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KEEPER OF THE CITIES FLASHBACK



BY SHANNON
MESSENGER

KEEPER OF THE LOST CITIES

FLASHBACK

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Aladdin

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

PREFACE

T *HIS TIME WE WIN.*

It was Sophie's only thought, even as the world around her fell into shadow and chaos.

Even as the Neverseen revealed their next move—their next twist in this deadly game.

A game Sophie had lost over and over again.

But this time she was ready.

This time she'd trained—and so had her friends.

This time, they knew how to fight back.

So Sophie's hand didn't shake as she reached for one of the throwing stars she'd learned to carry.

And she knew exactly where to aim.

No hesitation.

No fear.

But . . . things weren't always as they appeared.

And as everything flickered and faded, as her friends shouted
and struggled to understand . . .

Sophie knew.

Illusion was her enemy's new secret weapon.

ONE

SO IS IT STRANGE COMING HERE AND *not* being the one on trial?” Keefe asked, checking his expertly styled blond hair in a shiny facet on one of the jeweled walls before he followed Sophie into Tribunal Hall. “Because I’d be happy to help you break a few laws if you’re feeling left out.”

“Me too!” Ro—Keefe’s bodyguard—jumped in. Her pierced nose crinkled as she surveyed the empty auditorium, which was built entirely out of emeralds. “Ugh, you guys have really out-sparkled yourselves with this place. It’s basically begging me to smash something.”

“No one will be smashing anything,” Sandor—Sophie’s bodyguard—warned. “Or causing any other problems!”

The threat didn't sound all that terrifying, thanks to Sandor's squeaky voice. But he backed it up by being a seven-foot-tall goblin warrior—and by folding his gray arms across his bare chest and flexing some seriously impressive muscles.

Ro flashed a pointy-toothed smile and patted the rows of daggers—a recent addition to her ogre arsenal—strapped to her toned thighs. “I'd like to see you try to stop us.”

“Believe me, I'd enjoy every second,” Sandor growled, gripping the hilt of his giant black sword. “I still can't believe the Council is allowing you into these proceedings.”

Neither could Sophie.

Then again, she hadn't expected to be invited either.

The Tribunal was supposed to be restricted to members of the Vacker family, since it was only a sentencing hearing—and mostly a formality. Alvar was already being held in the secret prison the Black Swan had designed specifically for him. The Council was simply deciding how many years he'd have to stay there.

But Alden had stopped by Havenfield that morning and explained that he'd gotten permission for Sophie to attend. And when she'd light leaped to Eternalia, she'd found Keefe and Ro already waiting.

Keefe looked dressier than usual, in a starched white shirt with a fitted black jerkin and an embroidered gray cape—and Sophie was relieved to see it, since she'd decided to show her support with a dusty-rose gown that was much more Biana's

fancy style than hers. She'd also used the gold-flecked eyeliner Biana had been telling her would bring out the glints in her brown eyes—even though she hated drawing more attention to their unique-for-an-elf color.

“What?” Sophie asked, wiping under her lashes when she noticed Keefe staring. “Did I smudge it?”

“No, Foster. You look . . . perfect.”

She blushed at the slight catch in his voice—and then wished she hadn't when he flashed his trademark smirk.

“Did Alden tell you he wanted you to be here for moral support too?” she asked, stopping in the center of the hall as she realized she didn't know which of the hundreds of seats were theirs.

His smile faded. “Yeah. He said Fitz was going to need a friend today.”

“He said a lot more than that,” Ro muttered.

“Relax, Foster,” Keefe said, shooting Ro a glare before he pointed to the crease that had formed between Sophie's eyebrows. “No need to get all crinkly on me. Nothing's going on. Alden's just . . . worried about how Fitz is going to handle this.”

“So am I,” Sophie admitted.

Anger was often Fitz's crutch in emotionally fraught situations—and nothing brought out his fury more than his traitorous older brother.

“Yeah, well, now I'm stuck listening to a bunch of stuffy, know-it-all elves arguing with each other,” Ro grouched as she

twisted one of her choppy pigtailed, which she'd recently dyed the same vivid pink she'd painted her claws. "It almost makes me wish I were still bedridden. Seriously, who thought having *twelve* Councillors was a good idea?"

Sophie was tempted to point out that the system was much more balanced than having a single power-hungry king. But since Ro was the daughter of the ogres' fear-inspiring leader—and the elves' alliance with King Dimitar had become rather shaky after the Neverseen almost killed Ro during their attack on Atlantis—she decided it was smart to avoid that particular conversation. Especially since the elvin Council was far from perfect.

She turned toward the twelve jeweled thrones that filled a large platform at the front of the glinting green room. Each had been ornamented to reflect the style and taste of the Councillor whose name was displayed along the top: Clarette, Velia, Alina, Terik, Liora, Emery, Oralie, Ramira, Darek, Noland, Zarina, and Bronte.

Sophie knew some of them better than others, and there were a couple she'd even grown to trust. But she would never stop wishing that there was still a simple, sturdy throne for Councillor Kenric.

Kenric had been kind. And funny. And one of Sophie's most loyal supporters.

And he'd still be alive if it weren't for her.

She tried not to let herself think about it, because the guilt might shatter her sanity. But she could still feel the stinging

heat of the flames—still hear the crunches and crackles and screams as the jeweled tower melted around them. And she'd never forget Fintan's taunt as he'd ignited the Everblaze to prevent her from retrieving his memories.

Sophie had only been in Oblivimyre that night because of a direct order from the Council. But if she'd been stronger, faster, smarter than Fintan . . .

"You okay?" Keefe asked, flicking a strand of her blond hair to get her attention. "And before you answer, remember: You're talking to an Empath. Plus, you've already pulled out two eyelashes since we got here, and I can tell you're dying to go for a third."

She was.

Her eyelashes itched whenever she felt anxious, and tugging on them was *such* a relief. But she kept trying to break the habit, so she held her hands at her sides and forced herself to meet Keefe's ice blue eyes. "I'm fine."

When he raised one eyebrow, she added, "I'm just frustrated. I wish the Council was holding a Tribunal for Fintan, not Alvar."

Keefe leaned slightly closer. "I wouldn't let the Fitzster hear you say that."

"I know. Or Biana."

The younger Vacker siblings had been counting down the days to Alvar's sentencing—and Sophie didn't blame them for wanting everything settled with their older brother.

But . . .

She glanced over her shoulder, grateful the auditorium was still empty, so she could ask the question she'd been trying not to say.

"Doesn't this feel like a waste of time?"

"Because Alvar can't remember anything?" Keefe asked.

Sophie nodded.

Alvar had been a longtime member of the Neverseen, involved in many of their cruelest schemes before Sophie and her friends found him drugged, bleeding, and trapped in a cell in an abandoned hideout. And when he'd finally regained consciousness, he couldn't even remember his own name.

He didn't seem to be faking, either. Sophie had checked. So had Fitz. And Alden. And Mr. Forkle. And Quinlin. And Councillor Emery—along with every other Telepath the Council trusted. None of them could find a single memory in Alvar's head, no matter how deeply they searched. The Black Swan had even brought in Damel—a trained Washer—who'd told them that Alvar's past had been scrubbed cleaner than he'd realized was possible. And Sophie had tried using her unique telepathic abilities to perform a mental healing, but it hadn't made a difference. Neither had any of the elixirs a team of physicians had given him.

Alvar's mind wasn't broken or damaged.

It was . . . blank.

Sophie had never felt anything like it—and she'd experi-

enced some pretty bizarre mental landscapes over the last few years. There was no cold, suffocating darkness. No sharp, fragmented images. Just soft, fuzzy gray space.

“I don’t understand why the Council is focusing on someone with amnesia,” she whispered to Keefe, “when they have Fintan in custody and they’re doing *nothing*.”

The former leader of the Neverseen had been captured during the raid on Nightfall. But Fintan had cut a deal with the Council for his cooperation. So he was currently being held in a prison built specifically for him, in exchange for sharing the location of a small supply of the antidote to soporidine—a dangerous sedative the Neverseen had developed for some still-undetermined purpose. He’d also demanded that all Telepaths be kept far away, to ensure that no one could mess with his memories. And while the Council did at least make him agree to help them gain access to his old cache—a small, marble-size gadget that contained dangerous memories called Forgotten Secrets—either Fintan was sabotaging the process, or caches were flawed inventions, because weeks had passed and they hadn’t recovered a single piece of information.

“You think he’s planning something,” Keefe guessed.

“Don’t you?”

Fintan had already proven that he was the master of long, intricate schemes. He’d destroyed Lumenaria—and freed Vespera from the castle’s dungeon—with a plan that required key members of the Neverseen to allow themselves to be

imprisoned. He could be pulling a similar trick again—and Sophie knew she could find out if the Council would just let her meet with him.

But all of her requests for a visit had been denied. And when she'd asked the Black Swan's Collective for help, they'd told her the Council wasn't giving them access either.

"Why is Fintan still calling the shots?" she murmured. "He already gave us the antidote."

"I don't know." Keefe seemed to debate with himself before he added, "But he's never going to cooperate. So do you *really* want to do another memory break on him? After what happened with Alden—and Kenric . . ."

Sophie stared at her hands, tracing her finger along one of the thumb rings peeking through her lacy gloves. The engraved bands had been a gift from Fitz, to identify the two of them as Cognates—and the rare telepathic connection made them far more powerful together than they'd been the last time they'd taken on Fintan. She'd also manifested as an Enhancer, which meant she could boost Fitz's mental strength with a single touch of her fingertips. So she had no doubt that they *would* get past Fintan's blocking and find whatever he was hiding.

But . . . memory breaks were horrible, brutal things—even when they were necessary.

"I don't see any other choice," she admitted. "Even if he's not part of some bigger scheme, Fintan has to at least know what Vespera's planning."

“But he won’t know what my mom’s up to,” Keefe reminded her. “And she’s the one running things now.”

Sophie wasn’t entirely convinced that was true.

Lady Gisela *had* seized control of the Neverseen when she’d tried to destroy Atlantis. But Vespera only allied with her because Keefe’s mom trapped her in a force field and threatened to leave her there until the Council arrived to arrest her. And Vespera didn’t seem like the type who’d cooperate for long—especially since she’d insisted that she and Lady Gisela had opposite visions.

Then again, Keefe’s mom had already clawed her way back to power once, so she must be taking precautions to make sure no one could overthrow her again.

“We have too many villains,” Sophie said through a sigh.

Keefe snorted. “You’re not wrong.”

She wasn’t even counting the other members of the Neverseen. Or the ogres who’d defected from King Dimitar. Or the dwarves who’d disappeared months ago, presumably to join the rebellion. Or—

“Hey,” Keefe said, fanning the air the way he always did when her emotions started to spiral. “We’ve got this, okay? I know it doesn’t feel like it—”

“It doesn’t,” Sophie agreed.

They’d been trying to come up with a plan for weeks and still had nothing. And whenever the Neverseen kept them stumped like that, people got hurt.

Sophie had even risked using Keefe's old Imparter, which his mom had rigged with a secret way to contact her. But Lady Gisela was either ignoring them, or she'd severed the connection. And the Black Swan had confiscated the gadget in case anyone could use it to monitor them.

Keefe grinned. "You're so adorable when you worry. I've told you that, right?"

Sophie gave him her best glare, and his smile only widened.

He stepped closer, reaching for her hands. "Let's just get through today, okay? Then no one will be distracted by Alvar anymore, and we'll be able to focus."

"Yeah. I guess."

"Hmm." He traced his thumb over the sliver of skin between her glove and the edge of her beaded sleeve. "There's something you're not saying right now. I can feel it."

There was.

The *other* question she'd been trying not to ask, because she was pretty sure she knew what her friends would say.

"Come on, Foster. It's me. You know you can trust me. And you already know all of my worst secrets, so . . ."

It was the sincerity in his eyes that made her glance over her shoulder again, making sure the room was still empty before she whispered, "Do you think it's weird to punish someone for crimes they don't remember committing?"

"Weird?" Keefe asked. "Or *wrong*?"

"Both, I guess."

He nodded and stepped back, running a hand down his face. “Well . . . everything about this is weird. But, just because Alvar doesn’t remember the creepy things he did, it doesn’t mean they didn’t happen.”

“True.”

Sophie knew better than anyone what Alvar was capable of. And yet . . . the few times she’d seen him since he lost his memory, he’d seemed *different*.

He wasn’t slick, or arrogant, or angry.

He was terrified. And desperate. And he’d spent the whole time begging everyone to realize he wasn’t the person they thought he was.

“He could still get his memories back,” Keefe reminded her. “Just because we haven’t found the right trigger yet doesn’t mean the Neverseen didn’t plan for one.”

That was another reason Sophie wanted a chance to poke around Fintan’s head. They’d recovered Alvar months before Fintan was arrested, so he had to know why Alvar ended up in that cell.

But since the Council wasn’t cooperating, Sophie had convinced Mr. Forkle to bring Alvar to places from his past, like the apartment he’d been living in and the destroyed Neverseen hideouts they’d found. They’d also spent days exposing Alvar to random images and sounds and smells—even tastes—trying to trigger a hint of familiarity.

None of it had caused even the tiniest flashback.

And she was starting to think that nothing ever would.

“I’m not saying I trust Alvar,” she said, turning to stare at the hundreds of empty seats. “But I also know how terrifying it is to stand in this room and face the Council, and I can’t imagine going through it without even remembering why I’m on trial. I mean . . . Alvar’s future is being decided by a past he doesn’t believe is his.”

“But it *is* his,” Keefe argued. “It’s not like we’re making this up. He helped kidnap you and Dex, and he helped the Neverseen grab Wylie and torture him, and he helped abduct your human family—and that’s only the stuff we know about. I saw what he was like when I was pretending to join the Neverseen. He was *all in*. One-hundred-percent committed to their cause, no matter what they asked him to do. And he’d still be just as dedicated if they hadn’t gotten rid of him—if that’s really what happened. Do you want to let him off the hook just because they wiped his mind to keep him from telling us their secrets?”

“No. But keeping him locked up in that miserable cell still feels . . . unfair, somehow.”

“Ugh, you elves overthink everything,” Ro grumbled. “It’s simple: A traitor’s a traitor, and they need to be punished so everyone understands there are consequences for treason. If you’re not willing to end him, lock him up and destroy the key. Or better yet, leave it hanging in his line of sight so he has to stare at it forever, knowing he’ll never be able to reach it.”

“For once the ogre princess and I agree,” Sandor added.

Sophie sighed. “Well, I guess it’s a good thing I don’t have to make the decision.”

“It is,” Keefe agreed. “Cause I’m pretty sure Fitz is going to have a meltdown if the Council gives Alvar anything less than a life sentence.”

The idea made Sophie cringe.

The elves called their life span “indefinite,” because so far no one had ever died of old age. So if Fitz got his wish, Alvar would be spending thousands of years locked away—maybe even millions. And his cell wasn’t just cramped and stuffy. It was buried in the middle of a putrid bog and smelled worse than imp breath.

Keefe moved back to her side, leaning in to whisper. “I do get what you’re saying, Foster. Punishing the bad guys is supposed to be easier than this—and way more fun.”

“Yeah,” Sophie said quietly. “I’ve been angry at Alvar for so long, I never thought I’d end up feeling sorry for him.”

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaand this is why we’re going to be stuck here for hours,” Ro whined.

“Nah, I’m sure the Council already made their decision,” Keefe told her. “They’re just putting on a good show for the Vackers.”

“Wanna bet?” Ro’s grin looked dangerous when she added, “I say we’ll be here until sunset—and if I’m right, you have to wear ogre armor to school, instead of your uniform.”

Keefe smirked. “No big deal. I would rock that metal diaper. But *I* say that this hearing will be done in an hour—and if I’m right, you have to call me Lord Hunkyhair from now on.”

Sophie shook her head. “You guys are terrible.”

“That’s why you love us!” Keefe draped his arm around her shoulders. “You should get in on this, Foster. I’m sure that devious mind of yours can come up with some particularly humiliating ways to punish us if we’re wrong.”

She probably could. But no way was she risking having to wear a metal breastplate to Foxfire. Ro’s looked like a medieval corset paired with spiked metal bikini bottoms.

“Hard pass,” she told him.

Keefe heaved a dramatic sigh. “Fiiiiiiiiiiiiine. I guess I can’t blame you, since I already owe you a favor. Any thoughts on what my penance is going to be, by the way? Don’t think I haven’t noticed how long you’ve been stalling.”

“I’m not *stalling*,” Sophie insisted. “I just . . . haven’t figured out what I want.”

“Yeah, I know.” The teasing tone faded from his voice, replaced with something that made Sophie very aware of how close they were standing. “Take your time,” he told her, the words mostly a whisper. “Just . . . let me know when you figure it out. Because I—”

The doors to the hall burst open, cutting off whatever else he was going to say.

“Oh good. Here comes the elf parade,” Ro muttered.

of the Ancients—but Sophie didn't know any other details about Fallon's appearance to help her narrow it down. And she couldn't ask Keefe—the hall was *way* too quiet. No one said a word as they climbed the auditorium's stairs and took their seats.

And yet, somehow, the silence grew thicker when the doors opened again and Alden and Della strode into the hall, followed by Fitz and Biana and their goblin bodyguards, Grizel and Woltzer.

Sophie had seen her friends shattered by grief, shaking with anger, sobbing with hysterics—even battered and bloody and half dead. But she'd never seen them looking so . . . timid. Their clothes were dark and boring, and they kept their teal eyes focused on the floor. Biana even disappeared for longer between her steps than her vanishing ability usually caused.

So did Della, who'd worn her long hair pulled back into a simple knot, along with a gown and cape that were dull gray, without any frills.

Alden's cape and jerkin were equally plain.

Not that any of it helped them draw less attention.

The air in the room shifted, turning hotter and heavier with each stare sent their way—a blast of searing judgment aimed at the family of Vackers who'd brought scorn upon the name. And Fitz and Biana seemed to shrink under the weight of it, ducking their chins and picking up their pace as angry murmurs began to swell—starting as a low rustle and growing into a pounding thrum.

Sophie tried to think of something to say as they drew closer, but her mind wasn't cooperating—and for once Keefe didn't seem to have a joke ready. So she was forced to go with the less-than-inspiring “Hey.”

Biana's head snapped up. “Whoa, what are you guys doing here?”

“Your dad didn't tell you he got us in?” Keefe asked, dropping his arm from Sophie's shoulders when he noticed Fitz staring at them.

“I wanted it to be a surprise,” Alden explained. “I hope that's okay.”

“Of course it is!” Biana practically tackled Sophie with her hug—but Sophie hugged her back as gently as she could.

Biana kept claiming that she'd recovered from the brutal injuries she'd suffered in *Nightfall*, but Sophie had noticed that Biana always wore long sleeves now and chose gowns and tunics that covered her neck and shoulders.

“By the way, you look awesome,” Biana said, pulling away to admire Sophie's dress. “Now I'm wishing I braided my hair or something.”

“Oh please, you look amazing,” Sophie assured her. “Like always.”

It wasn't a lie.

Even in a hall full of Vackers, Biana managed to shine.

So did Fitz—though Sophie was trying not to notice.

“Hey, Fitzy,” Keefe said, elbowing Fitz's side. “Wanna join our

bet on how long this Tribunal is going to last? You get to name your terms—oh, but if you lose, you’ll have to wear a metal diaper to school and call me Lord Hunkyhair from now on.”

“Uh . . . yeah, *no*,” Fitz said as Biana asked, “Hunckyhair?”

“*Lord* Hunckyhair,” Keefe corrected. “What? It’s accurate.” He tossed his head like he was in a shampoo commercial. “I think we need to make it a thing either way—don’t you, Foster?”

“I think you’re ridiculous,” Sophie told him.

Then again, Biana was giggling. And Fitz’s lips were twitching with the beginning of a smile. Even Alden and Della had relaxed a little.

But everyone turned serious as Alden motioned for them to follow him toward a narrow silver staircase that led up to a platform with a row of chairs facing the Councillors’ thrones.

Fitz offered Sophie his arm, and she tried to ignore the way her insides fluttered at the gesture. He was probably only doing it because everyone knew that climbing things without tripping wasn’t one of her strengths—particularly when she was wearing heels. But her face still grew warm as she hooked her elbow around his.

It got even warmer when he told her, “I’m glad you’re here.”

“So am I.”

She meant it, even though the buzz in the room was shifting tone—and she caught enough scattered words to know many were now talking about her.

“Raised by humans.”

“Genetically altered.”

“Project Moonlark.”

There were also a few mentions of “matchmaking” in the mix, and Sophie decided she did *not* want to know what they were saying. Especially when she noticed Keefe’s smirk.

Fitz guided her to a chair on the far left of the platform and took the seat next to her, with Keefe sitting on his other side, followed by Biana, Della, and Alden. All the bodyguards took up positions behind them.

“Where’s Alvar going to be?” Sophie whispered, noticing that there were no empty seats.

Alden pointed to a portion of the floor that had a square pattern. “That platform will rise once he’s standing on it.”

“He has to face the Council alone,” Della added quietly.

“And it looks like our time starts *now*,” Keefe told Ro, as two dozen heavily armed goblins marched into the hall and took up positions around the Councillors’ thrones.

“They call *that* security?” Ro huffed. “I could take them down without even drawing a dagger.”

Fanfare drowned out Sandor’s reply—which was probably for the best. And Sophie’s insides squished together as all twelve Councillors shimmered onto the platform in their gleaming silver cloaks and twinkling circlets.

Ro snorted. “Wow. Do the jewels in their crowns *seriously* match their thrones?”

“I suppose you’d rather we ink our adornments to our skin?” Councillor Emery called back.

His deep, velvety voice bounced off the emerald walls—but Ro didn’t look the least bit intimidated as she reached up and traced one of her pink claws over the tattoos swirling across her forehead.

“I doubt you guys could handle the pain,” she told him.

“I think you’d be surprised what we can bear,” Councillor Emery responded.

His skin was usually a shade similar to his long dark hair—but whatever memories inspired his statement had turned him slightly ashen.

“But that’s not what we’re here to discuss,” he added, taking a seat in his sapphire-encrusted throne, which matched both his circlet and his eyes. “I know many in this hall have important assignments to return to. So let’s not waste time.”

“Did you hear that?” Keefe asked Ro as the other Councillors sat in their respective thrones. “They’re *not* going to waste time.”

“Psh—like that’s going to last,” Ro argued.

“Bring in the accused!” Emery commanded, and four additional goblin warriors marched into the hall, flanking a hooded figure who blinked in and out of sight with every step, just like his mother and sister.

Alvar had never been as effortlessly attractive as his younger siblings, but he’d always made up for it with immaculate

clothes, perfectly gelled hair, and a build that looked like he'd spent hours working out every day. He would've been horrified by the scrawny, battered person he'd become. His loose gray cloak seemed to swallow him, and greasy strands of his dark hair hung in his pale blue eyes.

But worst of all were the curved red scars marring his gaunt face.

"The Council better get this right," Fitz whispered as the platform raised Alvar to the Councillors' height.

"State your name for the record," Councillor Emery ordered.

Alvar gave a wobbly bow and drew back his hood. "I'm told it's Alvar Soren Vacker."

"You sound as if you don't believe that to be the case," Emery noted.

"I don't know what I believe," Alvar told him. "Like I keep telling you, I have no memory of my past."

Fitz reached for Sophie's hand when Councillor Emery closed his eyes. As spokesperson for the Council, Emery's job was to telepathically mediate all arguments, to ensure the Councillors presented a unified front for the audience.

Several long seconds passed—and Ro's grin widened with each one—before Emery asked Alvar, "Do you understand why we've brought you before us today?"

Alvar bowed again. "I understand that certain charges have been raised against me. But I have no way to verify them."

"Are you implying that we're liars?" a sharp voice barked.

All eyes shifted to Councillor Bronte, the oldest member of the Council—with the pointy ears to prove it, along with the piercing stare of an elf who could inflict pain on anyone he wished with a simple glance.

Alvar shrank back a step. “Of course not. I’m just . . . emphasizing my predicament. You keep outlining my crimes—but I feel no connection to any of it. Just like I feel no connection to anyone in this room, even though I’m told you’re my family.” He glanced behind him, studying the intimidating crowd before his eyes settled on Alden and Della. “I wish I could remember you. I wish I could remember *anything*. But since I can’t, all I’ll say is . . . whoever did these horrible things that you’ve accused me of—that’s not me. Maybe it used to be. And if that’s the case, I’m truly sorry. But I promise I’m not that person anymore.”

“Right,” Fitz muttered, loud enough for the word to echo off the walls.

“I understand your skepticism,” Councillor Emery told him. “We have doubts as well.”

“Then let me prove myself!” Alvar begged. “I realize the chance of regaining my freedom is slim. But if you *did* decide to grant it—”

“We’d be endangering the lives of everyone in the Lost Cities,” Councillor Emery finished for him. “Whether you remember your past or not, your connection to the Neverseen poses a threat we cannot ignore.”

Alvar's shoulders slumped.

"*But*," Emery added, and the whole room seemed to suck in a breath, "your current imprisonment also creates quite the conundrum."

Fitz's hand shook and Sophie tightened her hold, twining her gloved fingers with his as Councillor Emery closed his eyes and rubbed his temples.

Ro leaned down and whispered to Keefe, "Settle in for a long debate, Betting Boy. And get ready to prance around school in our tiniest armor."

Keefe shrugged.

But Emery stood, pacing twice along the platform before pausing to face Alvar. "I'll admit, none of us are entirely comfortable with what I'm about to say—but we're also not willing to issue a sentence while there are so many uncertain variables."

"WHAT?" Fitz blurted, jumping to his feet.

"We understand that this is an emotionally challenging situation for you," Emery told Fitz. "That's why I'm tolerating your interruptions. But surely you can agree that the primary goal of any punishment must be to prevent further crimes from being committed. And we cannot determine what's necessary for your brother in that regard until we discover who he is *now*. We need to witness how he interacts with others and study how he behaves in ordinary situations—which cannot happen in his isolated cell. But since we can't trust him either, we must

move him to an environment where we can keep him constantly monitored and separated from our larger world while still providing ample opportunities for us to take his measure.”

Sophie noticed the total lack of surprise on Alden’s and Della’s faces the same moment she realized that *this* was why she’d been invited for moral support.

A quick glance at Keefe told her he’d come to the same conclusion.

So neither of them gasped with the rest of the crowd when Emery announced the Council’s decision. But she still felt a sour wave of dread wash through her when he said, “For the next six months, Alvar will be returning to Everglen.”