

KEEPER OF THE LOST CITIES

LODESTAR



BY SHANNON
MESSENGER

**For Katie and Jo,
who bring new meaning to the words
“above and beyond”**

PREFACE

THIS IS WHAT they want.

The words tumbled through Sophie's mind as she raced up the spiral staircase, counting her steps, trying to guess which door to take.

The first handle she tried was locked.

Another opened into darkness.

A third revealed a path that glowed with eerie blue balefire sconces.

The floor shook as she hesitated and threads of dust slipped through the ceiling, scratching her throat and making it hurt to breathe.

She followed the flames.

Back and forth the halls snaked—a careful maze, designed to deceive. Swallow. Separate.

The tremors grew with every step, the shifting subtle but unmistakable.

And too far away.

No one else would feel the ripples swelling, like waves gathering speed.

They were too focused on their celebration.

Too caught up in their imagined victory.

Too trusting.

Too blind.

Too late.

The ground rattled harder, the first fissures crackling the stones.

This is what they want.

ONE

THIS IS A security nightmare!” Sandor grumbled, keeping his huge gray hand poised over his enormous black sword.

His squeaky voice reminded Sophie more of a talking mouse than a deadly bodyguard.

Several prodigies raced past, and Sandor pulled Sophie closer as the giggling group jumped to pop the candy-filled bubbles floating near the shimmering crystal trees. All around them, kids were running through the confetti-covered atrium in their amber-gold Level Three uniforms, capes flying as they caught snacks and bottles of lushberry juice and stuffed tinsel-wrapped gifts into the long white thinking caps dangling from everyone’s lockers.

The Midterms Celebration was a Foxfire Academy tradition—hardly the impending doom Sandor was imagining. And yet, Sophie understood his concern.

Every parent roaming the streamer-lined halls.

Every face she didn’t recognize.

Any of them could be a rebel.

A villain.

The enemy.

Sandor watched Sophie tug on her eyelashes—her nervous habit, back in full force. “Nothing is going to happen,” he promised, tucking her blond hair behind her ear with a surprisingly gentle touch for a seven-foot-tall goblin warrior.

It definitely helped having Sandor back at her side—especially after almost losing him during the battle on Mount Everest. And Sandor wasn’t the only goblin at Foxfire anymore. Each of the six wings in the main campus building had been assigned its own patrol, with two additional squadrons keeping watch over the sprawling grounds.

The Council had also added security throughout the Lost Cities.

They had to.

The ogres were still threatening war.

And in the three weeks since Sophie and her friends had returned from hiding with the Black Swan, the Neverseen had scorched the main gate of the Sanctuary *and* broken into the registry in Atlantis.

Sophie could guess what the rebels had hoped to gain from the elves' secret animal preserve—they obviously didn't know that she'd convinced the Council to set the precious alicorns free. But the registry attack remained a mystery. The Councillors kept careful records on every elf ever born, and no one would tell her if any files had been altered or stolen.

A bubble popped on Sophie's head, and Sandor caught the box of Prattles that had been hovering inside.

"If you're going to eat these, I should check them first," he told her.

Sandor's wide, flat nose scented no toxins in the nutty candy, but he insisted on examining the pin before handing them over. Every box of Prattles came with a special collectible inside, and in the past, the Black Swan had used them to send Sophie messages.

He fished out the tiny velvet pouch and Sophie caught herself clutching her allergy remedy necklace. She still kept the silver moonlark pin that Calla had given her attached to the cord—a reminder of the friend she'd lost, and a symbol of the role she needed to figure out how to play.

"Looks like we're good," Sandor said, handing her the small boobrie pin—a strange black bird with bright yellow tail feathers. "Can't imagine *that* means anything important."

Sophie couldn't either. Especially since the Black Swan had been annoyingly silent.

No notes. No clues. No answers during their brief meetings.

Apparently they were "regrouping." And it was taking forever.

At least the Council was doing *something*—setting up goblin patrols and trying to arrange an ogre Peace Summit. The Black Swan should at least be . . .

Actually, Sophie didn't know what they should be doing.

That was the problem with having her friend join the enemy.

"There you are!" a familiar voice said behind her. "I was starting to think you'd ditched us."

The deep, crisp accent was instantly recognizable. And yet, the teasing words made Sophie wish she'd turn and find a different boy.

Fitz looked as cute as ever in his red Level Five uniform, but his perfect smile didn't reach his trademark teal eyes. The recent revelations had been a huge blow for all of her friends, but Fitz had taken it the hardest.

Both his brother and his best friend had run off with the Neverseen.

Alvar's betrayal had made Fitz wary—made him doubt every memory.

But Keefe's?

He wouldn't talk about it—at *all*.

Not that Sophie had many chances to bring up the subject. Only a handful of people knew the truth. The rest believed the Black Swan's carefully crafted lie, and thought Keefe was taking time away to mourn his mother's disappearance. Even the Council had no inkling, and Sophie hoped it would stay that way. The less everyone knew, the easier it would be for Keefe to come home.

If he came home.

"You okay?" Fitz asked, making her realize she'd forgotten to say hello. "I hope you're not worrying about your tests. There's no way you didn't pass."

"I don't know . . ."

Her photographic memory *helped*—but lately she'd struggled to concentrate during her school sessions. Honestly, though, she'd barely given her midterms a second thought. She wasn't the same girl she'd been the year before, who thought failing out of Foxfire would be the end of the world. Now she'd been kidnapped, presumed dead, banished from the Lost Cities, and helped stop a plague from killing off the entire gnomish species. She'd even snuck into the ogres' capital and helped destroy half the city—which happened to be why the Council was struggling to negotiate a new elvin-ogre treaty.

"Relax," Fitz said as her mind spun to nightmares of lumpy-faced ogres tearing through the elves' glittering streets. "We're supposed to be celebrating."

His cheer sounded forced. But she knew Fitz was trying.

That's what they did now.

Try.

Wait.

Hope.

"Just let me grab my thinking cap," she told him, heading for her locker. The long floppy hat was required during midterms, designed to restrict Telepaths and preserve the integrity of the tests—not that anything could block Sophie's enhanced abilities. But after the exams, the hats became present sacks, and everyone filled them with treats and trinkets and treasures.

"I'll need to inspect your presents before you open them," Sandor warned as he helped Sophie lift her overstuffed hat.

"That's perfect," Fitz said. "While he does that, you can open mine."

He pulled a small box from the pocket of his waist-length cape and handed it to Sophie. The opalescent wrapping paper had flecks of teal glitter dusted across it, and

he'd tied it with a silky teal bow, making her wonder if he'd guessed her favorite color.

She really hoped he couldn't guess why. . . .

"Hopefully I did better this year," Fitz said. "Biana claimed the riddler was a total fail."

The riddle-writing pen he'd given her last time *had* been a disappointment, but . . .

"I'm sure I'll love it," Sophie promised. "Besides. My gift is boring."

Sandor had declared an Atlantis shopping trip to be far too risky, so Sophie had spent the previous day baking her friends' presents.

She handed Fitz a round silver tin and he popped the lid off immediately.

"Ripplefluffs?" he asked, smiling his first real smile in days.

The silver-wrapped treats were what might happen if a brownie and a cupcake had a fudgey, buttery baby, with a candy surprise sunken into the center. Sophie's adoptive mother, Edaline, had taught her the recipe and helped her invent two flavor combinations.

"How did you know that chocolate and mint is my favorite?" Fitz asked, peeling off the silver wrapper and devouring the whole fluff in one bite.

"I didn't," Sophie admitted. "If I had, I wouldn't have given you any of the butter toffee ones."

"Those look amazing too," he said, then frowned at his present. "Aren't you going to open it?"

"Shouldn't I wait until we're with the others?"

"Nah. It'll be better if it's just the two of us."

Something about the way he said it made her heart switch to flutter mode, even though she knew Fitz didn't think of her that way. Her mind raced through a dozen theories as she carefully tore the shimmering paper. But she still wasn't prepared to find . . .

"Rings?"

"They go on your thumbs," Fitz explained. "It's a Cognate thing."

She wasn't sure what thumb jewelry had to do with their rare telepathic connection. But she noticed Fitz was wearing an identical set. Each ring had initials stamped into the verdigris metal. *SEF* on the right—Sophie Elizabeth Foster—and *FAV* on the left.

"Fitzroy Avery Vacker."

"Your full name is Fitzroy?" she asked.

"Yeah. No idea what my parents were thinking with that one. But watch this. Try opening your thoughts to mine, and then do this."

He held his hands palm-out, waiting for her to do the same.

As soon as she did, the rings turned warm against her skin and snapped their hands together like magnets.

“They’re made from ruminel,” Fitz said, “which reacts to mental energy. It doesn’t change anything, but it’ll show us when our minds are connected, and I thought it would help us concentrate and . . .” His voice trailed off. “You hate them, don’t you?”

“Of course not!”

She liked them a little too much, actually.

She was just trying not to show it.

There were a lot of kids staring at them.

And whispering.

And giggling.

Fitz twisted his palms, breaking the rings’ connection. “I guess I should’ve gone with the necklace Biana showed me. You just have so many necklaces—and the last one you got . . .”

He didn’t finish the sentence.

It would’ve meant mentioning Keefe.

“I’m glad you got me these. Seriously. They’re my fave.” She pointed to the “FAV.”

That earned her another smile, and Fitz brushed his dark hair off his forehead. “Come on, I’m sure Dex and Biana are getting sick of waiting for us.”

“Where did Grizel go?” Sandor asked as they turned to leave. “She’s supposed to stay by your side.”

“I’m right here,” a husky female voice said as a lithe gray goblin in a fitted black jumpsuit seemed to melt out of the shadows. Fitz’s bodyguard was just as tall as Sandor, but far leaner—and what she lacked in bulk she made up for in stealth and grace.

“I swear,” she said, tapping Sandor on the nose. “It’s almost too easy to evade you.”

“Anyone can hide in this chaos,” Sandor huffed. “And now is not the time for games!”

“There’s always time for games.” Grizel tossed her long ponytail in a way that almost seemed . . . Was it flirty?

Sandor must’ve noticed too, because his gray skin tinted pink. He cleared his throat and turned to Sophie. “Weren’t we heading to the cafeteria?”

She nodded and followed Fitz into the mazelike halls, where the colorful crystal walls shimmered in the afternoon sunlight. The cafeteria was on the second floor of the campus’s five-story glass pyramid, which sat in the center of the courtyard framed by the U-shaped main building.

Sophie spent most of the walk wondering how long it would take Dex to notice her new accessories. The answer was three seconds—and another after that to notice the matching rings on Fitz’s thumbs.

His periwinkle eyes narrowed, but he kept his voice cheerful as he said, “I guess we’re all giving rings this year.”

Biana held out her hand to show Sophie a ring that looked familiar—probably because Sophie had a less sparkly, slightly more crooked, definitely less pink version on her own finger.

“I also made one for you,” Dex told Fitz. “It’s in your thinking cap. And I have some for Tam and Linh, whenever we see them again. That way we’ll all have panic switches—and I added stronger trackers, so I can home in on the signal even if you don’t press your stone. Just in case anything weird happens.”

“Your Technopath tricks aren’t necessary,” Sandor told him, pointing to their group of bodyguards—four goblins in all.

“But it’s still good to have a backup plan, right?” Biana asked, admiring her ring from another angle. The pink stone matched the glittery shadow she’d brushed around her teal eyes, as well as the gloss on her heart-shaped lips. Biana reminded Sophie of the dolls her human parents had tried to get her to play with as a kid—too beautiful and stylish to be real.

“Thank you again,” Biana told Dex. “I’m never taking it off!”

Dex’s cheeks turned the same color as his strawberry-blond hair.

Sophie smiled, glad to see Dex and Biana getting along so well—especially after all the years Dex had spent resenting the Vackers. He used to call Fitz “Wonderboy” and claimed their legendary family was too snobby and perfect.

Nobody thought that anymore.

In fact, both Fitz’s and Biana’s thinking caps looked emptier than they’d been the previous year. Their parents had decided not to let the Black Swan cover for Alvar’s disappearance like they’d done for Keefe. Alvar had lied for more than a decade and used his position in the nobility to spy on his father and the Council—and helped kidnap Sophie and Dex. He didn’t deserve protection, even if it brought undeserved shame on the family.

Awkward silence settled over their table and Sophie tried not to look at the empty chairs. Not only was Keefe missing, but Jensi had chosen to sit with his old friends. He’d reconnected with them during the months that Sophie and the others had lived with the Black Swan, and he seemed reluctant to come back, like he was worried they’d abandon him again. Marella was avoiding them too—though she also wasn’t at

Stina Heks's table, like Sophie would've expected. Marella sat by herself in the farthest corner, while Stina sat with Biana's former best friend, Maruca.

Stina caught Sophie watching her and didn't return her smile—but she didn't offer her usual glare either. Apparently that was as nice as Stina was going to get, now that her dad was working with the Black Swan.

"Here," Dex said, placing a white box into Sophie's hands. "Made this for you—and sorry it's not wrapped. Rex and Bex used up all the ribbon tying Lex to a chandelier."

Dex's younger triplet siblings were notorious troublemakers. Sophie had a feeling the loudest shouting on the other end of the cafeteria was coming from them. And she'd expected to open the box and find another Dex-ified gadget. But his gift reminded her that he was also an amazing alchemist.

"You made me Panakes perfume?" she asked, shaking the fragile crystal bottle and watching the pinkish-purplish-bluish petals swirl through the shimmering syrup.

She twisted open the top and closed her eyes as she inhaled the rich, sweet fragrance. Instantly she was back in the Havenfield pastures, standing under the swaying branches of Calla's tree. A Panakes only grew when a gnome willingly surrendered their life and shifted into their final tree form. Calla had made the sacrifice for her people, to let her healing blossoms end the deadly plague the ogres had unleashed.

"I'm sure you smell them all the time," Dex said, "but I know how much you miss her. And this way, when you wear the perfume, you're keeping a small part of her with you everywhere you go."

Sophie's voice failed her, so she grabbed Dex and hugged him as tight as she could—but she *might've* held on a bit too long. When she let go, Dex was redder than Fitz's school uniform.

They were saved from the awkwardness by the doors to the cafeteria bursting open.

Despite her earlier calm, Sophie's palms turned clammy as she searched the flood of parents for Grady and Edaline. She spotted Grady's tousled blond hair first, and as soon as his bright blue eyes met hers, his chiseled features curved with an enormous smile.

"Passed with flying colors," he and Edaline both shouted as Sophie raced across the room to meet them.

She threw her arms around both her parents. "Even linguistics?"

That had been her iffiest subject—by far. Being a Polyglot made her naturally understand languages, but after the trick Keefe had pulled, Sophie refused to practice mimicking voices. Plus, her relationship with her Mentor was . . . complicated. Lady

Cadence had a special affinity for the ogres, and was *not* happy with Sophie for helping flood the ogre capital.

“That was your lowest score,” Edaline admitted, shaking a piece of her wavy amber-colored hair out of her eyes. “But you were still well within passing range.”

“And your highest score was inflicting,” Grady added. “Councillor Bronte said you’ve been incredibly dedicated during your sessions. In fact, he said you’ve now reached his most advanced level of training.”

“Is that bad?” Sophie asked, not missing his raised eyebrow. She didn’t *like* inflicting pain—but the ability had saved her life. And training at least gave her *something* she could do to prepare for the next time she faced off with the Neverseen. “I just want to make sure I can defend myself—and I know I have Sandor. But it’s not like he’s invincible. Isn’t it smart to plan for the worst-case scenario?”

“It *is* smart,” Grady agreed. “But I also think you and I should talk later. Okay?”

Sophie gave him half a nod. The last thing she wanted was another “with great power comes great responsibility” lecture. But she was pretty sure it was unavoidable.

“Do you guys want to go?” she asked, knowing her parents weren’t fans of crowds. Before she’d moved in with them, Grady and Edaline had spent sixteen years hiding away, mourning the death of their only daughter. Jolie had been killed in a fire they’d recently discovered was set by her fiancé, Brant—a secret Pyrokinetic, and a leader of the Neverseen.

“We’re fine,” Grady promised, squeezing Sophie’s hand. “And we can’t leave until Magnate Leto makes his final announcement.”

He said the name so easily, without tripping over it the way Sophie tended to. Now that she knew his secret identity, her brain always wanted to call him *Mr. Forkle*.

Sophie scanned the room to check for her friends and found them smiling and celebrating. Even Alden and Della—Fitz and Biana’s parents—looked happier than she’d seen them in weeks. She was on her way to say hi when the lights dimmed and Magnate Leto’s face projected across the glass walls.

“You kids did an excellent job on your midterms!” he said, starting his speech with his two favorite words.

No matter how many times Sophie studied his slicked dark hair and sharp features, she still couldn’t see the bloated, wrinkled face of the Black Swan leader behind them. But she’d watched Mr. Forkle’s ruckleberry disguise fade right before her eyes.

“I realize this is usually the point where you’re dismissed for a six-week break,” Magnate Leto continued, “but in light of recent events, the Council has elected to do things a bit differently. I won’t go into further details—the Council will be sending out official scrolls after the weekend. But I wanted to mention it now so you’d be

prepared. In the meantime, enjoy the rest of the celebration. And remember, change can be a powerful, inspiring thing when we keep an open mind.”

Murmurs turned to a roar as his projection flashed away, leaving everyone debating possibilities.

“Do you have any idea what he’s talking about?” Grady asked Sophie.

She didn’t—and that made it even more frustrating. After all the debates she’d had with the Black Swan, all her endless pleas for them to include her and trust her, they still insisted on keeping her at arm’s length.

“Looks like everyone’s heading home,” Grady said, offering to gather up Sophie’s gifts while she returned her thinking cap to her locker.

The atrium was empty when she arrived—just Sophie and Sandor and a few forgotten candy bubbles. She left her hat on the middle shelf of her locker and was about to walk away when she noticed a white envelope bearing a familiar curved black symbol on the top shelf.

“Finally,” she whispered, ripping the thick paper right through the sign of the swan. Inside she found a short note—and a gift.

She slipped the long necklace around her neck, not bothering to inspect the pendant’s swan-neck shape, or the round piece of glass set in the center. The Black Swan had given her the same monocle when she swore fealty to their order, and she was glad to have a replacement for the one Brant had destroyed.

“What does the note say?” Sandor asked, reminding her that she would not be sneaking off for secret assignments without him.

She handed him the paper, which was more direct than the Black Swan’s usual clues:

Principal's office.

Now.

Come alone.

“I don’t like this,” Sandor mumbled.

“You never do.”

He followed her without further comment as she made her way back to the glass pyramid. Sophie kept her eyes down as she walked, relieved when she reached the apex without running into her friends. If they’d known about the note they would’ve *insisted* on joining her.

“You may come in, Miss Foster,” Magnate Leto’s deep voice called through the heavy door before Sophie could even knock. “But I’d like Sandor to keep watch

outside. This conversation cannot tolerate eavesdroppers.”

Sandor’s sigh sounded like a snarl. “I’ll be *right* outside—and if you leap away without me, there will be *consequences*.”

“Close the door behind you,” Magnate Leto told her as she entered, the words echoing around the glass office.

Afternoon sunlight streamed through the windows, turning the triangular room blindingly bright. The sloped glass walls had mirrors set into every other pane, remnants from the days when Councillor Alina—Sophie’s least favorite Councillor—was principal of Foxfire.

“I’m glad you came,” Magnate Leto said from the other side of his huge swiveling desk chair. He was turned toward the windows, hidden behind the stiff winged-back cushion. “Sorry my note was so hasty. Next time I’ll make sure it rhymes.”

The last few words sounded higher pitched, and Sophie was trying to figure out why when the chair slowly spun around to face her.

Instead of the dark-haired elf she’d been expecting, she found a boy dressed all in black, with artfully styled blond hair and an infamous talent for mimicking voices.

“Keefe?” she whispered.

He smirked. “Did you miss me?”

TWO

WHOA, THAT IS an epic wave of emotions you're hitting me with," Keefe said, fanning the air between them. "It feels like you either want to hug me or strangle me—and personally, I'm rooting for the hug."

He leaned back in the chair, stretching his arms wide open.

"You're really going to joke about this?" Sophie asked, trying to keep her voice low. She didn't want Sandor bursting in until she'd gotten some answers.

"Don't come any closer," she warned as Keefe stood to approach her. "I've been practicing inflicting. A *lot*."

One hand moved to her stomach, rubbing the knot of emotions lodged under her ribs. Bronte was teaching her to tie them away, ready to unravel whenever she needed a burst of furious power.

Keefe's smile faded. "Are you *afraid* of me?"

"You're the Empath."

The words hung there for several seconds, turning heavier and heavier.

Keefe sank back into his chair. "Wow . . . I didn't expect that."

"What *did* you expect? You ran off with the Neverseen! You realize those are the people trying to kill me, right? The same people who killed Kenric and Jolie, and almost killed all of the gnomes and—"

"I *know*," Keefe interrupted. "But you know me, Foster."

"I thought I did."

"You *do*. I'm still the same guy. All I'm trying to do is end this nightmare. If I can figure out what they're planning—"

"Nope," Sophie jumped in. "Worst idea ever. Playing both sides never works. Sooner or later they're going to make you *commit*."

Keefe shifted in his seat. "I realize that what I'm doing is risky—"

"And stupid," Sophie added. "And dangerous. And—"

"I still have to do it. And it'll be fine. It's all about keeping the right balance."

“There’s no *balance* when it comes to the bad guys, Keefe. They’re bad. It’s that simple.”

“You and I both know it’s *never* simple. In fact, I seem to remember you telling me that the villains are never *all* bad.”

“I didn’t say that because I wanted you to join them! I said that’s what makes them so scary!”

“I know. But . . . I have a plan. I have to stick to it.”

His ice-blue eyes met hers, pleading for understanding.

She shook her head. “We can beat them together. Team Foster-Keefe, remember?”

“And how many times will you almost die in the process?” he asked. “How many emergency physician visits will there be? And what if Elwin can’t fix you?”

“What if Elwin can’t fix *you*?”

“I . . . don’t matter.”

And there it was.

Keefe’s *guilt*.

The most dangerous emotion an elf could feel.

Most were crippled by it. Alden’s sanity had once shattered because of it. But for some people it made them *reckless*.

“It’s not your job to protect me,” she told him.

“Maybe not. But if something happens . . .”

She waited for him to say the rest—the real reason he felt so responsible. When he didn’t, she said it for him.

“I know you blame yourself for what your mom’s done—”

“This isn’t about her!”

But it was.

Sophie knew him too well.

Keefe’s family life had always been miserable, thanks to his stiff, insulting father. But he’d been on a downward spiral ever since he’d discovered that his mom was one of the leaders of the Neverseen. She’d even erased some of his childhood memories and hidden a tracker in his family crest pin so he’d lead the Neverseen straight to his friends. But that was all before the Neverseen left her to die in an ogre prison as punishment for allowing one of her cohorts to be captured.

Keefe kept claiming he didn’t care. But Lady Gisela was still his mom—and he’d joined the Neverseen right after he found out they might be willing to help him rescue her.

“Please,” Sophie begged. “We can do anything they can do. Just come home—before it’s too late.”

“It’s already too late.”

His voice was the same flat tone he’d used before, when he’d told her *I can’t pretend I’m who you want me to be anymore.*

“So this is about the Lodestar Initiative, then?” she asked.

She’d only heard the mysterious project mentioned twice—once from the Neverseen and once in Keefe’s mind, in a memory his mother had tried to erase. It seemed to be the Neverseen’s grand plan. And Keefe believed he was a part of it.

Keefe stood to pace the small room, keeping a careful space between them.

“What *is* the Lodestar Initiative?” she pressed. “And what other lost memories did you recover? You said there were more.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Obviously it does.”

Keefe tilted his head toward the ceiling, his eyes focused on the highest point. “All you need to know is that I’m not like you, okay? The Neverseen aren’t going to give me a choice.”

Sophie was part of a project too—the Black Swan’s Project Moonlark. They’d genetically enhanced her abilities and filled her mind with important secrets for reasons they’d still never fully explained. But Mr. Forkle had always made it clear that any further involvement was up to *her*.

“There’s always a choice, Keefe.”

“Yeah—I’m going to find a way to end this on *my* terms. *That’s* my choice.”

Silence swelled between them, and Sophie played with the monocle pendant he’d included with the note. “Was this the one that Brant ordered you to brand me with?”

Keefe cringed. “No. That one’s mine. I stole it back.”

“What happens when they notice it’s gone?”

He shrugged.

She sighed. “This is never going to work, Keefe. Brant and Fintan are crazy—but they’re not stupid. Neither is Alvar. One of them is going to figure out what you’re doing, and then who knows how they’ll punish you? Just quit now and we’ll come up with a new plan together.”

She offered him her hand.

Keefe stared at it for so long Sophie’s arm muscles began to ache.

“That’s it?” she asked when he turned away. “You’d rather keep hurting the people who care about you?”

“I’m helping you!”

“And hurting us. Do you know what Fitz did when I told him you left?”

Keefe ran his hands through his hair, wrecking his careful style. “I’m guessing yelling was involved.”

“That’s what I’d been hoping for. But he didn’t even raise his voice. He just looked away so I wouldn’t see him crying. So did Biana. Even Dex teared up.”

Seconds ticked by. Maybe minutes. It felt like forever before Keefe whispered, “What about you?”

“I cried harder than any of them,” she admitted. “And then I got angry. You stole Kenric’s cache from me. You mimicked my voice!”

The marble-size gadget held seven Forgotten Secrets—information deemed too dangerous for even the Council to know. Each Councillor had their own cache, and Kenric had asked Oralie to entrust Sophie with his when he died. Sophie had vowed to protect the cache with her life, and if she didn’t get it back before the Council discovered it was missing . . .

“I also helped you escape,” Keefe reminded her.

“Yeah, but you only made me one special bead. So what happens the next time the Neverseen find me? Or Dex? Or Fitz? Or Biana?”

“I’ll find another way. I’m already working on a few things. And I only rigged one bead because I knew the Neverseen wouldn’t fall for the same trick twice.”

“I love how you keep talking about them like you’re not one of them now.”

“I’m *not*.”

“Are you sure?”

She pointed to the patch on the sleeves of his long black cloak, the same symbol that kept haunting her nightmares—a white eye set in a circle.

“This is just a costume,” Keefe insisted.

“Even if it is, the things you’re doing are *real*. That cache could destroy everything. And you handed it over like it was no big deal—”

“Because it wasn’t! They can’t open it. They’ve had all their Technopaths working on it, and they can’t break through the security.”

“And when they finally figure it out?”

“I’ll steal it back long before that happens. I can handle this, Sophie. It’s my *legacy*.”

“What does that mean?”

“I’m still putting all the pieces together. But I know enough to know I have to do this. And my plan is already working. Every day they’re trusting me a little bit more.”

“Why is that?” she snapped. “What horrible things are they making you do to prove yourself?”

Keefe tried to pace again, but she blocked his path. “Did you help them break into the registry?”

“Of course not.”

“Because they didn’t ask you? Or because you told them ‘no?’”

His fidgeting made her wish she didn’t have to ask her next question.

“What about the Sanctuary?”

The Neverseen had spent months trying to break into the animal preserve to steal Silveny and Greyfell—the only known alicorns, who also happened to be Sophie and Keefe’s friends.

“You were there, weren’t you?” she asked when he moved away from her. “You helped the Neverseen burn the gate?”

“All I did was keep watch.”

She shook her head. “How could you be a part of that?”

The Neverseen were willing to risk anything to steal Silveny. They’d even broken one of her wings. All because the elves believed that allowing a creature to go extinct would throw off the delicate balance of the entire planet. Whoever controlled the last two alicorns—and their unborn baby—could blackmail the Council. They’d also prove to the world how little the Council could do to protect something it cherished, and fuel the unrest threatening to boil over.

“I knew Silveny and Greyfell weren’t there anymore,” Keefe argued. “That’s the only reason I agreed. And in case you’re wondering, I haven’t told the Neverseen *anything*.”

“*Yet*,” Sophie corrected. “Even if you don’t tell them, they can use a Telepath to fish out all of your secrets.”

“They don’t have a Telepath right now. Gethen was their only one, and the Council has him locked away—thanks to *us*. I’m telling you, I’ve thought this through. I just need you to trust me.”

She wanted to.

She really did.

She’d even done her best to convince Fitz, Dex, and Biana to not give up on him.

But she could still hear the Neverseen telling Keefe: *Surely you’ve realized that switching sides means betraying your friends.*

“Please,” Keefe begged. “I promise, I’m still me. And I can do this.”

He took a cautious step toward her.

Then another.

And another.

Until he was right in front of her, his lips curling with the world’s saddest smile.

“Back to nervous habits, huh?” he asked as he brushed a fallen eyelash off her cheek.

“It’s been a rough few weeks,” she whispered.

“Yeah. It really has.”

He blew the eyelash away and she wondered if he'd made a wish—until she remembered that elves didn't have silly superstitions like that.

She probably shouldn't either, but she went ahead and sent a silent plea into the universe.

“You're not still afraid of me, are you?” he asked. “You trust me?”

She honestly didn't know. So she offered him a shaky hand. “You tell me.”

Keefe's fingers curled around hers and his brow creased as he closed his eyes.

“Thank you,” he whispered, his lips stretching into a glorious smile. “I knew I could count on you, Foster.”

“Don't make me regret it.”

“I won't. That's why I came here today—I had to find a way to warn you. The Neverseen are planning something big. I don't know any specifics yet, but I know it involves Grady and Edaline and—whoa, easy there.” He steadied her when her knees wobbled. “It's going to be okay. See why I'm doing this? I can stop things *before* they get bad.”

Sophie took a slow, deep breath, trying to remind herself that Grady's ability as a Mesmer gave him an incredible advantage. She'd seen him make all twelve Councillors smack themselves in the face. He'd even made Brant burn off his own hand.

But the Neverseen were ruthless.

And clever.

And always ahead of the game.

Which made her realize . . .

“You can't go back there, Keefe. Today was probably a test. I bet they gave you that information to see if you'd sneak away to warn me. They could be tracking you right now—what?” she asked when she noticed how hard he was biting his lip.

“It's not a test. They . . . *sent* me here.”

“Why would they do that?”

Keefe's eyes returned to the ceiling. “Probably because I suggested it. I needed a way to warn you—and they needed me to prove my loyalty. This was the best solution I could come up with.”

Cold chills washed through Sophie as he removed two items from his cloak pocket—a flat golden triangle and a blue pendant with a single facet.

“This next part is going to be rough,” he whispered. “But if you cover your face, I promise you'll be safe. And just in case . . .” He unfastened his cloak and wrapped it around her shoulders, pulling the hood up over her head. “I'll tell them I lost this in the chaos.”

“What chaos, Keefe? What are you doing?”

“I’m helping you. Sometimes things have to get worse before they get better.”

Sophie tried to shout for Sandor, but Keefe covered her mouth with one hand and flung the golden triangle toward the ceiling with the other. One of the points stuck to the center of the apex and the gadget flashed green.

“That means we have ten seconds.” Keefe said. “Just get down and cover your face—everything is going to be okay. Sandor will be safe. Goblins have super-thick skin—just trust me, okay?”

He pulled his hand back, but Sophie was shaking too hard to scream. She dropped to her knees and pulled the hood against her head.

“Please don’t hate me,” Keefe begged as he held his blue crystal up to the light to make a path. “Tell everyone I’ll be back as soon as I finish this. And remember—I’m on your side.”

He glittered away right as the green gadget turned red and a high-pitched squeal blasted from the ceiling, sending a rippling sound wave rushing down the walls.

Shattering all of the glass.

THREE

IT'S NOT AS bad as it seems.”

Magnate Leto had said the words a dozen times—and Sophie wanted to believe them. But all she could see were the slivers of glass glinting in his hair.

She was covered in them as well, but they were mostly stuck to Keefe's thick cloak. She'd been spared any cuts or scratches, just like he'd promised.

The glass pyramid hadn't been so fortunate. Magnate Leto's office was in shambles, its walls now empty metal frames. And while the rest of the pyramid had simply crackled and splintered, all of the glass would have to be replaced.

At least no one had been hurt—and the other buildings on campus had been spared. But that didn't change the fact that the Neverseen had now attacked Foxfire.

And it had been Keefe's idea.

All twelve Councillors had visited the school to assess the damage, and questioned Sophie thoroughly. Then Magnate Leto had followed her home to get the *real* story.

The fading twilight glow seeped through Havenfield's glass walls, painting the elegant white décor of the main room in shades of purple, gray, and blue. Even with the soft shimmer from the twinkling chandeliers, Sophie felt like the whole world had been bruised.

“Truly, Miss Foster,” Magnate Leto said as he plopped next to her on the plush sofa. “I've been meaning to redecorate my office since I took over as principal. I've never been a fan of my reflection—especially in this form.”

Sophie shook her head. “You know this is about more than broken mirrors.”

“She's right,” Grady agreed, stalking down the curved staircase in the center of the room with Brielle—his svelte goblin bodyguard with tight curly hair—in tow. “This is about That Boy! I know he used to be your friend—”

“He *is* my friend,” Sophie corrected.

And he was working with her enemies.

Grady crouched in front of her. “Whatever he is or isn't to you doesn't change the things he's doing.” He plucked an especially jagged shard of glass off of her sleeve.

The razor-sharp edges would've shredded her skin if Keefe hadn't given her his cloak.

Then again, she wouldn't have needed it if he hadn't blown up the place.

She reached for Grady's hands. "I'm fine. And Keefe did this to warn us."

"That doesn't make destroying Foxfire okay!"

No, it didn't . . .

"Technically, he only destroyed my office," Magnate Leto argued. "And my own foolishness is partially to blame. I should've suspected something the moment I was called to the Level Five atrium to remove a pair of gremlins from the lockers. Causing havoc has always been one of Mr. Sencen's specialties. As is breaking into the principal's office."

"You're seriously going to equate this with one of his pranks?" Grady asked. "Like it's just another Great Gulon Incident?"

If the vein in Grady's forehead hadn't been so bulgy, Sophie would've asked someone to *finally* share the story of Keefe's legendary triumph.

"It's all a rather dark shade of gray," Magnate Leto admitted. "But that's a color all of us are familiar with, aren't we? Wouldn't you use it to describe your behavior when you confronted Brant about what he did to your daughter? Or Miss Foster, when you drugged your human family so you could be erased from their lives? And surely the Council would apply it to most of my actions. After all, I helped form an illegal organization. Experimented with the genetics of an innocent child. Secreted her away in the Forbidden Cities to be raised by humans. Erased two of her memories without her permission—"

"We have a bigger problem," Sophie interrupted, not needing any more reminders of how weird her life had been. "I'm sure Oralie knew I was lying when I said I didn't see who triggered the sound wave. I was way too emotional to fool an Empath."

"Councillor Oralie has always been your loyal supporter," Magnate Leto assured her.

"Okay, but Councillor Alina looked suspicious too—and she hates me. All it takes is one of them to figure out that it was Keefe, and he'll never be able to come back."

"Not necessarily," Magnate Leto said. "Questionable actions can be forgiven when they're done with good intentions. Think of the Ancient Councillors' reasons for not warning the gnomes that the ogres possessed the plague. With time, most have come to understand their complicated motivations."

The key word in that sentence was "most."

In Keefe's case there'd be many who'd see a notorious troublemaker graduating to a new level of mayhem. Or worse: a loyal son stepping into the role his mother

designed for him.

Sophie sank back into the sofa's cushions, trying to disappear into the fluff—anything to avoid having to figure out what to do or think or—

“I know this is all very overwhelming,” Magnate Leto said. “But that’s only because you’re trying to interpret Mr. Sencen’s actions with your head. You have a very good head, Miss Foster. Very logical and clever and strong. But do you know what’s even more powerful?”

He pointed to her heart.

“Which means what?” Grady asked. “We’re relying on *teenage feelings*?”

“I wouldn’t be so quick to dismiss them. Miss Foster understands Mr. Sencen in ways the rest of us simply cannot. I watched them most carefully during their time in Alluveterre. He opened up to her. Leaned on her. Trusted her. So”—his eyes met Sophie’s—“what does your heart tell you?”

Sophie crossed her arms over her chest, wishing she could reach in and pluck out the answer. Instead, her head kept taking over, flooding her consciousness with memories:

Keefe crying on her shoulder the day she’d had to tell him that his mom might be dead.

The window slumber parties they’d held so they wouldn’t have to face the tougher nights alone.

His room covered in notes and crumpled bits of paper as he desperately tried to piece together the truth hidden in his past.

A much younger Keefe, sitting and waiting in Atlantis for a family that didn’t care enough to remember him.

Over and over the scenes replayed, until another image slowly replaced them.

Keefe, in the Healing Tent in Exillium, his humor and confidence stripped away, revealing the scared, angry boy he kept hidden underneath.

The memory didn’t tell her anything. But it made her heart ache—made her wish she could wrap her arms around him and make everything okay.

Magnate Leto nodded, as if he’d been eavesdropping on her thoughts. Which made her wonder . . .

“When we were in Alluveterre, did you ever read his mind?”

Telepaths weren’t supposed to invade anyone’s privacy without permission—but Magnate Leto had never been one to follow rules.

“You’re asking if I knew he was going to join the Neverseen?” he asked. “I knew he was considering it. But the idea was incredibly tentative. It didn’t truly take shape

until you were heading for Ravagog—and even then, he still seemed undecided. But I can tell you that he saw it as a necessary evil to right the wrongs his mother caused.”

“Evil’ is right,” Grady muttered. “And if That Boy comes anywhere near you again, I want you to drop him with the full weight of your inflicting.”

“Grady!” Edaline gasped.

She’d been standing by the farthest wall next to Cadoc—her hulking new bodyguard, who almost made Sandor look skinny—staring so silently at the pastures of grazing dinosaurs and other crazy creatures that Sophie had forgotten she was there.

“Need I remind you that Keefe’s doing the same thing our daughter tried to do?” Edaline asked him.

The words knocked Grady back a step.

They hit Sophie pretty hard too.

Jolie had tried to infiltrate the Neverseen, and the plan had been working—until they ordered her to destroy a human nuclear power plant to prove her loyalty. A few days after she refused, she was dead.

Grady moved to Edaline’s side and wrapped his arm around her waist. “I’m sorry. I guess I have some trust issues, after Brant.”

He said something else, but Sophie didn’t catch it, her mind too stuck on the huge reality Keefe was facing.

As much as she’d worried and fretted and stressed, she’d never truly imagined the impossible choices he’d have to face—or the worst-case scenario:

A tall, lean tree with blond shaggy leaves and scattered ice-blue flowers growing on a grassy hill in the Wanderling Woods—the elves’ version of a graveyard.

Each Wanderling’s seed was wrapped with the DNA of the person it had been planted to commemorate, and it grew with their coloring and essence.

“He’s going to get himself killed,” Sophie mumbled as the knot of emotions under her ribs twisted a million times tighter. “We need to get him out.”

“How do you propose we do that?” Magnate Leto asked.

Sophie wished she had suggestions. But she didn’t even know where Keefe was. She’d been trying to track his thoughts for weeks, like she used to do when she played base quest. But all she could tell was that Keefe was very far away.

“He’ll come home when he’s ready,” Magnate Leto told her. “In the meantime, I suggest we make use of the information he’s gone to such lengths to bring us.” He turned to Grady and Edaline. “I trust that you’ll allow your new bodyguards to do their jobs?”

“Brielle and Cadoc are some of our regiment’s best,” Sandor added.

“Do you think the Neverseen will guess that Keefe warned us if Grady and Edaline suddenly have goblins following them around?” Sophie had to ask.

“I’m sure Mr. Sencen has a plan for that,” Magnate Leto promised.

“Uh, we’re talking about the same Keefe, right?” Sophie asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” Grady told her. “I don’t need a bodyguard.”

Brielle cleared her throat. “With all due respect, Mr. Ruewen, there’s a reason the elves rely on goblin assistance. Are you truly prepared to kill if the need arises?”

Grady looked more than a little green as Brielle unsheathed her sword and slashed it with a deadly sort of grace. The elvin mind couldn’t process violence. Their thoughts were too sensitive—their consciences too strong. It was why the Neverseen were so unstable—though Fintan held his sanity together far better than Brant.

“What if we stay here?” Edaline suggested. “The Council hasn’t given Grady an assignment in weeks, and we have plenty to keep us busy with the animals. We can pass Cadoc and Brielle off like they’re additional guards for Sophie—which shouldn’t seem strange after what happened.”

“*That*,” Magnate Leto said, “is a brilliant solution.”

“Except it puts us on house arrest,” Grady argued.

“Isn’t it worth it to be safe?” Sophie countered.

“Hey—that works both ways, kiddo,” Grady reminded her. “If I agree to this, I need you to agree that there will be no more one-on-one meetings with anyone associated with the Neverseen—especially That Boy.”

Sophie groaned. “His name is Keefe!”

“Not right now, it isn’t. He has to earn that back. And if he’s really on our side, he won’t mind you having your bodyguard around as backup. Understood?”

Sophie agreed, mostly because Sandor would clobber her if she didn’t. “What do you think the Neverseen want with you guys?”

“I suspect this is primarily a power play,” Magnate Leto said quietly. “Much like their attempts to capture the alicorns. If they possess something you love . . .”

“They can control me,” Sophie finished.

Magnate Leto nodded. “I’m betting that they—like myself—assume Kenric would’ve known his cache is far more valuable to you if you have a way to access the information inside. This could be their plan to force you to open it for them.”

“Oh good—so the thing That Boy stole is putting all of us in more danger,” Grady muttered.

“If it weren’t that, it would be something else,” Magnate Leto assured him. “They’ve been after Miss Foster from the beginning. And honestly, the more valuable they see her as, the safer she is—relatively speaking.”

“I don’t even know how to open the cache,” Sophie reminded everyone—though *technically* she’d never tried. She had enough crazy information stored in her head. The last thing she wanted was to fill it with secrets even the Council couldn’t handle.

Still, Magnate Leto’s theory raised other questions—the kind that made her voice get thick and squeaky.

“I know you don’t want to tell me who my genetic parents are—”

“Wrong,” Magnate Leto interrupted. “I *can’t* tell you.”

Sophie glanced at Grady and Edaline, trying to decide if she should leave the conversation at that. She rarely mentioned her genetic parents around them—or her human family. It was complicated enough having three different moms and dads—especially since one pair no longer remembered her, and another was a complete mystery.

But she needed to know.

“Was Kenric my father? He was a Telepath. And he was always so kind to me.” Her throat closed off as she remembered his bright smiles.

The red-haired Councillor had been one of Sophie’s strongest supporters, right up until the day she’d lost him to Fintan’s inferno of Everblaze.

Magnate Leto reached for Sophie’s hand, tracing a finger across the star-shaped scar he’d accidentally given her when he healed her abilities. “Kenric wasn’t involved with Project Moonlark. And that’s *all* I can tell you. Some secrets must remain hidden. Besides, we have much more pressing matters to discuss, like the other significant piece of information we learned from Mr. Sencen. Did he really say that Gethen was the Neverseen’s only Telepath?”

“Why does that matter?” Sophie asked.

“Because telepathy is generally considered to be our most vital ability. We’d never have known the humans were plotting to betray us all those millennia ago if our Telepaths hadn’t overheard their schemes. That’s why there are more Telepaths in the nobility than any other talent. So either the Neverseen have failed to recruit any others—which could tell us something about their method of operating. Or there’s a reason they’re avoiding the talent. Either way, it means I should press the Council about allowing a visit to Gethen.”

Sophie’s eyes narrowed. “I’ve been saying that for weeks!”

“I know. And I’ve been stalling—partially because I promised to bring you with me, and I still believe Gethen intends to harm you if you try to search his mind. But mostly because I wanted to see exactly what role Mr. Sencen was going to play before choosing our next step.”

“Well, now we know,” Grady muttered, holding up the shard of glass again.

“I know you look at that and see violence and destruction,” Magnate Leto told him. “But I see a boy willing to do anything to tear the Neverseen’s organization apart. And I for one am going to believe in him—especially since he may have unwittingly given us another advantage. May I have that cloak, Miss Foster?”

“I’m sure there’s a hidden tracker,” Sandor warned as Sophie handed it over.

“That’s what I’m hoping for. Perhaps if we move it somewhere *interesting*, we can lure them out of their little hiding places.”

“You want to meet with them?” Grady asked.

“I want to send a message. Can I borrow a dagger?”

Brielle whipped a jagged silver knife from her boot and handed it to Magnate Leto. He sliced open the cloak’s hem along the bottom edge, revealing two disks—one gold and one black—sewn between the folds of thick fabric.

Sandor frowned. “The gold one’s the tracker—but I’ve never seen anything like the black. It’s not even made of metal.”

“Indeed it’s not,” Magnate Leto said, severing the threads securing the black disk to the lining. “And it’s not magsidian, either.”

The rare dwarven mineral changed properties depending on how someone carved it, and it was often used as a form of security authorization.

“Careful,” Sophie warned as he held the disk up to the grayish light. “I’m sure that’s covered in aromark.”

The powerful ogre enzyme wouldn’t hurt him. But it could only be removed through an *unpleasant* process.

“I’ve only seen aromark on metal,” Magnate Leto murmured. “And this symbol . . .”

He traced his finger over the thin white etchings across the top—a line decorated with dashes, sandwiched between two different-size circles.

“Do you know what it means?” Sophie asked.

“Sadly, no,” Magnate Leto admitted. “But I’ve seen it before—along with other similar markings—on a shard of memory I recently recovered.”

“From who?” Sophie asked.

Magnate Leto sighed, letting several seconds crawl by before he told her, “From Prentice.”

FOUR

PRENTICE,” SOPHIE REPEATED, not sure if she felt relieved or furious. “The same Prentice you’ve been telling me isn’t strong enough to have me search his mind?”

“That would be him,” Magnate Leto agreed, and with that, Sophie’s fury won.

Prentice used to be a Keeper for the Black Swan, in charge of protecting their most crucial secrets. And he’d allowed his sanity to be broken to prevent the Council from discovering Sophie’s existence. He’d spent years locked away in the elves’ underground prison, needing her abilities to grow strong enough to heal him. But when Sophie was finally ready—and the Council had freed him from Exile—his consciousness disappeared, leaving him an empty shell.

Nothing had seemed capable of bringing him back—until a few weeks earlier, when Prentice woke up. Sophie had assumed the news meant he’d made a major recovery, but sadly, his mind was still badly broken. She’d been begging the Black Swan to let her heal him, and each time she’d been told that Prentice’s mind was too weak, too fragile, too unstable.

“Why would you lie to me?” she snapped as Edaline placed a calming hand on her shoulder.

“I didn’t,” Magnate Leto promised. “I told you he wasn’t ready to be *healed*—not *searched*.”

“And I thought my enhanced abilities made me the only one strong enough to search a broken mind,” Sophie argued.

“You are. I paid dearly for my attempt. But I had to see if I could figure out why he called swan song.”

The Black Swan used the words as a code, to warn each other when they were in extreme danger. Prentice had given the signal right before the Council arrested him, almost like he’d known it was coming.

“Why didn’t you let me help you search his mind, then?” Sophie asked.

“Because . . . I didn’t trust myself not to beg you to heal him. You have no idea how much it pains me to leave him in darkness. But his mind needs to grow stronger

before we bring him back to full consciousness. He has far too much to bear—and if his sanity collapses again, I fear there won't be enough left for you to attempt another repair.”

The crack in his voice deflated a bit of Sophie's anger.

The rest faded when she admitted she shared the same worries.

A lot had changed in Prentice's life since he'd sacrificed his sanity. His wife, Cyrah, had died in some sort of light leaping accident. And his son, Wylie, had grown up barely knowing his father. That was a tremendous amount of grief for a weakened mind to process.

“You could've at least told me what was going on,” Sophie grumbled.

“I know. When it comes to Prentice, I never seem to follow the course of wisdom. I suppose I feel too responsible.”

“How do you think I feel? He's broken because of me!”

“Careful, Sophie,” Grady warned. “You saw what thoughts like that did to Alden.”

Alden's guilt over his role in Prentice's capture—even though he hadn't known Prentice was one of the good guys at the time—had shattered his sanity. If Sophie hadn't found the strength to heal him, he'd still be lost to the madness.

She took a steadying breath and pointed to the black disk. “We need to find out what that symbol means. And the best way to do that is to take me to see Prentice—just to search his mind for additional memories. Not to heal him.”

Magnate Leto's jaw set and Sophie braced for him to argue. But when he spoke, he told her, “I suppose I can arrange to bring you tomorrow.”

“Why not now?” Sophie pressed.

“Probably not a good day to sneak away,” Grady reminded her, pointing to the crystal dangling from her choker-style registry necklace. The pendant monitored her location—and while a Technopath could cheat the signal, after what happened at Foxfire the Councillors would likely be watching her much too closely.

“Do you think it'll be safe to slip away tomorrow?” Edaline asked.

“It will with careful arrangements.” Magnate Leto tucked the black disk into his cape pocket. “I'll test this for enzymes tonight, just to be safe. I'll also see if I can figure out what it's made of. And we should get rid of this.”

He handed Keefe's cloak to Brielle.

“Do you want me to salvage the tracker?” she asked.

“No, I think it's best we avoid the Neverseen's attention until we better understand the significance of the disk. I'd prefer that they believe we destroyed the cloak without discovering its secret.”

Brielle headed for the door, her curls bouncing with every step. “Will fire be enough?”

“As long as the tracker melts completely.” He turned to Sophie. “I’ll be back to pick you up at dawn, along with Mr. Vacker. I think it would be wise for you to have your Cognate on hand. He won’t be able to enter Prentice’s mind, but he can boost your mental energy.”

Sophie’s stomach soured. “Does Fitz know that Keefe was behind what happened today?”

“If he doesn’t already, he will soon. His father hailed me before I left campus, and I promised to get back to him with details. I suspect he fears his eldest son was involved. Why? Is that a problem?”

“It might be. Fitz has been weird about Keefe. It’s like he wants to pretend they were never best friends.”

“Sometimes that’s easier,” Edaline said quietly. “Missing someone can hurt too much. It’s safer to be angry.”

Anger definitely was Fitz’s default. But his reaction to Keefe felt different.

Less angry. More . . . afraid.

“Well, if there’s one thing I have no doubt of,” Magnate Leto said as he reached for his pathfinder—a slender wand with an adjustable leaping crystal on one end—“it’s that you know how to help your friends through their struggles. Perhaps you can help Mr. Vacker tomorrow. In the meantime, try to get some rest. I’ll need you in top form to face Prentice.”

They watched him glitter away, leaving behind a silence that felt itchy.

“I think I’m going to shower and get in bed early,” Sophie decided, kissing each of her parents’ cheeks before heading upstairs, where her bedroom suite took up the entire third floor.

“Do you think you’ll be able to sleep?” Edaline called after her.

“Probably not.”

But no one offered her any sleeping aids. They knew how much Sophie hated sedatives, after all the times her enemies had drugged her. Even Sandor said nothing as he completed his nightly security sweep of her bedroom. But his check was more thorough than usual—inspecting every corner and closet and cranny—despite the fact that none of the petals in the flowered carpet showed even the slightest trace of a new footprint.

“All clear,” he announced after peeking under her giant canopied bed. “And I’ll be right outside if you need me.”

As soon as he closed her door, Sophie jumped straight in the shower to let the warm, colored streams wash away the last flecks of glass. They looked insignificant as they swirled down the drain. But her brain wouldn't stop repeating what Keefe had told her.

Sometimes things have to get worse before they get better.

Emotions swelled with each reminder. Fear. Doubt. Dread.

She closed her eyes and imagined each as a solid thread—then twisted them into the knot under her ribs the way Councillor Bronte had taught her. The tangle burned as she worked, and she pressed her hands against her skin, taking deep breaths until the feelings cooled.

Worry can bring power, Bronte had told her. Better to embrace it than ignore it.

But as she crawled into bed and clung tightly to Ella—the bright blue stuffed elephant she couldn't sleep without—new threads of fear kept flaring up. Even when Iggy—her tiny pet imp—flitted to her pillow and snuggled his blue furry body up next to her, his squeaky purring couldn't make her relax. Only one thing might help—the thing she'd been too scared to try before.

Her enhanced telepathic abilities allowed her to stretch her consciousness impossibly far and transmit to people and creatures on the other side of the world. She mostly used the talent to communicate with Fitz—or for her regular check-ins with Silveny to make sure everything was going safely with the alicorn's pregnancy. But that night, there was someone she needed to talk to so much more.

Keefe?

She sent the thought spiraling through the deep black nothingness, shoving the call with her full mental strength. She'd never pushed her limits to communicate with someone who wasn't a Telepath—which was the excuse she'd been using for why she hadn't tried this before. But really, she'd been afraid she couldn't trust him.

Or that he would ignore her.

Keefe? she called again, repeating the word over and over. He wouldn't be able to transmit back to her, so she'd have to connect directly to his thoughts.

She pressed her consciousness lower, imagining she was aiming for his mind like an arrow slicing through the night. A rush of warmth flooded her head when she finally hit the mark, along with a single, shaky thought.

Foster?

Yes! she transmitted—a bit too loudly. She lowered her mental voice before asking, *Can you still hear me?*

DUDE. This wins for freakiest mind trick ever!

Sorry! Did I scare you?

You think? How does Fitz not pee his pants every time you do this—or wait, DOES HE?

Don't be gross.

I'm not. I'm keeping it real. And, um . . . does this mean you're searching my memories right now?

She didn't actually know if she *could* from so far away—but it didn't matter. She'd paid the price for violating the rules of telepathy too many times.

Besides—if she was going to trust Keefe, she had to *trust* him.

I'm keeping my mind focused on what you're saying, she promised—though his loudest thoughts buzzed in the back of her consciousness like a TV in the background. So she could hear how relieved he was to know that she was safe—and even more so that she was still talking to him. He also sounded very worried that someone would catch them communicating.

Is this a bad time? she asked.

No. But I'm glad Ruy and Alvar are heavy sleepers. There was definite squealing and flailing when I first heard your voice.

The idea of him being so close to one of her kidnappers—and the Psionipath who'd attacked her and Biana—made Sophie shiver. *Can you go somewhere we can talk?*

I'm not allowed to leave my room without one of them with me. But I should be fine here, as long as I stay still. So . . . what's up? Did something happen?

Aside from you destroying part of Foxfire?

Hey, it was my turn to blow up the school. You've been hogging all the fun.

This isn't a joke, Keefe.

It can be if we make it one. We just have to commit!

Sophie sighed, letting her frustration ripple through her mind.

Nobody was hurt, right? he asked.

You got lucky this time, she agreed.

Luck had nothing to do with it. I planned it perfectly.

That's exactly the kind of overconfidence that's going to get you killed.

Not necessarily. I know you don't want to hear this—and believe me, I'm not happy about it either—but . . . I'm kind of important to their plans. At least, I think I am. I'm still working it all out. But I can tell they want me here. I just have to convince them they can trust me before they'll tell me why—and I made some serious progress today. Fintan totally looked ready to join Team Keefe when I met him at the rendezvous point so he could bring me to the hideout.

Every part of that made Sophie sick to her stomach. But she reminded herself that he was doing this for a reason—the same reason she'd reached out to him.

If you're really going to stay there, you need to let me help. You can't keep sneaking away—sooner or later they'll catch you. So I'll reach out to you like this every night and you can tell me anything you've learned.

That's actually not a bad idea, he admitted. Though it does mean I won't get to use my brilliant plan for my next escape. It didn't have any explosions, either. Just a LOT of selkie skin.

Sophie felt her lips smile, even if she probably shouldn't.

I'm not going to be able to tell you everything, though, his mind added quietly. I can only leak so much without getting caught.

I know. Sophie tried not to wonder how much he was already hiding. Are nights safer to reach you? Or would mornings be better?

Definitely nights. My training starts early—and I'm sure you're probably imagining all kinds of scary things, so just know the stuff they've been having me do isn't a big deal.

That'll change once they really trust you.

Yeah. Probably.

It was his cue to tell her he had a brilliant plan for that, too. But his mind had gone achingly silent.

I really hope you know what you're doing.

I do. I can't promise I won't have to be a part of some more shady things. But I know where the hard lines are, and I won't cross them.

She could feel the threads of his conviction, like roots digging deep. But whether they would hold him steady through the coming storms, she couldn't tell.

She'd have to keep an eye on him.

Is this the best time to reach out to you each night? she asked.

Yep—it's a date. Tell your boyfriends not to be jealous.

She wished she had a way to roll her eyes in a mental conversation. *I don't have any boyfriends.*

I dunno. I can think of a few dudes who might not be fans of all this Keefoster time.

Keefoster?

Sounds way cooler than Sophitz or Dophie, right? And don't even get me started on Bangs Boy. By the way—don't think I didn't notice those new rings on your thumbs today. The Fitzster has a matching set, doesn't he? I bet they look so cute when you guys are holding hands and staring deep into each other's eyes.

We don't stare into—why are we talking about this?

Would you rather hear about how loud Ruy snores? Or how this room smells like rotting toenails? Or Alvar's crazy theories for who the Forklenator is?

The last question reminded her that Keefe had already run off before the Magnate Leto–Mr. Forkle reveal happened.

You found out another one of his identities, didn't you? Keefe guessed.

I did. But I don't think it'd be good to tell you. You already have enough secrets to protect.

There you go, ruining all the fun with your logic.

I guess that's my job.

That doesn't mean you have to be so good at it—though it is kinda nice having someone look out for me.

You don't make it easy.

Another thing you and I have in common.

His floating thoughts made it clear how determined he was to protect her. It made her heart somehow both light and heavy at the same time.

Have you learned anything else I should know? she asked.

I wish. They haven't let me meet any of the other members of their order yet. And this run-down shack I'm in is where they bring all new recruits because there's nothing worth finding. They won't give me my own crystal or pathfinder—and the ones they let me borrow always leap to neutral meeting places.

They trusted you enough to let you help at the Sanctuary, she reminded him.

Only because that mission was about causing chaos. They knew they wouldn't get inside the preserve. They just wanted to make the Council look bad and keep people on edge.

Is that what the registry was about too?

No, they were super secretive about that, so I'm betting there was more to it. It's on my list of things I'm trying to find out.

What else is on that list?

Not gonna lie—it's a LOT. But I'm trying to focus on details that will tell me how to shut them down.

Well . . . I know one thing that might be worth looking into. Her mind filled with the symbol from the black disk they'd found in his cloak.

Am I supposed to know what that is? Keefe asked.

You've never seen it before?

Nope. Why, where did you find it?

If you don't know, I don't think I should tell you. It might be something they're trying to keep hidden from you. Just keep an eye out for it, okay?

Done. Anything else?

That's all I can think of for now.

Awesome. Then it's my turn to ask you a question. He paused, like he was gearing up for something incredibly important. *How'd Dizznee react to your new rings?*

Sophie shook her head, refusing to dignify the question with a response.

You can ignore it all you want, Foster, but sooner or later you're going to have to solve the triangle. Or should we get real and call it a square?

I have no idea what you mean.

I'm pretty sure you do. I bet if I were there I could feel your mood shifting.

Right, because I'm trying to figure out if it's possible to strangle you with my thoughts!

There you go, rocking the whole adorable-when-you're-angry thing. I think that's what I've missed about you the most.

She knew he was only teasing—but she still found herself transmitting, *I miss you, too.*

His thoughts went quiet for a second. And when he came back, his mental voice sounded heavier.

Well, he told her, I should probably get some sleep. Gotta rest up for another day of playing nice with the bad guys—and no need to tell me to be careful. I've got that one down.

She doubted that. “Careful” wasn’t a word that described Keefe Sencen.

Fine, she said. But before I go, I need you to promise me something.

Yes, I will call you Lady Lectures-a-Lot every time you transmit to me.

That's definitely not what I meant.

What about Little Miss Heartbreaker?

Keefe!

Okay, fine, we'll stick with the Mysterious Miss F. Deal?

Deal, she agreed. And can you focus for one second?

I suppose I can try. . . .

I need you to promise that if this gets too tough, you'll walk away. No matter how close you are to what you're trying to learn.

Edaline had once made Sophie give her a similar promise, after admitting she should've said the same thing to Jolie.

It's not going to come down to that.

Then promise me anyway.

Endless seconds slipped by before he told her, *Okay, fine, I promise. Now get out of my head, Miss F. I need my beauty sleep.*

FIVE

YOU KIDS WOULD sleep the day away if I'd let you," a wheezy voice grumbled, dragging Sophie out of her tangled dreams.

She rubbed the crustiness from her eyes and waited for her vision to adjust to her still-very-dark bedroom. "I thought you said dawn—and whoa. You're back to the Forkle disguise?"

She hadn't seen the heavysset figure standing in her doorway since the day he'd revealed his other identity. But there he was, looking wrinkled and puffy and reeking with the dirty-feet scent of ruckleberries.

Strangely, Sophie liked him better that way.

This was the face she'd known her whole life. The nosy next-door neighbor who'd kept watch over her while she'd lived among humans. The elf who'd healed her abilities after they'd been damaged by a failed light leap, and fought at her side on Mount Everest. The elf who'd driven her crazy with his riddles and secrets—but who seemed to know her better than anyone.

"As I told you before," Mr. Forkle said, "it's easier for me to compartmentalize my life. When I'm in the Lost Cities, I rely on my established identities. But today we're going to the Stone House."

The name launched sparks through Sophie's nerves.

She'd only been to the isolated cottage twice, and neither were happy memories. One was the day they'd first brought Prentice home—when they'd discovered how severely his condition had deteriorated. And the other was when Calla had brought her there to deliver devastating news about the gnomish plague.

"You know, the last time I was there, you weren't in Forkle mode," she reminded him.

She probably should've figured out his secret identity right then. But Magnate Leto had given her some story about how the Black Swan had brought him along to help cover for Tiergan and Wylie's visit.

Sometimes it was better if she didn't think about how good he was at lying.

“That was for young Mr. Endal’s benefit,” Mr. Forkle told her. “He’s unaware of my other identities—and I’d prefer it stay that way for the time being.”

“Will Wylie be there today?”

“Are you hoping to avoid him?”

Seeing Wylie tended to be unpleasant—he’d spent the majority of their conversations blaming her for every horrible thing that had happened to his dad.

But their last talk hadn’t been *as* awkward.

“I just want to be prepared,” she said. “I’m sure he’s wondering why I haven’t healed Prentice yet.”

“Actually, Wylie came to us after his father woke, begging us not to perform the healing until we understand why Prentice slipped away. He’s terrified of undoing what little progress his father has made. So remember: You and Mr. Vacker are going there to retrieve, not heal.”

“Wait—Fitz is here?”

She scrambled to cover her frumpy pajamas and accidentally launched poor Iggy off the bed. He flapped his black batlike wings and shook his tiny blue arms as he flew to the top of her canopy and glared down at her.

“Mr. Vacker’s waiting downstairs,” Mr. Forkle said, snapping his fingers to turn on her lights, “and your imp looks like he’s plotting revenge. So I’ll leave you to get ready. But do try to hurry. I’d prefer to get out of here before sunrise.”

Sophie tried not to think about how early that meant it was—or how little she’d slept—as she stumbled out of bed and threw on a simple tunic and pants.

“You might want to consider using a hairbrush,” Sandor warned as she passed him on her way to the stairs.

Sophie rarely gave much thought to her appearance, but Sandor’s twitching smile sent her rushing to the nearest mirror.

A tiny face appeared in the corner and immediately burst into laughter.

“What’d you do—get zapped by a Charger?” Vertina asked, swishing her silky dark hair.

Sophie glared at the spectral mirror, wishing she could tell Grady and Edaline to get rid of the obnoxious piece of technology. But the mirror had once belonged to Jolie. And Vertina had occasionally proven herself useful.

Plus, her hair *did* look like the top part of a pineapple.

“You’re making it worse,” Vertina said as Sophie tried brushing out the tangles. “Go grab a box of hair pins and let me save you from this impending disaster.”

Sophie was tempted to ignore her—Vertina would disappear the second she stepped out of the mirror’s range—but she let Vertina walk her through pulling her

hair into some sort of sleek, twisty ponytail.

“Aren’t I a genius?” Vertina asked as Sophie tucked the final strand.

“You actually are,” Sophie begrudgingly admitted.

“Okay! Now for your makeup. Go get—”

Sophie stepped out of range, done with primping.

“Whoa,” Fitz said as she made her way down the stairs. “I didn’t recognize you for a second.”

“Bad hair day,” she mumbled, fidgeting with the end of the ponytail.

“No—it looks good,” he promised. “It really draws attention to your eyes.”

She knew Fitz probably meant it as a compliment. But she’d never gotten used to being the only brown-eyed elf.

Why couldn’t the side effect of her tweaked genes have been green eyes?

Or purple?

“You should do that more often,” Grizel said, emerging from her hiding spot in the shadows. “It’ll drive the boys wild.”

“Um, maybe.”

Attention made Sophie sweaty and fidgety. Especially attention from Fitz.

He was studying her so closely she finally had to ask, “What?”

“Just . . . checking for cuts or scratches. Making sure he didn’t hurt you.”

“You mean Keefe?”

Fitz cringed at the name. His hands also curled into fists—the knuckles turning white from the pressure.

Sophie turned to Mr. Forkle. “Can we have a minute?”

Mr. Forkle nodded and led Sandor and Grizel to the other side of the room.

Sophie motioned for Fitz to take a seat next to her on the sofa and decided it’d be easiest to talk telepathically. She gave him permission to enter her mind—he and Mr. Forkle were the only ones who could—and he effortlessly slipped past her mental blocking. Apparently she had a point of trust, and if someone transmitted the right thing, it worked kind of like a mental password. But it all happened subconsciously, so she had no idea what they said.

Okay, Sophie thought, sitting on her hands so she couldn’t tug on her eyelashes. We have to talk about Keefe. I know you don’t want to. But the more we ignore it, the more it’s going to affect our ability to work as Cognates.

All of their training focused on being open with each other. Their ultimate goal was supposed to be *no secrets at all*.

Are you sure it’s a good idea? Fitz asked. *We both know I say stupid stuff when I’m angry.*

Are you angry? she asked. *I know you are at Alvar—and I'm with you on that. But are you sure that's what you're feeling toward Keefe?*

Uh—did he or did he not destroy part of Foxfire yesterday?

Yeah, but it wasn't like how you're picturing.

In his mind, Keefe looked like a proper villain, laughing as the glass rained down.

Just watch, okay? She rallied her concentration and replayed what actually happened, from the moment she stepped into Magnate Leto's office, to the final shattering seconds. Her photographic memory painted the scenes in perfect detail, and she left nothing out.

Okay, so maybe it's not as bad as I thought, Fitz reluctantly admitted. *But I still think you should've Sucker Punched him as soon as he spun around in that chair.*

I thought about it, Sophie admitted, tracing her finger across the wide bracelet Dex had given her to make her punches stronger. *But I'm glad I heard him out.*

Fitz sighed. *I guess that's why he went to you instead of me.*

Does that bother you?

No.

There was a strange prickliness about the thought, though.

What would you have done if he'd left the note for you instead of me? Sophie asked.

Fitz flopped back against the pillows and stared at the cascading crystal chandelier. *I have no idea.*

Are you sure? Sophie pressed. *I can feel the words bubbling in the back of your mind. Just let them out—I can take it.*

Fitz chewed his lower lip. *Fine. I . . . don't trust Keefe. I know you want me to—and I know I probably should, since he's my best friend and he's been through a ton of hard stuff. But he also has a LOT in common with my brother. Shoot—he used to call Alvar his hero.*

Keefe didn't know Alvar was with the Neverseen when he said that.

Maybe not. But it still makes me sick. Did you know that Alvar went to your planting in the Wanderling Woods? After he'd drugged you and tied you up and staged the cave to make everyone think you'd drowned? Then he stood there with his hand on my shoulder and offered to let me borrow his stupid handkerchief. And later that night, he snuck back to the Neverseen's hideout and helped them torture you.

The skin on her wrists stung, phantom pain left from the interrogation.

Brant was the one who questioned me, she reminded him quietly.

Yeah, but Alvar let it happen. He knew what they were doing. Probably heard you screaming.

He punched one of the fluffy pillows so hard, bits of feather swirled through the air.

You're right, Sophie said as the fluff slowly settled. But that was Alvar. You can't keep lumping him together with Keefe. Your brother is . . . I don't even know. I don't understand why he would turn his back on his family, or do such unimaginably awful things. But Keefe really is trying to help us. He's in over his head, and his plan is probably full of holes, and I'm betting we're going to have to save him before this is over—but . . . his heart is still in the right place. I have to believe that.

Fitz shook his head. *How do you stay so trusting after all you've been through?*

It's not always easy. Her hand moved to rub the emotions tangled under her ribs. Did I ever tell you what happened with Councillor Bronte? Remember how much he used to hate me?

Yeah, I used to hear my mom and dad whispering about what they'd do if Bronte got you expelled or banished.

He tried really hard. And when the Council made him my inflicting Mentor, I was pretty sure that would do it. It got so bad that Kenric had to be there to make sure Bronte wasn't hurting me during the lessons. But then, Bronte made me teach him how I inflict positive emotions. And the happiness I blasted into his mind caused this weird mental shutdown. I still don't know how to explain it. But I had to pull his consciousness back, and his head was seriously one of the scariest places I've ever been.

She shuddered just thinking about it.

After that, I figured things would get way worse between us, she continued. But somehow Bronte ended up becoming one of my only supporters on the Council. I didn't know what caused the change until after the whole ability restrictor nightmare. Bronte sent me a message through Magnate Leto. He told me, "It takes a special person to see darkness inside of someone and not condemn them." But the funny thing was, I had condemned him. I'd decided he was a traitor. I'd even asked Keefe to go all Empath-lie-detector on him to see if we could find proof that he was leaking confidential information from the Council. So . . . now I try to be the person Bronte thinks I am. Which is why I'm not ready to give up on Keefe. Not yet.

I guess that makes sense. But—

I'm not trying to change how you feel. In fact, maybe it's better this way. I'll be the believer and you can be the skeptic and we'll keep each other in check—but that only works if you're honest with me and actually talk about stuff.

He sighed. *There you go being all practical and wise.*

Hey, one of us has to be.

He laughed at that—and reached over to give her ponytail a playful tug.

She moved to block him and their rings snapped their hands together—which would’ve been startling enough without Mr. Forkle asking, “I take it the hand-holding means you’ve worked things out?”

“I think so,” Sophie mumbled, not looking at Fitz as she pulled her palm free.

“Very good, because we really do need to get going. The window of time that we can be away is closing by the minute.”

“And you have your Imparter in case you need me?” Grady asked Sophie as he strode in from the kitchen.

Sophie showed him the square silver gadget she’d tucked safely in her pocket. Imparters were the elves’ much sleeker voice-commanded version of a videophone.

“All will be fine,” Mr. Forkle assured Grady. “We’re going to a secure location.”

Grady strangled Sophie with a hug anyway. “I keep thinking it’s going to get easier, sitting back and letting you take risks,” he told her. “But every time, I want to drag you back upstairs and barricade you in your room.”

“That makes two of us,” Sandor said. “But I’ll keep an eye on her.”

“And *I’ll* keep an eye on both of them,” Grizel said. “Show them how it’s done.”

Grizel tossed her long hair—which she’d let hang loose that day—as Mr. Forkle pulled a pink pathfinder out of his cloak, making Sophie wonder how many types of leaping crystals the elves actually used. Blue went to the Forbidden Cities. Green went to the ogres. Pale yellow to the Neutral Territories. And clear to the Lost Cities. She’d also seen the Black Swan use purple crystals. But this was the first time she’d seen pale pink—and its hundreds of facets sparkled with different colors, like a diamond.

“Please tell me this isn’t going to be like leaping with the unmapped stars,” Sophie begged. She’d experienced that particular misery several times, and really didn’t have the energy to endure it again.

“No, the hint of opalescence is simply an added security measure,” Mr. Forkle assured her. “Now everyone lock hands.”

Their group formed quite a chain, with Sophie, Fitz, Mr. Forkle, Sandor, and Grizel.

“You ready for this?” Fitz asked.

“Of course she is,” Mr. Forkle answered for her. “This is what she was made for.”

SIX

PRENTICE'S NORMALLY RICH brown skin had a grayish tint, and shiny streams of sweat trickled down his forehead and soaked his tangled dreadlocks.

But he was awake.

His cloudy blue eyes kept darting blankly around the room.

Even his mumble-gurgle sounds were a huge improvement from his previous deathly silence.

Still, Sophie understood Mr. Forkle's reasons for keeping her away.

Watching the string of drool hanging from Prentice's lips made her want to dive into his mind and call him back to reality. He deserved to be *truly* awake—not strapped to a bed so that his flailing limbs wouldn't send him crashing to the cold silver floor.

All in good time, Mr. Forkle transmitted. And I'm not reading your mind, in case you're worried. I know you well enough to know that your thoughts echo mine. But we must be strong.

"Everything okay?" Fitz asked as Sophie gave Mr. Forkle a reluctant nod.

She forced a smile and tried to look anywhere but at Prentice.

The house was exactly as she remembered it. Sleek and sterile and sparse—and small. Sandor and Grizel chose to patrol the moorish grounds to escape the low ceilings.

The only pieces of furniture were the neatly tucked cot Prentice was resting on and a medicine-strewn table next to it. The rest of the space was floor-to-ceiling apothecary shelves and one narrow counter under the room's only window, covered in an elaborate alchemy setup.

"Isn't someone watching him?" Sophie asked, studying the beakers on the burners, which were bubbling with some sort of smoky magenta liquid.

"Of course," a ghostly voice said from the loft hidden above.

Seconds later, Wraith's silver cloak came swishing down the narrow corner staircase. *Just* his cloak—though his invisible body was clearly moving underneath the slinky

fabric. He used a trick called partial vanishing—hiding his body, but not his clothes—to keep his true identity secret.

All five members of the Black Swan's Collective had crazy nicknames to match their even-crazier disguises. So far Sophie and her friends had only learned who two of them actually were. They knew Mr. Forkle was both Magnate Leto and Sir Astin—though he'd admitted that he still had other identities they'd yet to uncover. And they knew . . .

"Granite!" Sophie said as a bizarre figure struggled up the narrow staircase from the cramped basement below. He looked like a cracked, unfinished statue come to life, thanks to the chalky indurite powder he ingested for his disguise. Sophie knew him better as Tiergan, her telepathy mentor at Foxfire—and she still couldn't believe she'd trained with him for more than a year and never guessed he was secretly involved with the Black Swan.

"Squall already left," Granite told Mr. Forkle. "And she won't be able to return for our evening meeting."

Mr. Forkle nodded. "I'd suspected that might occur."

Squall used her ability as a Froster to crust herself with ice and obscure her identity—and whoever she was in real life seemed to make it very difficult for her to sneak away from the Lost Cities for long.

"Blur should be here momentarily," Granite added.

Almost on cue, a smudged-looking figure passed through the solid wood of the cottage's front door. As a Phaser, Blur could break down his body and walk through anything—but he only let himself partially re-form, in order to hide what he looked like. All Sophie could see were splotches of color and shadow in a vaguely elflike shape as he turned back to open the door for two familiar figures.

"You know, you could use the door like a normal person," Tam said as he stalked into the room.

"Where's the fun in that?" Linh asked, trailing behind her brother.

She'd opened her mouth to say something else when she spotted Sophie and Fitz. Then there was a whole lot of hugging—while Tam settled for a nod-shrug-wave from the doorway.

The twins looked a lot alike—especially with their silver-blue eyes, and the silver tips they'd added to their jet-black hair. But personality-wise, they were night and day.

"I wish I'd known you'd be here," Linh mumbled. "I was so happy to leave the house, I didn't bother changing out of my training clothes." She fussed with the sleeves of her simple blue tunic, which were wet along the edges. She must've been practicing hydrokinesis.

“You look beautiful,” Sophie promised.

Linh always did.

All elves were inherently gorgeous, but Linh was especially striking with her soft pink cheeks and lips contrasted against her dramatic eyes and hair. Tam was just as handsome, but with more edge to his style, thanks to his jagged bangs and ultra-intense stare.

“Why aren’t you letting Tam and Linh leave Alluveterre?” Sophie asked Mr. Forkle.

“The same reason we haven’t let you visit,” he told her. “Far too many people would love to find that hideout.”

Tam and Linh lived in the same tree houses that Sophie and her friends had stayed in while they were banished from the Lost Cities, hidden deep under the earth in a subterranean forest only the Black Swan knew how to access. They could’ve returned home when their banishment was lifted, but they chose to stay away from their family—not surprising, considering their parents let them spend more than three years scrounging for food and living in tattered tents instead of standing by Linh’s side as she adjusted to the strength of her ability.

“Does that mean you’re not going to Exillium anymore?” Fitz asked the twins.

“No, they let us out for that,” Tam told him, “but only with our dwarven stalkers.”

“Bodyguards,” Blur corrected. “And they’ll only surface if they hear trouble.”

“King Enki assigned four of his royal brigade to Tam and Linh’s charge,” Granite clarified as he made his way over to check on Prentice, who seemed completely unaware of the noise around him. “The goblins have been spread a bit thin, between the forces they’ve stationed outside Ravagog and the patrols in the Lost Cities. And honestly, it’s better for Tam and Linh to have a discreet form of cover at Exillium.”

“How’s it going there, by the way?” Sophie asked.

Linh smiled. “It keeps getting better—thanks to you.”

Sophie shrugged, not sure she should be given credit for the changes. All she’d done was tell Councillor Oralie what life was truly like at the neglected school. Oralie had arranged the improvements herself.

“I never thought I’d miss that place,” Fitz said. “But some of the skills they taught were pretty awesome.”

“We miss you guys even more,” Sophie added. “Dex and Biana are going to be so jealous that we got to see you.”

“Seriously,” Fitz said, “Biana was already super sulky that she couldn’t come with us this morning, so when I tell her we saw you guys she’s going to flip.”

“All four of them have been nagging me to let them visit you two for weeks,” Mr. Forkle added. “I’d wager they’ve broken Mr. Sencen’s record for Most Visits to the

Principal's Office to plead their case.”

The name drop might as well have dragged a giant woolly mammoth into the room.

Tam cleared his throat. “So . . . have you heard from him?”

“You could say that,” Fitz said, glancing at Sophie.

“I saw him yesterday.” She hoped Tam would leave it at that. But of course he didn't.

“I'm guessing there was drama?”

“Mr. Sencen has chosen a very challenging path,” Mr. Forkle said carefully. “But we're still hoping for the best. And I want you all to know that we are not trying to keep you separated from each other. But we have to protect Alluveterre. The Council is watching your pendant feeds *very* closely, and while they may not be actively working against our order, we also cannot truly count them on our side.”

“I'm sure Dex could cover us sneaking away for a few hours,” Sophie argued.

“Mr. Dizznee's talents are especially creative,” Wraith agreed. “But the Council's new measures are cleverer than you might expect. It took our Technopath most of last night to set up the false feed we're using right now. And it's only for a limited time.”

“Besides, we need Dex concentrating on other things,” Blur added.

“Like what?” Sophie asked, surprised that Dex hadn't mentioned anything.

Mr. Forkle shot Blur a look that seemed to say, *That was top secret information!* before his voice filled her head.

We've given Mr. Dizznee access to all of the eldest Mr. Vacker's registry records, hoping he'll be able to determine why the Neverseen went to such lengths to destroy the files.

Is that why they broke in to the registry? Sophie asked.

In part. The investigators were unable to determine if any additional files were accessed. But all of Brant's, Fintan's, Ruy's, and Mr. Vacker's records were erased. It's quite fortunate we'd made our own copies before the break-in. And I'm sure you can understand why we asked Mr. Dizznee to keep this project quiet.

“I know you're talking about me,” Fitz said when Sophie's eyes darted his way. “And you know I can eavesdrop on what you guys are saying, right?”

“But you won't,” Granite told him. “Because you respect Sophie too much to violate the rules of telepathy.”

Tam snorted. “Telepaths are weird.”

“Said the guy who won't trust anyone until he's read their shadowvapor,” Linh teased.

Tam was a Shade, which meant he could manipulate shadows—including the inner darkness everyone hid in their minds. He claimed he could tell whether someone was trustworthy simply by sensing how much shadowvapor he felt when he took a reading—and it seemed to be true. Tam had doubted both Alvar and Keefe because they'd refused to submit to the test. Sophie was still waiting for the *I told you so*.

"Just tell me what's going on," Fitz said, and Sophie could hear the desperation hidden in his voice.

She sighed. "Dex is investigating your brother, trying to see if he can learn anything about the Neverseen. And they didn't tell us because . . ."

She pointed to his hands, which were fisted so tightly, his thumb rings were cutting into his skin.

It took Fitz six painful seconds to relax his grip, and when he did, he turned to Mr. Forkle. "I want to know what he's found."

"Nothing at the moment—another reason we've waited to tell you. If you don't believe me, you're welcome to speak to Mr. Dizznee directly."

"I will," Fitz assured him—and Sophie made a mental note to be there in case the conversation turned into an epic disaster.

"Now, can we focus on the reason we're all here?" Mr. Forkle asked. "Mr. Song—"

"I've told you I don't want to be connected with my parents' name," Tam interrupted.

"Right. My apologies. Mr. *Tam*. Did Blur explain the plan?"

"He said something about having me lift another veil. And I've been hoping I misunderstood. You remember what happened last time."

"I do," Mr. Forkle said. "Prentice finally woke up."

"Right—but after that," Tam pressed. "I'm never going to forget those screams."

"Why was Prentice screaming?" Sophie asked as Linh reached for her brother's hand.

"It only lasted a few minutes," Mr. Forkle assured her—which was hardly reassuring. "And I suspect it was from the influx of jagged memories released by the veil."

"Anyone else confused?" Fitz asked.

"Very," Sophie said. In all the times she'd been in people's minds, she'd never felt any veils.

"Shadowvapor forms in layers," Tam explained. "Only Shades can sense them. And I like to think of them as veils, since they usually feel thin and wispy—and they're always covering the things we're trying to hide. That's why I can learn so much from reading someone's shadowvapor. The more you have, the more secrets you have. But

the veils of darkness in Prentice's mind felt like they were made of solid metal. It took all my energy to lift one, and when I did, his consciousness surged back as it released the memories hidden underneath."

"All the years of Exile and madness must've buried him in darkness," Granite said quietly. "I just wish I understood what caused the final avalanche."

"We'll figure it out," Mr. Forkle promised. "But today, we need to focus on peeling back another veil—which should be lighter now that we've lifted the layer that smothered him. The piece of memory I recovered was tethered to something else—something weighed down by darkness. Hopefully if we remove the veil, Miss Foster can find it."

"But what if this makes Prentice worse?" Sophie whispered.

"Believe me, I've asked that question a thousand times," Granite told her. "But last time, the process made him significantly better. So it stands to reason that lifting another veil might actually help him."

Out of everyone in the room, Granite had the strongest connection to Prentice. He'd resigned from Foxfire after Prentice's Memory break, and despised the Vacker family for years because of Alden's involvement with what had happened. He'd also adopted Wylie and raised him as his own son.

So if Granite thought it was worth the risk, it had to be a good sign.

"Have you told Wylie we're doing this?" Sophie asked.

Mr. Forkle nodded. "He gave us his blessing."

"Then why isn't he here?" Fitz asked.

"Knowing something is the right decision doesn't make watching it any easier," Granite reminded him. "But he trusts me to protect his father—and I *will*."

"As will I," Mr. Forkle said. "As I'm sure you will as well, Miss Foster. And you, Mr. Tam. We all have the same goal."

Tam sighed. "What memory are we even trying to find?"

"The remaining portion of a symbol. I found one piece during my ill-advised search, and we've now found part of it etched onto a disk connected with the Neverseen—which, by the way, tested negative for any enzymes, in case you were worrying," he told Sophie. "It's made of a stone called duskitine, which is neither rare nor valuable. But it does react to starlight, which may be a clue to its purpose—though at the moment, I'm still at a loss for what it could be. Perhaps once we have the rest of the symbol all will become clearer."

"Can I see the full piece of memory you already found?" Sophie asked.

He shuffled to her side and placed two fingers on each of her temples, sending a scrap of jagged darkness surging into Sophie's mind. The chill made her shiver as the

memory emerged from the shadows: white symbols glowing through the dark—three diagonal lines, each decorated with different patterns of dashes before they ended in open circles. The line in the center matched the disk from Keefe’s cloak.

“It’s possible we’re missing more than one piece,” Mr. Forkle warned.

“How will I know if I’ve found them all?”

“Send anything you find to me,” Fitz offered. “I’ll piece them together and let you know when you’re done. And if you need an energy boost, just squeeze my fingers.”

He offered her his hand, and after all their months of working together, relying on Fitz felt like putting on a pair of comfy running shoes.

“Are we ready?” Mr. Forkle asked.

Everyone turned to Tam.

He shook his bangs out of his eyes and let go of his sister. “I really hope we don’t regret this.”

“As do we all,” Granite whispered.

Tam’s shadow sprang to life, crawling slowly across the room until it fell across Prentice’s face and sank into his mind.

SEVEN

TAM HAD BEEN right about Prentice's screams.

Sophie would never forget his eerie wails—the sound of someone caught between pure terror and overwhelming despair.

Each second was an eternity.

Each breath a knife in her throat.

And then, as quickly as it started, it was over.

Prentice's mouth snapped shut and his head lolled to the side as Tam stumbled back, his shaky legs collapsing underneath him. Linh lunged to catch him, easing Tam's trembling body to the cold floor as she gathered the moisture in the air into some sort of floating forehead compress.

"Wow," Fitz breathed, the same way he always did when he saw Linh's Hydrokinetic tricks.

Sophie was impressed too—especially with Linh's control. Linh had come a long way since her days of being the Girl of Many Floods and causing so many catastrophes that she'd ended up banished.

"I'm fine," Tam managed to mumble. "How's Prentice?"

"Strong," Mr. Forkle promised.

Sophie turned to check for herself, relieved to see how clear Prentice's eyes looked. The cloudiness she'd noticed earlier had lifted, and his gaze was focused and steady. Even his thrashing had calmed, and his mumbles had dulled to whispers.

"What happened?" Linh asked her brother, shifting his water compress with him as he sat up. "You weren't this affected last time."

"Yeah, well, last time the veil wasn't that heavy." Tam turned to Mr. Forkle. "Your theory about the next layer being lighter was *way* off. It was like trying to lift a big, blubbery whale."

"That's quite the mental picture," Mr. Forkle noted. "And that should give you extra pride for the strength and skill it took to lift it."

“Yeah . . . about that.” Tam curled his arms around his knees. “It felt like he helped me.”

All four members of the Collective crouched around him.

“What does that mean?” Granite asked.

“It’s hard to explain,” Tam mumbled, reaching though Linh’s water compress to tug on his bangs. “But I was running out of strength, and I thought . . . maybe it’d help if Prentice knew I was on his side. So I used my shadow to send a message—which won’t mess with his consciousness at all, I swear,” he added quickly.

Tam had used the same trick when he was first getting to know Sophie. Exillium had strict rules about Waywards communicating with each other, so their first conversations had happened entirely in her head. Whenever his shadow crossed hers, it opened a channel between them, allowing him to whisper directly inside her mind.

“Anyway,” Tam continued, “I told him I was working with the Black Swan, and that I needed to move the darkness so that Sophie could search his memories. And as soon as I said her name, the resistance lessened and the veil started budging.”

Granite whispered something Sophie didn’t catch as he rushed back to the cot and grabbed both of Prentice’s hands. “Prentice—can you hear me?”

Everyone stopped breathing.

Waiting.

Wondering.

And . . . nothing.

“It’s for the best,” Mr. Forkle said quietly, before turning to Sophie. “If Prentice responds to your name, I’d be wary of using it when you’re in his mind. And speed must be of the essence. In fact, I think we should set a timer.”

He fumbled in his cape pocket and pulled out a shimmering crystal hourglass.

“Do you always carry that around?” Sophie asked.

“A wise leader is always prepared. You’ll have ten minutes. I don’t think you should be in his mind any longer than that.”

The lump in her throat blocked Sophie’s voice. But she did her best to look confident as she approached Prentice’s bed. Fitz moved behind her, taking her hand to help steady her nerves.

“Squeeze my fingers if you need me,” he told her. “I’ll also randomly send a few bursts of energy just in case.”

Sophie nodded, taking one last look at each of the worried faces of her friends before she focused on the only one that mattered.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” she promised Prentice.

Then she pressed her consciousness into his mind.

Down, down, down she sank—through darkness and shards of memory that battered against her mental barriers. Her stomach plummeted with the rush, even though she knew her body wasn't actually moving.

The farther she fell, the more the blackness faded.

First to gray.

Then to white.

Then to something . . . else.

A color too bright for her mind to name.

It was all colors in one—blindingly perfect in its purity. And as her consciousness slowly adjusted, other images took shape.

Fractal patterns.

Flecks of rainbows.

Everything opalescent and swirly.

And standing amid all of that beauty was a figure.

A young woman in a pale purple gown, with long blond hair and a dazzling smile.

“Hello, Sophie,” Jolie whispered. “I knew you'd come back to see me.”

EIGHT

SOPHIE KNEW JOLIE wasn't actually there—but that didn't make the vision any less real.

Prentice had conjured up Grady and Edaline's daughter in perfect vibrant detail, right down to the wispy, frilly gown in Jolie's favorite color. He'd used the same projection once before, to guide Sophie out of his madness when she'd first tried reading his mind. But this time, instead of a meadow, they were nestled in a pocket of space among all the shimmer and sparkle.

"I'd thought your mind would feel more familiar," Jolie said. "But it's different somehow. Stronger."

You remember me? Sophie transmitted.

"Sometimes I do, and sometimes I don't. Reality is relative." Jolie's turquoise eyes focused on her slender fingers, wiggling them, like she was checking to see if they really belonged to her. "Am I right? Has something changed?"

Last time my powers were broken, Sophie told her. They had to fix me before I could come back. And then you were gone.

"I had to go away," Jolie whispered. "I don't remember why. But I'm here again—and it's so much brighter this time!"

She raised her arms and twirled, her featherlight skirt floating around her.

Why do you use Jolie to communicate with me? Sophie had to ask. *Did she mean something to you?*

"You're still looking for reason. The mind is a funny thing. Logic doesn't always run things the way it should. So often it's feelings." Jolie reached out and caught a green fractal pattern floating by, and it turned blue and swelled large enough to surround them.

"I make you feel safe, don't I?"

Yes.

Sophie had never met Jolie, but she knew that if she had, she would've liked her. Everyone who knew her had loved her. Even the person who'd killed her.

“You remind me of her,” Jolie said, flipping the ends of her golden hair. “And it’s easier this way. I’ve lost such track of myself, I don’t know how to be me.”

But I am talking to Prentice right now? Sophie asked, needing to be sure.

Jolie’s smile faded. “Prentice is everywhere and nowhere. *He* can’t help you. Though rumor has it, you can help him.”

I can, Sophie said, her heart thundering so loud, she wondered if the whole room could hear it. *But it might not be safe yet. He—or, I guess I should say you—need to get stronger.*

The fractals shifted again, flickering through so many colors it felt like standing in a disco ball. Jolie’s image flickered too, her features growing vague and smudged. “It’s strange. Sometimes I feel so sane. And other times . . .”

The light shattered.

Icy splinters jabbed Sophie’s consciousness, screeching like nails on a chalkboard as she plummeted. She tried to squeeze Fitz’s hand for help, but her body felt disconnected.

No strength.

No power of her own.

Blackness crashed around her, so thick it felt tangible—and then it *was* tangible as the shadows twisted into—

A swan?

“Sorry,” Jolie said from somewhere behind her as Sophie struggled to get a firmer grip on the soaring bird’s slender neck.

Jolie’s arms wrapped around her waist and the touch felt warm and soft—despite the blizzard they were flying through. A storm of blurry fragments that seemed determined to send them careening again.

“I’m trying to hold it together,” Jolie told her. “Black Swans always keep me centered.”

I wasn’t supposed to talk to you, Sophie admitted. *They’re afraid I’ll make you worse.*

“Nothing could be worse than where I’ve been.”

I’m so sorry.

The words were never enough—but Sophie didn’t have anything else to offer.

Where are we going? she asked, trying to figure out if they were flying forward or backward or sideways.

“Somewhere. Nowhere. Everywhere. It’s all the same here. Always now but never then. Always then but never now.”

That doesn’t make a whole lot of sense.

“Welcome to my world. I’d love to say you get used to it, but . . .”

The swan started spinning loop-di-loops, tossing Sophie's stomach around with it. She wondered if she could throw up in someone else's head.

"You're looking for something, aren't you?" Jolie asked. "That's what the voice in the shadows told me before you came."

That was Tam. He's a friend.

"I'm glad I didn't drag him under, then."

You do that?

"Sometimes. Not always by choice."

So . . . sometimes you do it on purpose?

"If I did, would that scare you?"

A little. But I trust you.

"Does that mean you'll come back?"

Of course I will, Sophie promised. But right now, I'm only allowed to stay for a few more minutes. Can you help me find the memory I need before I have to go?

"I can try," Jolie said as the swan tucked its wings and plunged. "But the memories here aren't what they used to be."

On and on they sank, until they reached a fog of glowing shards all scrambled up and flipped around and crashing into each other. Some had images painted across them. Others moved like fragments torn from a movie. And others held only a cacophony of noises.

"Everything that once was, is gone," Jolie said sadly. "All that's left is fractured and fragmented."

I'm only looking for a piece—or maybe a few pieces.

Sophie projected the image Mr. Forkle had sent her and it flared in front of them like a hologram.

"That doesn't look familiar," Jolie murmured.

Mr. Forkle found it the last time he was in here.

Jolie's arms tensed. "Someone else visited?"

You don't remember?

"I hear voices sometimes. But I can never tell if they're echoes. I hope I didn't hurt him."

He was able to get out—but only barely. That's why he sent me.

"You're the moonlark," Jolie whispered. Her arms clung so tightly that Sophie had to fight to breathe.

Or maybe the pain in her chest came from Jolie's next question.

"How long has it been since I was me?"

I'm probably not supposed to tell you.

“But you’re old now, aren’t you? Far older than my son was when . . .”

Don’t think about it, Sophie said. There’s a lot that needs to be explained—but we have to wait until you’re strong enough to handle it.

“That doesn’t sound like good news.”

It is and it isn’t. There are a million reasons to keep fighting. But it’s probably not going to be easy.

The shards trembled and tightened.

“I think I’m slipping away,” Jolie warned.

A burst of energy flooded Sophie’s senses—probably Fitz sending backup—and Sophie wrapped it around Jolie’s fading form.

Please—if you can’t stay for me, do it for Wylie.

“Wylie,” Jolie repeated. She kept murmuring the name as she waved her arms and made another glowing bubble around them, spinning the shards like leaves in a windstorm. “I still don’t see what you’re looking for.”

It has to be there. I’m pretty sure this is one of the memories you were protecting. Maybe even the reason you called swan song.

The bubble burst at the words.

“I don’t know what that means,” Jolie said as they sank into the glittering oblivion. “But the phrase has a pull, like an anchor dragging me toward . . . I don’t know.”

Down they went again—so far that Sophie wasn’t sure she’d ever be able to claw her way back up. But it was worth the fall when Jolie whispered, “There.”

She waved her arms and the fragments parted, revealing three blindingly bright pieces. “Those are what you need. I . . .”

Jolie’s image vanished into the dark.

Sophie had just enough strength left to wrap her mind around the gleaming shards and transmit a call for Fitz’s help.

He sent a tidal wave of heat, launching everything up, up, up—through softness and sludginess and pain and relief until she was back in her body, shivering in a pair of warm arms that held her close and careful and wouldn’t let her fall.

“Shhhh,” Fitz whispered. “You’re back. You’re safe.”

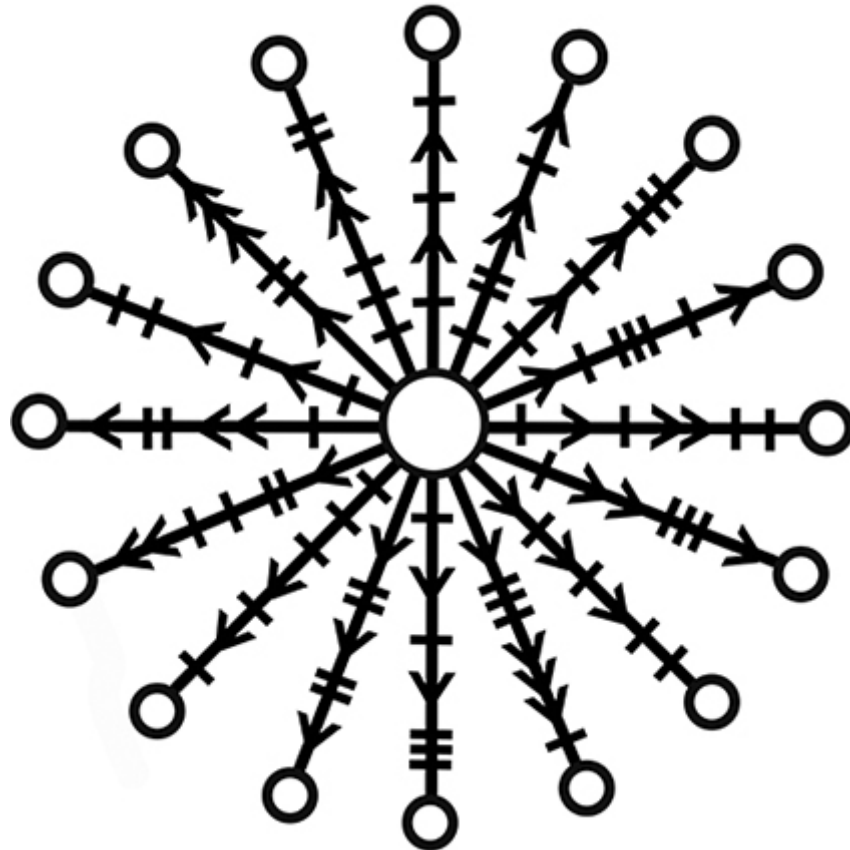
“How’s Prentice?” she asked as Mr. Forkle pressed two fingers against her temples to check her memories.

“Same as before,” Fitz promised. “Why? What happened in there?”

“Incredible things,” Mr. Forkle whispered. Tears streamed down his wrinkly cheeks as he cleared his throat and added, “I’ll explain later. Right now we must focus. Mr. Vacker—perhaps you could ensure I’m assembling these memories properly?”

Fitz slipped into Sophie's mind and she watched as the bits of symbol snapped together. The three diagonal lines from the original image converged with other lines bearing similar circles and dashes, all meeting in a central point and fanning out like rays from the sun.

The symbol was abstract, of course, but it reminded Sophie of an asterisk.
Or a star.



NINE

THE SYMBOL IS a Lodestar,” Sophie whispered. “Isn’t it?”

“We don’t know that for sure,” Mr. Forkle said. “Technically, the word ‘lodestar’ refers simply to any kind of star that can be used as a guide.”

“But this could easily be connected to the Lodestar Initiative,” Sophie argued.

“Perhaps it would help if we could see?” Granite suggested.

Blur retrieved a memory log from one of the apothecary drawers, and when Sophie projected the image across the stiff pages, everyone had to admit the symbol looked like a star.

“Even if the symbol *is* a Lodestar,” Granite said after a moment, “we’re still a long way away from understanding what it means. All those dashes and circles have to be significant. I’m assuming you saw nothing that could help us translate while you were in Prentice’s mind?”

“I wish. It seemed like Prentice didn’t even remember that he’d seen the symbol before. But . . . he only found it after I mentioned swan song. So the two must be connected.”

They all tilted their heads and squinted at the star from different angles, as if the explanation would pop out at them if they just stared hard enough.

“Soooooo,” Tam eventually said, “anyone want to explain why lodestars are so important? Or are you going to keep acting like Linh and I aren’t here?”

“Didn’t they tell you?” Fitz asked, glancing at the members of the Collective.

“I told them Keefe joined the Neverseen,” Blur said. “I didn’t get into why.”

“Care to clue us in now?” Tam asked, not sounding happy to have been kept in the dark.

Mr. Forkle explained what little they knew about the Lodestar Initiative and how Keefe’s mom seemed to have created it.

“And the Initiative had something to do with what happened to the gnomes?” Linh whispered, tugging nervously on the silver ends of her hair.

“*That* is unclear,” Mr. Forkle emphasized. “Fintan implied a connection when he first threatened the Council with the plague. And he made the Initiative sound as though it’s the Neverseen’s grand plan. But he also admitted to eliminating Mr. Sencen’s mother so he could take over the project, so it’s highly possible he’s made his own amendments.”

“Does Keefe know what the plan is?” Tam asked.

“He says he’s still piecing it together—but I know there’s something he isn’t telling me,” Sophie said quietly. “Maybe he’ll be more willing to share when I show him the whole symbol.”

“I assume that means you’ve found a way to transmit to him?” Mr. Forkle asked.

Sophie nodded. “We’re going to check in every night.”

“You are?” The tightness in Fitz’s voice made Sophie realize she’d forgotten to mention that detail when they talked.

“It’ll be safer this way,” she explained. “He can update me on anything he’s learned without having to sneak away.”

“Or feed you a bunch of lies,” Tam pointed out. “Hey—don’t look at me like that. You have to admit it’s possible.”

“*Anything* is possible,” Sophie argued. “All I know is that if I’d been brave enough to try transmitting to Keefe sooner, he wouldn’t have had to destroy part of Foxfire to warn me.”

“Whoa—back up,” Tam said. “*He destroyed part of Foxfire?! Okay, seriously, am I really the only one who thinks trusting this guy is a bad idea?*”

“No,” Wraith said, folding his invisible arms under his cloak. “Some of us are a bit more reluctant.”

“I’m not,” Blur jumped in.

“Well, Squall is just as torn as I am,” Wraith said. “So is Granite.”

“You are?” Sophie asked.

Granite had seemed so supportive when he first heard about Keefe. He’d even decided to reveal his true identity to help reassure her that she shouldn’t be afraid to trust people. But now he shifted his hefty weight, filling the small space with the crunch of his crystallized joints. “I don’t doubt that Mr. Sencen left with good intentions—but we can’t ignore the possibility that he might become corrupted. He’s immersed in the Neverseen’s world—training in their methods, being exposed to their teachings and theories. There’s no telling how that might influence him.”

“Exactly,” Tam agreed. “You’re with me on this, right?” he asked Linh.

Linh shook her head. “Remember how people have doubted us? Their murmurs and snipes about the strength of our powers. Their outrage when you left with me

after I was banished. Not to mention the mistrust because we're twins. They had reasons for their feelings. Did that make them right?"

"No—but their reasons are stupid," Tam argued.

Multiple births were rare in the elvin world, and for some reason that bred judgment and scorn. Sophie would never understand how the elves could be so brilliant and sophisticated and still have so many strange prejudices. They didn't care about skin color or money or appearance. But they condemned anyone without a special ability, or anyone with unusual genetics.

"And you think that's the same as joining the enemy?" Tam asked.

"No, I think it means we shouldn't pass judgment until we see how things play out. Actions never tell the whole story. Good can be done for the wrong reason. And bad can be misunderstood."

"Fine," Tam grumbled. "But if he comes anywhere near me, I'm siccing the dwarves on him until he lets me take a reading. And you guys should be keeping us way better updated about this stuff," he told the Collective.

"The incident at Foxfire was only yesterday," Mr. Forkle explained. "But I realize you're both feeling very separated—and that's because you are."

"Maybe it would be easier if we returned to the Lost Cities," Linh told her brother.

"You really want to go back to Choralmere?" he asked. "You want to deal with Mom panicking that you're going to flood the house every time you gaze at the ocean? You want to hear Dad constantly lying about us, like our very existence brings him shame?"

"Of course not," Linh told him. "I just—"

"I might have a solution for you," Mr. Forkle interrupted. "I've been in talks with the Council about a new arrangement that would allow you to visit the Lost Cities regularly. But nothing is official yet, so I'm going to need you—"

"Let me guess," Tam jumped in, "You want us to be patient?"

Mr. Forkle smiled. "I know I ask for that a lot. I also demand it of myself. I've often said that it seems we're attempting to drain the ocean with a leaking spoon. But even if that's the case, we can either give up, or we can continue taking it one dripping spoonful at a time. And *this*"—he pointed to the symbol Sophie had projected—"is a pretty important spoonful. We need to find out what it means."

"I can ask Keefe," Sophie offered. "Though he didn't recognize the black disk or the symbol when I showed it to him last night, so I doubt he'll be much help."

"I can think of someone who might know more about the symbol," Fitz mumbled. "But . . . you're not going to like it."

Sophie was about to ask who when she figured it out on her own.

She groaned. “Please tell me you’re not asking us to trust Lord Cassius.”

TEN

Wow,” LINH WHISPERED, staring at the stark crystal skyscraper looming over them. “*This* is where Keefe grew up?”

“It explains a lot, doesn’t it?” Sophie mumbled.

Mr. Forkle hadn’t been sure if it would be wise to bring the twins on this excursion—but Sophie had insisted. Maybe it would help Tam understand where Keefe was coming from.

Their feet crunched on the gravelly ground as they crossed under an intricate arch with the word CANDLESHADE woven into the iron. Lord Cassius answered the golden door before Mr. Forkle finished knocking, looking pristine in his intricately embroidered blue cape. He reminded Sophie far too much of his son—same blond hair and ice-blue eyes. Same handsome features. But he was the version where all the fun had been squeezed out and only the sour was left.

Even his smile was creepy—oily and insincere as he said, “Why, Miss Foster. I almost didn’t recognize you with your hair back. But it’s always a pleasure to see you. And you as well, Mr. Forkle. And Mr. Vacker.” His eyes flicked past Sandor and Grizel without acknowledging them and settled on Tam and Linh. “And who might our surprise guests be?”

“This is Tam and Linh Song,” Mr. Forkle told him, ignoring Tam’s scowl at the use of his last name.

“Song?” Lord Cassius repeated. “You’re Quan and Mai’s children?”

“Their *twins*,” Tam corrected.

Tam’s father had tried to convince people that Tam and Linh were a year apart in age, but they refused to play along.

“I see the resemblance now,” Lord Cassius said, studying the twins more closely. “I know your father well. He was a Level ahead of me at Foxfire, but we often studied together. We still meet for drinks in Atlantis sometimes.”

Tam glanced sidelong at Sophie. “I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised to hear that.”

“Do your parents know you’ve joined the Black Swan?” Lord Cassius asked.

“I don’t see why they would,” Tam told him. “And for the record, we haven’t sworn fealty.”

“Yet,” Linh added quickly.

“I know the feeling.” Lord Cassius had volunteered to join the Black Swan himself—which made Sophie want to vomit on his jewel-encrusted shoes. She didn’t care that he’d been searching his wife’s possessions for clues to her Neverseen activities. Finding a bunch of maps and a leaping crystal kit would never make up for the way he’d treated his son.

“Oh my,” Lord Cassius said, fanning his face, “I always forget how intense your emotions are, Miss Foster. It’s such a strange sensation to feel them wafting through the air. A bit like static electricity, only pricklier.”

Most Empaths needed physical contact to take a reading, but for some reason Keefe and his father were different—at least when it came to Sophie.

“Well,” she said, hoping he could feel the massive waves of disgust she was sending his way, “some things give me a stronger reaction than others.”

Abuse came in all forms—and while Lord Cassius had never hit his son, his constant belittling criticism had done plenty of damage.

Not surprisingly, he didn’t bother asking for an update on Keefe as he stepped aside to let them in. The sparse foyer felt as cold and welcoming as a morgue—black floor, sleek walls glinting with sparks of blue balefire, and a silver staircase that spiraled all the way up to the two hundredth floor.

“You said you needed my help with something when you hailed,” Lord Cassius prompted.

“Indeed. We’re looking for any information you might be able to provide us about this symbol.” Mr. Forkle removed the memory log from his cape pocket and handed it over.

Lord Cassius’s eyes widened. “Lodestar.”

“So that *is* what the symbol means?” Sophie asked.

Lord Cassius frowned, turning the memory log to study the symbol from different angles. “It’s strange. The word clicked when I looked at the image, but I have no idea why.”

Memories could do that sometimes—especially memories that had been erased. Some triggers only dragged certain details back. Others unleashed the entire scene in a dizzying rush. Sophie knew the feeling well, thanks to the secrets the Black Swan had planted in her brain. It was also why she wasn’t allowed to ever visit her human family, in case seeing her made them remember.

“I feel like there’s something I’m missing,” Lord Cassius said, scratching his head and messing up his immaculate hairstyle.

“The mind is a tricky thing,” Mr. Forkle told him, taking the memory log back. “If you remember anything else, you know how to reach me.”

“Of course. Though I don’t see why you need *me*. Surely you realize there’s someone who could be infinitely more helpful.”

Sophie was about to ask who when realization dawned, spreading goose bumps across her skin. “You . . . want us to ask your *wife* about the Lodestar Initiative?”

“Why not?” Lord Cassius asked. “Isn’t this whole thing her mess? Who better to solve the problem than the one who created it in the first place?”

“Uh, maybe someone who’s not locked away in an ogre prison?” Fitz suggested.

For the briefest glimmer of a moment, Lord Cassius’s expression faltered and he looked like a grieving husband and a crushed father, standing all alone in his cold, empty tower.

Then he blinked and it was gone, replaced with his dripping smile. “Where there’s a will, there’s a way.”

“Not in this instance,” Mr. Forkle told him. “If we express interest in Lady Gisela, we turn her into an ogre bargaining chip—one that would come at far too high a cost.”

“Diplomacy so rarely yields results,” Lord Cassius agreed. “But that’s why I’ve grown so passionate for your order. Rumor has it, the Black Swan staged a rather successful raid on Exile a few months back. Why not pull the same trick again?”

“Because we’ve gained wisdom,” Mr. Forkle told him. “And experience.”

Their adventures in Exile hadn’t exactly gone as planned, between Fitz nearly dying and the Council almost arresting everyone. And yet, Sophie couldn’t help finding Lord Cassius’s suggestion *tempting*. Not only could Lady Gisela teach them all the things Keefe was so determined to learn from the Neverseen, but Keefe also wouldn’t need Fintan to rescue his mom.

No, Mr. Forkle interrupted. A jailbreak in an uncharted prison run by a particularly violent species will never be a worthwhile risk—especially considering that Lady Gisela may no longer be alive.

Dread hit her stomach with a thud. But Fintan told Keefe—

Yes, I know what he promised. I also know he gave Mr. Sencen that information when he was trying to lure him into joining their order. And even if the report was accurate, it’s been weeks since then—and Lady Gisela was badly wounded at her arrest. Or if she is alive, it’s also incredibly likely that they erased her mind before they sent her away.

You’ve put a lot of thought into this, Sophie noted.

Of course. The Collective and I have discussed it at length. I never mentioned it because I know how you struggle to ignore possibilities.

Or maybe it was because your first instinct is to say no to everything. You realize that ninety percent of the time, you give me a big speech on all the reasons why an idea is too dangerous, and then a few weeks later we end up doing it anyway?

A rueful smile curved his lips. *And in each of those instances, it was only because the situation grew especially desperate. Thankfully, we're not there yet. There are avenues we haven't yet explored—like showing the symbol to Gethen when we meet with him and seeing if we can trick some answers out of him.*

I guess that's true, Sophie hated to admit.

She'd been expecting him to offer his usual less-than-helpful solutions, like “read a bunch of really long books” or “practice telepathy with Fitz.”

Gethen . . . might actually work.

Good—it's settled, Mr. Forkle told her as he turned to their group. “Forgive our moment of distraction.”

Lord Cassius nodded. “I'm sure we're all used to Telepaths. Have you at least come to a decision?”

“Only that we'll be focusing on alternate plans. But thank you for the suggestion. I wonder if I could trouble you with one further request. I'd love to take a look around before I leave. Perhaps my fresh eyes might turn up a clue your wife left behind.”

“Where would you like to search?” Lord Cassius asked. “There are *quite* a few places.”

Talk about an understatement.

Sophie doubted an army of gnomes would be able to search the massive estate in less than a week—and gnomes were the most efficient, industrious creatures she'd ever met. Still, Keefe had stayed at Candleshade the night before he ran off with the Neverseen. And while he was there, *something* must have changed.

When he'd left Sophie's house he'd seemed upset—but nothing like the mess he'd been the next day.

Something had triggered new memories—memories that made him believe he was part of the Lodestar Initiative.

So maybe if she searched his room, she could find what made him remember.

ELEVEN

HUH,” FITZ SAID. “So this is Keefe’s room.”

Sophie blinked. “That’s right—you’ve never been here.”

“Uh, have *you*?”

“I’d like to know that answer as well,” Tam said.

She shook her head. “Keefe told me he didn’t like to have friends over to his house. But I’ve seen it in a few of his memories.”

The memories weren’t happy memories, though, so she hadn’t paid much attention to the scenery. The room took up three stories, and was one of the fanciest places Sophie had seen—sparkling crystal walls, swirling chandeliers, and tons of ornate furniture in shades of black, white, and gray.

“This place reminds me of our old room,” Linh mumbled. “We weren’t allowed to decorate it either.”

“You guys shared a room?” Fitz asked.

“It was our punishment for telling people we were twins.” Tam rolled his eyes.

Linh hooked her arm around him. “Too bad I liked sharing a room better.”

“And yet you ditched me the first second we got to Alluveterre.”

“Hey, what girl is going to pass up her own private tree house?” Linh asked.

“Definitely not me,” Sophie said, trying to figure out where to start their search. Everything seemed so un-Keefe, it was hard to imagine him touching any of it.

“What exactly are we looking for?” Tam asked. “Keefe doesn’t hit me as the Dear Diary type—though if we find one, I call dibs.”

“No you don’t,” Sophie told him. “We’re not here to *snoop*. I just figured we should look around and make sure there’s nothing important.”

“Well, this place is huge,” Fitz said. “So maybe we should split up—some of us upstairs and some of us downstairs and meet in the middle?”

“New game!” Grizel jumped in. “Girls versus boys. Losers owe the others a favor. GO!”

“Bring it on!” Fitz said, sprinting for the stairs.

Grizel beat him there and bolted downstairs, so Fitz raced up.

“Looks like we have closet and bathroom duty, guys!” he shouted.

“I’m going on record right now and saying I’m not getting within ten feet of Keefe’s underwear!” Tam shouted back.

Sandor heaved a sigh as he turned to follow the boys. “If you care about me at all, Miss Foster, *lose* this silly game. Do whatever you have to do.”

Sophie and Linh shared a look before they made their way downstairs, where Grizel was already busy flipping through one of the notebooks piled on an enormous gilded desk. “Either of you want to give me a hand with these?”

Linh grabbed one. “Wow. The whole first page is just *‘bored bored bored’* written over and over.”

“He also makes some rather entertaining notes about his Mentors in the margins,” Grizel said. “But none of that is particularly useful, so we’d better get moving. We’re winning this thing! And when we do, Sandor is taking me dancing.”

“Dancing?” Sophie repeated, trying to picture that.

Nope.

Her brain couldn’t compute.

“Does dancing mean something else to goblins?” Linh asked.

“I don’t know—does it mean this?” Grizel hummed a silky beat and shook her hips in a move that reminded Sophie of belly dancing, only with less arm waving and more head bopping.

“You really think Sandor’s going to do *that*?” Sophie asked.

“He will if you help me force him. Think of the favor you could demand from that pretty boy up there. And I bet our little Linh would love to force her brother to do something especially embarrassing.”

Linh grinned. “How do we win? You never explained the rules.”

“Of course I didn’t. How else can I change them? Now get to work!” Grizel pointed across the room—which seemed to be some sort of study, complete with oversize armchairs and walls of bookshelves. From a distance, anyone would think a model student lived there—or maybe a snooty professor. But as Sophie looked closer, she could spot glimmers of Keefe in the details. Like the subtitles he’d scrawled on the spines of the books:

688 pages that don’t actually tell you anything.

Does anyone honestly care this much about fungus?

I tore a page out of the middle somewhere—good luck trying to find it!

“Think this is significant?” Grizel asked, pulling a silver Imparter from one of the desk drawers.

“I’m betting he left that so no one could track him down,” Sophie said “But you’re welcome to compare it to mine to see if there’s something unique.”

She handed over her Imparter, and Grizel studied them from every angle. “Ugh, I guess you’re right. These look identical—oh, what’s that?”

Linh showed them the notebook she’d been flipping through, where Keefe had drawn a detailed map of Foxfire and marked several places with “Hide gulon here.”

Grizel snorted. “I’ll give the boy this—he’s definitely creative.”

“That’s true,” Sophie realized, trying to see the room through Keefe’s eyes. “We need to search beyond the obvious places. He’d want to be clever—hiding stuff in plain sight where no one would suspect. He’d also enjoy damaging things his father cared about, like the walls or the floor or . . .”

Sophie squatted to find the S section on the bookshelf. Specifically: *The Heart of the Matter* by Lord Cassius Sencen.

Keefe’s father had published his theory that elves generated emotions in both their minds and their hearts, and believed the heart was where the purer emotions lived. Sophie actually found the idea fascinating—and it synced with certain things she’d experienced during her inflicting training. But Keefe’s subtitle was: *I’d rather gouge my eyes out with a Prattles pin.*

She flipped back the cover and found that Keefe had glued all the pages together, then cut out their center, creating a hollow space he’d packed with vials of elixirs.

“Victory is ours!” Grizel shouted, handing Sophie back her Imparter.

“It’s not about who finds something first—it’s about who finds the most!” Sandor snapped back. But Sophie could hear him yelling at Fitz and Tam to work faster.

“I’m not sure this stuff is actually important,” Sophie warned, holding up two of the vials—Burp Blaster and Pus Powder. “I think it’s Keefe’s pranking supplies.”

“Maybe some of it,” Grizel said, fishing out a silver forklike gadget from the bottom. “But this is an effluxer—also known as an ogre repeller. One of my favorite inventions you guys make, by the way.”

“Yeah, but Keefe uses those for pranks,” Sophie argued. “One time he tried hiding them in the grounds at Foxfire, so they’d go off right as the principal walked by.”

“No wonder he and my brother don’t get along,” Linh said. “They’re basically the same person.”

Practically on cue, Tam shouted from the bathroom above, “Dude—this guy uses more hair products than I do!”

“Well,” Grizel said, tucking the effluxer next to her sword, “I’m still counting this as a find. The rules never said it had to be related to the Neverseen.”

She winked.

“But we’re not done searching yet,” she added. “I don’t just want to win. I want to crush them like a sanguillisk.”

“Do I want to know what that is?” Sophie asked as she followed Grizel back upstairs.

“Depends on how you feel about bugs,” Linh told her. “Imagine a roach and a mosquito having a ten-pound flying baby.”

“And . . . now I’m never going to sleep again.”

Grizel laughed as she and Linh got busy searching under the bed and between the mattresses.

Sophie studied the space, trying to think like Keefe again. “Where’s Mrs. Stinkbottom?”

“Am I going to regret asking what that is?” Grizel asked.

“She’s a green gulon stuffed animal that Elwin and I gave Keefe to help him sleep. He didn’t have a satchel when he left, so she should be here.”

They checked under the bed again, and under the decorative pillows piled on top, before making their way upstairs.

“This is our territory,” Sandor growled, blocking them from entering the humongous bathroom, complete with mirror-lined walls and a swimming pool-size bathtub.

Grizel stroked his cheek. “Are we making you nervous?”

Sandor flinched out of the way, not saying a word as Sophie and Linh made their way into the closet. They found Fitz and Tam sorting through the racks of clothes—so many clothes. Enough to last Keefe a decade or two.

“Anyone see any stuffed animals?” Sophie asked. “I can’t find Mrs. Stinkbottom.”

Tam snickered.

“Hey, all the cool kids are sleeping with stuffed animals these days,” Fitz informed him.

“I take it that means you have a Mrs. Stinkbottom of your own?” Linh asked.

“I have a Mr. Snuggles.”

“Wow,” Tam said. “Just . . . wow.”

Grizel clapped her hands. “Enough about stuffed animals. Did you boys find anything?”

Sandor’s smile was undeniably smug when he showed her the two stashes of pranking elixirs they’d found in Keefe’s shoes—plus a rather terrifying container labeled MIXED FECES that had been hidden behind a rack of tunics.

“We also found my favorite bramble jersey,” Fitz added. “I *knew* he stole it.”

“That doesn’t count,” Grizel told him.

Sandor shrugged. “Either way, we’re still winning. And I already decided on my favor.”

“Yeah, well, don’t go counting on it yet,” Grizel warned. “Girls—help the boys with this closet. I’m sure they’ve missed something.”

Sandor was busy assuring her they hadn’t when Linh noticed the edge of a silver chest in the shadows of the highest shelf.

Sophie floated the trunk down using her telekinesis. “Looks like more pranking supplies—another effluxer, a few empty medicine vials, and a bottle of Drooly Dew.”

The bottle was wrapped in crumpled green paper, and when she spotted an opened card underneath it, Sophie realized she was looking at the gift she’d given Keefe for midterms the year before. He’d teased her mercilessly about the detention dance lesson she’d been forced to share with Valin—nicknamed one of the “drooly boys” by Marella—so she’d decided to get back at him. In the card she’d written, “Now you can be drooly too!”

She couldn’t believe he’d kept it.

“All right, back to searching,” Grizel said. “I’m not settling for a tie. You boys found three stashes, and we found two, and learned that Mrs. Fartbottom is missing.”

“Stinkbottom,” Sophie corrected. “And honestly, I’m starting to think we’re wasting our time. If Keefe left something for us, he probably would’ve asked me if I found it. And if he had something to hide, he probably would’ve taken it with him.”

Grizel shrugged. “Either way, we still need a winner. Did you boys already check all of the cape pockets?”

“Some of them,” Fitz said.

Grizel clicked her tongue and rushed over to a rack of cloaks. “Clearly I need to teach you some dedication. But we’ll do that *after* I destroy your lazy butts with the find of the night. Come on, Sophie and Linh, let’s crush these boys!”

“Not if we crush you first!” Sandor shouted, charging into the cape-pocket showdown.

“Are all goblins this competitive?” Sophie asked, deciding to watch from the sidelines as Sandor and Grizel tried to shove their meaty hands into the narrow pockets.

“It’s just *her*,” Sandor squeak-growled.

“Nothing wrong with a girl who goes after what she wants,” Grizel argued. “And what I want is a whole night of you wearing those silver pants I know you still have and sashaying around the dance floor.”

Sophie giggled. “Can I be there?”

Sandor tore through the capes even faster. “No, because it’s not happening!”

“Oh, sweetie, I hate to break it to you—but BAM!” Grizel pumped one fist while she used the other to wave a sealed envelope under Sandor’s nose. “Would you like do the honors, Sophie—even if you don’t deserve it, after you chose to be Too Cool for the Cape Hunt?”

Sophie caught herself holding her breath as she took the envelope from Grizel, slid her finger under the flap, and removed a folded, crumpled paper.

“Did Keefe draw that?” Fitz asked, peeking over Sophie’s shoulder at the photo-real sketch of Lady Gisela looking elegant and aloof—but with a hint of her son’s smirk.

“I think so,” Sophie said.

She’d seen the same sketch in a memory Keefe had shown her, of his father screaming at him for drawing during his Foxfire sessions. Lord Cassius had torn all the pages out of Keefe’s notebook and stormed off. But after he was gone, Keefe’s mom had retrieved one drawing.

Sure enough, when Sophie turned the portrait of Lady Gisela over, she found a note in loopy writing.

Signed: *Love, Mom.*

TWELVE

THE ENVELOPE WAS still sealed,” Fitz said, taking the drawing from Sophie to study it closer. “So that means Keefe never saw this.”

“But why would Lady Gisela hide it somewhere Keefe wouldn’t look for it?” Sophie asked.

The note gave them the answer.

Dear Keefe,

You may think you understand what you saw today on the mountain. But there's so much more that needs to be explained.

I think you're ready for the truth. But it's going to be confusing.

I need you to trust me.

I've left a way for you to find me. And I know you're smart enough to figure it out.

This is your legacy. All it takes is a leap of faith.

I'll see you soon.

Love, Mom.

81 / 34 / 197

“Lady Gisela must’ve written this right after the battle on Mount Everest,” Sophie mumbled, rubbing her knot of tangled emotions. “After she phase-shifted off the cliff, she must’ve come here and left it for him.”

“But Keefe didn’t come home,” Fitz added. “We all went to my house—and then we left to find the Black Swan. So he never found it.”

“I wonder what he would’ve done if he had,” Sophie whispered.

Would it have stopped him from joining the Neverseen?

Or would it have made him run away sooner?

More important: What had Lady Gisela planned to tell him?

“It sounds like there are a bunch of stories you haven’t shared,” Tam said, reading the letter over Fitz’s shoulder. “But I guess that’s how it goes for the new kids in the group.”

“We’ll try to catch you up,” Fitz promised.

Linh pointed to the digits under Lady Gisela’s signature. “Do you guys know what those numbers mean?”

“I’m guessing that’s what she meant about leaving Keefe a way to find her,” Sophie said. “But I have no idea how three numbers would help.”

The only theory she could come up with was latitude and longitude coordinates. But those were always in pairs, and they usually had decimal points.

“What’s the sparkly stuff?” Linh asked, pointing to the glints on the edge of the paper.

Sophie had been wondering the same thing. They were too small to be temporary leaping crystals, and there were more inside the envelope, like Lady Gisela had added in a pinch of microglitter before she sealed the letter.

But why would she bother—especially since it seemed like she’d been in a rush? Her writing looked much sloppier than the other time Sophie had seen it.

“Well,” Grizel said, “while you guys ponder all of that, let’s not forget that girls win!”

“Forget it!” Sandor snapped. “It’s not happening.”

“What isn’t?” Mr. Forkle asked from the top of the stairs. Lord Cassius loomed behind him.

Grizel grinned and shook her hips. “Dancing. Sandor’s going to be doing a *lot* of it.”

“I . . . think I’ve missed something.” Mr. Forkle’s eyes were on Sophie, and she was pretty sure his piercing stare meant he’d noticed the not-so-subtle way Fitz had flailed to hide the note behind his back.

Lord Cassius must’ve noticed too.

“I’m assuming you found something,” he said.

Before Sophie could figure out a good lie, Tam grabbed the jar of feces from Keefe’s stash and tossed it to him. “We did. Isn’t it awesome?”

Lord Cassius grimaced and stalked over to one of the bathroom sinks to wash his hands, even though he'd only touched the container. "We both know that's not what I was referring to."

"We also know that anything Keefe hid in here was because he didn't want *you* finding it," Tam said. "So do you really think we're going to tell you about it?"

Lord Cassius raised one eyebrow. "I see why your father struggles."

All the shadows in the room seemed to stretch.

Lord Cassius let out a sigh. "No need for dramatics. Keep your secrets. I'm done trying to control willful teenagers."

Sophie breathed a sigh of relief, even as Mr. Forkle's voice filled her head.

As soon as we get back to Havenfield, you're showing me that letter.

Out loud he said, "Can someone at least explain why Grizel keeps dancing?"

"Because it's *happening*," Grizel told him.

Sophie explained the specifics of their game.

"And let's not forget that Pretty Boy owes you a favor too," Grizel reminded her. "And Twinnny is at his sister's mercy."

"I'm betting this means we're getting a pet," Tam mumbled.

Linh nodded. "As soon as we're able to leave the house more, you're taking me to Claws, Wings, Horns, and Things."

Lord Cassius whistled. "Either your control has improved significantly or you enjoy flooding Atlantis."

Linh didn't reply, but she formed a small bird out of water, letting it soar around the room before splashing Lord Cassius's shoes.

"Whoa," Fitz breathed, blinking several times before turning to Sophie. "What about me? What's my punishment?"

"I'm . . . still narrowing it down," she hedged, her mind screaming with too many possibilities.

"That's fine," he said. "But I think we need to set a time limit so you can't hold this over me forever. Let's say: If you don't call in the favor within a month, it becomes mine."

Sophie agreed, not sure why the deal made her nervous. Worst-case scenario, she'd just rattle off whatever lame idea she came up with off the top of her head.

"Anyway," Mr. Forkle said, "we shouldn't impose on Lord Cassius's hospitality any longer."

"One thing before you go," Lord Cassius said as Mr. Forkle reached for his pathfinder. "I know you saw my son yesterday," he told Sophie. "And that he was

behind the damage at Foxfire. I wanted to thank you for keeping that information private.”

“I didn’t do it for you,” she said.

“That doesn’t stop me from appreciating it. I’ve always valued your friendship with my son. If anyone can guide him along this challenging path he’s chosen, it’s you. I also assume he’ll be contacting you again—and if so, I hope you’d be willing to give him a message.”

Sophie steeled herself for some sort of cruel threat. Instead, Lord Cassius told her, “Please let him know that no matter what happens, he will always have a room here at Candleshade. I realize my son and I do not get along. I’ll even own that it’s primarily my fault. But regardless of our differences . . . Keefe and I will always be family. And no matter where he goes or what he does, he can *always* choose to come back home.”

It definitely wasn’t the kind of speech that left Sophie feeling warm and snuggly. But Lord Cassius was offering his son more than Tam and Linh’s parents had done for their children.

“I’ll let him know,” she promised.

Lord Cassius nodded. And with that, they leaped back to Havenfield.

MR. FORKLE GAVE THEM TEN SECONDS after their group arrived in the creature-filled pastures before he held out his pudgy hand. “Show me the letter.”

Fitz obediently passed it over.

“Well,” Mr. Forkle said when he’d finished reading, flipping the note over to study the drawing. “Mr. Sencen is a remarkable artist.”

“That’s it?” Sophie asked as Tam groaned. “What about the note? And the numbers?”

“And the sparkles,” Linh added.

“Excuse me for wanting to give proper praise to Mr. Sencen’s talent. Look at those details! Do we know how old he was when he drew this?”

“He was a Level Three at Foxfire,” Sophie said. “And now you’re stalling,”

“I am,” Mr. Forkle agreed. “But only because I know you’re all going to start shouting at me in a few seconds—even Sandor and Grizel.”

“Why would we do that?” Fitz asked.

“Because . . . I know what the numbers mean.”

“YOU DO?” six voices shouted in unison.

Mr. Forkle rubbed his temples. “Just as I expected. And now . . .”

He pointed to the path that led to the T. rex pasture, where Grady came sprinting toward them covered in neon green dinosaur feathers.

“Is everything okay?” Grady asked. “I heard shouting while I was bathing Verdi.”

“We’re fine,” Mr. Forkle said. “But by all means, please join this conversation. It’ll save me from having to explain a second time.”

Mr. Forkle handed Grady the note from Keefe’s mother and pointed to the line under the signature. “Eighty-one, thirty-four, one hundred and ninety-seven. I’m surprised none of them could guess after seeing the crystal powder.”

Grady sighed. “Path angles.”

Mr. Forkle nodded. “For those who’ve never made a temporary leaping crystal before, the beam is made by three facets that converge to a single point, and then collapse in on each other once the leap is done. In this case, the crystal that Lady Gisela is instructing her son to carve has an eighty-one-degree angle, a thirty-four-degree angle, and a one-hundred-and ninety-seven-degree angle. She also provided the crystalline powder he’d need in order to form it, so he could take the leap of faith and meet her.”

“So we can do the same thing, right?” Sophie asked, hoping she hadn’t lost any of the powder when she opened the letter.

“I assumed that would be your next question,” Mr. Forkle said. “And I’m sure all of you are now imagining rather dramatic scenarios that involve storming a secret Neverseen hideout and solving everything with an epic showdown.”

“That’d be nice,” Tam said.

“Though I’d be even happier if they surrendered without a fight,” Fitz admitted. He rubbed the spot on his chest where he’d been impaled during their Exile prison break.

“We are the only ones who will be storming anything,” Sandor assured him, pointing to himself and Grizel.

“That won’t be necessary,” Mr. Forkle interrupted. “And no, Miss Foster, I’m *not* saying that because my first instinct is to deny things. I happen to know where this particular crystal will lead, and it’s nowhere we need to be visiting. I used the same angles the day I came to rescue you and Mr. Dizznee from the Neverseen.”

THIRTEEN

THE FLASHBACKS HIT Sophie hard.

No visuals. Only sounds.

Ghostly laughter. Haunting threats. Questions with no answers.

“Are you okay?” Fitz asked as Sophie dug her fist under her ribs, trying to keep the tangled emotions from unraveling.

“I’m fine,” she promised—then cleared her throat and tried again without the definitely not-fine squeak. “I just don’t have good memories of that place.”

“Neither do I,” Mr. Forkle mumbled. “Seeing you blistered and drugged and strapped to a chair . . .”

Everyone shuddered.

Sophie didn’t have the same memories. Her blindfold had prevented her from seeing the hideout. And the cloyingly sweet-scented drugs had dulled the rest.

All she remembered was pain.

And panic.

And scattered random details, like the weight of her bonds, the rush of the elevator they’d used during their escape, and the endless minutes as Mr. Forkle had carried her and Dex through the halls. Then she’d woken up on the streets of Paris with new abilities and three vague clues to help them find their way back to the Lost Cities.

“Just so I’m understanding this right,” Tam said, “you guys actually know where one of the Neverseen’s hideouts is?”

“An abandoned one, yes,” Mr. Forkle said. “They managed to destroy the entrance in the brief time it took me to treat Miss Foster’s and Mr. Dizznee’s wounds—and by the time I found a new way in, they’d removed all trace of themselves. Which is probably why Lady Gisela chose it for her rendezvous point. If the note fell into the wrong hands, all anyone would find are a few empty underground rooms—and even then, only if they knew exactly how to find them.”

“Does that mean the numbers in the note are a dead end?” Fitz asked.

“Unfortunately, yes. I’m sure any lookout Lady Gisela posted there is long gone now that she’s in prison. And we monitor the area. No unusual activity has ever been reported.”

Fitz’s shoulders slumped. “Just when I thought we were getting somewhere.”

“We *are* getting somewhere,” Mr. Forkle said. “This note is not the only discovery we made today. All we need—”

“I’d like to see it,” Sophie interrupted. “The hideout, I mean.”

“That would be very unwise, Miss Foster. Reliving all the trauma—”

“I can relive the trauma anytime,” Sophie interrupted. “I’m doing it right now.”

Grady pulled her close.

“Really, I’m fine,” she promised, glad her voice matched the words. “All I’m trying to say is that it’s not like I’ll ever forget what happened to me.”

“Maybe not.” Grady kissed her forehead. “But you could trigger additional flashbacks.”

“That could be a good thing,” Sophie argued. “We might learn something important.”

“I can assure you, Miss Foster, that whatever miniscule truths you might glean from those dark flashbacks won’t be worth the additional stress they’ll cause. Your mind and sanity are far too precious to take such a risk.”

“I can handle it,” she insisted.

It’d been months since her kidnapping, and she’d never once considered going back. But to stand in a Neverseen hideout—even just the shell of it . . .

Maybe it would help her get inside their heads.

“We know way more about the Neverseen now than we did when I was taken,” Sophie reminded them. “Back then, we didn’t know the name of their organization, and we hadn’t seen the creepy white eye symbol on their cloaks. We’d also never heard anyone mention the Lodestar Initiative. So it *is* possible you missed something when you were there. We have to at least check. I promise it won’t be too hard for me, and you already said it won’t be dangerous—”

“Funny, I don’t remember saying that,” Mr. Forkle interrupted.

“You said there’s been no unusual activity,” she reminded him. “Same difference.”

“Just because we’ve seen no sign of the Neverseen doesn’t mean it’s safe to go sneaking off to a Forbidden City—especially with the Council watching your registry feed so closely.”

“We’re following an important lead,” Sophie argued. “I’m sure the Council realizes that finding the Neverseen is going to require us bending a few rules—and if they don’t, who cares? We’ve never let that stop us before.”

Mr. Forkle sighed so hard it made his pudgy cheeks flap. “Can we at least let this idea sit for a few days?”

“What will that accomplish?” Sophie asked. “Besides wasting time we can’t afford to lose? If we have a shot at learning something, why not learn it *now*?”

“I’m with Sophie on this one,” Tam jumped in.

“Me too,” Linh said.

“You kids are getting too smart for your own good,” Mr. Forkle muttered. “Fine. Let me reach out to Blur.”

He stepped away to whisper into his Imparter, and Grady shifted so Sophie was facing him. “Are you sure this is a good idea, kiddo?”

“I’m never sure of anything,” Sophie told him. “But I’ve been back to the cave they grabbed me from, and it didn’t cause a breakdown.”

“This will be much harder,” Grady warned. “And you’ve already had a long, tough day. You’ve been up since before dawn.”

“I know.” Sophie yawned just thinking about it. “But we both know I’m never going to sleep until this is done.”

“I doubt you will afterward either,” he said sadly. “Just . . . promise you won’t be afraid to admit if it gets too hard and you need to leave. There’s no shame in saying *I can’t*.”

Sophie promised as Mr. Forkle returned looking equal parts determined and resigned.

“Blur sent two of our gnomes to inspect the area,” he said. “As long as they give the all clear, I’ll take you for a quick look—but the emphasis must be on ‘quick.’ Understood?”

“And you mean all of us, right?” Fitz jumped in.

“I leave that up to Miss Foster. She may well prefer to keep this a private moment.”

The idea of bringing an audience to her torture chamber felt *strange*.

But facing it alone sounded worse.

“Just . . . don’t freak out if I start bawling, okay?” Sophie asked.

Tam and Linh nodded, and Fitz patted his shoulder. “Ready to cry on if you need it.”

“What about Dex?” Grady asked.

The question had a weight to it, pressing on Sophie’s heart as she imagined how furious Dex would be if she left him out.

But could she watch him relive the horrors—knowing they happened because of *her*?

“I think the smaller the group, the better,” she whispered.

“I agree,” Sandor said. “It will be easier for me to protect you.”

“*You’re* going?” Tam asked.

“I go where Sophie goes.”

“And I go where he goes,” Grizel said, grabbing Fitz’s arm.

“But you guys are seven feet tall and gray,” Tam argued.

Sandor was unmoved. “I went with Sophie to visit her former home.”

“Yeah, but that street’s almost always empty,” Sophie reminded him. “Paris is one of the humans’ most popular cities. There will be people everywhere, taking pictures and videos. And hilarious as your old-lady disguise was, it was *not* convincing.”

“Hang on—old-lady disguise?” Grizel asked, cracking up when Sandor flushed.

Even Mr. Forkle was smiling as he said, “No disguises should be necessary. We’ll be mostly underground. And I always keep one of these with me for emergencies.”

He showed them the obscurer hidden in his pocket—a small silver orb that bent light and sound to hide their presence.

“Some of us won’t need your gadgets,” Grizel said as she moved into the shadow of a nearby tree. She pressed herself against the trunk and held so still, Sophie lost sight of her.

Sandor coughed something that sounded a whole lot like “show-off” as Mr. Forkle’s Imparter flashed with what must’ve been the equivalent of a text message.

“The gnomes feel the hideout is empty,” he said. “And they’ve agreed to stay nearby in case we need them. So I suppose this is happening.”

He pulled a handful of crystals from his pocket and chose one that was pale blue and pear shaped. “I had a permanent crystal cut once I knew the hideout existed.”

“You don’t think you should change into human clothes before you go?” Grady asked.

“The gnomes are reporting rain in the city,” Mr. Forkle said. “Which will clear the streets and make our capes appear far more normal should someone somehow spot us beyond the protection of the obscurer. This mission may seem hasty, but I assure you, I would *not* make it if I foresaw any dangers—no matter how grumpy it might make your daughter.”

Grady cracked a smile at that, strangling Sophie with a hug before Mr. Forkle removed the hourglass from his pocket and handed it to him.

“That will last twenty-five minutes,” Mr. Forkle explained.

“I thought it was ten,” Sophie said.

“It lasts however long I need it to. Is everyone ready?” He offered Sophie his hand, and she tried not to tremble as Fitz took her other hand and the rest of their group formed a tight circle.

“I’ll be waiting,” Grady said, holding the hourglass ready to flip.
Mr. Forkle nodded. “We’ll be back by the final grain of sand.”

FOURTEEN

THE DWARVES WERE right about the rain. In fact, “downpour” would’ve been a better word. The fat, sloshy drops fell so fast they blurred the scenery, bouncing off the gravelly ground and soaking Sophie’s group from both above and below.

She could feel the dirty water seeping through her boots when Linh waved one arm back and forth, twisting the rain into thin, gurgling streams and weaving a weblike bubble around them. She pulled her other arm into her chest, drawing the moisture out of their hair and clothes.

“Seriously,” Fitz told her. “You’re amazing.”

Linh’s cheeks flushed a deeper pink. “My ability makes it easy.”

“I wouldn’t sell yourself short,” Mr. Forkle corrected. “This is remarkable control.”

“He’s right,” Fitz said, unable to take his eyes off Linh.

“Shouldn’t we keep moving?” Sophie asked, sounding grumpier than she meant to.

“We should,” Mr. Forkle said. “Just let me get my bearings.”

They’d leaped to the edge of some sort of garden, where neat rows of trees led toward an extravagant palace surrounded by flowers and benches and statues and a lake-size fountain. The place was probably a huge tourist trap on a clear day, but for the moment it was empty, save for one couple clinging to their cheap umbrellas as they scurried around looking for better shelter.

“Relax,” Mr. Forkle said as Sandor and Grizel clutched the handles of their swords. “The obscurer will do its job.”

Linh kept the rain away as they headed toward a narrow gate in the iron-and-gold fence, but her legs were shaking from the strain by the time they reached a main street.

“It’s fine,” Tam told her. “Getting wet isn’t going to kill us.”

“But the water smells like pollution. Besides. If I could hold back a tidal wave in Ravagog, I can hold back a little rain.”

“I seem to remember us having to carry you while you did that,” Tam reminded her.

“Well, this time I’ve got it covered.” But she nearly tripped as they ran through the puddled crosswalk.

“How much longer until we’re there?” Sophie asked as Fitz wrapped his arm around Linh’s waist to keep her steady.

The city looked familiar—narrow streets, stone buildings with iron balconies, charming cafés with bright awnings, and tiny cars that looked more like toys than actual transportation. But she didn’t recognize anything. No sign of the Eiffel Tower. Or Pont Alexandre III, with its fancy lanterns. She couldn’t even see the Seine.

“We’re close,” Mr. Forkle promised, ducking down a street that felt more like an alley. Cars were parked right on the sidewalk.

“I’ve always wondered what it would be like to drive around in these things,” Fitz said.

“Did you ever ride in one?” Tam asked Sophie.

“Pretty much every day,” she said.

“Wow—was it scary?” Linh asked.

Mr. Forkle said “yes” at the same time Sophie said “no.”

“*You* drove?” Sophie asked.

“Of course not. But occasionally I was unable to avoid being a passenger—and there is nothing quite so terrifying as putting your life in the hands of a distracted human who’s operating a piece of deadly machinery they only marginally understand and can hardly control. It’s a wonder any of them survive the process.”

A siren blared in the distance, making a different wail than the police cars Sophie was used to hearing, followed by screeching tires and a whole lot of honking.

“Case in point,” Mr. Forkle told them, turning down an even narrower alley lined with trash cans.

“Lovely place the Neverseen chose,” Tam grumbled as Mr. Forkle dropped to his knees in front of a gunk-encrusted manhole cover.

“It gets worse,” Mr. Forkle warned.

“Is that their symbol?” Fitz pointed to the curved markings etched along the grimy circle of metal—and he was right. The whole pattern was made of the Neverseen’s round eyes.

“See?” she told Mr. Forkle. “Bet you didn’t notice that last time.”

“I did not,” Mr. Forkle admitted as he twisted the cover and lifted it free.

Dread clawed around Sophie’s stomach as she stared at the ladder descending into the darkness. “Wasn’t there an elevator?”

“They collapsed that tunnel to stop me from coming back. Took me a whole day to find this back entrance—and it’s not a direct access point. We still have a journey

underground.”

“I’ll go first,” Sandor said, already lowering himself onto the ladder. “And I’ll scout the path ahead.”

“You might want to duck when you’re down there,” Mr. Forkle warned. “I remember the ceilings being rather low. You’ll also need this.”

He removed a long necklace and breathed on the crystal pendant, letting the heat reignite the blue balefire dormant inside.

“Got any more of those?” Fitz asked as Sandor disappeared into the darkness.

“Unfortunately, no,” Mr. Forkle said. “So hopefully you remember your Exillium training. You covered night vision, right?”

“Yeah, but I wasn’t good at it,” Fitz mumbled.

“You were probably overthinking it,” Linh told him. “There’s always *some* light present. If you make your mind believe that, it will amplify it for you.”

“Precisely. Trust your mind, not your eyes. And if all else fails, remember that you have other valuable senses to guide you. I’ll see you at the bottom.” Mr. Forkle’s hefty girth barely squeezed into the cramped tunnel as he shuffled down the ladder.

“I’ll go next,” Tam said, already crouching to reach for the top rung. “Maybe I can thin some of the shadows and make it brighter for you guys.”

“I should go last,” Grizel decided. “To make sure no one follows.”

“Then I’ll go next to last, to keep the rain away,” Linh said.

Which meant it was Sophie or Fitz’s turn.

“What would be easier for you?” Fitz asked. “I can be a few steps ahead, or right behind you. Either way, I’ll be close.”

“I’ll go first.”

She gave herself five deep breaths—wishing they didn’t taste like putrid, rotting trash—before she lowered herself onto the ladder. The metal felt cold and scratchy under her fingers, and she cursed the ruined elevator as she climbed down into the stale darkness.

Her mind was racing way too fast to focus on her night vision, so all she could see were smudges and vague outlines. But she could hear shaky breaths and scraping shoes and feel the vibration in the ladder, proving she wasn’t alone. She counted the rungs to keep calm, and had just reached number one hundred and thirty-four when her foot touched solid ground.

“Over here,” Tam said, taking her hand. “The floor’s uneven, so be careful.”

She still managed to trip. Several times.

Sandor returned from his sweep of the passage, and his balefire pendant cast a murky blue glow around the cavern, bouncing off the low ceiling and rough stone

walls.

“Where are we?” Fitz asked as he climbed down behind her.

“I believe the humans call it the Catacombs,” Mr. Forkle told him.

“I was really hoping you weren’t going to say that,” Sophie mumbled. “You know there are dead bodies down here, right?”

Linh froze on the ladder. “There are?”

“Yes, Miss Linh—I stumbled through several of the mass graves the day I found this passage. But they’re quite far away.”

“Still. Mass *graves*?” Linh shuffled up a couple of rungs. “Why would humans have something like that?”

“It’s what happens when you have a species with a very short lifespan,” Mr. Forkle explained. “As I understand it, they ran out of space to bury all of their bodies. So they moved them down to these old mine tunnels. Some of the bones were even arranged into patterns and decoration. Incredibly morbid, but I suppose some would see it as a tribute.”

“So, how many bodies are we talking about?” Grizel asked as she forced Linh to finally climb down. Linh walked on her tiptoes, like she was afraid of stepping on bones.

“I remember reading that there were about six million,” Sophie said.

“SIX MILLION?” Tam’s too-loud voice echoed off the walls. “Sorry. That’s just a *lot*.”

“And that’s only the dead from one city, right?” Fitz asked.

“Also from a specific time period,” Mr. Forkle agreed. “Humans have buried billions of their species throughout the centuries. Their population size was one of the reasons the Ancient Councillors chose to leave the bulk of the world to them—if only they put it to better use. But we can lament their missed opportunities another time.”

Sandor used the balefire crystal to illuminate a narrow gap in the far wall and motioned for everyone to follow him. They had to walk single file, so they stuck with their same order, and Fitz kept one hand on Sophie’s shoulder in case she tripped.

She counted her steps, trying to keep her mind distracted. But the memories made her wrists burn with every pulse.

“Okay,” Mr. Forkle called as she took step one hundred and sixty-four. “Ahead is a series of sharp curves, which will lead to what your eyes will tell you is a dead end. It’s an illusion. There’s a weak spot in the stones for us to slip through.”

“What do you mean by ‘weak spot?’” Sophie asked, imagining cave-ins.

“They must’ve had a Fluctuator alter the stones’ density. You’ll understand once you feel them. And try to hurry. This is all taking much longer than I wanted.”

Sophie's knotted emotions pulsed with every step as she followed the zigzagging path to what looked like a very solid wall of rock. Tam ran his hands over the stones until he found the right spot—then pushed his arm straight through the wall. Sophie flinched, waiting for the stones to crumble, but somehow everything held strong.

"You ready for this?" Fitz asked Sophie as Tam shoved the rest of his body through. "If not, I'll turn back with you."

"I'll go too," Linh offered.

"I'm not a fan of this place either," Grizel said. "I could bring you back to the surface while the others search."

Sophie was tempted to take them up on it.

Very tempted.

But . . . she had to face this.

Before she could change her mind, she aimed for the same patch in the wall she'd seen Tam use and shoved her shoulder through the rocks.

FIFTEEN

SOPHIE COULD FEEL the stones roll across her skin—kind of like walking through one of those ball enclosures she used to play in as a kid. And when she emerged on the other side, it felt like she'd stepped into another world.

Gone were the rough walls and low ceilings. The hallway was sleek and metal and bright, lit by thousands of tiny flames of balefire glowing in the glass walls. Fitz stepped through the stones behind her, and Linh and Grizel followed right after.

"This is the hall you carried us through, isn't it?" Sophie whispered.

Mr. Forkle nodded. "Mr. Dizznee was kept over here."

His steps echoed off the metal floor as he led them down the hall. Fitz held Sophie's hand, tightening his grip when Mr. Forkle slid a panel in the wall aside, revealing a small, dusty room.

A line of thick black bars divided the space in half, but otherwise the room was empty.

Mr. Forkle pointed to the cage's far corner, where a black scorch mark on the floor made Sophie shudder. "They'd left him tied up over there. He was lying so painfully still when I saw him, I feared he might be . . ."

"They burned him when he moved," Sophie whispered, tears brimming in her eyes. "I can't believe I had to *force* you to take him with us."

"I wasn't going to leave him," Mr. Forkle promised. "I simply thought it would be faster to carry you one at a time. And it would've let me hold you a gentler way. You both had raw burns—I was trying to make you as comfortable as possible."

When she turned away, his voice filled her mind.

I can see the doubt in your eyes—and I suppose I deserve it after the times I've failed to protect you. But you have to know that I would sooner die than allow harm come to any of you.

"Everything okay?" Fitz asked.

Sophie nodded and walked away from Dex's grim little cell. "Where did you find me?"

Mr. Forkle sounded like the world's most depressing tour guide as he asked her to follow him to a room on the opposite side of the hall with no bars, no furniture—just silver walls and a pile of splintered wood. Sweetness swam through the air, or maybe it was Sophie's mind playing tricks on her as her thoughts fuzzed and her eyes glazed over.

"I've got you," Fitz said, holding her steady.

Tam and Linh took her hands. Even Sandor huddled close, resting a meaty palm on her shoulder.

"This is it?" Sophie asked. "I wasn't in a cell?"

"They had you restrained to a chair." Mr. Forkle kicked a piece of the jagged wood, revealing thick black cords in the pile.

Sophie bent to touch the rope, remembering the feel of its thick fibers against her skin. The pieces of wood were heavy and solid. Unrelenting.

She picked up a piece that looked like the arm of the chair, gasping as she turned it over.

"Scorch marks," she whispered.

The wood slipped from her hand as the nightmares took over.

You're safe, Fitz transmitted, filling her mind with a soft thread of warmth. Their thumb rings snapped together as he pulled her gently away from the pile of wood.

"I told you this would be a bad idea," Mr. Forkle said, kicking a broken board into the wall.

"I'm fine," Sophie promised. "I just . . . need to get out of this room."

Fitz helped her wobble back to the hall and she sank to the floor, putting her head between her knees to stop the spinning.

Want me to carry you out? Fitz offered.

NO!

The thought was so loud he jumped.

Sorry. I . . . I don't want to be carried out of here again, like some helpless little girl.

No one would ever call you helpless. But I get what you mean. Is there anything I can do?

You're here.

He tightened his hold on her hands.

"Are we ready to go?" Mr. Forkle asked.

Sophie closed her eyes, focusing on tying the threads of panic away with her other emotions. The knot in her chest swelled so huge, it felt like it was pressing on her heart. But after a few slow breaths, she could bear it.

"There's still more to the hideout, isn't there?" she asked.

“Only the old entrance,” Mr. Forkle said. “But it’s nothing worth seeing. Just an empty room with a collapsed tunnel.”

“I still think we should check it. We’ve come this far.”

Fitz helped her to her feet and Sophie was glad to walk on her own. But she was grateful for the hand to hold on to.

“Okay, so I have a question,” Tam said, breaking the silence. “And this might be one of those stories you need to catch us up on. But . . . how did you get past the Neverseen while you were here? I haven’t seen a single hiding place.”

“They must’ve let down their guard after they learned of the plantings in the Wanderling Woods, thinking no one would come searching for two children who’d been declared dead,” Mr. Forkle told him. “So when I triggered my distraction, *all* of them left their posts to investigate.”

“Why didn’t you stage an ambush?” Fitz asked. “You could’ve captured the Neverseen and ended this.”

“We considered it,” Mr. Forkle said. “But there were too many unknown variables, and we couldn’t risk that our ambush would lead to further harm to Miss Foster or Mr. Dizznee. I honestly wasn’t sure if a rescue was even possible—that’s why I didn’t have a fully formed plan for returning them to the Lost Cities, and why I had to trigger Miss Foster’s abilities and leave the two of them to find their own way back. I tried to comfort myself with the knowledge that Miss Foster was well prepared for such adventures, but . . . not a day goes by that I don’t regret the decision. I’m very aware of how lucky we are that you had the strength and foresight to call for aid,” he told Sophie, “and that Mr. Vacker found you before you’d completely faded away. This whole nightmare was a huge wake-up call for our order. None of us ever imagined our enemies would dare be so bold.”

The saddest part was, their kidnapping seemed rather tame compared to the awful things the Neverseen had done since.

But Sophie was trying not to think about that.

She was trying not to think at all.

Trying to focus on breathing.

And walking.

One foot in front of the other. Until the hall ended in a round, empty room.

Half the curved wall had shattered, leaving a pile of jagged glass and twisted metal that looked ready to slice off the legs of anyone who dared to climb it.

“I take it that was the elevator?” Fitz asked.

Mr. Forkle nodded. “They were very thorough in their efforts to leave no trace.”

Even the ceiling was cracked in the center, like they’d ripped out a chandelier.

“I can’t believe there’s *nothing* useful here,” Sophie whispered.

“The Neverseen aren’t fools,” Mr. Forkle told her.

“Maybe not,” Tam said. “But I don’t think they understand how shadowprints work either. See this?” He kicked a dusty shard out of the center of the floor and pointed to what looked like a smudge underneath. “If the same light hits the same crystal in the same place enough times, it casts a shadow inside the facets. Most people would never notice them. But if you darken them up . . .”

He waved his hands, grabbing every shadow in the room and pulling them to the center of the floor, the smudges turning blacker and blacker as a shape slowly formed.

“Whoa,” Fitz breathed as everyone stepped back to study the pattern. “Is that . . . ?”

Sophie nodded. “It’s the Lodestar.”

SIXTEEN

EVERYONE ELSE SEES the symbol, right?” Sophie whispered. “I’m not imagining it?”

“Oh, it’s definitely there,” Fitz said. “Though I don’t remember this.”

He pointed to one of the rays, where the open circle at the end had thin lines running through the center.

Linh circled the symbol, moving to the part closest to the rubble. “This is the angle they would’ve seen it from when they first entered from the elevator, right? If you look at it from here, that new mark looks like two runes that spell out . . . Alabestrine.”

“The star?” Sophie asked.

Fitz grinned. “I keep forgetting you have the stars memorized.”

“You do?” Tam and Linh asked, their jaws falling in unison when Sophie nodded.

“Wow, what must it be like to live in your head?” Tam asked.

“It’s very complicated.” Sophie squinted at the rune. “So does this mean the symbol is some sort of constellation?”

“If it is, it’s none that I’ve heard of,” Mr. Forkle told her. “My memory is far inferior to yours, but as I recall, Alabestrine is what we call a solo star—one that’s not connected to anything else.”

“Are there a lot of those?” Sophie asked.

“Millions. No idea why this one would be special.” Mr. Forkle wandered the symbol several times, turning his head this way and that. “The problem is, even if this is a constellation they’ve created, we’d need to know more of the stars before we’d be able to match it up. And if we did . . . I’m not certain what that would tell us.”

Sophie didn’t know either.

But it had to mean *something*.

“Just to be sure that I’m understanding this correctly,” Mr. Forkle said, turning to Tam, “you were able to create this mark because the symbol was projected here?”

Tam pointed to the damaged ceiling. “I’m betting there used to be a gadget right there that flashed the symbol across the foyer.”

Mr. Forkle scratched his chin. “I don’t understand why I didn’t see it during the rescue. Mind you, I had a lot to consider in that moment—but I can’t believe that I would overlook a glowing mark projected across the floor.”

“Maybe they didn’t keep it lit up all the time,” Linh suggested.

“But it would’ve had to be on a *lot* in order to leave this strong of a shadow impression,” Tam reminded her.

Sophie had a much bigger, much more terrifying question.

“Do you think this means that my kidnapping was part of the Lodestar Initiative?”

She knew the Neverseen had taken her, but she’d thought it was because they wanted to learn why the Black Swan created her. She’d never considered it might’ve been part of some sort of bigger *plan*.

Mr. Forkle sighed. “I figured you might be worrying about that—and before you panic, remember that it’s possible this hideout was chosen for its convenience or availability. In fact, that could explain why the symbol wasn’t illuminated while I was here.”

“Maybe,” Sophie said. “But those bars in Dex’s cell were permanently installed, weren’t they? So even if it wasn’t built for me, it was built to hold *someone*.”

“And therein lies the problem of only having pieces of information,” Mr. Forkle told her. “It raises more questions than it answers. Which means we need to focus our efforts on learning as much about this symbol as possible—and *try* not to worry about the possibilities in the meantime. Have you memorized the details of this shadowprint? I’ll need you to project it for me when we return to Havenfield. And speaking of which, I believe we’re already past the timeline I gave your father.”

They were.

And Grady was *not* happy.

“I was five minutes from hailing the Council and begging them to track your pendants!” he told them as Sophie made her way over and squished him with a hug. “Missed you too, kiddo. Everything all right?”

It wasn’t.

But it felt better knowing she was home.

“Did you find anything?” Grady asked.

Mr. Forkle explained about the symbol.

“Wow,” Grady whispered, hugging Sophie tighter. “I guess it’s a good thing you went.”

“It appears so,” Mr. Forkle said, handing Sophie the memory log.

She projected the shadowy symbol on the opposite page from where she'd recorded Prentice's memory. The marks were the same except for the runes.

The design had sixteen rays with sixteen circles—so if each one was linked to a star, that meant they had a *lot* of secrets to discover.

“Speaking to Gethen has taken on a new level of priority,” Mr. Forkle told her, “so use this time to start working on a plan for how to trick him into cooperating. We’ll need something clever to get his attention, beyond showing him this symbol. It’s always a game with him, and we cannot face him until we know how to win.”

Sophie handed him back the memory log. “How long do you think it’ll be before the Council lets us meet with him?”

“I’m on my way to Eternalia right now to find out. Mr. Ruwen, do you have any gnomes who might be willing to bring Mr. Tam and Miss Linh to the Alluveterre for me?”

“Lur and Mitya live here now,” Grady suggested.

“Perfect. In fact, it might be wise to see if they know anything about the symbol,” Mr. Forkle said.

Lur and Mitya had been the ones to discover the hideout in Paris. If it weren't for them, Sophie and Dex wouldn't be alive.

“So that's it?” Tam asked. “You're sending us home to wait?”

“Only because the next step falls squarely on my shoulders,” Mr. Forkle told him. “I’ll have more specific assignments once I secure the meeting with Gethen.”

“Are you going to see the Council looking like that?” Grady asked, pointing to his Forkle disguise.

“Of course. This is the only identity the Councillors are allowed to know. And, if I’m being honest, it also makes the whole process of haggling with them much more entertaining. Councillor Emery looks so delightfully frustrated as he tries to push past my mental blocking. And Councillor Alina loves to pretend like she *almost* recognizes me. I’m certain she’ll fall out of her chair when she realizes they nearly elected me instead of her.”

“I’ve been wondering about that,” Grady said. “What would you have done if you’d been voted in?”

“I truly had no idea. In all my years with the order, it never crossed my mind that any of my identities might be considered for the Council. It stirred *quite* the controversy among the Collective. Personally, I didn't fret too much, since I assumed I'd never win. But if I'd been wrong, I would've accepted the position. The same means that allowed me to live among humans for twelve years would surely have allowed me to be both Black Swan *and* Councillor.”

“And you still won’t tell us how you pulled that off?” Sophie asked.

“Perhaps someday. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I must be off. And while I’m away, I trust that you four”—he pointed to Fitz, Sophie, Tam, and Linh—“will be responsible members of the order and await further guidance before doing any of your own investigating?”

“Linh and I aren’t members of the order,” Tam reminded him.

“Yes, and that’s something you might want to reconsider. I’m not trying to rush you, of course. But you do push rather hard to be included in all of our happenings.”

Tam tugged on his bangs. “I’m sure I’ll take the oath soon. I just have . . .”

“Trust issues,” Mr. Forkle finished for him. “Not something I blame you for. But keep in mind that there may also be times when something needs to be restricted to those who are officially in our order.”

“Do we have to swear fealty together?” Linh asked.

“Of course not. You’re each welcome to make your own decision. And speaking of decisions”—he turned to Sophie—“are you planning on telling Mr. Sencen about our discoveries today?”

Her eyelashes turned itchy. “Should I?”

“I . . . would be careful with the specifics,” he said. “As I remember, the last time he found a note from his mother, he took the news quite hard.”

“Hard” was putting it mildly.

Keefe had tried to run away to Ravagog to take on King Dimitar all by himself. But part of the reason for his recklessness had been that Sophie kept the note secret.

“Let me know how it goes,” Mr. Forkle said before he leaped away.

Tam and Linh left with Lur and Mitya a few minutes later.

“Need me to stay while you talk to him?” Fitz asked.

Sophie shook her head. “I’m sure it’ll be okay.”

It wasn’t.

Keefe’s mind exploded with angry flashbacks, and he seemed especially fixated on the word “legacy.”

Should I not have told you? she asked.

No—it’s . . . whatever. I should be used to it by now.

Do you have any idea what she wanted to tell you?

I wish I did.

He also didn’t recognize the Lodestar symbol.

You’re sure? Sophie pressed. *Look at it really carefully.*

I am. The only part that’s familiar is the piece you already showed me. And I have no idea why my idiot dad would think it’s connected to the Lodestar Initiative.

Doesn't that scare you? Sophie asked.

A little, he admitted. But I learned something super important today. Did you know Fintan has a cache—and not the one I stole from you and gave to him? He has one from back when he was a Councillor. Alvar told me. He asked me how I'm holding up after the Foxfire incident, making sure it wasn't affecting my sanity and getting all big-brotherly about it—

Gross, Sophie interrupted.

I know. But I was able to ask him how Fintan's mind didn't shatter after what he did to Kenric. He told me Fintan knows how to wipe his own memories, and locks anything dark-but-crucial away in his cache before he purges it from his mind so he doesn't have to live with it.

Do you think that's why he hasn't recruited any other Telepaths? Sophie asked. *Because he doesn't need them?*

Maybe—I don't know. But don't you realize what that means? His cache is probably filled with everything we need to know about the Neverseen.

Only if we can open it, Sophie reminded him. *Plus, it can't hold any of their current plans. Otherwise how could he work on them if he doesn't remember them?*

Either way, Keefe said. *That cache is my new target. I'm betting he keeps it with the other one. And I'm going to find a way to steal them both.*

SEVENTEEN

YOU'RE ALIVE!" SOPHIE said as Sandor helped her shove through the crowd to where Dex stood with his lanky female bodyguard—Lovise—in the purple grass of Foxfire's expansive main field. "I'd started to worry."

A gleaming silver stage had been set up in the center of the field, awaiting the arrival of the Council for some sort of official announcement. Scrolls had been sent out that morning, instructing at least one representative of every family to gather.

"Sorry," Dex mumbled. "I know I haven't been around much."

"Much? I haven't seen you since midterms!" Sophie's eyes strayed to the damaged pyramid in the background, hidden under a bright orange tarp bearing the Foxfire seal.

A week had passed since Keefe set off the sound wave, and, other than that first day—when Sophie had gone to see Prentice and the Neverseen's hideout—it'd been an endless week of nothing, nothing, and more nothing. All Sophie had heard about Gethen was "We're waiting for an answer from the Council." And Alden and Della had asked Fitz and Biana to stay at Everglen for "family time." Even Keefe's nightly check-ins had been unhelpful. He was still trying to figure out if Fintan hid his cache the same way the Councillors did—tucked away in the void of nothingness that only Conjurers and Teleporters knew how to access. If it was—and Keefe could figure out Fintan's secret verbal command—he could steal it the same way he'd stolen Kenric's cache from Sophie. But so far, Fintan and Alvar weren't giving him any clues.

So Sophie had spent the week distracting herself by having lots of telepathic conversations with Silveny, making sure the alicorns were safe and happy and keeping themselves hidden. Silveny was still in the first trimester of her eleven-month pregnancy, and was happy to share more details than Sophie really wanted to know about preggers life—especially the morning sickness.

Spoiler alert: Apparently, alicorn vomit was just as sparkly as their poop.

Silveny's maternal instincts also seemed to be kicking in, and she kept making Sophie promise that she'd call for her if she ever found herself in danger. It was nice to

know that Silveny cared—but Sophie would never do anything to risk the safety of the baby alicorn, no matter how many times Silveny assured her she wasn't as fragile as Sophie feared.

The rest of the time, Sophie spent trying to learn whatever she could about Alabestrine—but she didn't find much in the library of Grady's office. The only slightly interesting detail was that Alabestrine was isolated from other stars, so its white glow was considered "pure" because no other light ever touched it.

But lots of stars were "pure." And pure light didn't seem to do anything special—though reading up on it did remind Sophie that there was a mirror called the Lodestar. The Silver Tower for the elite levels had a round room called the Hall of Illumination, lined with mirrors that were unique—each meant to teach the prodigies a different lesson about themselves.

The Lodestar mirror reflected pure light, and Sophie kept thinking that had to mean *something*. But . . . the mirror was centuries old.

She'd still asked Mr. Forkle about it, and he'd reminded her that the Neverseen didn't invent the word "lodestar." It still seemed like a strange coincidence, though.

"So what have you been up to?" Sophie asked Dex. "I tried hailing you a bunch of times but you didn't answer."

Dex patted his cape pockets and frowned. "I must've left my Imparter at Slurps and Burps. But I've had it with me every day and it never gave me any alerts. I've been trying to help my dad keep up with all the orders at the store. Everybody's been stocking up on medicines. I think people are worried that the next time the Neverseen attack, someone's going to get hurt."

Sophie was worried about that too—and even more worried that Keefe would somehow be involved.

"What about your *other* project?" she asked, keeping her voice low—though no one seemed to be paying them any attention. "The one the Black Swan told you to keep secret?"

Dex's ears turned red. "You know about that?"

"Blur mentioned it. And don't worry, I'm not mad. I know how hard it is to have a secret assignment from the Black Swan. But now it's my turn to be the one saying: *I want to help.*"

"So do I," Biana said, appearing in the space between them.

As a Vanisher, Biana had a special gift for sneaking up on people. It made her goblin bodyguard Woltzer's job a million times harder.

Sophie could see him now, using his skinny-for-a-goblin arms to shove his way over from the opposite end of the crowd. As soon as he made it, Sandor launched into

an epic lecture about keeping track of his charge.

Biana gave Woltzer an apologetic smile before turning back to Sophie and Dex and leaning in to whisper. “Whatever you’re planning, count me in—and don’t even think about visiting any more secret hideouts without me.”

Dex straightened. “What is she talking about?”

“I don’t think—”

“Sophie went with Fitz, Tam, and Linh to the abandoned hideout where Mr. Forkle rescued you guys,” Biana interrupted, not letting Sophie change the subject.

The color drained from Dex’s face

“Please don’t be mad,” Sophie begged. “It was just a weird, long day where one thing kept leading to the next.”

“If it makes you feel any better,” Biana told him, “they left me out too. Maybe we should start our own group. Team Bianex!”

Dex sighed. “That’s . . . not the best name.”

“It isn’t,” Biana agreed. “What about Dizznacker? Or Vackiznee?”

“I don’t know what you guys are talking about,” Fitz said as he and Grizel joined their group. “But I vote for Dizznacker.”

“Traitors don’t get a vote,” Biana informed her brother.

“You’re still on that?” Fitz asked. “Seriously—aren’t you forgetting that you and Sophie snuck off with Calla and had a big showdown with the Neverseen’s Psionipath without the rest of us? How was that any different?”

“Because you guys went to the place where *I* was held prisoner without me.” Dex kept his voice low, but Sophie could see a few people glancing their way.

You’re right, she transmitted, making Dex jump. I made a selfish decision. I’m sorry. I didn’t want to see the hurt in your eyes as you walked those hallways, knowing that every flashback you had was my fault. But it wasn’t fair to leave you out. Please don’t hate me.

Dex bit his lip. “Is there anything else you haven’t told me?”

Sophie nodded and transmitted a quick explanation about the Lodestar symbol, the note from Keefe’s mom, the shadow on the floor of the abandoned hideout, the rune for Alabestrine, and Keefe’s new plan to steal Fintan’s cache.

“I was going to tell you everything,” she promised. “That’s why I kept hailing you.”

“Stupid Imparter,” Dex grumbled. “I bet it has a loose wire.”

“Does that mean I’m forgiven?” Sophie asked.

“Only if you promise that from now on, you’ll include me no matter what.”

“Hey, that works both ways,” Fitz whispered, glancing over his shoulder at the crowd, who’d thankfully gone back to ignoring them. “I want to know what you’ve

learned from my brother's records."

"Me too," Biana said. "And I want to help."

"But you realize what I'm trying to do, right?" Dex asked. "The Black Swan are hoping I'll find a way to track your brother's movements and find him. And if that happens, best-case scenario is he gets sentenced to Exile. Or there could be way worse punishments."

Fitz shrugged, his eyes like teal ice. "No one forced him to do what he's doing."

"That won't make it any easier when it all goes down," Dex said quietly. "I know you're mad, but . . . he's still your brother. Are you sure you're up for it?"

"If I start to feel sorry for Alvar, I'll just think about how many times I've found my parents sobbing these last few weeks," Biana mumbled. "That's why they're not here now. They weren't up for all the stares and whispers—especially if the announcement has to do with the Neverseen."

"And I'll think about what he did to you and Sophie," Fitz added. "I saw the scorch marks on the floor of your cell, and the burned chair Sophie had been strapped to."

Dex rubbed his side, where Sophie knew he hid a thumb-size scar from the ordeal.

"I've tried to understand my brother," Biana whispered. "I've spent weeks researching my family history, hoping I'd figure out what he meant about the Vacker legacy. But so far I don't see anything wrong—or any reason why he thought *I* would understand and not Fitz. And I've decided it doesn't matter. I know our world isn't as perfect as I used to think it was—so I won't be surprised if my family turns out to be the same way. But nothing justifies doing the kinds of horrible things Alvar's doing. Someone has to stop him. I know it's not going to be easy, but . . . please let us help?"

"I guess you can try," Dex said. "But all the records are in tech code, so I doubt you'll be able to read them."

"Then *you* read them, and I'll help find the best dates to look," Biana suggested. "I can think of lots of times I saw Alvar sneaking away and never thought to ask where he was going."

"Same here," Fitz said.

"If that's what you guys want," Dex said. "Just warning—it's *beyond* boring. I thought nothing could be worse than searching that Lumenaria database, but at least with that I got to build the Twiggler to help sort the records. This is literally just reading scroll after scroll of dates and times and tiny coded numbers. I'm going cross-eyed."

"It's on paper?" Sophie asked.

"Yeah—it's easier to spot glitches that way."

“Well, that still sounds better than all the awkward family time I’ve been having with my parents,” Biana told him.

“You guys okay?” Sophie asked.

“We’re fine,” Fitz said. “My parents definitely have their bad days. But they kept us home because they seem to want to know *everything* about us. It’s like they’re doubting themselves after not seeing what Alvar was up to.”

“My dad even had the world’s most awkward conversation with me about boys,” Biana said with a shudder.

“Actually, *that* was pretty awesome,” Fitz teased.

Biana rolled her eyes. “No, what was awesome was when they asked *you* about girls. You should’ve seen him squirm,” she told Sophie. “They went through this long interrogation about which girls he might be interested in—way worse than the one they put me through. And then they took him to see the matchmakers.”

EIGHTEEN

WAIT—WHAT? SOPHIE asked, wishing she hadn't sounded *quite* so horrified.

But seriously . . . *what?*

"You went to see the *matchmakers*?" she asked

Fitz glared at his sister. "It's not like I got my first list or anything. All I did was pick up my packet—which every Level Five does after midterms, so we'll have time to fill it out by the end of the school year."

"It's a huge packet," Biana said, miming several inches of thickness. "Honestly, I had no idea it was that in-depth. And the questions are *crazy*."

"How would you know?" Fitz asked.

"Um, I can turn invisible. Did you really think I wouldn't sneak into your room and read it? Your answers so far have been *adorable*."

"I hate you so much right now," Fitz said.

It took all of Sophie's willpower not to press for details. "I still can't believe you have your packet already. It seems so . . . early."

"It's really not," Biana said. "By Level Five, everyone knows if they're going to get a special ability or not, which is the most important detail for the match. And once they turn the packets in, the matchmakers take a whole year to work through all the information. Your first list isn't ready until you finish Level Six."

"That still feels very soon," Sophie mumbled—though she probably should've realized that was how the process worked. Edaline had told her that Jolie received her matches before she signed up for the elite levels.

Sophie had just never really thought about how young Jolie would've been.

The elite levels started at seventeen.

"It's not like anyone gets married right then," Biana told her. "Well, I guess a few people might. But most only get their lists so they can start considering their options. It takes a while to get to know everybody, you know? There are a hundred names—and that's only one list. It's kind of daunting when you think about it."