



KEEPER OF THE LOST CITIES EXILE

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MESSENGER

PREFACE

SOPHIE'S HANDS SHOOK AS SHE LIFTED the tiny green bottle. One swallow held life *and* death—and not just for her.

For Prentice.

For Alden.

Her eyes focused on the clear, sloshy liquid as she removed the crystal stopper and pressed the bottle to her lips. All she had to do was tip the poison down her throat.

But could she?

Could she give up everything to set things right?

Could she live with the guilt, otherwise?

The choice was hers this time.

No more notes.

No more clues.

She'd followed them to this point, and now it came down
to her.

She wasn't the Black Swan's puppet anymore.

She was broken.

All she had left was trust.

ONE

I STILL CAN'T BELIEVE WE'RE TRACKING Bigfoot," Sophie whispered as she stared at the giant footprint in the muddy soil. Each massive toe was as wide as her arm, and the print formed a deep, mucky puddle.

Dex laughed, flashing two perfect dimples as he stood on his tiptoes to examine a scuff in the bark of a nearby tree. "Do humans really think there's a giant hairy ape-man running around trying to eat them?"

Sophie turned away, pulling her blond hair around her face to hide her flushing cheeks. "Pretty crazy, right?"

Almost a year had passed since she'd found out she was an elf and moved to the Lost Cities, but she still slipped sometimes

and sounded like a human. She *knew* sasquatch were really just tall green shaggy creatures with beady eyes and beaklike noses—she'd even worked with them in the pastures at Havenfield, the enormous estate and animal preserve she now called home. But a lifetime of human teaching was difficult to forget. Especially with a photographic memory.

Thunder cracked overhead and Sophie jumped.

"I don't like this place," Dex mumbled, his periwinkle eyes scanning the tree line as he moved closer to Sophie. The damp, heavy air made his light blue tunic stick to his skinny arms, and his gray pants were caked with mud. "Let's find this thing and get out of here."

Sophie agreed. The murky forest was so dense and wild. It felt like a place time had forgotten.

The thick ferns in front of them rustled and a brawny gray arm grabbed Sophie from behind. Her feet dangled above the ground, and she got a face full of musky goblin sweat as her bare-chested bodyguard shoved Dex behind him, drew his curved sword from the scabbard at his side, and pointed it at the tall blond elf in a dark green tunic who stumbled out of the wall of leaves.

"Easy there, Sandor," Grady said, backing away from the glinting point of the black blade. "It's just me."

"Sorry." Sandor's high-pitched voice always reminded Sophie of a chipmunk. He dipped a slight bow as he lowered his weapon. "I didn't recognize your scent."

“That’s probably because I just spent twenty minutes crawling around a sasquatch den.” Grady sniffed his sleeve and coughed. “Whew—Edaline is not going to be happy with me when I get home.”

Dex laughed, but Sophie was too busy trying to wriggle free from Sandor’s viselike hold.

“You can put me down now!” As soon as her feet touched the ground she huffed away, glaring at Sandor and struggling to remove the giant wedgie he’d given her. “Any sign of the sasquatch?”

“The den’s been empty for a while. And I’m guessing you guys haven’t had much luck picking up the trail?”

Dex pointed to the scratch he’d been examining in the bark. “Looks like it climbed this tree and traveled in the branches from here on out. No way to tell which way it went.”

Sandor sniffed the air with his wide, flat nose. “I should take Miss Foster home. She’s been in the open for far too long.”

“I’m fine! We’re in the middle of a forest and no one besides the Council knows we’re here. You didn’t even have to come.”

“I go where you go,” Sandor said firmly, sheathing his sword and running his hands down the pockets lining his black military-style pants to check his other weapons. “I take my charge very seriously.”

“Obviously,” Sophie grumbled. She knew Sandor was only trying to protect her, but she hated having him around. He was a seven-foot-tall constant reminder that the kidnapers she

and Dex had narrowly escaped were still out there somewhere, waiting for the right time to make their next move. . . .

Plus, it was humiliating being followed by an ultraparanoïd goblin all the time. She'd been hoping she'd be done with the bodyguard thing by the time school started again. But with less than two weeks left on her vacation and the Council hitting dead ends on all their leads, it looked like her burly, slightly alien-looking shadow was coming with her to Foxfire.

She'd tried convincing Alden he could just keep track of her with the crystal registry pendant latched around her neck, but he'd reminded her that the kidnappers had no problem tearing it off the last time. And even though this one had extra cords woven into the choker and a few other added security measures, he refused to put her life in the hands of an inanimate accessory.

She repressed a sigh.

"We need Sophie here with us," Grady told Sandor as he pulled Sophie into a quick, reassuring hug. "Are you picking up anything?" he asked her.

"Not nearby. But I can try widening my range." She moved away from him and closed her eyes, placing her hands over her temples to focus her concentration.

Sophie was the only Telepath who could track thoughts to their exact location—and the only one who could read the minds of animals. If she could feel the sasquatch's thoughts, she would be able to follow them straight to wherever it was hiding. All she had to do was *listen*.

Her concentration spread like an invisible veil across the scenery, and the chirping and creaking sounds of the forest faded to a low hum as the “voices” filled her mind. The melodic thoughts of the birds in the trees. The hushed thoughts of the rodents in the ground. Farther away in a small meadow were the calm thoughts of a doe and her fawn. And farther still, in the thicker parts of the underbrush, were the stealthy thoughts of a large cougar, stalking its prey.

But no trace of the heavy, thundering thoughts of a sasquatch.

She pushed her focus toward the snowcapped mountains. The stretch was longer than most Telepaths could handle, but she’d reached much farther when she was calling for rescue from her captors—and she’d been half-drugged at the time. So she was surprised when her body started to shake from the strain.

“It’s okay, Sophie,” Grady told her, squeezing her shoulder. “We’ll find it another way.”

No.

This was why Grady had brought her along for this rescue, despite Sandor’s numerous concerns for her safety. He’d already tried three other times to capture the beast, and came home empty-handed. He was counting on her.

She tugged out a loose eyelash—her nervous habit—as she pushed her mind as far as she could go. Spots of light flashed across her vision, each one paired with a stab of pain

that ripped her breath away. But the misery was worth it when she caught the vaguest whisper of a thought. A fuzzy image of river with mossy green rocks and white, trickling water. It felt softer than the sasquatch thoughts she'd touched when she practiced at Havenfield, but the thought was definitely too complex to belong to any of the normal forest animals.

"It's that way," Sophie said, pointing north before she took off through the trees. She was glad she'd worn lightweight boots instead of the flat, dressy shoes she was usually supposed to wear, even with her plain tan tunic and brown pants.

Dex sprinted to catch up with her, and his messy strawberry blond hair bounced as he matched her pace. "I still don't understand how you do that."

"You're not a Telepath. I have no idea how you do any of the things Technopaths do."

"Shhhhhh, they'll hear you!"

Dex had made her promise not to tell anyone about his newly discovered talent. Dame Alina—Foxfire's principal—wouldn't allow him to take ability detecting if she knew he'd already manifested, and Dex kept hoping he'd trigger a "better" talent, even though it was incredibly rare to have more than one ability.

"You're being dumb," Sophie told him. "Technopathy is cool."

"Easy for you to say. It's not fair you get to be a Telepath *and* an Inflictor."

Sophie cringed at the last word.

If it were up to her, she'd drop the dangerous ability in a heartbeat. But talents couldn't be switched off once they'd been triggered. She'd checked. A lot.

Sophie's muscles burned as the ground became steeper and the cold drizzly air stung her lungs—but it felt good to run. Ever since the kidnapping everyone kept her closed in, trying to keep her away from danger. All it really meant was that she was the one being held prisoner while the bad guys ran free.

The thought spurred her legs faster, like if she just pushed herself harder, she could get far enough from her problems to make them disappear. Or at least far enough from Sandor—though the goblin was surprisingly agile for his bulky size. She'd never been able to ditch him, and she'd tried *many* times over the last few weeks.

The path grew narrower as they moved toward the mountains, and after several more minutes of climbing, it curved west and ended in a gurgling stream. White puffs of mist hovered above the rocks, giving the water a ghostly feel as it snaked up the rocky foothills.

Sophie paused to catch her breath, and Dex bent to stretch his legs. Grady and Sandor caught up as she was checking on the sasquatch's location.

"You're supposed to stay by my side," Sandor complained.

Sophie ignored him, pointing toward the snowcapped mountains. "It's up there."

The thoughts felt sharper now, filling her mind with a

shockingly vivid scene. Every tiny leaf on the lacy ferns was crystal clear, and she could almost feel the cool water splashing against her skin and the breeze tickling her cheeks. But the really strange part was the warm calm that wrapped around her consciousness. She'd never experienced a thought as such a pure emotion before—especially from a creature so far away.

“No more separating,” Grady ordered as they started to follow the stream higher up the mountain. “I’m not familiar with this part of the forest.”

Sophie wasn’t surprised. The trees and ferns were so thick she was sure no one—human or elf—had set foot there in a very long time.

Squishy green moss coated the ground, muffling their footsteps. It was also slick, and the third time Sophie slipped, Dex grabbed her arm and didn’t let go. The warmth of his hand sank through the fabric of her sleeve and she felt like she should pull away. But he was steadying her balance, which made it easier for her to concentrate on what the sasquatch was thinking.

The beast must have been eating, because a satisfied feeling settled into the pit of Sophie’s stomach, like she’d just had an extra helping of mallowmelt.

She hurried forward—afraid it would move on now that it was full—and accidentally stepped on a fallen branch.

Craaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaack!

Goose bumps erupted all over her body, and even though she

knew the emotion wasn't hers, Sophie couldn't ignore the shivering terror. She had no idea what that meant—but she didn't have time to think about it. From the images flashing through her head she could tell the sasquatch had started to flee.

She jerked her arm out of Dex's grip and took off after it.

The beast ran so fast its thoughts turned to a blur. Sophie concentrated on channeling energy from her core into her legs, but even with the extra strength she could still feel the sasquatch pulling farther ahead. It was going to get away—unless she found a way to boost her speed.

A brain push.

She hadn't been thrilled when she'd learned that she could perform the incredibly rare telepathy skill. But as she shoved the warm energy humming in the back of her mind into her legs and felt her muscles surge with a tremendous burst of power, she was suddenly grateful for the strange ways her brain worked—even if it did make her headache worse. Her feet barely touched the ground as she raced over the soggy soil, leaving Dex, Sandor, and Grady far behind.

The sasquatch's thoughts turned clearer again.

She was catching up.

The extra energy didn't last as long as she'd expected, though, and as her strength drained she found herself barely able to stumble forward.

It's okay, she transmitted, desperately shoving the words into the creature's mind. I'm not going to hurt you.

The sasquatch froze.

Its thoughts were a jumbled mix of emotions, and Sophie couldn't make sense out of any of them. But she took advantage of its momentary stillness, rallying the last of her energy to fumble toward a narrow opening in the thick wall of foliage. She could feel the sasquatch on the other side of the trees.

Waiting for the others would be the safer thing to do—but who knew how much longer the creature would wait around? And the creature felt calm at the moment. Curious.

Three deep breaths spurred her courage. Then Sophie padded into the clearing.

TWO

SOPHIE'S GASP ECHOED OFF THE CIRCLE of trees, and she blinked to make sure her eyes were working.

A few feet in front of her stood a shimmering pale horse with outstretched feathered wings. It wasn't a pegasus—she knew from the books she'd studied at Havenfield that those were smaller and huskier, with deep blue spots and midnight blue manes. This horse had wavy silver hair that trailed up its neck and parted around a horn of swirled white and silver that jutted from its forehead like a unicorn. But the unicorns she'd seen didn't have wings.

“What are you?” Sophie whispered as she stared into the horse's deep brown eyes. Usually she thought brown eyes were

flat and boring—especially her own—but these had glinting flecks of gold, and gazed back at her so intently she couldn't look away.

The horse whinnied.

“It's okay. I won't hurt you.” She transmitted images of herself caring for other animals.

The horse stamped its hooves and nickered, but stayed put, eyeing Sophie warily.

Sophie focused on its thoughts, searching for anything she could use to make it trust her. The complexity of its mind was shocking. She could feel rapid observations and quick calculations, just like when she was reading an elvin mind. And the emotions were so intense. Now she knew how Empaths must feel—and she was glad she wasn't one of them. It was hard to know which feelings were hers.

“*There you are!*” Dex said, stomping into the clearing. His jaw fell open as the horse whinnied and took to the sky.

“It's okay,” Sophie called. “He's a friend.”

Friend.

As soon as she transmitted the word, the horse froze, hovering above them. Dozens of images flashed through Sophie's head. Then a new emotion nearly choked her. Her eyes burned and her heart ached, and it took her a second to translate the feeling.

“You're lonely?” Sophie whispered.

“That's not a sasquatch,” Dex mumbled.

“Yeah, I caught that,” Sophie told him. “Do you know what it is?”

“An alicorn,” Grady murmured behind her, triggering a new wave of panic from the flying horse.

Another friend, Sophie transmitted as it soared higher into the clouds.

Grady was actually more than a friend. He was her adopted father. But for some reason she had a hard time calling him that—even with her adoption being final now.

It's okay, she promised the alicorn. *No one is going to hurt you.*

The alicorn whinnied, its mind focused on Sandor—and the weapon at Sandor's side.

“Sandor, you're scaring it. You need to get back.”

Sandor didn't budge.

“Please,” Grady told him. “We *can't* lose this creature. You know how essential it is to our world.”

Sandor sighed and stomped out of the clearing, grumbling about it being *impossible* to do his job.

“This horse is really that important?” Sophie asked, squinting at the sky.

“Uh, yeah.” Dex's voice was annoyingly smug. “They've only found one—ever. The Council's been searching for another for centuries.”

“Millennia,” Grady corrected. “Throughout our time on this planet we've worked to discover all of its secrets. And then by accident, really, a magnificent alicorn stumbled into our lives,

proving the earth still had a few tricks up its sleeves. We've been trying to find another ever since. We can't let it slip away. Can you call it down to us, Sophie?"

The pressure of his request sat heavy on her shoulders as she promised to try.

Safe, she transmitted to the terrified creature, adding images of her caring for other animals to try and reinforce the word. Then she sent a picture of the alicorn standing next to her in the clearing. *Come down*.

When the alicorn didn't respond she added an image of how she would look if she were stroking the alicorn's shimmering mane.

A rush of loneliness poured over her again—stronger this time. An ancient-feeling ache. Then the alicorn circled once more and landed just out of Sophie's reach.

"Incredible," Grady breathed.

"Good girl," Sophie whispered.

"Girl?" Dex asked.

Sophie nodded, wondering how she knew that. It almost felt like the alicorn had told her. . . .

"The alicorn at the Sanctuary is male!" Grady said, snapping her out of her musings. "This is the find of a lifetime, Sophie!"

Sophie grinned, imagining the look on Councillor Bronte's face when he heard the news. He despised her human upbringing and her connection to the Black Swan—a secret group of rebels who seemed to be behind every mystery in Sophie's

past—and was always trying to prove she didn't belong in their world.

“Um . . . not to kill everyone's excitement here,” Dex interrupted, “but how are we going to get her home?”

Grady's smile faded. “That's a good question. The sasquatch harness won't fit—and even if I dashed home, it's not like we have an alicorn restraint.”

“Maybe we don't need one.” Sophie stared into the alicorn's unblinking eyes and transmitted *friend* again. Then she reached out her hand and took a slow step forward.

“Careful,” Grady warned when the alicorn whinnied.

“Easy, girl,” Sophie whispered, not breaking eye contact as she took another step.

Calm.

She sent a flood of images of her petting different animals, trying to communicate what she was about to do.

The alicorn processed each scene, focusing on Sophie. She nickered.

Sophie hoped that meant “Go ahead.” She held her breath and closed the last space between them.

Her fingers brushed the smooth, cool fur on the bridge of the alicorn's nose. The shimmering horse snorted, but didn't back away.

“Good girl,” Sophie said, tracing her fingers up toward the horn. She fingered the strands of silvery mane, surprised at how cold they were, like threads of ice.

The alicorn released what sounded like a soft sigh. Then she nuzzled Sophie's shoulder. Sophie giggled as the wet nostrils tickled her neck.

"She likes you," Grady whispered.

"Is that true, girl? Do you like me?"

A shiver streaked down Sophie's spine as something tickled her consciousness. The longer it bounced around her mind, the more it took shape, until it formed a single word.

Friend.

"What's wrong?" Grady asked as Sophie took a step away, shaking her head.

"Sorry—I'm just not used to how powerful her mind is." She stroked the horse's gleaming cheek, trying to make sense of what just happened.

Had the alicorn learned a word from her? Was that possible?

"Think she'll let me touch her?" Grady asked, taking a cautious step forward.

The alicorn reared and flapped her wings.

Grady backed off. "That's going to be a problem."

In order to light leap with the alicorn, someone would need to keep physical contact with her to form a connection between them.

"I can leap her—" Sophie offered.

"Absolutely not!" Grady's shout made the alicorn whinny, and he lowered his tone to a whisper before he added, "That's far too dangerous."

“I can handle it,” Sophie insisted. All the excitement had erased both her headache and her weariness from the brain push.

“Um, remember what happened last time?” Dex interrupted.

Sophie glared at him, stunned he was siding with Grady on this.

“Hey, don’t look at me like that. You almost faded away.”

His voice caught as he said the last part, and Sophie couldn’t help wondering how much Dex had seen that day. She’d thought he was unconscious when she made the nearly fatal leap to escape the kidnappers. But apparently he’d watched the light pull her away—or at least that’s what Elwin had told her. She and Dex had never talked about what happened. All Sophie remembered was warmth and flashing colors and a pull so irresistible she’d been ready to follow it anywhere—and very nearly had.

She’d *never* forget the agony of drawing herself back together. And now whenever she leaped, she felt slightly dizzy. But the dizziness only lasted a few seconds, and in all the times Elwin had tested her since she’d recovered, he’d never found anything wrong. Plus, all of that happened before she knew how to use her enhanced concentration. Before she even knew her concentration had been enhanced. Not to mention, the kidnappers had taken her nexus.

She cupped the sleek black cuff on her wrist, fingering the sparkly teal jewel set into the center, surrounded by swirling

lines of diamonds. The nexus put a force field around her, making it impossible for her to lose even a single particle of herself during a leap. Which meant she could use *her* concentration to protect the alicorn and leap them both home safely.

It made sense in her head—but she couldn't fight off a tiny quiver at the idea of another risky leap.

"We don't have any other options," Sophie said, as much for herself as to convince Grady and Dex. "Unless there's something I'm missing?"

When no one had any other suggestions, she took a deep breath and imagined her concentration covering the glittering horse like a protective seal. Her headache returned and she had to channel the last of her core energy to cover such a large creature, but she scraped together enough strength to feel a firm grip.

She could do this.

Before she could change her mind, she placed one hand on the alicorn's cheek and used the other to grab the pendant hanging from a long chain around her neck. She held the crystal up, and light hit the single facet cut into the stone, refracting toward the ground.

"Sophie, don't you—" Grady started to say, but he was too late.

She stepped into the light, letting the warmth swell under her skin like thousands of tickling feathers as the simmering rush swept her and the alicorn away.