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# KEEPER OF THE LOST CITIES NIGHTFALL



# KEEPER OF THE LOST CITIES

NIGHTFALL

SHANNON MESSENGER

**Aladdin**

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

**For Nadia and Roland,  
best niece and nephew an aunt could ask for  
(and not \*just\* because you're the only ones—  
though that does help)  
;**

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# PREFACE

**S**OPHIE STARED AT THE GLEAMING trail that wound down. And down. And down. Disappearing into the misty shadows far below. The path of ancient silver and gold stones shouldn't exist—and yet it had been there all along.

Hidden in plain sight.

Buried under lies.

Wiped from memory.

But never truly gone.

She glanced at her friends as they braced themselves for the dangerous journey ahead, and found their expressions mirroring her own.

*Reluctant. Rattled.* But also: *Ready.*

Whatever waited in those murky depths was far more than  
a secret.

It was an answer.

*A truth.*

And it was time to uncover it.

Time to stop believing the pretty stories they'd been fed all  
their lives.

Time to see their world for what it really was.

Time to take something back.

So together—as one—they locked hands and started the  
long, slippery descent.

Into the past.

Into darkness.

# ONE

Y

OU REMEMBER ME?"

The question slipped from Sophie's lips before she could stop it, and the weighted words seemed to hit the floor of the messy bedroom with a thud.

The wide-eyed, trembling girl standing in front of her slowly nodded, and Sophie's heart swelled even as it plummeted into the sour pit of her stomach.

Her little sister *shouldn't* remember her.

Technically, she wasn't even her sister—at least not genetically. Sure, they'd grown up together in the same house in San Diego, California, both believing they had the same parents—despite the fact that Sophie's blond hair and brown eyes didn't match her family of light-eyed brunettes.

But that was *before*.

Now they were in the *after*.

A world where elves were real creatures—and nothing like the silly stories that humans had invented about them. They were beautiful. Powerful. Practically immortal. Living across the globe in hidden glittering cities. Ruling the earth from the shadows.

And Sophie was one of them.

Born from humans—but *not* human—as part of a rebel group's secret genetic experiment called Project Moonlark. Her DNA had been tweaked. Her abilities enhanced and manipulated. All to mold her into something special.

Something powerful.

Something she still didn't fully understand.

And after years of feeling out of place—even among the family she loved—the elves finally showed Sophie the truth about her life and brought her to the Lost Cities. They'd planned to fake her death to cover her disappearance, but she'd begged to be erased instead, to spare her parents the grief of losing a child. So her family's minds had been “washed” by specially trained Telepaths, to make them forget that Sophie had ever been born. And they'd been relocated to a new city and given new names, new jobs, even the fancy new Tudor-style house that Sophie now stood in, with its quaint windows and wood-paneled walls.

But erased memories were never *truly* gone. All it took was the right trigger and . . .

"I don't understand," her sister whispered, rubbing her eyes like it would change what she was seeing. "You . . . shouldn't be here."

Major understatement.

Sophie wasn't supposed to know her family's new names or where they lived—and she definitely hadn't been allowed to visit them—to ensure that something like this *never* happened. And yet, here she was, raising a mental shield to block her sister's chaotic thoughts as they pounded through her consciousness like stampeding mastodons. Human minds were more open than elvin minds, and they broadcast everything like a radio station on full blast.

"Listen, Amy—"

"That's not my name!"

Sophie kicked herself for the slip. "Right, I meant—"

"Wait." Her sister mouthed the name a few more times, as if her lips were remembering the feel of it. "It is, isn't it? I'm . . . Amy Foster?"

Sophie nodded.

"Then who's Natalie Freeman?"

"That's . . . also you."

Amy—Natalie—whatever Sophie was supposed to call her—groaned and pressed her fingers against her temples.

"I know how confusing this must be," Sophie told her. Triggered memories tended to flash back in scattered bits and pieces, leaving lots of holes. "I promise I'll explain, but—"

“Not right now,” a crisply accented voice finished for her.

Sophie flinched. She’d almost forgotten they had an audience for the Most Stressful Family Reunion in the History of Family Reunions.

“Who are you?” her sister asked, backing away from the guys standing slightly behind Sophie.

“That’s Fitz,” Sophie said, pointing to a dark-haired boy whose teal eyes flashed as he offered a smile that would put any movie star to shame. “And that’s Keefe.”

Keefe gave her sister his famous smirk, reaching up to smooth his expertly tousled blond hair. “Don’t worry—we’re all in the Foster Fan Club.”

“They’re my friends,” Sophie clarified when her sister shrank back another step. “You can trust them.”

“I don’t even know if I can trust *you*.” Her eyes narrowed at Sophie’s outfit: a fitted purple tunic with black leggings, boots, and wrist-length black gloves. Fitz and Keefe also wore tunics and pants, and while none of the outfits were *that* elf-y, they definitely stood out next to her sister’s jeans and TARDIS T-shirt.

“You trusted us enough to stop hiding, right?” Keefe asked, pointing to the still-open closet door.

Sophie’s sister turned toward the dark nook she’d emerged from, where most of the clothes had been heaped into a pile on the floor. “I only came out because I heard you guys say you’d get my parents back.”

And there it was. The reason Sophie had broken all the rules

and raced to the Forbidden Cities to check on her family. She'd spent months protecting her adoptive elvin parents, believing they were the ones that Keefe had warned her were in danger. But they'd both forgotten she had another family to worry about—a family without powerful abilities and bodyguards to keep them safe.

“Can you really find Mom and Dad?” her sister whispered, giving Sophie the cue to tell her, “Of course we will! Everything is going to be okay!”

Sophie wanted to. But . . . the Neverseen were behind this.

The same villains who'd kidnapped Sophie, tortured her, and killed people she dearly loved. And no matter how hard Sophie fought to stop them, they always seemed to be ten steps ahead.

Keefe reached for Sophie's shaky hand. “We'll get them back safe. I *promise*.”

His tone was pure determination. But Sophie could see a shadow darkening his ice-blue eyes.

*Guilt.*

A few months earlier, Keefe had run away to join the Neverseen, planning to be a double agent and destroy the wicked organization from the inside out—but they'd played him the whole time, tricking him into leading Sophie and her friends down the wrong paths.

Part of Sophie wanted to shove Keefe away, let him shoulder the blame for every terrible thing that had happened. But deep

down she knew he wasn't the only one who'd missed the warning signs. He'd also been working every day to make up for his mistakes. Plus, it was dangerous to let him feel guilty. The elvin conscience was too fragile for that kind of burden.

So Sophie squeezed his hand, twining their fingers together as she turned back to her sister. "It'll help if you tell us everything you can about the people who took Mom and Dad."

Her sister wrapped her arms around her stomach, which wasn't as plump as Sophie remembered. She looked taller now too. And her curly brown hair was cut shorter. In fact, everything about her seemed so much older than the hyper nine-year-old she'd been when Sophie had left—and it hadn't even been two full years.

"I don't remember much," her sister mumbled. "Dad was helping me with my homework when we heard strange voices downstairs. He told me to stay quiet while he went to see what was going on, but I snuck out to the landing and . . ." She swallowed hard. "I saw four people in the living room wearing long black cloaks with these creepy white eyes on their sleeves. Mom was passed out over one of their shoulders, and another had a cloth pressed over Dad's mouth. I wanted to run down and help—but there were so many of them. And Dad stopped moving a couple of seconds later. I tried to crawl to a phone to call the police, but then I heard them say something about searching the rest of the house, so I ducked into the nearest closet and buried myself in clothes."

Sophie shuddered as she imagined it, and her nose burned with a sweet scent, remembering the smell of the cloying drugs the Neverseen favored during their abductions. “Did you see any of their faces?”

“They had their hoods up the whole time. But one of them . . .”

“One of them what?” Sophie pressed.

“You’re not going to believe me.”

“Try us,” Keefe said. “You’d be surprised what we can believe after hanging around this one.”

He elbowed Sophie gently in the ribs, and Sophie knew he was trying to break the tension. Humor was Keefe’s favorite coping mechanism.

But she didn’t have the energy to joke around. Especially when her sister whispered, “One of the guys kept disappearing somehow. Like with quick flashes, fading in and out of sight.”

Fitz muttered something under his breath. “That was Alvar.”

“You know him?”

“He’s done a lot of awful things,” Sophie jumped in, shooting Fitz a please-don’t-say-he’s-your-brother look. She doubted it would help her sister trust them.

“How did he disappear like that?” her sister whispered. “It almost looked like . . .”

“Magic?” Sophie guessed with a sad smile. “I remember thinking that too, the first time I saw it. But he’s what we call a Vanisher. All he’s doing is manipulating light.”

“What about the mind reading thing?” her sister asked.

“One of them said he was listening for nearby thoughts as he searched the house, so I thought about darkness and silence just in case.”

“That was really smart,” Sophie told her, stunned she had managed to pull that off.

Her sister shrugged. “I’ve seen a lot of movies. But . . . could he really do that?”

“If he was a Telepath,” Fitz said. “Which means it was probably Gethen.”

The name sent Sophie spiraling into nightmares of crumbling castle walls and jagged mazes of rubble. Screams echoed in her ears as the world turned red—partially with her rage, but mostly with the memory of a wound that cut too deep for her to stop the bleeding.

A slow breath cleared her head, and Sophie concentrated on her churning emotions, imagining her anger, fear, and grief as thick threads before tying them into a knot under her ribs. She’d learned the technique from her inflicting mentor, a way of storing the power as a reserve. Embracing the darkness to let it fuel her later.

“Are you okay?” Keefe asked, tightening his hold on her hand.

It took Sophie a second to realize he was *also* talking to her sister, who’d turned so pale her skin had a greenish sheen.

“None of this should be real,” her sister whispered. “These things you’re telling me. These weird names you keep saying. Mom and Dad being taken. And then you show up out of

nowhere and it feels like . . . like you should've been here this whole time. And now my name feels wrong. And this house feels wrong. *Everything* feels wrong."

Sophie hesitated before moving to her sister's side and wrapping an arm around her shoulders. They hadn't been touchy-feely sisters back when they'd lived together. In fact, they'd spent most of their time bickering.

But after a second, her sister hugged her back.

"Where have you been, Sophie? And how do you know these scary people?"

Sophie sighed. "There's a really long, really complicated story I need to tell you. But right now, we need to stay focused on finding Mom and Dad, okay? Did you hear anything else that might be useful?"

"Just the part I already told you, about taking them to Nightfall. Do you know what that means?"

Sophie glanced at Fitz and Keefe.

They'd only seen the word once, in one of Keefe's recently recovered memories—an inscription carved in elvin runes across a mysterious silver door set into a mountain:

*The star only rises at Nightfall.*

They didn't know what the phrase meant, or where the door led, or even precisely where the door was. But they knew it unlocked with Keefe's blood, and that his mom—who'd been one of the leaders of the Neverseen before getting trapped in an ogre prison—had declared it to be his "legacy."

*If that door leads to Nightfall, Sophie transmitted to Keefe, sending her thoughts directly into his head, wouldn't the Neverseen need to have you with them in order to get inside?*

Keefe focused on the floor. *They would, if they didn't already have some of my blood.*

WHAT?

*Yeah . . . not-so-funny story: I traded some for part of the secret I needed to steal the caches.*

ARE YOU KIDDING ME?

Caches were marble-size gadgets the Councillors used to store Forgotten Secrets—information deemed too dangerous for anyone to keep in their memory. Councillor Kenric had given Sophie his when he died—and Keefe had stolen it from her to buy his way into the Neverseen. But he got it back before he fled—and he also took the cache that belonged to Fintan, their leader. Dex was now trying to use his ability as a Technopath to hack into the gadgets. But even if they learned something important, Sophie *never* would've told Keefe to trade his blood for the caches.

*I know, Keefe told her. It wasn't my most brilliant idea. I thought I was so close to taking the Neverseen down that it wasn't going to matter. So, when Fintan asked for my blood, I told him he needed to prove that I could trust him by answering one question. And once he did, I had to hold up my end of the deal.*

*But I thought you were going to trade Tam's leaping crystal for that information, Sophie reminded him. Wasn't that why you left me stranded in one of the Neverseen's hideouts?*

Keefe cringed.

Of all the mistakes he'd made during his time with the Neverseen, that one had been the hardest for Sophie to forgive.

*That was my plan, Keefe admitted. But Fintan interrogated me when I got back, and I had to use the crystal to convince him not to burn off my arm.*

Ice rippled through Sophie's veins. *You never told me that part. I know.*

His shadowed eyes made her wonder what other nightmares he'd secretly endured. But she'd have to save those worries for another time. At the moment, they had much more complicated problems.

*Do you really think Fintan would help you steal the caches if they're actually important?*

*Yeah, Foster. I do. Because he had no idea that he gave me the other piece of the code phrase weeks earlier, after he had too much fizzeberry wine. Trading my blood was a bad call. But I SWEAR the caches are still a score. And I should've told you—I was planning on it, and then everything happened in Lumenaria and I forgot.*

Sophie closed her eyes, wishing she could stop her mind from flashing to crumbling walls. But the memories refused to be ignored.

In one night, the Neverseen had destroyed the elves' magnificent glowing castle while Sophie, the Council, and the leaders of all the intelligent species were inside for the ogre Peace Summit. Most of the leaders made it out with only minor

injuries—and Lumenaria was already being rebuilt. But nothing could erase the message the Neverseen sent that day, or bring back the prisoner that had escaped from the dungeon, or the lives that had been stolen away.

*I'll fix this, okay?* Keefe promised. *I'm going to fix everything.*

*You mean "we,"* Sophie corrected. *WE are going to fix this.*

If they'd learned one thing from all the disasters over the last few months, it was that none of them should be working alone. It was going to take *all* of their abilities, all of their ideas—and a scary amount of luck—to get through whatever this was.

*Does that mean you don't hate me?* Keefe asked. His mental tone sounded softer—almost timid.

*I told you, I'm never going to hate you, Keefe.*

*But I keep giving you new reasons to change your mind.*

*Yeah, you really need to stop that.* She offered him half a smile, and he gave her the same when she added, *But we're in this together.*

*Team Foster-Keefe IS pretty awesome.*

*And Team Vacker-Foster-Keefe is even better,* Fitz transmitted, making Sophie wonder how long he'd been eavesdropping.

Fitz was one of the only Telepaths who knew how to slip past Sophie's impenetrable mental blocking. Actually, he was the *only* one, now that Mr. Forkle was . . .

Sophie shut down the devastating thought, not ready to tear open the still-too-fresh wound.

*Don't worry, she told Fitz. We're going to need all the help we can get.*

*Though we need a WAY cooler name, Keefe jumped in. How about Team Foster-Keefe and the Wonderboy?*

Fitz rolled his eyes.

"Why are you guys staring at each other like that?" her sister asked, reminding them they had someone watching their rather lengthy mental exchange.

"We're just trying to figure out where Nightfall could be," Sophie told her.

She'd have to reveal her telepathy eventually—as well as her other special abilities—but she wanted to give her sister more time to adjust before she dropped the *I can read minds and teleport and inflict pain and speak any language and enhance other people's powers* bombshells. "Can you think of anything else that might be important?"

"Not really. After they said the thing about Nightfall, the house got super quiet. I waited another couple of minutes to make sure it was safe, and then I ran for Mom's phone and called 911. I was scared the police would take me if they knew I was here alone, so I said I was walking by the house and saw men dragging two people away. I hid in the trees when the cops showed up—but maybe that was a bad idea. I heard them say they thought my call was a prank, since there were no signs of robbery. One of them said something about following up in a few days, but so far, I haven't seen them."

“How long ago was that?” Fitz asked.

Her chin wobbled. “Five days.”

Keefe looked like he was trying hard not to swear. Sophie felt like doing the same—or punching the walls and screaming as loud as she could.

“You don’t think it’s too late, do you?” her sister whispered. “You don’t think they’re . . . ?”

“No.” Sophie let the word echo around her mind until she believed it. “The Neverseen need them alive.”

“Who are the Neverseen?” her sister asked. “What do they want with Mom and Dad?”

“I wish I knew,” Sophie admitted. “But they won’t kill them.”  
*At least not yet.*

The Neverseen had been trying to control Sophie since they’d first learned she existed, so she was sure they’d use her parents as the worst sort of blackmail. But there had to be more to it. Otherwise they would’ve let her know the second they had their prisoners.

At least the Neverseen didn’t know her sister heard them say they were going to Nightfall. All they had to do was find that door—and Sophie was pretty sure she knew how to do that.

She just wished it didn’t involve trusting one of their enemies.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Keefe told her. “And I’m in. All the way.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Fitz said, pointing toward

the windows, where the sky was fading to twilight. “First, we need to get out of here. They probably have someone watching this place, waiting for us to show up.”

Sophie nodded to her sister. “Go pack a bag as quick as you can. You’re coming with me.”

“Uh, that’s *way* too dangerous,” Fitz warned. “If the Council found out—”

“They *won’t*,” Sophie interrupted. “As soon as we get back, I’ll hail the Collective.”

The Black Swan—the rebel organization that created Sophie—had an extensive network of secret hideouts. And they’d always come through when Sophie needed their help.

Then again, that was before Mr. Forkle was . . .

This time, she couldn’t stop her brain from finishing the sentence with “murdered.”

She pressed her palm over her chest, feeling for the new locket under her tunic, which held the last task Mr. Forkle had entrusted her with before he took his final breaths.

When an elf passed away, they coiled their DNA around a Wanderling seed and planted it in a special forest. But Mr. Forkle had asked Sophie to hold on to his seed, claiming she’d somehow *know* when and where to do the planting. He’d also asked that his body be removed from the rubble before anyone saw it, which meant only a handful of people knew he’d been killed. But the rest of their world would find out soon enough. The Council had extended Foxfire’s midterm break in light of

the tragedy in Lumenaria—but school was scheduled to restart in less than two weeks. And one of Mr. Forkle’s secret alter egos had been principal of the academy.

Keefe moved closer, leaning in to whisper, “I’ll take care of your sister, Foster. The place I’m crashing in is small—and it smells like sasquatch breath mixed with rotting toenails. But I guarantee no one will find us.”

Keefe had been living on the run ever since he’d fled the Neverseen—and his offer wasn’t a horrible suggestion. But Sophie wasn’t letting her sister out of her sight.

“She’s coming with me to Havenfield. We’ll figure out the rest once we get there.”

“Uh, I’m not going anywhere with a bunch of strangers,” her sister informed them.

The last word stung more than Sophie wanted to admit, but she did her best to shrug it off. “Do you really think you’re safe here? Even if the Neverseen don’t come back, the police might. Do you want to end up in foster care?”

Her sister bit her lip, leaving indentations in the soft flesh. “What about Marty and Watson? Who’s going to feed them?”

Sophie’s eyes prickled. “You still have Marty?”

The fluffy gray cat used to sleep on her pillow every night, and it had broken her heart to leave him behind. But she’d figured her family would need him. And Watson must’ve been the dog she’d heard barking when they’d first arrived. Sophie had asked the elves to move her family somewhere with a yard

big enough to allow them to finally get the puppy her sister had always wanted.

"I guess we'll bring them with us," Sophie decided. "Get Watson on a leash and put Marty in his carrier."

"Okay, seriously, we can't do this," Fitz said, reaching for Sophie's hands to force her to listen to him. "You don't understand how dangerous this is."

"It'll be fine," Sophie insisted. "The Black Swan will keep her hidden."

"The Black Swan," her sister whispered. "Wait. I think . . . I think they said something about that. Everything was happening so fast, it's hard to remember. But I think one of them said, 'Let's figure out why the Black Swan chose them.'"

Sophie shared another look with her friends.

"I take it you guys know what that means?" her sister asked.

"It . . . might be about me," Sophie said. "It's part of that long story I have to tell you—but we should get out of here first."

She tried to reach for her home crystal, but Fitz wouldn't let go of her hands.

"You're not understanding what I'm saying," he told her. "Do you have any idea how risky it is to light leap with a human?"

He'd kept his voice low, but her sister still snapped, "What do you mean *a human*?"

"Exactly what you think he means," a slightly deeper, even crisper voice said from the doorway.

Everyone whipped around to find the three others who'd insisted on joining Sophie, Keefe, and Fitz on this hastily planned—and highly illegal—excursion to the Forbidden Cities. Fitz's father, Alden, who looked like an older, more regal version of his son. And Sandor and Grizel, who instantly triggered a massive amount of screaming.

"It's okay," Sophie promised. "They're our bodyguards."

That only seemed to make her sister scream louder.

To be fair, both Sandor and Grizel were seven feet tall and gray, with flat noses and massive amounts of rock-hard muscle—plus gigantic black swords strapped at their sides.

"Wh-what are th-they?" her sister stammered.

"Goblins," Sandor said in his unexpectedly high-pitched, squeaky voice.

"And we mean you no harm," Grizel added in her huskier tone.

A hysterical laugh bubbled from her sister's lips. "Goblins. Like from the bank in Harry Potter?"

Fitz grinned. "She sounds like Sophie did when I first told her she was an elf."

The word triggered another round of hysterical laughter.

"Okay, so two things," Keefe jumped in. "One: How is she understanding us? I just realized we've all been speaking the Enlightened Language, and she has too."

"I gave her—and her parents—a basic understanding of our language before we relocated them," Alden explained. "In case

something like this ever happened. Communication can be a powerful weapon, and an essential defense.”

*“What is he talking about?”* her sister shouted. *“WHAT DID YOU DO TO MY BRAIN?”*

“That’s the second thing,” Keefe said, fanning his arm the way he always did when he was reading emotions through the air. “I’m betting your sister is about three minutes away from a meltdown of epic proportions.”

“I’d wager it’ll be sooner than that,” Alden said through a sigh. “This is exactly the kind of worst-case scenario I hoped we’d never have to face. Fortunately, I came prepared.”

“What are you doing?” Sophie asked, yanking her hands free from Fitz as Alden reached into the inner pocket of his long blue cape. She’d been afraid he’d pull out a vial of sedatives. But the round silver disk he tossed at her feet was much more terrifying.

Sophie had used the same gadget the day she’d drugged her family so the elves could erase her. And as the world spun to a blur, she realized she should’ve held her breath the second the disk hit the floor.

“Please,” she begged when her sister collapsed. “She’s going to need me. You can’t erase me from her life again.”

Keefe lunged to help Sophie, but only lasted a second before he went down. Fitz followed a second after that.

Sophie’s knees gave out, but she crawled for her sister, pleading with Alden to change his plan. He’d always been so

kind to her—a loyal, trustworthy advisor. Almost a father figure. But his face was sad and serious as he released the breath he'd been holding. "Don't fight the sedatives, Sophie. You can't beat them."

He said something else, but she couldn't understand him. Her ears were ringing, and the light kept dimming.

She hated this feeling—hated Alden for putting her through it. But she couldn't focus enough to rally any of her defenses.

"Please," she said again as her face sank against the carpet. "Please don't take my sister away from me. Not again."

Through her hazy eyes she saw Alden crouch beside her, his lips mouthing, *I'm sorry*.

Then darkness swallowed everything.