

The Spectra UNEARTHED



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Keita thought that being a princess was nothing but trouble even before the power-hungry Stygians took over the Spectra kingdoms. Now she's on the run, hunted at every turn, and able to trust only a few other royal exiles. Her Sprite abilities, including the power to change to animal form, are not enough to defeat the Stygians, whose oaths have given them the abilities of all six clans. Only joining forces with the other exiles can give her the strength to change her dangerous life.

Chapter 1: In the Dark

Most girls would be afraid to wander dark tunnels, but Keita Sage did her best to seem fearless. The soldiers who had dragged her into the underground maze were far behind. She could avoid the remainder with ease. Now she just needed to find an exit and she'd never have to feel the damp, oppressive air again.

This was turning out more difficult than expected.

A soldier's steady footfalls echoed through the stone passageways. His surety must come from experience, not sight—no clan could see in the dark. Keita began to creep after him. On the way in she had caught a glimpse of a concrete building, a squat toad at the mouth of its burrow. Surely the soldiers used it, spending their nights or their mealtimes in the open air. It might take a while, but eventually this one would lead her to the surface.

Her skin was tingling, a sign she'd been without light for too long. She was in no danger, not yet, but worry lurked. Without either light or food, she would starve. They didn't mean to kill her. The soldiers had passed up countless opportunities for that on the long trek here. If

she gave up, let them capture her again, they would provide light, or at least food. But the thought of trading freedom for life was repulsive.

Keita sensed a knot of men approaching her soldier. She growled, a sound that never left her throat. Dodging one or two would be easy when she could feel their presence, down to the least motion of twitching fingers, but a large group was too unpredictable.

The darkness pressed against her eyes until she could no longer tell if they were open or shut. Even the chill in the air had a dreamlike quality, and the thought tickled her brain. Maybe last winter, the whole complicated season, was nothing but a bad dream. Any minute now she would wake up and walk out into the dappled sunshine and soft piney smell of the Inner Vale. Father, alive and well, would be bustling around the courtyard, and her biggest concern would be avoiding the escorts he insisted accompany her everywhere.

She was almost crazy enough to believe it.

The group of soldiers she had sensed were standing further up the tunnel. Sneaking past so many would be difficult, but a group like that might mean that they were guarding something—like the exit. Maybe she could risk making herself smaller and attempting to pass.

A boot bumped a piece of gravel behind her. A tiny noise, and yet Keita whirled around. She had sensed nothing behind her—no man, not even a rat or a toad. Sprite sensing was not easily fooled, and yet the feeling of being watched spread down her spine and tingled in her bare feet.

“You’re safe. I’m here.”

Keita jumped so badly that her head slammed into the rock ceiling. Jasper Smelt, leader of her captors, was the last person she wanted to meet in a place like this.

A hand grasped her shoulder. “You all right?”

She jerked away, even as her mind, sticky as spring mud, registered that he wasn’t groping in the dark, that he had seen her jump. Somehow, impossibly, he could see through the blackness.

He could see her now.

“You don’t have to be afraid,” Jasper said. “I rescued you.”

To remain silent would prove her fear. “You call that a rescue? To have soldiers drag me across the kingdoms?”

“I had to. I needed to get you before the other Stygians did.”

She grimaced. Competing to catch their prey sounded exactly like something a Stygian would do.

They'd murdered her father and most of the royal families and were hunting down the remainder. They had conquered Spritelands and the other five Spectra kingdoms with no thought for the inhabitants. Little more would surprise her.

"I've got things under control," Jasper went on. "You can trust me."

"Trust you?" She tried a derisive laugh, but it came out shaky. "I know what you've done. You joined the Stygians so you could take your father's throne. Why would I trust you?"

"Because we were friends."

It wasn't quite true. They'd met during the four days of the annual Summit Council meeting, and she hadn't seen him since. She could still remember the worst moment, standing alone except for the snow-tipped mountains peering over the great stone wall. Their fathers were closeted together, deciding her future, and she could do nothing but wait. In her worry she did not hear the footsteps or sense his presence. The whisper in her ear came from nowhere: "It isn't my fault." By the time she'd turned to look, she saw only his back, clad in the bright colors of royalty, disappearing behind a hut. Two months later, all six rulers were dead.

He was waiting for a reply. “You were closer to my brother,” she said. “If this was really about saving old friends, why didn’t you track him down?”

“He’s too...” Jasper hesitated, and then went on, “Glen is too well protected. Stygians can’t enter the Summit after we take our oaths. You know that.”

She did, but she hadn’t realized he knew her brother’s whereabouts.

His hand returned to her shoulder, and his grip was stronger this time. He steered away from the soldiers still milling around in front of them, apparently unaware of their prisoner so close. For a second she considered breaking free, charging through those men with everything she had... but even if she could fight so many, she didn't dare test Jasper's Stygian abilities.

She turned to him again. “If I can trust you, will you tell me where we are?” she challenged.

“Sure. We’re in Nomelands, under the Scissor Point Outpost.”

She stiffened. Unless she was mistaken—which was entirely possible, curse her useless tutor—they were deep in the Nome kingdom, over a hundred miles from the city where she’d been captured. She’d known they’d been traveling for days—every time she regained

consciousness, the scenery had become browner and drier—but she'd had no idea they'd gone so far.

As if reading her thoughts, Jasper added, "You're safer this way. The others won't look for you out here."

"I was avoiding them fine on my own."

"Donovan entered the search."

She stopped.

"He's coming in person. Even you can't hide from him."

Keita wasn't sure about that, but she did know that the mention of Donovan's name caused panic among the royals who had met him. But Jasper wouldn't betray the Stygian leader. Would he?

"Why did you join him in the first place?" she demanded.

Jasper stopped walking. She turned in his direction, eyebrows uplifted—maybe the expression wasn't useless, despite the darkness—and waited. At last he spoke. "Donovan didn't tell us everything. He made a lot of promises. And he kept them too, just not... not like we expected. He doesn't care about us. He'd turn on any of us in a second if he weren't so busy chasing the remains of the royal families."

Keita turned before her expression could reveal her thoughts. That must be why he'd captured her. He didn't care about old friends. He was after a royal, any royal, so that Donovan would never stop hunting. She'd just been the unlucky one the soldiers had found first.

Jasper took her shoulder again and directed her onward. "You'll be all right here," he went on. "I know you don't like the dark, but Donovan wouldn't look for you here. And sometime, he'll have to return to his own kingdom. You can come out then. We're up in the mountains, just like where you live."

Mountains? She remembered seeing tiny purple blobs on the horizon, but nothing that looked like proper mountains.

"You'll see," Jasper said, as though he could feel her doubt. "Glen told me all about your home. We've got pine trees, climbing rocks, everything. You can grow all the plants you want. I know you like that kind of thing."

Telling Jasper all of those details did sound like something Glen would do. He never did know when to keep his mouth shut.

"It sounds nice," she admitted, "but I can't stay shut up here. I can't..."

"Don't you want to be safe?"

She stopped walking. What would that be like, to be safe? To stop looking over her shoulder for the soldiers that always seemed to be chasing her no matter how many times she dodged them? To leave the cluttered city behind, with its human gangs and sharp debris waiting to stab at her feet? Could it be possible to lose all the worry, all the fear? Would imprisonment be worth it?

Jasper's hand slipped from her shoulder to her hand. His grip was stronger than she'd expected. "You'll be safe here," he said. "I promise."

Keita had to remind herself that he was just looking for a hostage. She'd left the safety of the Summit to help her friends, and they still needed her.

"You don't need me," she said. "Donovan will never find all of us."

"He'd find you."

She waved this aside. "He can't get the ones at the Summit."

She felt his shrug through his fingers. "For now."

"Not just for now! You said yourself, the walls repel Stygians. And they've got defenses—the traps and things—and he doesn't even know where it is."

"He knows."

"He's not royal. Only the royals ever knew..."

“I told him.”

For a moment she couldn't speak. Then she leapt back, yanking her hand from his grasp. “You betrayed us!”

His hand guided her a few steps further and then retreated. “I had to. The other royals wouldn't let me forget what I did. If Donovan doesn't stop them, they'll come after me! They're dangerous!”

“They'll be even more dangerous if you don't let me go! I bet they're coming after you right now.”

His pregnant pause drained her show of bravado. “I didn't think of that,” he admitted. A strange jangling noise filled the empty tunnel. He was shuffling around in front of her, boots scuffing the stone floor. Keita took a step back. Whatever he was doing, she wanted nothing to do with it.

“I can handle it,” Jasper decided. “I'm stronger than those girls you were with. Donovan wouldn't suspect I've got you if I get rid of them. Or maybe I could barter, trade them for keeping you...”

Keita leapt. Her outstretched hand hit an unseen wall seconds before her body crashed into it. Metal jangled as wire links dug into her skin. Then she bounced back, landing hard on the rough floor. Shaking, she reached for

the barrier. Jasper must have been hanging it while he was talking. The wire mesh seemed to grow straight from the rock, woven so finely that not even a mouse could squeeze through.

This changed everything. Nomes like Jasper could break through stone. Those who could not would be held in by a simpler door. No, this barrier was designed for a Sprite. He didn't grab the first royal he could find. He was after her.

Jasper was breathing fast. "You tried to hurt me."

"I won't let you harm them."

She shouldn't be surprised he'd treated her that way. Her heart had no reason to be squeezing as though the feet of stone overhead were falling on it.

"You shouldn't try to hurt me. I'm protecting you."

Something sparked in the darkness. Then a face appeared, glowing sickly yellow. Keita had to edge close to the glinting copper chains to see but then wished she hadn't. The flickering light made his face leaner, his eyes more menacing.

"You can't fight a Stygian," he growled. "We defeated the kings. We're picking off the heirs one by one. Your friends are cowering at the Summit. They don't dare stick their noses beyond the walls."

He opened his hand. Flames danced on his palm. The flickering light captured her gaze, pointing upward with no fuel to feed it. He shouldn't be able to do that.

“Stygians have the abilities of all six clans. You can't hurt me. You can't even hide. We know your weaknesses. We know how to use them. Sprites are afraid of fire, aren't you?”

Keita stepped back into a solid rock wall. She shouldn't be showing weakness... but she couldn't help it. Her memories were dancing in those flames. Grand trees, burning, toppling, dead. Sprites running, screaming, panicking before the blaze. And Father's face, and what the fire had done to him...

“Don't you see?” Jasper asked. “This is the only safe place for you. But you can't try to hurt me. Then you're no better than they are.”

Keita took a deep, shuddering breath, and forced herself to stand. Her trembling legs barely held her. “What do you want from me?” she asked.

“I told you. I want to keep you safe.”

A door opened. In the rectangle of bluish light, Keita saw a dark form. Without the glinting eyes, his silhouette was familiar. For a second, she saw the quiet, reserved

boy she thought she had known. Then the door shut, and the light was gone.

Chapter 2: Sienna

The cell had no door, no holes, not even a crack in the sculpted rock. Keita paced across the uneven floor as the cold shoot through her bare feet to the rest of her. She'd been cornered before, but never by someone as powerful as he was. If he could use fire—not to mention the abilities of the other clans—she might as well give up now.

Keita thrust her fingers through the mesh barrier and yanked again and again, ignoring the wire biting her skin. The jangling metal spoke in her friends' voices. They were unaware that Donovan was coming, unaware that Jasper would be waiting if they tried to rescue her. She had to get back. She had to.

A drop of warm blood trickled down her arm. She released the chain. The wetness on her arm and the sharp stinging faded slowly. She shouldn't have done it. She couldn't heal properly in the dark—or do much else either. Jasper had designed her prison well.

“Hello?”

Keita dropped into a tense crouch as the strange voice echoed out of the blackness. She sensed into the darkness and felt a person beyond the barrier. Her tension eased. She'd never been hunted by a girl before.

"I know you're there," the voice said.

"Yeah, I'm here. Are you a prisoner?" Keita asked.

"Uh huh. I'm Sienna. Who are you?"

"Keita Sage. What clan are you?"

"What clans are there?"

Keita flinched and backed toward the back wall. Relating with humans had never been her strong point. Eventually, even her sister gave up teaching her. Keita was happy to hang back and let others do the talking. But the others weren't here now.

Sienna was still waiting for an answer. Keita tried to change the subject.

"Do you know where we are?"

"Underground, by the point of the Scissor Mountains, like that fire guy said."

"Oh. I thought he might be lying."

"Nope. I was awake the whole time the soldiers were marching. Not like you. You are that girl, right? The one under all the blankets, with the green skin?"

“No,” Keita said quickly. “I mean, yes, that was me, but I’m not usually green.”

“So what are you?”

Keita stopped.

“You might as well tell me. I already saw you all green.”

“It’s called dormancy,” Keita interrupted, “and stop talking about it. It’s embarrassing.”

Sienna didn’t even hesitate. “Yeah, I saw that, and I heard the guards brag about catching you. Can you really turn into a lizard?”

“No, I can’t.”

“Well, then?”

She gave up. If the kid knew this much, she might as well get her facts straight. “It’s not magic, exactly, but Spectra have got abilities that humans don’t. We belong to this land. The humans only arrived a couple hundred years ago. After a few battles we went undercover, and they forgot about us.”

That should be enough information to keep the kid busy, Keita decided.

She was wrong.

“You said abilities? What kind?”

Keita sighed. “It depends on the clan. And your talents within the clan.”

The girl’s voice was suddenly eager. “Can one work with stone?”

“What do you mean?”

“Like, making things out of rocks. Shaping them without tools. Finding handholds in cliffs that aren’t there for anyone else. That kind of thing.”

“Who do you know like that?” Keita demanded.

For a moment the girl hesitated. Then she whispered, “I can do it.”

Keita didn’t speak.

“I knew it. You think I’m crazy.”

“No, Sienna. I know you aren’t crazy. I just don’t know how to explain.”

“You know what’s going on?”

“Yes. You’re not human. You’re a Nome.”

The name didn’t have quite the effect Keita had expected. “A what?”

“A Nome. That’s one of the Spectra clans. We’re in Nomelands now, and Jasper’s the king.”

“*He’s* my king?”

“Yeah.”

Sienna seemed to run out of questions for the moment. Keita could almost hear her mind spinning. She didn't blame her. She couldn't imagine what it would be like, finding out you were Spectra at a time like this. Finding out that the world worked by different rules than you'd always thought. Worrying you weren't capable enough to face such a complicated world, and finding out it was true... Well, maybe she could imagine some of it.

“So, are you a Nome too?”

For once Keita didn't mind the interruption from her thoughts. “No. I'm a Sprite. That's another clan. The one that goes dormant when we run out of energy.” She hesitated as a thought struck her. “Sienna, if you're a Nome, why can't you just break out?”

“We're ten feet underground. The ceiling would smash us.”

“Oh.” Keita leaned back against the wall. For a second she'd thought they could get out of here.

A sliding sound, like skin against wood, caught Keita's attention. Perhaps Sienna's door was wooden. Too bad they couldn't switch cells somehow. They'd both be out in seconds.

“Hey, Sienna?”

“Uh huh?”

“How’s that door attached to the wall?”

Sienna didn’t answer. For several minutes Keita waited. The girl was shifting again. At last she called, “Keita?”

“Yeah?”

“If I get us out, will you stay with me?”

“Sure.”

The stone cracked like a gunshot. Keita leapt to her feet and hit her head on the ceiling. Moaning, she wobbled toward the barrier. Seconds before her hand should have touched the chain, it fell, jangling a triumphant song that filled the cavern.

A hand touched Keita’s arm.

“Yi!” she yelped.

“Calm down. It’s me,” Sienna said.

The girl couldn’t have been more than a few feet away, and still Keita saw nothing. She reached for the barrier and found empty air. “You did that?”

“Easy. I can’t break the walls, but getting hinges out of the stone—no problem.”

A grin spread across Keita’s face. “You are amazing.”

“We aren’t out yet,” Sienna answered, but she sounded pleased. “Is that fire guy around?”

“His name’s Jasper. I saw him leave, but I can’t sense Stygians, so there’s a chance he...”

“Sense?”

“Of course, I... oh, sorry, you wouldn’t know. I can sense the living things around me—everything except Stygians. So, for example... there’s five guards behind the door Jasper left through, several more milling beyond—walking through passageways, I guess. Two more that way...” She pointed, and then realized the gesture was useless. She fumbled in the darkness, and her fingers closed around a bony hand. “That way,” she said again. “I bet those two are guarding a back door. We might be able to slip past.”

The girls stepped forward. “Will we have to fight?” Sienna whispered.

“I hope not,” Keita answered, “but we might.”

“I’ve fought before. People can’t hold me. I can make them let go, if I have to. But those soldiers... they grabbed me, and I couldn’t do anything.”

“The soldiers were probably Nomes too. Your abilities canceled each other out. We’ll just have to...”

A door crashed open. The doorway framed Jasper’s silhouette, a shadow against dim light. They saw his face sweep across the darkness, and stop in their direction.

Keita bolted toward the place where she had sensed the two soldiers, pulling Sienna after her.

“Stop!” Jasper yelled.

A second later, the girls slammed into something solid. Keita clutched her spinning head and began groping for a handle. Sienna must have found it first, for the wall swung open, revealing a scrawny girl framed by lamplight. Then she was gone and a pair of burly men stood in her place.

Keita tried to follow. She thought she'd gotten past them until a hand closed around her wrist. Pain shot up her arm. She yanked back, and her hand, suddenly numb and heavy, slid from his grasp. Echoing cries faded behind her as she ran through the chamber, mouthing silent thanks to the lanterns mounted on the walls.

“Over here!”

A pale face peeked through a doorway. Keita dashed through and Sienna closed the door behind her. More lanterns lined the walls, a line of yellow spots in a great circle around them. Piles of crates lined the entire space except for a few haphazard walkways. On one of these, as far from the only door as she could get, sat Sienna. Sweat, dust, and stringy auburn hair plastered her forehead. Intense dark eyes studied Keita, who wondered

what the younger girl saw. With dark curls in disarray and green dress smudged by dungeon grime, she couldn't be a decent Sprite specimen.

Keita's fingers weren't moving. Gray, stiff skin contrasted her reddening wrist. Sienna gasped. "They did that?"

"It's petrified," Keita said. She held her hand up to the lanterns. Only the color and stiffness showed the difference.

"But... that's what happens when I stop people touching me?"

"Not so much as this. A quick shock and they'd let go without too much damage. But this..." She eyed the limb again. "I'm going to have to sever it."

"You mean..."

The dead hand clattered to the floor. Keita focused on her stump, ignoring Sienna's gasp. A new hand was already growing, fingers unfurling like new leaves. It swelled to the usual size and stopped. Keita collapsed onto a crate, her head swimming. It was still too dark.

"How did you do that?" Sienna demanded.

"I'm a Sprite." Her voice was shaking more than she liked. She forced it to steady and added, "We heal naturally."

“Did it hurt?”

“Of course it did. You try having your flesh replaced with bits of rock and tell me...”

“I meant the regrowing.”

“Oh. That wasn’t too bad.” Keita clenched and unclenched her fingers, working out the stiffness. “I heard petrification is bad, but I’d never felt that before. Severing contaminated limbs, yes, but...”

“I’m going to be sick.”

Sienna did look pale. Shrugging, Keita turned away, and her eyes fell on a large brown spider in one corner. Not quite scream-sized, she decided, but it might bring a startled yelp. Three points to me if I can find the right victim.

“What’s the smile for?”

Keita ran a hand through her snarled hair. “Just thinking of games my brother and I played at the dullest place on earth.”

As their voices faded, silence crept through the heavy air. Keita could feel Sienna beside her—she was older than she looked, maybe Avie’s age or just younger. No other people lingered near. “The guards aren’t close. We might be able to make a break for it.”

“But what about...”

The door flew open. Keita leapt to her feet. How had she forgotten him? Jasper stood in the frame, eyes fixed on her face. "I can sense too, you know," he said. Keita drew back against the rock wall as the implications set in.

"I wondered why the soldiers didn't deal with that girl themselves," Jasper went on. "I thought she'd be a companion for you. But that's not going to work, not if..."

Sienna shifted. Keita glanced sideways and saw the girl pressing her palms into the wall.

Something cracked. A dark line was drawing itself over their heads. It snaked across the ceiling, changed from black to white, and divided into strange shapes. Jasper glanced up just as the first great chunk of rock detached above his head. Keita leaned forward, trying to see what had happened, but Sienna pulled her back. Gray dust filled the room, but Keita could still hear the smashing and banging of the crates and their contents. Fingernail-sized shards filled the air, beating the walls, carving scrapes in Keita's skin that were slow to heal.

As suddenly as it had begun, the cacophony stopped. A beam of sunlight burst through the cloud of dust. Keita ascended the heap and stepped into the light. The stinging wounds vanished as energy surged across her body. She

raised her arms, feeling the warmth play on her skin, bathing her in its life giving glow.

“You're green again.”

Sienna still lurked in the darkness below.

Keita examined the green streaks in her maple-colored skin. “Sorry. It'll fade.”

The girl clambered up to join her. She seemed even paler in true sunlight as she peered up the hole in the ceiling. “You up for climbing that?” she asked.

In answer, Keita jumped. Fingers fastened on the jagged edge of the hole, and she clambered up. Her head passed the rock, passed a layer of soil still trickling into the hole, and entered the living air.

Sienna scrambled to join her. “I never saw anybody else climb that fast.”

“That's nothing. I'd leave you behind in a tree-climbing race.”

“Of course. That's not stone.”

A breeze played in Keita's hair, bringing the pine-soaked scent of home. Waiting for her eyes to adjust, she felt life blossoming around them—birds in the pines, rabbits in the undergrowth, lizards basking on rocks. Sparse brush and impressive rock formations speckled

the land. Scraggly trees grew at the base of a cliff behind them, and the ground leaned away from it.

The yawning hole behind the girls reminded Keita they weren't safe yet. She circled it once, then again. "Help me look for stuff to plug this."

"What for? Jasper got smashed."

She didn't look up. "He's alive."

"You know how much that rock weighs?"

"You heard him. He's got abilities from all six clans. He can heal or do anything I can, and you can, plus he can manipulate heat—you saw the fire—and water, and..."

"People can do that?"

"And more."

"Then how's blocking the hole doing any good?"

"It'd buy us more time. If we get far away enough he might not be able to sense which way we went. This should work." She stopped in front of the nearest stunted tree. Pressing her hand to the bark, she focused her energy. The trunk swelled. She could sense its roots thickening and creeping through the ground. One burst through the rock chimney and pushed against the other side, snaking across the surface in its search for a way through.

"Er, Keita?"

"What?"

"The ground's not stable after what I did. Those rocks could..."

A rumble drowned her words. Ground shifted beneath their feet. Keita stumbled and saw Sienna's horrified face. She looked behind her, and gasped. A cascade of rocks and dirt was roaring down the cliff.

Chapter 3: The Oath

Keita tried to run on ground that swayed like water. She had gone only a few feet when the insane mass overtook them. Dust filled her nose and eyes as she stumbled on. Then something slammed into her stomach. Her fingers tightened around rough bark and she heaved upward while rocks behind hammered her back and shoulders. Gasping, she clambered onto the branch. The tree she'd landed in was holding its own against the onslaught.

A smear of reddish hair appeared above the surface, and was gone. Keita took a deep breath. She couldn't go back in there without more bulk, more power. She reached for her energy, like a white core inside her. Coarse black fur sprouted along her arms and through the folds of her skirt. She hooked new claws into the dipping branch as she finished her change.

The bear leapt. Claws sank through streaming dirt. She stumbled. Gravel ripped her skin and dust clogged her nose and eyes. A human cry, a smell of fear gave her direction. She lunged downstream, tripping and

stumbling but ever moving forward. A scrawny arm broke the surface, and she caught warm flesh in her mouth. The head emerged, the girl screaming. The bear positioned herself behind the girl, taking the brunt of the impact.

The current of earth thinned. A fist-sized rock crashed into a foreleg, and she stumbled. The girl shrieked once more. Past the rolling, sliding earth, straggly trees stood unmoving, out of the avalanche. The bear stumbled toward them, shuffling at an angle.

Claws found solid ground. The bear heaved one more time, and she and the girl collapsed onto motionless earth.

Pain pierced her mouth. She roared, and the arm in her mouth dropped. The girl scurried back. She met the bear's eyes and raised her arms, a clear challenge. Small, scrawny, she did not look dangerous, but the bear knew better.

In a flash of light, Keita returned to her true form. She weaved for a moment—her body felt unearthly light—and then spat. Large gray objects, spattered with blood, fell into her palm. Bear teeth, she realized, turned to rock.

Sienna's jaw had dropped but her hands had not.

"It's just me," Keita said.

Slowly the wild look faded from the girl's eyes. She staggered back. "You... you..."

"I change form, yes. Not as well as some, but I learned several forms, and..." She stopped. Sienna was staring at her as though she'd sprouted extra limbs. "It's not that big a deal," Keita tried again. "Most Sprites have learned a form or two."

Sienna was still staring. At last she said, "This is the weirdest day of my life."

Keita tried to look sympathetic. "At least it's almost over." The sun had vanished beyond the horizon, and the sky had exploded in a masterpiece of color. "Do you know how far we came?"

"Just under a mile."

"Good. That should be outside his range. We can stop for the night."

"Who made you leader?"

Keita stepped back. Sienna's pout made her seem more like a child than ever. She took a deep breath. "All right. Do you think we should stop for the night?"

"Uh huh."

Shaking her head, Keita wormed in among the low branches of a stubby pine and drifted off to sleep with its scent like a blanket around her.

* * *

She awoke in a cocoon of stone. For one horrid moment she thought she'd been captured again. Then she saw the opening, facing the faint orange gleam of a sunrise to be. Worming forward, she saw a second heap of stone beside hers, similar to other outcroppings she'd seen except that Sienna was sitting in a hole on one side.

"Where are we?" Keita demanded.

"Same place we were yesterday. I built a shelter around us."

Keita rolled on her back and pressed her hand to the ceiling. It was solid, as hard and immovable as any other stone. "All right, that is impressive," she admitted.

"Even after that cool stuff you did yesterday?"

"Me? I'm not that good a Sprite. You're lucky you didn't break anything. I'm terrible at healing others."

She scooted out of the cave. The ground fell away not far from their resting place, revealing a spectacular view: patches of golden-colored land between rocky purple mountains. She couldn't see even a glimpse of the city she'd lived in for the past weeks. To have been carried so far like inanimate baggage made her sick.

"You okay?" Sienna asked.

Keita realized that she had sagged against the cave, and straightened. “Of course.”

“That’s good.” Her voice was muffled, and Keita didn’t understand why until she turned around. The girl was stuffing small yellow flowers off of a nearby plant into her mouth. A pair of tiny yellow petals dribbled down her chin, and Keita couldn’t help laughing.

“What?” Sienna demanded.

“You look like a marmot or something. Seriously though, are you sure that’s edible?”

“Of course I am.” Sienna crossed her arms. “We eat Rabrush all the time. You’re in my territory now.”

She was right. This wasn’t home. The trees were too scraggly, and the undergrowth’s plants were strangers. It wasn’t a bad place, though. At least it had character. Maybe, if she had remained in Jasper’s fort, it wouldn’t have been so terrible.

Sienna stuffed her last handful of flowers into her mouth and climbed to her feet. “Two groups of soldiers passed by last night,” she said. “They woke me up.”

Keita’s doubt departed. She started to walk, making Sienna trot to keep up. “We’re lucky Jasper wasn’t with them.”

“I thought that’s what you’d say.” Sienna looked around. “How far do we have to go?”

“I don’t know. If we find a town, we can blend in with other people for a bit. Then I can find some other Nomes who can help you, and get back to my sister.”

Sienna stiffened. “You can’t leave me behind! You owe me! You’d still be locked in that dungeon if I didn’t get you out!”

“You want to stay with me?” Keita waited for a denial, but Sienna didn’t speak. “Thanks, but... no, you don’t want to be anywhere near me. I’m one of the Stygian’s biggest targets. Everywhere I go I’m being hunted. It’s like a nightmare, but I can’t wake up.”

Sienna tilted her head. “Why you?”

“My father was the Sprite king before the Stygians took over.”

“So you’re a princess?”

“You could call it that. I call it a lot of trouble.”

Sienna nodded. “Then you need my help.”

“What?”

“Well, you’re fighting them, aren’t you?”

Keita turned and began marching forward. Sienna followed, but the fast pace left the girl no breath for further conversation. For nearly an hour they saw nothing

more alarming than a fox in the underbrush and tiny spots that were deer on a northern slope.

For the past several minutes the girls had been walking down a dry creek bed. Now it opened into a wide gap between two rocky ridges. Huge boulders, spaced too evenly to be natural, stood like sentinels across the pass.

“Is this normal Nomelands geography?” Keita asked.

“Voice down,” Sienna hissed.

Keita looked around and saw no one. “What’s wrong?”

“I thought you could sense them. The rocks are hollow.”

“What?” Keita concentrated on the rocky field. Sienna was right. A man crouched inside each boulder, hidden by a few inches of stone. “How did you know?”

“I saw them when we came in.”

“Let’s go around. You can climb those ridges fine.”

Sienna’s expression darkened. “We’ll just have to be careful. Come on.” Without another word she crept into the open. Keita hissed, but already Sienna was several feet in. Swallowing her protests, she followed.

Sharp stones lurked among the soft sand. Keita flinched every time she stepped on one but she stole forward without sound. Sienna’s shuffling steps and

labored breathing filled the pass but she did her best. Her tattered shoes left no mark in the shifting sand.

They passed the first occupied rock. Keita let out her breath as the far side became visible. The stubby mountain trees had never looked so inviting. A small bird—grackle or blackbird, Keita couldn't tell from this distance—landed on one of the smaller boulders in their path. A small stone whistled through the stillness, and the bird dropped. Keita saw its lifeless body thud into the dust.

Sienna froze. Her face pointed, not at the bird's body, but at something behind them. Keita turned, and felt her stomach drop. A man-shaped shadow stretched out from behind the rocks. She tensed, prepared to flee, as he stepped into the light.

Widening eyes were the only hint that he was surprised to see them. Keita glanced at his purple necktie, which showed his captain's rank, and then peered into his face. She'd seen it when she'd awoken on the trail. Captain Marcus, if she remembered right.

Sienna took off. Shouts rang from the once silent field. Soldiers emerged, slings slicing the air. A rock thudded against flesh. Sienna yelped, but her footsteps did not falter.

Keita attended the girl's progress by sound alone. She and the captain stood motionless in each other's gaze. A smile played around the corner of his mouth, half-hidden in uneven stubble. He knew as well as she that the soldiers wouldn't dare leave the field as long as she was there, whether Sienna escaped or not.

The footsteps faded at last. The captain opened his mouth, some taunt already prepared. Before he could deliver, she bolted. Without a non-Sprite companion, she didn't have to hold back. A soldier shied back to avoid a collision that might have snapped his neck. Stones flew after her. Most whooshed behind her, aimed by men who misjudged her speed. Others hit, making dents in her legs that faded almost before she felt them. Within seconds she was passing the last boulder and running across the natural rocky terrain.

The one nice thing about leaving Spritelands, Keita thought as she slowed to a walk, was that she'd never be last in a footrace again.

Once she caught her breath, she closed her eyes and focused on her surroundings. She filtered out the usual things, the pines and the songbirds, the rabbits and lizards under the brush, and reminded herself to examine an interesting new tree species later. Now she could expand

her range and examine the people. The captain was charging straight down the wash, far to the east. Other men searched haphazardly in twos and threes, but none were close. A few had returned to their posts among the boulders.

At first she couldn't find Sienna. When she finally felt the girl her eyes popped open and it took a moment to regain concentration. Sure enough, Sienna was hovering several feet above the ground, her arms flapping, held up at an odd angle. Keita may not have known much about Nomes, but she was positive they did not know how to fly.

She jogged back through the trees, easily dodging the lumbering soldiers. She was beginning to wonder if she'd already passed the girl somehow when she saw a figure writhing between a pair of pines. Keita was almost upon it before she realized what she was seeing.

Someone had stretched a net of tiny threads between the two trees. Sienna must have hit them at full speed, for she was hopelessly entangled. The mesh cinched her baggy clothes tight, showing how small the girl really was. Her scrawny arms and legs flailed silently as the net twisted tighter around her skin.

“Don't move!” Keita hissed.

The girl froze. “Keita?”

“Yes. Now let me look at this thing. And hold still or you’re going to strangle yourself.” Keita fingered a strand. She knew this weave, but it was the last place she’d expect to find it. Designed by Lectrans, the nets were made with a series of loose loops that would tighten when pulled. Untangling it would require hours unless you knew what to look for.

Keita circled the net, running her fingers along the threads. At last she found a single strand which wound through the tree branches, leading higher than she could reach. She glanced at Sienna, who had begun trembling, and then began to climb. Despite her best efforts the branches shifted under her weight, and Sienna whimpered each time. The single strand ended in a loop around a developing cone. Keita unstuck it from a glop of pitch and peered down.

She wasn’t far up, only twice her own height, but she could see over most of the scrub. A trio of soldiers was marching through the bush behind them. They weren’t coming straight toward the trap, but they would be sure to see it as they drew near.

“What’s wrong?” Sienna demanded.

“Patrol coming.” She bit her lip. “I could kill you if I rush this.”

“Better to try than get caught, isn’t it?”

“If you’re insisting. Try to hold still.” She wound the thread around her hand, and jumped.

Sienna’s shriek pierced her ears as Keita landed in a cloud of dust. From a distance she heard the soldiers yell. Sienna didn’t seem badly hurt, but only her head and one arm were free.

Loops unraveled in neat rows that twisted around Sienna’s body. Kinked thread bunched at Keita’s feet as she yanked hand over hand. Sienna shrieked again as her head and torso fell and hit the ground, her legs still tangled in the air. Keita pulled, too focused to reprimand Sienna’s writhing, and at last the girl worked free.

Red lines created odd patterns on Sienna’s exposed skin. The threads had ripped through her shirt and carved chunks from her nose and fingers. Still, she was alive. With the soldiers drawing near, Keita scooped her into her arms and began to run.

“Turn right,” Sienna said. “Not that much. There.”

As the trees flashed by, Keita caught a glimpse of a rocky mound ahead. She surged toward it, ignoring a biting ache in her legs. Her foot caught on a protruding rock and she dived into the dust. Sienna jumped to her feet and pressed her hands to the rock. It parted, and Keita

hobbled inside. Sienna followed, and the entrance sealed behind them, leaving them in darkness that made Keita cringe.

“Could you give us some light?”

For a moment Keita saw nothing. Then a blue dot appeared above them, turning the chamber’s black to grays. Sienna’s face came into view, the bleeding patch on her nose even more prominent. She pressed her ear against the stone. Keita felt for the soldiers as they ran toward the rock and then passed without a second’s hesitation.

“How’d you do that so fast?” Keita asked.

“Sandstone’s soft rock. Easy to shape.” She straightened. “I was worried they’d know where we’d gone. They ought to know what I can do.”

“I was surprised how fast you hid us,” Keita reminded her. “I guess you’ve got a talent for it.”

Sienna studied her hands with sudden interest, which faded when her eyes stopped on her bleeding forefinger. “How’d you get that net off?”

“My brother taught me the trick. See, he went to the Summit council every year, until last, and it gets really boring there. He and his friends...” She broke off as a chill ran down her spine.

“What’s wrong?”

Keita lowered her voice. “Glen and his friends used to explore the Summit while the kings were meeting. They know the defenses better than anyone.”

“And?”

“Jasper was one of those friends.”

Sienna considered this for a moment before speaking again. “And what’s the summit?”

Normally just the word 'summit' would be enough to make Keita change the subject, but Sienna wouldn't know the kind of things that happened there. “It’s a safe place in the mountains. The royals use it for meetings and in case of danger. Glen and a few others are hiding there now. It’s got walls made out of spectrite—that means they were created by all six clans, and they repel Stygians. It’s also hard to find, and they’ve got a lot of traps and things around it, including net traps like the one you found. That’s probably where Jasper got the idea for this one.”

Sienna studied her face. “So Jasper could put your brother in danger.”

“Exactly.”

“Then you’ll have to do something about it.”

The matter of fact way she spoke grated on Keita’s nerves. “You don’t understand. I want to do something.

More than anything I want to stand up and take control and make things right again. But Stygians... even if they do have a weakness, they've got armies at their command. They killed the old rulers... my parents... what chance do I have?"

"If you won't fight him, he's already won." Her eyes held an intensity that was almost tangible.

"Believe me, I'd rather stand and fight than run and hide, but... I don't know how to fight something like this. I'd make it worse if I barged in without knowing what I was doing."

Sienna considered this for only a moment. "Then we need to figure it out."

Keita stared at her. "I guess..." she said slowly, "I guess I could look at it that way. Paying attention, looking for a weakness... yes, that makes sense."

"Good. Maybe me and Sandy can help you."

"Wait. Who's Sandy?"

"He's my brother, and you're helping me find him."

"I am?"

"Sure. You can do it. You found me easy enough back there."

Keita suddenly felt like she was back in the landslide, battling forces she couldn't control. "Sienna, I've got to get back to Lectranis. I left my friends and my sister there."

"You have to help!" The panic in Sienna's face made her look even younger. Keita remembered how tiny she'd appeared in the net. "Sandy's my family—all I got. He went missing weeks ago, and I was looking for him when the soldiers got me. I've got to find him. I've *got* to."

"Look, I'm sorry, but my friends need me, and our whole world needs them."

"Not if you won't even fight back."

At the last minute, Keita bit back a retort. Instead, she climbed to her feet, barely missing hitting her head on the cave roof. "We can talk about this later. We'd better move before the soldiers come back."

She was surprised that Sienna didn't object. Instead, the girl reached for the wall, which crumbled at her touch. The grays of the world matured into living color, and the girls walked, side by side, into the light.

* * *

Keita had expected to hear her pursuers hours before their stumbling footsteps reached her ears. The trees had withdrawn from each other's company, creating empty swaths protected only by waist-high boulders and

undersized shrubs. She had been examining a stump ahead, trying to decide its shape: wolf, eagle, maybe a lost child, when she caught the low voices and shuffling steps of men trying to be quiet.

“Again?” Sienna groaned.

“Welcome to my world,” Keita said.

Sienna studied the path behind them. “That’s the trouble. You’re leaving footprints.”

A single line of impressions in the gravel—heel, ball, and a hint of separate toes—marked their progress as far as they could see. “Where are yours?” Keita asked.

Sienna just smirked.

Distinct voices became audible enough to join the tramp of feet behind them. “They’re on our trail all right,” Keita said.

Sienna broke into a run. Keita trotted on, angling east of Sienna’s route. She held steady, fighting back the urge to sprint, as the voices grew louder—a snapped complaint, a terse argument, a grunt as one was snagged by prickly weeds.

Ahead, Sienna stopped. Keita caught sight of her, still as stone, eyes squinting westward. When the wind in her ears died, Keita knew why her friend waited. Large

animals clumped through the gravel in an unnaturally straight line.

Keita sensed for them and then called across to Sienna, "Horses."

"Yeah," Sienna agreed. "A scouting party, probably."

Keita tensed. "Change course then. And move! The Nomes will be here any second."

"Okay. Come on." She turned and began to run.

"Not that way!"

The girl ignored her.

"Sienna, wait! The humans are that way!" Keita dashed after her. She could hear both the humans on horseback before them and the Nome soldiers behind. Any second and they would collide. She put on a burst of speed and reached out to grab Sienna's baggy shirt.

Something huge burst out of the trees toward them. Keita lost her balance as the horse reared. Hard hooves beat the air inches from her head. She rolled aside, and one landed in the gravel where her head had been.

"What do you think you're doing?" a voice roared.

Her heart beating wildly, Keita got to her feet and met a pair of fierce dark eyes. The man, still on his horse, towered above her. Red-brown hair hid most of his face, accentuating his sharp gaze. For a moment she couldn't

move. Dangerous in large groups. Fearsome weapons. Everything her father had told her about humans flashed through her mind.

From the trees behind, Keita heard mutterings too low for other ears. The Nome soldiers were lurking just out of sight, ready to pounce once the humans had gone.

Sienna stepped forward. "Please, sir..."

"Get out of here, you miserable brat." The man raised a short metal staff.

"Davis!"

Everyone froze. Keita glanced under the horse's belly and saw a forest of knobby legs. The other riders had joined them.

A large white horse made its way around their attacker. His rider was even taller than the first man, though not so broad.

"Lower your sword," he ordered.

Keita tried to catch her breath as their attacker sheathed his weapon. The leader's eyes never left the man's face as he backed into the ranks. Then he turned to face the girls. Even if he were off his horse, he would have towered over them. Sunlight glinted in his eyes and across his unnaturally white hair.

“I apologize for this disorderly conduct. Commander Davis will be disciplined for his actions.”

Keita looked back at Sienna, who stepped forward. “We’re looking for a way home,” she said, in such a strange accent that Keita had to turn to make sure it was she who had spoken.

The human leader nodded. “There’s a small settlement west of us. Gates’ Farm, I believe. Is that where you live?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. It’s not far. I’ll have my men escort you.”

Keita flinched and looked at Sienna, but the girl didn’t speak. Instead, she caught Keita’s eye and nodded into the brush. Keita glimpsed a man on his belly, nearly invisible under a large pine. She felt the rest of the patrol just out of sight behind him.

“Hammel, Prentiss, take these girls down the Bidewell trail. Leave your horses—it’s too steep.”

Two men leapt forward at the leader’s command.

“Thank you,” Sienna called. The leader inclined his head, and wheeled his horse around.

The two humans did not speak after their first attempts at conversation, but their clomping boots made up for it. Keita winced each time they stumbled and

caused miniature avalanches on the steep path, but the noise had its uses. Throughout the whole journey, she did not sense a single Nome soldier within her range. Still, she was not sorry to leave them when Sienna, using her strange accent, told the men that they could find their own way now. As soon as the humans were out of sight, Sienna led the way into the hills to a small cave. Carved out of a steep slope, the hollow had an excellent view of the tiny village below and the great desert plains around it.

“I can’t believe we got out of that,” Keita said.

Sienna looked up from the landscape. “You mean from the Nomes or the scouts?”

“The humans.”

“The Nomes were chasing us.”

“Yeah, but Nomes are predictable.”

“Maybe for you.”

With her tiny body, thin face, and ragged clothes, Sienna looked nothing like a human. Keita hadn’t considered before that her friend had grown up among them. She’d have been small, of course—Sienna was small even by Spectra standards—but not so small that she could not have fit in.

“Where did you come from?” Keita asked.

“I didn’t come from anywhere. I’ve always been here.” Sienna’s grin answered Keita’s annoyed frown. She pointed to the view. “See? Those are the Shields in the east. Me and Sandy climbed over a few times and saw the ocean. I’ve been as far as the borders of those cities in the south and the Snowmelt River in the north. Sandy didn’t want to go further than that.”

Keita had been examining the purple patches of distant city, a part of Lectranis though much too far south for her sister Avie to have visited. Now she looked up, eyebrows raised. “Is Sandy a Nome?”

“Doubt it. He can’t do the same stuff I can.”

Keita frowned. She hadn’t questioned it before, but she had never heard of a part-human, part-Spectra family. She supposed he could be a crossover, a child born with different abilities than either parent, but they were supposed to be rare.

“Why’d you ask?” Sienna prompted.

“If you’re Spectra, Sandy probably is too. And he was keeping you inside the Nomeland borders.”

Sienna started. “He what?”

“Across the Snowmelt is the Cole kingdom. The big cities are part of Lectranis.”

Sienna looked pale enough to faint. “You mean he knew? He knew about all this Spectra stuff and never told me?”

Keita didn’t say anything. She knew that look—the mix of shock and anger, the betrayal by someone you thought you had known, the discovery that the world is not the place you thought it was. She had seen that look on every face as the surviving royals trickled into the Summit after the Stygians took over. She’d probably worn it herself.

“I don’t understand,” Sienna said finally. “He sneaks away sometimes, but I thought... I thought maybe it was a girl he was seeing. He never said anything about kingdoms or abilities or any of this stuff.”

Keita watched her face. “Have you ever spoken mind-to-mind with him? I mean, talked to him without saying anything out loud?”

Her friend’s eyes widened. “Spectra do that?”

“Siblings can, when they’re in range. We call it the siblink.”

“I...” Sienna began, and then stopped. “There was once... maybe more than that... I thought I heard him talking when he wasn’t there. Do you mean... he could have done that all the time?”

Keita nodded.

For once Sienna had no more questions. When it seemed obvious she wasn't going to speak, Keita turned to examine the sun creeping toward the peaks of the Scissor Mountains. She and Glen had used the siblink as long as she could remember. It was their special link, even when Avie grew old enough to join them. Only during Glen's yearly trip to the Summit was she without it, until her own visit last fall. Now the voices were gone, hundreds of miles out of range, and she didn't think she would ever get used to the silence.

"Sienna?"

"Uh huh?"

"I was just thinking... if you still want my help with your brother..."

The girl looked up, dark eyes glowing with hope.

"I mean, I know what that's like, missing your siblings. My brother's locked up at the Summit, and my sister's in Lectranis somewhere. I think they're safe, but just not knowing..."

Sienna didn't even blink.

"What I mean is, I'll help you look for Sandy."

"You promise?"

Her face was as tough as ever, but Keita heard a note of fragility in the girl's voice that she'd never heard before. "I will help you find your brother," she said. "I give you my oath."

A chill ran down her spine despite the warm evening. It traveled down to her toes and crawled back up again as though every part of her body was coming to terms with the oath. Sienna's eyes were wide with wonder though she couldn't possibly know the meaning of what had just happened.

Neither girl spoke as the sun slipped out of sight. Keita watched where it had gone. Somewhere beyond the horizon, this range melded into the Great Mountains. The Summit nestled in the junction. Further south, if you could travel among the cliffs and ridges, if you could dodge the patrolling soldiers, if you hadn't just made complicated oaths, you could find home.

The Spectra UNEARTHED



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