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KEEPER OF THE LOST CITIES LEGACY



SHANNON MESSENGER

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KEEPER OF THE LOST CITIES LEGACY

SHANNON MESSENGER

Aladdin

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

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For Debra Driza

**Because I *never* would've finished this book
without your steady support, brilliant brainstorming
sessions, and tiny chocolate chip cookies
(And FYI, readers: The cliff-hanger was Deb's idea!)**



PREFACE

W

E CAN'T KEEP DOING THIS.

The words pulsed through Sophie's mind.

Gaining volume—gaining momentum—
as the arguments raged around her.

All the strategizing and analyzing and agonizing.

It never worked.

No matter how clever or careful their plans were.

Their enemies were always smarter.

Stronger.

Ready with some brutal, unexpected twist.

Leaving them stumbling and scrambling.

“We can't keep doing this.”

This time the words had a voice, and it took Sophie a second to realize they'd come from her.

And she didn't regret them.

It was time to try something new.

Time to take a stand.

Even if it risked everything.

And maybe if they worked together—and were really, *really* lucky . . .

This would be their new legacy.

Saving Keefe from his.

ONE

YOU LOOK CONFUSED,” MR. FORKLE said, and the lilt of his tone made Sophie wonder if his lips were twitching with a smile—but she couldn’t pull her eyes away from the round, gilded door he’d brought her to, tucked into the side of a rolling, grassy hill.

The place reminded her of a hobbit hole. But Sophie had been living in the Lost Cities long enough to know better than to voice that observation. All it would earn her was laughter. Or perhaps some impossible-to-believe story about how Mr. Forkle had once brought J. R. R. Tolkien there and provided him with the inspiration.

“I thought you were taking me to your office,” she told him, shifting her gaze toward the windblown meadow and searching the swaying wildflowers for clues as to where they were.

“I did.”

Sophie opened her mouth to argue—then realized what he meant.

He’d brought her to *his* office. Not Magnate Leto’s office at Foxfire, like she’d been expecting. Which was an easy mistake to make, considering the fact that Mr. Forkle and Magnate Leto were actually the same person—and “Mr. Forkle” was his much more enigmatic side.

“So, this is your *secret* office,” she clarified, feeling goose bumps prickle her skin at the thought.

“One of them,” Mr. Forkle confirmed, winking as he shuffled his ruckleberry-bloated body closer to the door. He leaned in and licked a spot on the left side of the door, which must’ve been a camouflaged DNA sensor because a rectangular panel slid open in the center, revealing five spinning, fist-size cogs lined up in a neat row: one silver, one copper, one iron, one bronze, and one steel.

“Did Tinker design this place?” Sophie asked, remembering the abundance of gleaming gears she’d seen decorating the walls of Widgetmoor, as well as the Technopath’s clear fondness for the number five. But that wasn’t the question she should’ve been focusing on, so she quickly added, “And why are we here?”

Mr. Forkle twisted the cogs one by one, entering some sort of complicated combination. “You said we needed to talk. Isn’t that why you requested this meeting?”

“It is, but . . .” Sophie’s words trailed off as the last cog clicked into place, making the ground rumble and the golden door sink into a slit that appeared in the damp earth. Cold air blasted her face from the dark room beyond, blowing strands of her blond hair into her eyes as she took an eager step forward and—

“Stop!” a familiar squeaky voice shouted behind her.

Sophie froze.

She’d learned that it was much easier to let the seven-foot-tall, heavily armed gray goblin lead the way—along with a hulking ogre warrior and a tiny green-toothed gnome. Sandor, Bo, and Flori were three of her five multispeciesial bodyguards, and they took their jobs *very* seriously.

So did her other bodyguards, of course. But Nubiti kept watch from a position deep underground, since dwarves' eyes were highly sensitive to light. And Tarina still hadn't been allowed to return to duty after what everyone was calling the "Scandal at Everglen"—though "scandal" really wasn't a strong enough word. It didn't capture the shock that came with discovering an illegal troll hive hidden at the estate of one of their world's most prominent families. And it *definitely* didn't evoke the horror of the genetically altered, bloodthirsty trolls who went on a murderous rampage once the door to the hive was opened.

Both the elvin and trollish worlds were still reeling from the disaster, since the Neverseen had managed to broadcast the nightmarish battle to everyone gathered for the Celestial Festival. And no one could agree on how to punish those who'd been involved. A Tribunal had already been held for Luzia Vacker, but her sentence had yet to be finalized. And numerous additional investigations seemed to be endlessly "ongoing." Foxfire, the elves' most prestigious academy, had even been put on an extended hiatus because parents were worried the school might be targeted. Plus, treaty renegotiations still needed to be arranged between the elvin Council and the trolls' supreme leader, but everyone was wary of another Peace Summit after what happened at the last one.

"This office is perfectly safe," Mr. Forkle assured Sophie's bodyguards. "Watchward Heath is protected by five different kinds of security. And only six people in the world know how to find it. Well, *seven* now, given Miss Foster's knack for teleporting."

"Then the office should have no problem passing my inspection," Sandor called over his shoulder as he drew his massive curved sword and marched through the doorway, followed by Bo and Flori. He'd always been overprotective, but his paranoia had reached new

levels of exhausting after the Neverseen's recent brutal attack—and Sophie couldn't blame him, since she and Fitz had ended up bedridden in the Healing Center for weeks. Her right hand still ached whenever she pushed herself too hard, and Fitz occasionally walked with a slight limp. But Elwin kept assuring them that they'd make a full recovery. Certain wounds were just trickier than others—and theirs had been some of the worst, thanks to the creepy echoes caused by their exposure to shadowflux.

The rare sixth element was darkness in its purest form. Only the strongest Shades could control it. And shadowflux changed everything it touched.

Shadowflux was also somehow so vital to whatever the Neverseen were planning that when their Shade was killed at Everglen, Lady Gisela threatened Tam until he agreed to serve as Umber's replacement. Sophie and Keefe had begged Tam not to go, but he swore he could handle himself. And Lady Gisela had warned them that any attempt at rescue would only put Tam and his twin sister, Linh, in greater danger. So Tam was on his own with the Neverseen—and it killed Sophie every time she thought about it.

Each passing week made her heart heavier. Her nightmares more vivid. Her brain more convinced that she'd never see her friend again.

Or worse: that Tam would join the enemy for real.

If you hear us out, I guarantee you'll realize that we are the only ones with an actual solution to the problems in this world, and that you've been wasting your talent serving the wrong side, Lady Gisela had told him. And she'd proven time and again that she was a master of mind games and manipulation.

“All clear!” Sandor called, and Sophie squared her shoulders and took a long, steadying breath.

She could go back to worrying about Tam later. Right now, she needed to focus on the conversation ahead—a conversation she’d been rehearsing for the last nine days. Ever since she’d gone to Atlantis and . . .

Well.

Things had *not* gone according to plan.

She could still see the pitying looks on the matchmakers’ faces as they’d shown her the ugly red words on the screen.

Words that would define her—*destroy* her—if people found out about them.

That was why she’d begged for this meeting. If she could convince Mr. Forkle to give her one tiny piece of information—something she *deserved* to know anyway—everything would get back on track.

She’d been gearing up for a fight, since getting information from the Black Swan was a lot like prying open the jaws of a thrashing verminion. But if he trusted her enough to bring her to his secret office . . .

“Shall we?” Mr. Forkle asked, gesturing to the entrance.

Sophie nodded and crossed the threshold, shivering as a blast of cold, metallic-tinged air seeped through the thin fabric of her lavender tunic. The room was too dark to see, but it felt like stepping into a refrigerator, and she pulled her dove gray cape tighter around her shoulders, wishing she’d worn thicker gloves, instead of the silk ones she’d chosen.

The light flared to life when Mr. Forkle followed, as if the sensor

only responded to him. “You don’t look impressed,” he noted as Sophie blinked in the sudden brightness.

“It’s just . . . not what I was expecting.”

She’d been imagining his secret office for years—and she’d always pictured a cross between a spaceship and Hogwarts, with fancy architecture and all kinds of high-tech gadgets and mysterious contraptions. Plus clues to who Mr. Forkle truly was, and plenty of hints about Project Moonlark. Instead, she’d found herself in a curved white room that made her feel like she was standing inside a giant underground egg. Soft light poured from a single bulb, which dangled off the end of a thin chain above a round, silver table. The walls were smooth and bare—as was the floor—and several small grates in the ceiling flooded the room with icy drafts.

That was it.

No windows. No doors—except the one they’d come through, which had sealed silently behind them. Nowhere to sit. No decor of any kind. Not even any books or scrolls, despite Mr. Forkle’s love of research.

“And here I thought you’d learned that things in the Lost Cities are rarely what they seem,” Mr. Forkle said, pressing his palm against the wall. The light bulb flickered twice before it flared much brighter and projected a grid of images across every surface of the room, as if the office was tapping into thousands of camera feeds displaying elves, goblins, ogres, trolls, dwarves, gnomes, and humans going about their daily lives. Every few seconds the images shifted, making Sophie wonder whether she’d catch a glimpse of the entire planet if she stood there long enough.

“Still nothing?” Mr. Forkle asked.

She shrugged. “It’s not *that* different from Quinlin’s office in Atlantis. And I’m pretty sure a lot of human leaders have rooms like this too—not showing all the other species, but . . . you know what I mean.”

“Do I?” Mr. Forkle tapped the wall to make the images disappear before he placed his palm flat against the silver table. “What about this, then?”

The metal surface rippled at his touch, stretching and splitting into a million thin wires that made it look like a giant version of one of those pin art toys Sophie used to play with as a kid. He tapped his fingers in a quick rhythm, and the pins shifted and sank, forming highs and lows and smooth, flat stretches. Sophie couldn’t figure out what she was seeing until he tapped a few additional beats and tiny pricks of light flared at the ends of each wire, bathing the scene in vibrant colors and marking everything with glowing labels.

“It’s a map,” she murmured, making a slow circle around the table.

And not just any map.

A 3-D map of the Lost Cities.

She’d never seen her world like that before, with everything spread out across the planet in relation to everything else. Eternalia, the elvin capital that had likely inspired the human myths of Shangri-la, was much closer to the Sanctuary than she’d realized, nestled into one of the valleys of the Himalayas—while the special animal preserve was hidden inside the hollowed-out mountains. Atlantis was deep under the Mediterranean Sea, just like the human legends described, and it looked like Mysterium was somewhere in the Bermuda Triangle. The Gateway to Exile was in the middle of

the Sahara desert—though the prison itself was buried in the center of the earth. And Lumenaria . . .

“Wait. Is Lumenaria one of the Channel Islands?” she asked, trying to compare what she was seeing against the maps she’d memorized in her human geography classes.

“Yes and no. It’s technically part of the same archipelago. But we’ve kept that particular island hidden, so humans have no idea it exists—well, beyond the convoluted stories we’ve occasionally leaked to cause confusion.”

“Huh.” Lumenaria *had* reminded her of Camelot when she’d been there, so that must be where some of those legends came from. The elves liked to play with the lore of their world, weaving in conflicting fantastical details, to make it that much harder for humans to believe in it.

She leaned closer, wondering how accurate the map’s details were. She hadn’t been to Lumenaria since the collapse, and it looked like the glowing castle was now fully rebuilt—with much higher walls. A new tree also stood next to the Four Seasons Tree, perhaps as a memorial for those who’d died in the attack. “And humans really haven’t found the island? It’s *right* by France and the United Kingdom—and boats go through the channel all the time.”

“You’ve seen how powerful our illusions are,” Mr. Forkle reminded her.

Sophie’s stomach soured.

Vespera had designed most of the optical illusions that shielded the Lost Cities from detection. And out of all the Neverseen’s leaders, she was the most ruthless. She saw violence as a *solution*—and was always claiming that Sophie and Keefe would never be “ready.”

For what, they didn't know. But it seemed safe to assume it had something to do with Keefe's "legacy."

"It helps to see our world this way, doesn't it?" Mr. Forkle asked, moving to Sophie's side. "I've been coming here a lot lately to strategize."

"Does that mean you have a plan?" she asked, even though she was pretty sure she already knew the answer.

"It's a work in progress." He sighed when her hands curled into fists. "I understand your impatience, Miss Foster. But some things cannot be rushed."

Her laugh sounded as bitter as she felt.

They'd been trying to take down the Neverseen the entire time she'd been living in the Lost Cities. And here they were, *years* later, still with no clue what the Neverseen were up to or where they were hiding.

She and her friends had been trying to figure out how to make their next move ever since Tam was taken, but all they had to go on were the same worthless leads they'd wasted too much time on already.

Fake caches.

A missing starstone.

Way too many confusing symbols.

The key to Lady Gisela's Archetype, but not the book that the key opened.

Tiny fragments of shattered memories that didn't make any sense.

And no matter what truths they pieced together or what risks they took, the Neverseen were always five million steps ahead of them.

Put simply: They were losing.

And Sophie was sick of it.

“The Neverseen have proven to be more formidable than we expected,” Mr. Forkle admitted. “And their changes in leadership have made anticipating their tactics particularly complicated.”

“We have too many enemies,” Sophie muttered.

“We do indeed. And their individual visions do not always perfectly align, which has caused additional confusion. But we still know far more than you’re letting yourself admit.”

“Like what?” She turned to face him, crossing her arms. “I’m serious. Tell me *one* useful thing we’ve learned.”

“I can name many, Miss Foster. And so can you. You’re simply overlooking them because you’re upset that you haven’t gotten the answers you *want*—and I understand that inclination. But you’re far too smart for such ill-reasoned logic. Which is why I brought you here, to make sure you’re seeing the bigger picture.”

He tapped another rhythm against the table, and the pins shifted, making new landmarks emerge among all the others: Gildingham, the goblins’ golden capital, which seemed to be tucked among the Andes Mountains—and probably inspired the human myths of El Dorado. Ravagog, the ogre stronghold on the Eventide River, which was apparently hidden in the lushest part of central Asia. Loamnore, a city Sophie assumed was the dwarven capital, since the enormous metropolis was *under* the Gobi desert rather than above it. And Marintrylla, an island near New Zealand that was probably the trollish capital and seemed to be an intricate network of caves and bridges.

“What do you see?” Mr. Forkle asked.

Sophie’s eyes narrowed. “I’m assuming you’re looking for a better answer than ‘a bunch of cities.’”

Flori giggled.

Sandor and Bo snorted.

Mr. Forkle grumbled something under his breath that started with “You kids.”

“Why don’t you just tell me what you want me to say?” Sophie suggested.

“Because I’m trying to teach you, Miss Foster. Your friends look to you for guidance, and lately all I’ve seen you display is despair and frustration. If you’re going to lead them, you need to do better.”

“Lead them.” The phrase felt heavy on Sophie’s tongue. “Is *that* your big plan, then? Dump all the responsibility on me, because I’m the moonlark?”

“Need I remind you that you’re the one who chose to involve your friends? I’m not criticizing you for that—your friends have proven invaluable to our efforts. But you can’t ignore the responsibility that you took on when you recruited them.”

Sophie’s insides twisted.

She’d never intended to “recruit” her friends. They just kept asking questions about what she was doing and offering to help. And eventually, she’d realized she needed them.

But now everything that happened wasn’t just her responsibility—it was her *fault*. Like when Lady Gisela knocked Tam out cold and dragged him away, even though he’d already agreed to cooperate.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Mr. Forkle said gently. “And not because I’m violating the rules of telepathy, in case you’re worried. The burden you’re carrying is written in every shadow on your face—and you must *not* blame yourself.”

Sophie forced herself to nod.

Guilt was dangerous for elves—almost as sanity-shattering as violence.

But it sure wasn't easy to let go of.

"I want Mr. Tam home safely every bit as much as you do," Mr. Forkle assured her. "As does the rest of the Black Swan. But that cannot be our only goal. So I need you to step back and remember what we're fighting for."

"What *are* we fighting for?" Sophie countered. "It feels like all we ever do is . . . try not to die—and sometimes we're not even very good at that."

Mr. Forkle looked away, blinking hard, and Sophie was sorry she'd brought up what had happened to his twin brother. But . . . if they didn't change something, it was only a matter of time before they lost someone else.

"We've been playing defense for far too long," he said, clearing the thickness from his throat. "And that is never a good way to win. That's why I need you to look at the map again—*truly* look—and tell me what you see."

Sophie dragged out her sigh and tilted her head, trying to guess what he expected her to say. "I see . . . a divided world."

"An *unevenly* divided world," Bo added.

He had a point. The elves had a bunch of huge cities—and that wasn't counting their individual estates scattered all over the planet. Meanwhile, the other species seemed to be much more confined to their capitals—except the gnomes, who lived with the elves.

"The ancient Council felt it would be easier to ensure that each leader upheld the tenets of their treaties if the various species were separated from each other," Mr. Forkle explained. "So they did their

best to keep everyone confined to their respective homelands.” A quick series of taps made glowing lines appear across the map, outlining the invisible boundaries around each species’ territory—and their lands were much vaster than Sophie had realized, with borders extending well beyond their capitals. “And the arrangement has had its share of success. We scattered our cities to better keep an eye on everything. And no *major* wars have erupted among the intelligent species—though what happened with Serenvale was a close call.”

Bo shifted his weight, not looking happy to hear a reminder of how the ancient ogres stole the gnomes’ homeland and forced them to flee to the Lost Cities.

Flori looked even less thrilled.

Mr. Forkle kept his focus on the map. “Time, however, has complicated things. Populations have grown. Resources have been depleted. And many are beginning to feel *restricted* by their boundaries. Particularly when you consider this.”

He tapped a rapid rhythm against the metal, and thousands more cities appeared across the parts of the map that had previously been empty, most scrunched so closely together that their labels overlapped in a tangle of letters. But Sophie could still tell she was looking at the Forbidden Cities.

Human cities.

“The Council let each intelligent species choose their homeland—and kept land for ourselves and the Neutral Territories,” Mr. Forkle continued quietly. “But they left the rest of the planet to humans, because they’re so much more prolific. And many now feel that decision was a mistake. Some have even begun calling for drastic

changes. I believe you've heard about the proposal for building a Human Sanctuary that circulated a few decades back, haven't you, Miss Foster?"

"Alden mentioned it a while ago," Sophie agreed. And the thought of moving all the humans to what would basically be an enormous prison still made her queasy. "Was that the Neverseen's idea?"

"It's hard to say where the murmurings originated. But the idea gained some powerful supporters, even among those considered to be respectable and influential. And though the Council shut it down, they failed to address the larger conundrum that's been festering beneath the surface of all of our worlds for centuries now." He turned to meet her gaze. "We're spiraling toward war. And not an isolated battle. A global conflict involving every living being." He let that sink in before he added, "*That's* why the Black Swan was formed—and why Alden and Quinlin have carried out so many of their own secret investigations throughout the last few decades. But it's *also* why the Neverseen exist. And why King Dimitar forged an alliance with them and unleashed the plague upon the gnomes. I suspect it's even why the trolls enlisted Luzia Vacker to help them experiment on their newborns. We're all reacting to the same problem. Only our solutions separate us."

"But . . . why?" Sophie had to ask, pointing to the map. "I thought we could make anywhere inhabitable. So if this is all just about space, couldn't we hollow out more mountains or sink more cities under the ocean or—"

"We could," Mr. Forkle interrupted. "But who would live there? Not every territory is ideally situated for that kind of expansion—and people generally don't like leaving the place they've come to

think of as *home*. There's also no telling what complications might arise from scattering the species. But even if we resolved all of that, it wouldn't address the fact that humans are polluting our planet and stripping it of its natural resources while simultaneously building weapons that could destroy everyone."

"My queen has expressed *many* concerns about that," Sandor noted.

"As has my king," Bo agreed.

"And rightfully so," Mr. Forkle told them. "It's an incredibly disturbing situation. And I assure you, the Black Swan has been hard at work on a solution."

His gaze drifted toward Sophie again, and she took a step away.

"*That's* what Project Moonlark's about? I'm supposed to . . ." She wasn't sure how to finish that sentence, but she had a horrible feeling it ended with something like "save the human race."

"Project Moonlark was about gaining a valuable new perspective," Mr. Forkle corrected, "in the hope that fresh eyes might help us spot something we've been missing—both for this issue and for some of the internal injustices in our own society. Any action beyond that was never meant to rest solely on your shoulders. You're a part of our *order*. We face these challenges together."

Somehow that was both a relief *and* a disappointment.

Sophie didn't want to be the answer to *everything*. But she wouldn't mind being the answer to *something*, after all the sacrifices she'd had to make.

Mr. Forkle rested a hand on her shoulder. "You're incredibly special, Miss Foster. And there are other roles you'll be asked to play someday—but for now, I need you to concentrate on this." He

pointed to the map. “Given everything I’ve just told you, and everything you see here, what do *you* think the Neverseen’s next move will be?”

She stared at the map so long, the colors blurred.

“Okay, let’s try it this way,” he said. “What do you think the Neverseen truly want? I’m talking about the order as a whole, not the personal agendas of their individual leaders.”

The only answer Sophie could come up with was: “Power?”

“Exactly. *They* want to be in control—that’s one of the primary ways our orders differ from one another. The Black Swan resorted to rebellion because we had no other means of pursuing necessary solutions. And our ultimate hope has been—and always will be—to work hand in hand with the Council as we address these complicated challenges. But the Neverseen have always desired to take over.”

“So . . . you’re saying their next move is to overthrow the Council?” Sophie asked, really hoping she was wrong.

“I believe that’s their endgame—but I also believe they’re wise enough to know they’re not ready for that step. Think about what would happen if they took out the Council now. Would they prove themselves mighty? Or simply show the leaders of the other species that the Lost Cities are ripe for a takeover?” He tapped another rhythm against the table and made every landmark on the map disappear except Gildingham, Ravagog, Loamnore, and Marintrylla. “That’s the piece I fear you’ve been ignoring. Ruling our planet involves so much more than leading the elves. And the Neverseen cannot afford to weaken the Lost Cities until they’ve first weakened all of the other worlds.”

“They’ll never weaken us,” Bo huffed, his knuckles cracking as he squeezed the hilt of his sword.

Mr. Forkle shook his head. “They already have. What happened when they tricked your king into unleashing the plague upon the gnomes?”

Sophie wasn’t sure if it was a good idea to remind Bo that she and her friends had been forced to flood half of Ravagog in order to escape the ogre city after they snuck in to steal the cure from King Dimitar. But Bo’s grip loosened on his weapon, and his mottled skin paled as he said, “We lost many great warriors.”

“You did indeed. And others defected to the Neverseen afterward. You’ve also had half of a city to rebuild—which is still a work in progress, as I understand it.” Mr. Forkle tapped Ravagog on the map, and the lights dimmed around the ogre capital.

“We can still protect ourselves,” Bo argued.

“I never said you couldn’t. But we all know that your king changed strategies after the flood, shifting his focus away from the larger world and centering his attention on his people—which is what the Neverseen require. They need the other leaders to be distracted and disorganized, so they won’t notice the turmoil in the Lost Cities—or have the means to take advantage—until things stabilize. And that’s exactly what they’ve now made happen for Empress Pernille. By exposing Luzia Vacker’s involvement with the experimental hive, the Neverseen cost the empress her secret ally, as well as the lives of those newborn soldiers, and the facility where they were created. *And* they’ve forced the empress to face numerous treaty violations, which will keep her far too busy to concern herself with whatever’s happening in our world for a good long while.”

Another tap darkened Marintrylla on the map.

“That leaves the goblins and the dwarves,” Sophie murmured, feeling her stomach churn with a thick, sloshy dread. “Though . . . I guess they already took out a bunch of goblins in Lumenaria.”

“That was hardly a dent in our forces,” Sandor argued. “Our army is immense.”

“It is,” Mr. Forkle agreed.

But he still darkened Gildingham on the map with an ominous tap.

“My gut tells me,” he explained, “that the Neverseen will save any targeted move against Queen Hylde until they’re ready to take down the Council, since the goblins serve as the Councillors’ bodyguards. And before they can take down the Council, they must *also* win over the majority of our people—otherwise their rule will be rejected, and our world will dissolve into rebellion. That’s why each of the Neverseen’s moves has also been designed to make them appear mighty while making our current Councillors look weak and foolish, and caused many in our world to question the Council’s power and authority.”

“But everyone saw Vespera, Ruy, and Gethen cowering under their little force field during the Celestial Festival,” Sophie reminded him. “And abandoning Umber without even bothering to see if she was still alive.”

“Yes, they made a grave mistake there—which is a credit to you and your friends.” He moved closer, placing both hands on her shoulders and bending to her eye level. “I realize how easy it is to see our defeats. But don’t overlook what we’ve achieved. We’ve dulled the effectiveness of each and every one of the Neverseen’s schemes.

And this time? We're going to thwart them much more completely."

All eyes focused on Loamnore, glowing like a beacon on the otherwise dark map.

Glowing like a *target*.

And yet, Sophie still had to ask, "How can you be so certain?"

They'd been wrong about the Neverseen's plans so many times before. In fact, she was pretty sure they'd never actually been *right*.

"I can be certain, Miss Foster, because this time the Neverseen tipped their hand. Taking Mr. Tam was devastating—but not just for us. In fact, it dealt a far larger blow to them. Now we know that shadows will play a role in the next stage of their plan."

"Shadow*flux*," Sophie corrected.

"I'm sure that will be crucial, yes. But I doubt they would limit themselves to one aspect of Mr. Tam's ability when they can utilize the full scope, particularly since Shades are so powerful. So I think it's best if we keep our focus wider and assume that the key will be darkness, in all of its varied forms. And where would darkness be more valuable than an underground city inhabited by creatures who rarely step into the light?"

A tingly sort of energy hummed under Sophie's skin as he moved back to the map and tapped the table with a new rhythm. The pins zoomed in on the dwarven capital, which reminded Sophie of an ant farm—a maze of carefully arranged tunnels snaking deep into the earth and leading to underground plazas and marketplaces, or to the scattered bubble-shaped living quarters. It was somehow both bigger and smaller than she'd been expecting. Grady had told her once that the most recent census showed only three hundred and twenty-nine dwarves on the entire planet—and that was before thirty

went missing, and others were lost in the battle on Mount Everest. But it was strange to see so few homes in Loamnore—especially since their tunnels stretched for miles and miles and miles.

“Okay,” she said, almost afraid to admit that he’d made a decent point. She was getting a floaty feeling in her heart that felt a lot like *hope*—and hope was an emotion that had led them astray far too many times. “Assuming you’re right, how are we supposed to know what the Neverseen are planning to do to the dwarves? Like . . . *specifically*? Because I’m seeing thousands of underground paths, and any of them could be used in an attack.”

“*That* is what I want you and your friends to figure out. You all have extra time while Foxfire remains on hiatus.”

“Uh . . . how are we supposed to do that?”

“By determining how the Neverseen can use shadowflux—and shadows or darkness in general—to weaken the dwarves while bringing further scandal to the Council.”

“Oh, is that all?” she asked, her heart crashing back to reality. “And here I thought you were going to be vague.”

“I think you’ll find that those guidelines narrow the options far more significantly than you’re expecting. Particularly when you also consider the fact that this attack will likely be targeted at you and your friends.”

Sophie’s mouth turned dry, giving her voice a hint of rasp as she asked, “Aren’t we always one of the targets?”

“In a way. But up until this point, they’ve mostly tried to test you or control you. This time, I believe they’ll be aiming to . . . well, I suppose the best way to put it is to ‘crush your spirit’—because their broadcast at the Celestial Festival backfired. Not only did everyone

see members of the Neverseen cower and flee, but they also saw you and your friends stand strong and keep fighting. And that made many in our world begin to see what the Black Swan and I have seen all along: the true future we should be focusing on.”

A fresh set of goose bumps prickled Sophie’s arms. But these ones felt itchier. Almost demanding.

“Yes,” Mr. Forkle told her. “It’s a tremendous responsibility. One that every young generation must learn to carry. Adults may have wisdom and experience. But our youth are bold and brave and willing to fight for what they believe in with a formidable kind of energy. And you and your friends showed everyone precisely how to be a true force for change. So I suspect the Neverseen will try to counter that by putting you in a situation where you will be forced to surrender in a very public way. And I realize that’s not easy to hear—”

“No, it’s fine,” Sophie interrupted, hugging herself to squeeze back some of the queasiness. “Who doesn’t love being told they have an evil band of villains trying to crush their spirit?”

“But they never will,” Flori said, placing her hand over Sophie’s. Her green thumb traced circles across the back of Sophie’s gloved palm as she hummed a soft melody that whispered through the air like warm spring rain.

Sophie closed her eyes, letting the song sink into her mind, washing away some of the panic.

“It’s okay to be afraid, Miss Foster,” Mr. Forkle told her. “I am.”

That didn’t make her feel any better. In fact, it made her wish she could go back to being a little kid, believing the grown-ups in her life would take care of everything.

Flori hummed another verse of the soft melody, letting the

whispery sounds flutter around them before she said, “The trick is to acknowledge your fear and let it fuel you to fight harder.”

“I’m already fighting as hard as I can!” Sophie argued.

“So it’s time to fight *smarter*,” Mr. Forkle told her. “The Neverseen took your friend, and now they’re going to use him to strike at you where you’re most vulnerable. Their plan will center on something that affects you, the Council, *and* the dwarves. If you consider all three goals, I’ve no doubt that you and your friends can determine the shape and direction of the threat we’re facing.”

“Shouldn’t someone also warn King Enki?” Sandor asked, leaning closer to squint at the map.

“I have,” Mr. Forkle assured him. “He’s already taking precautions. But several of the dwarves who defected to the Neverseen were key strategists behind the city’s security. So we’ll definitely have our work cut out for us. But we must rise to the challenge. We cannot let the Neverseen weaken the dwarves. It would bring our world far too close to their ultimate endgame. Plus, the dwarves are a vital resource. Without them, we never would’ve been able to rebuild so quickly after the Neverseen’s attacks.”

“You’ve had a lot of help from my people as well,” Flori reminded him. “Don’t count us out.”

“I haven’t. And I’m sure the Neverseen haven’t either. In fact, I’m certain they’ll strike against the gnomes again when the time is right. That’s why I’ve allowed you—and Miss Foster’s other guards—to be present for this meeting.”

Sandor and Bo both snorted “allowed” under their breath.

Mr. Forkle smiled. “Oh, I assure you—if I didn’t want you in my office, I could cast you out before you could even draw your

weapons. It's my favorite security feature that Tinker designed. But I haven't used it, because I'm counting on you three to make sure your people are ready, in case the Neverseen attempt to weaken your worlds further while they're targeting the dwarves. I'll update the Council as well, and convince them to take their own precautions. And while we're doing all of that"—he shifted back toward Sophie—"I need you and your friends to focus on what we've discussed. I'd recommend starting with Mr. Tam. Think about *his* strengths and *your* weaknesses, since where they overlap likely lies the Neverseen's plan."

Sophie swallowed hard, but it couldn't dislodge the lump in her throat as she forced herself to ask the question she'd been dreading. "So . . . you think Tam's going to do what they want him to? You don't think he'll find a way to resist?"

Mr. Forkle looked away. "I think, if it comes down to it, there are very few things Mr. Tam wouldn't do to protect his sister. And Lady Gisela knows that all too well."

Sophie wished she could argue. But she'd been worrying about the same thing.

Tam had already left the Lost Cities so that Linh wouldn't have to be alone after the Council banished her. And the two of them spent years living in shoddy tents and nearly starving in the Neutral Territories. He even joined the Black Swan mostly for her.

It made him incredibly brave and sweet and noble and . . .

A little scary—at least in his present situation.

"He needs your help," Mr. Forkle told her. "*You* can save Mr. Tam from facing an impossible decision. So I suggest you get to work. Compare what you and your friends each know about him. Then

talk to Lady Zillah and find out everything she's taught Mr. Tam—and everything she knows about shadowflux. I'd also recommend familiarizing yourself with Loamnore. Miss Linh lived there for a brief time, so she might have some ideas about the city's vulnerabilities. And you should ask Nubiti as well. Feel free to share my theories with her—if she hasn't been listening to us already—and see if she can provide any insights. I'll of course arrange a visit between you and King Enki, along with a tour of Loamnore as soon as I can."

Sophie nodded, telling herself to feel relieved as he pounded his fist against the table, making the metal flatten back into a smooth, empty surface. This was the earliest they'd ever had a concrete strategy for stopping the Neverseen—and she hadn't even had to pry it out of him, or follow a bunch of mysterious clues and notes before he trusted her.

This was progress!

But . . . was it *enough*?

And how would her friends feel about focusing on Tam?

She suspected that would *not* go over well, but . . . at least it would give her a perfect excuse not to talk about—

"Wait," she said as the door slid open and Mr. Forkle pulled his pathfinder from his cape pocket. She'd gotten so distracted by the map and his theories about the dwarves and Tam that she'd forgotten the reason she'd asked for the meeting in the first place. "None of this is why I said we needed to talk."

He spun the crystal at the end of the silver wand. "Well, surely you can agree that this is far more important."

It was and it wasn't.

Compared to everything going on, her personal life did rank pretty low.

But . . . she'd waited nine days for this opportunity. She wasn't about to waste it.

"This will only take a minute," she promised, squaring her shoulders and trying to project confidence as she switched to the speech she'd prepared. "I know you haven't wanted to tell me certain things about who I am, and what your plans for me are, and where I come from, and what's happened in my past. And I know you think you're protecting me—but I can handle that stuff now. And I'm worried that the reason we keep failing is because of all of the secrets between us. It makes trusting you really hard sometimes—and it leaves me without some pretty important information. So I think it's time for us to agree that we need to solve all of those mysteries."

She let out a breath.

There.

She'd said it.

Now she needed him to argue that he couldn't possibly tell her *everything*—because this was Mr. Forkle, after all—and then she'd offer a compromise and make him agree to answer at least one question.

They'd made a similar deal before—and she knew exactly what question she'd ask.

But Mr. Forkle didn't follow the script.

"I'm sorry, Miss Foster." His eyes stayed focused on his pathfinder as he locked the crystal into place. "I can't tell you what you want to know."

"You don't even *know* what I want to know," she pointed out.

“Actually, I do. You . . . want to know who your biological parents are.”

Sophie blinked. “How did you—”

“I know you far better than you realize. Which is why I *also* know that you won’t be happy with me when I tell you that, unfortunately, the answer to your question is ‘no.’”

“Why?”

He sighed. “I can’t tell you that, either.”

She gritted her teeth. “I deserve to know.”

“You do. But that doesn’t change the fact that I can’t tell you—because it doesn’t *only* affect you. The ramifications are too huge. I’m sorry, I realize that’s not what you want to hear. But it’s the best I can do.”

His tone made it clear that they’d reached the end of the conversation.

But Sophie couldn’t let it go. She had to make him understand that there were huge ramifications for her, too—even if it meant saying the words she’d been bottling up since that horrible day in Atlantis, when she’d stumbled out of the matchmakers’ office with a fake smile plastered across her face, pretending everything was okay.

“I’m unmatchable.”

It came out as a whisper, but she knew everyone heard her. They all sucked in breaths. Even Bo, who probably didn’t understand the full enormity of that statement.

The elves didn’t discriminate because of skin color or money, like so many humans did. But anyone who was part of a bad match faced scorn for the rest of their lives—and so would their kids. It

mostly happened to the Talentless, since the matchmakers focused on pairing up those with the strongest abilities in the hope that their children would be equally powerful. But the foundation of the matchmaking system was genetics, to ensure that no distant relatives were intermarrying, which could happen all too easily in a world where everyone stayed beautiful and healthy for thousands of years.

So if Sophie couldn't provide the names of the male and female whose DNA she carried, the matchmakers could do nothing except give her a sympathetic pat on the head and send her away in shame.

She honestly wasn't sure how she'd made it out of that room without bursting into tears—and couldn't remember what she'd told her parents to explain why she wasn't carrying a match packet as she rejoined them in the main lobby and headed home.

It was all a horrible, sickening blur—and the nine days that followed had been even more unbearable. She'd had to avoid her friends, afraid they might be able to tell that something had happened, all while her brain kept imagining the many ways her life was about to implode. The only thing that had gotten her through was waiting for this moment—this chance to avert the disaster.

"Please," she said, ready to drop to her knees and beg. "I won't tell anyone and—"

"You'd *have* to," Mr. Forkle interrupted. "The information would only be useful if it were part of your official records. And that cannot happen."

"*But I'm unmatched!*" she repeated, much louder this time. And she couldn't help noticing that he didn't flinch.

That's when she realized . . .

"You knew."

She should've figured that out before.

He was the one who filled out her Inception Certificate and left off that crucial information.

Of *course* he knew what that would mean for her someday.

"What is this?" she demanded. "Another way that Project Moonlark is manipulating my *perspective* so I'll see the follies of our world? Am I supposed to be the poster girl for the dark side of match-making?"

"Of course not! Though, as I recall, you have had quite a few issues with the system. You even considered not participating."

She had.

Matchmaking was disappointingly unromantic, and inherently problematic—but that was before . . .

She couldn't think about it without wanting to throw up. And yet her mind still flashed to a pair of beautiful teal eyes.

Fitz had looked so adorably earnest—so honest—when he'd said the six words that changed everything.

I want it to be you.

The boy she'd liked from the moment he'd found her on her class field trip and showed her where she truly belonged—the boy who was so impossibly out of her league that it was almost laughable—told her he wanted to see her name on his match lists. And whether she agreed with matchmaking or not, she needed her name to be there so they could be together.

But she was unmatchable.

"Please," she said again. "There has to be a way to fix this."

"I wish there were."

The sorrow in his voice sounded genuine.

But that didn't help.

"I realize at your age," he said carefully, "dating and relationships can feel like *everything*. But it's truly only one small fraction of your life—and something you definitely don't need to be rushing into. Perhaps in a few hundred years—"

"A few *hundred* years," Sophie repeated, suddenly despising the elves' indefinite life span with the passion of a thousand fiery suns.

It didn't matter how he was planning to finish that sentence. In a few hundred years, everyone she knew would already be matched up.

Actually, they'd probably all be matched in the next decade. Fitz definitely would be. Even with all the drama surrounding his family, he was still basically elvin royalty. And he was handsome, and charming, and talented, and sweet, and thoughtful, and powerful, and—

"Time is relative," Mr. Forkle said, interrupting her mental swooning. "Things can feel so urgent, and yet be so small in the grand scheme. I realize that's a difficult concept to grasp at such a young age—and I'm sure it's even harder for you, given your upbringing."

"The upbringing you forced on me," she spat back at him.

"Yes, that is one of the few things we didn't give you a choice in. And yet, I suspect you wouldn't trade the time you spent with your human parents and sister."

"I wouldn't," she conceded. "But that doesn't mean I don't deserve to know who my biological family is—especially since not knowing them ruins everything."

“Not everything,” he corrected. “And not *ruins*. It simply *complicates* certain things.”

Sophie shook her head.

It would ruin what she had with Fitz. That was more than enough.

“Please don’t do this to me,” she whispered to him as Flori started humming again, trying to keep her calm.

Mr. Forkle dragged a palm down his face. “I’m not *doing* anything. We’re just . . . at an impasse. And I wish I could change that. But right now, this is where we must stand—and given everything going on, I’m begging you to put this out of your mind. You cannot let it distract you from everything we’ve been discussing. Focus on the dwarves. There’s too much at stake. Too many people we care about who could get hurt. I know you’re smart enough to see that, so I won’t say any more.”

Sophie turned away, counting her breaths and willing herself not to cry. But she could still feel the tears burning behind her eyes as Mr. Forkle tilted her chin back toward him.

“You’re the strongest, most resourceful person I’ve ever known, Miss Foster. And after everything you’ve survived, I know you can survive this.”

He was wrong.

This was officially too much.

But . . .

Maybe he was also right.

She *was* strong and resourceful.

And she wasn’t backing down.

She’d spent the last few years learning how to focus on multiple challenges at the same time. She had multitasking down to an art.

So she let him lead her and her bodyguards into the sunlit meadow and pulled her home crystal out from under her tunic. She had to light leap out of there fast, before he caught a glimpse of the new plan forming in her mind.

If he wouldn't tell her who her genetic parents were, she'd find the answer herself.