

KEEPER OF THE LOST CITIES

NEVERSEEN

SHANNON MESSENGER

Aladdin

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

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For my readers.

I love you more than Silveny loves Keefe.

mallowmelt and custard bursts for everyone!

PREFACE

SOPHIE STUMBLERD BACKWARD, SCRAMBLING closer to her friends as a cage of neon yellow flames erupted all around them.

Heat licked across her skin and smoke choked her lungs while the Neverseen moved forward, their black cloaks gone, disguises abandoned.

There would be no more hiding.

The Neverseen shouted insults and warnings that Sophie tried to focus on, but her mind was too fixated on other words.

Trick.

Trap.

Traitor.

The last word made it impossible to look one of the figures in the eye.

Another betrayal.

Another lie.

Sophie was done with all of it.

She reached for her pendant—the sign of the swan carved into cold black metal curled around a piece of smooth glass. She still didn't fully understand the reason the Black Swan had given it to her. But she knew enough of its power to realize it was their best chance.

She held the glass into the fading rays of sunset, letting the searing beam of white light refract toward the flames of Everblaze.

It was time to fight fire with fire.

ONE

WE HAVE TO GO,” FITZ SAID, bursting through the doors of Everglen’s upstairs guest room.

He found Sophie sitting alone on the edge of the giant canopy bed, already dressed in some of her old human clothes.

“I thought we were waiting another hour?” she asked, glancing out the window at the endless black sky.

“We can’t. The Council is already convening to vote on our punishments.”

Sophie took a slow breath, letting the words pulse through her veins, steeling her nerves as she reached for her purple backpack. It was the same bag she’d used when she’d left her

human life nearly a year earlier. And now she would use it again to leave the Lost Cities.

“Is everyone ready?” she asked, proud of her voice for not shaking. She also resisted the urge to tug out an itchy eyelash.

This was not a time for nervous habits.

It was time to be brave.

The Council had vowed to punish anyone associated with the Black Swan—the mysterious organization responsible for Sophie’s existence. But Sophie and her friends knew the real villains were a group called the Neverseen. Fitz, Keefe, and Biana had even tried to help the Black Swan catch the rebels on Mount Everest. But the Neverseen guessed their plan and turned the mission into an ambush. Sophie had discovered the trap in time to warn her friends, and they’d escaped with their lives—and managed to capture one prisoner. But they’d each broken numerous laws in the process.

Their safest option now was to flee to the Black Swan and go into hiding. But Sophie had mixed feelings about getting up close and personal with her creators. The Black Swan had tweaked her genes to enhance her abilities as part of their Project Moonlark—but they’d never given her any clue as to *why*. They’d also never told her who her genetic parents were, and Sophie had no idea if she’d finally have to meet them.

“Bout time you got here,” Keefe said as Sophie followed

Fitz down the twisting silver staircase. He stood next to Dex in Everglen's glittering round foyer, both of them looking very human in hoodies and dark jeans.

Keefe flashed his famous smirk and patted his carefully mussed blond hair, but Sophie could see the sadness clouding his sky blue eyes. During their confrontation with the Neverseen, Keefe had discovered that his mother was one of their leaders. She'd even attacked her own son, before fleeing to the ogre capital and abandoning her family.

"Hey, no worrying about me, Foster," Keefe said, fanning the space between them. He was one of the few Empaths who could feel Sophie's emotions rippling through the air.

"I'm worried about *all* of you," she told him. "You're all risking your lives because of me."

"Eh, what else is new?" Dex asked, flashing his dimpled grin. "And will you relax? We've got this! Though I'm not sure about my shoes." He pointed to his soft brown boots, which were a typical elvin style. "All the human ones Fitz had were too big for my feet."

"I doubt anyone will notice," Sophie told him. "But I guess it depends on how long we'll be around humans. How far away is the hideout after we get to Florence?"

Fitz smiled his movie-ready smile. "You'll see."

The Black Swan had taught Fitz how to sneak past Sophie's mental blocking and view the secret information hidden in her brain. But for some reason he wouldn't share what he'd

learned. All Sophie knew was that they were headed to a round window somewhere in the famous Italian city.

“Hey,” Fitz said, leaning closer. “You trust me, don’t you?”

Sophie’s traitorous heart still fluttered, despite her current annoyance. She *did* trust Fitz. Probably more than anyone. But having him keep secrets from her was seriously annoying. She was tempted to use her telepathy to steal the information straight from his head. But she’d broken that rule enough times to know the consequences definitely weren’t worth it.

“What is *with* these clothes?” Biana interrupted, appearing out of thin air next to Keefe.

Biana was a Vanisher, like her mother, though she was still getting used to the ability. Only one of her legs reappeared, and she had to hop up and down to get the other to show up. She wore a sweatshirt three sizes too big and faded, baggy jeans.

“At least I get to wear *my* shoes,” she said, hitching up her pants to reveal purple flats with diamond-studded toes. “But why do we only have boy stuff?”

“Because I’m a boy,” Fitz reminded her. “Besides, this isn’t a fashion contest.”

“And if it was, I’d totally win. Right, Foster?” Keefe asked.

Sophie actually would’ve given the prize to Fitz—his blue scarf worked perfectly with his dark hair and teal eyes. And his fitted gray coat made him look taller, with broader shoulders and—

“Oh please.” Keefe shoved his way between them. “Fitz’s human clothes are a huge snoozefest. Check out what Dex and I found in Alvar’s closet!”

They both unzipped their hoodies, revealing T-shirts with logos underneath.

“I have no idea what this means, but it’s crazy awesome, right?” Keefe asked, pointing to the black and yellow oval on his shirt.

“It’s from Batman,” Sophie said—then regretted the words. Of course Keefe demanded she explain the awesomeness of the Dark Knight.

“I’m wearing this shirt forever, guys,” he decided. “Also, I want a Batmobile! Dex, can you make that happen?”

Sophie wouldn’t have been surprised if Dex actually could build one. As a Technopath, he worked miracles with technology. He’d made all kinds of cool gadgets for Sophie, including the lopsided ring she wore—a special panic switch that had saved her life during her fight with one of her kidnappers.

“What’s my shirt from?” Dex asked, pointing to the logo with interlocking yellow W’s.

Sophie didn’t have the heart to tell him it was the symbol for Wonder Woman.

“Why does Alvar have human stuff?” she asked. “I thought he worked with the ogres.”

“He does,” Fitz replied. “Or he did before you almost started a war with them.”

Fitz said the words in a light, teasing way, but the truth behind them weighed heavily on Sophie's shoulders. They'd be in a *lot* less trouble if she hadn't ignored the rules of telepathy and tried to read the ogre king's mind. She'd known it was a dangerous risk, but she'd been desperate to know why the ogres had snuck into the Sanctuary and hidden one of their homing devices in Silveny's tail. The rare female alicorn wasn't just essential for the survival of her species, she was one of Sophie's closest friends. If only Sophie had known that ogres' minds could detect Telepaths—even genetically enhanced Telepaths like her. She hadn't learned anything useful, *and* she'd nearly voided the elvin-ogre treaty and started a war.

"But that still doesn't explain why Alvar has human stuff," Sophie reminded Fitz. "Ogres hate humans even more than elves do."

"They do," Fitz agreed. "But these clothes are from years ago, back when Alvar used to go out looking for you."

"He did?" Sophie asked. "I thought that was your job."

Fitz was the one who'd found her on her class field trip about a year earlier and brought her to the Lost Cities.

It was the best thing that ever happened to her.

Also the hardest.

Fitz smiled sadly, probably remembering the same thing: the moment she'd had to say goodbye to her human family. He was the only one who really understood what she'd

lost that day, and she couldn't have gotten through it without him.

"I started searching for you when I was six," he told her, "after Alvar started his elite levels and wasn't able to sneak away from Foxfire anymore. But my dad searched for you for twelve years, remember? I couldn't go on secret missions when I was a toddler."

"What a slacker," Keefe interrupted. "I totally could've pulled that off. But then again, I'm Batman, so"—he draped an arm over Sophie's shoulders—"I could be your hero any day."

Dex pretended to gag, while Biana stared at Keefe's arm around Sophie.

"Aren't we supposed to be leaving?" they both asked at the same time.

Sophie pulled away from Keefe as Alden called "Wait!" from the top of the stairs. His elegant cape swished as he rushed to catch them. "You can't leave wearing your registry pendants."

Sophie grasped the choker around her neck, hardly believing she'd overlooked that essential detail. The pendants were special tracking devices from the Council. She wondered what other important things she might be forgetting. . . .

Alden pulled out a pair of sharp black pliers and said, "Let's start with Fitz." He spoke with the same crisp accent as his children, but his voice sounded weak and wobbly.

Fitz flinched as Alden cut the thick cord and the crystal pendant clattered to the floor.

“Whoa. This just got real,” Keefe whispered.

“Yeah it did.” Fitz traced his fingers across his now-bare neck.

“Are you okay?” Alden asked Biana, who was clutching her pendant in a white-knuckled fist.

“I’m fine,” Biana whispered, lifting her long dark hair to expose her necklace.

Alden hesitated only a second before he sliced through the silver band. Her pendant landed next to Fitz’s, followed by Keefe’s.

“Yours will be trickier to remove,” Alden reminded Dex and Sophie.

The Council added extra security measures after the Neverseen used their pendants to convince everyone Sophie and Dex had drowned instead of been kidnapped. Both of them even had trees in the Wanderling Woods—the elves’ equivalent of a graveyard—from the funerals their families had held.

Alden’s brow beaded with sweat as he pried at the thick metal until the cords broke free. “I’ll need to remove your nexuses, as well,” he said, pulling out a dime-size disk.

Sophie sighed.

Another very important detail she’d overlooked . . .

A nexus was a safety device meant to hold their bodies together during light leaps, but the force field it created could be tracked.

“I guess I didn’t plan this running-away thing very well, did I?” Sophie mumbled.

“It’s not the kind of thing one can plan for,” Alden reassured her. “And do not expect yourself to think of *everything*. You’re part of a team now. Everyone works together and helps.”

The words would’ve been a lot more comforting if her “team” hadn’t forgotten the same important things—though Fitz, Keefe, and Biana were already nexus-free. Their concentration strength had reached the required level. Dex was almost there too. The meter on his wide blue cuff had less than a quarter of the way to go.

When Alden pressed the tiny disk against it, the level surged to full.

“I’ve been tempted to do that myself,” Dex admitted as he slipped the nexus off his wrist. “But I didn’t want to cheat.”

“Wise choice,” Alden agreed. “Having the ability to do something does not mean it’s the safest course of action. It also does not give us permission to break the law.”

“It does when the law is stupid,” Keefe argued.

“I wish I could disagree. But look at where we are.” Alden gathered their fallen pendants and tucked them into his cape pockets along with Dex’s nexus. “There was a time when I believed in the infallibility of our world. But now . . . we must rely on our own moral compasses. Right here”—he pressed his hand to his heart—“we know what is necessary and true. You all must hold to that and let it guide you through what

lies ahead. But I've let myself get sidetracked. Sophie, let's take care of those nexuses."

Thanks to Elwin, her overprotective physician, Sophie had to wear one on each wrist. He'd also locked her nexuses so they couldn't unlatch, even though both of her meters were full. She'd fainted several times during leaps—one of which had nearly killed her. But that was before the Black Swan had enhanced her concentration and healed her abilities.

Still, Sophie reached for the Fade Fuel she wore around her neck in case of emergencies. It hung next to her allergy remedy, both vials tucked safely under her T-shirt. She hadn't needed either elixir in weeks, but she felt better having them. Especially as Alden produced a twisted silver key and unlocked each of her nexuses.

She stopped him as he examined her third black cuff. "That's one of Dex's inventions."

"I call it the Sucker Punch," Dex said proudly. "It releases a burst of air when you swing your arm, so you can punch way harder than normal."

"Very clever," Alden told him. "And a good thing for you to have. Though, Dex, I'm hoping you've learned the dangers of inventing new weapons."

Dex's shoulders drooped as he promised that he had. Dex had built the painful ability-restricting cirlet that the Council had forced Sophie to wear, not realizing it would be her punishment for what had happened with the ogre king.

She nudged him with her elbow and smiled to remind him that she'd forgiven him. But he kept his eyes fixed on the floor.

"I think that takes care of everything," Alden said. "Though you all must remember to look out for one another. Fitz and Biana, share your concentration with Dex when you're leaping. And Keefe, I want you to help Sophie."

"Oh, I *will*," Keefe promised with a wink.

"We *all* will," Fitz corrected.

"Hey, I can take care of myself," Sophie argued. "I'm the one bringing us to Florence, remember?"

The blue leaping crystals all led to the same place in each Forbidden City, which would make it easier for someone to follow them. So they'd be teleporting to Italy, an ability only Sophie had—thanks to a surprise side effect of the way the Black Swan had altered her DNA.

"All of you can take care of yourselves," Alden said, "but you are stronger when you work together. You must also have a leader to keep the team organized, so Fitz, since you're the eldest, I'm putting you in charge."

"Hey, wait a minute," Keefe argued, "he's only older by a few months."

"Uh, by 'few,' you mean *eleven*," Fitz corrected.

Dex snorted. "Dude, you guys are *old*."

He glanced smugly at Sophie, and she blushed, hating that she'd been thinking the same thing.

Well . . . she didn't think Fitz and Keefe were *old*, but they were definitely older than her.

She'd guessed that Keefe was fourteen, which would make Fitz at least fifteen—but they could be even older than that. . . .

It was hard to keep track of age in the Lost Cities. The elves didn't pay that much attention to it, thanks to their indefinite lifespans. In fact, Sophie had no idea how old any of her friends actually were. No one ever mentioned their birthdays. Maybe that meant Sophie wasn't supposed to care about age either—but she was very aware that she was only thirteen and a half, and the difference between her and the boys felt *huge*.

"Hey, I'm the one who knows where we're going," Fitz said. "So I'm in charge, and . . . I guess we should probably head out. Though, wait—what about Mom? Shouldn't we say goodbye?"

Alden glanced at Biana. "Your mother has to take care of something at the moment. But she told me to tell you she'll see you soon."

Fitz didn't look very satisfied by that answer. But he didn't argue, either.

Alden turned to Sophie, not quite meeting her eyes. "I . . . offered Grady and Edaline a sedative a few minutes ago, and they decided to take it. We feared what would happen when they actually had to watch you leave. So they told me to tell you that they love you and that they left a note for you in your backpack."

The lump in Sophie's throat made it hurt for her to nod, but she forced herself to do it. Grady and Edaline were her adoptive family, and she hated leaving without seeing them. But she doubted they were strong enough to handle another tearful goodbye, given everything that had happened.

They'd lived in a deep fog of depression ever since they'd lost their only daughter, Jolie, to a fire seventeen years earlier. And now Sophie had discovered that Brant, Jolie's former fiancé—who Grady and Edaline had been caring for as if he were part of their family—had been the one to set the fire that killed her. Brant had been hiding that he was a Pyrokinetic—the elves' only forbidden talent—and joined the Neverseen because he hated living as a Talentless. But when Jolie discovered his betrayal and tried to convince him to change his ways, he lost his temper and sparked the flames that accidentally took her life.

The guilt and grief had left Brant dangerously unstable. He'd even tried to kill Grady and Sophie when they went to confront him. Grady had been so furious, he'd used his ability as a Mesmer to make Brant burn off his own hand. Sophie had barely managed to stop Grady before he went too far and ruined his own sanity. She'd also had to let Brant escape in order to get the information she needed to save her friends.

"All right, we've lost enough time," Alden said, pulling the five of them close for a hug. "Remember, this is not goodbye forever. It is simply goodbye for now."

Sophie felt tears slip down her cheeks as Fitz asked, “Do you want us to let you know when we get there?”

“No, I cannot know anything about what you’re doing. None of us can.”

“Do you think the Council will order memory breaks?” Sophie whispered.

“No, the Council will not sink to that level. Plus, they know we are too prominent and powerful. It is simply wise to be cautious. I promise there’s no reason to worry.”

Sophie sighed.

No reason to worry were Alden’s favorite words. And she’d learned to never believe them.

“Come on,” Biana said, pulling open Everglen’s shimmering doors.

They tromped down the shadowy path in silence.

“I never thought I’d say this,” Keefe said, “but I really miss having Gigantor tagging along with us.”

Sophie nodded, wishing her seven-foot-tall goblin bodyguard was healthy enough to join them. Sandor had been thrown off an icy cliff during the ambush on Mount Everest and broken pretty much every bone in his body. Elwin had assured her that he’d be okay, but Sandor had a long road to recovery before him.

Not as long as the road we’re about to travel, Sophie thought as she spotted Everglen’s enormous gates through the gloomy night. The glowing yellow bars absorbed all passing light, preventing anyone from leaping inside.

“Time to run,” Alden whispered.

Teleporting only worked when they were free-falling, and the bluffs they needed to jump off were beyond Everglen’s protection.

Fitz wiped his eyes. “Tell Mom we love her, okay?”

“We love you, too, Dad,” Biana added.

“And don’t let the Councillors anywhere near my family,” Dex begged.

“You have my word,” Alden promised. “And I won’t let them near Grady and Edaline, either.”

Sophie nodded, her mind racing with a million things she wanted to say. Only one really mattered. “Don’t let Grady go after Brant.”

Alden took her hands. “I won’t.”

Everyone looked at Keefe.

“Tell my dad . . . that I’ve been hiding his favorite cape in a closet on the twenty-ninth floor. But don’t tell him the door is rigged with gulon gas. Let him find that out on his own.”

“Is that really all you want to say, Keefe?” Alden asked.

Keefe shrugged. “What else is there?”

Alden wrapped Keefe in a hug and whispered something in Keefe’s ear. Whatever it was made Keefe’s eyes water.

Sophie’s eyes did the same as Alden opened the gates.

The five friends stared at the towering forest and locked hands.

Slowly, together, they took the first step into the darkness. They'd just crossed the threshold when a cloaked figure stepped out of the shadows—not a black cloak like the Neverseen wore.

A diamond-encrusted silver cloak.

The style worn by the Councillors.