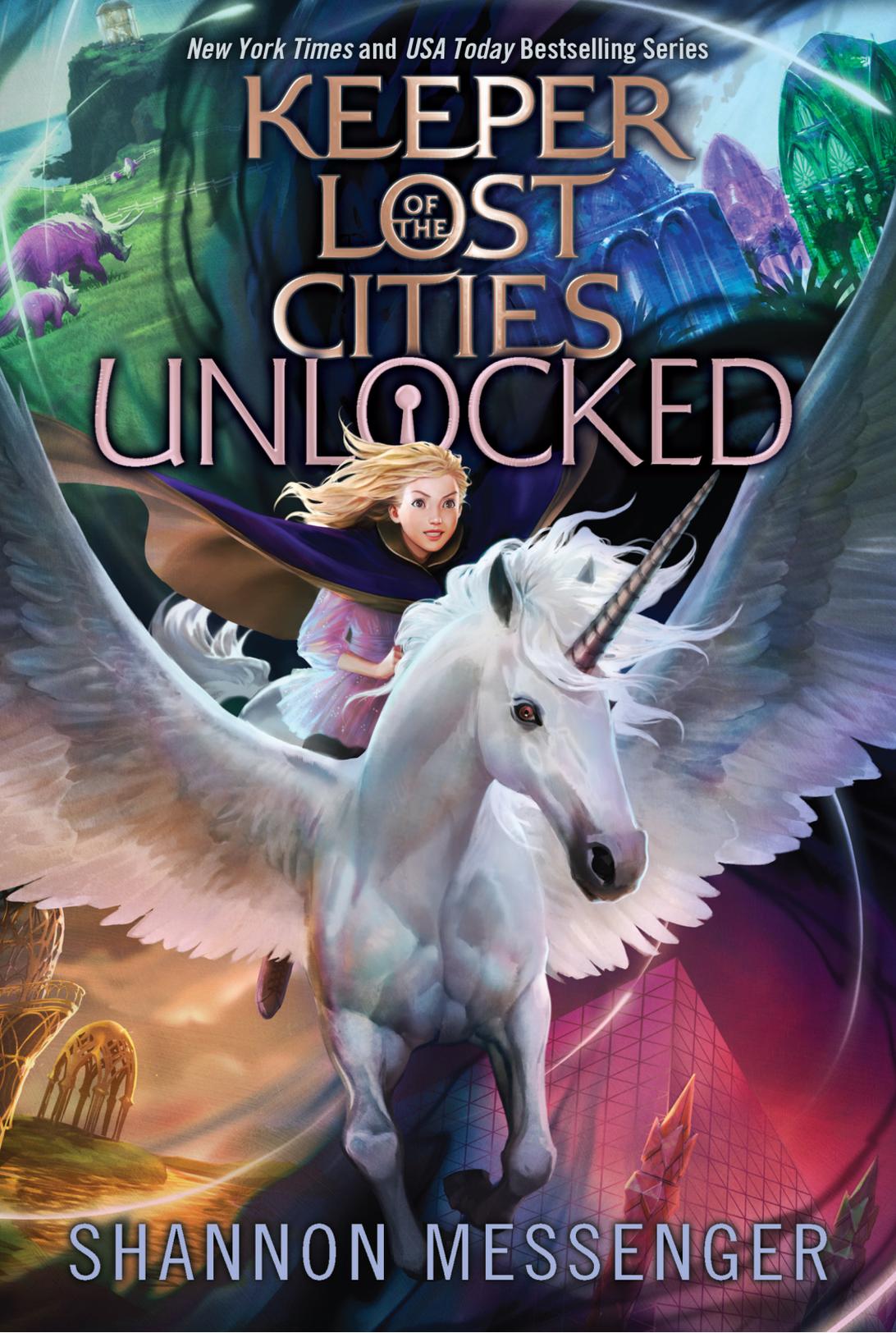


*New York Times and USA Today Bestselling Series*

# KEEPER OF THE LOST CITIES UNLOCKED



SHANNON MESSENGER

# KEEPER OF THE LOST CITIES

UNLOCKED

BOOK 8.5

SHANNON MESSENGER

**Aladdin**

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

- PREFACE -

KEEFE

I CAN'T DO THIS.”

The words felt desperate and terrifying—but Keefe could taste the truth behind them. So he didn't lie or take them back or try to twist them into a joke.

He wanted to.

He missed laughing and pulling pranks and messing around with his friends.

But he wasn't that guy anymore.

He didn't know *who* he was.

All he knew was that he'd changed.

And the powers he'd been given were *much* too dangerous.

He needed to accept that, and make everyone else accept it too.

They were too busy hoping and planning and pretending that everything was okay.

But it *wasn't* okay.

He couldn't control this—not unless he did something drastic.

Something he definitely didn't want to do.

But he would.

He *had* to.

He wasn't giving up.

He was fighting back his own way.

- ONE -  
Sophie

**S**O . . . HOW DO WE ACCESS THE MEMORY?” Sophie asked, pulling free from the deal-sealing handshake to uncover the clear, marble-size gadget that had been pressed between her palm and Councillor Oralie’s.

The tiny blue jewel set into the center of the cache glinted in the afternoon sunlight seeping through the swaying Panakes branches.

Inside was a single Forgotten Secret.

Hopefully filled with the answers Sophie needed.

That was why she’d agreed to work with Oralie, despite barely being able to look at the pretty blond Councillor now that she knew the truth about her.

“Don’t even *think* about telling me we have to wait,” she warned when Oralie’s delicate features pulled into a frown.

Sophie didn’t have time to be patient anymore.

Or cautious.

Or afraid.

She needed to figure out how to help Keefe, then get back to the Healing Center.

“That’s not what I was going to say,” Oralie assured her.

But the crease between her perfectly arched eyebrows deepened, and she kept shifting the way she sat, streaking the skirt of her fluttery pink gown with mud and bits of grass.

“The cache is designed to erase itself if I perform the access sequence incorrectly,” Oralie eventually admitted, “and I’m having a difficult time determining the proper order of the steps.”

“Access sequence?” Sophie repeated. “I thought the memory just needed a password.”

That was what Dex had told her when he was trying to access the secrets hidden in Fintan’s cache—though he’d technically been trying to hack into a fake cache without realizing it at the time.

“The password’s part of it,” Oralie agreed. “But first I have to prove that I’m ‘authorized.’ And no, a Technopath won’t be able to bypass any of the security, if that’s what you’re about to suggest. Even someone as talented as Dex.”

Sophie groaned, wishing she could grab the cache and fling it off one of Havenfield’s cliffs—or maybe at Oralie’s head. But the memory inside had something to do with stellarlune—the term Keefe’s mom had used for the creepy things she’d done to herself and her husband before she got pregnant.

An experiment of sorts.

Designed to make Keefe ready for whatever “legacy” his mom had been planning for him.

And there had turned out to be a second, horrifying step to the process.

Sophie tried everything to stop it, but in the end, all she could

do was watch as Lady Gisela forced Tam to use his ability as a Shade to dissolve the dwarven king's magsidian throne after Keefe had been bound to it—and then ordered a Flasher who called herself Glimmer to blast the ethertine crown that had been placed on Keefe's head. Exposing Keefe to massive amounts of shadowflux and quintessence to trigger . . .

*Something.*

Sophie had no idea what.

Lady Gisela had managed to escape—*again*—without giving any further insights into her son's condition. And Keefe had been unconscious ever since.

But Elwin could tell that Keefe's cells were going through some sort of *transformation*—which was the same horrible word that Lady Gisela kept using to describe what she hoped would happen to her son if he “embraced the change.” And while Elwin seemed convinced that Keefe was simply manifesting a new special ability—that still sounded absolutely terrifying. Especially since Sophie had a feeling that would only be the beginning.

They wouldn't know for sure until Keefe woke up.

*If he—*

She managed to shut down that bleak thought before it could fully form. But she couldn't stop the bigger worries from screaming around her brain like a freaked-out banshee.

*What if Keefe wasn't Keefe anymore?*

*What if he joined the Neverseen for real?*

*What if he turned into—*

“No.”

She said the word out loud to silence all the mental noise.

She'd stayed telepathically connected to Keefe the entire time the shadowflux and quintessence were tearing through his system, and he'd still been *him*.

He'd also been having some very Keefe-like dreams now that he was safely in the Healing Center.

Plus, Keefe was *much* too stubborn to ever let his mom win.

*But Lady Gisela is just as stubborn, her brain had to remind her. And she isn't done with Keefe yet.*

*She'll never be done with him.*

*Not until she gets what she wants.*

*Or someone kills her . . .*

"What are you doing?" Oralie asked as Sophie jumped to her feet, needing to move—pace—something.

"I don't understand why you didn't look up the sequence to open the cache before you came here," Sophie grumbled. "You knew we were going to need it."

Oralie's pink lips flickered with a hint of a smile. "It's not as if there's an instruction manual, Sophie. Quite the opposite, actually. The knowledge was divided into pieces and scattered throughout my consciousness—and sadly, using your telepathy won't help, since false instructions were buried with everything else, and you'd never be able to tell which are which."

"Okay," Sophie said, tugging out an eyelash as she walked a slow circle around the trunk of Calla's Panakes tree. "Then how do we figure it out?"

"We don't—though I appreciate your spirit of teamwork. And I understand your urgency. I feel it too. But I'm still going to need a minute to think."

Sophie gritted her teeth and went back to circling, tapping her fingers against the coarse, braided bark to distract herself.

But one minute turned into two.

Then three.

*Four.*

“You know, for years I’ve had to hear about how perfect and safe your world is supposed to be,” Sophie muttered, kicking the grass. “And yet you guys sure did put a lot of obnoxiously complicated security measures into place.”

“I think you mean *our* world,” Oralie corrected.

Sophie shrugged.

The Lost Cities were her home now—and she wouldn’t ever want to leave them.

But sometimes she felt . . . disconnected.

“You’re not wrong about the contradiction,” Oralie admitted, reaching for a fallen Panakes blossom. “We’ve been playing both sides for far too long. Convincing ourselves that we’re above the problems plaguing the other intelligent species, all while still attempting to prepare for any worst-case scenarios—through rather convoluted methods, I’ll even admit. We wanted to believe that we’re superior. And we are, in certain ways. But . . . I can’t help wondering if things would be different right now if we’d simply accepted from the beginning that the power we have is both our greatest asset and our largest vulnerability.”

“Or maybe things would be different if you stopped trying to control everyone all the time,” Sophie suggested.

*That* was what the whole mess boiled down to.

A ridiculous power struggle.

The Neverseen thought *they* should be in charge—and they’d convinced others to join their cause by pointing out the Council’s mistakes.

Uncovering lies the Councillors had told.

Highlighting injustices they’d allowed.

And the scariest part was: The Neverseen weren’t wrong.

They just had really cruel solutions to all of the problems—at least as far as Sophie could tell. She’d only uncovered tiny fragments of their plans, and she still had no idea how to fit the pieces together.

The Neverseen were too smart to give anything away until they were ready to put their schemes into action.

But Sophie *had* to get ahead of them this time—*had* to stop them from dragging Keefe in any deeper.

Unless she was already too late . . .

“Ruling this planet is no easy task,” Oralie told her. “We do the best we can.”

Maybe they did. But the Council’s “best” didn’t seem to be good enough anymore—assuming it ever had been. And Sophie was tempted to remind Oralie that no one had *asked* the elves to put themselves in charge.

But she needed to stay focused.

“What exactly do you remember from the instructions?” she asked, pointing to the cache.

Oralie stood, holding the tiny crystal up to eye level. “I know it needs my blood, sweat, and tears. I’m just not sure if that’s the right order to give them in. It might be tears, sweat, then blood. Or sweat, tears, then blood. Or sweat, blood, and tears. Or blood, tears, then—”

“Is there someone you can ask?” Sophie cut in. “What about Bronte?”

“Councillor Bronte would not support my decision to come here. Nor would any of the other Councillors. They believe the Forgotten Secrets should remain forgotten.”

“Then why bother storing the memories in the first place?” Sophie countered.

“Because it’s important to have a record *somewhere*, in case of an extreme emergency.”

“Well this—”

“*Isn’t*,” Oralie finished for her. “At least not as far as the rest of the Council is concerned. In fact, several Councillors feel that the uncertainty behind Keefe’s condition would best be managed medicinally—or by containing him.”

Bile soured Sophie’s tongue. “They wouldn’t order Elwin to keep him sedated, would they? Or lock him away in Exile?”

*Or both.*

She couldn’t bring herself to voice the last option, in case it gave the Council ideas.

Exile’s somnatorium was *real*.

Sophie had walked through its disturbingly silent halls.

“I won’t let that happen,” Oralie promised. “But the more information we have about what the Neverseen are planning for him, the better. Why do you think I’m here? I told you, I’m done hiding from the darker truths in our world. I’m ready to face them—even if it means violating my oaths. I just can’t count on any help from the rest of the Council. Particularly because I’m working with you.”

Sophie frowned. “But, I’m a Regent now. And the leader of Team Valiant! If they don’t trust me—”

“This isn’t about trust. It’s about *risk*. Like you said, you’ve become quite valuable to the Council. They’ve finally realized exactly how much they need you. So to put you in danger this way—”

“I’m always in danger!” Sophie pointed to where Sandor stood sentry by Verdi’s pasture—then to where Flori watched them from the edge of the tree line.

She’d gotten so used to being shadowed by bodyguards that she could almost forget they were there—particularly since she was down to only two now that Nubiti was the new queen of the dwarves. Tarina was still ironing things out with her empress after the incident with the illegal troll hive, and Bo was protecting Tam and Linh.

“This is a different level of danger,” Oralie insisted. “You’ve never dealt with a Forgotten Secret before.”

“Uh, pretty sure I have,” Sophie argued, loud enough to make sure Sandor heard the reminder. The last thing she needed was to have him think she was stepping into a new level of uncharted dangerous territory and shift into overprotective-goblin mode. “*Someone’s* cache has to be filled with all of the things Vespera did to get herself locked up in Lumenaria’s dungeon. But the Council didn’t bother coming clean after she escaped, so I got to learn about her crimes the hard way.”

The *very* hard way.

Like, having her human parents captured and tortured after Vespera went back to work on her evil experiments.

And Biana had scars all over her back, arms, and shoulders from when Vespera tried to kill her.

“I suppose you’re right,” Oralie murmured. “But that should

make you all the more cautious. Forgotten Secrets aren't erased simply to protect the sanity of the Councillors. They're often truths that could send our world spiraling into chaos."

"Yeah, well, what else is new?" Sophie's eyes locked with Sandor's, and thankfully he didn't argue.

But he did seem to be gripping the hilt of his giant black sword a whole lot tighter.

Oralie stepped closer. "I'm not telling you this because I'm going back on our deal—or because I'm trying to scare you. I just . . . need to make sure you're *truly* prepared for the turbulent waters ahead. I can't bear having any more regrets when it comes to you."

Sophie rolled her eyes.

The words were probably meant to be touching—but she knew all Oralie was *really* trying to do was allay her own guilt if something bad happened.

Oralie sighed. "I realize you're angry with me, Sophie. And I'm not trying to start another fight. But regardless of what you may think, I do . . . *care* about you. And someday I hope you'll understand the difficult position I—"

"I won't!"

"You *might*. Things feel so much bigger when you're young. So much more absolute. But . . . love isn't as black-and-white as you believe it to be. It comes in many colors, many forms—"

"Yeah, well, I'm pretty sure none of them involve lying to someone for years, or signing your daughter up to be part of a genetic experiment!"

"It can," Oralie whispered, wrapping her arms around her waist, "when that's the only way to *have* a daughter."

The last word sounded different than the others, and for a second, Sophie found herself meeting Oralie's stare and wishing the Black Swan had made her an Empath. Then she would've been able to tell if the sadness and longing she could see in Oralie's eyes were actually real.

But it didn't matter.

"It wasn't the *only* way," Sophie reminded her. "You just wanted to keep your precious position on the Council."

"I did," Oralie agreed, reaching up and tracing her fingers over the jewels in her circlet. "But that isn't just about me. It might've started out that way when I was first elected. But you have no idea what kind of chaos would ensue if I were to leave—especially for a scandal like this."

Sophie opened her mouth to argue, but . . .

She'd unfortunately already come to the same frustrating conclusion.

The Lost Cities were in turmoil, and losing another Councillor could give the Neverseen the opening they needed to finally take over.

That was why Sophie hadn't told anyone the truth about Oralie.

Not even Fitz.

Despite how much the secret had cost her.

Her heart turned sharp and heavy at the reminder, like a lump of shrapnel slowly shredding the inside of her chest.

She'd gotten used to their "breakup"—if that was even the right term for what had happened between her and Fitz. But that didn't mean she was over it. Or that part of her didn't still wish . . .

"I'm sorry," Oralie said, stepping closer. "I never meant to hurt you."

“Well, you have.”

“I know. And . . . I have to live with that.”

Oralie’s voice cracked—and the sound made Sophie’s resolve crack a little too.

But her shrapnel heart snapped her out of it.

Her hands curled into fists. “Yeah, well I get to live with being *unmatchable*. So I win.”

*Worst. Victory. Ever.*

“I’m so sorry, Sophie. Truly.”

Sophie jerked away when Oralie reached for her. “Just stop it, okay? You’re wasting time.”

“Actually . . . I’m not. We needed my tears, didn’t we?” Oralie blinked, showing how glassy her eyes had gotten. “I knew the easiest way to trigger them was to remind myself of how much you hate me.”

“Oh.”

It was the only thing Sophie could think to say.

She was so tired of feeling sorry for people who didn’t deserve her sympathy.

“How do you know that starting with tears is the right order for the cache?” she asked, getting back to a subject that actually mattered.

“Because my mind’s been fixated on a phrase ever since I started trying to piece together the steps. *Truth starts below.*”

“Am I supposed to know what that means?”

“No, it’s a clue I left for myself. And it’s not about the words—though I’m sure I chose them because they sound mysterious enough to catch my attention. The secret’s in their first letters. *T. S. B.* Tears, sweat, then blood.”

“You’re sure?” Sophie had to ask as Oralie reached up to wipe the corners of her eyes.

“Positive.”

Her voice didn’t waver—but Sophie noticed that Oralie held her breath as she smeared her damp fingertip across the curve of the cache.

“Should something be happening?” Sophie asked after several endless seconds.

“Not yet. I’ve only begun the sequence.” Oralie swept the long tendrils of her hair over her left shoulder. “These ringlets are so heavy—they always make my neck glisten.”

“*Glisten?*”

Oralie nodded, and Sophie begrudgingly had to admit that Oralie did look more shimmery than sweaty as she brushed her finger along her hairline and swiped it across the cache—which still didn’t respond.

“Now for the part I’ve been dreading.” Oralie bit her lip as she removed one of the golden pins securing her circlet. “The rational side of me knows I’ll only feel a tiny prick, but . . . I think you must get your needle phobia from me.”

“I’m pretty sure everyone hates needles,” Sophie argued, refusing to feel even the tiniest connection to Oralie.

“I suppose.” Oralie scowled at the sharp point for a beat before she lowered it toward her fingertip—and Sophie looked away until Oralie announced, “All done.”

The cache was streaked with red when Sophie turned back—but nothing else had changed.

“There’s one final step,” Oralie explained. “Now it needs a

password—and I actually have two, in case someone ever tried to force me to do this. One that opens the cache, and one that destroys it.”

“And you’re sure you know which is which?”

“Thankfully I made it easy for myself.” She leaned closer, her breath clouding the crystal as she whispered, “Fathdon.”

Sophie realized that was Councillor Kenric’s last name the same moment the cache flashed glaringly bright and she found herself squinting right at him—or rather, squinting at a small projection of him that was hovering above the glowing orb like a tiny Kenric apparition. A projection of Oralie stood facing him, both of them silhouetted in moonlight, wearing long silver capes with hoods covering their circlets.

“I knew Kenric would be a part of this,” the real Oralie murmured. “He always insisted on being involved in everything I did.”

“But he doesn’t look happy about it,” Sophie noted.

The projections were slightly blurry, and some of the details were a little off with their features, since Oralie didn’t have a photographic memory. But Sophie could still see the scowl on Kenric’s usually smiling face.

“For once, would you please just trust that I know what’s best?” he pleaded, knocking back his hood and tearing his hands through his vivid red hair.

“No! You don’t get to drag me into this and then not tell me what’s going on!” the projection of Oralie argued.

Kenric heaved a sigh. “It doesn’t matter. Your memory is going to be erased anyway.”

“Then that’s all the more reason to keep me informed! The record

in my cache should be a *complete* account of what we're up against, not whatever scattered pieces you feel like sharing. Otherwise, what use will it be if we need to reference it in the future?"

"Exactly!" Sophie said, hoping Kenric listened.

But his projection moved closer and reached for Oralie's hand. "Please, Ora. I need you to trust me on this. Can you feel how serious I am when I tell you that it's absolutely essential to keep everything about Elysian fragmented?"

The projection of Oralie frowned. "That's not the word you had me ask Fintan about."

"I know. And I can't tell you what it means, so don't ask. I shouldn't have mentioned it at all, but . . . I always say too much when I'm with you."

"And yet, here I stand, completely in the dark," the projection of Oralie noted.

"Good. You'll be safer that way."

"Elysian doesn't feel familiar," the real Oralie murmured as the projection of Kenric started to pace.

"Is it a place?" Sophie asked, remembering the myths she'd read back in her old school about the Elysian Fields.

Often there were glimmers of truth behind the stories humans told—remnants from the days when the elves and humans still had a treaty between their worlds. Or pieces of the elves' campaign of misinformation to make their existence sound too silly to be believed.

"I truly have no idea," Oralie admitted. "All of this feels strangely . . . detached. It's like I'm watching someone else's life instead of my own. I always thought accessing a Forgotten Secret would be like recovering any other memory, and after a few

moments my brain would find enough cues to sync it back into my mental timeline. But this doesn't connect to anything."

"Not even to stellarlune?"

Past Oralie must've been thinking the same thing, because her projection asked Kenric, "Does this Elysian thing have something to do with whatever stellarlune is?"

Kenric sighed. "I can't tell you that, either."

"You can and you *will*." The tiny Oralie stalked forward, grabbing his wrist. "You don't get to show up at my door in the middle of the night, beg me to go with you to see a former Councillor—who seemed particularly unstable, by the way—ask him over and over about whatever stellarlune is, even after I told you he wasn't lying when he said he'd never heard of it, and then stand there, gray as a ghou! because you slipped and said something about this mysterious Elysian."

Kenric let out a soft chuckle. "*Gray as a ghou!* You've always had a flair for the dramatic, Ora. It's one of my favorite things about you."

"Stop trying to distract me!"

"But I'm so good at it!" Kenric flashed a smug grin as he stepped closer—so close, the toes of their shoes touched. "I seem to remember you losing your train of thought twice the other day when I wore that gray jerkin with the emeralds on the collar. The one you've always said brings out the flecks of green in my eyes."

He batted his lashes and Sophie had to smile.

But the real Oralie looked ready to cry.

And her projection seemed eager to smack him.

"You're ridiculous," she whisper-hissed, reaching up to make sure her hood still covered her circlet before glancing over her

shoulder. The memory was too shadowy for Sophie to tell where they were, but the silence in the background made it seem like they were alone. “Tell me about Elysian, Kenric! And stellarlune! And anything else you’re investigating! You came to me for help, so let me help!”

“You already have, far more than you know,” he assured her. “Fintan was calmer with you there, and that allowed me to finally slip past his guard.”

“You breached his mind? Why?”

Kenric backed away, resuming his pacing. “The same reason I always breach someone’s mind—but I didn’t find the information I was looking for, in case you’re wondering. That’s probably good news, though. At least this mess is a little more contained than I’d feared. I just wish I could find the source of the leak.”

“I’m getting tired of your vagueness and riddles,” the projection of Oralie warned.

Sophie snorted. “Welcome to my world.”

“The truly strange thing is,” the real Oralie murmured, “I can’t recall any part of the conversation I apparently had with Fintan. And if the Washers erased it, there should be a second jewel in my cache—or this memory should start much earlier. I suppose it’s possible that Kenric washed it himself, but—”

“Kenric was a Washer?” Sophie interrupted.

“One of the best. It was often his job to wash the minds of the other Washers, to make sure they hadn’t inadvertently learned anything from their assignments—but he was under oath to never wash the mind of anyone on the Council, even if they asked him to. And I can’t see him breaking that vow—especially with me.”

“I can, if he thought he was protecting you,” Sophie argued.

“I suppose.” Oralie studied the tiny versions of herself and Kenric, who seemed to have entered into some sort of epic staring contest. “Actually, now that I think about it, there was another time when my mind felt like it does right now. I woke up in my sitting room, and Kenric was there with . . . someone. I can’t remember who—which is strange. I know we weren’t alone, but . . .” She rubbed the center of her forehead, like she was trying to massage the detail loose. “I also have no memory of letting them in. But I remember Kenric teasing me about drinking too much fizzleberry wine. And I *had* indulged in a second glass that night with dinner, so that seemed like a logical enough explanation at the time. But . . . I do also remember thinking that something about his smile felt off. I was just too tired to ask him about it. My head was so . . . fuzzy.” She frowned, rubbing her forehead harder. “I have that same fuzziness now. It’s like . . . trying to feel my way through fog, except there’s nothing on the other side, if that makes sense.”

“Do you think that other memory has something to do with stellarlune?” Sophie asked. “Or Elysian?”

“It could. But let’s not forget that it’s equally possible that I truly did have too much wine.”

Somehow Sophie doubted that. “And you have no idea what Elysian is—not even a guess?”

She wasn’t surprised when Oralie shook her head—but that didn’t make her any less ready to scream, *Just once, couldn’t you guys call it something like “Our Massive Conspiracy to Control the World” and stop with all the fancy words that don’t mean anything?*

“This is such a classic Kenric move!” Oralie huffed, glaring at his

projection. “He always kept me out of anything he’d decided was ‘too intense.’ That’s why there’s only one Forgotten Secret in my cache.”

“Um . . . it sounds like the real reason for that might be because Kenric stole some of your other memories,” Sophie had to point out, which made her want to throw a full-fledged tantrum—complete with kicking and flailing.

Sometimes it felt like all she ever did was try to help fill in someone’s mental gaps after someone else messed with their memories. It was enough to make her start hating Telepaths.

Oralie turned away, stretching out her hand to catch several of the pinkish, purplish, bluish petals raining around them. “I know what you’re thinking, Sophie. But Kenric would never do anything malicious—especially to me. He and I . . .”

She didn’t finish the sentence—but she didn’t need to.

Kenric’s feelings for Oralie had been incredibly obvious, and Sophie had long suspected that the feelings had been mutual.

But she still had to wonder if there’d been a lot more to Kenric than she’d originally realized.

She squinted at his face, wishing she knew more about him.

He’d always been her favorite Councillor—but that had mostly been because he tended to take her side. And that didn’t necessarily mean she should’ve trusted him.

“Is that the end of the memory?” she asked.

“I can’t tell,” Oralie admitted.

The two projections were standing so still that the image almost looked frozen.

“Do you think—” Sophie started to ask, but Kenric’s voice cut her off.

“I’m sorry for dragging you into this, Ora.” He dropped his gaze toward the ground. “I tried to avoid it. But I didn’t know who else to trust.”

Oralie’s projection reached for his hands. “If you *really* trust me, tell me what’s going on.”

For a second he looked tempted. But he shook his head. “I *can’t*. And I swear, I’m doing you a favor by keeping you in the dark. I’m counting down the days until I can have the Washers clean this mess out of my brain.”

“I can tell.” Oralie closed her eyes in the memory. “I feel so much fear and frustration. And . . . is that disgust?”

Kenric pulled his hands away from her. “Let’s just say that sometimes I’m not particularly proud to call myself a Councillor.”

“It’s that bad?” she whispered.

He looked pale when he nodded. “Some days I dream about walking away.”

“You mean resigning?” Oralie clarified.

He hesitated before stepping closer. “I’ve done my share for my people, Ora. I’d have zero problem letting someone else take over. But . . . I won’t go unless you resign with me.”

Everyone sucked in a breath: Sophie, Oralie, Oralie’s projection—even Kenric, as if he couldn’t believe he’d just said that.

But he didn’t take it back.

Instead, he reached for her face, gently cupping her cheek. “I may not be an Empath, but I know I’m not alone in this. Don’t tell me you’ve never wished—”

“Please don’t say it,” Oralie begged—but there was no energy behind her plea.

She even leaned into his hand.

“Ora,” Kenric breathed, sweeping back her hood, “you don’t have to keep fighting this. We wouldn’t be the first to walk away because of—”

Oralie shook her head. “Kenric, don’t.”

His jaw set and his eyes blazed with the same intensity as his voice when he told her, “Because of *love*, Ora. We both know that’s what this is, no matter how hard we pretend otherwise.”

The real Oralie covered her mouth, tears streaking down her face.

Her projection just stood there shaking.

Kenric reached for her other cheek. “Think of how much simpler everything would be if we stopped trying to deny how we feel,” he whispered. “How *happy* we could be. How *free*.” His gaze shifted to her mouth. “We could have our own place. Our own lives. Maybe someday even our own family.”

“Kenric . . .”

He leaned toward her, and her lips parted, like she might let him kiss her. But at the last second she turned her face away.

“I can’t do this.”

He turned her chin back toward him. “Can’t? Or won’t?”

“Both.”

The word seemed to form a wall between them, growing thicker with every silent second that followed.

Kenric tilted his head. “There’s something you’re not telling me.”

“No—”

“There is. I know you too well, Ora. In fact . . . I might even know what it is.”

“There’s nothing to know,” Oralie swore.

Kenric laughed sadly, stepping back. “Empaths are terrible liars.”

“Kenric—”

“That time when you were ill,” he interrupted. “When you wouldn’t let me take you to see any physicians. I stayed by your side the whole night, just to be safe. And there were a few moments when I couldn’t tell if you were asleep or awake. You’d toss and turn and whisper something over and over. Something that sounded . . . a lot like *suldreen*.”

Sophie felt her jaw fall open.

“*Suldreen*” was the proper term for a moonlark.

“That doesn’t mean—” Oralie’s projection tried, but Kenric cut her off.

“I saw how upset you were when Prentice was exiled. And I saw the look on your face when Alden brought us that strand of DNA. Everyone thought it was a hoax or a misunderstanding—but not you. Don’t try to deny it, Ora. I saw you flinch when he used the phrase ‘Project Moonlark.’ And you’ve tried harder than anyone to stop Alden’s search. You think I don’t know that you’re the one who convinced Bronte to place someone in Quinlin’s office to keep an eye on things?”

“So he knew,” Sophie said as both Oralies let out a strangled sob. “He knew you’re my . . .”

“He must have,” the real Oralie whispered. “But I had no idea. He never said . . .” She leaned closer to his projection, shouting, “*Why didn’t you tell me when I’d remember it?*”

Kenric, of course, didn’t answer.

And Sophie studied him, trying to decide if she wanted to laugh or cry or teleport somewhere far, far away.

Another person she'd trusted, who'd hidden things and lied to her every time she saw him.

That was the worst part of being the moonlark—aside from having enemies trying to kill her all the time.

No one was ever quite who they pretended to be.

“What did he mean about you being ill?” she asked, trying to piece together as much of the *real* story as she could.

Oralie pressed her hand against her stomach. “The process of giving the Black Swan what they needed for your genetics turned out to be more involved than I expected—physically *and* emotionally. And Kenric stopped by right after I returned home from the procedure. I tried to hide it from him, but I nearly fainted just answering the door. So he insisted on taking care of me. But . . . I woke up alone. He told me he went home after I finally fell asleep. Apparently not.”

“And you're the reason Quinlin thought his receptionist was reporting on him to the Council?” Sophie verified, remembering the first time Alden brought her to Atlantis. “Not Bronte?”

“It wasn't like Bronte needed any convincing. All I did was suggest that Quinlin and Alden might be overstepping their authority—which they *were*. And then I made sure *I* received the reports on their activities so that I could monitor Alden's progress and also remove any notes about you from the record. I was trying to protect you!”

Sophie had no idea what to do with that information, except to shove it into another mental box of Things She'd Have to Deal with Later.

Her brain was getting pretty cluttered with those.

Someday she'd have to get brave and try to unpack them. But for now, she turned back to the memory, watching Kenric hold up a hand to silence Oralie.

"Don't bother with whatever lie you're about to give," he told her. "We both know I'm right. And . . . I understand. Or I'm trying to, anyway."

"Kenric—"

"And if that's why you have to stay, Ora, then I'm staying too." He tucked one of her ringlets gently behind her ear. "You're going to need all the allies you can get. Especially since someday the Black Swan is going to bring their moonlark into play. You know that, right?"

Oralie's mouth started to form one word. But at the last second she changed to a hushed "yes."

Kenric nodded gravely. "Do you know a lot of other things you aren't telling me?"

"No. I swear, Kenric. That was part of the deal." Her gaze shifted to her feet. "I'm completely separate."

"Good. It'll be easier to protect you that way."

"I don't need your protection!"

"Yes, you do. And you'll have it. I'll be right here by your side, even if I have to pretend that things between us are strictly professional. It's okay," he added, wiping away her fresh tears. "I knew this was how this conversation was going to go. Why do you think I've never said anything before? I just . . . had to say it—at least once. Just to see what would happen. And now seemed like a perfect time, since you won't remember it anyway."

Oralie closed her eyes, letting out a shaky breath. "You can't hide

your feelings, Kenric. They're there—every time I'm around you."

His smile was heartbreaking. "I know. Empaths may be terrible liars—but they always find the deeper truth."

"We're not like Telepaths. We can't bury it—or wash it away," Oralie murmured.

"Very true." Kenric tucked another ringlet behind her ear before he pulled her hood back into place and pressed two fingers against her temple. "Still, it'll be hard for you to understand what you're feeling without the context, right? So how about I help you with that? I think it's time to put all of this behind us, don't you?"

"What are you doing? You're not supposed to—"

The projections blinked away, as if someone had flipped a switch.

In a way, Kenric had.

"Well," Oralie said, curling her fingers around the cache and leaning against the trunk of the Panakes. "That . . . wasn't what I was expecting."

"Me neither," Sophie agreed, trying to figure out which emotion to go with.

The memory had been intense, and fascinating, and devastating—but also ridiculously disappointing, and maddening, and pointless.

*That* was all they had to help Keefe?

A new word that meant nothing, a vague mention of a conversation with Fintan about stellarlune—where he apparently didn't know anything—and Kenric and Oralie's star-crossed love story?

"It's okay," Oralie told her, slipping her cache into a pocket hidden in her gown. "This isn't the dead end you're thinking it is."

"Why? Did it finally trigger the other memories?"

"No. But I know where we can find them. Kenric's cache clearly

has the information we need. That must be why he asked me to give it to you if something happened to him, and why he made sure I had a way to open it. It works differently than mine, since there are multiple memories inside, but the access sequence is actually a little easier.” She held out her hand. “I’ll show you.”

Sophie’s heart dropped into the sloshiest part of her stomach.

Oralie stepped closer, taking Sophie by her shoulders. “Please tell me the panic I’m feeling isn’t because you lost Kenric’s cache.”

Oh, but it was so much worse than that.

Sophie stared at her boots, knowing she had no choice but to explain the whole miserable mess—from Keefe stealing the cache away from her and using it to bribe his way into the Neverseen, to him taking it back when he escaped and then finding out that he’d actually stolen a fake.

Oralie tightened her grip on Sophie’s shoulders. “How could you not tell me about this sooner?”

“Uh, the Council hasn’t exactly been super supportive and friendly, remember?” Sophie argued.

“I have. And I could’ve helped you get it back!”

“How?”

“I . . . don’t know,” Oralie admitted. “But that doesn’t mean I wouldn’t have found a way, or that you were right to keep this a secret!”

She had a point.

But Sophie wasn’t in the mood to apologize.

Oralie dropped her hands and stepped back, letting out a long, heavy breath. “This has to stop, Sophie. We have to start working *together*. No more secrets. No more lies. You don’t have to like me

or forgive me—but you do have to trust me. And I’ll do the same for you. There’s too much at stake—and not just for Keefe. I don’t know what Elysian is, or what it has to do with stellarlune, but the fear I can now remember feeling in Kenric was unlike anything I’ve ever experienced from him. He was always calm and collected, even under incredibly fraught circumstances. So for him to be *that* worried . . .” Her voice hitched and she turned away. “We have to find his cache—now.”

“Okay, but *how*?” Sophie repeated.

Oralie stood taller, smoothing her gown. “I suppose we should start with you telling me everything you’ve already tried. Maybe that’ll help us spot something you overlooked.”

“We haven’t really tried anything,” Sophie reluctantly admitted. “There were too many other things going on. I did think about asking Fintan when I met with him, but our deal only allowed me to ask him one question, and there was something else I needed to know more. Plus, I’m sure the Neverseen moved the caches after he was captured, so anything he could’ve told me would be useless anyway. But . . . I guess we could try making another deal with him just in case—or wait. What about Glimmer? You guys have her in custody, right?”

“In a way, yes. We’ve placed her at Tiergan’s house and made it clear that she’s not allowed to leave—and Bo has been tasked with making sure she’s constantly supervised. But . . . we’ve yet to schedule her Tribunal. She’s being cooperative enough that we don’t want to risk changing her attitude.”

Sophie’s jaw tightened. “Cooperative *enough* isn’t the same as cooperative! Has she told you anything new about the Neverseen?”

Like where any of their hideouts are, or any insights into their plans, or—”

“She’s answered all of our questions honestly,” Oralie assured her. “I’ve monitored her reactions closely during our conversations. But . . . so far, she hasn’t shared anything particularly useful. Then again, neither has Tam. And neither did Keefe, after he escaped, as I’m sure you remember. The Neverseen are incredibly cautious with what they allow their members to know. And there’s been no indication that Glimmer’s holding anything back from us—at least not beyond her name and what she looks like.”

“She still hasn’t taken down her hood?”

“She says she doesn’t feel safe—and yes, we *could* force her to,” Oralie added before Sophie could make that exact suggestion. “But the Council feels she’ll be more useful to us if we make her a *willing* ally—and I agree. So we’re giving her a little space—a little time—to see if she’ll choose to trust us before we try anything more drastic.”

Sophie opened her mouth to argue—and realized she had no idea what she wanted to say.

She’d watched Glimmer *voluntarily* help Lady Gisela with her dangerous plans for Keefe—and heard Keefe’s mom champion Glimmer’s loyalty.

*But.*

Glimmer had also been the one to turn on Lady Gisela in Loamnore and set Tam free from the bonds that had been controlling him.

*And yet . . .*

Glimmer was the one who put those bonds on his wrists in the first place.

They also hadn’t figured out how Lady Gisela had escaped.

Given her injuries, she would've needed *someone's* help—and while it was possible that a few dwarves remained loyal to her, it was also *just* as possible that Glimmer was trying to do exactly what Keefe had attempted when he ran off and joined the Neverseen, and was pretending to switch sides to try to take down her enemies from the inside out.

Tam seemed to trust her, though . . . and he barely trusted anybody.

So basically, Sophie had no idea what to believe.

"I want to meet with her," she decided, wishing she'd demanded it sooner.

She'd lost so many days sitting by Keefe's side in the Healing Center.

And yet, she needed to get back to him as soon as possible.

"I should be able to make that arrangement," Oralie agreed after a second. "But we need to keep pursuing other leads as well. There's a good chance that Glimmer knows nothing—or that what she knows is now outdated, just like Fintan."

"Okay, but *what* leads?" Sophie hated the whine in her voice, but she was done convincing herself they had something to go on when they didn't.

Oralie chewed her lip, pressing so hard that her teeth left tiny dents. "Well . . . do you think you can find Alvar again?"

The name hit like a thunderbolt, stirring up enough anger, sorrow, and regret to make Sophie dizzy.

"I don't even know if he's still alive," she mumbled.

The last time she'd seen Alvar, he'd looked . . . *grim*.

That'd been one of the reasons why she and Keefe were willing to

let Alvar escape in exchange for a little information. The risk of him hurting someone before his time was up had seemed pretty small.

“Still, I think it’s worth trying to track him down,” Oralie told her. “Maybe Fitz or Biana would know some places he might go to die in peace.”

“I suppose I can ask them,” Sophie said, feeling ready to vomit just thinking about it.

Biana might not handle it *that* badly.

But Fitz?

Fitz had the *worst* temper.

Especially when it came to anything to do with his brother.

But . . . Alvar was a Vanisher. And he’d already admitted that he’d used his ability to sneak around the Neverseen’s hideouts, trying to gain leverage in case he ever needed it. So he might know something about the caches.

Or maybe there was something he hadn’t told them about stellar-lune.

He might’ve even heard of Elysian.

“I’ll talk to Fitz when I go back to the Healing Center,” Sophie promised, reminding herself that they couldn’t afford to waste any time.

And maybe because she was dreading that conversation so very much, it took her longer than it should have to realize that the crisp, accented voice shouting inside her head wasn’t just a flashback from her memories.

*SOPHIE!*

*SOPHIE!*

*SOPHIE!*

*FITZ?* she transmitted back, stumbling over her feet when he responded with a brain-splittingly loud *FINALLY!*

*WHAT'S WRONG?* she asked. *IS KEEFE OKAY?*

If something happened . . .

*HE'S FINE*, Fitz assured her. *BETTER THAN FINE. THAT'S WHY I REACHED OUT. I FIGURED YOU'D WANT TO KNOW THE GOOD NEWS RIGHT AWAY.*

He paused long enough that she would've clobbered him if he'd been closer.

Then he told her, *KEEFE'S AWAKE.*



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