

# The Spectra UPENDED



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## Chapter 1: Fiske Fort

Keita Sage crouched on the wall of a massive fort, trying to judge whether the soldiers below were friend or foe. She perched between the sharpened points of two massive logs, gripping wood that reshaped to accommodate her fingers. Below, stone barracks lay in perfect rows, and men marched between them or lingered in patches of morning sunshine. Their uniforms were navy blue—Merlandia’s colors, but if the soldiers served the deposed overseer instead of the queen, Keita would be imprisoned at best.

A soldier limped to the wall. Keita’s shoulders tensed but he didn’t look up. Instead, he settled with his back to the thick logs and stretched his leg out in front of him. Keita sensed his life force. A wound on his calf was starting to fester. She had a few minutes before she needed to be in position, and this man needed her now. No one was watching, so she slipped off of the wall.

She landed cat-like on her toes. The soldier started but she grabbed his arm and pressed a drop of life energy into his body. He stared at her for several seconds, then whipped up his trouser leg. The skin beneath was flawless.

“Thank you,” he said. “Now who in Desiccation are you?”

She couldn’t tell him her name. Could she claim to be a healer searching for a job or an innocent, lost maiden? The

man's eyes fixed on the golden betrothal bracelet on her left wrist. Too late, she jerked back.

The man's eyes were narrowed but Keita couldn't read his expression. "You're the Sprite Princess."

No one in her home kingdom called her Princess. "Yes," Keita admitted. "I've been sent by your queen..."

The soldier held up his hand. "I won't report you after the healing, but I'm not getting involved."

"I need to speak with your commander." She gestured to a huge log cabin near the front gate, where the officers were probably quartered. "Who's in charge?"

The soldier turned his back on her. "In ten seconds, when I turn around, I'll have forgotten everything about this meeting."

Keita couldn't risk arguing. She dashed for the nearby barracks and scrambled onto the roof. The soldier disappeared behind her.

She couldn't count on the soldier not reporting her. She'd given away her presence and had little to show for it.

*Are you in position?*

Instinct made her look around, though Brian, her betrothed, could speak to her mind from any distance.

*Almost,* she sent back. Then she ran toward the front gate, jumping over alleyways so filled with half-melted snow that no one dared enter them.

She reached the last barrack. An empty stretch of beaten earth separated her from the headquarters building. Keita saw no one, but she heard voices just out of sight. She couldn't stop until she had a clear view of the gate, so she eased down

from the roof and dashed across the clearing. The voices in the distance didn't change. She reached the building and scrambled up the wall, creating handholds at a touch. At last she pulled herself over the edge and paused, breathing hard, basking in the uninterrupted sunshine on the roof. Then she raised up on one elbow. She had a perfect view of the open front gate.

*I'm ready*, she sent.

A lone person walked through. Brian moved with quiet confidence. He wore a sword, but it was sheathed and his hands were loose at his sides. While unified with her life abilities, he could self-heal from most injuries—was that why he seemed so at ease? His friendly brown eyes flicked up to the roofs, and the hint of a wink was the only sign he'd seen her. He'd dressed as an official emissary—elaborate Merlandia jacket, Sprite sash over one shoulder, and a large keyring from his home kingdom, Castalia.

Guards straightened as he approached. "Who are you?" one demanded.

"My name is Brian Pensier."

Why did they ask? No Mer had straw-colored hair like his.

The man stiffened and leaned back, but then his expression changed. The alarm faded, and his stern expression drooped into complacency. "I have orders," he said, in an eerily flat voice.

"You can trust me," Brian answered.

Even from the heights, Keita could feel the truth in his words, and it made her squirm. Brian, from the Muse clan,

was careful when manipulating people's emotions, but she'd met others who weren't.

"I brought a message from the queen," Brian went on.

"I ought to ask for proof."

Brian removed a scroll from his pocket. From this distance, Keita couldn't see the royal seal. Queen Marsha had given Keita a mission to call the Mer troops back from foreign conflicts. These soldiers were still in Merlandia, but they needed to recognize the queen as their direct commander.

"This seems to be in order," the soldier said. "I'll have you sent to the Overseer directly."

Brian didn't react, but Keita couldn't help a gasp.

A balcony overlooked the central plaza. Now the doors to the second story burst open. Keita had an odd angle from the rooftop but glimpsed a pale face surrounded by frizzy brown hair. "Seize them!" Overseer Isobel shouted. "The other one's up there!" She pointed to Keita's hiding place. Stygians like Isobel had the abilities of every clan—she could sense living things as well as Keita could.

Keita leapt from the rooftop. In midair she changed to kestrel form. Wings unfurled and she soared over their heads.

Water burst from the ground at Brian's feet—the Mer soldiers' abilities. The force threw him against the wall. His skin was red, raw from the pressure of the water—but within a few seconds it smoothed back to his usual tone.

Keita dived, pulling up inches from their faces. Men swatted and the charge faltered. She paused to check on Brian. He had drawn his sword. Four of the nearest soldiers sat on the ground around him, their faces tear-stained.

The air turned heavy. Keita didn't know what it meant until white mist clogged her vision. She tried to bank but a wall loomed out from nowhere and she collided with it. She hit the ground with a thud and eased back to her true form.

The mist lessened. She was crouching on the balcony, and Isobel stood feet away. Before Isobel could summon fire, Keita lunged. She intended to shock the Stygian into forgetting her other abilities, but she did not expect the pure terror on Isobel's face. The woman scrambled backward through the doors and slammed them shut. Keita returned to kestrel form.

A geyser shot Brian into the air. Keita dived. In midair she changed to true form. Her momentum carried her on. She crashed into Brian and both tumbled sideways. Her shoulder clipped one of the pointed logs as they soared over the wall. They hit the dirt on the other side with a painful crunch. Keita staggered toward the gate and pressed her hand to the wood. It reformed at her touch, swinging closed and sealing itself to the rest of the fence. No one would open it any time soon.

Brian put a steadying hand on her good shoulder. Keita looked down, and gasped. The log had torn through her leafskin dress, leaving her shoulder bloodied. Somehow looking at the mess made the wound more painful.

"It'll be fine in a minute," Keita said, mostly to herself. "We have to keep moving."

A wet nose touched her arm. Eyrie, her dapple-gray pony, had arrived. Keita gestured for Brian to climb on. "You're the one hurt," he protested.

“It’s healing,” she answered. New leafskin was already creeping over her shoulder.

Shouts echoed from the fort behind them. Isobel could burn the gate down with ease, and the wood wouldn’t hold up against the Mers’ pressurized water unless Keita was touching it. Brian’s expression was pinched but he swung onto Eyrie’s back. Keita bolted down a mountain trail. Her shoulder stung each time she pumped her arms but she forced herself not to think of it. She heard Eyrie’s footfalls behind her, but the other sounds faded behind them.

A small side canyon branched off of the main trail. Keita veered into it. Eyrie dropped to a fast walk. No full-sized horse could handle the steep trail for long, and even her mountain pony needed help.

Faint clouds drifted across the sky, but plenty of light reached Keita’s leafskin dress, smooth green material that turned sunlight to energy. Keita checked that her wound was gone. Then she reached for Brian’s hand and fed a drop of energy into both him and the pony.

Brian slid off of Eyrie’s back and walked beside them. “Thank you.”

She smiled in answer but let it die fast. Soon, she wouldn’t be there to heal him. Until she completed her mission, he couldn’t leave Merlandia.

He must have felt her emotions, for he set a hand on her arm. “I’ll miss you too.”

She didn’t want to think of the separation right now. “We’ll have to sort out Fiske Fort before we leave. We’re

supposed to renew the Merlandia troops' allegiance to their queen—these ones ought to count.”

“I like that thought.” Brian looked behind them. “At least we know where Isobel is now.”

Keita flinched at the image of Isobel's terrified face. She should be proud that she affected someone so powerful that way. If her Sprite cousins were here, she might try to brag about it, but Brian would know she didn't mean it. “Isobel is afraid of me.”

“Do you blame her? Last time you met, you shamed her in front of her troops and threatened to claw off her head. She had no way of knowing that you didn't have more protection.” He beamed at her as though she'd bluffed Isobel on purpose.

“She was terrified.” Keita couldn't meet his eye. “Why does that bother me?”

“I have no idea. I sense what you're feeling, not why.” Brian cupped her chin in his hand and lifted her face toward his. “You don't need to feel guilty. She used you as a hostage against your kingdom. She tried to send me off to die in the war. She should be terrified of you.”

A wave of calm swept over her. “Brian.” Her voice came out quiet, almost sing-songy. “Please don't do that.”

“Right, sorry.” The foreign calmness vanished. Brian dropped his hand.

They continued walking up the little trail. The snow-capped peaks felt like home, though Keita was over a hundred miles north of the Inner Vale where she grew up. Until her betrothal, she'd never left it. Castalia City, Brian's home, was much closer.

The ravine they'd been following ended at a small camp. A pair of canvas tents were set up on either side of an empty firepit.

"Excuse me," came a voice from behind them.

Both stiffened, then turned around. Princess Scarlet Kelvin of the Cole Kingdom, Carli for short, stood behind them.

Carli's red curls reminded Keita of a fiery halo. "We were just out walking," Keita stammered.

"Yeah, that's what I thought at first. I planned to be polite and let you say goodbye in private. But how do you explain this?" Carli pointed at Brian. His hair was still wet, making it look darker. His jacket had dried in patches. Worse, the fabric was slashed, though his skin underneath was undamaged.

"We stumbled onto the fort," Keita admitted.

Carli snorted. "The Fiske guard station is a huge deal. It has historical significance, it has family significance, and, most importantly, it's where Brian leaves us. There is no way he didn't know where it was."

Keita frowned. Brian had given his brother Tide, the king-consort of Merlandia, an unbreakable oath that he would not leave the kingdom until Tide returned from the war. Beyond the fort, they couldn't be sure where the kingdom's boundaries were.

"I knew it was close," Brian admitted, "but I don't have a perfect sense of direction."

"We saw soldier activity," Keita said, "so we decided to scout it out. We had no idea Isobel..."

“Isobel is here?” Carli cried. “You two just gave away our location to a Stygian? She’ll tell the other two where we are! Do I have to remind you that they can all speak mind-to-mind?”

“So can you,” Brian said.

A tight silence followed. Carli’s sister Ash was a Stygian and the queen of the Cole kingdom. All Spectra siblings could communicate mind-to-mind through what they called a siblink, and Ash’s Stygian abilities meant that physical distance was no barrier.

Carli gave Brian a furious look, then whirled around and began taking down her tent. Keita tried to change the subject. “The fort has family significance?”

“My great-grandfather, Dorian Fiske, lived here,” Brian answered, “until he married my great-grandmother.”

“Who left him for my great-grandfather,” Carli threw in over her shoulder.

Relations hadn’t improved over the generations.

“We need Brian’s help with the fort,” Keita said. “Marsha sent me to recall all of her troops, not just the ones fighting in the Cole Kingdom.”

“I’m sure that reestablishing the chain of command here should be part of her mission,” Brian agreed.

Carli rolled her eyes at both. “Like staying together isn’t your real motivation.”

“It’s not my only motivation,” Keita protested. She looked to Brian for help, but he was smiling at her and didn’t say anything.

Eyrie swung his head around back the way they had come. Keita whirled. She saw nothing, so she closed her eyes and

concentrated on sensing. The life forces around her appeared in her mind. Scraggly oak trees, songbirds, a family of raccoons... then, near the edge of her half-mile range, she felt something different. "Soldiers are following our trail," she said. "Several dozen, all on horseback."

Carli raised her hands. Wind swirled around her, creating a spiral of snow and dirt. Her feet left the ground and she shot across the trail. Even among heat-shaping Coles, her wind abilities were rare.

Brian swung onto Eyrie's back, and Keita ran at her pony's side, thankful for the clear mountain sky. His hooves clattered over stones—they would hide his prints, but the noise could draw attention.

They ran for several minutes, dodging between hills. At last they reached a hollow between slopes and Carli landed, panting. Her hair was sticking up in all directions and her face was red. "Did we lose them yet?"

Keita shook her head.

"You two go," Brian said. "I'll hold them off."

"Not even you can take on a whole fort," Keita said. "Not without days of planning. What about a K-loop?"

Brian looked confused, but Carli recognized their old code. "Go for it."

Keita and Carli had been royal exiles for months and were experts at escaping soldiers. K-loop meant that Keita would lead them off, then bolt away. When she wasn't among Sprites, she could outrun almost anyone. Keita jogged back toward the soldiers. Brian gave a cry of protest but she didn't stop. She'd

done this maneuver plenty of times—and been captured once, but she ignored that thought.

The soldiers appeared around a bend. Several cried out when they saw her. She ducked back behind the slope. Her friends had disappeared down a relatively smooth section of hills between steeper mountains. She chose a side canyon with steep walls angling further away. A second before the soldiers ran around the bend, she bolted up the canyon. Once she got far enough ahead, she'd climb the cliff walls and leave them trapped at the bottom. They'd spend valuable time searching for her.

She was trying to sense how far behind they were when echoing footsteps caught her attention. Another group of soldiers was running up the canyon from the other direction. She swore under her breath. She could climb or fly out, but she'd be seen before she reached the top.

A small black hole in the rocks caught her eye. Hiding might be a better option.

She was too large to hide so she shrank, and the hole became larger, more inviting. Mouse claws hit the ground and she scampered for the shelter. She reached the darkness and scurried in as far as she could go. Darkness was safe. She held still, waiting.

The tunnel jerked. She was thrown against the wall. Metal wall. Not stone. Why hadn't she noticed? She darted back up the tunnel. A metal plate covered the entrance. She scurried back and forth, nosing the wall. There had to be a way out. There had to...

Light flooded the tunnel. Pinprick holes revealed a huge figure leering at her. “I wasn’t sure you’d fall for that one,” said Isobel’s voice. “You should have remembered that I can sense too.”

Keita could have kicked herself. She felt her body swelling. She couldn’t regain her true form here! She shrieked, trying to get the form under control.

Isobel laughed. “This will be interesting. You’ll be crushed if you change back. If you don’t, you’ll forget and be stuck mouse forever. Which will you choose?”

Panicking, Keita darted back and forth. Her claws fit through the holes. So did the tip of her tail. That was no use. Her cage was rocking, but she couldn’t afford to pay attention—if she lost concentration, she would lose the form. She could remain in kestrel form for hours, but she didn’t know her limit in mouse form. Was the cage large enough for a kestrel? She tried but the forms were so different that she couldn’t slide from one to the other without losing control.

*Brian!* she sent. *I’m in trouble... Isobel...*

Her tail was shortening. Keita couldn’t think in words and hold onto the form. She concentrated on staying mouse. If Brian answered, she didn’t understand it.

Light blinked on and off through the holes. They were traveling but she couldn’t focus on why or where. Her paws itched. She wanted hands. Hands could open metal cages. She forced the urge away.

After some time, the cage stopped moving. She liked that. The light was softer, muted. She liked that too. Snatches of words flew around her. “...brother will still... got permission

from...” She knew that voice. She did not like that voice, but the nice, safe metal walls kept that voice away. She would stay here, as long as she could. Only hunger would drive her from the safety of the dark place.

Something screeched. A tantalizing smell reached her nose, and a chunk of food fell in front of her. The mouse froze, but the screeching noise did not return. The voice said something. She couldn't understand the words. It didn't matter. She had food. She had no reason to leave.

## Chapter 2: Isobel

“Keita!”

Loud noise! The mouse darted to the back of the hiding place and froze, unmoving.

“Keita, it’s Brian. You know me.”

Light flooded her safe place. The mouse tried to dart away but something huge fastened around her middle. She bit and smelled blood, but the thing didn’t let go.

“Keita, come on. You need to remember who you are.”

She knew that voice. She liked that voice. She stopped squirming.

“You are not a mouse. You are Keita Sage, Sprite princess. You’re my betrothed and Carli’s friend. You have an important mission to do. Do you remember?”

Something stirred in the back of her mind. Something important.

“Isobel is going to use you to hurt your brother and sister. She doesn’t need you in true form to do that.”

She remembered Glen and Avie. They were safe. They were powerful. What could a mouse do to protect them?

“Kae, I love you. Please come back.”

The words crystalized. She was in Brian’s hand. The smell of blood was his? What had she done? Her claws were softening. That was a good thing. She tried to increase the tingling spreading across her body.

Hands helped her sit up. Keita touched her hair, then examined her fingers. Her leafskin skirt spread around her. She became aware of dry, dusty air, then a packed-earth floor, then log walls that let sunlight in through their chinks.

She looked up into Brian's smiling face. "Welcome back," he said gently.

Her heart was still beating as though it hadn't realized it wasn't inside a tiny mouse chest. He'd pulled her out of animal form. Not just anyone could do that. Her mother did it when she was a small child. Her friend Sienna had managed it once, but Keita had only been in mouse form a few minutes. That time, Brian had said he looked ridiculous speaking to a mouse, and Sienna had to take over. They'd come a long way.

Brian's smile deepened, and she realized she was staring. What emotions had he sensed? Something embarrassing—no. She stopped herself. They were betrothed, they were alone, and deep emotions didn't bother him. "I love you too," she said.

His eyes softened. His hand brushed her cheek. Then he stood. "We have to keep moving. Can you walk?"

"I'm not useless." She climbed to her feet, but streaks of green showed on her skin. "How long has it been?"

"Isobel caught you yesterday."

Her foot bumped a small metal cylinder. Keita's breath caught when she recognized the pinprick holes. She turned away and realized that they were not entirely alone. A trio of soldiers huddled at the base of the wall, their faces frozen in terror. "Who...?"

“I projected my fear on your guards.” He winced and turned away from them. “It’ll wear off when I’m gone. Probably.”

Normally that would bother her, but Keita was still fuzzy-headed. She wouldn’t be able to use mouse form for a while. She didn’t want to use mouse form again, ever.

Brian walked toward the door. Keita hesitated. “I can get us...”

She’d been going to say ‘through the back wall’, but too late. Brian swung the door open. Then he leapt back.

Isobel stood behind it.

Keita stumbled backward. Isobel’s eyes flashed in her direction, and a smirk spread across her pale features. “You won’t be using bear form anytime soon.”

Isobel had always been uncomfortable around her bear form.

*Can you unify?* Brian sent her.

*I’m with you.* As Keita sent him the words, she felt the connection.

“I need the Sprite princess alive,” Isobel said, staring at Brian. “You’re wanted dead.”

Isobel wouldn’t kill Keita. Couldn’t that be an advantage? She darted forward, but Isobel gestured and wall of fire appeared, trapping her in a corner. She tried not to scream as heat buffeted her face. All Sprites feared fire. She tried to see Brian and Isobel through it but the flickering light was blinding.

The building shook. A second later, the wall of fire vanished. A hole had appeared in one wall, charred around the

edges, and Carli stood framed in the middle of it. She met Keita's eye and grinned. "You started the fun without me?"

For a moment, Keita thought they were safe. They had a chance of beating Isobel. Though Carli wasn't close enough to unify with Brian, connecting with Keita meant sharing defenses with anyone else she'd unified with. They were safe from three types of abilities, leaving the Mer's water, Lectran's lightning, and Nome's earth.

Then Isobel gestured. The three cowering soldiers stood up. Their fearful expressions hardened to deadly calm.

Keita didn't mean to step back. *She can't emotivate, can she?* she sent Brian.

*That's not emotivating,* he answered. *She just removed my projecting..*

Their anger wasn't amplified then. For half a second Keita looked into their faces, waiting for the hardness in their eyes to fade. It didn't. Isobel stepped behind the men, smirking her challenge.

Keita touched the wall. A section of log fell off in her hands. Under her will, it molded into a long, straight staff. Her hands were still green—a bad sign. If she ran out of energy and went dormant, her friends couldn't self-heal. The logical thing to do would be to stand back and let her friends do the fighting, but she couldn't make herself do it.

She jumped between Brian and one of the soldiers. The man's blade clacked on her staff, and stopped. She was still feeding her life energy into the wood, strengthening it. She thrust the end of the staff into her opponent's chest. He crumpled, gasping.

Keita froze. She'd hurt him badly. Cracked rib?

Pain shot through her side. Keita bit back a cry. Her knees buckled, and her staff slipped from her hand. A blade had sliced into her back. Who's blade? Was she still in danger? She tried to follow the fighting but the noise and motion blended into solid cacophony.

Carli ducked in front of her, wielding a golden dagger. "Get to the hole," she yelled.

The hole in the wall. Of course. Keita crawled back to it, pressing her hand against the wound in her side. Dust drifted in the beams of sunlight. Keita pulled herself into the light. Her body began stitching together. Her mind sharpened. Why had she hesitated? She'd crippled herself when her friends needed her.

Carli still fought one of the soldiers. Another was unconscious on the ground, and the third had fled. Isobel and Brian were fighting. Isobel had no sword, but she moved with Sprite-like speed. She ducked under a blow from Brian and batted his blade into his own shoulder. Brian grimaced, but the wound knit itself back together. He had one chance to defeat her—she couldn't heal from a beheading. Of course, neither could he.

Keita leapt to her feet before the wound had fully healed. She lunged to help Brian, but a cry made her change direction. Carli dropped, and the metallic scent of blood filled the room. Keita ran straight at the soldier looming over her friend. She didn't bother trying to strike. Her shoulder hit his chest and slammed him back into the wall. His head cracked against wood and he dropped. Keita ignored him and examined her

friend. A wound in her armpit was bleeding fast. Carli had gone unconscious too fast to self-heal. Keita grabbed Carli's arm and sealed off her arteries. The bleeding slowed.

With Carli unconscious, they had no protection from fire. Isobel's eyes were shadows behind the fire blazing over her palms. Keita cringed against her friend's body.

The fire never came.

Keita looked up.

Brian stood with bloody sword raised. Isobel's headless body had fallen. For several seconds he didn't move. Then he took a step back. The sword dropped from his hand. He fell on his hands and knees and vomited.

Keita rushed to his side.

"Not very heroic," he muttered.

"I'd be less impressed if you didn't react. Are you hurt?"

"Of course not. We're unified."

Keita tried not to look around the room, but the smells were overwhelming. Of their own accord, her eyes moved toward the mess on the ground. Her heartrate returned to mouse-speed. Isobel had pretended to be her friend once—Keita would never know what was her and what was acting.

Brian set a hand on her shoulder. Immediately her mind cleared. She moved to Carli's side. A small touch finished healing Carli's wound. Her friend's eyes popped open. "What happened?"

"Brian cut off Isobel's head." Keita's voice came out flat and cold.

"That doesn't bother you?" Carli demanded.

“I think it will later.” Keita gestured to Brian. “He’s muting my shock.”

“I’m muting all your emotions,” Brian corrected. “I’ll stop once we’re out of this room.”

Keita walked to the closest wall and sensed to make sure no one was in the next room. Then she set her hand against the wood and formed an opening. Her friends ducked through, and Keita followed. Then she concentrated on the wood again, and the makeshift door closed itself.

Her muted emotions returned. Brian had killed. They’d all been hurt. They could have died. The blood... the smell... Keita barely noticed her knees hit the ground.

## Chapter 3: Goodbye

Breathe. Walk. Forget.

Keita circled another storeroom. The smells were lessened but not gone.

“Do you want my help again?” Brian asked.

She shook her head. He’d rescued her this time but she couldn’t depend on him for much longer.

“That’s a shame,” Brian said, “because it helps me.”

Keita paused her pacing. “What?”

“I can’t emotivate unless I’m calm. You give me a reason.”

She took a deep breath and forced her tensed muscles to ease. He could calm himself at will. So could she. Maybe that wasn’t the lesson he had in mind, but it helped. “Before, you said you projected your fear on the soldiers...”

“Projecting is a different emotional technique. It’s giving someone else my emotions instead of manipulating theirs—but that wouldn’t have helped in this case.”

That was a use of his abilities that she hadn’t considered. She wouldn’t mind the manipulation if she knew that he was communicating his emotions instead of changing hers. Maybe he could designate some kind of sign that he was communicating. They’d have to experiment...

No. He had to see someone physically to change their emotions, and she was leaving.

Brian wrapped his arm around her shoulder but said nothing.

“You just beat a Stygian,” Carli told Brian, sounding impressed despite herself.

“You distracted her,” Brian said.

“It is impressive,” Keita told Brian. “You can brag to your brothers about this for years.”

He eased into a grin. “Oh, I have been. They’re saying it’s a good thing you have to live with me instead of them.”

She colored. All Spectra siblings could speak mind-to-mind, but only Muses—and Stygians—could do so outside of a small physical range.

“We’ve still got the fort to deal with,” Carli said. “Do you think the soldiers will listen to us after we killed their leader?”

“They’ll listen,” Brian promised.

Keita forced herself not to shudder, but Brian’s face fell anyway. “I didn’t mean to do that,” she said quickly. “I do appreciate your abilities. They have been extremely useful, and you’re using them to help us, and it’s not really any creepier than Carli burning people or me overpowering them, and...”

“You can stop now,” Carli said drily. “He’s enjoying this apology far too much.”

Brian gave her a dirty look, then turned back to Keita. “Thanks.”

“Thanks for coming for me,” she answered immediately.

He grinned. “That was entirely selfish. Marrying a mouse would not go over well at home.”

She pictured the Castalian courtiers' horrified faces and couldn't help laughing.

Carli broke the moment. "All right, come on."

Keita sensed before they opened the door. A crowd had gathered around the entrance of the room where they had fought, but all of them had their backs to this one. They must have heard the commotion, or perhaps the third soldier had summoned help. Keita nodded to Carli, who opened the door.

Brian tapped the nearest soldier on the shoulder. "I need to speak to your commander."

The crowd turned toward them in rounds like a ripple. They edged sideways, moving their circle so that Keita and her friends were in the center of it. The log wall was at their backs, and Keita breathed easier knowing that she and Carli could get through the wood if the crowd became hostile.

The crowd parted for a short man in a black uniform and purple necktie. Brian inclined his head. "The message the queen sent is to you." He pulled a scroll from his pocket and handed it to him.

The captain studied the seal, then broke it and unrolled the letter. He read for a long time—Keita glimpsed rows and rows of tiny writing. Keita saw no change in his expression so she looked at Brian. He caught her eye and gave her a tiny smile. *He's not a threat. He's concerned, but no aggression. I'll warn you if I pick up anything dangerous.*

At last the captain turned to his soldiers. "The queen has ordered that we assist these travelers in any way possible. She has also instructed that the Overseer is a traitor and that, if we saw her, she should be exiled or executed immediately."

Short gasps hissed through the crowd.

The captain rolled the letter and handed it to an aide. “The seal is authentic,” he said. “These are our orders.”

Keita let out her breath. Hopefully the other captains she needed to find would agree this quickly.

As the soldiers scurried about, the captain turned to Brian. In a voice much softer than his previous one, he said, “I understand we’re related.”

Brian looked up with sudden interest. “Who were your fathers?”

“I am Captain Deverell Fiske, son of Bradford, son of Welton, son of Alford Fiske.”

Brian’s eyes went vacant, and Keita suspected he was repeating the information to his younger brother Teague, who had a perfect memory and a good head for family relations. A minute later, Brian said, “I believe you’re my second cousin once removed.”

“Sounds about right,” Captain Deverell answered.

Carli rolled her eyes. “We want to rest for today. Then Princess Keita and I need to move on.”

Move on. Leave Brian behind. Keita kept her face blank, but Brian set a hand on her shoulder before he addressed the captain. “I’ll remain here a bit longer. First, I’ll need our pony back.”

*Where is Eyrie?* Keita sent him.

*I assume the Mer soldiers stabled him somewhere. He helped me find you, but I left him outside the door of the storage room you were in.*

Keita's pony had shown a remarkable ability to find her, no matter where she was, but she hadn't realized he could do it even when she was stuck in mouse form. *Can you keep him from following us into the Cole Kingdom?*

*I'll do it somehow,* Brian promised.

Captain Deverell escorted them to a trio of small rooms along one side of the fort. They were sparsely furnished, and Keita was glad of it—not only did that reflect her personal taste, but it meant that Isobel had never used them. The Stygian would have chosen opulent surroundings, and Keita did not want to be surrounded by reminders of her. She'd hoped they wouldn't have to kill Isobel—breaking an oath or leaving the continent would remove a Stygian's powers without necessarily killing them.

Empty shelves stood ready around the room, but Keita had nothing to unpack. She paced the floor, studying. The hinges on the door opened inward. They wouldn't be hard to break. The wooden walls were easy to shape. One, made of thicker logs than the others, lead to outside the fort. She could get through easily, if outside of the fort were safer. Then she could change to kestrel form and circle back around...

"What are you doing?"

Keita turned as Brian walked in. "Preparing an escape plan, just in case."

He sat down on the wooden bedstead behind her. "You've been an exile too long."

"I'm a royal. I've always been a target."

"Not always," Brian protested. "The Inner Vale was safe."

“Father wouldn’t have kept us locked up there unless he thought something outside it would target his family,” Keita answered. He’d made a crucial mistake. Sometimes the danger came from within.

Carli walked into the room in time to hear Keita’s last comment. “At least your father cared. My sister and I were just husband-bait.”

Brian leapt off the bed at Carli’s approach. “Well, we have a chance to change the future.”

“I’ll change my own future,” Carli said. “You deal with the other royals’ future—if you survive that long.”

Keita started. “What are you saying?”

“That the future’s too uncertain to depend on. But I’ll promise you one thing—mine doesn’t have a throne in it.”

“But you’re next in line for the throne, aren’t you, if Ash...” Keita faltered under Carli’s glare.

Brian stepped in. “Coles don’t have ruling queens. Carli would have to marry, and her husband would be king. That’s why she was betrothed to Griffin.” Carli got along with Griffin, Brian’s brother, even worse than she did with Brian.

“Ash changed that,” Carli said. “She’s the first ruling Cole queen.”

Why did Carli sound proud? Ash had murdered their parents and brother. Keita didn’t blame Ash for running away from an arranged marriage—probably also with Griffin—but she’d come back to sacrifice her family.

So far the conversation had been civil, but the strained glares Brian and Carli shot at each other suggested they were

only holding back for Keita's sake. She stood up and took Brian's hand. "Can we walk?"

"Sure."

Carli waved them away. "I've got some knife work to practice."

Captain Deverell spotted them as soon as they emerged. He bowed. "Would you like a tour? This is your ancestral home as well as mine."

Keita couldn't deny Brian the chance to learn more about his family. She hadn't meant to send the thought, but Brian replied to it. *You'll be leaving sooner than I am. I can tour later.* Then he turned to the captain. "I've only got the afternoon to spend with Princess Keita before she leaves. Are you willing to give a tour tomorrow?"

"Of course." Deverell bowed again and left them alone.

They wandered away, following the wall. "How long are you staying here?" Keita asked.

"A week or two—just in case you change your mind and come back."

She stiffened. "Brian..."

"I know how many people are counting on you. I'm not going to persuade you to stay, but if you change your mind, or if we can think of another way, I'll be here."

Keita didn't meet his eye. Recalling the Mer soldiers from the war would help Queen Marsha and her kingdom as well as the Nome soldiers they were fighting. If she could send back Brian's oldest brother Tide, she could reunite their family and free Brian from his oath to remain in Merlandia. And Carli wanted her help in finding her sister. She had too

many reasons not to back out. She changed the subject. “You were amazing, fighting Isobel. I’ve never been a fighter.”

“You’re not bad with a quarterstaff.”

“Compared to other Sprites, I am.” She sighed. “I should have been able to win back there, but I just sort of froze up...”

“Fighting is a mindset as much as it is an action. You have to decide what you’re willing to do beforehand. In the thick of things, there’s no time to stop and make decisions. And when you’re in the middle of a fight is not the time to hold back.”

Keita frowned. “I don’t want to hurt people any more than I have to.”

“I love you for it.” She gave a little start, and he smiled and went on, “I don’t care if you’re a fighter or not. But... you’re an incredibly important person, and not just to me. If you’re in danger, don’t hold back.”

“Troy Marcus,” she answered.

“What?”

She sent him a memory: standing above a battle, swirling dust hiding the fighters, solid confusion. A pair of fighters appeared. Rebel leader Tanner Smelt fell to the ground. The Stygians’ captain Troy Marcus stood over him, raising a club studded with jagged stones. Keita leapt forward. She wrapped her arms around the captain’s head and snapped his neck. His body fell. “Tanner’s men congratulated me,” Keita said. “Carli and Tanner looked down on me for being soft-hearted—I froze up and couldn’t fight for the rest of the battle. No one really understood. I’ve killed more people now. Troy

Marcus. Buzz Gelbert. Felix Sage. And a Mer soldier. I never knew his name.”

Brian’s usual calm faded, leaving a vulnerability she rarely saw. “Isobel Jonson,” he murmured.

She took his hand.

“And if you’re counting Felix, I have to too,” Brian added.

They continued walking, and though they said nothing, Keita felt that they didn’t need to.

\* \* \*

“Okay, I know you’re leaving him and it’s sad and whatever,” Carli said, “but you’re planning to be with him pretty much forever. I plan on avoiding the Pensier family after this, which means that you and I will be together pretty much never. You could have spent a little time with me.”

“Weren’t you the one pointing out that the future is uncertain and we might not survive?” Keita asked.

Carli grumbled something unintelligible and returned to her packing.

Keita stared at the ceiling. She had returned after sunset the night before, unheard of for her. Her head felt fuzzy but she didn’t regret it.

She straightened a moment before Brian appeared in the doorway. “Are you ready?” he asked.

“Yes.” Carli stuffed her nightgown into her pack and forced the drawstring closed. “You had plenty of time to say goodbye yesterday. Let’s go.”

She marched past Brian into the courtyard. Keita followed, but stopped once she entered the sunshine. “I always come back,” she told Brian.

He wrapped his arms around her. “Someday you’ll stop leaving.”

“Brian, I...”

“I know. It’s okay.”

Their lips met and for a moment Keita thought of nothing else.

At last Carli’s impatient sigh registered. Keita stepped back. Carli raised her arms and wind swirled around her. Keita squeezed Brian’s hand, then let go. She slipped into kestrel form. Carli launched into the air and Keita flew as close as she dared to the unstable wind.

Only when Brian disappeared did she realize he’d been blocking her heartache.

# The Spectra UPENDED

Christie Valentine Powell



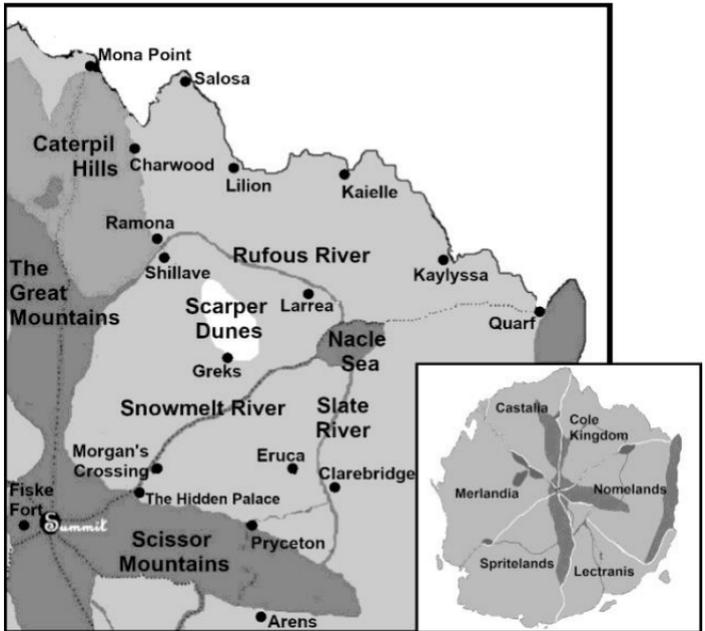
Keita Sage and her best friend Carli each have a mission: to find and protect their family and bring them home. The problem? The people they seek are leading opposite sides of a heated war. Keita's betrothed is trapped inside a foreign kingdom until his brothers return from war. She's determined to reunite her new family, but entering the chaos of the battlefield is twice as dangerous for her. Her brothers-in-law are fighting Coles, who manipulate heat, and she has both a natural weakness and a personal fear of fire. Carli can protect her, but she's searching for her long-lost sister, the Cole's new queen, no matter what atrocities her sister has committed. Keita and Carli need each other, but only one side can win a war.

Read more [here](#).

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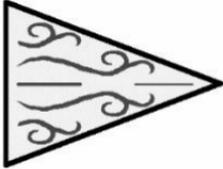


# Map of the Cole Kingdom



# The Spectra Kingdoms

## Cole Kingdom



Clan: Cole

Abilities: Power over heat.

Opposite: Sprites (Coles dominant)

Crossovers: No

Stygian Ruler: Ash Kelvin

Capital: Kelvin Canyon

## Nomelands

Clan: Nome

Abilities: Power over stone.

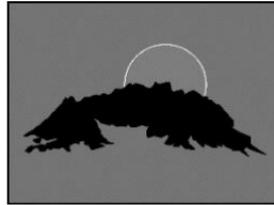
Opposite: Mers (Mers dominant)

Crossovers: Coles and Lectrans

Stygian Ruler: Jasper Smelt

Current Ruler: Tanner Smelt

Capital: Arens



## Lectranis

Clan: Lectran

Abilities: Power over innovation.

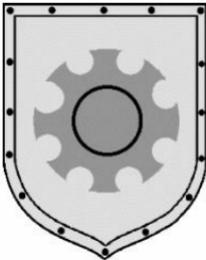
Opposite: Muses (Lectrans dominant)

Crossovers: No

Stygian Ruler: Tawny Smelt (Regent)

Current Ruler: Solana Tesla

Capital: Telosa



## **Spritelands**

Clan: Sprite

Abilities: Power over life.

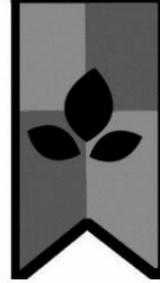
Opposite: Coles (Coles dominant)

Crossovers: Lectrans and Mers

Stygian Ruler: Felix Sage

Current Ruler: Glen Sage

Capital: The Inner Vale



## **Merlandia**

Clan: Mer

Abilities: Power over water.

Opposite: Nomes (Mers dominant)

Crossovers: No

Stygian Overseer: Isobel

Current Ruler: Marsha Neried

Capital: Jaladi

## **Castalia**

Clan: Muse

Abilities: Power over communication.

Opposite: Lectrans (Lectrans dominant)

Crossovers: Mers and Coles

Stygian Ruler: Donovan

Former Ruler: Hugo Pensier

Capital: Castalia City





