



KEEPER
OF THE
LOST
CITIES
EVERBLAZE

BY SHANNON MESSENGER

PREFACE

THE MIRROR SLIPPED FROM SOPHIE'S hands, landing on the petal-covered carpet with the softest thud.

Both sides of the glass survived the crash without cracking. But inside, Sophie shattered.

She kept a smile plastered across her lips as she listened to the rest of the story, searching for the tiniest detail or clue that would rule out the terrifying possibility.

But by the end she knew.

All this time.

All these wasted, hopeless days.

Her kidnapper had been right in front of her.

Watching.

Waiting.

Hiding in plain sight.

All the signs had been there. She'd just been too blind to see them.

And now, it was too late.

ONE

WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?"
Keefe shouted over the howling wind
and the roaring sea. "Don't tell me
the great Sophie Foster is afraid."

"I'm just trying to concentrate!" Sophie shouted back, wishing her voice didn't sound so shaky.

Not that she could fool him.

As an Empath, Keefe could feel the terror coursing through her veins like a herd of stampeding mastodons. All she could do was tug out an itchy eyelash—her nervous habit—and try not to think about how very far down the ocean was.

"You *should* be afraid," Sandor told her in his strange, squeaky voice. He placed a gray gobliny hand on Sophie's

shoulder and pulled her back from the edge of the cliff. “There has to be a safer way to teleport.”

“There isn’t.”

Most of the time Sophie was grateful to have the constant protection of a burly bodyguard—especially since her kidnapers had proven they could find her anytime, anywhere.

But sometimes she had to take risks.

She shrugged off Sandor’s hand—which took quite a lot of effort, considering he was seven feet tall with biceps like giant boulders—and inched forward, reminding herself that she liked teleporting better than light leaping. Despite the nexuses she had clamped on each wrist, or the force fields they created to hold her body together during a leap, she’d faded too many times to truly feel safe.

Still, she wished free-falling wasn’t an essential part of teleporting.

“Want me to push you?” Keefe offered, laughing as Sophie jerked away from him. “Come on, it’ll be fun—for me, at least.”

Dex snorted behind them. “And *he* gets to go with you today.”

“Uh, more like *she* gets to go with *me*,” Keefe corrected, flashing his trademark smirk. “Go on, tell Dex who the Council contacted first.”

“Only because your dad’s in charge of arranging visits to the Sanctuary now,” Sophie reminded him.

“Eh, firsties is still firsties. Just admit it, Foster. You need me.”

Sophie wished she could argue, but unfortunately the

Council *did* want Keefe to go with her. Apparently Silveny was having some sort of trouble at her new home in the elves' special animal preserve, and since Sophie and Keefe each had a connection with the precious alicorn, the Council had asked *both* of them to head to the Sanctuary immediately.

The Councillors had to be pretty concerned if they were willing to rely on Keefe. . . .

"I'm sorry, Dex," Sophie said, trying not to worry. "You know I'd bring you if I could."

Dex smiled—but not enough to show his dimples—as he went back to playing with the lock she'd asked him to open.

Sophie hadn't wanted to tell him she was going with Keefe, afraid it would make Dex feel left out again. But with Grady off on a classified assignment, and Edaline helping rescue a verminion—a rottweiler-size, purple, hamsteresque creature—before humans found it, Sophie needed a Technopath to get past the Cliffside gate.

"If it makes you feel better, Sandor's not allowed to come either," she added, regretting the words as Sandor reeled on them.

"Yes, and it's completely absurd! I'm supposed to be protecting you—not banned from entering because of arbitrary new rules!"

"Hey, even my dad's not allowed to go with us. But don't worry"—Keefe draped an arm across Sophie's shoulders—"I'll take care of her for you."

Sophie wasn't sure who groaned louder, her or Dex.

Sandor grabbed Keefe's shoulders, lifting him off the ground. "If I find even one scratch on her—"

"Whoa, easy there, Gigantor," Keefe said, kicking the air, trying to squirm free. "I'm not going to let anything happen to her. But let's not forget that this is Sophie we're talking about. Odds are, we're going to need an Elwin visit."

Even Dex had to laugh at that one.

Sophie glared at all of them.

It wasn't her fault she'd set a record number of visits to the Healing Center at school, plus a ton of additional house calls from Elwin. She didn't choose to have a deadly allergy, or genetically enhanced abilities she couldn't always control. And she definitely didn't ask to have a group of rebels trying to kill her—which was probably why she should listen to Sandor and not leave his sight.

"We'll be fine," she promised, tucking her blond hair behind her ears and trying to sound more confident than she felt. "I can teleport us directly inside the Sanctuary, and security's been tripled since Silveny moved in."

"And you will come *straight* home afterward," Sandor added, waiting for Keefe to nod before setting him down. "I want you back here in an hour."

"Aw, come on," Keefe whined as he adjusted his dark blue cape. "We haven't seen Silveny in two weeks."

Sophie smiled.

She never would've guessed that Keefe could get so attached to a sparkly, winged horse. But he seemed to miss Silveny as much as she did. Maybe more, since he didn't get stuck with a head full of exuberant alicorn transmissions every time he saw her.

Silveny was the only creature that Sophie's unique telepathy couldn't block, probably because the Black Swan had modeled Sophie's genetics off an alicorn's DNA when they "created" her—a fact she was less than thrilled about. Her friends had assured her they didn't think it was weird, but she still felt like "the horse girl."

"You know how panicky Silveny can be," she reminded Sandor, trying to stay focused on the bigger problem. "It's going to take a few hours to calm her down."

Sandor grumbled under his breath. "Fine. You have until sunset—but if you're late, I'm holding you responsible, Mr. Sencen. And trust me when I say you do not want that to happen."

"Fear the wrath of Gigantor—got it." Keefe dragged Sophie back to the edge. "Let's do this!"

"I guess I'll see you at school on Monday," Dex mumbled, staring at the ground as he dug out his home crystal. "I reset the mechanism to make the lock open with your DNA, so you probably won't need me anymore."

"I'll always need you, Dex," Sophie told him, blushing as she quickly added, "you're my best friend."

“And dude, I’m telling you,” Keefe jumped in. “When you’re finally ready to go public with your ability—which you seriously need to get cracking on, by the way—we *have* to team up. We could break into Dame Alina’s office and fill it with dinosaur poop. Or sparkly alicorn poop! Or we could—”

“And this is who you’re entrusting your safety to?” Sandor interrupted, looking like he wanted to strangle Keefe again.

“I can take care of myself,” Sophie reminded him, tapping her forehead. “Inflictor, remember?”

She might have mixed feelings about her rare ability to inflict pain on people, but it did come in handy if the rebels attacked.

“So we ready?” Keefe asked, swooping his arm to mime them diving off the edge.

Sophie’s mouth went dry.

“You got this, Foster. Stop doubting yourself.”

She nodded, trying not to look down as she asked, “Do you remember how teleporting works?”

“Well, last time we were kinda falling to our death and stuff, so it’s a little blurry. But I’m pretty sure I just cling to you and scream like a banshee while you tear a crack into the universe, right?”

“Something like that. We go on three.”

Sandor repeated his objections as they both bent their knees.

“One,” Sophie counted, squeezing Keefe’s hand so hard her knuckles cracked.

“Two.”

She gave herself just slightly longer than a second before she closed her eyes and whispered the final command.

“Three.”

The word was still on her lips as they both launched off the cliff.

Keefe whooped and hollered and flailed, but Sophie stayed quiet, trying to tune out everything except the warmth building in her mind and the adrenaline rushing through her veins.

Down down down they fell, until Sophie could feel the salty mist spraying her cheeks. But just when she was about to scream, something clicked inside her mind, and she channeled the burning mental energy out into the sky.

Thunder clapped as a crack formed in the air beneath them, and they dropped straight into the darkness.

Time and space didn't exist in the void. There was no up or down. No right or left. Just the pull of the force and the warmth of Keefe's hand. But Sophie knew that all she had to do was think about where she wanted to go and they'd be free.

The Sanctuary, she thought, picturing the lush meadows and sprawling forests she'd seen in pictures. Her photographic memory could recall every vivid detail, right down to the tiny drops of mist that coated every petal and leaf, sparkling like glitter in the sun.

“You with me, Foster?” Keefe called, when no exit appeared.

“I think so.”

She squeezed her eyes tighter, picturing the hollowed out mountains that shielded the Sanctuary from the rest of the world, and the animals in every shape and color wandering through the pastures. She even tried imagining herself standing with Keefe in a meadow, watching Silveny soar above them with gleaming silver wings.

But when she opened her eyes, all she saw was black—thick and suffocating and inescapable.

Panic closed off her chest and Sophie gasped for breath, fighting to concentrate on the Sanctuary with the full power of her mind.

A migraine flared, so intense it felt like her brain was cracking. But the pain wasn't nearly as terrifying as the realization that came with it.

They were trapped in the void.

TWO

CALM DOWN, WE'LL FIGURE THIS out," Keefe promised as Sophie clutched her head and groaned from the migraine. "Are you doing anything different?"

She took a slow, deep breath and tried to think through her panic. "No—I can picture exactly where we need to go. But it's like my mind hits a wall when I try to take us there."

"Have you tried taking us somewhere else?" Keefe asked. "Maybe there's some sort of security around the Sanctuary to keep Teleporters away."

Sophie doubted that, since she was the only elf who could teleport. But it was worth a try.

She just couldn't think of anywhere else to go. Her mind

was racing a million directions, and they all ended in a blank.

“How about home?” Keefe asked. “Can you take us home?”

An image flashed in Sophie’s mind, so sharp and clear it made her eyes water. Or maybe the tears were for the narrow crack that finally split through the darkness. She had just enough time to tighten her grip on Keefe’s hand. Then the air filled with the boom of thunder as they blasted out of the void.

They hit the ground hard, tumbling across sloshy grass before landing in a heap. Sophie sat up first, untangling herself from Keefe’s arms as she stared at the gray, overcast sky.

“Uh . . . this isn’t Havenfield,” Keefe said, squinting at the narrow street lined with plain, square houses.

“I know.” Sophie rallied her concentration, imagining an invisible barrier wrapping around her head to shield herself from the voices pummeling her brain. She’d forgotten how loud human thoughts could be. “This is San Diego.”

Keefe scrambled to his feet. “You teleported us to a Forbidden City? Okay. That. Is. Awesome! Don’t get me wrong—I could do without the whole almost-getting-trapped-in-the-endless-black-nothingness thing. But this is epic! I mean, that’s a human!”

He pointed across the street, to a mom in a bright blue tracksuit, jogging with her baby in a stroller.

“Yeah, and she can probably hear us,” Sophie whispered.

Surely everyone must’ve noticed the teenagers in strange

clothes who fell out of the sky. But the few people outside weren't even glancing their way, too busy walking their dogs or checking their mail.

"I don't think they know we're here," Keefe said, pointing to a small black orb nestled in an overgrown daisy bush. There was another next to the trunk of the giant sycamore in the center of the yard. And three more along the path.

Obscurers.

Sophie had only seen the light-and-sound-bending gadgets once before, in the hands of her kidnappers when they ambushed her and Dex on a bridge in Paris.

One of them was the same blond elf who'd tried to snatch her months earlier, posing as a human jogger on the very street she was standing on.

She walked to the spot where she'd faced him, hoping it might help her remember something new. But all she could see was his face—and Alden had already entered his image in the Council's database, which was supposed to have a record of every elf ever born.

No match had been found.

He was a ghost. Only real when he jumped out of the shadows, like the rest of the rebels in their dark hooded cloaks with a creepy eye in a white circle sewn onto the sleeve.

"Maybe we should go," Sophie said, glancing over her shoulder, half expecting to spot the rebels jogging toward them.

"Are you kidding? I've been dying to see where the

Mysterious Miss Foster grew up.” Keefe turned toward her weathered old house. “It’s . . . small.”

Compared to the crystal mansions of her new world, it was practically a hovel. But humans weren’t given a birth fund, like elves were. They didn’t get to start their lives with more money than they could ever possibly need.

“It smells weird too,” Keefe decided. “What is that?”

“Smog, I think.”

She’d forgotten how sour human air tasted. It made her not want to breathe. And the spots of oil staining the street and bits of litter in the gutters made her almost embarrassed to admit she used to live there.

And yet, it was the first place she’d thought of when Keefe had said “home.”

A lump caught in her throat as she made her way to the front door. Of course it was locked—and the shutters on the windows were closed tight. But one had a crooked blind, and when Sophie peeked through, she could see that the house had been gutted, right down to the concrete slab and the insulation in the walls.

She shouldn’t have been surprised. She knew her family had been relocated—and she’d already seen where the elves had stored all her old things in an unmarked building in Mysterium, one of the smaller Elvin cities.

But staring at the empty shell of her old life made it seem like all her memories had just been a dream. There was nothing left to prove any of it had been real.

Unless . . .

She rushed to the top step on the path, dropping to her knees where her dad's messy writing was still etched into the concrete.

W. D. F.

E. I. F.

S. E. F.

A. R. F.

She traced her fingers over her initials. "They didn't erase me."

Keefe squinted at the sloppy letters. "Does that say 'elf'?"

"No, that's an *I*. Emma Iris Foster. My dad was William David Foster, and my sister was Amy Rose Foster. I don't think my parents realized her initials spelled 'arf' until it was too late. Not that it matters anymore."

Now they were Connor, Kate, and Natalie Freeman.

Sophie wasn't supposed to know their new names. But the Black Swan had given them to her, and she'd been careful not to let anyone know she knew.

"So this is where Fitz found you?" Keefe asked. "I always wondered where he was disappearing to on his 'classified assignments'—and I would've found a way to follow him if I'd known he was off chasing girls."

"He wasn't *chasing* me," Sophie said, feeling her face heat up. "Well . . . he did have to chase me the first time we met. But he was freaking me out."

“Fitz is pretty terrifying.”

“Hey, when you’ve been hiding a secret ability for seven years and a total stranger outs you in the middle of a museum, you run. No matter how cute he is.”

She wanted to clamp her hands over her mouth as soon as the words left her lips, but that only would’ve made it worse.

All she could do was turn bright red and wait for Keefe to tease her.

He cleared his throat. “What about that other boy? The one who disappeared? Was that here?”

“I think so.”

Part of her hated that Keefe knew her secrets—most of them, anyway. But she’d had to tell him when they were working together to save Alden, and Keefe would never let her forget it. Not that she could remember much about the mysterious disappearing boy.

She knew he had to be important because she had a blurry memory of him vanishing when she was five, *years* before Fitz found her and showed her she was an elf. And she could remember him wearing a blue bramble jersey, a game only elves played. It was also right around the time Mr. Forkle triggered her telepathy, so there had to be a connection.

But the Black Swan had torn the pages out of her journal and wiped the memory out of her mind, save for the few vague details she’d managed to recover.

“He stood right here,” she said, moving closer to the sycamore and running her fingers along a branch.

He must’ve been taller than she’d realized. Not really a boy at all. More like a teenager. And there was something else—a detail so close she could feel it prickling her consciousness. But no matter how hard she concentrated, she couldn’t reach it.

“Hey, no need to punish the innocent plant life,” Keefe said as she kicked the tree. “I’m sure the Black Swan will tell you everything soon.”

Sophie wished she could believe him. She’d thought the Black Swan would be working with her now, especially since she’d risked her life to let them heal her abilities. But two weeks had passed since she’d fled their hideout during the rebels’ attack, and she hadn’t heard a peep. Not a note. Not a clue. Not even the slightest sign that they were still watching her.

She turned to the pale blue house next door, where Mr. Forkle used to sit every day, looking bloated and wrinkled in his ruckleberry-induced disguise. He spent twelve years sitting in the middle of his lawn, playing with his silly gnomes, so he could keep an eye on her. Now all that was left were a few weathered figures, peeking through the weeds with their tiny, ugly faces.

“What are those supposed to be?” Keefe asked as he followed her over to the planter.

“Garden gnomes.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“You should see what humans think elves look like. They give us bells on our shoes and pointy ears—though I guess they’re right about the ears.”

Sophie still wasn’t thrilled that her ears would grow points as she aged. But at least she wouldn’t have to worry about it for a few thousand years, thanks to the elves’ indefinite lifespan.

Keefe laughed as he squatted to get a closer look at the tiny statues with pointy hats. “Okay, I have to take one of these home. My agriculture Mentor will pee his pants.”

“Wait,” Sophie said as Keefe reached for a gnome that was sitting on a rainbow-colored mushroom. “What if it’s a clue?”

There was no rhyme or reason to the way the gnomes lined up, but something felt *familiar* about the arrangement. She let her eyes go out of focus, and as the shadows blended into a dark swirl, the memory slowly surfaced.

“Cygnus!”

“What’s a Cygnus?” Keefe asked as she dropped to her knees and started to dig in the planter.

“A constellation. Each gnome is one of the stars. We call them Aquello, Fuschaire, Rosine, Grisenna, Sapphilene, Scarletina, Nievello, Gildere, and Peacerre—but humans call them Cygnus.”

“Okay Miss I’ve-memorized-all-the-stars, no need to show off. And I still don’t see why you’re burrowing like a dwarf.”

“Because Cygnus means ‘swan,’” Sophie explained as she scooped out another handful of dirt. “And the constellation is

made up of ten stars. But there are only nine gnomes. So I'm checking where the tenth star would be."

Slimy mud squished under her nails, but Sophie kept digging. After another minute her fingertips brushed something cold and smooth.

"It's . . . a bottle," Keefe said as she unearthed a tiny green vial and wiped the crystal clean on the grass.

"And a note," Sophie added, removing the stopper and tipping the bottle until a curl of paper slid free.

Keefe snatched the note before she could touch it. "Someone *not* covered in swamp sludge should read that."

He had a point.

She wiped her hands on the grass as Keefe frowned at the note. "What?" she asked.

"You're not going to like it."

"I usually don't." The Black Swan could be annoyingly vague with their clues. But she was happy to have them back in touch. Or, she was until Keefe showed her the message.

Wait for instructions and stick to the plan.

"They could've at least made it rhyme again," he said, stuffing the note back into the bottle. "And what plan?"

Sophie took the bottle and sniffed the nozzle, gagging at the familiar salty smell.

It was the same green bottle she'd drunk an entire ounce of

limbium from—and almost died in the process, thanks to her allergy—so she'd be able to heal minds again.

“Prentice is the plan,” she told Keefe, rubbing the star-shaped scar on the back of her hand. Mr. Forkle had injected her with tweaked human medicine to stop the allergic reaction, and the needle wound had never gone away. “They’re telling me to wait until they decide it’s time to heal him.”

“Yeah, well I still think they could’ve rhymed. *Wait for instructions and stick to the plan. Now get home safe as fast as you can!*”

Sophie was too disappointed to laugh.

She definitely wanted to heal Prentice. But she didn’t want to *wait*.

Prentice had been a Keeper for the Black Swan, and thirteen years ago he’d let his mind get broken in a memory break to keep Sophie’s existence secret from the rest of the elves. She hated knowing he was locked in a tiny cell in Exile, moaning and drooling and waiting for her to pull him out of the darkness.

Plus, every day that passed increased the chance that Alden would shatter again. His guilt over his role in Prentice’s memory break had already broken his mind once—and even though Sophie had healed him, the only way to ensure his safety would be to bring Prentice back.

But the Councillors were still deciding if they were going to allow Prentice to be healed. And apparently the Black Swan were content to sit back and wait.

“Hey—how did they even know we’d come here?” Keefe asked as Sophie shoved the bottle into her pocket a little harder than she needed to. “I mean, they’ve pulled off some crazy things—but I doubt even they could guess you’d have trouble teleporting and accidentally bring us to your old house instead of your new one.”

“No,” Sophie agreed, hating that the only new note the Black Swan had given her probably wasn’t new at all. “They must’ve just assumed I’d come here eventually.”

Still, she had a more pressing problem to deal with than the Black Swan being stubborn—again.

Neither she nor Keefe were old enough to have their own pathfinders, so they’d have to get to a Leapmaster—a gadget made of leaping crystals—in order to leap to the Sanctuary.

“Do you have your home crystal with you?” she asked Keefe.

“Yeah. Why?”

“It’s not safe to teleport until I figure out what went wrong. It’s also not like there’s a cliff to jump off. And if we go back to Havenfield, Sandor will never let us leave—especially now that we can only leap outside the Sanctuary gates and wait to be let in.”

Keefe stared at his feet, looking about as unexcited by this idea as Sophie felt. His father definitely belonged on her list of People She Liked To Avoid.

“Silveny needs us,” she said, reminding herself as much as him.

“I know. But . . .”

“What?” she asked when he didn’t finish.

“I . . . don’t bring friends home.”

He fidgeted with the pin clasping his cape—the Sencen family crest. Two jeweled hands holding a candle with an emerald flame. His father had only given it to him a few weeks ago, even though most kids wore their family crest their whole lives.

“Okay,” Sophie said slowly. “I guess we’ll go back to Havenfield, then. If we run straight for the Leapmaster we might be able to get out of there before Sandor can stop us.”

“No, we won’t.”

Probably not. Sandor’s goblin supersenses would detect them the second they arrived.

“It’s still worth a try.” She dug out her home crystal—a pendant with a single facet—and held it up to the light.

Keefe glared at the beam refracting toward the ground. “This is stupid.”

He pulled out his own home crystal and created another light path.

Sophie didn’t have to be an Empath to feel the tension in his grip, or the way his fingers shook as they laced together with hers.

Her hands were shaking too.

But neither of them said anything as they stepped into the light. Then the warm, feathery rush pulled them both away.