

New York Times and USA Today Bestselling Series

KEEPER OF THE LOST CITIES

STELLAR LUNE

SHANNON MESSENGER



STELLARLUNE

KEEPER OF THE LOST CITIES #9

EXCERPT NOT FOR SALE

Also by Shannon Messenger

The KEEPER OF THE LOST CITIES Series

Keeper of the Lost Cities

Exile

Everblaze

Neverseen

Lodestar

Nightfall

Flashback

Legacy

Unlocked Book 8.5

The SKY FALL Series

Let the Sky Fall

Let the Storm Break

Let the Wind Rise

ONE

A

RE YOU OKAY?"

Grady had asked the question three times, and Sophie still didn't have an answer. All she could do was stare at the crumpled note she'd found waiting for her in her bedroom, hoping she'd somehow misread it.

Keefe couldn't . . .

Wouldn't . . .

A sound bubbled up her throat, something between a laugh, a cry, and a groan.

This was Keefe.

He definitely would.

"How long ago did Keefe leave?" she asked, glancing between

Grady and the tiny gnome standing near her canopied bed.

Grady shrugged.

Flori shook her head, making her plaited hair rustle like windblown leaves. “I didn’t see him—but I was out in the pastures, waiting for the new patrols to arrive.”

Sophie sighed.

Sandor was in the process of frantically amping up Havenfield’s security because she’d burned down one of the Neverseen’s storehouses a few hours earlier, and everyone seemed to think that meant she’d officially started the war they’d been teetering on the brink of for years—but she couldn’t worry about that at the moment.

“Is Sandor still outside?” she asked, hoping he’d gotten a report about Keefe from one of the other guards.

Grady blocked her. “Listen, kiddo. I know what you’re thinking—”

“I doubt that.” Even *she* wasn’t sure if she wanted to clobber Keefe, lock him up somewhere, or wrap him in a huge strangle-hug and tell him everything was going to be okay—though the last option seemed the least likely.

“Keefe will be fine,” Grady promised, carefully steering her away from her doorway. “He’s very resourceful.”

She locked her knees. “If you knew what he’s planning, you wouldn’t be saying that.”

Silence followed, and Grady wouldn’t meet her eyes.

“You talked to him while he was here, didn’t you?” Sophie

guessed, tapping her temples when he stayed quiet. “You know I can find out what you’re hiding.”

“Not without violating the rules of telepathy,” Grady reminded her. “But to answer your question . . . yes, I did talk to him—and he didn’t say much. He was obviously still afraid to use his voice.”

Something sour coated Sophie’s tongue, and she tried not to think about the fear she’d seen in Keefe’s eyes after he’d accidentally given his first *command*. Or how empty and hopeless she’d felt when the command turned everyone numb.

“That’s why he’s running away,” she murmured.

Part of the reason, at least.

Keefe’s letter had also implied that he’d manifested other scarier abilities—but he didn’t tell her what they were. All he’d said was that it was too dangerous for him to be in the Lost Cities and he was planning to hide among humans—which was why Sophie had to find him.

“How long ago did he leave?” she asked in a tone that hopefully made it clear she wouldn’t let Grady shrug away the question again.

He glanced out her windows, where the clouds were slowly turning pink with the sunset. “At least an hour ago, so it’s too late to stop him—but it’ll be okay. I think he actually has a solid plan this time.”

“Oh really? So you think he’ll be able to survive on his own in the Forbidden Cities?”

She'd hoped Grady's mouth would fall open when he heard Keefe's destination.

Instead, his lips set into a grim line.

"Wow," she mumbled. "You really did know what he was up to, and you still let him go. I know Keefe's never been your favorite, but—"

"I never said that," Grady interrupted.

"You didn't have to. You call him 'That Boy' and glare at him all the time."

"Not *all* the time."

His smile was probably supposed to soften her mood.

It didn't.

"Okay, fine. Sometimes your friendship with Keefe . . . makes me a little nervous," Grady admitted, dragging the toe of his boot through the flowers woven into her carpet. "He has a gift for getting in trouble—and you do that more than enough on your own. But he wasn't his usual overconfident self today. He looked tired. And terrified—"

"And that didn't seem like a sign that maybe you should stop him?" Sophie cut in.

"Hey, we both know there's no *stopping* Keefe Sencen once he makes up his mind."

"Um, last time I checked, you're still a Mesmer," Sophie felt the need to point out, even though she wouldn't have wanted Grady to use his ability that way.

It was easier having someone to blame.

Then she wouldn't have to wonder if she could've talked Keefe into staying if she'd been home when he came by, instead of spending so long at Solreef answering Mr. Forkle's questions about her unexpected inferno.

Or if she'd checked on Keefe more often after he woke up from his trance-coma thing, instead of letting him push her away.

Or if she'd fought a little harder in Loamnore and stopped his mom before she triggered Keefe's unnerving new abilities.

Or if she'd at least been able to learn more about Keefe's "legacy," so they had some idea of what they were dealing with.

Grady stepped closer, tucking a strand of Sophie's hair behind her ear. "I know this is hard. And for what it's worth, I actually did try to talk Keefe out of leaving. But I've never seen him so determined. Best I could do was . . ."

"Was?" Sophie prompted when he didn't finish.

Grady closed his eyes, and his lips formed a few different words before he asked, "You trust me, don't you?"

"Why do I need to?"

"Because . . . I promised Keefe something. And I'd like to keep that promise. But it's hard to do that if you keep asking questions."

Sophie studied him, wishing she were an Empath and could tell what he was feeling. But the Black Swan had left her without that particular talent.

"Fine," she decided. "I'll stop asking questions—if you stop trying to talk me out of going after him."

Grady blew out a breath. “I think you’re forgetting that now’s really not a smart time for you to leave Havenfield. We have no idea how the Neverseen are going to respond when they discover what you’ve done to their storehouse. And you have your own army here—”

“And the Neverseen know exactly where to find me,” Sophie argued. “Besides, I’m not going to sit around, waiting for some attack that may never happen. I’m not afraid of them!”

“You should be.” Grady lowered himself onto the edge of her bed and rested his head in his hands—which made it hard to hear him when he said, “I am.”

Sophie wished she could sink down next to him—lean on each other as they tried to prepare for whatever came next. But she forced herself to stay standing. “I’m done making decisions based on fear. It gives the Neverseen more power.”

“Isn’t fear the reason you’re so desperate to track Keefe down?” Grady countered.

Sophie glanced at Keefe’s note again. “Yeah, but . . . *this* is something I can fix.”

“Can you?”

And there it was.

The question Sophie had been trying so hard not to let herself ask.

Could she fix Keefe?

Could anyone?

“Only one way to find out,” she said, mostly to herself.

Grady grabbed her hand as she turned for the door, and as his fingers pressed against her skin, she realized she wasn't wearing her gloves.

She technically didn't need them anymore, now that she'd learned how to switch off her enhancing. But she still tended to wear them as backup.

Maybe it was time to start believing that abilities truly could be controlled.

"I can help him," she told Grady, pulling her hand free and continuing forward without going back for her gloves.

"I hope you're right. But finding him is going to be harder than you think. I watched him spin to a random facet on his pathfinder and leap wherever it led."

"Was it a blue crystal?" Sophie asked, feeling her stomach go *thud* when Grady confirmed it.

Keefe really was in a human city.

And the city could be *anywhere*.

Grady gently pulled her closer. "I know you hate letting your friends take risks. But Keefe can handle himself—"

"No, he can't! Keefe doesn't know how the human world works. He doesn't have any money, or any kind of ID, and he doesn't speak their languages."

Well . . . he was a Polyglot now, so he might be okay with the last one—but that wouldn't get him very far.

"Humans have tons of laws about loitering and trespassing," she added, "so you can't just show up and expect to find

shelter—or food and water. They have a million other rules too, like when you’re allowed to cross the street, and how late you’re allowed to be out at night. A lot of times it can be hard just finding a bathroom! And every country is different, so if he moves around, that’s only going to make it worse—especially since Keefe’s terrible at keeping a low profile. Even if he tries to keep his head down, people are going to notice how good-looking he is—by human standards,” she quickly clarified, feeling her cheeks burn. “I lived with humans for twelve years, and I doubt I’d be able to hide there without ending up with Child Protective Services or something. He could get himself arrested. Or hit by a bus. Or—”

“I’m not saying you’re wrong,” Grady jumped in. “But . . . I think you’re also forgetting that Keefe’s not exactly safe around here.”

He wasn’t.

But neither was she, as everyone loved to keep reminding her.

And they never would be, until they stopped the Neverseen—which they’d have a much better chance of doing if they worked together. Yes, Keefe’s new abilities were probably scary—and his mom was absolutely going to try to exploit them. But there had to be a way to use his powers against her.

“I have to *try*,” she said, stepping away from Grady. “If I can’t find him . . .”

She didn’t know how to finish that sentence.

Hopefully she wouldn't have to.

Grady dragged a hand down his face. "Just . . . promise me you'll stay in the Lost Cities."

"She will," a high, squeaky voice announced from the hallway. "I'll make sure of it."

Sophie fought the urge to roll her eyes.

She'd had enough experience with her overprotective goblin bodyguard to know that Sandor *would* be coming with her. She'd honestly been surprised he was willing to let her out of his sight after he brought her home from Solreef. And she was grateful to have his protection. She needed it now more than ever.

But she was also done being cautious—and Sandor was going to have to get used to that.

If Keefe was in the Forbidden Cities, she *would* be going after him.

Still, she'd learned to fight Sandor one battle at a time—and at the moment, she needed more information before she could figure out the smartest plan. So all she told him was "Let's go" as she headed upstairs to the Leapmaster.

"Go where?" Sandor, Flori, and Grady asked as they trailed behind her.

Sophie studied the giant orb made up of small, glittering crystals dangling from the roof of Havenfield's cupola. "Ro wasn't with Keefe, right?"

"He was alone," Grady confirmed.

Sophie had no idea what lengths Keefe must've gone to in order to sneak away from his ogre bodyguard. But she was sure Ro would do everything in her power to find him—mostly so she could torture Keefe with humiliating punishments.

“Splendor Plains,” Sophie called, turning to Flori as the Leapmaster shifted into motion. “Are you coming with us?”

“I’d prefer to have Flori stay here and continue organizing the new security,” Sandor cut in.

“As you wish.” Flori closed her eyes, swaying like a tree in a storm. “I hope our moonlark doesn’t worry too much. I hear songs of change in the air. But they’re not unhappy melodies. They sing of freedom. And new opportunities.”

Sophie wished she could hear the same tunes.

The only sound in her ears was her heartbeat, hammering like a war drum as she took Sandor’s hand and stepped into the light, letting the rushing warmth carry them away.

TWO

JUST AS I FEARED,” SANDOR MUTTERED AS he marched through the main entrance of Elwin’s colorful home.

Sophie peeked around his huge gray body. “Really? You were afraid we were going to find *this*?”

The downstairs level of Splendor Plains was framed by glass walls with panes in every tint and tone of the spectrum—a giant, empty space, save for a single armchair and table in the center, which were both toppled over. Elwin and Ro were crouched beside them, in the middle of some sort of bizarre showdown. The ogre princess held several stuffed animals with her sword pressed against their throats, while Elwin seemed to be using telekinesis to make a dozen shimmering vials hover around Ro’s head.

“Hey, Dr. Sparkles could’ve spared his snuggle buddies if he’d taken me to find Funkyhair!” Ro shouted, angling her blade to target the stuffed boobrie. “Instead, he chose to be stubborn. So now his little birdie needs to pay!”

“Harm one thread on Boo Boo,” Elwin warned, “and I’ll have glitter pouring out of your body for the next three days!”

Ro gritted her pointed teeth. “I told you, I’m not afraid of your elf-y potions! *But* it looks like I won’t need your help anymore.” She nudged her chin toward the letter still clutched in Sophie’s hand. “Let me guess. Captain Mopeypants told you he’s running away forever, and you’ve dragged Gigantor here on a quest to save our reckless boy from his terrible life choices.”

“Pretty much,” Sophie agreed. “Any idea where he went?”

“Not at the moment.” Ro sheathed her sword with a little more force than necessary. “I’d been planning to catch him at your place, since I knew he’d never disappear without some sort of mushy goodbye—but *someone* refused to take me.”

“*Refused?*” Sophie stumbled back when Elwin nodded.

“It’s not how it sounds,” he promised. “I found Ro crawling around upstairs with two dead legs, and—”

“Dead legs?” Sandor interrupted.

“Hunkyhair commanded me to *sleep* so I couldn’t stop him from leaving,” Ro admitted. “And his command to wake me up only worked halfway. I was strong enough to sit up and shred his ridiculous bedsheet bonds. But even after I freed my legs, they still dragged for a little while.”

“It was more than *a little while*,” Elwin argued as the floating medicine vials drifted into the satchel slung across his shoulders. “Took me nearly an hour to get her circulation back to normal. And by then, it would’ve been too late to catch up with Keefe.”

“You didn’t know that! I’m sure he went home to Daddy Dearest’s to pack the rest of his stuff before he went over to Blondie’s—and I’m sure he spent a while at Blondie’s feeling all weepy and conflicted about abandoning her. We should’ve checked!”

“You should have!” Sophie agreed, shooting a death glare at Elwin.

He’d saved her life so many times, she never would’ve expected him to let Keefe down like this.

Elwin scrubbed his fingers through his dark, messy hair. “Pretty sure I can guess what you’re thinking, Sophie. But . . . I’ve seen how terrified Keefe is to use his voice right now—and how hard he’s fought to stop himself from giving any commands. So if he was willing to tell Ro to *sleep* and didn’t even stick around long enough to make sure she fully woke up, something big must’ve scared him away. And maybe we should trust that he knows what he’s doing.”

“Except—spoiler alert—Funkyhair *never* knows what he’s doing,” Ro argued, tossing Boo Boo at Elwin’s head.

Elwin caught the fluffy boobrie with his mind. “I think he actually did this time.”

“Ugh, you sound like Grady,” Sophie grumbled, still not sure she’d forgiven her adoptive father for letting Keefe go. “I had to remind him how little Keefe knows about humans and how easily he could end up in jail—or worse.”

Elwin winced.

Ro muttered a string of inappropriate OGREISH words. “I’m assuming that means our boy’s planning to hide with the only creatures that are even more annoying than goblins?” She flung the rest of the stuffed animals at Elwin. “See what you’ve done?”

Elwin scrambled to catch his fluffy friends. “Hey, we all know that even if we’d dragged Keefe back, he just would’ve run away again—maybe after using commands that caused serious problems.”

“Not if I’d gagged him and chained him up in my father’s dungeon!” Ro snapped back.

“Or if I talked to him!” Sophie added—even though some of her recent conversations with Keefe hadn’t exactly gone well.

Elwin hugged his snuggle buddies. “I know this is hard to accept. I’ve been struggling with it too. But . . . Keefe *needs* to take control of his new abilities—and I think he might have to do that on his own. I’d been hoping that Kesler and I could create elixirs to help, or that Dex could build some sort of gadget. But so far we’re getting nowhere—and until we do, Keefe’s going to make himself sick worrying about hurting someone or getting manipulated by his mother or—”

“That’s why the dungeon would be perfect!” Ro interrupted. “I also know a lovely bog that looks and smells like all the vomit in the world went there to die. A few days floating in that sludge and our boy will be *begging* to head back to Sparkle Town. Except now we have to find him first—and apparently he could be anywhere on the planet, because of *course* he decided to hide with the species you elves gave *way* too much land to, but we can discuss your Council’s absurd ruling choices another time. First . . . let’s think.” She twisted one of her bright red pigtailed around her clawed finger. “You lived with humans for a while, right, Blondie? Is there anywhere that’d be a particularly good spot for sitting around, feeling sorry for yourself?”

“You’re *not* going to the Forbidden Cities!” Sandor reminded Sophie.

“Try and stop us!” Ro countered.

“The problem,” Sophie cut in before Sandor could draw his sword, “is that Keefe spun to a random facet on his pathfinder when he leaped away. Logic isn’t going to help us find him.”

Ro heaved a dramatic sigh. “Then I don’t suppose there’s some fancy mind trick you can use to track him down, is there, Little Miss Moonlark?”

“Not from this far away. I can’t hear his thoughts if he ignores me. And I can’t track his mind if I don’t know where I’m supposed to *feel*.”

“Ugh. Yet another reason I’ll never understand why you guys care so much about your elf-y abilities.”

Sandor's snort sounded like agreement—and Sophie didn't necessarily blame either of them. The Black Swan had modified her genetics and given her more abilities than any elf had ever had before. And still, more often than not, she was out-matched and underprepared.

"Can't *you* track your charge?" Sandor asked Ro. "Surely you keep him covered in one of those enzymes you ogres love so much."

Sophie's heart did a backflip. "That's right—I forgot about aromark!"

But Ro shook her head. "My boy made me promise I wouldn't expose him to anything that would require melting off his skin if we needed to remove it. And after what his mommy's put him through, I figured . . . fair enough."

Sophie couldn't fault Ro for that—but Sandor apparently could.

"A bodyguard's job is to keep track of their charge, not cater to their wishes!" he snapped.

"No, our job is to *protect* our charge, which I can do just fine with these." Ro waved her hands in front of the rows of daggers strapped to her muscled thighs.

"How are those protecting him right now?" Sandor countered.

"I'll admit, I wasn't fully prepared for my boy to learn how to knock everyone out with a single word." She shuddered. "But you would've been just as dead-legged as I was—and if you

think those silly disks you like to sew into Blondie's clothes would've changed anything, you're delusional. He would've ripped those out in two seconds."

"Only if he could find them." Sandor's smile was so smug, it made Sophie want to tear through everything she was wearing.

But it didn't matter. "Fighting isn't going to help us find Keefe," Sophie reminded them.

"It isn't," Ro agreed. "But for the record, *if* I have been giving my boy a little more breathing room, it's only because I could tell he was on the verge of a meltdown. Plus, I was waiting for him to realize that he's looking at these new powers all wrong. Sure, accidentally numbing his friends is less-than-awesome—but he also doesn't have to fear Mommy Dearest anymore! Next time she shows up, he can just command her to sleep. Or better yet, tell her to jump off a sparkly building—problem solved!"

Sophie wished it would be that easy. "I'm sure Lady Gisela has a way to protect herself."

The Neverseen were always five steps ahead.

Sometimes ten.

Or fifty.

Then again, she'd managed to find their secret storehouse and burn it to the ground. That's why the inferno had felt like Sophie's first *real* victory—and why she had to be ready to make lots more terrifying decisions.

"May I?" Ro asked, pointing to Keefe's letter.

“There’s nothing useful in there,” Sophie warned. But she still handed over the paper as she turned to pace. “Did Keefe say anything before he left?”

“Not that I know of,” Elwin told her. “But I was down here with earplugs in while he tested the Imparter with Dex.”

“They wanted to see if Hunkyhair could talk with a gadget and not feel the urge to give any commands,” Ro explained. “Which totally worked, by the way.”

Sophie halted midstep. “Something happened during that conversation, didn’t it?”

“I’m assuming so, since Keefe left right after,” Elwin said. “But I wasn’t listening.”

“Hang on! How are we not talking about *this*?” Ro pointed to a sentence near the end of Keefe’s letter.

Sophie realized what it said the same second Ro shifted to a fairly convincing impersonation of Keefe’s voice.

“You mean a lot to me, Foster. More than you’ll ever know.”

Sophie lunged for the paper.

“Nope! No destroying the evidence—and don’t even *think* about telling me you don’t know what he meant by that, Blondie! Your cheeks are way too red!”

Sophie tugged her hair forward.

She’d been so thrown by the rest of Keefe’s message that she’d forgotten that part was in there—and her brain honestly had no idea what to do with it.

It almost felt like Keefe was trying to tell her . . .

But he couldn't mean that.

. . . Could he?

"Whoa. I think the Great Foster Oblivion might actually be over!" Ro pumped her fist. "Now I'm even more excited to drag Hunkyhair home! You two can have *the talk* and—"

"Are you serious right now?" Sophie lunged for the letter again, managing to snatch it back that time—though part of the paper tore in the process. "Two minutes ago you were threatening to behead a bunch of stuffed animals because Elwin wouldn't help you find Keefe. And now you're wasting time teasing me about some throwaway line—"

"That line is *not* a throwaway! You know it. I know it. Dr. Sparkles knows it. Shoot, even Gigantor knows it—look how intently he's studying his feet right now. *But* . . . I suppose you might have a point about priorities. Sorry. I'm just so excited! Do you have any idea how long I've been waiting for this? It's going to be so adorable when you guys finally . . ."

She made a disgustingly loud smooching sound—and Sophie hated her brain for imagining it.

Hated how sweaty her palms felt even more.

She stuffed the letter into her pocket and crossed her arms, trying to dry her hands on her sleeves. "Can we focus, please? I need to know what happened when Keefe talked to Dex."

Ro's smile faded. "You should probably ask your techy friend about that."

"That'll waste more time."

“Not really. I only understood some of the stuff they were freaking out about, and if you’re going to have to cross-check everything, you might as well start at the source, right?”

Sophie *really* hated that Ro had made a good point—and she was still tempted to whip her Imparter at Ro’s head like a goblin throwing star. But she fought the urge, digging out the small, flat gadget and telling it, “Show me Dex Dizznee.”

The Imparter stayed blank.

Sophie tapped the screen harder. “Dex Dizznee!”

More seconds crawled by.

“Is that thing working?” Ro asked. “Or is he ignoring you?”

“I have no idea.” Sophie held the Imparter closer to her mouth and repeated Dex’s name.

Still nothing.

She rubbed her temples and turned back to Ro. “Okay, why don’t you tell me everything you remember, and if I need clarification, I’ll—”

“Sophie?” Dex’s face flashed across the screen. “Sorry . . . I was, um . . . Is everything okay?”

“I was about to ask you the same question.” His periwinkle eyes looked red and puffy, and his pale skin was super blotchy. “What’s wrong? And don’t say ‘nothing,’ because it’s pretty obvious that you’ve been crying.”

“No, I haven’t!” He swiped at his nose and cheeks. “I’m fine.”

It might’ve been the worst lie in the history of lying.

Sophie sighed. “We don’t have time to argue, okay? I need to know what happened between you and Keefe.”

All the color drained from Dex’s face. “Why? What did he tell you?”

“Nothing. But . . . he ran away.”

Dex closed his eyes and somehow managed to turn even paler. “You’re sure?”

“Unfortunately, yeah.” She stopped herself from mentioning Keefe’s letter—no need to relive *that* humiliation. “I’m still figuring out how to find him, but—”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Dex interrupted. “I mean . . . maybe he needs to be alone for a while, you know? Might be safer.”

“Seriously?” Sophie asked.

What was wrong with everybody?

“Keefe needs *help!*” she snapped. “And to know that people still care about him and believe in him no matter what. It’s also way safer here than with humans—”

Dex’s eyes popped open. “Wait—he’s in the Forbidden Cities?”

“Yep. And he doesn’t know how to survive there. He also doesn’t have any money—and he can’t accidentally rob an ATM like *some* people.”

Sophie had hoped the tiny tease might lighten the mood—but Dex just looked away, chewing his lip so hard, his teeth left dents in his skin.

“Maybe if you tell me why Keefe left, I’ll understand what you’re so afraid of,” Sophie suggested. “Don’t you trust me?”

“It’s not about trust.”

“It’s *always* about trust—and Keefe’s life is on the line, Dex. I know that sounds dramatic, but it’s true. Every minute we waste is a minute when he could be hurt, or arrested—or things I don’t even want to think about.”

An eternity passed before Dex said, “I might be able to track him down.”

He disappeared from the screen and reappeared holding a small copper cube with twisted wires sticking out of it. “If he’s still wearing his registry pendant, I can find the signal. Just give me a minute.”

Sophie counted every second.

By four hundred nineteen, Dex had rearranged the wires a zillion different ways—and Sophie had tugged out two itchy eyelashes.

“I’m assuming he removed his pendant?” she guessed.

Dex set the gadget aside. “Sorry.”

“Ugh, the one time we needed our boy to be clueless!” Ro unsheathed one of her daggers and stabbed the air. “Got any other techy tricks?”

Dex shook his head. “Keefe doesn’t wear a nexus anymore—”

“What about his panic switch?” Sophie held up her slightly lopsided ring, wishing she’d thought of it earlier. “You put trackers in them, didn’t you?”

“I did. But . . . I never gave one to Keefe. I made yours first, remember? And then I made all the others while Keefe was off with the Neverseen—and I kept meaning to make him one after he got back, but there were always other projects I had to work on, you know?”

Sophie *did* know. But she couldn’t quite keep the disappointment out of her voice when she said, “That’s okay.”

“I’m sorry,” Dex mumbled. “I wish I could help.”

“You *can*. Tell me what happened when you tested the Imparter. If it’s easier to talk in person, I could come there—”

“NO!”

Dex disappeared from the screen, followed by a series of thuds that sounded like he was barricading his door.

“What do you think I’m going to do?” Sophie called after him. “Leap there and drag the secrets out of your mind?”

Honestly, she was tempted to do exactly that when Dex called back, “Just promise you won’t come here, okay?”

“*Why not?*”

“Because”—more thuds—“it’s . . . um . . . chaos right now!”

“It’s always chaos there! I’ve met the triplets, remember?”

“I know. But . . . Lex and Bex manifested, so it’s extra insane. Lex is covering everything in ice, and Bex is trying to walk through every wall.”

“Then why don’t you come here? Or we can meet at Havenfield. Or—”

“I can’t.”

“Can’t? Or *won’t*?”

“To save time,” Ro jumped in, “it might help if I mention that I heard your whole conversation with Hunkyhair. I told Blondie to ask you about it because I don’t understand all your elf-y weirdnesses—but if you’d rather be a pain, I can tell her about—”

“STOP!” Dex rushed back into view, and for a second Sophie wondered if he was going to hang up on them. Instead he took a long, shaky breath and said, “The thing is . . . it’s not really my secret to share.”

“Whose is it?” Sophie asked.

“I can’t tell you that, either.”

“Well then, it’s a good thing I can!” Ro draped her arm around Sophie’s shoulders. “I’ll give him ten seconds to start talking, or I’m taking over. Ten . . . nine . . . eight . . .”

“*Please stop.*” The crack in Dex’s voice made Sophie’s heart feel twenty pounds heavier.

“I don’t want to hurt you, Dex. Or force you to share something you’re not comfortable with. But Keefe’s out there right now, lost in some human city with no food, no ID, no place to go, and no one to help him. I have no idea how I’m going to find him—but I have to try. And if I *do* manage to track him down, I need to be able to convince him to come back. He thinks he’s too dangerous to be in the Lost Cities—and I won’t be able to prove him wrong if I don’t know why he believes that. So please, tell me what you know—I promise I won’t tell *anyone.*”

Dex buried his face in his hands.

It felt like a year passed before he mumbled, “*No one* else can hear this. In fact . . .”

He disappeared from the screen again, and a loud click echoed in the background, followed by a steady crackling hum, like static.

“That’s my silencer,” he explained as he stepped back in front of the Imparter. “It guarantees that no one can eavesdrop—over here at least.”

“I guess that’s my cue,” Elwin said, making Sophie jump. “Forgot I was here, did ya? Don’t worry, I won’t mention anything I’ve already heard—not that it’s made a whole lot of sense.” He turned to head for the stairs, shoving earplugs in as he walked. “I’ll be in my room.”

“What about Sandor?” Dex asked.

Sandor leaned closer to the screen. “I go where Sophie goes. And I stay where she stays.”

“Aw, come on, Gigantor!” Ro whined. “We’re finally getting somewhere! I can protect Blondie—”

“That’s debatable,” Sandor interrupted. “But I’m far more concerned about the two of you running off to the Forbidden Cities.”

“I won’t go anywhere without you,” Sophie promised.

“Besides, I thought you had trackers sewn into her clothes,” Ro reminded him with a smirk. “Surely Mr. Perfect Bodyguard would be able to catch us if we tried to—”

“We’re not going to try anything!” Sophie cut in. “I swear on Ella—and Wynn and Luna!”

Sandor cracked his knuckles. “I’ll be *right* outside, watching you through the windows.”

Ro snorted. “Because *that* doesn’t sound creepy!”

Sandor slammed the door so hard, the glass walls rattled.

“Okay, start talking,” Sophie told Dex.

He turned a vomit-y shade of green. “I . . . don’t know how to say this.”

“Then blurt it out—it doesn’t have to be a big, fancy speech.”

“The shorter the better!” Ro added.

Dex swallowed hard and closed his eyes. “Okay . . . so . . . Keefe manifested another ability. We’re not a hundred percent sure how it works, but . . . it seems like he can sense if someone is going to manifest, and tell what ability they’ll get.”

Sophie let the words tumble around her head.

“Why is that such a bad thing?” she had to ask.

“THANK YOU!” Ro shouted. “Glad I’m not the only one who thinks Tech-Boy and Hunkyhair are being *way* overdramatic!”

“You seriously don’t see how scary that is?” Dex asked.

Sophie shrugged. “I can see how Keefe might have a ton of people asking him what their ability is going to be. Kind of like what happened to Councillor Terik with his descrying. But Terik just stopped doing readings.”

“Yeah, well, descrying only measures someone’s potential,” Dex reminded her. “Abilities define us for the rest of our lives.”

“For the record, that’s where you elves lose me,” Ro noted.

“Me too,” Sophie said quietly. “And that still doesn’t sound *that* bad, Dex, so I’m assuming there’s more you haven’t told me.”

Dex glanced over his shoulder again, then leaned closer to the Imparter and whispered. “We’re pretty sure Keefe can *make* someone manifest.”

“How would you know . . . ?” Sophie’s voice trailed off as she answered her own question. “You think Keefe *made* Rex and Bex manifest?”

“*Lex* and Bex,” Dex corrected, choking strangely on the names. He had to clear his throat twice before he could add, “Keefe was around them yesterday, and he said Lex’s hand felt super cold, and Bex’s hand felt weirdly squishy—and no one else could feel that. Then today Lex manifested as a Froster, and Bex manifested as a Phaser. No way that’s a coincidence.”

Sophie had to agree. But she also wasn’t ready to make *as* huge of a leap. “Couldn’t Keefe have just been sensing what was about to happen?”

“He could—but given how young they are, it seems more likely that he caused it. And if he did . . .”

Sophie tried to find an end to that sentence with the right amount of *dun dun dunnnnnnnnn*.

“I still don’t get why Keefe ran away,” she admitted. “Even if he *can* trigger abilities, he’s just speeding up something that’s going to happen anyway, right? And Mr. Forkle has triggered abilities—”

“That’s different,” Dex cut in. “There was no guarantee that what Mr. Forkle did would work—well, except with you, but you’re . . . you know . . .”

“Weird?” Sophie finished for him.

“I was going to say *unique*,” Dex corrected.

“Suuuuuuure you were.”

Her smile faded when Dex didn’t return it.

He looked so serious.

So sad.

So . . . *scared*.

“What aren’t you telling me?” she mumbled.

She tried replaying the conversation, looking for any clue she might’ve missed.

The only thing that stood out was Dex saying that Keefe’s ability was different from what Mr. Forkle did to trigger her abilities.

“So . . . Mr. Forkle *can’t* guarantee that someone will manifest,” she said slowly. “Does that mean Keefe . . . can?”

Dex’s eyes welled with tears. “No.”

She was about to ask how he could be so sure when she remembered something he’d told her earlier.

It’s not really my secret to share.

She’d assumed he’d meant Keefe. But now all she could think about was the fact that only two of the triplets had manifested.

A lump lodged in her throat, making it hard to choke out

her next question. But she cleared it away and whispered, “Was Rex there when Keefe touched Bex’s and Lex’s hands?”

Dex’s tears spilled over—which pretty much answered her question. But he still said, “Keefe said Rex’s hand felt empty somehow. And . . . he felt the same thing from my dad.”

“Oh.”

The tiny word seemed to pulse, growing louder with every beat until the sound filled the enormous room.

So did the word none of them said.

Talentless.

More tears dripped down Dex’s cheeks, and Sophie felt her own eyes turn watery.

She wanted to insist it was a mistake. After all, Keefe was barely beginning to understand his power.

But truth always felt different.

It carried a heavier weight.

“Promise me you won’t tell Rex,” Dex whispered, drying his face with his sleeve.

“He doesn’t know?”

Dex shook his head. “He’s already been sobbing most of the day because he’s worried it *might* happen. Can you imagine how he’d feel if he knew for sure? He still has years before he gets to the point where everyone will give up on him—unless the Council finds out what Keefe can do and makes him start testing everyone in ability detecting.”

Sophie sucked in a breath. “Do you think they’d do that?”

“I wouldn’t put it past them. It’d make it way easier to decide who belongs at Foxfire and who doesn’t. And who knows? They might even start testing everyone at birth. I’m sure they’d claim it’s better for everyone to know as early as possible. But all it would do is make the Talentless be judged their entire lives.”

Chills rippled down Sophie’s spine. “Keefe would never go along with that.”

“He might not have a choice. All they’d have to do is restrain him and have a Telepath read his mind while people touched his hands.”

Sophie wasn’t sure if she could picture the Councillors ordering something so cruel.

But she *could* imagine his mom doing it.

“Why would Lady Gisela want that?” she said, mostly to herself. “Why endure all the painful experiments on herself and her husband—and everything she put Keefe through—just so Keefe could tell if someone is or isn’t going to manifest?”

“He might also be able to trigger abilities,” Dex reminded her. “Plus, he’s now a Polyglot and can give commands that do all kinds of scary things. And maybe there’s other stuff we haven’t discovered yet.”

“There probably is,” Sophie hated to admit. “But . . . I still don’t see a connection. She’s trying to rule the world—how does this help with that?”

“I don’t know,” Dex said. “But I don’t want to find out.”

Neither did Sophie.

Keefe clearly didn't either—which finally explained why he'd fled the Lost Cities.

And this was going to make it pretty impossible to convince him to come back.

“Do you think he'll ever be able to control this ability?” she asked, staring at her gloveless hands.

She'd found a way to master her enhancing. . . .

But it had taken her months.

And several special gadgets.

And a strange mental exercise.

And help.

Lots of help.

“I'm working on some prototypes,” Dex said, as if he knew what she was thinking. “And I'll talk to Tinker—though it's going to be hard to get her to understand what I need without telling her why. But . . . there has to be something we can do.”

“I'll tell Keefe that,” she promised. “Well . . . if I find him.”

“Oh, we're finding him!” Ro said with way more confidence than Sophie was capable of mustering. “I don't care if we have to tear through every human city.”

“Where will you start?” Dex asked.

“Somewhere random, I guess,” Sophie said quietly. “Grady said Keefe spun the blue crystal on his pathfinder and leaped wherever it stopped.”

“Where did he get a blue pathfinder?”

“Probably from Daddy Dearest,” Ro grumbled. “Hunkyhair was always bragging about how he used to steal it.”

“Do you think Lord Cassius knows which cities his pathfinder can access?” Sophie asked.

“He’d have to,” Dex agreed, “otherwise he wouldn’t be able to use it.”

A spark of hope flared to life. “Looks like we need to stop by the Shores of Solace.”

Ro sheathed her dagger—then stretched her arms and cracked her knuckles. “I *really* hope Lord Bossypants decides to be difficult. I’m in the mood to punch something.”

Sophie wouldn’t mind an excuse either.

“If there’s anything I can do, let me know,” Dex told them. “And keep me updated, okay?”

“I will. And . . . thank you for telling me. I know it wasn’t easy.”

“Nothing’s easy anymore,” Dex mumbled.

“It isn’t,” Sophie agreed, wishing she could reach through the tiny screen and hug him.

She couldn’t.

Just like she couldn’t promise him that everything would be okay.

All she could do was keep going.

Keep trying.

Keep fighting with everything she had.

And always hope for the best.

THREE

W

HERE IS MY SON?”

Of *course* Lord Cassius greeted them with the question that Sophie had been hoping to avoid.

She'd realized as they were teleporting to the Shores of Solace that Keefe's father had no idea his son was missing—and it'd probably be better to keep it that way. But Lord Cassius would never answer questions about his pathfinder without knowing why she was asking. And lying to Empaths was annoyingly challenging.

So she cut straight to the brutal truth: “Keefe ran away.”

Normal parents would've cried—panicked—pummeled Sophie with questions.

Lord Cassius simply smoothed his already perfect blond hair and stepped aside to let Sophie, Ro, and Sandor into his fancy beach house.

He led them to the farthest corner of the property, to a bougainvillea-lined patio facing the ocean, and settled onto the only chair—a chaise covered in worn turquoise pillows.

“I assumed this would happen,” he said as he flicked a speck of lint off his pristine gray cape. “If Keefe had come home with me—”

“He would’ve run off even faster,” Ro finished for him. “Probably left a Keefe-shaped hole in one of the walls.”

Lord Cassius’s lips curled into a smile—but it was a dark, twisted thing. “Such bravado coming from the one whose job was to prevent something like this from happening.”

“Yeah, well, wasn’t it *your* job to make sure no one did creepy experiments on your son, instead of signing him up for them before he was born?” Ro snapped back. “And while we’re discussing failed responsibilities, shall we acknowledge the fact that it’s *also* a father’s job to make sure their child feels happy and secure and loved?”

“Is that what your scar displays?” Lord Cassius pointed to the jagged mark running the length of Ro’s spine. “Your father’s *love*?”

Ro reached behind her, trailing her fingers gently along the rough, raised skin. “You’re right. My father *did* make this mark. He’s done the same thing to all his most trusted

warriors. And when he cut it, I felt his pride, and respect—and yes, I actually *did* feel his love. Can Keefe say the same about *anything* you’ve done for him?” She waited for Lord Cassius’s smile to fade before she added, “You elves like to talk about ogres as if we’re these cold, brutal creatures. But I’ve never seen anything as cold and brutal as the way you treat your son.”

Sophie wanted to hoist Ro on her shoulders and parade her around the room—but that would probably get them kicked out of the Shores of Solace.

Still, she hoped Lord Cassius could feel her disgust slashing through the air.

He looked away, staring at the darkening horizon. “How long has Keefe been gone?”

“A few hours,” Sophie told him. “And we’re pretty sure he used your blue pathfinder when he left, so I need a list of all the places that pathfinder goes.”

“That will be a very long list.”

“How long?” Sandor asked.

“*Long*. The Council granted me their highest level of clearance. I was one of their top Emissaries—”

“I don’t care if it’s a long list,” Sophie interrupted before he could launch into a speech about the wonder that was him.

“You should. It’s over a hundred cities. And I suspect my son plans to visit each and every one.” He folded his hands neatly in his lap. “Keefe has likely realized by now that his

mother surely borrowed my pathfinder over the years without my knowledge, and is hoping he'll find one of her secret hide-outs. He hasn't accepted the futility of such endeavors. Just as you won't accept the futility of leaping all over the planet, trying to hunt down a boy who obviously doesn't want to be found."

"A scared boy with no idea how to survive in the Forbidden Cities," Sophie argued. "I can't believe you don't—"

She cut her sentence short.

Lord Cassius's lack of concern *wasn't* a surprise.

"So much judgment," he murmured, trailing his fingers through the air, testing her emotions. "It's as if you've forgotten what you found in my mind."

Sophie rolled her eyes.

She *had* unearthed memories that proved he actually did love his son—but they didn't count. He'd buried the feelings too deep, claiming that love convoluted things.

Lord Cassius sighed. "Affection comes in many forms. Even surrender. Which is why I'm willing to admit that I never have been and never will be able to control my son. No one can. Not even you—though I'm certain you'll continue to try. You're even more stubborn than he is. The good news, though, is that my wife might be the most stubborn out of all of you—and she foolishly made Keefe integral to her plan. I suspect it will be her downfall—which would be rather poetic, wouldn't it?"

It would.

But Sophie wasn't in the mood to agree with him.

"Do you need me to get you some paper?" she asked. "Or should I just pull the list of cities from your mind?"

She'd meant the second option as a threat. But Lord Cassius flashed another twisted smile and said, "Pulling it from my mind will be much more convenient."

Sophie glanced at Ro and Sandor.

"Hey, if Lord Creepypants wants to let you dig through his head, I say go for it," Ro told her. "You can dredge up all his embarrassing secrets!"

"Or it could be a trick," Sandor warned.

Lord Cassius clicked his tongue. "Need I remind you that we're on the same side?" He reached under his tunic and showed them the swan-neck monocle he'd received after swearing fealty to the Black Swan. "Your Collective trusts me. Surely you can do the—"

"What assignment did they give you?" Sophie interrupted.

The last time she'd seen Lord Cassius, he'd mentioned an assignment for the Black Swan. But he didn't tell her what it was.

"If you want me to trust you," she added, "you should tell me what you're working on."

He flicked away more invisible lint. "My assignment is classified."

"But if you're inviting Blondie into your head, her super-brain

can find out anything she wants,” Ro reminded him. “So there’s no point keeping it secret.”

“Perhaps not from *her*. But she’s not the only one here, is she?” He bent his knees and slid his feet back toward himself, then motioned to the now-empty portion of his chaise. “You prefer to sit when using your telepathy, don’t you, Miss Foster?”

Sophie stared at the lumpy cushions.

“If you want answers,” he snapped, “and that list—you have permission to enter my mind. Otherwise, you may see yourself out.”

He raised one eyebrow in challenge, and the expression made him look much more like his son—if Keefe was also harsh and cold and . . .

Sad.

“Fine,” she said, lowering herself onto the farthest edge of the chaise. “But you’re not going to like this.”

“Oh, I’m quite certain of that. And yet, here we are.” He waved one hand in a sweeping, circular gesture, inviting her into his mind.

Sophie closed her eyes and let her consciousness harden into steel—into armor—with just enough edge to slice through his flimsy mental barriers in one quick shove.

Let’s make this quick, she transmitted. I need . . .

Her words trailed off as she took in the disarray.

Lord Cassius’s mind used to be meticulous—everything carefully sorted and rigidly arranged, as if his head were a

stuffy library where no one was allowed to touch any of the books.

Now it looked like an earthquake had crashed through, knocking all the memories to the floor and leaving a sea of jumbled piles, flashing and blaring in full color and volume, like mounds of broken televisions.

You'll get used to the noise, Lord Cassius thought as she reached up to rub her temples.

Sophie doubted that.

And if it'd been anyone else, she would've checked to make sure he was okay.

Instead, she transmitted, *What are you working on for the Black Swan?*

Nothing that caused the mental disruption you're seeing, if that's what you're wondering. Nor is it anything that merits the level of frustration I felt when I told you the assignment was classified. You truly despise secrets, don't you?

I do, Sophie agreed.

And yet, you're keeping more of them than anyone, aren't you? Our fearless moonlark, with her impenetrable mind. The Leader of Team Valiant, doing the Council's bidding—

You didn't answer my question, Sophie reminded him.

A low rumble shook the mounds of memories as he struggled to keep his temper. *I wasn't lying when I said the assignment is classified. But before you throw a tantrum—*

I don't throw tantrums!

Yes, and you aren't gripping one of my pillows right now, tempted to hurl it at my face.

Sophie relaxed her grip on the cushion. *So this is where Keefe gets his obnoxious side from.*

I suppose that's possible. His mind brightened slightly with the thought. *But as I was trying to say before your unnecessary interruption, I'm sure you can guess enough to satisfy your curiosity if I tell you that my assignment involves stalled treaty negotiations.*

Sophie needed several seconds to piece together a theory. *Do you mean the negotiations with the trolls?*

I can't think of any other negotiations in progress, can you?

She couldn't. But she also hadn't realized that things with the trolls weren't already settled—though she probably should have, since Tarina still hadn't returned to her post as one of Sophie's bodyguards.

Why are the negotiations stalled? she asked.

Why do you think? You and your friends uncovered an illegal hive hidden within our borders, filled with bloodthirsty, genetically manipulated newborns that were clearly part of an ongoing experiment.

Flashbacks of shredding claws and bloody teeth tore through Sophie's brain, so it took her a second to catch the key word in that sentence.

Ongoing? Does that mean there are more hives?

That's what the Council would like to find out. Particularly since

Empress Pernille has now closed the borders to Marintrylla and requested a treaty similar to what King Dimitar demanded after the destruction at Ravagog. She wants to sever ties with the Lost Cites and keep the trolls isolated from everyone.

And just like that, Sophie was back in Mr. Forkle's strange egg-shaped office, staring at a 3-D map of the world and listening to him explain how he believed that the Neverseen were trying to keep the other intelligent species fragmented and distracted, so they'd be too weak or busy to cause trouble when the Neverseen overthrew the Council.

She couldn't decide if this proved their plan was working—or if they were creating an even bigger mess.

Probably both.

Do you think the Council will agree to the terms of Empress Pernille's treaty? she asked.

Possibly. If she proves she's not amassing a mutant newborn army.

Sophie shuddered. So *THAT'S* why you said we should talk telepathically. You didn't want Ro and Sandor to know about this.

Actually, I'm sure their leaders are monitoring the situation just as closely as we are—if not more so. I suggested a mental conversation, because . . . there's something else I need to share with you—and it will be far easier to show you than to try to explain it out loud. Particularly given your annoying propensity to interrupt.

Sophie wanted to argue with his insult, but she was too focused on what his offer meant.

You remembered something.

I did. In fact, I'm surprised you haven't already asked me about it, since you were the one to trigger the memory. The last time we spoke, when you mentioned "merged abilities."

Goose bumps erupted across Sophie's skin—mostly from irritation. You told me those words DIDN'T trigger any memories.

No, I said I wished they had—and that I needed time to process. Both of which were true. I knew something felt uncomfortably familiar, but I couldn't connect it to anything—until this morning, when I woke up from a nightmare and realized it was actually a moment I'd lived.

His mind rumbled again—louder and longer that time—and the piles of memories shifted, clearing a narrow, winding path.

Sophie couldn't tell where it led—only that it disappeared into the shadowy depths of his consciousness.

Nervous? he asked as Sophie studied the sludgy black. *Or curious? Funny how those two emotions feel similar, isn't it?*

Actually, I'm mostly wondering why you're suddenly so eager to share your secrets with me.

"EAGER" is the wrong word. But I'm WILLING to, because—as I keep assuring you—we're on the same side. I want to protect my son any way I can. And I want to stop my wife every bit as much as you do—maybe more so, now that I know how far she's willing to go.

How far is that?

See for yourself.

The path widened with the invitation—but his mind also sharpened.

With impatience, maybe?

Or something more ominous?

There was no way to tell—and Sophie was sure that if Keefe were there, he'd beg her not to follow his dad's eerie path into the deep mental gloom.

But Keefe *wasn't* there.

And Sophie needed answers. She didn't get to choose who gave them to her.

So she took a long, steadying breath and gathered as much mental energy as she could muster.

Then she let her consciousness sink into the darkness.

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and events are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.



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