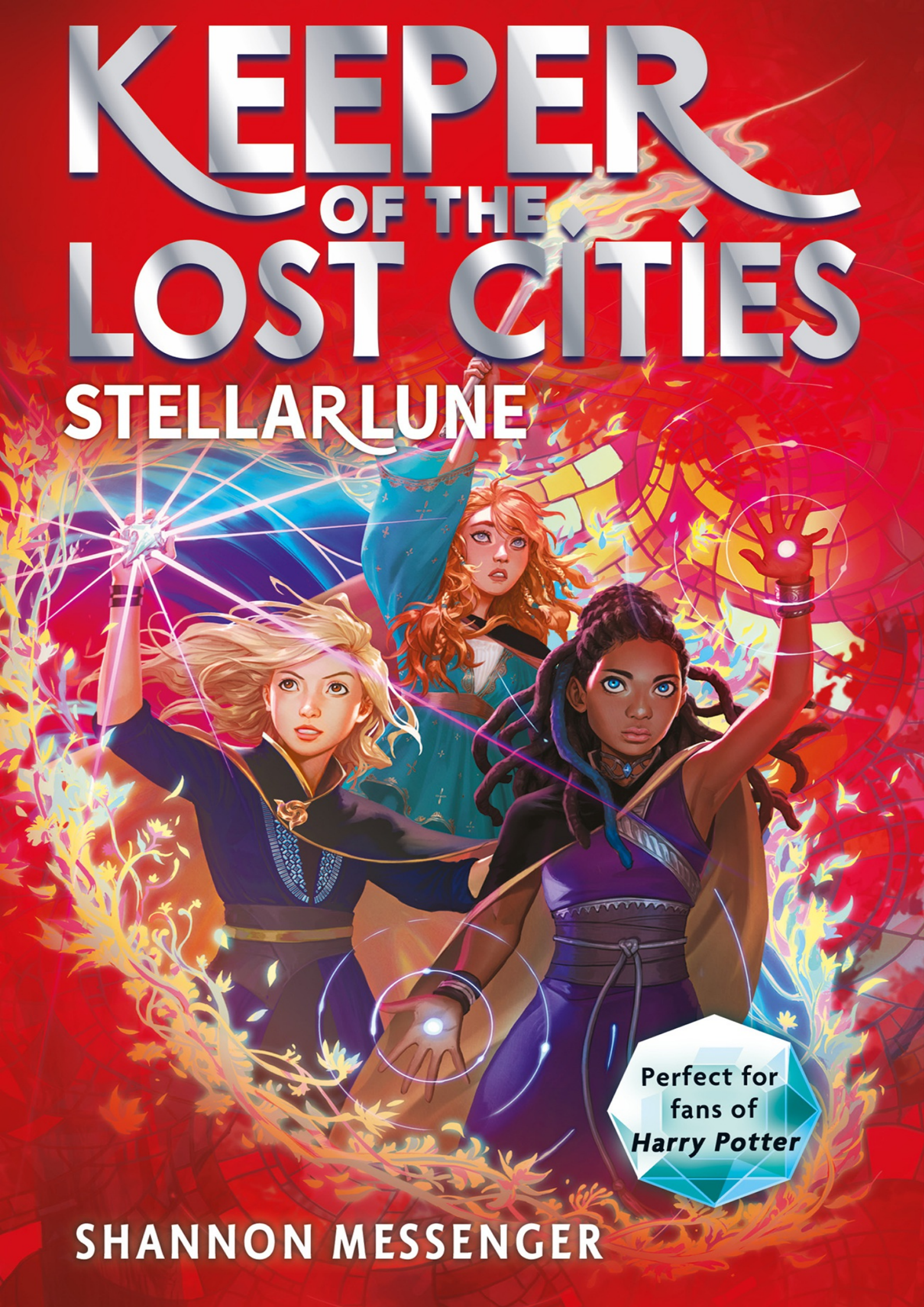


KEEPER OF THE LOST CITIES STELLARLUNE



Perfect for
fans of
Harry Potter

SHANNON MESSENGER

KEEPER
OF THE
LOST CITIES
STELLARLUNE

SHANNON MESSENGER

SIMON & SCHUSTER

For my son.

**Who made writing this book
exponentially more challenging.
And makes my life infinitely better.**

PREFACE

THERE'S NOTHING HERE."

Sophie wasn't sure who'd said it—but all her friends had to be thinking the same thing as they trudged through the long moonlit grass, which seemed to stretch endlessly into the darkness.

She squinted at the sky, checking the stars again.

"There has to be *something*," she murmured.

Every clue they'd solved.

Every truth they'd pieced together.

All of it had led to this place.

This moment.

This rare chance to finally get ahead of their enemies.

Sophie turned in a slow circle, searching for the clue she had to be missing.

An edge to an illusion.

A sliver of hope.

There was always another trick.

Another lie.

And this time, she wouldn't let herself be fooled.

She was taking control of stellarlune.

Seizing its power.

Otherwise...

She glanced at the sky again, watching the new star fade with the light of early dawn.

Time was almost up.

Which left only one option.

A desperate risk.

A last resort.

The path everyone else was against.

Sophie was ready to take it—no matter what it cost.

She *had* to.

For Keefe.

For her world.

For the future.

ONE

ARE YOU OKAY?"

Grady had asked the question three times, and Sophie still didn't have an answer. All she could do was stare at the crumpled note she'd found waiting for her in her bedroom, hoping she'd somehow misread it.

Keefe couldn't...

Wouldn't...

A sound bubbled up her throat, something between a laugh, a cry, and a groan.

This was Keefe.

He definitely would.

"How long ago did Keefe leave?" she asked, glancing between Grady and the tiny gnome standing near her canopied bed.

Grady shrugged.

Flori shook her head, making her plaited hair rustle like windblown leaves. "I didn't see him—but I was out in the pastures, waiting for the new patrols to arrive."

Sophie sighed.

Sandor was in the process of frantically amping up Havenfield's security because she'd burned down one of the Neverseen's storehouses a few hours earlier, and everyone seemed to think that meant she'd officially started the war they'd been teetering on the brink of for years—but she couldn't worry about that at the moment.

“Is Sandor still outside?” she asked, hoping he’d gotten a report about Keefe from one of the other guards.

Grady blocked her. “Listen, kiddo. I know what you’re thinking —”

“I doubt that.” Even *she* wasn’t sure if she wanted to clobber Keefe, lock him up somewhere, or wrap him in a huge strangle-hug and tell him everything was going to be okay—though the last option seemed the least likely.

“Keefe will be fine,” Grady promised, carefully steering her away from her doorway. “He’s very resourceful.”

She locked her knees. “If you knew what he’s planning, you wouldn’t be saying that.”

Silence followed, and Grady wouldn’t meet her eyes.

“You talked to him while he was here, didn’t you?” Sophie guessed, tapping her temples when he stayed quiet. “You know I can find out what you’re hiding.”

“Not without violating the rules of telepathy,” Grady reminded her. “But to answer your question... yes, I did talk to him—and he didn’t say much. He was obviously still afraid to use his voice.”

Something sour coated Sophie’s tongue, and she tried not to think about the fear she’d seen in Keefe’s eyes after he’d accidentally given his first *command*. Or how empty and hopeless she’d felt when the command turned everyone numb.

“That’s why he’s running away,” she murmured.

Part of the reason, at least.

Keefe’s letter had also implied that he’d manifested other scarier abilities—but he didn’t tell her what they were. All he’d said was that it was too dangerous for him to be in the Lost Cities and he was planning to hide among humans—which was why Sophie had to find him.

“How long ago did he leave?” she asked in a tone that hopefully made it clear she wouldn’t let Grady shrug away the question again.

He glanced out her windows, where the clouds were slowly turning pink with the sunset. “At least an hour ago, so it’s too late to stop him—but it’ll be okay. I think he actually has a solid plan this time.”

“Oh really? So you think he’ll be able to survive on his own in the Forbidden Cities?”

She’d hoped Grady’s mouth would fall open when he heard Keefe’s destination.

Instead, his lips set into a grim line.

“Wow,” she mumbled. “You really did know what he was up to, and you still let him go. I know Keefe’s never been your favorite, but —”

“I never said that,” Grady interrupted.

“You didn’t have to. You call him ‘That Boy’ and glare at him all the time.”

“Not *all* the time.”

His smile was probably supposed to soften her mood.

It didn’t.

“Okay, fine. Sometimes your friendship with Keefe... makes me a little nervous,” Grady admitted, dragging the toe of his boot through the flowers woven into her carpet. “He has a gift for getting in trouble—and you do that more than enough on your own. But he wasn’t his usual overconfident self today. He looked tired. And terrified—”

“And that didn’t seem like a sign that maybe you should stop him?” Sophie cut in.

“Hey, we both know there’s no *stopping* Keefe Sencen once he makes up his mind.”

“Um, last time I checked, you’re still a Mesmer,” Sophie felt the need to point out, even though she wouldn’t have wanted Grady to use his ability that way.

It was easier having someone to blame.

Then she wouldn’t have to wonder if she could’ve talked Keefe into staying if she’d been home when he came by, instead of spending so long at Solreef answering Mr. Forkle’s questions about her unexpected inferno.

Or if she’d checked on Keefe more often after he woke up from his trance-coma thing, instead of letting him push her away.

Or if she’d fought a little harder in Loamnore and stopped his mom before she triggered Keefe’s unnerving new abilities.

Or if she’d at least been able to learn more about Keefe’s “legacy,” so they had some idea of what they were dealing with.

Grady stepped closer, tucking a strand of Sophie’s hair behind her ear. “I know this is hard. And for what it’s worth, I actually did try to talk Keefe out of leaving. But I’ve never seen him so determined. Best I could do was...”

“Was?” Sophie prompted when he didn’t finish.

Grady closed his eyes, and his lips formed a few different words before he asked, “You trust me, don’t you?”

“Why do I need to?”

“Because... I promised Keefe something. And I’d like to keep that promise. But it’s hard to do that if you keep asking questions.”

Sophie studied him, wishing she were an Empath and could tell what he was feeling. But the Black Swan had left her without that particular talent.

“Fine,” she decided. “I’ll stop asking questions—if you stop trying to talk me out of going after him.”

Grady blew out a breath. “I think you’re forgetting that now’s really not a smart time for you to leave Havenfield. We have no idea

how the Neverseen are going to respond when they discover what you've done to their storehouse. And you have your own army here —”

“And the Neverseen know exactly where to find me,” Sophie argued. “Besides, I'm not going to sit around, waiting for some attack that may never happen. I'm not afraid of them!”

“You should be.” Grady lowered himself onto the edge of her bed and rested his head in his hands—which made it hard to hear him when he said, “I am.”

Sophie wished she could sink down next to him—lean on each other as they tried to prepare for whatever came next. But she forced herself to stay standing. “I'm done making decisions based on fear. It gives the Neverseen more power.”

“Isn't fear the reason you're so desperate to track Keefe down?” Grady countered.

Sophie glanced at Keefe's note again. “Yeah, but... *this* is something I can fix.”

“Can you?”

And there it was.

The question Sophie had been trying so hard not to let herself ask.

Could she fix Keefe?

Could anyone?

“Only one way to find out,” she said, mostly to herself.

Grady grabbed her hand as she turned for the door, and as his fingers pressed against her skin, she realized she wasn't wearing her gloves.

She technically didn't need them anymore, now that she'd learned how to switch off her enhancing. But she still tended to wear them as backup.

Maybe it was time to start believing that abilities truly could be controlled.

“I can help him,” she told Grady, pulling her hand free and continuing forward without going back for her gloves.

“I hope you’re right. But finding him is going to be harder than you think. I watched him spin to a random facet on his pathfinder and leap wherever it led.”

“Was it a blue crystal?” Sophie asked, feeling her stomach go *thud* when Grady confirmed it.

Keefe really was in a human city.

And the city could be *anywhere*.

Grady gently pulled her closer. “I know you hate letting your friends take risks. But Keefe can handle himself—”

“No, he can’t! Keefe doesn’t know how the human world works. He doesn’t have any money, or any kind of ID, and he doesn’t speak their languages.”

Well... he was a Polyglot now, so he might be okay with the last one—but that wouldn’t get him very far.

“Humans have tons of laws about loitering and trespassing,” she added, “so you can’t just show up and expect to find shelter—or food and water. They have a million other rules too, like when you’re allowed to cross the street, and how late you’re allowed to be out at night. A lot of times it can be hard just finding a bathroom! And every country is different, so if he moves around, that’s only going to make it worse—especially since Keefe’s terrible at keeping a low profile. Even if he tries to keep his head down, people are going to notice how good-looking he is—by human standards,” she quickly clarified, feeling her cheeks burn. “I lived with humans for twelve years, and I doubt I’d be able to hide there without ending up with Child Protective Services or something. He could get himself arrested. Or hit by a bus. Or—”

“I’m not saying you’re wrong,” Grady jumped in. “But... I think you’re also forgetting that Keefe’s not exactly safe around here.”

He wasn’t.

But neither was she, as everyone loved to keep reminding her.

And they never would be, until they stopped the Neverseen—which they’d have a much better chance of doing if they worked together. Yes, Keefe’s new abilities were probably scary—and his mom was absolutely going to try to exploit them. But there had to be a way to use his powers against her.

“I have to *try*,” she said, stepping away from Grady. “If I can’t find him...”

She didn’t know how to finish that sentence.

Hopefully she wouldn’t have to.

Grady dragged a hand down his face. “Just... promise me you’ll stay in the Lost Cities.”

“She will,” a high, squeaky voice announced from the hallway. “I’ll make sure of it.”

Sophie fought the urge to roll her eyes.

She’d had enough experience with her overprotective goblin bodyguard to know that Sandor *would* be coming with her. She’d honestly been surprised he was willing to let her out of his sight after he brought her home from Solreef. And she was grateful to have his protection. She needed it now more than ever.

But she was also done being cautious—and Sandor was going to have to get used to that.

If Keefe was in the Forbidden Cities, she *would* be going after him.

Still, she’d learned to fight Sandor one battle at a time—and at the moment, she needed more information before she could figure out the smartest plan. So all she told him was “Let’s go” as she headed upstairs to the Leapmaster.

“Go where?” Sandor, Flori, and Grady asked as they trailed behind her.

Sophie studied the giant orb made up of small, glittering crystals dangling from the roof of Havenfield’s cupola. “Ro wasn’t with Keefe, right?”

“He was alone,” Grady confirmed.

Sophie had no idea what lengths Keefe must’ve gone to in order to sneak away from his ogre bodyguard. But she was sure Ro would do everything in her power to find him—mostly so she could torture Keefe with humiliating punishments.

“Splendor Plains,” Sophie called, turning to Flori as the Leapmaster shifted into motion. “Are you coming with us?”

“I’d prefer to have Flori stay here and continue organizing the new security,” Sandor cut in.

“As you wish.” Flori closed her eyes, swaying like a tree in a storm. “I hope our moonlark doesn’t worry too much. I hear songs of change in the air. But they’re not unhappy melodies. They sing of freedom. And new opportunities.”

Sophie wished she could hear the same tunes.

The only sound in her ears was her heartbeat, hammering like a war drum as she took Sandor’s hand and stepped into the light, letting the rushing warmth carry them away.

TWO

JUST AS I FEARED, SANDOR muttered as he marched through the main entrance of Elwin's colorful home.

Sophie peeked around his huge gray body. "Really? You were afraid we were going to find *this*?"

The downstairs level of Splendor Plains was framed by glass walls with panes in every tint and tone of the spectrum—a giant, empty space, save for a single armchair and table in the center, which were both toppled over. Elwin and Ro were crouched beside them, in the middle of some sort of bizarre showdown. The ogre princess held several stuffed animals with her sword pressed against their throats, while Elwin seemed to be using telekinesis to make a dozen shimmering vials hover around Ro's head.

"Hey, Dr. Sparkles could've spared his snuggle buddies if he'd taken me to find Funkyhair!" Ro shouted, angling her blade to target the stuffed boobrie. "Instead, he chose to be stubborn. So now his little birdie needs to pay!"

"Harm one thread on Boo Boo," Elwin warned, "and I'll have glitter pouring out of your body for the next three days!"

Ro gritted her pointed teeth. "I told you, I'm not afraid of your elf-y potions! *But* it looks like I won't need your help anymore." She nudged her chin toward the letter still clutched in Sophie's hand. "Let me guess. Captain Mopeypants told you he's running away forever, and you've dragged Gigantor here on a quest to save our reckless boy from his terrible life choices."

“Pretty much,” Sophie agreed. “Any idea where he went?”

“Not at the moment.” Ro sheathed her sword with a little more force than necessary. “I’d been planning to catch him at your place, since I knew he’d never disappear without some sort of mushy goodbye—but *someone* refused to take me.”

“*Refused?*” Sophie stumbled back when Elwin nodded.

“It’s not how it sounds,” he promised. “I found Ro crawling around upstairs with two dead legs, and—”

“Dead legs?” Sandor interrupted.

“Hunkyhair commanded me to *sleep* so I couldn’t stop him from leaving,” Ro admitted. “And his command to wake me up only worked halfway. I was strong enough to sit up and shred his ridiculous bedsheet bonds. But even after I freed my legs, they still dragged for a little while.”

“It was more than *a little while*,” Elwin argued as the floating medicine vials drifted into the satchel slung across his shoulders. “Took me nearly an hour to get her circulation back to normal. And by then, it would’ve been too late to catch up with Keefe.”

“You didn’t know that! I’m sure he went home to Daddy Dearest’s to pack the rest of his stuff before he went over to Blondie’s—and I’m sure he spent a while at Blondie’s feeling all weepy and conflicted about abandoning her. We should’ve checked!”

“You should have!” Sophie agreed, shooting a death glare at Elwin.

He’d saved her life so many times, she never would’ve expected him to let Keefe down like this.

Elwin scrubbed his fingers through his dark, messy hair. “Pretty sure I can guess what you’re thinking, Sophie. But... I’ve seen how terrified Keefe is to use his voice right now—and how hard he’s fought to stop himself from giving any commands. So if he was

willing to tell Ro to *sleep* and didn't even stick around long enough to make sure she fully woke up, something big must've scared him away. And maybe we should trust that he knows what he's doing."

"Except—spoiler alert—Funkyhair *never* knows what he's doing," Ro argued, tossing Boo Boo at Elwin's head.

Elwin caught the fluffy boobrie with his mind. "I think he actually did this time."

"Ugh, you sound like Grady," Sophie grumbled, still not sure she'd forgiven her adoptive father for letting Keefe go. "I had to remind him how little Keefe knows about humans and how easily he could end up in jail—or worse."

Elwin winced.

Ro muttered a string of inappropriate Ogreish words. "I'm assuming that means our boy's planning to hide with the only creatures that are even more annoying than goblins?" She flung the rest of the stuffed animals at Elwin. "See what you've done?"

Elwin scrambled to catch his fluffy friends. "Hey, we all know that even if we'd dragged Keefe back, he just would've run away again—maybe after using commands that caused serious problems."

"Not if I'd gagged him and chained him up in my father's dungeon!" Ro snapped back.

"Or if I'd talked to him!" Sophie added—even though some of her recent conversations with Keefe hadn't exactly gone well.

Elwin hugged his snuggle buddies. "I know this is hard to accept. I've been struggling with it too. But... Keefe *needs* to take control of his new abilities—and I think he might have to do that on his own. I'd been hoping that Kesler and I could create elixirs to help, or that Dex could build some sort of gadget. But so far we're getting nowhere—and until we do, Keefe's going to make himself sick worrying about hurting someone or getting manipulated by his mother or—"

“That’s why the dungeon would be perfect!” Ro interrupted. “I also know a lovely bog that looks and smells like all the vomit in the world went there to die. A few days floating in that sludge and our boy will be *begging* to head back to Sparkle Town. Except now we have to find him first—and apparently he could be anywhere on the planet, because of *course* he decided to hide with the species you elves gave *way* too much land to, but we can discuss your Council’s absurd ruling choices another time. First... let’s think.” She twisted one of her bright red pigtails around her clawed finger. “You lived with humans for a while, right, Blondie? Is there anywhere that’d be a particularly good spot for sitting around, feeling sorry for yourself?”

“You’re *not* going to the Forbidden Cities!” Sandor reminded Sophie.

“Try and stop us!” Ro countered.

“The problem,” Sophie cut in before Sandor could draw his sword, “is that Keefe spun to a random facet on his pathfinder when he leaped away. Logic isn’t going to help us find him.”

Ro heaved a dramatic sigh. “Then I don’t suppose there’s some fancy mind trick you can use to track him down, is there, Little Miss Moonlark?”

“Not from this far away. I can’t hear his thoughts if he ignores me. And I can’t track his mind if I don’t know where I’m supposed to *feel*.”

“Ugh. Yet another reason I’ll never understand why you elves care so much about your elf-y abilities.”

Sandor’s snort sounded like agreement—and Sophie didn’t necessarily blame either of them. The Black Swan had modified her genetics and given her more abilities than any elf had ever had before. And still, more often than not, she was outmatched and underprepared.

“Can’t you track your charge?” Sandor asked Ro. “Surely you keep him covered in one of those enzymes you ogres love so much.”

Sophie’s heart did a backflip. “That’s right—I forgot about aromark!”

But Ro shook her head. “My boy made me promise I wouldn’t expose him to anything that would require melting off his skin if we needed to remove it. And after what his mommy’s put him through, I figured... fair enough.”

Sophie couldn’t fault Ro for that—but Sandor apparently could.

“A bodyguard’s job is to keep track of their charge, not cater to their wishes!” he snapped.

“No, our job is to *protect* our charge, which I can do just fine with these.” Ro waved her hands in front of the rows of daggers strapped to her muscled thighs.

“How are those protecting him right now?” Sandor countered.

“I’ll admit, I wasn’t fully prepared for my boy to learn how to knock everyone out with a single word.” She shuddered. “But you would’ve been just as dead-legged as I was—and if you think those silly disks you like to sew into Blondie’s clothes would’ve changed anything, you’re delusional. He would’ve ripped those out in two seconds.”

“Only if he could find them.” Sandor’s smile was so smug, it made Sophie want to tear through everything she was wearing.

But it didn’t matter. “Fighting isn’t going to help us find Keefe,” Sophie reminded them.

“It isn’t,” Ro agreed. “But for the record, *if* I have been giving my boy a little more breathing room, it’s only because I could tell he was on the verge of a meltdown. Plus, I was waiting for him to realize that he’s looking at these new powers all wrong. Sure, accidentally numbing his friends is less-than-awesome—but he also doesn’t have to fear Mommy Dearest anymore! Next time she shows

up, he can just command her to sleep. Or better yet, tell her to jump off a sparkly building—problem solved!”

Sophie wished it would be that easy. “I’m sure Lady Gisela has a way to protect herself.”

The Neverseen were always five steps ahead.

Sometimes ten.

Or fifty.

Then again, she’d managed to find their secret storehouse and burn it to the ground. That’s why the inferno had felt like Sophie’s first *real* victory—and why she had to be ready to make lots more terrifying decisions.

“May I?” Ro asked, pointing to Keefe’s letter.

“There’s nothing useful in there,” Sophie warned. But she still handed over the paper as she turned to pace. “Did Keefe say anything before he left?”

“Not that I know of,” Elwin told her. “But I was down here with earplugs in while he tested the Imparter with Dex.”

“They wanted to see if Hunkyhair could talk with a gadget and not feel the urge to give any commands,” Ro explained. “Which totally worked, by the way.”

Sophie halted midstep. “Something happened during that conversation, didn’t it?”

“I’m assuming so, since Keefe left right after,” Elwin said. “But I wasn’t listening.”

“Hang on! How are we not talking about *this*?” Ro pointed to a sentence near the end of Keefe’s letter.

Sophie realized what it said the same second Ro shifted to a fairly convincing impersonation of Keefe’s voice.

“*“You mean a lot to me, Foster. More than you’ll ever know.”*”

Sophie lunged for the paper.

“Nope! No destroying the evidence—and don’t even *think* about telling me you don’t know what he meant by that, Blondie! Your cheeks are way too red!”

Sophie tugged her hair forward.

She’d been so thrown by the rest of Keefe’s message that she’d forgotten that part was in there—and her brain honestly had no idea what to do with it.

It almost felt like Keefe was trying to tell her...

But he couldn’t mean that.

...Could he?

“Whoa. I think the Great Foster Oblivion might actually be over!” Ro pumped her fist. “Now I’m even more excited to drag Hunkyhair home! You two can have *the talk* and—”

“Are you serious right now?” Sophie lunged for the letter again, managing to snatch it back this time—though part of the paper tore in the process. “Two minutes ago you were threatening to behead a bunch of stuffed animals because Elwin wouldn’t help you find Keefe. And now you’re wasting time teasing me about some throwaway line—”

“That line is *not* a throwaway! You know it. I know it. Dr. Sparkles knows it. Shoot, even Gigantor knows it—look how intently he’s studying his feet right now. *But...* I suppose you might have a point about priorities. Sorry. I’m just so excited! Do you have any idea how long I’ve been waiting for this? It’s going to be so adorable when you two finally...”

She made a disgustingly loud smooching sound—and Sophie hated her brain for imagining it.

Hated how sweaty her palms felt even more.

She stuffed the letter into her pocket and crossed her arms, trying to dry her hands on her sleeves. “Can we focus, please? I need to know what happened when Keefe talked to Dex.”