteps faded. While she waited for the sound to end, Keita wriggled out of the stiff uniform. Smooth green cloth emerged from her skin to take its place, forming itself into a knee-length dress. Darker leggings grew to her ankles. Only then, when she looked appropriately Sprite-like, did she turn to examine her surroundings.

She was standing at the end of an enormous room that must have capped the entire cabin. A tiny east-facing

window let in an ambitious shaft of light that fought to illuminate the dim room. She had crossed half of the room before she saw the dark shapes slumped against the opposite wall.

Keita broke into a run. Three prisoners, her sister had said. Her mind leapt over the possibilities. Was it her twin brother? The Pensier brothers? Or were they the Mer clan survivors, a large group of royal cousins she could never keep straight?

A human figure was propped against the wall, stiff as though carved from stone, and another lay at his feet. Keita stopped in her tracks. Two. Not three. She hesitated for a moment, but the gray sky was easing to blue and she had no time for worry. The captives were silent, eyes closed, faces blank. Keita placed a hand on one head, prepared to heal him, and felt for the problem. Dorma flower. The drug kept the prisoners from moving, but they might well be awake, listening to every sound. She'd seen Donovan use it before on rebel leaders in Nomelands, the kingdom to the northeast.

A crash murdered the silence.

Keita whirled. A grinning head surfaced through the trapdoor. "Nice try, Princess," it said as the rest of him came into view. Small and round, he looked more like an army recorder than a soldier, but she recognized the purple necktie. Captain Berk had found her.

“We didn’t expect you for another few weeks. Otherwise we’d have made you a proper welcome.”

Keita glanced at the pale blue sky behind him. He caught the gesture. “You can try to get past me,” he said, “but you can’t take my prisoners that way.”

He was right, of course. She could change into two animal forms small enough to squeeze through that window and escape alone. But that wasn’t her goal.

A bottle swung from his broad hand—more drugs, probably. He dropped it through the trapdoor. It exploded in a cacophony of breaking glass much too loud for its size, and a distant cry of alarm responded.

“Not that I need reinforcements,” Berk said. “We were preparing for a real plan. This is just pathetic.”

Keep talking, she thought. Just keep talking.

Without warning he leapt. She ducked by instinct as a fist swung over her head. She kicked and hit empty air. Then the fist slammed into her thigh. She stumbled as unnatural tingles shot up her leg.

“Not much of a fighter, are you, Princess?”

No, she wasn’t. Fighting was one of many important things her tutor had never taught her. She looked into the captain’s smirking face and attempted to stand. Her right leg did not want to move. She stumbled backward, dragging her tingling leg, until rough wood met her back. The captain advanced without hurry, confidence obvious in each step.

At the last second Keita pressed her hands to the logs. One of the wooden beams escaped its fastenings and toppled. The captain leapt aside, and the floor shook as the log landed where he had been seconds before. He landed sprawled on the floor, and then turned to face the new gap in the wall with an expression Keita did not understand.

An invisible force of sound and pain threw her to the ground. Keita found herself sliding across the floor, her face grating against the rough wood. At last she stopped. She took a deep breath and, ignoring the ringing in her ears, tried to stand up.

Nothing happened.

Keita tried again. Her eyes blinked, her lungs drew air, but the rest of her body would not respond to her will no matter how much she tried to fight back. The captain approached, footsteps vibrating the floor under her cheek.

“Stupid,” he said. The triumph in his voice overrode a slight wheeze. “You let me access the sky. You know some Lectrans call lightning.”

She should have remembered. Her own sister had some talent with lightning. She tried again to move, but she could only listen as his steps drew nearer and nearer.

Something flashed at the edge of Keita’s vision. The captain gave a startled cry. Bodies shuffled and thudded. Two pairs of lungs gasped for breath. The captain reappeared in her view. He teetered, framed by the hole

in the wall, and then dropped. She heard a cry, a distant thud, and then silence.

A pair of familiar brown eyes peered into her face. Brian Pensier, the Muse prince, was standing over her. Keita let out a shaky breath as she realized what had happened. Berk had delayed his next dose of Dorma flower too long, and one of the prisoner's drugs had worn off. Perhaps her touch had helped too. She was still learning to control her healing ability.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

She tried to answer him with a nod, but her head only twitched. The eyes filled with concern and then peered toward the tiny window across the room so that its glow played on his face. "At least sunrise is approaching."

At any other time, the thought would have been comforting. Sunlight would give her the strength she needed to throw off the paralysis, but much more was on its way now. Non-Sprites were not supposed to know that her clan depended on sunlight, but Brian had known her and her brother too well.

Months of hiding showed in his shaggy hair and ragged clothes, and his face was leaner than she remembered. The shock and sorrow of the Stygian takeover, when an ancient society had seized their kingdoms and killed their families, lingered in his eyes, but strength and healing were there too.

Brian's gaze did not turn away. In normal circumstances she would say something business-like to break the sentimental pause. Being around Brian had been awkward enough after their forced betrothal three seasons ago. Now that she knew he'd been interested in her for years beforehand, based only on her brother's questionable descriptions, she'd be happy to avoid him for many seasons yet.

He opened his mouth, probably to say something embarrassing, and she forced her throat to work. "It's fine. I am... always... all right."

He stepped back. "Are you sure?"

She focused all her willpower on one of her arms. It flopped over. "See?"

He shook his head and turned to check on the other boy. Keita tilted to keep them in sight. She recognized Brian's older brother Griffin; his freckles were obvious even in the dim light. "His drugs should wear off soon," Brian said, before leaning over the sleeping form. "Hey, what's taking you so long? Sulking that I woke up first?"

Nothing changed on Griffin's blank face.

Keita ignored the brothers and tried to roll over. Her shoulder got in the way and she fell back. "We've got to... be ready... to get out of here... by daybreak. Is there... a third prisoner?"

"Not anymore. Glen escaped."

"Is he all right?"

“He’s your brother. He’s always all right.”

Keita tried to nod. She'd seen Glen swim a raging river, face his own betrothal without a second glance, and drive off raiders with a quarterstaff. Even more than she, Glen had no trouble taking care of himself.

Brian frowned at her. “You didn’t come just to rescue him, did you?”

“My sister said three prisoners. It could of... could have been any of you.”

The sound of pounding feet made both flinch. Keita squirmed and managed to rise on one elbow. “I forgot. The other soldiers heard the bottle break.”

“They could have felt the lightning too.”

A groan interrupted them. Griffin’s eyes were open. Keita watched with envy as he stumbled to his feet. “Hullo again, Princess.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Would you rather I call you...”

The trap door thudded open, and for half a second Keita was glad for the interruption. A soldier pulled himself into the room, followed by another and another. Brian and Griffin turned to face them, but Keita saw uncertainty on both faces. One wrong move and they would join her on the floor. She turned toward the window just as the first beam of sunlight blazed over the mountains.

The cabin lurched. Keita ignored the cries of the others and wormed into the light. Warmth bathed her skin and strength surged through her. Her muscles unfroze and she clambered to her feet. She hadn't heard more fighting, but Griffin's right arm dangled and one soldier cradled a raw, red hand. They circled around each other, eyes focused in primal concentration..

“Stop!” she cried. Whether they listened to her voice or to a second tremor shaking the building, she didn't know. “You're wasting time. You need to run. Warn the others.”

A soldier laughed. Others exchanged disbelieving looks.

“Look,” she said, and pointed out the hole in the wall. Doubt-filled faces shriveled into terror. The rising sun illuminated the valley from one set of distant purple mountains to the other. At the base of the furthest hills, growing larger every second, raged a great, frothing wave.

Chapter 2: Flash Flood

Keita did not watch the men shove each other as they attempted to escape. Her gaze clung to the wave, but she heard the cry of alarm spreading through the camp below.

"I lied." She didn't mean to speak aloud, but the words slipped out. "They shouldn't have run. Up here is the safest place to be."

"Not while we're here," Griffin said.

She whirled to glare at him, only to find that Brian had beaten her to it. "Some will escape, after your warning," he said.

"Not many. And I wasn't supposed to warn them. The others said not to." She glanced down at the approaching wave. "We were supposed to run, if we could, but..."

The wave hit. The cabin shuddered but held firm. Spray filled the air. Voices screamed before being covered by the roaring current. Crashes resounded from below as the wave grabbed everything in its reach.

"What now?" Griffin yelled.

"Now we wait. After a while the water level will drop again."

"Yeah? Well, it's still rising."

The dark surface was indeed creeping up the cabin wall. It churned with debris everywhere she looked. No swimming through that. She studied the two boys. Griffin was a Cole, which gave him abilities over heat. He had a specific talent for controlling fire. Useful, if terrifying. How Brian's communication abilities could help, she had no idea.

Brian kicked the huge log she had dislodged. "Can you shape this into a boat?"

She beamed. "No problem." Her hands caressed the wood, causing it to twist and reshape itself.

Griffin peered over her shoulder. "Are you sure that'll hold up?"

"I can keep the wood from breaking."

"Yeah, but can you keep it from dumping us?"

She tried to picture the churning water, and how the debris might strike the boat. "Maybe?"

He rolled his eyes. "Make me a paddle."

Under her hands the boat took shape, with the wood from the hollow center thickening the sides and bottom. She kept her eyes on the wood, trying not to listen as the roaring grew louder. "I hope the others will think to look for us downstream."

Griffin swung his new paddle. "I'm glad there are others. It'd be too embarrassing, getting rescued by a girl."

"All of us are girls," Keita snapped. She'd met the other two princesses, Carli and Zuri, at the Summit

Council last autumn, a few months before the takeover, when all three had been betrothed. All three of them had survived the takeover. They'd worked to restore Lectranis and later Nomelands, where they'd helped defeat the Stygian Jasper and met Sienna Agate, a Nome who now traveled with them.

"You're lucky you were taken to the same kingdom my friends and I were hiding in," Keita said.

"It wasn't luck," Brian said grimly.

She looked up, ready to ask what he meant, but her eyes caught on the hole in the wall. She had no time to warn them. The wave charged across the floor, a hungry animal devouring everything in its path. Brian lost his footing and fell back into the boat. Keita clambered after him. The boat held still, momentarily anchored by their weight.

Griffin waded toward them, fighting a current that rose every second. He was feet away when the boat began to glide forward. He lunged, and Brian grabbed his outstretched hand. Keita took the other and pulled him inside.

"I changed my mind," he said. "You can rescue me."

"Good, because we need you." Brian pointed at the tiny window ahead, far too small for their boat. Keita was still staring at the logs rushing toward them when they exploded in orange light. She screamed as searing heat

licked her face. Moments later the boat burst through a wall of fragile charcoal and into a chaotic lake.

“Is everyone all right?” Brian called.

Keita was still trembling. “Of course,” she said, but her voice squeaked. She tried to slow her breathing. All Sprites feared fire, but she struggled more than most after the Stygians burned her home. “Just don't do that again,” she added.

“Sorry, Sprite-girl,” Griffin said. “I've got work to do.” He pointed at a log angling toward them. At his gesture, it burst into flame and careened away.

The brilliant blue sky mocked the destruction below. The stone wall had disappeared beneath the surface. The cabin roofs were still visible, artificial islands in a violent sea. Cascades of rock and earth plunged from the gouged bank into the new lake.

“Good news,” Griffin said. “Most of the debris is getting stuck before it enters the river.”

Ahead, the current stormed through a gap in the hills where water ricocheted off of rocks in towers of spray. Keita grabbed for the paddle, but Griffin pulled it out of her hand. “No steering out of this,” he said. “We'll have to ride it.”

“Are you crazy?”

He grabbed a second stick from the water, blasted off the branched end, and threw it to his brother. “Just hold on, Princess,” he said.

The boat picked up speed as they neared the gap. Griffin laughed, a maniacal sound that blended with the surf. The prow dipped below the frothing rapids, sending a wave rolling into the boat. The cold passed right through Keita's clothes to jab at her skin. Before she could react they were rocketing upward.

"Lean right," Griffin called.

She obeyed automatically. The boat shifted around a turn, missing a boulder by inches. Both paddles flew faster than she could follow, digging into the water, shoving against rocks. Keita's tense stomach started to relax, until she saw the great granite slab filling her vision ahead.

The water sped around a curve, but the boat was too heavy to follow. Seconds before they hit, the two boys stabbed their sticks downward, lifting the prow over the boulder. The boat rocketed skyward with a stomach-pounding jerk. For seconds they flew over shrubs and gravel, and then they hit.

Keita slammed against the bottom of the boat and bounced upward. She grabbed the edge as it threatened to buck her overboard. Then it hit the earth again. Her head slammed into the bottom, and she lay still.

* * *

Water was muffling her left ear. Keita sat up and watched streams fall from her sodden hair. The boat's

nose was buried in the side of a hill, putting Keita at eye level with the bulky shrubs.

Brian lay a few feet up the slope. A nasty red and purple mark shone across his forehead. Keita scrambled toward him, ignoring the cloud in her head. She would know if he'd died, but he wasn't moving... She reached out and grabbed his ankle.

Brian screamed. The ankle jerked out of her grip. He bolted upright, and uncomprehending eyes filled with panic.

“What happened?”

Griffin was hobbling up to them, leaning against the paddle. Angry red welts traversed his arms.

“I tried to heal him.”

Brian straightened. “Is that what that was?” His hand rubbed his forehead where the ugly wound had been.

“Sorry.” She looked at her feet. “I’ve been getting better at healing, but I’m still not good at it. It gets the job done, but not without hurting.”

“I think I’ll skip the Sprite treatment,” Griffin said. “I’ve got to admit, I’m glad you used the flood to get us out. I got to rescue you as much as you rescued me.”

“I delayed the captain while your drug wore off! And you wouldn’t have gotten far without my boat!” She looked at the river cutting through its channel below them. “The other girls broke a dam and redirected the river. We just didn’t expect it to be that big.”

“Aw, that was nothing,” Griffin said. “You should try rafting Kelvin canyon sometime.”

“You do that on purpose?” Keita asked, but something else caught her attention. Squelching footsteps were ascending their hill. She whipped around to look for hiding places, but the sagebrush was too short, and the pine-covered mountains too far away.

Brian yanked the boat from its burial place and rolled it over. “Under here,” he said. Keita followed the boys underneath, curling as small as she could.

The footsteps drew near, and mumbled voices with them.

“Well?” snapped a voice Keita recognized. Captain Berk had survived his fall.

“Another log, sir. More debris from the camp.”

Keita bit back a cry as their boat rocked. The captain had kicked it. “We cannot let them escape!” he cried. “If the Muse king finds out...”

Both Pensier brothers flinched, and Keita knew why—only a few months ago, ‘the Muse king’ meant their father instead of the Stygian leader Donovan. Keita could literally feel Griffin’s anger as the temperature under the boat climbed.

“Even he knows we can’t defeat a mixed Spectra group. Our camp was temporary, less defended.”

“And they knew that. They knew it!” Footsteps pounded the earth as Berk paced. Keita could only hope

he was destroying their tale-tell footprints. “The Muse king doesn’t accept excuses. You saw what happened to Captain Jallen when the Sprite boy escaped.”

“Jallen was careless. We did everything we could have done to stop this.”

Quick footsteps approached from the lake. “Sir,” came a young voice. “Commander Hoffen wants backup. He’s fighting rebels in the northern pass.”

The captain leapt into action. “Let’s go, men,” he yelled. “We’ll catch them and exchange them for the ones who escaped.”

Keita remained still as the footsteps faded. Griffin stirred, but she jabbed him with her toe. Moments later the young voice said, “You can come out now.”

Obedying was not easy. Both boys began to squirm, nearly knocking the wind out of her. “Hold still, both of you,” Keita ordered. Then she stood up, lifting the heavy boat on her shoulders. The boys scrambled out, and she let it fall.

“That looked awkward.”

Sienna Agate, Keita’s best friend, stood beside the log. She had just removed a black cap, letting stringy auburn hair fall around her shoulders. A messenger boy’s uniform hid her scrawny form.

Keita smiled a greeting. “What’s really going on up north?”

“We’re keeping the soldiers occupied. More of them escaped than we counted on.” She looked at Keita suspiciously.

“Is this another rescuer?” Griffin asked.

“Yeah, and you’d better be glad Sienna’s helping,” Keita said. “She stopped three patrols on our way here by herself.”

“Really? What clan are you?”

“She’s a Nome,” Brian said.

Sienna raised an eyebrow, and Keita knew why. Her wiry form and reddish hair often led people to guess she came from the Cole clan, like Griffin. Nomes were usually sturdy and dark, but anyone who’d seen her shape rock would know immediately what she was.

“How’d you know?” Sienna asked Brian.

“He can tell a person’s clan by looking at them,” Keita explained. “It’s a Muse ability.”

“Muse? Then I’ve met all six clans!” Her eyes traveled to the gold bracelet on Keita’s wrist that marked her as betrothed. “I guess you’re Brian?”

“Yes.”

Keita cleared her throat before Sienna could ask any awkward questions. “So, are Carli and Zuri all right?”

Her friend’s dark eyes grew serious. “When I left. They’re keeping the soldiers busy so you can get away. I’m going to help. You’re supposed to take take the prisoners to Avie’s court.”

“What, we’re your prisoners now?” Griffin complained.

Both girls ignored him. “I’m supposed to take them through the city on my own?” Keita asked. Only after the words left her did she realize how whiny she’d sounded.

“You can take the river most of the way,” Sienna suggested, though she looked at the water like it was full of cockroaches. Nomes disliked water, as a rule.

Griffin rubbed his hands together. “Escorting the Sprite princess *and* riding the river? I think I’ll come after all.”

Keita sighed. “We’ll see you in Telosa,” she told Sienna. Then she turned to the boat and began repairing the shattered wood.

Chapter 3: Lectranis

Keita was back in control. After observing Griffin for an hour, she'd felt ready to paddle while he rested. Although both boys had insisted they had no need to rest after a week of forced immobility, they'd been slumped against the boat bottom for hours. A pink tinge was creeping up Brian's face.

Suddenly his eyes opened. "Where are we?"

"A few hours downriver from Oleander."

He sat up and peered over the edge of the boat. Great mountains still edged the western sky, but the closer hills had gentled. "Oleander's the enemy camp, I guess. But what kingdom?"

"Oh. We're in northern Lectranis."

He studied the mountains again. "Then you're not far from home."

She nodded. "The Lectran border ends at the mountains. Everything west of us is Spritelands." She hesitated a moment, then added, "If we kept following the river after it joins the Silver, we'd go right through the Inner Vale." Home, she thought, or where home used to be.

Brian studied the horizon. “That big mountain is Siege Peak, isn’t it?”

She glanced up, impressed despite herself. “How do you know that?”

“Glen told me a lot about Spritelands.”

She scowled and looked away. Much more than Spriteland geography had escaped her twin brother's big mouth.

A jolt shook the boat. While Keita was occupied, they’d left the deep river for a shallow section laden with rocks. She jabbed a boulder and threw all of her weight against the paddle. The boat swung out into the current. That was stupid, she berated herself. Too many delays and they wouldn’t get through Telosa before nightfall.

The nose dipped under a wave, sending cold water flowing into the boat. Griffin sat up, sputtering, and Keita noticed that his face was beet red. Funny, she’d thought Coles were immune to sunburn. Maybe it was his mixed ancestry—he was a crossover, born with abilities from a clan different than his parents, who were both Muses like Brian.

“So, how’d you guys end up prisoners?” she asked. “I thought you were safe at the summit.”

Griffin winced. “Do you have to bring that up?”

“The summit’s impenetrable to Stygians, but any other Spectra can get in,” Brian said. “The royals

depended on secrecy, and the traps and other defenses, to stop anyone else from entering.”

Which had worked, Keita thought, until the Nome prince Jasper betrayed them and told the Stygians everything he knew. But she didn't want to think about that. Jasper, who had also internalized Glen's stories, who had joined the Stygians, who denounced them instead of harming her and died for it, was still a confusing subject.

“Glen saw the army coming,” Brian went on. “He said they were getting through the traps so easily that they had to have inside information. He suggested Griffin and I join him as decoys while the others escaped.”

Keita half-smiled. The royals needed one person from each clan to defeat the Stygians. Brian's younger brothers Teague and Reid, also a Muse and Cole, called themselves spares. She didn't know how much resentment lay underneath that title, but she doubted they approved of escaping while their brothers acted as decoys.

“They're safe in Merlandia now,” Brian said. “The plan worked.”

“We would have made it too,” Griffin threw in, “but Donovan was there in person.”

Keita winced.

“He left after he caught us, ‘to make better arrangements’, as he put it,” Brian said. “He wanted to use us as bait to trap you girls. He was really mad about Nomelands, and telling us all kinds of exaggerations

about the things you had done. Luckily Avie had sent us messages so we already knew the real story."

Keita squirmed, wondering if her sister had more discretion than Glen. Somehow she doubted it.

"That captain kept bragging about how they would capture you." A spasm of pain crossed Brian's face, and Keita could picture the three boys, sprawled motionless on the floor, unable even to respond. "That's why Glen didn't help us after he got free. He had to warn you."

"We're doing fine," Keita protested.

A change in the river's pitch caught her attention. A stand of willows blocked her view upstream, but she could see a great cut in the mountains where the river rushed on. "This is our stop," she said.

Griffin stood and pulled the paddle from her hands. "I'll handle this," he said. She frowned, but scooted over to give him more space. The boat shot across the water, which had become wider and clearer. Keita looked back and saw the fork, where the mud from the Alpine entered the Silver's pale water.

The boat slowed as they neared the bank. Griffin grabbed a handful of the thick reeds lining the bank and leapt ashore. The boat rocked, but he was already clasping hands with Brian. The boys pulled, and the boat slid in to nestle against the bank. Keita and Brian clambered out.

Free of their weight, the boat glided back into the current and was whipped toward the canyon mouth. Keita

stood still, watching the river drag it toward home. Her thoughts must have shown on her face, for Brian said, “Do you want to go back?”

She almost said yes. She could picture the great trees on the banks of the river, the other Sprites sitting in their shade, and the sunlight dancing between leaves. But the answer stuck in her throat. The last time she saw her home it was in flames. She shuddered and turned back to the boys. “I can’t go home now. I just don’t want to go in there.”

From the surface of the river, the reeds had blocked the city from view. Now, as Keita pointed southward, both boys stared in dismay at the ruins. The landscape was a city of hiding places. Shadows lurked everywhere—among the heaps of brick and wood that had been buildings, between piles of household oddments littering the streets, behind the trunks of dying trees. In most of the kingdoms, the Stygians had killed the rulers and placed one of their own in charge, but they didn't have a Stygian to rule Lectranis. Instead, they sent their armies to tear up the cities and put a foreign regent in charge.

“Is the whole kingdom like this?” Brian whispered.

“No,” she answered. “The further south you go, the more buildings are still standing. Lectranis is divided into regions—that means clusters of cities. The southern ones are mostly human, so the Stygians didn’t bother with

them. They ransacked this region—Telosa—looking for the Lectran rulers.”

Brian’s horror did not abate. “What if Castalia is like this?”

“I don’t think so. Donovan's already got the throne. He doesn't have a reason to destroy the Muse kingdom.”

Brian did not look reassured. Keita was powerless to ease the despair on his face, the same expression he'd worn when he'd learned that Donovan murdered his father.

A slight motion caught her attention. A figure was drifting ghostlike through the wreckage, a human male made pale by dust. Their eyes met, and he faded into the shadows.

Brian had seen him too. “People still live here?”

“If you want to call it living. He’s a spotter. We’ve got to move on before he calls his gang.”

“How do you know that?” Griffin asked.

“The sane people migrated south.”

She caught their dubious looks but chose to ignore them. Instead, she stepped into the debris-laden streets. Already the shadows were melding into each other, creating swaths of murk. She could sense living things, but she’d be blind to any debris in their way. Worse, the gangs tended to emerge at night.

A shout stopped her in her tracks. Griffin was on the ground, his foot caught in an old spinning wheel. He swore again, and pointed. “Don’t!” she cried, but too late.

The wood blazed in sudden flames and disintegrated into a pile of black ash. Griffin removed his foot, grinning.

“You can’t do things like that in the open!” Keita hissed. “I told you there are humans around!”

“No one’s watching.”

“You can’t know that. Not even I know that, and I can sense! You can never be sure who’s watching you in Lectranis.”

“Well, so what if they’re watching me? Humans aren’t that dangerous.”

“They are in mobs. Can you fight hundreds at once?”

She was pleased to see the alarm on his face.

“Our ancestors went into hiding for a reason,” Brian added. “Humans tried to hunt us down, centuries ago. Most of them stopped believing in us, but they’re still dangerous. Didn’t you ever listen to Dad?”

A shadow of regret crossed Griffin’s face. “I wasn’t paying attention,” he admitted.

“Have you ever heard of Aiyana?” Keita demanded.

The brothers shook their heads.

“She was a Sprite who rescued a whole city of humans. They were starving, and she felt bad for them and started healing and bringing food, anything she could do to help. They loved her for it. Some people say the Hanan region is a mispronunciation of her name. But then an army from a nearby city grabbed her. They had her in

a cage, took her onto the human ships, and no one ever saw her again.”

Both boys winced. “All right, I get it,” Griffin said. “No fire.”

The sun sank toward the horizon. Nothing looked familiar, but any minute now the pine tree that marked Avie’s Court would appear. Any minute now...

A huge, wrinkled hand closed around her wrist. Keita yelped and tried to jump back, but the person didn’t budge. He was big, too big to be Spectra, with matted hair on his face that hid all but his eyes.

The boys rushed toward them, but the man didn’t move. Keita glimpsed a knife, flashing orange in the setting sun. “Three?” he croaked. “Small party for this part of town.”

“We have nothing for you,” Keita said, voice as level as she could make it.

The knife slashed. She ducked, and it swiped inches from her face. Keita grabbed his arm and a strange weariness hit her body. In the same instant, the man screamed and let go. His eyes dropped to the flesh of his arms, smooth as a newborn’s. He scampered down a track in the debris and disappeared.

“What was that?” Griffin demanded.

“There’s something ironic in attacking with healing,” Brian remarked.

“I didn’t mean to.” She stared into the alley where he had disappeared. “Maybe he won’t tell. Come on.”

The buildings drew closer together. They were less damaged, but enough debris remained to hamper their travel. The sun was gone now but the sky would remain light for a few more minutes.

A searing pain shot up her leg. Keita toppled, stifling a yelp. For a second she lay still, ignoring the boys’ questions. Then she rolled over to examine the wound. A long metal spike had pierced her bare foot. She eased it out, wincing at the bright red smear left behind. “Sorry,” she said.

“You’re the one hurt, and you’re sorry?” Brian asked.

“I wasn’t paying enough attention.”

Shouts from behind made all three turn. A cluster of humans was charging toward them. “Run!” Keita yelled. She bolted forward, ignoring the wound still healing on her foot. She darted into the shadows, leapt a wall, and ducked through an old stable. On the other side, she turned back. Brian and Griffin were nowhere in sight.

She waited, shifting from one foot to the other. Then she sighed and stormed back the way she had come. Those boys had to learn to move, she thought. You can’t just stand there with gangs coming. She rounded a corner and nearly collided with Griffin. He motioned for her to be quiet, and pointed.

Brian stood in the middle of the street, calm as a new morning. The six full-grown humans were in full retreat before him. Keita gaped as they disappeared into the shadows.

Griffin rounded on Keita. "Non-Sprites can't run that fast."

Her heart sank as she realized why they hadn't followed. "Oh, no. I'm sorry." She collapsed on a wooden trunk. "I hate cities."

The boys looked at each other. "Aren't you getting used to it?" Griffin asked.

"To this?" She waved a hand at the destruction.

"Well, maybe not, but you've been here awhile, haven't you?"

She shook her head. "I spent a season in Lectranis helping my sister, but then my friends and I were in Nomelands for another season, and we were only here a week before Avie told us about you guys..."

"A season?" Griffin repeated.

"About three months," Brian said. "It's a Sprite thing."

Then they were quiet, staring at each other in inaudible conversation. Spectra siblings could communicate mind-to-mind, cutting everyone else out. Keita had always hated it when her cousins used their siblink around her, especially when Glen and Avie weren't close enough for her to use her own link.

Brian cleared his throat. "I wonder... what if I led us for a while?"

"You know the way?"

"No, not that kind of leading." He looked to Griffin for help, but his brother cocked an impudent eyebrow and said nothing. Brian started over. "It seems like Sprite abilities are hard to hide. If you have to run, or fight, it'd be hard for you to scale back. My abilities let me communicate with people differently, I can talk my way out of trouble..."

Now she understood. "You want to take charge?"

"That's not how I'd phrase it. It's just so you'd have someone to follow if we have to run. And someone to... I mean, if we had to fight, you couldn't just..."

"Wait a minute. I'm supposed to stand back and do nothing if we get in trouble?"

"It wouldn't hurt you to be the damsel in distress for once," Griffin said.

Brian ignored him. "I had to sit back on the river," he said. "I couldn't do much against that kind of force like you and Griffin. Here I can be more helpful."

Keita glanced at Griffin, who was staring as though she were an actor in an intriguing play. "I guess that makes sense."

"We'll be fine. Trust me."

She sighed and nodded.

He set out with confidence evident in each step. She still kept an eye out, but the streets he chose were deserted. At crossroads he looked to her, and she pointed in what she hoped was the right direction.

For what seemed like hours they met no one. Keita was starting to relax when they stumbled into a particularly devastated neighborhood. The heaps of rubble blended until the buildings' remains were indistinguishable from each other. Keita felt the human before she saw it—a young female, drowning in a tattered dress, face hidden by matted hair. “You don't belong here,” the girl said.

“We'll leave,” Brian said. “Sorry to bother you.”

He backed away, but a voice from behind yelled, “Hey! Get away from her!”

“Uh oh,” Griffin said.

A group of boys had scrambled around a corner. In the darkness, Keita had to squint to count them—eight, taller than the two Pensier brothers, with tight shirts and long, shaggy hair. Several held clubs or metal rods while others fingered knives at their belts. Her eyes traveled from the ropey scar dividing one arm to the ugly black bruise on another's face.

“Don't hurt them,” the girl whimpered.

The leader whirled on her. “Get outa here!” She jumped as though struck and disappeared into the

wreckage. The boys parted to let her pass, but their eyes never left Keita and her friends.

“You’re trespassin’,” the leader said.

“I’m sorry. Show us the border, and we’ll leave,” Brian answered.

“An’ join the Nighthawks, I guess. Or wait ‘til we sleep and cut our throats. Or,” he leaned in close. “Maybe you summon the Yellow Warriors.” He paused as his followers muttered to one another. “You’re not yellow, but you look like them.”

“We don’t even know what Yellow Warriors are,” Griffin protested.

“Talk like them, too,” the leader said.

Eight pairs of eyes narrowed in their direction.

“Swore I’d stop Yellow Warriors when I get a chance. This is a good chance, I think.”

“Wait. Let’s just...” Brian began.

The leader lunged. Brian ducked his first blow. Keita leapt forward, but Brian yelled, “Get back!” Stunned, she stopped in her tracks. The other boys swarmed around, and for a moment she lost sight of him. Griffin ran forward and disappeared into the mass.

Keita backed against a wall, trying to peer into the swarm. Surely no one would notice if she hit too hard in a mess like that? Especially in the dark? She tensed, preparing to spring, but then Brian appeared. His face was filled with a dangerous fury she had never seen before.

He danced around the edge of the group, jabbing with his elbows and open hand. The rest of the gang were thrashing around after him, attacking each other by mistake. She lost sight of him for a moment, and then he was back, angling away from her, moving fast but in complete control.

She had thought they were using only their fists. Then a knife gleamed in the moonlight. The gang's horrid scars left no need to imagine what it could do. Someone yelped, and it took all her willpower to remain where she was. She stared into the fight, willing someone to make her defend herself, but no one noticed. As her hands trembled she realized she could not enter now. She couldn't hold back once she got going. Instead, she clenched her hands so until her nails dug into her palms. She could teach the bumbling humans a lesson they'd never forget, yet she was the one who had to play helpless.

"Stop," Brian said. It wasn't loud, but his voice carried over the fight. Everyone froze. Keita caught sight of him and Griffin, standing side by side on the opposite side of the crowd. At first Keita thought that the gang had shrunk, until she saw the humans sprawled across the ground.

A boy climbed to his feet, and Keita recognized the leader. "Takes more than that to beat Wasps," he panted.

"We don't want to beat you. We just want to pass through."

“You’d join the Nighthawks. Or the Yellow Warriors.”

“We don’t help any Yellow Warriors,” Brian said. “We’re going to fix the cities and make them better. We’re trying to make everything right again.”

The truth was ringing in his voice—there was no possible way to doubt that he meant what he said. And by the stunned looks on everyone else, they heard it too. At last the leader stepped forward. “Sounds impossible,” he said, “but... maybe you can.” He extended his hand, and Brian shook it.

“You need help?” another boy asked.

“We need a place to stay for the night,” Brian answered.

“No problem,” the leader said. “You in our territory, nobody hurt you if we don’t like it. How about she goes in there with my sister?”

He pointed into the rubble, and a small round face peered out at them. Keita opened her mouth to object, but Brian beat her to it. “That sounds great.”

“Good. You can sleep now. I shook, I promised. Nobody will hurt you here.” He stepped back. Keita watched as he and his gang disappeared, one by one, into the rubble.

“Nice job,” Griffin said.

Keita looked at Brian. “You did that?”

“I influenced them a little.”

She peered into the shadows. “What if it wears off?”

“He made his own decision. I just helped him feel I meant what I said.”

She was still shaking. All of a sudden she had a mad desire to do something crazy—scream, laugh, cry, attack someone, something.

“I can’t believe you held back the whole time,” Griffin said.

She was still deciding whether this was a compliment or an insult when Brian said her name. She met his gaze. “You were amazing,” he said.

Unbidden tears stung the corners of her eyes as a thousand replies chased themselves around her head. At last she threw her hands in the air, muttered something unintelligible, and walked away.

The Spectra UNITED



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