

## Welcome

to the world of the Spectra.

Please enjoy a sample chapter from each of our books/series.

More information on [the Spectra Books website](#).

## Mira's Griffin

Mira believes that griffins are unaware humans are more than beasts, but tension is growing. Humans are fighting back, and fatalities on both sides seem inevitable. Mira and her griffin must find a way for the two sides to communicate before they destroy each other.

[Sample Chapter](#)

## DreamRovers trilogy

Indra has lived in dreams since her mother's death. Fifteen-year-old Norma lost everything when her village discovered her family's abilities. Walker escaped court life two years ago, when the rest of his family was executed for dreamroving.

As persecution grows fiercer, all three struggle to defend their new family. Hatred runs deep, and escape is no longer an option—not even through dreams.

[Sample Chapter](#)

## Keita's Wings series

The Stygians stole the thrones of all six kingdoms, leaving Keita and a few other royal heirs with no family and no home. For the past few months she's been creeping behind the scenes, helping those worse off, until a traitor hunts her down and a prisoner begs for assistance. Keita has never wanted her title or the attention that comes with it, but now she's back in the limelight, back in the crosshairs. Survival is no longer enough.

[Sample Chapter](#)

## The Spectra Crown Tales

For two centuries, Spectra hid their elemental abilities from humans, but the world is changing. Human messenger Perrin needs life-mage Allee to save his revolution, while she'll be trapped as a beast without him. Their mission to bring two people together opens the door to a complicated new world where human and Spectra live side by side. Each season follows one of the Spectra royalty in a fairytale retelling, starting with Beauty and the Beast.

[Sample Chapter](#)

## The Captain's Dowry

Sal lives a double life--half at sea as her father's cabin boy, and half at a fine finishing school. Both worlds turn upside down when her father sells his ship and her hand in marriage. If her new husband thinks she'll stay quietly at home while he sails off into the sunset, he can think again. She won't stop until she finds a way to be herself—both of them.

[Sample Chapter](#)

## The Tournament of Princes

**Impersonate a prince. Win a crown. Stop an Empire.**

If Collis can enter the emperor's tournament to become his heir, he could create his own legend and stop the war for good. But the legends he loves never mentioned dust or blood, and the heroes had useful companions, not a child without fire abilities, an escaped slave, or his mother. Yet Collis will need them to cross the desert, survive the tournament, and beyond.

[Sample Chapter](#)

## The Centaur Chase

Are centaurs human? Bree thinks so, even after tragedy. Trying to create peace only puts her at the mercy of her selfish older brother. Dale the centaur believes that humans are the monsters after he loses his family. He cannot care for his surviving son alone and his kind is growing scarce. His only option may be his brother's hairbrained scheme to change human females into centaur mares. If they can grow past their loss, Dale and Bree may be each other's only chance for a new start.

[Sample Chapter](#)

## Mira's Griffin

Mira circled the room in the darkness, hands sliding against the flawless stone to keep her weight off of her throbbing ankle. What was her family doing now? Her sister Bodil would have arrived home two days ago. Two guards and nine girls were gone, including Mira and the chief's daughter. Would the elders send hunters now that they knew that griffins had been stealing people, or would they abandon the village? Either way, she was on her own for now. The griffins were not going to set her free. She would have to escape herself.

"Are you all right?" called Runa's voice.

Mira started. "I didn't realize you were here."

The woman sighed. "We're both Junior's. I think that's why we're separated from the others. The middle of the room is lighter than the edges. You'll want to wait until your eyes adjust before you explore."

Mira did not want to wait. She still couldn't see Runa, or anything else. She walked to the edge of the room and began feeling around. Her hands bumped into something different. A big bowl holding a slimy mess that smelled faintly of raw meat. Mira had eaten only hard biscuits in the last twenty-four hours, but her stomach churned at the scent. She took a deep breath and then forced a small chunk into her mouth. The cold, sticky paste tasted worse than it smelled. Her exploring fingers found chunks of familiar vegetables but they had absorbed the flavor of the paste.

She wiped her hands on her tunic, then froze. How was she going to wash her tunic? How would she make another when it wore through? Mamma had made it of the toughest hide, but Mira had still worn holes in it on the cliffs. They'd been patched, but the patches would be weak. Mira explored the cloth with her fingers and found the place where she'd wiped her hands. She'd need to clean it somehow. If the griffins had provided food, they would also give water.

She circled the empty room twice before she bumped into a flat pan of water so cold that her hands ached when she cupped them inside. She rubbed a handful on her tunic and then sipped another. On her third dip, she bumped her head against a hard surface that sent her handful of water splashing down her front. She yelped and reached for the offender.

A wide circular tube began a few feet above the water pan and stretched as far as she could reach. The inside was cold and wet. The griffins could give them water without ever coming inside the tower room. The hole was too small for her to fit inside. Mira tried anyway.

"The food chute is bigger," said Runa's voice. "It's a tight fit for me—so it'd be tougher for you, if you don't mind me saying—and if you climbed it, you'd be stuck in another locked room, this time with a whole flock of nesting griffins inside. Good try, though."

Mira sighed and headed toward the voice. Runa took shape out of the gloom, sitting cross-legged. A bundle rested on her lap. A baby, her face angelic in sleep, cuddled close on a ragged blanket.

"Her name's Oline," Runa said proudly.

Mira's heart turned to ice. Capturing girls and guards was one thing. Keeping babies was worse. "Where's her father?"

Runa sighed. "With the other scorchers. I join them when I can, but... I've got Junior's mark."

Mira cringed. Different owners, different towers. Had the griffins split them apart? She looked at Oline again. So young. "When were you captured?"

"About a year ago. Marriages aren't uncommon, even here. But I didn't realize, not for quite a while, that everyone else belongs to Alban and I'm supposed to be Junior's. We tried to escape, before Oline was born. We didn't even make it to the walls. We've been separated for evenings ever since."

Mira cringed at the thought of the separated family. She watched Runa lay down, curling her body around her sleeping baby. She was around three months, Mira guessed, though hard to tell in the darkness. She remembered when her brother Franz was this age. He'd been small and sickly and a boy, which fascinated all of his sisters. Mamma weaved a blanket of the softest wool, and Pappa carved a new cradle. This tiny girl had nothing.

Nothing but Runa, Mira thought. And, just maybe, me.

In the darkness, Mira could not tell when night fell—the faint center light did not change. She sat with her back against the cold stone, drifting through happier memories—outings into the hills with her family, her sister Ro's smile when she helped her speak, her father's pride when she scaled a new peak, and the triumph of reaching her own goals unassisted.

She had reached some gray world between sleep and wakefulness when a crack of light outlined the door. Mira was instantly alert. As soon as the crack had grown wide enough, she lurched through it. A startled chirp came out of the blinding brightness. She'd gone three feet when her injured ankle gave out and she toppled into the grass.

A claw tapped her knee. Mira straightened and found feathers all around her. A griffin stood over her, smaller than the others, and Mira knew him. "Hello, Freko," she said.

He cocked his head, almost as though he understood. He chirped at her. For a second she remembered the excitement of meeting him on the beach. Then a human cry caught her attention. Somewhere out of sight, the other humans were working. Freko was part of this. She edged away from him, but gasped with pain. She'd come down hard on her bad ankle.

A cry made both look up. From a higher level of the tower, another griffin had leapt. Huge reddish wings, larger even than Alban's, carried it overhead and over the orchard. Mira caught the red mark on its breast. Red Leader. Freko called to it, and the flier chirped an answer and circled across the vale.

"I wish I could understand," Mira said. She tried to stand but found a soft head butting into her chest, knocking her back. The black down on his head was soft against her hand, contrasting the long ear tufts. He wore no dye patch. Too young?

The griffin glanced over his shoulder. A second later, Mira heard soft footsteps. A young man trotted toward them. His shiny green clothes and riveting blue-green eyes reminded her of the Spectrit native who had warned her village, but this one was closer to her age. Bodil and the other village girls had never had a crush on someone like this, she thought, then wondered why she'd thought it.

"You're Spectrit?" she asked, then cringed inwardly. What if she'd been offensive?

He nodded, dark features guarded. "Hurt in capture?" he asked in the husky accent she remembered.

"No, before that," she said. "I was climbing..."

"May I see?"

She frowned at the interruption. His face was unreadable. Some new sense suggested that he was hiding a stronger reaction, but she couldn't tell what. Still puzzling over it, she held out her swollen foot.

He placed a finger on her ankle. It tingled with uncomfortable heat. Mira squirmed, struggling to hold still, until the sensation faded. Pain vanished with it. The Spectrit slipped off her boot with ease, removed the bandage, and then handed her boot back.

Mira realized she was staring and glanced back at Freko. "He summoned you to heal me?"

The Spectrit nodded. "That is Junior."

She should have guessed that the little griffin she'd met and this Junior, who was supposed to own her, were the same one. For the moment the Spectrit held her attention.

"What's the black collar mean?" she asked, pointing at his.

"Keeper," he said. "I am Ket. I heal. Other keepers tend plants or animals." He rose to his feet in one fluid motion, then gestured to the griffin. "I must go. He watches."

Freko stood still, not even his tufted tail moving.

"I have more questions."

He waited, but she sensed his discomfort.

"Can you heal like that because of the griffins, or because you're Spectrit?"

"Spectrit. Unlike you Vinlanders, we do not need the griffins to unlock our abilities."

"Do you mean..."

"Only one more question."

She skipped to the most important one. "How do I get out of here?"

Ket glanced over his shoulder. "Be careful. They are not kind to runaways. And to those who fight back, even worse."

"They don't just... let people go?" Even as she said it, the words sounded foolish. Runa said that the griffins thought of humans as animals. You didn't just let goats go without reason. Mira scowled at the thought and folded her arms. "I am not a goat."

Ket's eyes darted from Freko to the orchard. Then he said, "If I escaped, I would wait for night. Griffins cannot see in the dark. Climb the walls. Then get into thick brush where they cannot follow."

She nodded, committing every detail to memory. Then she said, "Have you tried to escape?"

He didn't meet her eye. "The others need a healer."

"You mean you could have escaped, but the other people need you?" Mira had sent her sister Bodil away, when it was clear Mira would be caught, but this was a whole new level of sacrifice. Could she have done it?

Ket squirmed and she realized she was staring. Before she could think of an apology, he turned and jogged toward the fence that framed an open field. He vaulted over it in one easy leap and disappeared from view.

A chuckle warned Mira that Runa had appeared. She emerged from the tower, with baby Oline peering out from her arms. "Keepers aren't known for their conversations," Runa said. Then she gave Freko a dirty look. "At least they're better than griffins."

"He healed me," Mira said. "I knew the Spectrit had better witches than us, but..."

"Oh, he's not a witch. Quite a few of the keepers can heal—though Ket seems to be the main healer. Of course, I haven't met many. Keepers and scorcheders don't mix, as a rule."

"What about keepers and minders?"

She had spoken without thinking, and flushed when Runa gave her a stern look. "You liked him? Well, don't get attached."

Mira winced when she realized what Runa meant: the two of them belonged to Freko. Ket and all the others did not. But in her case, it didn't matter. She was going to escape.

Runa added, "There are all sorts of superstitions about how different ability classes relate to one another, who gets along and who doesn't. I gave up trying to keep track of it months ago."

"So there's minders, keepers, scorcheders, growers..."

"And fielders," Runa finished. "They manage the hay and grain fields, and invent their own gadgets to do it. They're a snobby bunch. Some vales have builders too. They shape stone. I don't think we have any at this vale. They're extremely difficult to contain, I'm sure you see why. But they are useful."

Useful. All of the ability types were named after their uses, and yet Mira and Runa were just standing there, not doing anything. Maybe this pet nonsense did have some benefits.

Runa looked down at Oline. "I do wonder what type she is, but I'm not looking forward to seeing the griffins unlock her. It was so painful!"

Oline stuck her fist in her mouth. Mira studied her. "I think..." she said, "she's already unlocked. And she's a scorcher like you."

Runa started. "How do you know?"

"You feel the same. I can't explain it exactly."

Runa still looked confused, so Mira tried to go on. "When we were unlocked, I could feel that the others had changed. And the people with the same colored collar felt similar. You feel like a red, just like all the other reds, and so does she."

"Maybe it's a minder thing."

A shadow overhead made both look up. Freko had launched. He circled above them, then disappeared over the trees.

"What's that way?" Mira asked.

"He'll be working on the grove," Runa answered. "It's a paddock of these weird, feathery trees right in the middle of the vale. Junior works on it a lot. Alban goes sometimes, but nobody else is allowed in. They get really mad if you try, which is a shame because all that brush would be perfect for hiding in."

Mira nodded. "Maybe I should check it out."

"Just pick your battles, remember. Don't antagonize them for nothing. I'm going to watch the scorchers." Then she turned toward the orchard fence. The wooden rails were so easy to climb that Mira wondered what they had been built for. Runa managed—though not gracefully—with Oline in her arms. Despite the neat rows, the orchard trees created hiding places in their shadows. The other scorchers must be in there somewhere, Mira thought, or else behind it.

The fence that Ket had leapt bordered a field with yellowing grain. It stretched to another cliff wall barely visible in the distance. A griffin swooped over the grass, occasionally darting down, but Mira could not see what it was doing. A black tower, shorter and squatter than the first but with the same smooth walls, overlooked the grain. "Fielders get their own tower?" Mira wondered aloud. She peered back at the tower she'd stayed in. Further up, another set of doors opened into empty air, so high that only griffins could reach them. "Griffins get their own tower," she corrected. "And the humans they watch live underneath."

She clambered over the fence and then walked along it, peering into the cool darkness of the orchard trees. Her uncle Calder and the other growers would be in there somewhere, she thought. Was he all right? Runa had said that the griffin Blue Leader was "bad" if disobeyed, and her uncle would not be the sort to follow his captor blindly.

Another fence, with its rails closer together, divided the field of grain from shorter grass. She caught a dark mass in the distance: some sort of animals, bunched together. A human shape detached from the rest—probably a keeper. A third tower stood behind them. Keeper tower, she decided. If growers and scorchers had their own towers, they were hidden from view.

In a few more feet she found the grove. She didn't need the fence between to tell it from the orchard trees. They grew in a single green mass, taller than a tower. Feathery leaves whispered in the slightest breeze. A few branches sent up tufts of delicate flowers: some pink, some beige.

Freko stood across the fence on a pile of severed branches. A triangular cart, half full of brush, waited beside him. A long stick was clutched in each claw but he wasn't moving. His eyes had fastened on her. Squirming under that never-ending stare, she approached.

"You're gathering these up?" Mira asked. "I've got nothing better to do." She took one of the branches on the ground and tried to angle it into the cart. The branch divided in several places and didn't fit inside. She circled it, then bent one of the offending twigs, trying to twist it off.

A beak snaked around her. Mira backed up, but it closed around the offending twig. A quick jerk from the griffin's head, and the branch snapped, leaving a perfect smooth cut. Mira tried not to imagine what that beak could do to a person. "You cut them," she said. "I'll stack."

She turned and studied the ground, searching for smaller wood. She gathered an armload of sticks and dumped them in the cart. Freko, who had been clipping the branch Mira had tried to load, stopped and hissed at her—not a harsh hiss, but a delicate one.

Mira looked from him to the cart and back again. "I'll take the compliment," she said. As he returned to loading, she added, "But don't get used to me slaving for you. I'm just..."

What was she doing? The griffin had returned to his work, so she had no need to finish her sentence.

Several times as she worked, the griffin made the same soft hiss. Definitely approval, she decided. Would he make a different sound if she quit? She stopped and leaned against the cart, telling herself that her pause was only experimentation, not rest. Freko stopped to stare, but he didn't react. She was a thrall. Wasn't she supposed to be punished for not working? He studied her almost a minute, and then went on snapping branches.

Mira caught herself smiling. She forced the expression off her face and returned to gathering branches. It wasn't hard work, anyway, and after she got into the rhythm of it she could stop concentrating and think of more important things, like escape. Ket said that griffins couldn't see in the dark. They must depend on the walls to keep people inside. The walls were intimidating, certainly, but she was sure she could find a weak spot and clamber out. As soon as the sun set...

Freko made a startled chirp. Mira snapped back as he pulled the branch from her hand. Apparently she'd hit him with it. She cringed, waiting for punishment. He made a different sound, a harsher hiss from the back of his throat. She flinched. The griffin pulled the branch back. Then he dropped it behind him and offered her a smaller one in his beak.

She took it. "You're not going to punish me?"

He didn't respond.

"You might if you knew what I was thinking."

His tail flicked behind him, the feathered tuft ruffling. Mira again caught herself smiling. "You're supposed to be a terrifying monster," she said. "I most definitely should not like you."

The sun dropped below the distant mountains, but because the peaks were so high the light had only slightly dimmed. Mira had at least one more hour before protective darkness. She turned back to the brush pile, which had shrunk considerably. Freko raised his head. His gaze turned from the empty horizon to the dark tower behind them.

Mira's heart sank. She stepped forward, toward the grove. Freko made his deeper hiss, so different than the approving one. The grove was so close, only a few yards away, and the branches were so

tangled that she could probably slip into a thicket that Freko could not reach. She stepped toward it. Freko darted in front of her. He spread his wings wide, blocking her way.

Mira scowled at him. "You wouldn't like being locked up all night either. I bet your room has a big open door."

His beak parted and he hissed again. She turned and took a few steps toward the tower. The second he lowered his wings, she darted for the trees.

A force like a club hit the side of her head. Mira toppled into the grass. When her head stopped spinning she looked up at Freko, standing over her.

"That was not nice."

He chirped again, a commanding sound. Perhaps in time she could recognize it, but the meaning was obvious. Still rubbing her head, Mira forced herself to walk after him, toward the open mouth of the tower. She'd almost gone complacent with the little griffin. That wouldn't happen again. Tomorrow, she'd get out.

This has been Chapter 6 of [Mira's Griffin](#).



## Keita's Wings series

Keita tried to run on ground that swayed like water. She had gone only a few feet when the insane mass of the landslide overtook them. Dust filled her nose and eyes. 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. Sienna! 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, that Sienna had 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 our enemy’s 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, before she’d been captured. 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 learn rock-shaping, 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—all of them, not just Jasper. 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 bumbling 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.

This has been Chapter 3 of [The Spectra Unearthed](#), book 1 of the Keita’s Wings series.

## DreamRovers trilogy



“Three days,” Walker said. “Two, if I hurried.”

Bridgley, the father, nodded as he peered down the mountain. They had an excellent view of the hilly country below, a blur of gray with a light dusting of spring green.

“Might take your family longer to reach Grayton though,” Walker added. They’d gone barely two miles yesterday, after their makeshift funeral.

“I assumed as much,” Bridgley answered.

The family members looked stronger this morning, though whether that came from food, rest, or a new goal, Walker didn’t know. All of them, except for the babies, carried sacks. At least they had a few supplies. The two oldest sons, Altair and Leo, owned a pair of horses.

“Will you come with us?” Bridgley asked.

“Told you last night,” Walker answered. “I’d be happy to escort you to Grayton.”

“Not just as an escort,” Bridgley said. “For months now, I’ve been envisioning a neighborhood where dreamrovers could live together. There are enough of us that if we joined forces, we could protect one another.”

Walker hoped Bridgley wouldn’t notice his skepticism. The law against dreamroving had been signed by King Stafford himself. Dreamrovers—especially those who could tread, like Leo—were not bound by distance, and so changing cities made little difference. No doubt that was why the guards had hunted the family into the mountains.

“Will you join us?” Bridgley asked again.

Walker owed this family. His own quiet life in the mountains meant nothing, but if he could help this family survive—that was a cause worth living for. “I’ll do everything I can,” Walker promised.

The ghost of a smile appeared through the stubble on Bridgley’s face. “I don’t ask for that much.”

“I won’t be much help in the city,” Walker said. “I’ve never been to Grayton, but there’s a chance I’d be recognized. That would just make things worse for you.”

“You’re that well known?”

Walker avoided his gaze. “My parents were courtiers. I joined the king’s guard instead. It was a well-publicized scandal.”

He waited with gritted teeth for further questions. When the older man said nothing, Walker risked a glance. Bridgley was staring out at the landscape, and his still-haunted expression hid any clue to his thoughts.

The family had accepted Walker without question once they knew he was also a dreamrover. The tragedies must have stifled their caution. They seemed to consider his solitary life in the mountains only in terms of the survival skills he had learned. That trustworthy people wouldn’t have had to live that way didn’t occur to them. Dreamroving made him an outlaw, true, but they ought to have pressed further before they trusted him with their lives.

“We don’t intend to stay inside the city,” Bridgley said at last. “I’ve always been a farmer. I hoped to purchase property on the edge of the city. If you’re willing to work with us...”

However hasty it was, they did trust him. “You’ll have to teach me farming, but I’ll work.” Walker hesitated only for a moment, and then dug into his pack. “And I can help purchase the property. Here.” He withdrew a leather sack and handed it to Bridgley.

Bridgley peered inside. His jaw dropped. He pulled out a handful of golden coins, then let them fall. “You wouldn’t be living with us. We’d be living with you.”

Walker snorted. “You’ll have to arrange the purchase. My name can’t be on anything.”

“I understand,” Bridgley said, “but you’d still be our partner.”

“I’m helping you,” Walker protested. “I don’t want leadership, or ownership, or anything like that.”

“I’m not taking your money,” Bridgley said. “I’d be your partner, not your charity case.”

Partner sounded like equality, and Walker wasn’t equal to these people. He was far below. Still, if this made Bridgley accept his help, why object? It wouldn’t have practical implications, as far as Walker could see.

“All right,” he said.

Bridgley extended a hand, and Walker shook it.

A piping voice made them turn. A woman was standing in front of a fire, roasting small strips of meat on sticks. A red-headed toddler sat at her feet, gnawing on one of the stripes and glistening in grease.

“Boys!” Bridgley shouted.

Walker jumped at the sudden outburst. Those he called must have too, for a moment later, his oldest sons rushed up to him. Altair, the carpenter, was an inch shorter than Leo but more muscular. His hair was auburn like his father’s, and he shared the family’s blue-hazel eyes.

“We need to send someone ahead into Grayton to make the transactions,” Bridgley said. “I need to stay with the family. Walker’s name can’t be on the paperwork.”

Both nodded as though this were nothing unusual, and Walker wondered if they had been listening to the earlier conversation.

“I’ll go,” Leo said at once. “I’m sure Altair wants to stay with his family.”

“I’m sure he does,” a feminine voice answered. The woman by the fire was listening. She must be the mother of the toddler...

Walker blinked. There were now two red-headed little girls at the woman’s feet.

“This is my family.” Altair must have seen where Walker was looking. “My wife is Luci. And before you ask, the girls aren’t twins. They’re a year apart.”

A year should have made a large difference—the girls couldn’t have been more than three. Maybe in time Walker would be able to tell the difference.

“We’ll need two people to go,” Bridgley said. “They can take the horses.”

Altair and his wife exchanged a look, as though they were speaking without words. Walker had heard of siblings speaking that way, or other people who were unusually close, but he wasn’t sure if these two could speak mind-to-mind or if their expressions were enough. The thought brought a pang that he forced himself to ignore.

“I’ll go as well,” Altair said. “You’ll keep my family safe.”

Altair couldn’t know that. Anything could happen in the mountains.

Bridgley nodded. Altair stepped across to his wife and kissed her. It was more frantic than romantic, an expression of need and loss, and Walker had to look away. By the time he looked back, Altair had a daughter in each arm.

Leo brought the horses forward. Bridgley slipped the bag of coins into the saddlebags. Leo swung up. Altair set his daughters down and joined him. In seconds they were gone. Their large black dog ran after the horses, but the youngest boy called it back.

Walker and Bridgley were the only two men in the company, and two of three adults. Walker felt the responsibility settle like a weight on his shoulders. What had he gotten himself into?



March 2, Year of Freedom 490

My name is Norma Filaura, and I am 15 years old. My new friend Walker gave me this paper, so now I can keep a journal again. My last one got left behind when we moved. Actually, all our stuff got left behind. Even my favorite milk cow. Papa said we might get a new cow in our new home, whenever we find it, but he didn't say it could be mine. My brothers teased me because I was sad about the cow when we've gone through so many sad things.

I guess I have to explain about the sad things, at least a little. We used to live in a town called Shelby. People didn't know what we could do. At first, because dreamroving wasn't that much different than any other special ability, crowd-speaking or empathy or even the odd ones like water or fire shaping. Then after it became illegal a couple years ago, we were too afraid to tell anyone. But eventually people found out. We had to leave our house fast before they caught us, but it was freezing cold and we left all our stuff behind, even our blankets and warm clothes. Mom and little Orion got sick. We lost Orion first. Then Mom.

I don't want to talk about sad stuff anymore. Let's move forward. We're making plans to enter a new city, a bigger one south from Shelby. We've moved before, which means we've rebuilt before. We can do it again.



An odd feeling, like a ripple along the dreamscape's current, caught Indra's attention. She wasn't alone. A rover was somewhere upstream, moving in awkward jerks that signified a beginner.

Indra drifted closer. The form was blurry—he was roving, not treading, so his body was still safe at home somewhere. Maybe ten years old, if Indra had to guess. “Hello,” she called.

The boy drifted away from her. “Sorry,” he called back. “I don't know how to steer.”

“You have to control your thoughts, not your body,” Indra said. “Concentrate.”

His movements became less erratic, but he was still drifting.

Indra moved alongside him.

“Can I escape?” The boy's voice had a quiver in it.

“You can't get lost unless you tread,” Indra said, “which you aren't. Your body is still back at home.”

His body contorted, and dark clouds of grief obscured him for a moment. Maybe she shouldn't have assumed that he had a home.

She stumbled over her next words. “Eventually you'll wake up right where you fell asleep.”

He eased, and the current flowed over him more gently.

“Is this your first time roving?” Indra asked. “You seem a bit old.”

“So?” the boy demanded. “My sister-in-law was fifteen when she roved for the first time.”

Indra raised her hands. “It’s okay. Nothing wrong with that.” She studied him more carefully. Shaggy auburn hair, blue eyes, and a ragged nightshirt were all she could make out. “Did you come to the dreamscape for a reason?”

The boy avoided her gaze, which made him rock back and forth. “Mama used to say the dead visit dreams.”

“I’ve heard that.” Indra tried to make her voice go soft. He must have recently lost someone. “The trouble is, it’s hard to tell what’s a spirit and what’s made up. Look.”

She concentrated on the mist. A figure formed on her palm. Sweeping white hair framed a face that glowed through the mist. The hair and a gray skirt both flowed with the current as though in a gentle breeze.

“That’s my mother,” Indra said.

The boy moved forward, eyes huge in a round face. He hovered inches from the figure, and then peered up at Indra. “Will you teach me?”

Indra gestured for him to go ahead.

An image appeared in front of him—a red face, glistening with beads of sweat, with strands of hair clinging to her cheeks.

“You don’t have to remember her that way,” Indra said.

The figure on Indra’s palm jerked from the impact of invisible missiles. Mother fell to her knees, bleeding in several places...

Indra forced the figure to fade. She was almost as trembly as the boy.

The younger rover squinted in concentration. The figure he conjured was much larger, taller than the boy and Indra both. The woman’s eyes were gray, constantly changing color like a turbulent sky, though that might have been the boy’s lack of control. The figure stared into the boy’s face, and her expression lightened until it was literally glowing. She reached out and tweaked his nose. The boy smiled as darkness seemed to shed off of him.

As the boy stepped back, the figure turned to Indra. “It’s been too long,” she said softly.

Indra jerked back. This wasn’t the boy’s imagination—he couldn’t have known what the woman meant. Indra looked down. Her featureless dress was blurring at the edges, and the color was leaching from her arms.

“I’ve got to go,” she said.

The boy started, and the figure vanished. Instantly his eyes widened and he flailed at the mist where she had been. Finding nothing, he whirled on Indra. “Don’t abandon me.”

“You can wait for your body to wake up, or you find your own dreams again,” Indra said. “There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

He grabbed for her arm, but his hand passed straight through.

“It’s not hard,” Indra said. “Just think about things that can’t exist inside the dreamscape.”

He cocked his head, but nothing else changed. Indra tried again. “What were you doing before you fell asleep? Where were you?”

As he concentrated, he began to fade. “In a wooden tent.”

“What does it feel like?” Indra pressed. “Smell like?”

“Terrible,” he answered, and grinned. For a moment Indra saw nothing but his white teeth hanging on their own in the mist. Then he was gone.

She had to go too. Treading too long was dangerous. She rushed through the dreamscape, trusting her instincts to find the right place to wake up.

★ ★ ★

March 4, Year of Freedom 490

My little brother Felis roved for the first time last night. He's eleven. That's kind of old for a first rove, but he at least beat me—I didn't rove until I was 13, and I still just barely do it. People say dreamroving is both ability and training, so maybe I could get better if I practiced more, but I can control my own dreams, and that's all I really want to do with it.

Papa went over all kinds of rules with Felis this morning. Don't go wandering around on your own until you know how to get back, don't go anywhere you don't have permission to go (this is actually super hard), always come back on time each morning, spend some time in your own dreams so you don't get lost... there are lots and lots of rules. My oldest brother Altair came into my dreams once when I was ten, and I was having an extra embarrassing one (no, I am not going to tell you what it was). He made fun of me for weeks whenever Papa wasn't looking.

That's the biggest problem with dreamroving. You can see stuff that other people really want to hide. Some people try not to rove at all. Some, like Papa, make a whole lot of complicated rules. Then there's people who try to use it, find a purpose with it. Probably the best example in the world is my brother Leo. He says he can see the difference between regular dreams and sick people dreams. He learned to be a doctor, and he finds the people who are sick and jumps to them and helps make them better. He had to learn to tread to do it—that means your whole body goes into the dreamscape, not just your consciousness. It's really hard and really dangerous because it's so easy to get lost.

If I were going to train at all, I would want to do something like Leo. But that's really hard, you have to train a whole lot. I'd rather just stay out of it as much as I can.

★ ★ ★

A peppery, savory scent filled the great room of a busy inn. Indra, scrubbing a table in an empty corner, knew that this was intentional—the owners had hidden cheap herbs in crannies to make the place more appealing. It didn't stop her fascination. She couldn't see the scent, or even its source, yet no one could deny its reality.

"Almost done?"

The womanly voice made Indra jump. Mauve, the innkeeper, was a muscular woman who would have been terrifying if not for her kind eyes.

"Almost done," Indra repeated. Luckily, her hands had figured out how to scrub automatically when her thoughts drifted.

The woman's expression lightened into a rare smile. She reached into an apron pocket and handed Indra a few bronze coins.

Indra slipped them into a pocket hidden beneath a slit in her skirt. They didn't interest her—she had a sleeping place and food as long as she worked, and that was all she needed. Her hands were



worn pink. Good. That would help her concentrate in the dreamscape. As soon as night fell and the inn's patrons began to sleep, she was ready to go.

A group of young people had gathered around one of the tables. They were speaking excitedly of a new ship that had come to port a few days ago, but it wasn't their words that caught Indra's attention. A pair of them sat closer together than was necessary, so that their legs touched. A man handed his closest companion a cup from further down the table. They were small actions, inconsequential, yet it proved that they were together, part of something Indra couldn't define.

"You can take your break now," Mauve announced.

Again, Indra jumped. She'd assumed that Mauve had left, but the woman was still watching her. How long had Indra been sitting in one place? She climbed off of her stool, doing her best to ignore the happy chatter from the nearby table.

She'd ended up in a city by the sea. During yesterday's breaktime, she'd found a cliff overlooking the ocean. The waves swirled like the dreamscape, full of color and motion, but they came with fascinating scents and sounds and the feel of a chilled breeze against her skin. She could stand that way for hours, just existing.

A laugh interrupted her thoughts. One of the women grabbed her neighbor's arm, and a man slapped another on the back.

"You should join them," Mauve said.

Were Indra's thoughts so apparent? She took a tiny step toward the group, but then shook her head. The second they knew what she was, they'd start throwing things. Her body would jerk around like her mother's had in her dream-image. If Indra was lucky, she'd survive. "I don't have time to join them. I need to get packed," Indra said. "I'll be leaving tonight."

"I'm sorry to hear that. You're welcome to work here as long as you like." Mauve glanced at the gathering over her shoulder. "You could make friends."

The only way those strangers would be her friends was if she hid who she was. She'd have to give up the dreamscape, her only connection to her mother, and the freedom and control that came with it. "I have to be somewhere," Indra said.

Thankfully, Mauve didn't press her.



Walker stood with his boots firmly planted in reality. Below, Bridgley was stalking an elk. From Walker's place on a higher slope, he saw the animal, a young buck, graze in a depression between hills. Its movements were jerky and impatient, suggesting youth. Bridgley wouldn't be able to see it, but he was heading in the right direction. He'd lost his hat and kept stopping to control his hair. The pause left him open to danger.

The mountains towered behind them. Only their tips were snowbound. Warmer weather was coming, but the thought put Walker on edge. The elk were moving higher into the mountains, and predators always followed prey.

A shift in the sparse grass caught Walker's eye. His hands moved faster than his eyes. He raised his crossbow. Then he saw it, a harmless fox, too far upwind of Bridgley to be aware of the man's presence. Walker's crossbow dropped but his grip did not lessen.

The elk raised its head. Bridgley fitted a stone into his sling, but his motions were slow and weary.

The young buck charged.

Bridgley's body impeded Walker's shot. Walker should have foreseen that. He yelled and ran down the slope.

Bridgley rolled aside, losing his stone.

Walker had almost reached them when the buck whirled toward him. He dropped to one knee and raised his crossbow. Brown fur filled his view. He shot, then rolled aside.

The beast plowed into the dirt behind him.

Everything went still.

Walker stood, then advanced on the animal. The quarrel had driven into the buck's chest. It was already dead.

Bridgley got to his feet and walked over, a bit unsteady. "I'm sorry. I'm not usually that slow. Under the circumstances..."

Walker's trainers had never accepted excuses, but none of the soldiers were widowers. He shrugged. "It worked out."

Bridgley frowned. "You put yourself into danger for me."

Walker shrugged. "Better I get hurt than you." He had no one to miss him if something happened.

Bridgley gave him a sharp look, but he turned to the elk and began to clean it without a word. Walker reloaded his crossbow and walked to the top of the ridge to watch for danger. Mountain predators were unlikely to attack the two men, but the buck's charge hadn't been likely either.

Bridgley finished his work and grabbed the animal's hind legs to drag back to camp. Walker returned his crossbow to its straps on his pack and joined him.

"I'll pull it," Bridgley protested. "I'm no old man yet."

Walker let go. "Guess I should be ready anyway." He unbuckled his crossbow again.

The hide slid easily over the ground, though it left a wide track behind them. Walker stepped in the newly swept earth, listening to the wildness of the wind.

"We might have to preserve some of this meat," Bridgley said.

Walker started. He'd have to get used to conversation. "Or sell it. We should make Grayton by tomorrow."

"Good. Altair and Leo made the purchase. We'll meet them in town and then head over to the new property."

How in Derya's name did Bridgley know that? "Did they send a messenger?" Walker asked.

The ghost of a smile appeared on Bridgley's face. "You're an only child, huh?"

Walker raised an eyebrow. "Yes, but..." Then the information clicked. "Siblings speak mind-to-mind, that's right."

"Not just siblings." Bridgley's almost-smile vanished again. "Anyone who's emotionally close enough."

Walker stiffened. They were dangerously close to painful memories.

Bridgley didn't seem to notice. "Aura and I could. It's hard to concentrate when it's so quiet in here." He tapped his temple.

Walker wasn't sure if he admired or pitied the man for discussing pain with a stranger. "Must be hard," he murmured.

He had wanted that closeness, so different than his own parents. Instead, he'd gotten betrayal, prejudice, and deaths for the few relationships he had. His mother's voice, harsh and angry, rang through his mind. "Why would you tell the girl about us? I hope you realize what you've done."

He couldn't even remember his betrothed's name.

Walker blocked the thoughts. He'd rather tangle with the elk again. At least a physical arrow through the heart ended quickly.

"Walker?" Bridgley asked. "You all right?"

His feet had stopped moving. Walker tightened his grip on his crossbow and hurried ahead. "Fine," he said. "Let's get that meat back to camp."

This has been Chapter 3 of [DreamRovers: Price of Deliverance](#), book 1 of the DreamRovers trilogy.

## The Seventh Clan, a Spectra Crowns Tale

The closer the boys drew, the worse camp looked. Tents stood without any sense of order and sagged against their poles. Wounded men were stretched out on blankets everywhere. Perrin tried not to stare as they passed.

After a few minutes, he and Gio passed the last tent and stared out at the grassy hills and, beyond those, mountains on the horizon. Where were the officer's tents? Where were the uninjured men?

Perrin stepped in front of a medic. "Where's General Niles?"

The medic maneuvered around him. "No time to talk."

Dread pooled in Perrin's stomach.

A nearby soldier stared at them. He seemed alert, despite the bloodstained bandage around his head.

"What happened?" Perrin demanded.

"You," the soldier said. "You're the messenger boys."

On any other day, the title would have rankled. "Yeah," Perrin said, "but where is everyone?"

The soldier closed his eyes. "More may come. We were scattered after the battle."

"The general?" Perrin pressed.

"In his tent."

Perrin let out his breath. "Thanks. We'd better report."

The soldier pointed, and the boys headed in that direction. "I want to know more about the battle," Gio said.

To Perrin, the battle was only firelight and chaos, but he knew that within the week, it would make sense. He'd hear about numbers and tactics, facts he could wrap his mind around. But checking on the general came first.

It didn't take long to find him. The general stood outside his tent, clinging to one pole. Perrin didn't see any obvious wounds, but his face was worn. The wrinkles seemed to vanish, though, when he caught sight of them. "Perrin!"

"Yes, sir?"

General Niles didn't quite hold back his smile. "I'm glad you're all right. You too, Gio."

The boy straightened, as though he were a member of their family.

General Niles straightened, the commander once more. "Most of the men are wounded. They need care. Get to work immediately."

Perrin hid his own relief. "Yes, sir."



Perrin ran a dipper full of water across the field, but the chaplain had already reached the man who had asked for it. Perrin stepped back, dipping his head in respect.

"Come forward, son," the chaplain called. "We can both assist him, physically and spiritually."

Perrin lifted the dipper to the man's lips. They twitched, so he dribbled a few drops in. The wounded man's lips continued to move, but his throat did not. Perrin meant to go to the next man, but the chaplain's words caught his attention. "Bless you, for rising above individualism. When our people are free from the Vangtons' tyranny, you will be a part of it, part of our freedom, forever."

The chaplain looked up and met Perrin's eye, and Perrin suddenly wondered if the words were meant for him too. The Vangtons had already destroyed his life, but he could still be part of freedom. Whatever happened to him, his cause would live on.

He offered the dipper again, and the man took a few more drops.

The chaplain moved to another man, and Perrin went with him. "So many men..." the chaplain murmured.

"It's because of the Vangtons..."

The chaplain interrupted Perrin with a look. "Somewhere, they are tending their wounded too."

Perrin blinked. "But you're on our side."

“Yes,” the chaplain agreed, “but it’s the ability to walk between sides that makes us human. We are all beast and divine and something in between.”

“I don’t understand.”

The chaplain eased the dipper from Perrin’s hand. “The sun sinks low,” he said. “Take your supper, son. I can attend this duty a while.”

Perrin could have kept going, but soldiers were obedient. He nodded a tired acknowledgment and turned back toward the village. He’d been running errands for two days, and it was hard to see if he’d made a difference.

He collapsed on a log beside Gio and a few others. The villagers brought out what little food they could spare. A girl set a tiny bowl of porridge in front of Perrin. “Have we lost?” she asked.

“No,” Perrin said.

“Probably,” Gio answered in the same moment.

Perrin glared at him.

“What?” Gio asked. “The odds are we’re not going to win.”

“Whose side are you on?” Perrin demanded.

“Calm down. I’m General Niles’ man. I’ll be at his side whatever happens.” Gio stood up, bowl still in hand, and stalked away.

Perrin watched after him, shaking his head. Gio was not a man, or General Niles’ possession either.

The girl hadn’t moved on. “There’s still hope.”

Perrin looked up at her. “You care?”

“Of course! I’d fight, if I could.” She put her hands on her hips. “My family were horse breeders. We had our own lines and everything. The Vangtons took every last one for the war.”

Perrin raised his bowl. “Well, this helps.”

She sat beside him. She was pretty, with golden curls and a nose that turned up. She turned toward him and gave him a half-smile.

Perrin tried to smile back, but his eyes were suddenly wet. His sister Elvira used to smile at boys like that. She was around this age, maybe fifteen. But Elvira was married now, to a stranger who could watch over her and keep her safe from Vangtons.

Gradually Perrin became aware that the men were swapping stories. Gio’s voice rang out from among them. “Have you heard the one about the fishermen brothers who were pulled out of a stormy sea by giant eagles?”

At least he’d given up on his ‘odds against us’ talk. That would have destroyed morale. What the men needed was a distraction.

And even a distraction could provide information. Perrin edged closer. “What do you know about Spectra?”

“Now, that’s a good source of stories!” a soldier said.

Another added, “Like Hanan, the girl who fell in love with a sailor. His crew was dying, and she healed them all. But when the sailor tried to take her home, she vanished from his ship.”

The girl sitting beside Perrin sighed.

“So they’re healers?” Perrin asked.

A man with a long mustache chortled. “You name a brand of magic, and you can find a story to fit it.”

“My father swears he saw one once,” another man said. “A band of pirates tried to carry off the princess of the Spectra. She called down lightning and sank the ship. My father was out on his boat. He went over to look for survivors. He caught a glimpse of the princess standing on driftwood, just floating away, and nothing else living.”

A girl who could sink an entire ship? A healer who saved a whole crew? Perrin had seen Tiol save Gio’s leg without apparent effort. If they did exist—if Perrin could persuade them to help—the Vangtons wouldn’t stand a chance.

A cry interrupted his thoughts. In the distance, two figures ran down the nearest hills, waving their white sashes over their heads.

“Scouts!” Perrin yelled.

The camp burst into action. General Niles appeared from his tent. “How close?” he called.

“They’ll be here in maybe five minutes,” Perrin answered.

General Niles hurried to Perrin's side and peered into the hills. "I'll take your word on it." He put a hand on Perrin's shoulder. "You have good eyes."

Perrin smiled.

"Come into my tent," General Niles said. "We'll wait for them there. You can take notes."

Perrin nodded. It was a good excuse—not many of the soldiers could write.

Gio reached the tent before Perrin did and scrambled inside. He immediately set about dusting a table that had no dust.

General Niles ignored him. "I can't tell you how relieved I was when you returned yesterday. If I'd lost you..."

"Are you speaking as my commander, sir?" Perrin asked, one eye on Gio.

"I am. The situation has grown more dangerous. If you were captured, you could be used against your family. I thought that keeping your identity secret, and keeping you out of the direct fighting, would solve the issue, but our army here is in too bad a state. We can no longer protect you."

Perrin's blood ran cold. "What are you saying?"

"The Vangton army knew right where we were. They attacked in the night and decimated our forces. We have less than a thousand men left. Our chances of success are minimal at best."

A pit settled in Perrin's stomach. He didn't need the numbers to know how much smaller the camp was. "We can't lose."

He'd known, since the beginning, that he might die. But that they might lose—that was impossible. Their side was right, and God never let villains write history.

"Will you keep fighting?" Gio asked.

General Niles didn't seem surprised that Gio spoke up. "I will. What choice do I have? I'd be executed if I surrendered. I might as well go down with a fight."

"Me too," Perrin said.

General Niles gave him a stern look. "Perrin, you have too much to live for."

That was nonsense. General Niles had too much to live for. His wife and little Gracie at home, for instance. Perrin was the one with nothing to lose. His life had been destroyed. Why shouldn't he give what was left of it to their cause?

A stir interrupted. General Niles crossed to the tent opening. "Enter!" he barked.

Two scouts entered, followed by several of General Niles' captains. Perrin knew their faces but not their names. Both scouts were wide-eyed and agitated, shifting and twitching as though they could not bear to stand still. "The Liber Pass is completely blocked," one blurted.

Perrin found the General's map among a pile of luggage and spread it out on the table. Gio moved aside to make room. If the boys looked useful, they wouldn't be thrown out.

General Niles set down a wooden marker designating their army. They were positioned on a narrow stretch of land between mountains and sea. The Liber Pass separated them from the rest of the mainland.

Perrin's eyes widened. If the Vangtons blocked the pass, they were trapped.

"This region is bigger than it looks," a captain said, "and the people here are sympathetic. If the Vangtons only block the pass, we can live here quite some time, hiding among the villages and small cities. We can find supplies and more men, and hide among them if needed."

General Niles frowned. "Were there any signs that the Vangtons will advance?"

"Some of the men are settling in," a scout answered. "The rest appear ready to march."

"That's what I was afraid of." General Niles frowned at the map. "If they advance, they will sweep through the region. They know that the cities here are sympathetic to our cause. Our benefactors are in as much danger as we are. You remember what happened to Tilsey Island."

Perrin shuddered. He'd visited Tilsey, walked among its orchards. But it was the first city to rebel against the Vangtons. They'd burned the place to the ground and turned the island into a prison camp.

"So we have to get out," a captain said, "and the Vangtons have to know about it."

"There's still a chance they will attack the people here anyway," another answered.

Perrin winced. "I'm afraid there's little we can do," General Niles said.

"Can we climb the mountains?" another asked.

General Niles pointed to the map. “The other side is a barren desert. We don’t have the supplies needed to take all our men back to civilization.”

“The sea, then?” another captain said. “We hire ships to carry us around. If they were disguised like merchant vessels, the Vangton navy might...”

“They’d board us to confiscate all of our fictitious goods,” General Niles said, “and to conscript our sailors. Taking the whole army to sea would be impossible.”

Perrin pictured the small sailboats docked beside the village. “Maybe not the whole army, but a messenger could get through.”

He hadn’t meant to speak aloud. For a moment, the men all stared at him, and he was tempted to duck out under the tent.

“You may be right,” General Niles said. “Governor Andres has allies who have been gathering supplies and troops. I don’t know how many men they have, but it could mean our salvation.”

The other captains exchanged glances. “Governor Andres is in hiding,” one said.

Perrin smiled. “Don’t worry. He’s hiding in plain sight, you might say.”

General Niles gave him a stern look. “I believe Perrin knows how to find the governor’s allies. If he can get a message through, he could save all of us.” He strode to a crate and pulled out a paper. “To start, I have a contact on Tilsey Island.”

The men looked at each other. “The Vangon’s prison camp?”

“The original residents are still there. The Vangtons believe that they’ve been cowed into submission. They apparently never knew the history of the place. It was settled by escapees from the mines. Those people are no pushovers.”

Starting with Tilsey Island meant that Perrin would definitely be taking a boat. It’d be safer than trying to ride a horse through enemy lines. For just a moment, Perrin pictured himself riding past the enemy line, his horse in perfect control, effortlessly dodging enemy fire. The sailboat wouldn’t be as heroic.

The light from outside grew steadily darker. One of the men lit first one lantern, then another.

General Niles pointed at the map. “A good sailboat with a good crew can make it within a day. I know you can handle yourself on the water. If you believe you can make it, I’ll send you.”

Perrin nodded, ducking his head so that his excitement wouldn’t show. A good crew might cut down on the heroics, but at least he’d have guidance out there.

“Gio,” General Niles said. “Will you go with him?”

Gio’s head whipped back and forth between Perrin and the general. He swallowed. “I ought to stay with you, sir.”

“He doesn’t have the experience...” Perrin stopped. Gio’s family had been fishermen.

General Niles shook his head. “I won’t force him to go.”

“I’d rather stay,” Gio said firmly.

General Niles nodded. “Then I need a few moments to write this missive.”

The captains and scouts filed out.

Immediately, General Niles stood. The rigidity in his shoulders eased, and his expression was far softer. “Are you sure you can make it?”

“Of course.” Perrin balled his fists. If it meant saving the war—not to mention saving his family—he’d find a way through. “It sounds like you think it’s less risky than staying here.”

General Niles sighed. “Perhaps I’m a coward. If you’re lost on the sea, I won’t be there to see it.” He pulled something from his pocket and pressed it into Perrin’s hand. “That’s our family crest. My contact in Tilsey will ask to see it. If you’re caught, throw it overboard. With luck, you’ll bring it back to me.”

Perrin felt the cold metal of a signet ring in his fist. General Niles had already called him family, so he said, “Yes, Father.”

Gio gaped. “Father?”

General Niles nodded. “That’s a secret, young man. I know you lost your family. If you’d like, if any of us survive this blasted war, you can be part of ours.”

Gio’s mouth hung open for several seconds. Perrin smirked. If Gio was really his brother, Perrin would call him a large-mouthed toad.

General Niles turned back to Perrin. “Don’t come back unless you’re bringing reinforcements. I’ll write more letters tonight, for people you can try after my contact in Tilsey.”

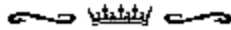
“Yes, sir.”

General Niles straightened, the hardened general once more. “Then you’re dismissed.”

They ducked out of the tent. Perrin waited for Gio to ask questions, but the boy was strangely silent. Finally Perrin said, “Stay alive while I’m gone, all right?”

“Me?” Gio made an exaggerated innocent face. “Who’s going to kill little old me?”

Perrin rolled his eyes. He had never been that naïve.



Perrin felt smaller than usual next to the four-man crew that General Niles had assembled. They were all broad-shouldered and muscular. Two had visible bandages, but neither seemed affected by their wounds.

The tallest one, with unruly hair that constantly escaped his ponytail, pointed out one of the sailboats. “That one. She’s in the best condition. Looks fast, too.”

Perrin couldn’t tell the difference, but he didn’t say so. He’d taken his father’s sailboat across the cove plenty of times, but he knew nothing of other boats or other waters.

The men dropped the barrels and sacks they were carrying into the boat.

“We’re getting permission first, right?” Perrin asked.

The nearest soldier gave him a condescending look, as though he’d asked something stupid. The tall one said, “We’ll find the owner if we can. Don’t want to be like the Vangtons, but this is urgent.”

Perrin knew it. Gio and the rest of their army would be destroyed without reinforcements. The curly-haired girl and the others watching from shore would be caught between the sea and the Vangtons. The war effort, and thousands of lives, depended on his message.

“Stop!”

An older man pushed through the gathering on the shore, waving his arms.

One of the soldiers sighed. “We’ll pay!” he called.

“Never mind that! There’s a storm coming on.”

Perrin studied the sky. Only a few fluffy white clouds interrupted the deep blue. “How do you know?” he demanded.

The other men started to turn back. “Don’t question your elders,” one barked at him.

“You said this was urgent!” Perrin argued.

“What did I just say?” The soldier’s glare was deadly.

“Not to question your orders, sir,” Perrin said automatically.

“That’s right.” All four men turned toward shore.

They hadn’t picked up their supplies.

Perrin’s father counted on this mission. Perrin lunged for the boat. He had it untied in seconds and kicked off from the dock.

“What the devil do you think you’re doing?” a soldier snapped.

Perrin ignored him. The current pushed them further out of reach. He worried that the men would swim out, but no one tried to stop him. The people still watched, but if they cried out again, he couldn’t hear it. He watched them get smaller for several minutes before he scrambled for the sails. Putting them up while moving would be tough, but he’d done it before.

Perrin ran his finger over the ring in his pocket, tracing the tiny engraved rose in the center of their family crest. “Sorry,” he said, though he knew the sea covered the sound of his voice. “It’s only a day or two. Then I’ll bring back help.”



*The bear bit into a long-dead rabbit and felt her teeth crunch through bone. She swallowed eagerly, but something was wrong, as though a corner of her mind disapproved. She tried to concentrate on it, and it was gone, like a forgotten dream.*

*Did bears dream?*



*Was she something else?  
Her attention was drawn to the rabbit, how it would fill her empty stomach. She shut her eyes, but the smell still called to her. She wanted to eat it, but she didn't think she liked dead rabbit.  
Her brain hurt from trying to think so much. She gave up and turned back to the rabbit. She needed the food.  
A thick tree trunk stood nearby. Frustrated, the bear dug her claws into the soft wood. Splinters flew. She clawed, again and again, until her paws ached. Then she stepped back. She'd made a mark in the wood. They weren't straight lines, but made a shape, a shape she ought to know.  
She'd forgotten something. Something important.  
Who was she?*

This has been Chapter 3 of [The Seventh Clan](#), the first Spectra Crowns Tale, also on [Kindle Vella](#).

## The Captain's Dowry

The message had to be a mistake. A foolish prank, perhaps, a cruel trick of Oliver's to get under Roland's skin. Father had been in fine health when Roland left port a few months ago. He couldn't just be dead.

The manor looked the same as ever, a boxy three-story building with large windows in strict rows. From the centered front door to double chimneys on either end, the house was perfectly symmetrical. Sunlight glinted on the glass windowpanes and there was no sign that anything was wrong.

Roland threw open the door, ignoring the watchmen who came in quietly behind him.

A cluster of men stood in the foyer. Their voices cut off as the sound of the slamming door echoed through the room.

His brother Oliver stood in the center of everything. He was a few inches taller and many years older than Roland. Every hair was slicked down in place. He was flabbier and paler than Roland remembered, soft from the cushy life of a gentleman. Roland could defeat him in a duel without even trying.

Not that Oliver would accept such a challenge.

"Ah, young Roland," Oliver said. "We have important things to discuss."

The watchmen cleared their throats. "This man was caught brawling on our dock," one said.

Roland had acted in self-defense, and given his opponent multiple chances to stop, but he didn't bother pointing it out. He was willing to bet that Oliver had bribed the man into it.

"Up to your old tricks," Oliver said, shaking his head. "Father would be devastated if he knew. Well, family is still family." He turned to the watchmen. "I will, of course, pay any fees he accrued. I'm sure my brother can find some way to pay me back."

They nodded as one.

Oliver turned to Roland. "If you would wait in my office, we'll be in shortly."

It wasn't Oliver's office. It was Father's.

But as Roland entered, alone, he saw a room vastly different than he remembered.

A stuffed bear's head hung on one wall. The portraits were rolled up and piled haphazardly into a crate. A new rug in brilliant colors stretched across the floor. One of Father's stuffed chairs remained, but the rest were gone. The owner's guests would have to stand while he sat in comfort.

Roland knew better than to sit in the one chair. When they were boys, Oliver would have shoved him out of it. Now that Roland was finally stronger, Oliver had the law and political power on his side.

There was no way to win.

Roland walked to the portraits and unrolled one. Roland Senior stood in the center, straight and tall, with a stern look for the artist. Oliver looked perfect, and that wasn't the painter enhancing his features. He always pasted on that perfect-son look when Father was around. Roland was still a young boy, with a few locks of hair standing up and one of his coat buttons missing.

The door creaked open. Roland quickly replaced the painting.

Oliver went straight to the chair and sank into it with an exaggerated smile. Two men in costly robes followed—the priest from the local church, and an official with Governor Lyr's insignia on his sleeve. He held out a hand to shake Roland's. "Beau Cortan," he introduced himself.

The priest cleared his throat. "Roland Andres of Mona Point, we regret to inform you that your father, Roland Andres Senior, has passed away."

His tone was flat, as though he were speaking of dull political matters. Roland did his best to remain equally stoic. It was impossible. Father was always waiting for him with open doors and warm words, eager to hear of his adventures. He couldn't be just gone.

"As per tradition, the older son will inherit his father's estate." Beau Cortan's speech was just as formal, but it had a note of sympathy in it. "However, the will contains—"

Roland could keep silent no longer. "Never mind that. What happened to him?"

The two officials exchanged looks. "I believe it was an illness," the priest said.

"He asked for you, toward the end," Oliver said. "It broke his heart that you were not here."

Roland gritted his teeth. He wasn't there because he'd been sent to the sea, blamed for a fight when he and Oliver were equally guilty. His father had at least secured an officer's post for him.

Beau Cortan cleared his throat. "The will has one provision for you. Upon your marriage, the estate of Roland Andres, Senior, will cover any debts that you have accumulated."

Roland didn't have any debts. He'd been making his own way for years. Surely his father knew that. Roland saved and scabbled every Riale, so that he would not need his father or brother's assistance. Was he to be punished now for his frugality?

"Is there anything else you wish to know?" Beau Cortan asked.

"Yes." Roland straightened. "When is the funeral?"

"Long past," Oliver said, and for once there was no malice in his voice. Whatever his feelings about Roland, he did care for his father. "Last September."

Two months ago. Roland's ship had arrived in Vangton, but hadn't yet embarked for home. No wonder he had received no communication.

Oliver leaned forward. "Well, now you know. I do hope you will be able to manage." His voice rang with such fake compassion that Roland was astounded no one else picked up on it. "You are welcome to stay here. I'd just ask for a small compensation for room and board. This is a time to stay together, to be a family."

Roland kept his face blank. The compensation Oliver wanted would not be small. Even if the amount of money was reasonable—and Oliver, a banker, would know what was reasonable—Roland knew how his brother operated. Roland would be both unpaid labor and a convenient scapegoat while Oliver used supposed debts to keep him under control. And having the will settle his debts upon marriage would be a tiny, temporary reprieve before Oliver regained control once more.

"I wish I could," Roland said, "but I have to get back to my ship. I have obligations."

Oliver feigned surprise. "You still have a position, even after your brawl?"

Roland clenched his fists. No wonder Oliver had bribed that other man to start a fight. "I at least need to head down to the dock and make arrangements."

"Of course." Oliver gave a condescending hand-wave. "I have business myself this evening. Just don't start any more fights! I'd hate to have to bail you out again."

Roland hurried from the room before he lost his temper.

The dock was just as crowded when Roland arrived. His old ship was still there, but Roland didn't bother to seek it out. The roster was probably filled by now, even in the unlikely event that Captain Bard would accept him back after the fight.

A figure in green climbed down from the nearby packet ship. "Well!" he called. "Cousin Roland!"

Roland half-smiled. "Hello, Alstin. Haven't seen you in ages."

Alstin's branch of the family lived halfway across the continent from Mona Point and visited infrequently. Roland had always looked forward to their visits—his aunt and uncle were too perceptive to fall for Oliver's tricks, and therefore Oliver didn't try to frame him for anything when they were around. It helped that his aunt and Alstin were Spectra natives.

The younger man grinned. "That's what you get for sailing across the sea. There's perfectly good sailing near the continent without crossing half the world."

Roland regarded his cousin. "Is it really true? Father's gone?"

Alstin's grin disappeared. "I'm sorry. He was a good man. Did you only now find out?"

Roland nodded at the distant horizon. He'd known, logically, that the priest and governor's man were unlikely to lie, but it didn't feel true until Alstin confirmed it.

"Sorry, cousin. I had no idea." Alstin looked at him sideways. "Are you going to be okay, with Oliver taking everything?"

"I'm no worse off than before. Father didn't send me any money. I'll get another position."

“That was before you starred in an illegal duel.” Alstin looked around. “I can introduce you to my captain, if you like. Captain Doyen’s a good man, and I’m sure I can convince him to take you on. You won’t be crossing the ocean, but a packet ship pays better for less risk.”

It wasn’t Roland’s first choice, but he might not have any other options. “I’ll give it a try.”

“Great.” Alstin slung an arm around Roland’s shoulders. “I’ll introduce you.”

\* \* \*

Sal tried not to show her alarm as her father sat with other men around a table at the local inn. He didn’t seem to care that she was here too, in her woman’s clothes, surrounded by recently returned sailors trying to make up for all the alcohol they hadn’t consumed at sea. The rotten smell of their drinks filled the big room, mixed with the smoke from the big hearth fire. Sal supposed that the sea smelled just as off-putting to someone who never lived there, but she couldn’t imagine it.

Father wasn’t drunk yet, but his tongue was uncomfortably loose. How he’d kept her secret for so many years was a mystery.

“You should’ve seen my Sarah,” he said. “Prettier than anyone you see here. And I’m including her own daughter.”

Sal winced as the men smirked at her.

“Rozie’s got too much of me in her. It’s only a pity Sarah died so young, with only the girl, and me so often gone at sea. What’s the point of having a child you never see, I ask?”

“Marry her off for a nice dowry, that’s what,” a man said.

Sal would love to clobber him, but her father kept talking. “That’s another thing, yes. A girl’s got to be educated and well-mannered and all that fluff to marry well, not to mention offering a decent dowry of her own. How’s a man without a wife to teach his girl that? Sending her off to school, it’s the only way, and never see her again. A son, now, a son you can take to sea and experience his growing up and everything. You can teach him what you know and it’ll actually do him some good.”

Sal stood up quickly. “Father, I believe we should be retiring. We have a long journey tomorrow.”

Her boarding school was only a half day’s sail in good weather, but a full day by carriage—thus the need for the inn tonight.

“You’re right, you’re right.” Her father stood. Thankfully, he missed the snickers and commentary from the men. The last thing they needed was for her father to start a fight in public.

Well, second to last thing. Spilling her secret would be the last thing. If the people of Mona Point knew she sailed with her father as his ship’s boy, she’d be locked out of that life.

The front door of the inn crashed open. Several people jumped. Cries came from another corner, where a family with young children were dining.

A well-dressed man charged into the room, with a fine coat stretched over a portly chest. His flabby face seemed comical among so many hardened sailors, yet Sal knew he was a bigger threat, even before several watchmen followed him inside. He spotted her father and marched over. “Captain Doyen?”

Father’s face became deadly serious. He stood, slowly, without an ounce of emotion on his face. Sal tried to keep herself equally stoic, though her heart raced painfully and dread curdled in her stomach.

“Oliver Andres,” her father said. “I was on my way to see you.”

Lie, Sal thought.

“I understand that you’ve refused to pay taxes,” Oliver said. “I think Governor Lyr will find that information interesting, considering that you owe me twenty thousand Riales.”

Sal couldn’t stop a gasp. Their whole ship wasn’t worth that much. Father would never be able to pay it all.

“We came into port today,” Father said calmly. “I am still collecting the money we made off our voyage.”

Oliver's eyes flicked to Sal. "I understand your daughter attends Miss Porter's Finishing School in Nod. I would know—I believe you borrowed quite a bit for her tuition."

This time, Sal kept her gasp back. Why had her father never told her?

Her father's expression was wary as he nodded.

"Well, I'd hate to think what might happen to her if you were thrown into debtor's prison," Oliver said. "I suppose she'd have to be the one to work off your debt. My household could use another servant."

Sal swallowed. There was no way she could work off that much money. She would essentially be a slave for the rest of her life, bound to the slim hope that she could free her father one day.

Oliver turned back to her father. "I expect you at my manor within the week with the money."

Father's bow was shaky. "I understand, sir," he said again.

With a smirk, Oliver turned and strode from the room, with the watchmen marching behind him.

Father immediately turned to Sal. "I believe you're right, dear. We should be retiring."

They retreated to their second-floor room. "Father..." Sal began.

He ignored her and threw open the window. "Soft landing," he announced. He grabbed their sack of belongings and tossed it out the window. Then he leapt after it.

Sal hurried after him. She hit the ground and rolled, coming to a neat stop near her father. Falling was an essential skill she'd learned as a child. She took almost a minute to stand up, tangled in her skirts. Her father watched without a word.

The inn was starting to recover from the dramatic entrance, for voices spilled out along with the firelight.

"Do we really owe so much?" she asked.

"In a manner of speaking," he answered. "That banker doesn't really intend to throw me in prison. He'd never get paid back that way! No, he'll demand the highest payment I can possibly afford, and let me go earn more for him to pilfer. I wish I'd never set eyes on the man."

Did her father know that Sal herself would be one of those payments? She suspected he did. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"That's not your business, girl! Didn't that school of yours teach you what's your business and what isn't?"

Perhaps, but the sailors—including her father—taught her to go under, around or through rules as long as you didn't get caught. She didn't say that, though.

Father sighed. "I was trying to save up for your dowry. I hoped we'd have a few more years, but it looks like I can't keep you safe. My only choice is to find someone who can, and quickly, before that scoundrel can come after you."

Neither she nor her father had saved enough, or knew anyone well enough, to make a good match. Her life would change, drastically, and she had no say in it.

"I'm only seventeen," Sal said. "I thought I had more time!"

Time to find someone who would give her the freedom that her father did.

"Don't talk back, Rozie. I gave you my reason."

She barely heard his order. "I don't need kept safe, Father. Please, don't push me out of your life—our lives! I can get away, you know I can."

"I refuse to make you a fugitive!"

His voice echoed down the street. Sal and her father froze. Oliver might still be nearby.

It wasn't Oliver that stirred in the shadows. Sal couldn't see the man clearly, but he was in much better shape. "Forgive me for overhearing," the stranger said. "Would you come back to my room in the inn? I have the perfect solution for all of us."

He stepped into the light of the nearest window, and Sal gasped. The fighter from the docks.

This has been Chapters 4 and 5 of [The Captain's Dowry](#), also on [kindle vella](#).

## The Tournament of Princes

*Dust rose over the desert. From the hills, Trissali saw it coming, and knew what it meant. At long last, the Vlieks had come for her tiny village.*

*She could have stayed where she was, hidden in the rocky hills in the desert, but Trissali could not abandon her people.*

*She raced down cliffs so quickly she seemed to fly. The cloud of dust spread across the entire sky behind her. The first stone houses came into view. Trissali rushed straight to the village center and rang their warning bell, again and again, until the whole village had gathered.*

*Her father was the first to come running, holding two spears. He handed her one of them. "The innocents can escape into the hills," he said, "but they need time."*

*Trissali accepted the spear, and she and her father alone charged the oncoming horde.*

\* \* \*

Collis let the dramatic pause linger. His audience, all children, waited eagerly. He'd loved these stories at their age too, but now they were the ones who needed protected, and he was old enough to help—as long as they were sufficiently distracted. He lifted a toy wooden spear and, for good measure, summoned a ball of fire. The tip of the spear burst into flames.

Twelve-year-old Tuya bounced where she stood. The girl's pale hair, so different than the black and brown of the others, flipped into her eyes. "Awesome!"

"I can't wait 'til I learn fire-shaping," a little boy said.

Collis grinned and swung the spear. The fire danced, creating glowing orange light on the drab stone walls of the schoolhouse, a major improvement. The kids laughed and cheered.

The next oldest after Collis, a fourteen-year-old baker's daughter, glared at the spear, and the fire went out. "Really, Collis? You'd tell them a story like that at a time like this?"

He hesitated. "They're having fun."

She pointed to the back wall. Some of the children gathered there, pressed close together. "Our parents are going to fight a real battle."

"Some of us don't have any," Tuya said. She swallowed her sadness and looked desperately up at Collis. "What happened next?"

The distraction clearly helped some of the kids. Collis edged further from the ones cowering in the back while the baker's daughter hurried to them. She was only a year younger, but a lot better than he was at minding the younger ones.

Collis pulled out the box he'd brought with him and opened the lid. Eleven carved weapons, with details outlined in black, charred wood. "I made you something." He chose a sword and handed it to Tuya. "Why don't you act it out and see who won?"

With whoops and cheers, the small horde descended on the box.

His collection might not survive, but Collis had bigger priorities. The baker's daughter had everything in hand. There was no reason he couldn't slip out.

As Collis closed the door of the schoolhouse, the cries of the children faded.

No other sounds took their place. No voices drifting between the simple stone homes, no birdsong echoing across the rolling green hills. Even the sheep locked in their pen were silent. Piles of hay kept them quiet—bad for their digestion in the long run, but even shepherds were warriors today.

He found his spear hidden beside the hut he shared with his mother and ran for the eastern pass. Surely, if the battle had already begun, he'd hear it. He'd be sent home if the defenders found him—

his mother insisted he was still a child, and everyone respected her—so he aimed for a path that cut into the hills. He wouldn't be able to participate from the heights, but he could watch and learn. Someday he'd be among the defenders.

At first the green slopes hid everything from view. Collis knew his trail well. Right before it turned toward the pass, he slowed to a trot. He pictured the layout in his mind, and chose a hiding spot. As he rounded the corner, his eyes fastened on the scrubby bush he'd chosen. He ducked behind it and caught his breath before peering into the pass.

The uncles and the other villagers stood in rows, with spear-points glinting in afternoon sun. From this distance Collis could not see their faces, so he imagined them, strong and proud. Even the women stood ready to defend their home.

A distant rumble echoed through the canyon, warning that the enemy Vliks were coming. The sound came from galloping horses, Collis guessed. Vliks were famous for them. He tightened his grip on his spear. Some claimed that their eyes glowed red. Mother always snorted at that and insisted that Vliks were as human as the rest of them. What did she know, though?

"Hey, save some room for me," a girl said.

Collis nearly dropped the spear. He hadn't escaped cleanly after all. Tuya stood behind him, in full view of the pass below. Not only was she a girl, and twelve, Tuya had no fire-abilities, and her gift of communication, whatever that meant, would be no help against a Vlik soldier.

"What are you doing here?" he hissed. "This is no place for a child!"

"Like you're so old and mature," Tuya said. "You're only a teenager."

He gritted his teeth. "Battles are messy. You don't want to see this."

Her chin jutted out. "Well, you're here."

"I will have to defend our village someday. I have to see how it's done."

"Then so do I."

Her voice was far too loud. Collis leapt from his hiding spot and pulled her back behind the bush. The branches rustled, and he froze. He couldn't tell if anyone below had noticed.

"This is because I'm a girl, isn't it? Girls can be warriors, you know. Lady Trissali was a warrior."

"If you want to be a warrior, shut up!" Collis hissed.

At last she stopped talking. She peered through the bare branches. The rumble from up the pass grew louder. Soon it wouldn't matter how much noise they made.

When the Vliks appeared, Collis had to double take. The dark figures were all on foot, not a single horse in sight. Sun glinted off of the plates of their armor and domed helmets, but if their eyes were red, they didn't glow enough for Collis to spot. He noticed a difference between them and the villagers, though. They were all stocky, with long black hair visible even under their helmets. Their faces were rounder and their eyes narrower than most of the villagers.

A whisper of fear passed through the village defenders. Some of the spear-shafts drooped. Others actually trembled. At a cry from their leader, their spears lowered and they charged at the Vliks. Collis couldn't help a cheer. No one could hear it over the shouting anyway.

The lines met. A spear went straight through the armor of the nearest Vlik. A Vlik's ax came down on a defender's head. Collis wanted to look away—his stomach already roiled—but the bright red forced his gaze to remain. Fire flashed as a soldier paused to cauterize his own wounded arm. Fire wouldn't hurt him—or, unfortunately, the enemy, who were all fire-shapers themselves—but it'd keep wounds clean.

Tuya's sob broke the spell. She'd hidden her face in her skirt.

Soon dust and smoke hid most of the battle from view. He still heard their voices—screams, not battle cries. Who was winning? He strained to see. It was too late to prevent nightmares, and he could at least learn from it. Preparation for... Collis shook his head. The thought of being part of the madness made bile rise in his throat.

The battle moved backward, closer to the village, closer to his hiding place. For the first time, Collis wondered if he and Tuya were safe. Many of the villagers had fallen. The Vlieks would soon be free to overtake the village, where the families waited. Collis had to do something, but he was helpless before the chaos.

A new rumble grew over the sounds of battle. Collis looked up, and screamed. A horse stumbled over the steep slope above where he hid. Galloping too fast to stop, it lost its footing and tumbled down the slope. It landed with an inhuman shriek that cut over the sound of the battle.

Another horse slid down the slope. This one toppled sideways just before hitting the bottom. Momentum sent it sliding right into the fray. Warriors of both sides scrambled out of the way. Collis didn't recognize the horses. Small but stocky, with huge blocky heads. These must be the famous Vliek mounts.

The third hadn't lost its footing, almost sitting on its haunches as it slid. It reached the bottom still alive and trotted into the battle. A Vliek abandoned his sword and ran after it. They didn't fight on horseback, Collis realized, only traveled with them. A Vliek who lost his horse couldn't return to his own home.

More horses careened down the slope. Most lost their footing and slid on their sides, huge legs flailing. Collis leapt to his feet. They'd have to move. He grabbed Tuya's hand and pulled her up. They ran back along the trail in full view of the armies, but no one seemed to care.

Another horse crested the slope without falling. It veered away from its companions, straight at Collis. "Get down!" Collis threw himself over Tuya, shielding her with his own body. As the hooves bore down on them, Collis concentrated on his inner heat.

Fire burst to life before his eyes. The horse shied back. It changed direction and half fell, half galloped down the slope. Collis and Tuya climbed to their feet and raced on.

At last they paused to catch their breath. The soldiers below were shouting. The Vlieks who hadn't been crushed were charging for the cliff face, trying to rescue the remaining horses, but they couldn't climb the slope with their horses crashing down on top of them. Behind them, the villagers regrouped.

Tuya tugged Collis's arm. "We've got to get out of here! They'll see us!"

He allowed himself to be pulled further away. No one in their right mind would climb up here. Dust slid under their feet.

A cry rang out. From the direction of the village came a well-ordered line of troops. Bright uniforms, shining weapons—the kingdom of Castalia's soldiers had come to aid their village. They had an easy time of it, Collis thought. The Vliek army was spread out and distracted. His uncles had taught him a few battle tactics, but they hadn't mentioned chaos, or dust, or blood.

They reached the end of the pass where the valley broadened out. Collis and Tuya walked back quietly. Perhaps, Collis thought, he wasn't ready to be a warrior.

A hand came from nowhere and fastened around Collis's shoulder. "Well, boy," a man said. He was tall and fair-haired, with a clean, pressed coat covered in medals and patches. Largest was the griffin insignia on his left shoulder, sign of the Kingdom of Castalia. The dusty, faded clothes underneath suggested he'd done more than watch the battle. This was some sort of officer over the soldiers who'd come to the rescue.



“So, you’ve got your first taste of battle?” the man asked.

“I didn’t do anything,” Collis said.

“You survived. That’s the point of a battle. And you kept your little friend safe too.”

Collis glanced back at Tuya, who stared at the man in awe. “Did you stampede those horses, sir?” she asked.

The soldier grinned, his white teeth standing out against weathered skin. “No, that’s no army tactic. It took someone creative, unconventional, and desperate to come up with a ploy like that. You did well in dodging them. You’ll have quite the story for your friends.”

Maybe it would make a grand story someday. It certainly hadn’t felt like a story when he was in the thick of it.

“Are you interested in soldiering?”

Collis hesitated. “I’d like to be able to defend my home.”

“And leave this tiny place and see the world?” the soldier prompted.

“Yes!” Collis couldn’t help a bit of a shout. He’d left their village only a few times, just enough to realize how much he was missing.

The soldier chuckled. “Then let’s have a talk with your mother.”

Collis swallowed his protests. His mother would never approve him watching a battle, or leaving the other children.

The village was still quiet. Doors were shut and locked, windows covered. Collis wondered if any of the people had run to hide in the wilderness, like in the legend of Trissali. He tried not to wonder which had just lost their parents in the battle, or what would have happened to them if the Vlieks had made it through the pass.

Collis pointed to the schoolhouse for Tuya. “Your family will look for you there.”

She nodded and trotted off.

The door of Collis’s home stood open, swaying and creaking in a faint breeze. Why so different from the village? He hurried inside.

The stone hut had only a single room, but a large one. Well-organized trunks, furniture, and tools lined the walls. His mother sat cross-legged in the center of the floor, sorting her woolen blankets. She breathed too hard for such an easy task. Dirt smeared her face, and strands of dark curls escaped her hair tie. “The wounded will need these,” she said curtly. “I can use help carrying them to the battlefield.”

“I need your help, Lady—” the soldier began.

“Sally,” Mother corrected. “I’m no lady, and no, you may not carry away my son. Should I cut any blankets into strips for bandages, or are they more useful whole?”

“I’ve sent my own healers to gather your wounded. Now—”

“Very generous. I’m sure that’s why you traveled all the way out here. But did you leave your men doing all the work, General Hanin?”

He gritted his teeth at the interruption. “Emperor Arippa has begun gathering his heirs.”

Mother didn’t even look at him. “I knew it would be soon. He’s what, forty?”

Collis’s head swum as he tried to follow their rapid-fire conversation. They had to mean the Vliek emperor, but Collis didn’t know his name, much less his age. His mother rarely left their village, and always with him. How would she know any of this?

“How do you know each other?” Collis demanded.

“Old friends,” his mother said shortly.

“You sure don’t sound like friends.” Sure, his mother was blunt with everyone, but this was even more curt than usual.

The general pulled something from a knapsack and handed it to Collis. Some kind of unexceptional rock, cold in his hand, except that as he held it, a strange red light began to glow in thin red lines that crisscrossed the entire surface.

Mother whirled toward them. “Drop it!”

Startled, Collis let go. The rock thudded to the dirt floor in a faint puff of dust. The glow vanished.

The general collected his rock. “This isn’t dangerous. The rock merely heats on contact with someone of royal blood. It seems Collis qualifies.”

“Royal blood?” Collis repeated.

“It’s nothing special,” his mother said. “Vliek royalty is well known for spreading their blood, so to speak, across the country. Half the empire has royal blood.”

“I wouldn’t say half,” the general said.

Collis faced his mother. “But we’re Castalian.”

“Our Catir hills are in Castalia, but they’re close to the Vliek Empire. I’m sure you noticed that most villagers are dark-haired? And the prevalence of fire-shaping over communication abilities is another sign of Vliek ancestry.”

She spoke too fast, too forcefully. She was hiding something. Collis would have to speak carefully to get the secret out of her. “If I have royal blood, and the emperor is gathering his heirs...”

“He’s gathering them to compete in a deadly tournament that will get most of them killed,” Mother said. “Not to mention that it’s hundreds of miles from here. Getting to the tournament is a deadly challenge itself.”

“But the winner is named crown prince and will become the next emperor,” the general said. “The crown prince would be able to stop Vliek expansion into Castalia territory, stopping the war in this part of the country. The Castalian king would reward—”

“Castalia doesn’t care about the sacrifices along the way,” Mother said.

Collis frowned. “If there’s a chance I can stop the war...”

“The chances of death are higher,” Mother said. “The chances of becoming someone who wouldn’t care about stopping a war are even worse. I promise you that those challenges will include murdering innocent people, for example.”

“Oh.” Collis stepped back. He should have realized. The Vlieks had ways to ensure that only the most evil, the prince most like them, would be their leader. That wasn’t him.

“I’m not the only one looking for an heir who can support my interests,” the general warned. “Once people find out about Collis—and they will—they’ll be coming in droves to groom him to their cause. Not even you can keep him safe, Trissali.”

This has been Chapter 1 of *The Tournament of Princes* [on kindle vella](#).

## The Centaur Chase

Green summer grasslands covered the rolling hills. Fat turkeys darted out of the mesquite brush, only to rush back in with a frantic clucking. Bree breathed a sigh of relief when they reached the shelter of the shrubby trees.

Marc chuckled. "You're worried about turkeys? They're just animals."

"I don't like guns," Bree said. No one should be shooting on a scouting trip, but not everyone followed the rules.

"Aw, poor baby sister." He reached across their horses to put an arm around her. "I'll protect you."

"I'm seventeen. That's hardly a baby."

He withdrew his arm. "Well, if you don't want my protection, you can face the wilderness alone." He kneed his horse into a trot and soon disappeared over a rise.

Bree let out her breath. If her brother punished her this way every time, she should anger him more often.

She wasn't really alone. The party had spread out over the hills, and Bree glimpsed several hunters in the distance. The only question was deciding which of them she should allow to escort her back to her father.

A rustle nearby caught her attention. The hills dropped into a gentle valley, filled with brush. Someone must be riding down there, closer than the other hunters. She checked that Marc was out of sight before she drew her shawl tight over her chest and tied it in place. Then she nudged her horse toward the valley. Whether Papa or one of his friends, she'd be more comfortable near someone else.

As she dropped into the brush, her visibility all but vanished. The wind rustling in the dry branches covered the distant voices. Still, she'd heard someone down here.

"Hello?" Bree called.

For a moment, she heard nothing. Then a figure appeared out of the brush ahead—a tall man she didn't recognize, with huge dark eyes that immediately captured her attention. For several seconds, she could only stare. At last he looked away, scanning their surroundings, and she caught her breath. What about this stranger was so mesmerizing?

The stranger returned his gaze to her. He inclined his head, but his expression remained impassive. "Are you lost?" he asked. His voice was rich and deep, and so quiet that she had to concentrate to pick out his words.

"No, I don't think so." She glanced behind her, but saw nothing through the brush. "I was separated from the party, but they should be just over the slope."

"I see." He turned his horse straight toward her. Bree suddenly realized that he wore no shirt. She averted her eyes. Could he be injured or needy, perhaps? Or... her maid liked to tell stories of wild men who roamed the wilderness between the estates. She made them sound exciting, but Bree hadn't believed her. Who would want to live out of doors when they could work at an estate?

"You're not from Papa's scouting party, then?" she asked.

"No," he said slowly. "I wasn't aware that anyone lived here. I was scouting a bit myself."

Again he captured her gaze, studied her a moment, and turned away to examine his surroundings. Did he have something to fear? Did she? He didn't sound dangerous.

"You have beautiful hair." His horse's hooves thumped slowly on the ground as he neared her.

"Thank you." Her hair was long and thick, and she brushed it twice a day to make it glossy. And so few people even noticed!

The stranger didn't sound like a wild man. Perhaps men at the estate where he lived didn't wear shirts? He clearly hadn't expected to come across a young lady in the brush. She glanced up and found herself staring into his eyes, so brown they were almost black, with a mesmerizing depth she couldn't describe. His black hair was shoulder length, sticking up in all directions and yet somehow never hiding those incredible eyes.

She knew she was blushing but couldn't look away. He'd come nearer than she realized.

"You shouldn't be alone out here," he said. "Why don't you come home with me? You can meet my family."

Definitely not a wild man, if he had a family. "I can't just leave my party," she said. "Papa would worry."

"That's very generous of you to consider his feelings." The stranger edged nearer. "Although, he's not keeping a very good eye on you, is he? You never know when you might meet a predator."

He turned away to study his surroundings. Perhaps he was serious about predators. He never seemed to look at her for more than a few seconds at a time.

"I'm not afraid." Maybe she should be. Only a few feet of brush still separated them.

"Very brave of you."

"Do you compliment everyone this often?"

Smile lines appeared around his eyes. "Only if they deserve it."

If Marc's friend had complimented her instead of snatching at her hand, she might not have minded her brother's plan. Did he want... She shook her head. She didn't know the man.

But she did want to get to know him.

Bree picked up the reins and nudged her mare forward. Dilly left the bush she was grazing on with a grumpy snort.

The stranger stared at Dilly. His eyes widened and he backed away.

He couldn't be afraid of horses, since he was riding too. "What's wrong?" Bree asked.

"Nothing. I must leave." He eased away from her, into thicker brush.

"Wait." Bree scrambled to think of an excuse as she nudged Dilly forward.

The brush opened up into a clearing. Bree gasped. The stranger was not a man. She was staring at a centaur.

They faced each other across a patch of thorny trees. She'd heard of such creatures but never seen one. Instead of legs, his torso melded into the body of a horse. His chest was too smooth, with not even a navel and muscle lines in the wrong places. The horse body wasn't exactly right either. Smaller, for one thing, and the proportions were somehow off.

The centaur had stopped trying to back away. Now, finally, his gaze fixed on her, his eyes wild. He shifted his weight from one foot to another, just like Dilly did when she was nervous, and his mahogany coat rippled as he shivered.

"Are you afraid of me?" she asked.

She couldn't read his expression, but he stopped shivering. "I should be," he said.

Bree supposed that she should be too, but he didn't seem dangerous. He held no weapon, and mounted on Dilly, she was slightly taller. This could be an interesting opportunity to learn more about him, if only she could decide which questions to ask first. "My name is Bree," she said. "What's yours?"

She expected hesitation, but he answered immediately. "Dale." He picked his way closer. "You are brave, aren't you?"

"Abriana!"

Bree jumped at the unexpected voice. Papa crashed through the underbrush, heedless of the thorns ripping at him and his horse. She turned back to the centaur but he'd disappeared as though he'd never been.

Papa raced to Bree's side, while Marc rushed straight past. He charged into the brush where the centaur had been, but Bree guessed by his mumbled cursing that Dale was long gone.

"Are you all right?" Papa asked.

"Of course," she answered. "I didn't mean to worry you."

Papa let out his breath. He'd lost his hat and the thorns had torn his long sleeves. He bowed his head, murmuring thanks to God, before he gave Bree his attention again. "I thought it would take you."

Bree cocked her head. "Take me where?"

"No one knows."

Marc circled back around, breathing heavily. He still had his hat, but one scratch cut down his cheek. "A girl at the Nedra estate was stolen last year. Her family never saw her again."

"This one didn't do anything wrong, though," Bree said. "He was very polite."

"You are so naïve," Marc said.

Normally Papa would tell him off for talking rudely, but now he said, "You can't trust them, Bree."

“Everyone knows, stealing away girls is what they do,” Marc said. “Obviously, he was faking to get your guard down.”

“He was afraid of me,” Bree protested. She thought back over their conversation. “He did mention taking me to his family, but...”

Papa and Marc both flinched, and she stopped talking. She’d only get Dale into even more trouble, if they ever met. Papa and Marc steered their horses so that one rode on either side of her. Bree didn’t see the need for it. If Dale had been frightened of her, he’d be terrified of her family.

Together they rode out of the hollow.

“Should I take Bree home?” Marc asked.

Papa shook his head. “I’ll escort her myself. Tell the others where I’ve gone.”

“I don’t want to interrupt your hunt,” Bree protested.

Marc scoffed. “You are way too nice for your own good.”

Papa ignored him and focused his full attention on Bree. “You should stay at home until we know it’s safe.”

“Yes, Papa.” She’d planned on doing just that once the hunting started, anyway. “I bet the hunt will scare the centaurs away. They’ll surely hear the gunshots, won’t they?”

Papa and Marc exchanged a look that Bree couldn’t decipher.

“Yes, honey,” Papa said finally. “They’ll be scared away.”

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