

Chapter 5 – Bonus chapter for our newsletter readers



Keelia

Sister Keelia and Sister Nara jogged through the swamp, saw palms and ferns clutching at them as they passed. The incessant rain had relented but the oppressive heat and humidity left them as drenched as any downpour. The legionnaires of three depleted centuria, weighed down by armor and heavy shields, labored to keep pace behind them. Fewer than two hundred men. Keelia didn't know exactly what to expect at the end of their race, but she knew the odds wouldn't be in their favor.

The collapse of the Fifth Cohort of the Fourth Legion was as much a surprise to the enemy as it was to the commander of the Fourth Legion. To be fair to the legionnaires of the Fifth, the fort they occupied, prosaically denoted Fort Twenty-one, was one of the oldest forts in the chain of earth and log fortifications that stretched across the swamps from the Southern Sea to the marshy grasslands to the west. They had been in the line for three months and were looking forward to being withdrawn into reserve in a week. The few that were in fighting shape were worn down. Even so, Keelia guessed when the Kaileuks' eerie ululating war cries emerged from the misty swamp, the legionnaires manned the stockade walls confident they would repel the attackers as they had many times before.

But something went wrong. What, wasn't yet clear, as there were few survivors to tell the tale. All Marshal Victor Storm, the overall commander of the Imperial forces, could tell Keelia and Nara was the fort collapsed. The survivors of the Fifth Cohort scattered, spreading confused portents of doom. Neighboring cohorts panicked, and before the high command could react, four entire cohorts, nearly two thousand men, were fleeing north, leaving a gaping hole in the Imperial lines behind them.

Long range scouts brought the alarming news the Kaileuk were rushing reserves forward to exploit the breakthrough. Storm immediately sent orders to his reserve legion, the Ninth, to move forward to close the breach. The race was on. If the Ninth Legion arrived in time, the front would be stabilized. But the Empire was at a disadvantage. Imperial legions were not known for their agility. While twelve thousand legionnaires marched ponderously south, ten thousand Kaileuk poured north. If the Kaileuk arrived first, the entire Imperial front was imperiled.

"You two take whatever forces you can find at hand and give us time," Storm told the sisters. "At all costs."

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Keelia, Nara and their soldiers crept the last few paces to the edge of the road that led from the reserve area to the Fourth Legion's headquarters. The corduroy road consisted of logs laid perpendicular to the direction of travel. It was hard to walk on, a teeth-jarring ride in wagons and the logs continuously

sank into the sticky mud that gave the swamp its sour stench. But it was the only method the Empire found for building roads in the muck.

As they stepped into the open, Keelia listened in vain for the tramp of the Ninth Legion's feet arriving from the north.

"Listen," Nara said.

"I am," Keelia said. "I don't hear anything."

"Exactly. No birds."

Keelia looked south. "The Fourth Legion's headquarters is about fifty paces south of here. Around that bend."

"Let's go," Nara said and jogged toward the bend.

They had gone twenty paces when they heard men's raised voices. Veering to the side of the road, they slid down the muddy bank of a drainage ditch and crouched in a foot of murky water.

"That sound like Kaileuk?" Nara asked.

"Yes. Looks like the Kaileuk won the race."

"Not yet," Nara said. She climbed the bank, edged out onto the road on her hands and knees and peered ahead. After a moment, she scrambled back. "Looks like they're sacking the Fourth Legion's headquarters."

"Excuse me, sister," one of the centurians, the commanders of the centuria, said. "I speak Kaileuk."

Keelia twisted around so she could see his face. He looked familiar but she couldn't remember his name.

"It sounds like their officers are trying to get the men organized," he said. "They're angry and using... command tense. Like they're having a hard time of it."

"You get an idea how many?" Keelia asked Nara.

"Couldn't be more than a thousand."

Keelia held her gaze for a moment then looked back at the legionnaires kneeling behind them. Two hundred men. Their faces glistened with sweat. Most of them had their heads down, catching their breath. Turning back to look down the road, she said, "So, probably the vanguard of the Kaileuk reserves. They're supposed to block the Ninth from getting to the front before the rest of their forces arrive."

"They can't resist stopping to sack the Fourth's headquarters," Nara said. "They're flush with victory and disorganized."

"Perfect time to teach them a lesson." Keelia closed her eyes and brought the surrounding terrain to mind. "The clearing is about twenty paces beyond this curve." Turning so she could bring the centurians into the conversation, she said to Nara, "Take two centuria and approach on the other side of the road. The rest of us will head up this side. I'll attack first. When the Kaileuk deploy to face us, you come in on their flank."

Nara nodded, squeezed Keelia's arm and said, "Good luck." She pointed to two of the centurians who passed along the orders, then they crossed the road and disappeared into the forest.

“Let’s go, centurian,” Keelia said to the man who spoke Kaileuk. As she slipped into the trees, anticipation emerged from the roiling frisson of fear and anxiety. Men would die. She and Nara might die. But she needed this, craved the thrill of battle and, most of all, the euphoria of channeling the spirits.

She held up her hand to tell the men to pause and looked up at the small luminous orbs flitting through the branches. Spirits of the land. Opening her mind, she called them to her and was gratified to see them spiral down toward her. A moment later, they burst into her mind. Nara told her the spirits entered the middle realm where her own spirit resided. The middle realm overlapped the physical realm, so she could sense them, could return their joyful greetings, could feel her own spirit reaching out to them. It felt to her as if they were sharing her mind and they could grant her their gifts.

Giving the signal to move forward, she opened herself to the lightning spirits. The fidgety spirits responded immediately, pouring into her mind from their realm, their jangly presence joining the swarm of land spirits.

As they approached the edge of the clearing that held the Fourth’s headquarters, they slowed and the men spread out on either side of her, their shields and short swords at the ready. Imperial tactics revolved around the Seidi sisters’ firepower. Their gifts were devastating to the enemy, but channeling the spirits had one drawback. It produced a deep euphoria. Channeling too many spirits in a short time would suck her down into a euphoric haze. The men were there to protect her, give her time to recover.

It was that bliss which drove her anticipation. Daga forgive her but she craved the action, the adrenalin rush followed by the dreamy escape from the horrors she witnessed nearly every day.

She was so lost in her thoughts, she didn’t notice the movement in the underbrush ahead of her until the centurian at her elbow shouted.

“Kaileuk!”

Startled, Keelia hesitated. Only for a moment, but it was enough. The enemy burst out of a stand of ferns, spears raised, their ululating cries freezing her and her men in place.

The centurian reacted first. Stepping forward, he caught the spear meant for Keelia on his shield but took another to his side. Blood pouring down his wound, he stood resolute, deflecting spear thrusts with his shield and sword. Buying her time.

A confused melee erupted. When the centurian finally sank to his knees and flopped forward, Keelia lifted a hand and released a spirit wave, a gift of the land spirits. The powerful compression wave rang like a bell in her mind and swept the Kaileuk in her immediate front away. Shivering at the ecstatic thrill it produced, she sank her teeth into the inside of her cheek to clear her mind.

It was a nightmare scenario for the Imperials. The legionnaires were trained to fight in a line behind a barrier of interlocking shields bristling with swords. In the confined space, their heavy four-foot shields were a hindrance. Many of them tossed them aside, bunched together and fought desperately against an enemy pressing in on all sides.

Keelia needed to act, but how? She raised a spirit shield, another gift of the land spirits. From behind her shield, she caught only glimpses of individual Kaileuk in the dense forest. If she tried to kill them one by one, she would be unconscious in moments. If she attacked indiscriminately, her own men would die.

Marshal Storm's grim face came into her mind. "At all costs," he said. She dropped her shield, lifted her hands to her sides and sent a plea to the lightning spirits.

The spirits exploded from her palms, manifesting in the physical realm as bolts of lightning that forked into hundreds of searching tendrils. Throwing caution to the wind, she moved among the trees, death's messenger, wreathed in smoke, her short hair made buoyant by static electricity. The familiar stink of mud, ozone, smoke and charred flesh stung her nostrils.

The Kaileuk knew who she was. The first Seidi sister in hundreds of years with the gift of lightning. Even those who couldn't see her recognized the buzz of hundreds of tiny thunderclaps. Abandoning the fight, they fled back to the clearing where their remaining forces waited. But she wasn't done with them.

She emerged into the clearing alone, riding rolling waves of the euphoria she needed. Nearly one thousand barbarians awaited her. When she appeared, one hundred Kaileuk launched spears at her. Lifting both hands, she implored the land spirits to raise a shield. The spears striking the invisible shield set off a staccato ringing that tugged at her mind. Spirit light only she could see spidered across her shield. Salty blood from her cheek flooded her mouth.

She dropped her shield and released a powerful spirit wave. Dozens of the enemy were thrown backward and lay still. The Kaileuk panicked. Their officers screamed at men caught between life and duty. Taking advantage of their hesitation, Keelia strode forward and let loose the lightning spirits.

But it wouldn't be enough. The Kaileuk knew her weakness. They knew she was reaching her limit and there were no more legionnaires to protect her while she recovered. Seeing her stumble, the officers finally managed to rally their remaining men. She was at her end.

Gouts of flame from Keelia's right swept the clearing with a deafening roar. Nara had joined the fight. Flame and Lightning. That's what the legionnaires called them. Sisters of the Seidi and more than sisters in life.

Keelia glimpsed the last of the Kaileuk fleeing into the forest on the other side of the clearing as she dropped to sit in the mud, legs splayed out in front of her. She let the land spirits return to the physical realm and sent the lightning spirits back to their realm. Alone again, she rode waves of bliss and gazed around at broken, charred bodies. More lives to add to her bloody tally. More ghosts to haunt her nightmares.

Nara's face appeared before her. "You okay?"

Keelia nodded numbly and let Nara pull her to her feet.

"You have to be more careful," Nara said, anger wiping away her worried frown. She gave Keelia a shove.

"The men," Keelia mumbled and pointed to the forest behind her where the legionnaires died, some of them undoubtedly because of her lightning. "My fault."

Nara put her face close and growled, "It's war. People die."

"Right. Right. War." Keelia gave her head a hard shake. "All costs."

"Come on, we have to make sure the enemy keeps running."

Keelia spat blood and followed, ignoring the stares of the surviving legionnaires.

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Keelia sat in Marshal Storm's outer office, fighting to stay awake. It had only been hours since the crises at the front had been resolved. She, Nara and their remaining men arrive at the remnants of Fort Twenty-one only minutes ahead of the Kaileuk. Surprised to find the fort occupied by two sisters, the Kaileuk hesitated while they sent out scouts. By the time the barbarians decided to bypass the fort, the Ninth Legion was filling the gap. The battle that followed was short and violent, but the front was stable again.

Not long after, Keelia received a message to report to Marshal Storm. Nara remained at the front in case the enemy attacked again. "Save me some hot grub," was the last thing Nara said to her.

The marshal opened the door to his office. "Sister Keelia. Please come in."

Keelia followed him in and stood in front of his desk.

"Have a seat," he said as he fell into his chair. He gazed at her after she sat. "Thank you. What you and Sister Nara accomplished was beyond heroic."

"And the men." Living or dying in a hopeless cause had always seemed a question of luck to Keelia. Heroism had nothing to do with it.

"Yes. And the men."

"Sir," Keelia said. "I can barely stay awake."

"Yes, of course." He retrieved a paper from his desk and held it out. When she took it, he said, "You've been recalled to Brennan."

Keelia held the paper aloft and stared at him, assuring herself she heard right, then she focused on the brief message. It was from Sister Briana. The woman who was her mentor at the Seidi. The woman who urged her to ask Malefica Deirdre to send her to the front. After reading the message twice, Keelia examined Briana's wax seal, then looked up at the marshal. "It says here I'm a war hero."

The marshal sighed and slumped in his chair. "When you arrived at the front and your..."

"Deficiencies." Keelia felt her face warm.

She and Nara arrived at the Seidi on the same day when they were eight years old. Nara lied about seeing spirits. Keelia didn't. The cleansing stole her spirit sight. It left her feeling numb, as if they amputated and cauterized the best part of her. But they told her she could regain that part of herself through devotion to their god, Daga. They said if she proved her faith, Daga would bless her with his gifts. She became one of what Nara called the *good girls* and threw herself into her faith.

Over the years, Keelia watched Nara and the other *bad girls* from afar in dismay. No one could prove they consorted with spirits when they were young, but as they grew into women, it became impossible to deny. Keelia was sure it was only a matter of time before they were cleansed.

It was the war that saved them. Afraid the military would collapse, the Seidi council voted Deirdre to be Malefica. Her first act was to send the bad girls to stiffen the army's resistance. It saved them a cleansing, but they paid the high price that allowed Briana and her ilk to hide in their tower.

Wracked by guilt, Keelia grew even more devout, throwing herself into her study of the scripture, searching for secret meanings and spending hours in meditation. And she thought it worked. When she produced the most powerful *Daga's wave and shield* of all the good girls, Briana leapt at the chance to prove faith in Daga would make her strong enough to stand with what she called Deirdre's favorites. Encouraged by Briana, Keelia begged the Malefica to send her to the front. They were hopelessly naïve.

Keelia's first encounter with the Kaileuk was a disaster. The men she was supposed to protect suffered badly, and she was captured. It was Nara and a small number of scouts who rescued her, saving her from the enemy's vengeance. During their frantic flight to safety, Nara restored the spirit sight the cleansing stole from Keelia.

Returning from her thoughts, Keelia focused on the marshal.

"I investigated after you were captured," the marshal said. "I wondered why Malefica Deirdre would send you into such a dangerous situation."

"Briana forced her hand."

Storm sighed. "Knowing Sister Briana, I'm guessing she wanted to prove something about faith in Daga."

Keelia nodded numbly.

He gestured to the paper in Keelia's hand. "Sister Briana probably feels she made her point. She wants to get you out of danger before anything happens to you." He looked away. "She can't very well hold you up as a hero if you're dead." When he looked at her again, he said, "In any case, you are to leave immediately. There is a caravan leaving in an hour. Be on it."

"I can't leave without telling Nara and the other sisters."

"I'll inform them."

"But..." Keelia finally let the hand holding the paper fall into her lap and studied the marshal's face. There was no leeway there. She stood and asked, "Is there anything else?"

"No." He stood and met her gaze. "I admit I doubted you when you arrived at the front. But I was wrong. We will miss you. Thank you for your service."

Keelia nodded. She paused in the doorway and looked back, but before she could speak, the marshal anticipated her.

"I'll give your regrets to the other sisters."

Keelia hesitated, then left.

Keelia and her friend Flynn are major characters in the [Spirit Song Saga](#). Find out what happens next!

Available on [Amazon](#), [Kindle](#), [Audible](#), [Barnes and Noble](#), and at your [local bookstore](#).



The image features three book covers by Ross Hightower. The first cover, 'Spirit Sight: Spirit Song Trilogy | Book One Volume One', shows a woman with dark hair and a hood. The second cover, 'Spirit Sight: Spirit Song Saga | Book One Volume Two', shows a woman in a blue dress with her arms outstretched. The third cover, 'Spirit Light: Spirit Song Trilogy | Book Two Volume One', shows a figure with arms outstretched against a bright blue, lightning-filled sky. The background is a lush, blue-tinted forest with a large tree on the left and glowing particles.

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what it can’t
control”**

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