

Cover 1

Relevant results in this cover: 6

Content pages range: [2, 21]

Groups range: [1, 4]

Deep intent (search) query	Ranking query (reranker)
Interested in example of human technology being presented as equal or superior to magic	Interested in example of human technology being presented as equal or superior to magic

-
- 000001.txt — ranks: #1
 - 000002.txt — ranks: #2
 - 000003.txt — ranks: #3 · #9 · #16
 - 000004.txt — ranks: #4

Group 1/69

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FORTY-EIGHT

THERE YOU ARE!" KEEFE CALLED from outside the pterodactyl enclosure. Grady was brushing the teeth of a bright orange male and Keefe was leaning against the bars watching. His gray tunic was streaked with mud, and tufts of purple fur were stuck in his especially messy hair. "Grady's been keeping me busy while you were gone," Keefe explained. "I can see that. Sorry. I told you I'd be home later." "Yeah, well, my dad started into one of his lectures on the importance of me living up to my potential. Anything's better than that. Plus, it gave me a chance to play with Glitter Butt." "Glitter Butt?" "Way better name than Silveny, right?" "Wait—you've been playing with Silveny?" "It's bizarre," Grady answered for him. "I had him help me feed her, since she responded to him last time. Next thing I knew she was nuzzling his neck, just like she does with you." "What can I say? Glitter Butt loves me." "Her name is not Glitter Butt." "It should be. She likes it better." "She does not." "Wanna bet?" "I wouldn't do it, Sophie," Grady warned her. "She really likes Keefe. Which is great for us. She's finally accepting another person." But... did it have to be Keefe? Sophie rushed to Silveny's enclosure, and as soon as the gleaming horse spotted her, the transmissions began. Friend! Fly! Trust! Fly! But there was a new word in the mix. Keefe! "See? I told you she likes me." "You don't know that." "Actually, I do. I can feel her emotions without touching her—just like I can with yours. I didn't notice it the last time I was around her because I assumed what I was feeling came from you. But now I can tell the difference." Keefe! "Hey, Glitter Butt—did you miss me?" Keefe! Keefe! Keefe! Do you realize he's calling you Glitter Butt? Sophie transmitted. She sent a picture of a large, sparkly horse hind to illustrate. Glitter Butt, Silveny repeated. Keefe! Sophie rolled her eyes. "If you're jealous because you don't have a cool nickname, we can start calling you Sparkle Fanny," Keefe offered. "Thanks, I'll pass." "Suit yourself. Personally, I insist that you call me Shimmer Booty from now on." Keefe! Silveny added. Keefe! Fly! Keefe! Glitter Butt! Sophie rubbed her temples. Just when she thought the transmissions couldn't get any more annoying. "So where were you anyway?" Keefe asked. "Yeah, I've been wondering the same thing," Grady said behind them. When Sophie didn't answer, everyone looked at Sandor. "She was perfectly safe," he assured them. "I went to see Councillor Terik," Sophie said, before Grady could grill Sandor further. "I'd asked him to help me find my old human things so I could pick up something." "Is that a diary?" Keefe asked as Sandor handed her the sparkly journal. He tried to snatch it, but Sophie yanked it away just in time. "I wrote it when I was five. All the entries are like three sentences long and they were just me plotting to annoy my sister." "Um, who doesn't want to know more ways to annoy people?" "Trust me, you already know them all." She caught Grady frowning at her. "It was fine," she promised. "There's nothing in the journal that could get me exiled—and Councillor Terik's not like that anyway. He even took off his crown before he checked through the journal." "His circlet is merely a representation of his power. With or without it—" "I know. I'll be careful." "Don't worry, I'll keep an eye on her for the rest of the day," Keefe said, offering a cheesy salute as he hooked an arm through Sophie's. Somehow Grady didn't look comforted as Keefe led her away. "DON'T YOU DARE," SOPHIE SAID, blocking Keefe as he tried to flop on her bed. "You smell like a wet rat. You can sit on the floor." He laughed and scooped up Iggy, scratching his fuzzy head. "Bet she treats you this way too, huh? Like it's your fault your breath smells like something died inside you." Iggy squeaked and nuzzled Keefe's hand. Sophie had to give him credit—he had a way with animals. "So now that we're alone, are you going to tell me what's really in the rainbow-unicorn-diary thing? And by the way—that's the kind of awesome human stuff I'd been hoping for. Please, feel free to go get more so I can make fun of it." Sophie sank to her bed with a sigh. "I'd hoped it had a clue in it. I can remember writing something in the margin—but of course the pages I needed have been torn out." She flipped to the section with the jagged scraps of paper. "Torn out by

who? And aren't you supposed to have a photographic memory?" Sophie explained about Mr. Forkle and the strange gaps in her memory. "Clearly, there's something they don't want me to find." "Okay, that's just... whoa. I mean, how do you deal with that and, like, go to school and hang with your friends and act so calm? I'd be running to Elwin screaming 'someone stole my memories—get them back!'" "Elwin can't help," she said, dropping the useless journal on the floor and kicking it away. "No one can." "Actually, that's where you're wrong. I knew you were going to need me. You got a pencil around here?" She pointed to her school satchel, and he rifled through and pulled out her silver pencils. Then he snatched the journal and started to plop down next to her. "Nope—stinky boys sit on the floor." "Sheesh, ungrateful much?" he asked as he sank to the flowery carpet. He tilted the book a number of angles, then grabbed a pencil and started to shade the margin with the side of the point. "If you pressed hard enough as you wrote, we'll still see the impression in the next page. Trust me, this trick has come in handy many times." Sophie had no doubt of that as she squinted at the faint white curves and squiggles Keefe had traced. Her heart stuttered as the marks twisted into words. "I'm guessing this is a good sign," Keefe said as she scrambled for a notebook to write the message down. A boy who disappeared. "Should've figured it would have something to do with a boy." "I was five, Keefe." "What, and cute boys didn't exist when you were five? Well, it's true you hadn't met me yet, but..." Sophie tuned him out as an image resurfaced in her mind. The same vague symbol she'd seen before, similar to the one on Brant's shirt—but she could see more of the scene now. It was like her mind had zoomed out and she could tell that it was a crest on the shoulder of someone leaning against a tree. She ran to her desk, grabbed her memory log, and projected the blurry scene before it slipped away. "Is that a bramble jersey?" Keefe asked, peeking over her shoulder. "A what? Wait, is that the game you and Fitz were playing?" "Sorta. We were playing the one-on-one version. There's a team version too, and every three years we have a championship match. They print special jerseys, and everyone who's into the game buys like ten of them and wears them all the time. That one was from—" "Eight years ago?" Sophie guessed. "Yeah, I think it was. But wait—is this your memory?" "I think so." She sank to the floor as the room started spinning. "But eight years ago you were still living with humans." "I know." She was living with humans and had no idea elves existed. Her telepathy hadn't even manifested. And yet, if her blurry memories were right, she'd somehow seen a boy in a blue bramble jersey. A boy who disappeared.

Group 2/69

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[
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Even months later, Sophie still flinched at the name. Her old alchemy instructor had made her first year at Foxfire equal parts humiliating and stressful.

“So if all the best people are working on it,” Sophie said, “why haven’t they found the cure?”

“It comes down to isolating the pathogen,” Mr. Forkle explained. “They haven’t been able to find the source, and without that crucial information, they don’t know what to target. The physicians suspect each gnome is plagued by only a single parasite, so finding it is a bit like that old human expression about needles in haystacks. But at least they’re not pressed for time. The gnomes have responded well to the symptom treatments, so the need for the cure isn’t as dire.”

His eyes drifted to the Evader in Dex’s hand, and his expression darkened. “Please tell me that’s not what I think it is—or that you’ve at least had the common sense to not put it to use.”

“Well . . . if you want me to lie . . . ,” Dex mumbled.

Mr. Forkle’s sigh sounded more like a growl. “This is about Exillium, right? I told you it wasn’t worth the risk.”

“But there was no risk,” Dex said, pointing to a thinner wire on the Evader. “I call this a wiper. It erased every step I took, so there’s no way the Council will know I was there.”

Mr. Forkle took the gadget, examining it from all angles. “Well, I’m no Technopath—and this is one of the most bizarre executions I’ve seen—but I must say, it’s rather . . . inspired.”

Blur took the Evader and passed his smudged hand through. “It’s a totally different approach than anything I’ve felt. But maybe that’s what we need.”

Dex looked ready to float away with the praise, and Sophie didn’t blame him. After being

underestimated his whole life, he deserved the recognition.

“Do not let our compliments overshadow our disappointment,” Mr. Forkle said, bursting their brand-new bubble. “When we give orders, we expect them to be followed.”

“Not if they’re dumb,” Keefe argued.

“I’m not going to debate this any further,” Mr. Forkle said. He turned to Dex. “I’d rather you focus your energy on a much more important assignment.”

He paused to confer with Blur and Granite before he continued. “You have an incredibly unique approach to technopathy, Mr. Dizznee, and perhaps that fresh take can solve a problem we’ve been facing.”

“For months we’ve been trying to gain access to a secret archive,” Granite jumped in. “In fact, ‘secret’ isn’t a strong enough word. It’s an archive that should not exist. Our best Technopath discovered it, but hasn’t been able to breach beyond that.”

“What kind of archive?” Dex asked.

“We have no idea,” Blur said. “All we know is it’s hidden in Lumenaria.”

Della’s eyes widened.

“Yes,” Mr. Forkle told her. “As I said, it should not exist. Lumenaria is where all the worlds gather for crucial negotiations,” he added when he saw Sophie’s confusion. “Any meetings there are not to be recorded, beyond the wording of the treaties. But it appears that someone has been transcribing the sessions.”

“What kind of security are the files protected by?” Dex asked.

“That’s the strangest part,” Blur told him. “We’d assumed the archive was the Council’s dirty little secret. But it’s guarded by technologies from all of the intelligent species.”

Dex whistled. “So I have to hack ogre technology?”

"And dwarven. And trollish. And goblin. And gnomish. And elvin as well," Mr. Forkle confirmed.

"I didn't even know the gnomes had technology," Biana said.

"Not all technology comes in the form of gadgets," Blur reminded her. "Which is why I think you'll be perfect for this, Dex. Only you would build a crazy Evader like that. So let's see what else you can do."

"And if you do manage to gain access," Granite added, "we'd like you to search for information on the Wildwood Colony. The Council's silence on the plague has made us want to further explore the Colony's history."

"I'll have supplies sent within a few hours," Mr. Forkle said. "And we need you to make this your number one focus. No more wasting time on this." He shoved the Evader into his pocket before turning to the rest of them. "You have assignments and training to work through as well. I suggest you get started."

"Anyone else getting tired of the Black Swan bossing us around?" Keefe asked after they'd de-furry-pajamaed and regrouped in the common room of the boys' tree house.

The room was decorated like a campsite, with indoor trees, a ceiling glinting with stars, and an enormous fire pit in the center. The flames burned in every color of the rainbow, and Sophie was sure the gnomes meant it to be just as stunning as the waterfall in the girls' house. But she would never see fire as anything but death and destruction.

"I think they just want to make sure everything goes right when we rescue Prentice," Biana said. She was working with Della by the window, learning to hold her invisibility in shifting light.

"It is annoying, though," Sophie mumbled, following Fitz to a clump of boulders that turned out to be beanbag chairs.

Dex had fortunately been smart enough to save a copy of the Exillium records he'd stolen, and he'd promised to make a gadget they could use to search through them. In the meantime, it was back to Cognate training, and it felt extra nerve wracking doing it in front of everyone. Dex had taken over most of the floor with tools and bits of gadget supplies. And Keefe had slumped into a chair in the darkest corner, pretending to read another empathy book. Every few minutes he'd mutter, "This is the stupidest thing ever."

"Should we start at the beginning?" Fitz asked, opening his Cognate training notebook.

Sophie nodded. Biana hadn't been exaggerating about Cognates having to share everything. Each exercise was designed to make them reveal more and more secrets.

The first assignment wasn't that bad. Just a list of questions they were supposed to ask while their minds were connected, so they could see each other's first thoughts.

"Is it okay if I enter your mind?" Fitz asked.

"Dude, do you realize how creepy that sounds?" Keefe interrupted.

"It's less creepy than reading her feelings all the time without telling her," Fitz argued.

"Hey, it's not like I try to do that! You're just mad that Foster can't hide things from me."

"Pretty soon, she won't be hiding anything from me, either."

"Yeah, and I can feel how not excited she is about that all the way over here."

Fitz turned to Sophie. "Is that true?"

"You make her super nervous," Keefe answered for her.

Sophie wished the Black Swan had given her laser eyes so she could skewer Keie with her death glare.

"I take it that's a yes?" Fitz asked.

"Well . . . yeah. But, have you met you?" she asked. "You're, like, Captain Perfect! And I'm—"

"The most powerful elf our world has ever known?" Fitz finished.

"Grady's way more powerful than me."

"Grady is powerful," Della jumped in. "But not as powerful as you'd think."

"How can you say that?" Sophie asked. "Grady made all twelve Councillors smack themselves in the face!"

Della laughed. "Wish I'd been there to see that. But I've seen him test his power, and his limit was twenty-four people—and that left him drained and vulnerable. He can also only maintain his hold for so long. I assume that's why the Black Swan didn't make you a Mesmer. Mesmers have limits, and their power rarely triggers a permanent solution. Did the Council suddenly change their minds because of what Grady did?"

"They backed down a little." But Della had a point. In the end, Grady still had to let her be sentenced to the telepathy restrictor.

Sophie gave Fitz permission, but before he could pass her blocking, Keefe slammed down his book and shouted, "I refuse to read this!"

"The book can't be that bad," Della insisted.

"Yeah, it is. My dad wrote it."

"Your dad's a writer?" Sophie asked.

"More like a torturer of innocent readers." He held up the cover as proof. *The Heart of the Matter*, by Lord Cassius Sencen. "It's just a long ramble about how he's the only one smart enough to realize that emotions come from both the heart and the brain, and that Empaths can only read what's in the mind. Too bad he forgot to explain why anyone cares!"

Sophie hoped Keefe was far enough away that he couldn't tell she actually found the idea fascinating. Councillor Bronte had taught her that inflicting pulled emotions from her heart—and Fitz had seen an emotional center in her mind. So did that mean people could feel different things in different places?

Group 3/69

```
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And when they re-formed...

“Do you have any idea how dangerous that was?” Alvar asked, gasping for breath as he held up his hands to block the much-too-bright sunlight. “And for what? To drag me to a tiny island?”

“It’s deserted, isn’t it?” Keefe reminded him, relieved the random leap had finally brought him somewhere isolated.

The only signs of life were some coconut trees and a few crabs skittering across the white sand.

“It’s also a million degrees and humid!” Alvar tossed back his hood, and Keefe took the opportunity to study his face.

His scars really did look better.

Most were just thin, pale lines.

And his cheeks were much fuller, and his dark hair wasn’t so greasy.

He still didn’t look like the guy he used to be, with fancy clothes and big muscles from working out all

the time.

But he didn't look seriously ill anymore either—or like someone who'd almost drowned in a pod full of poisonous orange goo.

"Go ahead," Alvar said, sweeping his hair out of his eyes. "Ask me. I know you're dying to."

Keefe didn't bother pretending he wasn't sure what Alvar meant.

He met Alvar's slightly defiant stare and said, "How are you still alive?"

"Long story." Alvar laughed when Keefe's jaw went rigid. "Relax. I didn't say I wouldn't tell it. I just figured I should warn you in case you'd like to be smart and leap us out of here before the heat saps your concentration. It's not too late to go with my pancake idea. Did I mention the sweet ones are stuffed with brown sugar and cinnamon and nuts and—"

"Quit stalling," Keefe interrupted—even though those pancake things sounded pretty amazing.

He actually was starting to feel a little dizzy from the heat—but the privacy was worth a little sweat. He pulled off his coat and draped it over a nearby rock, then rolled up his sleeves as high as he could.

"Fine," Alvar said, taking off his coat and dropping it to the sand in a heap. "Have it your way. But I'm at least moving to the shade." He stumbled across the beach and settled into the slim shadow of one of the palm trees.

Keefe followed—not that the shade made much difference.

"The short version," Alvar said, fanning himself with a fallen palm frond, "since I'd like to get out of here as quickly as possible, is... human medicine saved me."

"Human medicine," Keefe repeated.

His mind raced through some of the stories Foster had told him about her various human hospital visits, and he couldn't help cringing.

"I figured that'd be your reaction," Alvar mumbled. "Elves love to think everything we do is better and smarter and safer than any of the other species. But the longer I'm around humans, the more value I see to their way of thinking."

"So..." Keefe said when Alvar didn't continue, "you came to the Forbidden Cities because you wanted to meet with their doctors?"

"No, I came to the Forbidden Cities to die." Alvar let that sink in before he added, "After Sophie convinced you to let me go, I leaped to your dad's beach house, figuring I should warn him that you'd discovered our deal. I was also hoping he'd let me stay, since that leap pretty much destroyed me. I was too weak to stand, and my body wouldn't stop shaking. But he said he'd already helped me more than I deserved, and the best he'd do was give me a vial of Fade Fuel and make me a path to wherever I wanted to go next. I had five minutes to choose a place."

"Sounds like Daddy Dearest," Keefe mumbled, not sure why he was surprised that his father never bothered to mention any of this.

"Doesn't it? I knew I wasn't going to survive that leap," Alvar continued quietly. "Pretty sure your dad knew that too. And as I tried to pick where to go, I realized I didn't want to die in the Lost Cities. It wasn't like anyone was going to do a planting for me—"

"Your parents would," Keefe interrupted.

"Would they? Or would they try—and then back down if the Council forbid it, or if they got pressured into protecting the 'family name'?"

He spat the last words, and Keefe was sure Alvar was about to launch into some tirade about the Vacker legacy—and if he had to hear him pretend he knew what it was like to come from a horrible, evil family one more time, he might actually vomit.

"Think whatever you want," Alvar said, probably reading the disgust on Keefe's face. "It won't change the fact that my brother tried to kill me—and almost succeeded."

Keefe couldn't argue with that.

He also couldn't claim that Fitz wouldn't try to do it again.

But Alvar brought that on himself.

"We both know you're not a victim," Keefe told him. "You made your choices."

"I did," Alvar said, watching a wave crash against the shore. "And I stand behind most of them."

"Most," Keefe repeated.

Alvar shrugged. "Nobody's perfect."

Keefe couldn't tell if that was a joke.

He kept trying to get a read on Alvar—but Alvar's emotions felt like a whirlwind. Spinning and shifting and whisking away before he could even start to translate.

"Anyway," Alvar continued. "I thought about heading to a Neutral Territory and just... disappearing. But it felt like there should be some record of my passing—even if it was only an unsolved human file about a nameless body found on the street. Some tiny bit of proof that I'd existed."

"So you were feeling sorry for yourself," Keefe noted.

"Try being moments away from dying and see if you don't do exactly the same thing."

He waited for Keefe to argue, but Keef had definitely had a bit of an internal pity party in Loamnore—even if he'd tried to pretend he wasn't scared.

"Exactly," Alvar said, annoyingly guessing what he was thinking again. "So I asked your dad to choose a random facet on his blue pathfinder, and he agreed. I didn't care which place I went as long as it was a Forbidden City. Then I crawled into the light thinking that would be the end of me—and I don't remember much after that. Just a few scattered pieces." He closed his eyes. "I can see an old guy with a bald head, leaning over me, saying something I couldn't understand. And a bright room with a really uncomfortable bed. And my arms"—he held them up and ran his hands across the skin—"I remember seeing all these needles and tubes and beeping things attached to them." And I remember thinking maybe I'd made a big mistake leaving my life in the hands of humans. Maybe I was going to be poked and prodded and scanned for days and days and days. But then... the pain started to fade. My head cleared. My strength came back. The people coming to check on me started smiling as they made notes. I couldn't understand their language, but I could tell I wasn't dying anymore. I left the hospital a few days later, and I've been on my own ever since. Mostly I hide out in the library trying to learn the language. Their tablets have an app with these handy little tutorials. And that's it—that's my big survival story. Satisfied?"

"Uh, not really."

"Shocking."

"Oh, come on—you left out all the details, like what the doctors did—"

"I don't know what they did," Alvar cut in. "I told you, I don't understand the language."

"Then how have you found clothes and money and food and—"

"It hasn't been easy," Alvar admitted, dragging his toe through the sand. "I knew some stuff about the Forbidden Cities from all the trips I made for my dad. So I knew I needed to sneak out of that hospital the first chance I got. I also had a ring with me that I was able to sell. The rest has just been trial and error—plus occasional kindness from strangers. That's the thing about humans—most are pretty generous and helpful. Especially for a guy recovering from an injury"—he pointed to his scars—"who doesn't speak the language and lost his memory."

"You lost your memory," Keefe repeated, raising one eyebrow.

"No. But that's the kind of story that earns a lot of sympathy. It's also a convenient way to get out of having to answer a bunch of questions."

"And it's probably pretty easy to pull off since you've faked memory loss before," Keefe muttered.

"That wasn't fake! It just... wasn't permanent."

"No, it was a ploy, so we'd let our guards down and you could betray us at exactly the right moment."

"And it worked out super well for me, didn't it?" Alvar countered.

"Oh boo-hoo—I feel so sorry for you."

"You're not supposed to!" Alvar blew out a long breath, swiping his hair out of his eyes again. "I don't

want your sympathy, Keefe. I don't want anything. You're the one who started following me—"

"Yeah, so I could make sure you weren't..."

"What?" Alvar asked when Keefe didn't know how to finish that sentence. "What exactly did you think I was doing in that library? Gathering intel so I can form my own human army?"

Honestly, Keefe wouldn't put it past him.

Group 4/69

```
[
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He grit his teeth into a pained smile. "Admit it... Foster... you're enjoying this... a little."

"Never." She rubbed her eyes with her gloved fingers, trying to fight back sobs.

"It's not that bad," he promised, and when she met his eyes, she could see the haze of pain slowly fading.

It crashed right back when he tried to uncurl his blistered, blackened hand. The metal pin seemed to have fused with his skin. "Remind me to kick Brant in the junk a few times once he's awake."

"Only if I get a turn," she said. "Physic has lots of burn salve at Alluveterre. I'm sure she'll get you fixed up."

"Physic?" Keefe asked. "Why not Elwin?"

"Tam's the only one who has a leaping crystal with him, and he's been living at the hideout. We kinda came here by accident—it's a long story. I'll tell you once we're back in the Lost Cities."

"He has a crystal to Alluveterre?"

"Yeah. Why?"

Keefe closed his eyes.

"What's wrong?" she asked. "Is it hurting."

"No, it's..." He took a slow breath and pulled himself up, cradling his singed hand. "I can't go with you guys. I know you think this fixes everything—but Fintan's vision is huge. And all of this will only be a small setback. We still need someone on the inside—"

"Do you really think Fintan will trust you after you let everyone else get captured?" Sophie interrupted. "Think of what he did to your mom, and she only cost him one prisoner. Look at what Brant just did to you!" She grabbed his wrist, forcing him to see his oozing wound. "Would they do that if they trusted you?"

Keefe turned away, not quite fighting off his shudder. "That's why you have to let me take Alvar."

"Yeah, that's never happening," Fitz practically growled.

"It has to. I know it's brutal—but think of the bigger picture. If I bring Alvar back, I'm the hero who saved one of the team. And Alvar's the safest one for me to take. He's always believed in me—you heard him defend me when Brant sparked the flames! And he's never killed anyone—"

"No, he just kidnaps people and watches them be tortured," Sophie snapped.

"Believe me, I'll make him pay for that—but right now we have to play this smart. Ruy and Brant are part of Fintan's big plan, so take them, lock them up, and have Forkle interrogate the crud out of them until we find out what they know. But they'll only know a piece, so I'll use Alvar to keep my 'in' and learn the rest. I'll be safe. Fintan... likes me."

"Dude, save your daddy issues for another time," Tam ordered. "Fintan doesn't care about you. He doesn't trust you. And if you go back to him, he'll destroy you."

Keefe's eye roll was epic. "Don't you need to go fix your bangs or something?"

"You can hate me all you want," Tam told him. "It won't mean I'm not right. Admit that now, and you might still have a chance to fix what really matters. Or you can wait until you've lost her. It's your call."

"Lost who?" Fitz asked.

Tam shook his head. "We need to go."

"Tam's right," Sophie said, her legs shaking as she stood. "Come on, Keefe. You're never going to get another chance like this. I've tried for weeks to figure out how to get you away from them, and this is it. You're safe. You'll be long gone before they realize what happened. And we'll hide you somewhere until we shut down every single one of their hideouts connected to the symbol. And that'll be the end of it."

"But it won't be," he mumbled. "That's what I'm trying to tell you. There's still so much more to do."

"Then do it with us."

She offered him her gloved hand, and her eyes pleaded with him to take it this time.

After a breathless second, he did.

He let her pull him to his feet, leaning on her to stay steady. "I know what matters, Foster," he whispered. "And it's all that matters."

The intensity of his stare turned everything floaty and fluttery. But it all crashed back down when he lunged for Tam and snatched the Alluveterre crystal from his hand.

"What are you doing?" Fitz shouted as Keefe bolted to Alvar and hefted him over his shoulder.

"I bet I can trade this for the information I need to steal the caches. And I'd stay back if I were you," he told Fitz and Tam. "You don't want those guys waking up if you jostle them around too much, do you?"

"Then drop him with your inflicting," Tam shouted at Sophie.

But Sophie had drained all her pent-up emotions when she took down the others. All she had left was shock, and a sickening sadness.

"Please don't do this," she begged. "If you leave here with that crystal, you'll trap us—and you'll compromise Alluveterre."

"The Black Swan can sacrifice one hideout for what this will get me," Keefe said. "And you can teleport. There has to be a cliff around here you can jump off to get the momentum."

"Are we supposed to haul two bodies with us as we try to find it?" Sophie argued.

"Use your telekinesis. You're the amazing Sophie Foster. You'll figure it out."

"And you're making a seriously huge mistake," Tam warned.

"Maybe. I'm pretty good at that—but I'm even better at fixing things. That's still what I'm trying to do here. Trust me."

"How?" Sophie's voice cracked along the edges. "After all the times you've lied or ignored us or betrayed us? How do we ever trust you again?"

"I don't know," he whispered.

"And I don't know if I can forgive this one," she whispered back.

Keefe swallowed hard, eyes focused on his feet as he nodded. "Yeah... I can feel that. And if you needed proof that I'm not doing this for me—that's it, okay?"

It definitely was not okay.

Nothing about this was okay.

"I'm sorry," Keefe whispered. "You have no idea how much. I'm also guessing this means no more check-ins. So please, please, please be careful. Keep your bodyguards close and know that I will end this."

It did feel like an end as he stepped onto the glowing Lodestar symbol. She just didn't know what it was the end of.

"Oh—I forgot to tell you," he mumbled. "I finally know how the black disks work. If you have the one you need, and you give the right command..."

He moved to a circle at the end of one of the rays and whispered, "Gwynaura."

The ray flashed so bright, Sophie had to look away.

By the time the glow faded, Keefe and Alvar were gone.

SEVENTY-ONE

SO... THAT HAPPENED," Tam mumbled. "You guys okay?"

Fitz looked like he wanted to stab many things.

"Fine," Sophie said, pressing her shaky hand against the glass to steady it. She'd moved to the cracked window, staring at the long grassy field swaying in the wind. "Just trying to figure out how to get out of here. We could be wandering a long time trying to find a cliff."

"And my levitation's not strong enough to lift a whole other person," Tam said. "Especially since it sounds like we need to be pretty high up if we're going to teleport. So weird that you need to free-fall."

"I guess we could press our panic switches," Fitz suggested.

"I thought of that," Sophie said, "but it seems like something about this place must be interfering with the signal—otherwise wouldn't Dex have already brought in the cavalry? He said the stronger trackers could be traced anytime, remember?"

"So what does that leave?" Tam asked. "A telepathic call to Forkle?"

That could work. But the suggestion gave her a better idea. She wasn't ready for another big dramatic scene. And Silveny had made her promise to call for help if she ever needed her.

She only sent the transmission twice before a giddy SOPHIE! SOPHIE! SOPHIE! blasted into her brain.

But Silveny picked up on her mood almost immediately. SOPHIE NEED HELP?

Yeah, Sophie told her. I don't know where I am, but—

FIND! FIND! FIND!

The alicorn's voice flashed away and Sophie barely had time to race outside before thunder cracked the sky and two shimmering alicorns—both gleaming silver, but one bigger, with blue-tipped wings—soared out of the void and circled around the gray, restless clouds.

SOPHIE! FRIEND! HELP!

Both alicorns tucked their wings and dove, slowing their fall at the last second and touching down in the long grass. Clearly Sophie's ability to track thoughts to their locations came from her alicorn-inspired DNA.

"Thank you," Sophie whispered, taking a cautious step forward. She knew Silveny trusted her—but Greyfell was always warier, especially now that he was going to be a daddy.

His deep brown eyes flickered to hers, and then to the empty field, his fur bristling, hooves stamping.

I don't like it here either, Sophie told him. We'll be quick. We just need to load up.

"Leave it to you to have our world's most valuable creatures at your beck and call," Tam said behind her as he dragged Brant over.

"And I'm risking their lives by doing it—if the Neverseen show up..."

She socked Brant in the face to make sure he stayed unconscious.

Fitz did the same to Ruy.

BAD PEOPLE? Silveny asked.

The worst, Sophie transmitted.

Silveny's thoughts darkened. BITE THEM?

Maybe once we get back. Right now, can you and Greyfell lean down so it's easier to load them?

"I'm staying with Brant," Tam said as Sophie and Fitz helped him hoist the limp body onto Greyfell's back. "Can you two both fit on the other alicorn, and hold Ruy?"

"We'll make it work," Fitz said, "But I want you to sit behind me," he told Sophie. "That way I can be a buffer between you and Ruy."

"I don't need you to protect me," she argued.

"I know. But I'd prefer knowing you're safe. Please? You have no idea how hard it was standing in that force field, watching them attack you. Just thinking about it..." He flung Ruy over Silveny's neck and climbed on before offering Sophie a hand. She let him pull her up, blushing when she wrapped her arms around his waist.

|Cover 2

Relevant results in this cover: 9

Content pages range: [23, 41]

Groups range: [5, 11]

Deep intent (search) query

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being presented as equal or superior to magic

Ranking query (reranker)

Interested in example of human technology
being presented as equal or superior to magic

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- 000006.txt — ranks: #6
- 000007.txt — ranks: #7 · #35
- 000008.txt — ranks: #8
- 000009.txt — ranks: #10 · #30
- 000010.txt — ranks: #11
- 000011.txt — ranks: #12

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I'm sure it is," Sophie told her, turning back to Livvy. "But I think it's funny how my sister and I have the same blank spot in our memories—the same time she also saw you. Did my allergy have to do with Amy?"

Livvy twisted her braids. "Right now isn't the time for this conversation. That memory was taken for a very specific reason. We can't give it back until you're ready."

"I'm ready," Sophie insisted.

"Me too," Amy added.

"I figured you might say that," Livvy glanced to Quinlin and Alden as if she was hoping they'd jump in with a subject change.

No such luck.

"The most I can tell you is that there was an accident that day." She seemed to choose each word carefully. "One that we feared would leave lasting trauma. So your memories were taken, to ensure that neither of you would be haunted by the experience."

"What kind of accident?" Sophie asked.

"I can't tell you that."

"But it was something you guys did?" Sophie pushed.

"Actually, it was something that just . . . happened. And when it did, I was called in to help. And then

things got complicated.”

“Because you gave me Limbium and I turned out to be deathly allergic to it?” Sophie guessed.

Livvy shuddered. “If I’d known it was possible for you to have such a severe reaction, I wouldn’t have suggested trying it. But I’d never seen an allergy before. Luckily the human doctors were much more familiar with what was happening and were able to fix what I couldn’t. And that’s truly all I can say. Anything more might trigger the memory—and with all the emotional stress you’re dealing with at the moment, that wouldn’t be a good idea. Trust me.”

“It’s kinda hard to trust someone who’s hiding things,” Amy told her.

“I know. And I wish I had something better to offer than: Someday you’ll understand.”

“Ugh, I hate when adults say that,” Sophie grumbled.

“Same here,” Amy agreed. “Can’t you use that mind-reading thing to find out what she’s hiding?”

“Not without violating the rules of telepathy,” Alden jumped in.

“But it’s not against those rules to steal someone’s memories?” Amy countered.

“It is,” Quinlin said. “Though it can be allowed in certain instances.”

“And this is one of those instances,” Livvy assured them. “When the time is right, I promise all will be revealed. In the meantime, try to keep in mind that the missing moment has zero relevance to anything you’re currently facing. I know the mystery of it all gives the moment a sense of importance, but what happened back then was . . . a blip.

Group 6/69

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NINETEEN

THE MEMBER OF the Neverseen seemed as surprised as they were, but Sophie recovered quicker. Her instincts took over, red fury rimming her vision as she pooled her anger, preparing to inflict.

“That’s enough of that,” the Neverseen member said, raising his hands and triggering a flash of blinding light.

Sophie charged forward, hoping to grab him before he could leap away, but Biana blocked her, shouting, “He’s a Psionipath!”

The warning rang in Sophie’s ears as the light solidified, encasing the cloaked figure under a glowing dome.

“He makes force fields?” Sophie asked.

“You sound impressed.” He smoothed the sleeves of his black cloak and gave a bow.

Sophie knew it wouldn’t work, but she grabbed a rock anyway, launching it at his head with all the strength she had.

Biana yanked them out of the way as the rock ricocheted, knocking a football-size crater in the tree they’d been standing in front of.

“You have to stop doing that,” Biana said.

“I agree,” the Neverseen member told them. “Those energy blasts are such a waste. And I believe this is what we call a stalemate. You can’t get to me—and if I leave this shield, you’ll unleash your Inflictor

rage. So I'm going to stay right here, where it's nice and cozy."

Sophie turned to Biana, keeping one eye on the Psionipath. "How long before the force field wears off?"

"Long enough for someone to come to check on me," he told her.

"And there's no way to break through the force field?" Sophie whispered.

Biana shook her head. "Psionipaths created the shields that keep Atlantis livable underwater."

"Like I said"—he traced his fingers along the glowing field of white energy—"we have a stalemate. So what are you going to do?"

"More of them could show up any second," Biana whispered.

"But one of the Neverseen is right there—how can we just leave?" Sophie asked.

They hadn't learned what he was doing to the tree—and what if he knew what happened to Keefe's mom?

"Your Telepath tricks won't work," he said, somehow guessing what Sophie was planning.

Sophie ignored him, hoping her tweaked abilities would come through as she gathered her mental strength and reached for his mind. As soon as her consciousness hit the force field, it split into a thousand directions, like shoving her thoughts in a blender without the lid on.

The Psionipath laughed as she clutched her temples, struggling to fight through the headache. "Clearly the Black Swan forgot to give you any common sense."

Fury and frustration clouded Sophie's vision, and she fought them back, knowing she had nowhere useful to inflict them.

"Don't think I haven't realized you're not here alone," he added. "You couldn't have leaped here—our sensors would've detected it. So that leaves dwarves and gnomes, and I'm betting on a gnome."

Where's your little friend hiding? Probably not close, otherwise they would've tried to help you."

"You seem to know a lot about us," Sophie said, hoping she sounded calmer than she felt.

Maybe if she egged him on, he'd slip and tell her something useful.

"How could I not?" he asked. "I've been hearing about Project Moonlark for years. How does it feel to know the sum total of your existence is to be someone else's puppet?"

"She's not a puppet," Biana spit through gritted teeth.

"No, perhaps you're right," he agreed. "I've always suspected her role would be far more sinister."

"You want to talk about sinister?" Sophie asked. "I know what you're doing here. This has to do with the plague, right?"

He snorted so loud, snot probably crusted the inside of his hood. "Is that my cue to outline our entire plan for you? Would you like names and dates, too, or just the general gist? I could also use hand puppets if you'd like, to make it more entertaining."

Okay, so maybe egging him on wasn't going to work.

But Sophie had realized something much more troubling.

He could've leaped away when they first startled him. But he chose to stay.

Why would he do that—unless he had a plan? And why did she have a feeling they were playing right into it?

Her feet itched to run, but if they turned their back on him, he could drop his force field and attack. And if they leaped away he could go after Calla.

"Ah, you're turning pale," he said. "I'm guessing that means you've finally realized the gravity of your situation. So what's it going to be? Run and hide? Don't think I won't find you. I know this place better than anyone. I came here all the time when I was a kid."

“Why would you be in the Neutral Territories?” Biana asked. “The only people who . . . ohh hhh hhh.”

“What?” Sophie asked as Biana shielded her eyes to squint through the force field.

“He went to Exillium,” Biana whispered.

Sophie covered her mouth.

That would mean . . .

“Whatever you think you’ve figured out—you’re wrong,” he insisted.

But Sophie could tell by his rigid shoulders that he was lying.

“Okay, I’m done with this game,” he said. “Surrender now, and save yourselves the pain I’ll put you through otherwise.”

“Or, we could do this,” Biana said, ripping off her Black Swan pendant and flinging it toward the force field.

Sophie braced for the ricochet to blast them with a swan-shaped meteor. But when the glass of the monocle hit the force field, it refracted the light a hundred different directions, unraveling the energy shield in a burst of white flames.

The Psionipath screamed as fire licked up his cloak, and he leaped away before Sophie could charge him.

“Come on,” Biana said, dragging Sophie back the way they came. “We have to get to Calla before he returns with reinforcements.

They channeled all their energy to their legs, letting it fuel their sprint. Their feet barely skimmed the ground as they raced through the forest.

Somehow Biana knew exactly where they were going, and within minutes they'd made it back to Calla.

"No time to explain," Biana shouted as they tumbled underground. "Just get us out of here."

Calla belted out a song, collapsing the tunnel's entrance as she coiled roots around them and the trees whisked them to safety.

"WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?" Mr. Forkle shouted the second they resurfaced in Alluveterre. The other four members of the Collective stood beside him, along with Fitz, Keefe, Dex, and Della.

Sophie stepped forward, ready to plead her defense—but Mr. Forkle wasn't focused on her.

"I did not give you permission to put these children in danger!" he growled at Calla.

Calla didn't blink. "I thought the only permission I needed was their own."

"Yeah, we chose to go with Calla," Biana agreed.

"And we're fine," Sophie added.

"Plus, we found something big," Biana said, giving a quick recap of their encounter.

Only then did Sophie realize the dangerous detail she'd forgotten. She backed away from Calla. "I touched those sticks—and then I let you tie the roots around me—what if I just gave you the plague?"

"Relax, Miss Foster," Mr. Forkle said. "The plague has shown no signs of being transmitted by touch. And anything outside the force field likely wouldn't have been contaminated—assuming anything was."

Calla nodded her agreement. "Do not worry over me. Our real concern is the Neverseen."

"Yeah," Keefe jumped in. "We're going after them, right?"

"You are not going anywhere," Mr. Forkle told him.

"But this is our chance to finally catch these jerks!" Keefe said.

"We might not get another opportunity like this," Blur agreed.

"You aren't actually considering staging an ambush?" Granite said when Mr. Forkle stroked his chin.

"There's no time to prepare," Squall added.

"Why are we arguing about this?" Keefe asked. "It's a no-brainer. They're going to come back to that tree at some point, and when they do, we blast them with everything we have."

"There will be no blasting!" Mr. Forkle told him. "And again, there is no 'we.' You kids are not a part of this. Go upstairs to your rooms. And you"—he wheeled on Calla—"need to explain yourself when we return."

"I can explain on the way," Calla said. "You'll need me to bring you to Brackendale."

"You can't leap," Sophie agreed. "He said something about sensors."

Mr. Forkle sighed. "Then Amisi can—"

"She doesn't know her way around as well as I do," Calla interrupted. "And she doesn't know where we were today. So you can take my help now and be angry with me later."

"All of us should be going," Keefe said.

"For the last time, Mr. Sencen, you are staying here!" Mr. Forkle snapped. "And I do not want to hear another word about it!"

"We're wasting time fighting," Sophie said, stepping between Mr. Forkle and Keefe. "Every second we delay gives the Neverseen time to prepare."

"You will not change my mind," Mr. Forkle added. "We're going. You're staying."

"What if something happens to you?" Della asked the Collective.

"If we're not back by sunrise, have Amisi alert our Proxies," Granite told her.

Sophie waited for Mr. Forkle to assure her they didn't need to worry.

Instead he said, "Upstairs. All of you!"

"Come on," she told her friends, who looked just as nervous as she felt. "There's something else we need to work on."

"It better involve studying your lessons," Mr. Forkle warned.

Sophie didn't bother replying as she dragged Keefe toward the stairs. He fought her for a second, but eventually gave in.

No one looked at each other or spoke as they climbed to the tree houses. The only sound was the slow melody of Calla opening a new tunnel into the earth to bring the Collective to confront the Neverseen.

Group 7/69

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Fintan had survived the Everblaze.

SIXTY-TWO

HOW COULD HE be alive?" Sophie asked. "Alden saw the flames overwhelm him."

"Clearly there was some trick," Sir Astin whispered.

"Does that mean—"

"No." He cut her off before she could fully form the question. "Kenric is gone."

"So was Fintan!"

"Yes. But do you think Kenric would let us mourn his loss? Let that thought go—now. It will only distract you from our actual problem." He pointed to the roof, where Fintan stood, stroking the smoke around the Everblaze as if it were his pet.

It wasn't fair—if she had to have Fintan back, why couldn't she have Kenric, too?

But Sir Astin was right. Kenric would never let Oralie suffer. Just watching her thrash and flail and sob broke Sophie's heart.

Fintan turned to the goblins, who'd huddled up to work out a plan. "Remember, the only reason these flames aren't devouring this building is because I'm holding them back. If anything happens to me, this whole city burns."

"This is madness," Councillor Terik shouted at Fintan.

"No—it's called taking action," Fintan snapped back. "A new concept for you, I realize. I remember when I was a Councillor. Always sitting back, thinking we needed more time, more information, more thorough consideration. We claimed it proved our superior wisdom. But really? We were cowards. Afraid to make the hard choices and do what needed to be done."

"And what are you accomplishing by killing innocent gnomes?" Emery shouted.

"It's called getting your attention," Fintan said. "We have a plan—one I wish I could take credit for, but that's owed to our previous leader. It's a shame she couldn't be here to see her vision realized. In the end, she was a coward too. She wanted to think more. So I removed her to see the Lodestar Initiative through."

Keefe's hand fell slack in Sophie's, and she needed Dex's help to keep him steady when Lord Cassius shouted, "What have you done to my wife?"

"Nothing more than she deserved," King Dimitar said, reminding everyone that Fintan wasn't the only monster among them. "And no more than I'd be willing to do to any of you."

"Is that a threat?" Councillor Bronte shouted.

"It's an end to the ridiculous charade we keep playing," King Dimitar told him. "Aren't you as tired of it as I am? You despise us every bit as much as we despise you. And were your minds not so pitifully weak, you would've attacked us long ago."

"And if you didn't know we could beat you, you would've attacked us," Councillor Emery snapped.

"For the moment," King Dimitar agreed. "But let's see what happens when we cut off your resources."

"Yes, let's," Fintan said, turning to the gnomes. "Everything the Council told you about the drakostomes is true—with the exception of one crucial detail." He paused to make sure he had their full attention before he added, "There is a cure."

King Dimitar reached into his metal diaper and pulled out a narrow test tube filled with a muddy liquid. Sophie wasn't sure which disgusted her more—where that test tube had been, or the fact that the ogres had withheld the cure all this time.

You didn't honestly believe we wouldn't save some of the Panakes bark, did you?" King Dimitar asked the Council.

"So here's how this is going to work," Fint

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We have to. There will always be some knowledge that's too dangerous for us to maintain. But... there must be a better way to find what's been erased. Maybe if everyone knows small pieces—" "We'd be exactly like the Neverseen," Sophie finished for her. "In a way, yes, we would. But we wouldn't be doing it to limit the power of our members. Merely to protect everyone's sanity, while also making sure we don't keep too much important information in one place." "It'll still slow everything down," Sophie argued. "I suppose." Oralie tucked another stray ringlet behind her ear as she turned to study her mind map. "There are no easy answers, Sophie. And very few perfect solutions—but I'm assuming you don't need me to tell you that. You're the one setting fires." "One fire," Sophie corrected, ready to remind her that they were talking about two very different things—but the hologram Bronte had finished studying the roots and was making his way back to Kenric. "The good news," he said, "is that this doesn't appear to be what I feared. I'll still need to collect a few samples to be absolutely certain—but I believe you're right. This poor creature fell victim to whatever human chemical wreaked havoc on this forest." "And the bad news?" Kenric asked. "Since I'm assuming you have some." "Unfortunately, I do." Bronte knelt next to the gnome, sighing as he studied the gnome's bare feet. "We're too late to save him—though I don't know that we ever would've been able to."

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]
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Sophie sank back down, too overwhelmed to even begin to process that. Especially when he added, “I have often wondered if that’s how you ended up with brown eyes, though.” Sophie buried her head in her hands. How was she ever going to look in the mirror and see anything but a horse face now? “Don’t be so dramatic,” Mr. Forkle grumbled. “This is not the tragedy you’re making it out to be—” “Really? So you wouldn’t care if someone played Dr. Frankenstein with your genes?” “Are you any different right now than you were five minutes ago, before you knew?” “I don’t know,” she mumbled miserably. “It feels like it.” “Well, you’re not.” She rolled her eyes. Her stupid, freaky, horse eyes. Mr. Forkle started to pace, stepping in and out of the shadows as he moved. “We’ve gotten off track. What’s important is that all my careful plans hinged on your mind being impenetrable. And it was, until you nearly faded away. Then your guard cracked, leaving an opening that light—and somehow Fitz—knows how to get through. I’m guessing you bonded with the light as you were fading, let it become a small part of you. And that bond has turned into a weak point where light—or darkness—can push through. That doesn’t explain Fitz, but maybe you pulled him through as you dragged yourself back, and his mind learned the way. Regardless, you made a special pathway straight into your brain, and things have been pushing through or slipping away because of it.” That made almost zero sense—but Sophie supposed it didn’t matter. All that mattered was, “You can fix it, right?” “In . . . theory.” “No—that’s not what you said.” She fumbled in her pocket for the note and shoved it at him. “See—right there. We. Can. Fix. You.” “We can fix you, Sophie.” He held up a tiny bottle made of glittering green crystal. “Drinking this will reset everything that’s been undone. But you need to understand the risk first.” He stared at the bottle instead of her as he said, “The only thing that will fix you is limbium.” She scratched at her arms thinking of the hives. “You know I’m allergic.” “I do. And believe me, I’ve tried to find another way. But alternatives like this”—he reached for the vial of Fade Fuel dangling from her neck—“simply aren’t strong enough. They’ve helped with the symptoms, which tells me I’m right about the cure. But the only true remedy is real limbium. A very strong dose.” A slightly hysterical laugh slipped through her lips. “So, the only way to fix me is to give me something that will kill me.” “No. The only way to fix you is to give you something that will almost kill you—and then give you the antidote I’ve carefully crafted and hope it stops the reaction.” Mr. Forkle sighed and sat beside her. His bulky body sank into the cushions, making her lean toward him more than she wanted. “The cure will work. Limbium affects the center of our special abilities, and this strong of a dose will serve as a reset, undoing any changes that have occurred since your abilities developed. But . . . there’s still a tremendous risk. Your allergy is a complete mystery to us. We’ve never encountered anything like it—and it’s already almost killed you twice.” “So it was limbium that caused my first allergy? The one you erased from my memory because you don’t want me knowing what happened?” He shifted his weight, making the cot creak. “Someday you will understand why that memory was taken. But yes, I gave you a small amount of limbium—not realizing it would trigger such a violent reaction. If the human doctors hadn’t stepped in, I’m not sure what would’ve happened. Which is why I’ve made this.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out the biggest syringe with the biggest needle Sophie had ever seen. Spots danced across her eyes and she jumped to her feet, backing away from him into the shadows where he couldn’t see her. “Uh-uh—no needles.” “It’s the only way.” “No, I have this now.” She stepped back into the light, holding up the black vial Elwin gave her to wear around her neck. “That won’t be strong enough.” “It worked last time.” “Yes, because the amount of limbium in that mild serum Dex gave you was less than a drop.” He held up the green vial again. “This is an ounce of pure limbium, and you must swallow every bit. It will take a lot to jolt your mind to

reset—and a tiny bottle of Elwin’s medicine is not going to counteract that. This is the only way.” He stared at the needle and even his hands shook. “Though even then, I can’t guarantee it will be able to stop the reaction. This is human medicine I collected and then altered and enhanced. It’s completely untested. And the limbium will have to stay in your system for several minutes to allow it time to work, so the reaction will be full fledged by the time I treat you. Which is why this has to be your choice.” She snorted. “Right.” “I mean it, Sophie. Despite what you may think, you are not our puppet. We may give you suggestions and guidance, but in the end the final decision is always up to you. You can leave right now and remain just the way you are.” “Oh, you mean broken.” She made no effort to hide the bitterness in her voice. “How nice of you to let me stay damaged and malfunctioning.” “You’re only a little broken. You can still live a perfectly normal life, so long as you take your medicine to help with the fading.” “But I won’t be able to fix Prentice, or Alden, right?” “No. Your mind will never be impenetrable again. Not without this.” “Well, then, it’s not really a choice is it?” “It is, Sophie. You can choose to protect yourself.” She stared at the bottle in his hands, trying not to think about the burning hives or the heaving pain of her last allergy attack. And the needle . . . She couldn’t look at it. And what about her family? Would Grady and Edaline want her risking her life for this? But could she live with herself if she left Alden trapped in the nightmare of his insanity and Prentice drooling in his dim cell in Exile? “Give me the vial.” A sad smile creased Mr. Forkle’s bloated lips. “Your courage never ceases to amaze me.” He stood, motioning for her to lie back down on the cot, and she didn’t bother arguing. He handed her the vial when she was settled. “I’ll do everything I can to guide you through this. But you’re going to have to fight hard.” “I always do.” She stared at the crystal vial, watching the liquid slosh in her shaking hands. It wasn’t too late to change her mind. Or maybe it was. She pulled back the crystal stopper and poured the salty, metallic liquid down her throat.

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[
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SIX. YOU WANTED TO FIND ME so badly?" Wylie asked as Sophie struggled to her feet, not sure if she felt hopeful or horrified to see him. He stretched out his arms as a challenge while Dex and Lovise fanned out and charged toward the Neverseen. "Come and get me!" "Gladly," Umber said, hurling a shadow spear straight for his face. Wylie dropped into a crouch to dodge, and as soon as he was down, Ruy tried to trap him in a force field. But Wylie somersaulted away before the energy could lock into place. Lovise snarled, and a blur of metal streaked toward Ruy's chest, but he shielded himself in time to block the spinning blades. "Hiding in your bubble already?" Wylie asked, jumping back to his feet, and Sophie tried to spot where Dex and Lovise had disappeared to. But a flash of green caught her attention, and she watched Wylie shape the light into a vivid sphere that looked almost solid as it hovered over his palm—before he whipped it at Gethen's head. Gethen ducked in time, collapsing to his knees as Umber swung a beam of darkness like a baseball bat and knocked the squishy ball of light toward Lovise as she charged forward. But the orb whizzed over Lovise's head, smashing into a nearby dune and bursting with a shower of green sparks that only seemed to speed Lovise's sprint. And Dex leaped from behind a nearby dune, tossing a silver cube right where Gethen was still kneeling. The gadget exploded, blotting out the world with a gritty red fog. But when the dust settled, Gethen, Ruy, and Umber were safely shielded inside a glowing white dome. Now it was a standoff, Sophie realized. And the Neverseen looked way too happy about it. "Cowards," Wylie muttered. "If you want a fight—let's fight!" Gethen's smile widened, and he took his time shaking the red powder out of his hair. "You do seem like you've been practicing. But I only came here to talk. And I must say, this is certainly a surprise. If Sophie didn't look so stunned to see you, I'd almost think this was proof that she'd decided to cooperate. Pity for her that it isn't." Wylie stole a glance at Sophie, swallowing hard when he looked at her ruined hand. "I wouldn't have blamed you if you told them where I was." "I would've blamed me." Her words were a rasp, her throat still hoarse from all the screaming. Gethen sighed. "Stubborn, foolish child. You can't protect him any more than you can protect yourself." "I don't need her to!" Wylie snapped. "You think I haven't been waiting for you guys to come after me?" He flashed another orb—yellow this time, and even squishier-looking than the green one—and pitched it toward the Neverseen like a curveball. Sophie braced for an explosion. But the golden blob deflated the second it touched the white energy, spluttering around like a wild balloon before winking out with a shower of glitter. Ruy laughed. "You'll have to do better than that." "How about this?" Dex shouted, and Sophie pivoted to watch him throw what looked like a handful of Hershey's Kisses. But these were no candy—the small silver blobs latched onto the force field and unleashed some sort of sonic pulse that made the white energy ripple and spark. "Eh," Ruy said, waving his arms to thicken their shield. "You would've been better off bringing along your Shade." "Nah, he'd be no match for me," Umber argued. "He lacks proper training." Ruy shrugged. "He's still the only one they have with any real potential." "Then why do you keep coming after me?" Wylie asked, pressing his hands together and forming a beam of light that was the same deep blue as his eyes. He slashed it like a sword, and Sophie's heart swelled with hope as it sliced through the force field like butter, making the white energy blink away with a crackle of static. But the second the shield disappeared, Ruy had another one in place. "You realize I can do this all day, right?" Wylie sliced the new dome with another blue beam. "So can I!" Sophie wanted to believe him—but sweat was pouring down the strained lines on his face. And the next gadget Dex hurled only kicked up a little dust. "I'm done with this!" Umber shouted, launching shadow spears at both of them. Lovise tackled Dex to save him from being hit, and they both tumbled across the dunes, rolling out of sight as Wylie formed a red orb around himself—and this time the light held strong when the shadows landed. "Interesting," Gethen said, adjusting his ugly hat. "Weren't you just calling us cowards for shielding ourselves?" "You lower yours, I'll drop mine," Wylie offered, forming a green orb with each of his hands. "We'll settle this right here." "And you'll lose," Gethen warned. "Your little tricks will never be strong enough—no matter how hard you've been practicing. Look at the state of your friend, if you don't believe me." Wylie's eyes

shifted to Sophie's hand, and fear, fury, and pity flickered across his face. "Same goes for you, boy," Gethen added, his voice projected toward wherever Dex was currently hiding. "Technology will never beat natural ability." Wylie's jaw clenched. "If you're so sure about that, prove it." Umber sighed. "If you insist." She whispered something Sophie couldn't understand, and her shadowy claws expanded, the darkness pouring out of her fingers and twisting into a short, thin strand that looked blacker than anything else Umber had formed. Sophie realized it was an arrow the same moment Wylie dropped to his stomach to dodge—and it was a good thing he did, because his shield unraveled the second the darkness hit. "That's the problem with light," Umber said as Wylie struggled to shield himself inside a purple orb. "It will always be weaker than shadows. No matter what you try." "It's one of the great flaws of our world," Gethen agreed. "We built everything around the lesser force because we were fooled by the shimmer and shine. But if we want to harness true power, we're going to need to embrace darkness." "Like this," Umber said, weaving another arrow from her shadow claws. She threw back her arm, aiming it toward Wylie, but halfway through the throw she pivoted and launched it at Fitz. Sophie's scream sounded like a death rattle as she watched the darkness slice through his force field and pierce his chest—then liquify and sink into his heart. Dex's shout sounded just as guttural. But then he was charging toward Umber and tossing another handful of his silver blobs—but not at her. At Sandor's force field. Ruy spun to reinforce the bodyguard's cage—which meant he wasn't ready for Wylie to swipe a long blue beam toward Grizel and unravel her force field. Lovise lunged out of the dunes beside her, and together they sprinted for the Neverseen, while Wylie hacked at their shield and Dex hit it with silver gadgets.

```
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And even that wasn't the worst thing she'd discovered. But before she could crush Fitz's spirit any further, she heard Tam's shadow voice whispering in her ear. "I hope you guys got what you needed, because your boy is about to lose it. Biana's already on her way down for retrieval." Sophie couldn't decide which of those facts was more terrifying as she looked down and found Keefe getting choked again, this time by King Dimitar himself. "That's where I've seen you!" the king shouted. "You were with that foolish girl who thought she could get away with invading my mind. Is she here?" And that—unfortunately—was the exact moment Biana chose to steal the silver chest. The second the chest moved King Dimitar dropped Keefe and lunged, snatching Biana and shaking her until she appeared. "Another one!" he bellowed, as Dex shouted, "EMERGENCY PLAN—GO!" and flung one of his cube gadgets at the king's feet. King Dimitar scrambled back as the gadget exploded, and Sophie couldn't see through the smoke to know if Biana got away. More gadgets flew—smoke bombs, stink bombs, sound bombs—as Sophie and the rest of her friends levitated into the fray. Fitz had Calla in his arms, but he set her down and charged into the smoke screaming, "Biana, where are you?" "Over here!" Keefe shouted, sucker punching the ogre who was trying to grab both of them. The punches barely elicited a grunt from the ogre, but Keefe kept fighting anyway. "Duck!" Linh shouted, and Keefe and Biana dropped to their stomachs as a stream of water blasted the ogre like a fire hose. The ogre swayed off balance and toppled off the cliff. "Don't worry," Sophie told Linh when she screamed. "Ogres can phase shift as they fall—you didn't kill him." "TIME TO GO!" Tam shouted, running toward them with ogres lunging after him. He grabbed his sister's hand and ran full speed off the edge of the platform. Fitz and Biana followed, carrying Calla between them. "Come on, Foster," Keefe said, pulling her toward the edge. "What about Dex?" "Right behind you!" Dex threw a modified obscurer and whited-out the world. "Next time warn us that you're going to blind us," Keefe said, clinging tighter to Sophie. "Nothing like jumping off a cliff you can't even see." "I can see," Sophie said, pulling Keefe forward. "Jump right . . . now!" They leaped together, and for a horrifying second Sophie couldn't concentrate enough to levitate. Keefe held her up with him until she got control. Her steps were shaky, but she remembered her Exillium training, and they put a good distance between themselves and the mountain. If only it were safe to teleport through Ravagog's force fields. Instead, they'd have to make it back to the tunnel. "Are you okay?" she asked, noticing the bruises forming on Keefe's neck. "I'll live," he said. "Well . . . assuming we survive that." He pointed to where dozens of heavily armed ogres had phase shifted to the dusty ground below. More ogres were swarming over the bridge, moving shockingly fast for such bulky creatures. They stormed the empty playa, waving their swords and snarling, waiting for their victims to land. "Uh, Dex, I hope you have some of those exploding gadgets left," Keefe said, "because I'm not sure how much longer Fitz and Biana can carry Calla." Dex flung two more gadgets, and he must've boosted his arm strength, because they launched to the other side of the bridge. Sophie worried it was a mistake, until one explosion created a crater near the bridge's first arch, and the other erupted with an ear-splitting screech that sent the ogres scattering away. It stemmed the tide of incoming reinforcements—but they still had more ogres than they could handle. And Dex had to ruin the small victory by saying, "That was all I had." "Then it's my turn!" Linh shouted, spinning in midair and thrusting her arms toward the mountain. Jet streams blasted out of the waterfalls, flooding the playa and washing the ogres over the edge of the canyon. Before Sophie could celebrate, Fitz, Biana, and Calla collapsed into the crashing waves. "Linh!" Tam screamed, and Linh whipped her arms again, sweeping the water back toward the mountain in a massive tidal wave. Fitz, Biana, and Calla dropped into the mud, coughing the water out of their lungs. Keefe, Dex, and Sophie landed as close as they could get, sinking up to their knees in the paste-thick muck. Tam set Linh down beside them. "Wow," Keefe and Dex said—a "wow" Linh definitely deserved. Somehow she was holding the tidal wave steady, keeping it as a wall between the mountain half of the city and where they stood. Across the canyon, the ogres stared at the wave with a mix of fear and fury, none daring to cross the bridge and risk getting washed into the river like their brethren. "You guys okay?"

Sophie asked, stumbling through the mud to help Fitz and Biana to their feet. "I think so." Biana tore off her soggy Neverseen cloak and flung it away. Her clothes underneath weren't as muddy, and Fitz and Calla quickly copied her. Sophie did the same. Dex dropkicked his cloak across the soggy plain.

Cover 3

Relevant results in this cover: 5

Content pages range: [43, 58]

Groups range: [12, 15]

Deep intent (search) query	Ranking query (reranker)
Interested in example of human technology being presented as equal or superior to magic	Interested in example of human technology being presented as equal or superior to magic

-
- 000012.txt — ranks: #13 · #54
 - 000013.txt — ranks: #14
 - 000014.txt — ranks: #15
 - 000015.txt — ranks: #17

Group 12/69

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He wasn't used to people making those kinds of sacrifices for him—and he could feel their concern drifting through the air, with no trace of any pity.

"I should probably explain how this is going to work," Kesler said, pointing to three vials on the small table next to the armchair—one green, one purple, and one orange. "The plan is—"

"GIVE IT BACK!" one of the triplets shouted, followed by a whole lot of squealing.

"DAAAAAAAAAAD!"

"STOP CRYING TO DAD ALL THE TIME!"

"I'M NOT CRYING—YOU'RE CRYING!"

"I'LL MAKE YOU BOTH CRY!"

"AHHH!"

Kesler sighed as Rex, Bex, and Lex charged past them like a strawberry-blond stampede. "Sorry. I know the triplets can make things a little chaotic—"

"A little?" Dex cut in.

Kesler rumbled Dex's hair, making the resemblance between the two of them even more noticeable. "Okay, fine—a lot more chaotic. But that's why they're here." His periwinkle eyes focused on Keefe as he said, "I need you to get overwhelmed. I won't know if anything's working until you start to lose control—and for the record, I won't mind at all if you end up numbing my kids. I might even have you leave them that way. I could use a little quiet."

"Relax," Elwin said, blocking Keefe from getting up. "If all goes well, no one will end up numbed—and if they do, it's totally painless, and you already know how to fix it."

"Rex, Bex, and Lex also know what might happen," Kesler added, "and they're good with it."

"YEAH—DO YOUR WORST!" one of them shouted. "YOU'LL NEVER BE ABLE TO NUMB ME!"

"OR ME!"

"OR ME!"

Keefe shook his head, even though he could definitely feel their conviction.

"I know there's a chance you might end up giving a different command," Elwin told him, before Keefe could figure out how to convey that exact argument. "That's why I'll be wearing earplugs, so I can step in if needed."

"So will I," Kesler promised.

"Me too," Dex agreed.

"Me three!" Ro winked when she added, "And I'll happily smack you around to snap you out of it."

"And yes, we realize there's still a small risk," Kesler admitted, "but... that's pretty normal for us."

"Yeah, my dad's always making us test his Slurps and Burps elixirs," Dex explained. "One time he made all my hair fall out and gave the triplets explosive farts. And my mom got stuck with bloodred teeth for a week."

"Ohhh, I might have to try that bloody teeth one!" Ro cut in, puckering her red lips.

"And let's not forget that Dex has almost electrocuted me several times," Kesler noted, "not to mention that hole in the roof."

Dex shrugged. "It happens."

"So see? Nothing out of the ordinary around here," Kesler added. "No need to look so worried."

Keefe shook his head again.

He could definitely tell from everyone's emotions that none of them were the least bit concerned by this plan they'd come up with. But that didn't mean it wasn't a super-bad idea.

"LOOK HOW SCARED HE IS!" one of the triplets shouted as the stampede charged closer.

"YEAH, WHO KNEW THE GREAT KEEFE SENCEN WAS SO BORING!"

"HE'S NOT BORING! HE'S CUTE!"

"EWWWW, BEX LIKES KEEFE!"

"SO WHAT IF I DO?"

Keefe had never been so relieved to not have to come up with a reply.

Especially when Rex and Lex started making a bunch of really loud kissy noises and chanting, "BEX WANTS TO SMOOCH HIM!"

Dex snort-laughed. "Welcome to my life. Try not to be envious."

Keefe grinned at the joke. But honestly?

When he looked at the crinkly smile on Kesler's face and the way he rested his hand on Dex's shoulder, Keefe was envious.

He would've fit in so much better with a loud, chaotic family. Instead, he'd been stuck with—

His thoughts were cut off when the triplets sprinted over, hitting him with such a strong blast of excitement, smugness, and pure energy that Keefe felt his eyes start to glaze.

"Okay, let's get this going," Kesler told everyone. "Earplugs in!"

"Remember, this is the best way to find something to help you deal with this. It'll be okay," Elwin promised before popping two glittery blobs into his ears.

Dex and Kesler did the same.

Ro sighed and crammed hers in too. "Even your earplugs are sparkly. You elves have serious issues."

Kesler clapped his hands. "All right. We'll start with the green and go from there. You guys remember what to do, right?" he asked the triplets.

"YEP!" they all said in unison, and the three of them lunged for Keefe with flailing arms, like some sort of mutated kraken.

Keefe jolted as Bex grabbed his hand and the two boys each grabbed his shoulders—but it wasn't just from the emotional bombardment.

One of the boy's hands felt like ice searing his skin. Bex's grip felt weirdly squishy. And the third boy's touch was... Keefe didn't even know how to describe it.

There was something hollow about it.

Or maybe "empty" was a better word.

All Keefe knew was, he didn't like it.

He tried to twist away, but the triplets clung tighter than a jaculus feasting on a T. rex. And the more he struggled, the more they squealed and slammed him with more emotions and tightened their unsettling grips.

He wanted it to stop.

Needed it to stop.

And the moment he had that thought, a word started burning in his throat.

"Drink this!" someone ordered, and Keefe felt a vial press against his lips.

He choked down the bitter liquid, coughing and hacking.

"Is that any better?" the voice asked.

Keefe shook his head.

If anything, the unspoken command seemed to burn even hotter.

He locked his jaw and pressed his lips tighter, sucking air in through his nose.

"Okay, how about this one?"

Keefe cracked his mouth open enough to gulp down something sludgy and sweet, which made his head feel like he was being stepped on by a mastodon.

The command turned to fire in his throat, getting hotter and hotter and hotter.

It had to stop.

Someone, please make it stop.

He gritted his teeth, biting back the plea.

But his brain kept rattling with the word.

Stop, stop, stop, stop, stop.

"I don't think that one helped either," the voice said. "But I feel like the last one will do the trick."

Keefe gagged as the cloying sweetness hit his taste buds.

Somehow he managed to choke the medicine down, and as it streamed across his throat, it did ease some of the burning.

But it also made his heart race and his head spin.

And the command was still there.

It was just... shifting into something else.

He didn't need it to stop this time.

He needed it to...

No.

He couldn't let himself think the word.

He was too tired to choke it back.

No. No. No. No. No.

“All right, let’s try it my way,” a new voice said, and Keefe felt something brush against his neck. “I just clamped my gadget around your registry pendant, and it should obscure your tone if you try to give a command right now.”

“It’s okay,” someone added as Keefe shook his head. “Remember, this is a test. Use your voice.”

Keefe shook his head harder.

Which made everyone start chanting, “USE YOUR VOICE! USE YOUR VOICE! USE YOUR VOICE!”

The triplets tightened their grips and rocked his shoulders—thrashed his arms—as their emotions brewed into a frenzy.

Keefe couldn’t breathe.

Couldn’t think.

Couldn’t fight anymore as the command shifted back to the most basic need.

“STOP!” he screamed, then slumped with sweet relief when the room fell blissfully silent.

He took a slow, deep breath, reveling in the quiet, before he forced his eyes open to see what he’d done.

And there they were.

All three of the triplets, looking sort of... stuck.

Their eyes were wide, mouths open, limbs stiff—as if they’d been frozen somehow.

"Well," Dex said through the fog of panic slowly filling the air, "looks like we'll all have to go back to the drawing board."

- NINE - Sophie

I think I'm starting to understand why the Council let Glimmer stay here," Sophie grumbled as she bent to catch her breath. "I swear this place is harder to get to than Exile. At least those stairs go down."

It also didn't help that she couldn't see their destination.

Somewhere up ahead—much farther than Sophie wanted to think about—the stone staircase they were climbing disappeared into the misty clouds.

Tiergan's house hopefully wasn't too far beyond that.

Fitz arched his back in a stretch. "I still think we should try levitating."

"Not in these winds," Biana told him. "We'd be swept so far out to sea, we'd never get back."

"Yeah, I guess." He lunged to stretch his quads, rubbing his left knee when he straightened.

"Is your leg hurting?" Sophie asked, realizing that was the same leg that Umber injured when she attacked Fitz with shadowflux.

"It's fine," Fitz promised.

"You're sure?" Biana pressed. "I saw you limping a little while ago."

"I wasn't limping. I was just... taking slower steps." He glanced at Sophie, who must've looked as unconvinced as Biana, because he raked his fingers through his hair. "I'm out of shape, okay? Thanks for making me feel bad!"

Sophie let him off the hook. "Clearly we're all out of shape."

"Hey—speak for yourself!" Biana sprinted up the next few steps, blinking in and out of sight with each movement. "I run laps around Everglen every morning—and I'm always faster than Woltzer!"

"It's my job to stay behind you," Woltzer muttered from a few steps back. "I can't protect you if I race ahead."

"Then how come Sandor and Grizel are ahead of us right now?" Biana countered.

"Because they know I'm covering the rear!" Woltzer shouted. "Don't you know anything about battle strategy?"

"Of course I do." Biana flashed her loveliest grin. "It's just so much fun to mess with you."

Fitz snorted. "It's amazing your bodyguard hasn't strangled you."

"Nah, Woltzer loves me!" She blew him a kiss over her shoulder.

Honestly, Woltzer should've won the prize for Most Patient Bodyguard.

"So, are you losers rested enough to keep going?" Biana asked, tossing her dark, wavy hair. "Or do you need to waste more valuable time?"

Fitz sighed. "Who invited her?"

"That would be you," Biana informed him. "You thought having a Vanisher would come in handy."

"No, I just knew you'd sneak along anyway, since you're nosy like that—and dying to see Tam." He stage-whispered to Sophie, "My sister's a fan of silver bangs."

Sophie raised her eyebrows, glancing at Biana.

Biana's cheeks flushed—but Sophie couldn't tell if that was confirmation or irritation.

Or both.

“Really, Fitz?” Biana snapped. “You want to talk about crushes? Because you...”

Her voice trailed off, and she turned even redder when she glanced back at Sophie.

They hadn’t really talked about the breakup—mostly because Sophie hadn’t talked much about the whole dating thing with Biana in the first place.

Yet another reason having a crush on her friend’s brother made things super awkward.

Fitz cleared his throat but didn’t seem to know how to break the silence.

Neither did Sophie.

But she forced her tired legs to start trudging up the stairs again—and the momentum helped her find a change of subject. “

```
[
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I'm a slight amendment to the plan," Kesler explained, "to clear the crowd out of the courtyard, since we're having to do this during a busy time." He patted the worn satchel slung around his shoulder, and Sophie could hear the clink of glass vials knocking into each other. "Stink bombs?" Keefe guessed. "Some of my finest," Kesler agreed. "Ohhhh, can I set one off?" Ro asked. Kesler laughed. "Pretty sure that would cause an interspeciesial incident." "Which is why it'd be so much fun!" Ro countered. Sophie tried to smile, but she couldn't take her eyes off the courtyard, where tiny shops and cafés surrounded the fountain in the center. The golden figures gleamed among the streams of colorful water that blasted around them in neat arcs before splashing into the swimming pool-size basin. She was too far back to see where Vespera's signature lay hidden on the top of the human statue's scepter—but she could feel it there. Waiting for her. Promising answers. "So when do we unleash the stink?" Keefe asked. "As soon as I get the signal," Kesler told him. "I guess Alden's setting up something in another part of the city, to try to draw everyone's attention over there." "And we have this to keep us hidden in the meantime," Dex said, pulling an obscurer from his pocket. "I made some tweaks to it last night, so it should even cover some of what Linh does to the fountain—at least for a while." "Where is Linh?" Fitz asked. "And Tam?" Biana added. "Sorry," the twins said a couple of minutes later, plodding into the alley carrying thick stacks of black fabric. "Tiergan made us wait for these," Tam explained, pointing to the white eye symbol on the sleeves. Sophie's stomach filled with all kinds of squirmy things. The wriggling grew stronger when Linh passed over their disguises and Sophie found herself surrounded by the black-cloaked figures of her nightmares—and dressed as one too. "Right there with you, Foster," Keefe mumbled. "I'd kinda been hoping I'd never have to wear one of these again. Even a fake one." "Does anyone else think it's a bad sign that the Neverseen are rushing us?" Marella asked, her petite frame hidden completely by the dark fabric. "Or are we all going to pretend we're not freaking out?" "I'm not freaking out," Grady promised, pulling his hood over his head. "Let them think they're calling the shots. Nothing's going to stop us from getting Sophie's parents back today." "Agreed," Fitz said, resting a hand on Sophie's shoulder. "Okay, but what's our actual plan?" Tam asked. "Do we know where we're going once Linh and Dex get the door open?" "Grizel and I will go first, to scout for guards," Sandor said, strapping his sword outside of his cloak. "We'll use our senses to find a path to where Sophie's parents are being kept." "And I'll make sure they don't mess that up," Ro added. "But just so we're clear, if I see any of my father's traitors, I'll be killing them on sight. If you want me to leave the Neverseen breathing, that's your call. But any ogres are going to die." "I have no problem with that," Sandor told her. "I'll happily help you strike them down." "I doubt I'll need your help," Ro said. "But . . . I guess it's good to have backup." Sandor nodded and Sophie wondered if this would be the first time an ogre and goblins had fought together. "The rest of us will follow," Grady told everyone. "Try not to be noticed—and stay behind me. If I tell you to do something—do it." "Now who's taking over everything?" Keefe muttered. "And I bet he won't get cut off for a week." "Uh, you're not helping yourself in the father-approval department right now," Ro whispered. Keefe shrugged. "Okay," Sophie said, before an argument started. "We're going to do this like we always do—listening to each other, and counting on the fact that our plans are going to change about a million times as soon as we get in there. No one goes off alone. No one single-handedly tries to be the hero. If we see the Archetype—grab it. Otherwise the goal is finding my parents and getting out as fast as we can." "Am I turning anyone else invisible?" Biana asked. Sophie shook her head. "If we can't hide the whole group, it doesn't make sense. Especially since I should probably save my mental energy in case I have to enhance Grady." Everyone shuddered at that. "I'll cover us with as many shadows as I can," Tam said. "And I'll have flames ready," Marella added. Sophie rubbed the knotted emotions in her chest. "I'll inflict if I have to—but it'll be less painful for you guys if I don't. And if anyone needs me to enhance them, let me know." "Same goes for needing a mental boost," Fitz told her. "And calming any panic," Keefe added. A distant chime rang through the city, and strange music followed—a series of soft, lovely sounds woven into something peaceful and

melodic. "That's one of my mom's compositions," Linh whispered, glancing at her brother. "She . . . she must be here." Tam whipped around, as if he'd be able to see his mom performing. But the rows of silver-blue towers blocked everything. "I think that's also my cue," Kesler said, pulling Dex into a strangle-hug before he headed out of the alley. "And I'd plug my nose and cover my mouth if I were you guys."

```
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I came here because a little girl has been separated from her parents—parents who’ve been unknowingly wrapped up in a dangerous project for more than a decade. I helped bring this trouble into their lives. The least I can do is keep their daughter safe while we figure out how to rescue them. Can we please focus on that and leave the past in the past? Several beats passed before Alden nodded. But Quinlin wasn’t ready to concede. “You told us Forkle recruited you. But you didn’t say why you agreed to join.” Livvy flicked her hair. “It was simple. Our glittering world is full of cracks, and I thought I was the only one who noticed them. When I met someone who shared my concerns, I decided to trust him.” “You can do better than that,” Quinlin pushed, turning back to face her. Livvy sighed, crossing to the opposite end of the room and settling into the shadows. “Fine. You want the whole story? It goes back to my Physician training. I spent years learning how each of our cures was developed, hoping I’d someday create my own. And I was stunned to discover that one remedy had its origins in the human vaccine for smallpox. The idea of using one virus to stop another was something no one would’ve attempted if the humans hadn’t found proof that it worked. So I wanted to explore what else we might learn from them—and when I told my professor my plan, he laughed me out of the room. I ended up agreeing to drop the idea, but a few months after you and I were married, I was putting something away in your office, and I discovered that you had a pathfinder with a blue crystal.” Quinlin sucked in a breath. Livvy’s eyes dropped to her hands. “I’m sure you had your reasons for not mentioning to your wife that you were one of the few elves approved to visit the Forbidden Cities. But I figured . . . if you were using the pathfinder in secret, I could too. So, I waited until the Council sent you on an overnight assignment, spun the crystal to a random facet, and followed the path to a city near the ocean, with a long red bridge that stretched across the water.” “Sounds like San Francisco,” Sophie noted. “Maybe it was,” Livvy said. “I was too distracted by the people sleeping on the street while others averted their eyes. It was almost enough to make me think my Instructor had been right to see no value in anything humans had to offer. But I’d come that far, so I tried to find one of their medical centers. And the longer I wandered, the more I started to see past the grime and disorder. I saw couples hand in hand. Parents caring for their children. Even their architecture, while primitive, had its own sort of beauty. But then I found a hospital.” Sophie shuddered, remembering her own hospital stays. “It was horrifying,” Livvy agreed. “Needles and blood and beeping machines leaking radiation. I even saw someone die.” She wiped her eyes. “And the worst part was, I could’ve saved him with one elixir. In fact, I could’ve cured the whole hospital in a few hours. But I didn’t have any medicine with me because I hadn’t gone there to give. I’d gone there to take. I thought I couldn’t be any more disgusted with myself. But as I was trying to leave, I stumbled into the children’s wing, and . . . I’ll spare you the nightmares.” “You couldn’t have helped them,” Quinlin said gently. “If you had, you would’ve created chaos.” “That’s what I told myself when I got home. And I kept repeating it as I spun the crystal on the pathfinder so I’d never find the facet again. But I spent the next few hours vomiting anyway, thinking about what I’d discovered about myself—and about us as a species. We tell ourselves that we’re the superior creatures on the planet. And yet, we’ll scour the globe to preserve animals—we even had the dwarves hollow out an entire mountain range so we could build a Sanctuary for them. But we’ve stood back and let billions of humans die. Yes, their life spans are fleeting. And yes, they tried to betray us all those millennia ago—and I have no doubt that some of them would do it again if they knew we existed. But none of that—none of that—justifies letting innocent people suffer and die. Especially children. You should’ve seen them smiling at me, waving hands that were taped to plastic tubes and needles.” “You’re talking about that time I went to help the dwarves, aren’t you?” Quinlin whispered. “I came home, and you were so shaky.” “I thought about telling you what happened,” she whispered. “But I didn’t know how you’d feel about me taking your pathfinder. So I kept it to myself—until I met Forkle. And after he heard my story, he brought me to meet the rest of the Black Swan and showed me their idea to fix the problem between elves and humans—and asked for my assistance.”

Group 15/69

```
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From there the memory skipped to the part Sophie already knew: waking up in the hospital, hearing thoughts for the first time and crying because she couldn't understand what was happening.

Whoa, Fitz transmitted. The voices feel like knives.

I know, Sophie thought, fighting to shut down the memory. Her mind seemed determined to relive every second.

I knew it had to be scary, manifesting so young, Fitz said, but I never realized it was like that.

Fitz's hands were shaking now, sharing five-year-old Sophie's terror as she'd screamed and thrashed, begging someone to make the voices stop. The doctors hovered around her, sticking her with needles, checking equipment.

How long was it like this before you figured it out? Fitz asked.

The doctors gave her another sedative, Mr. Forkle told them, and while she was out I was able to plant the truth in her mind so she'd understand I'd tried to do that before, but hadn't been able to reach her while the ability was still manifesting.

That makes sense, Sophie thought. I remember somehow knowing that I was hearing thoughts. Also that I couldn't ever tell anyone. I'd never felt so alone.

I'm sorry, Mr. Forkle said.

"Uh, are you guys okay?" Keefe asked. "Foster's emotions are spiking all over the place, and Fitz feels... weird."

"I'm fine," Sophie promised, shaking her head to clear it. She turned to Mr. Forkle. "But I still can't see the boy's face, or how you triggered my telepathy."

"You were unconscious for the telepathy triggering. And the boy's face is blurry because he was wearing an addler. It's a gadget that makes it impossible for your eyes to focus on the wearer's face. They were very popular during the Human Assistance Program, since humans forget anyone they cannot recognize."

"Why would the boy have one?" Sophie asked. "And who was he? Why was he there?"

"Those are the questions I've been trying to answer for the last eight years. Obviously he's with the Neverseen, but I have no idea how he found you, or why he didn't seem to realize what you truly were. I'm glad he didn't, because I wasn't watching you as closely back then. I hadn't even known you were outside until I heard the neighbor girl shouting that you'd fallen. I ran out to check and found you bleeding and unconscious. When I probed your recent memories, I realized you'd seen an elf and I was tempted to grab you and flee. But there were too many people watching. Plus, the boy had disappeared, and I hoped that meant he'd crossed you off whatever list he was working from. Still, I decided to move up your timeline just in case. I called 9-1-1 and triggered your telepathy, knowing the head injury would be an excuse to help your mind accept the new ability. I also altered your memory to be sure you'd forget the boy. And then I never let you out of my sight again."

"If you erased the memory that quickly," Keefe asked, "how did Foster write about the boy in her journal?"

"I merely hid the memory at first. I was trying to avoid interfering any more than I had to. But the memory kept resurfacing. Sophie's mind had latched on to the moment to try to understand it. When I caught her writing in her journal, I knew I had to be more drastic. That night I washed the moment completely and tore the page out of her journal."

"So you did sneak into my room while I slept?" Sophie asked, feeling especially squirmy when he nodded.

"My job was far from easy, Miss Foster. I had to ready your abilities, keep you safe, and still have you believe you were a regular human girl."

"You failed pretty epically at the last one," Sophie mumbled. "If you'd wanted me to feel normal, maybe you shouldn't have made me read minds—or at least taught me how to block the thoughts I didn't want to hear."

"Believe me, I tried. Certain skills need conscious training, and I couldn't reveal the truth to you yet. So every night I searched your memories and helped your mind set aside anything too upsetting. I also tried to help with your headaches—don't you remember how I was always asking about them? I even

gave your mother remedies to try, but I doubt she gave them to you. She wasn't a fan of medicine. She made it clear at her first fertility appointment that she was only there as a last resort. It was one of the reasons I selected her. So many human remedies do more harm than good, and I had to ensure you wouldn't be subjected to them constantly. The few times you went to the doctor, I had to monitor what they gave you and then find ways to undo the damage. I also had to change your records to ensure you looked human on paper—and your hospital stays were even worse. So many files to erase and treatments to adjust. You have no idea what a nightmare it was."

"I might, if you gave me back my other missing memory," Sophie reminded him.

"Nice try."

"But it's not like this memory even taught me anything," Sophie argued. "I still don't know who the boy is."

"Perhaps that will convince you we are not withholding crucial secrets," Granite said.

Or that they picked that memory to return because they knew it was a bust...

"And you really have no theories for who the boy could be?" Sophie pressed.

Mr. Forkle heaved a heavy sigh. "In the interests of avoiding further questioning, I will tell you that we've spent many years investigating the children at Foxfire. And we've ruled out every single boy."

"Could you have missed someone?" Biana asked.

"Our methods were very thorough. I'm convinced he was not there—and if I'm right, then there's only one other place he could have been."

Fitz figured it out before Sophie did. "Exillium."

Cover 4

Relevant results in this cover: 4

Content pages range: [60, 73]

Groups range: [16, 19]

Deep intent (search) query	Ranking query (reranker)
Interested in example of human technology being presented as equal or superior to magic	Interested in example of human technology being presented as equal or superior to magic

-
- 000016.txt — ranks: #18
 - 000017.txt — ranks: #19
 - 000018.txt — ranks: #20
 - 000019.txt — ranks: #21

Group 16/69

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FORTY-ONE

BIANA WAS RIGHT—these masks smell funky,” Keefe said as the five friends leaped to Exillium.

The fleck of crystal on their beads dissolved as soon as they arrived on the slope of a misty mountain. Sharp winds stung their cheeks while they climbed the rocky path ahead, and the slender trees around them looked normal and healthy.

“No sign of the plague here,” Sophie said, not sure if she was relieved or disappointed. No plague meant no chance of finding any clues, either.

“So, um . . . where’s the school?” Biana asked. “Do you think we leaped to the wrong place?”

“How?” Dex asked. “We used their beads.”

“True.” But Sophie had yet to see another person, or even a sign that anyone had ever been there. No footprints marred the path, no voices buzzed in the distance. “If we’re lost . . .”

“Then we all jump off these cliffs,” Fitz said, “and teleport as close as we can get to Alluveterre.”

“Or she could take us to Foxfire,” Keefe jumped in, “and we could run through the halls screaming, ‘YOU CAN’T GET RID OF US THAT EASILY!’”

“I like that plan,” Dex said.

“Me too,” Biana agreed.

"Of course you do. It's brilliant."

Their path curved, leading to a rocky clearing so thick with mist, they couldn't see the ground. An enormous arch made of jagged black metal loomed over the entrance, woven from iron thistles.

"This place is freaky," Dex whispered. "Do you think this is it?"

Sophie pointed to the center of the arch, where the same X symbol they'd seen before seemed to taunt them.

"Okay," she whispered. "From this point on we keep a low profile, and if we find something we—"

The rest of her instruction disappeared in a scream.

A thick rope had tightened around her ankle, yanking her off the ground and leaving her dangling upside down from the arch. Her friends hung beside her, flailing and thrashing, the ground very far below.

"Welcome to your Dividing!" a raspy female voice shouted from somewhere in the fog.

The mist parted and a figure in a red hooded cloak stepped forward, followed by a figure in a blue cloak and another in royal purple.

"You must find your way to freedom," the purple figure told them. Her voice sounded stiffer than the other figure. More reserved.

"There's no right answer to the problem," the blue figure added, his voice high and nasal. "But light leaping doesn't count. You must untie or sever the cord. And choose wisely. This will determine which one of us will be coaching you."

Sophie's brain throbbed from the head rush, and her snared foot went numb as she tried to curl her body up to reach the knot. She couldn't even make it halfway before her abs gave up.

Why had that always looked so much easier in movies?

"Anyone having any luck?" Fitz asked, clearly not experiencing the same ab challenges as Sophie. He pried at the rope with shaking hands. "This knot is impossible."

"Almost out," Keefe said.

Sophie tried to catch sight of him, but Dex was in the way.

Keefe mumbled "ow" several times before shouting, "YOU THINK YOU CAN HOLD M—"

A loud RIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIP cut him off, and he shouted a bunch of words that would earn him a month of detention before a CRUNCH! left him silent.

"Are you okay?" Sophie called.

"I've been better," Keefe groaned. "Guess I forgot to brace for the fall."

"He also forgot his pants," the blue-cloaked figure noted.

A wave of snickers followed, and Sophie realized the whole school was hiding in the mist, watching them dangle like sides of beef at the butcher shop. Keefe's boot dangled with them, along with a shredded pair of black pants.

"Oy, his boxers are covered in little banshees!" a kid shouted.

"Bet he peed himself too," another said.

"SILENCE!" the blue Coach snapped. "Those of you still trapped should not concern yourselves with those who are free. He's passed the test. Can you say the same?"

"I can in a second!" Dex shouted back.

Sophie spun around and found Dex curled up like a monkey, sawing at his rope with something silver. The cord snapped a second later, leaving him hovering there.

Levitating.

"Should've thought of that," Keefe grumbled as Dex floated to the ground and tossed his silver blade—fashioned out of his vest's buckles—at the purple figure's feet.

"Impressive," the purple Coach said. "Too bad you won't be in my hemisphere."

"And then there were three," the red Coach called to Sophie, Fitz, and Biana.

"Try two!" Biana shouted, pumping her arms to swing back and forth. Her rope frayed against the metal thistles of the arch, and she stopped her fall with shaky levitating. She got most of the way down before her concentration gave out, but she was able to tuck and roll when she hit the ground.

Sophie tried Biana's method, but her rope refused to fray. And there was no way she was dropping down pantless, like Keefe—not that she really understood how he'd managed that. She also had no idea how to turn her vest into a blade. But there had to be something else she could use. She checked all of her pockets.

"GOT IT!" Fitz shouted, doing a gold medal-worthy flip to stand on top of the arch. He unknotted his rope easily, then climbed over to Sophie.

"NO ASSISTANCE ALLOWED!" all three Coaches hollered at him.

"I'm not going to leave her up here!" Fitz shouted back.

"It's okay," Sophie told him. "I have a plan."

She doubted it was a good plan—but he didn't need to know that. She refused to be the only one who couldn't get out on her own.

Fitz reluctantly floated to the ground, and Sophie reached under her vest and dug out her Black Swan pendant, remembering how it had worked with the force field. She held it by the swan-shaped handle and tipped the glass into the orangey rays of sunrise. As soon as the light hit the lens, a blue beam flashed like a laser. She aimed it for her rope and it erupted with white-hot flames, spreading down her boot and igniting the metal arch in a shower of sparks.

She thrashed and broke free, but the fire kept burning her leg, the pain making it impossible to levitate as she fell. She curled into a ball, bracing for a brutal landing and . . .

A powerful stream of cold water knocked her back.

She sank into the wet, glad to feel the flames vanish on her leg. Then the wave rolled forward, tossing her gently to the dirt like the ocean crashing onto the shore. She gasped for breath and tried to pull herself to her feet, but the searing pain of her burns was too unbearable.

The last thing she saw was a giant wave crashing against the burning arch. Then everything faded to black.

Group 17/69

```
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My dad was always paranoid. Always preparing me for something he seemed afraid would happen. But he got much weirder toward the end. Started shutting himself in his office for days at a time. Wandering around the house muttering under his breath about power sources and how he should've spent more time studying geology. And then one night I came downstairs and found him smashing all his laptops and burning all his research in the fireplace—and when I asked him what he was doing, he grabbed my arms and told me he'd made a huge mistake, and the only way to fix it was for us to disappear. He said he had a plan that was going to sound scary because it would mean starting over with new names, but I had to trust him because it was the only way, and he promised he'd tell me more once he had everything arranged." She had to clear her throat a few times before she said, "Three days later a stranger showed up at our door and told me my dad was dead and I had to leave because I needed people to think I was dead too. I thought it was a cruel joke, but... they had a letter from my dad. Apparently he'd given it to them in case something like that happened."

"What did it say?" Keefe asked.

"A bunch of stuff I'm not going to tell you. But... he'd made all these arrangements. Obituaries. Graves. A new name. New guardian. A bank account. Lists of dos and don'ts and general survival skills. And he told me the most important thing I could do was forget my old life, forget about him, pretend I was an orphan, and never look back."

"I'm guessing the hidden camera at your grave doesn't really follow those rules," Keefe said quietly.

"Neither does trailing you—or telling you any of this."

Keefe nodded, deciding not to ask why she was doing it.

He was pretty sure it was the same reason he kept trying to trigger the memories his mom stole.

Some things you just can't let go.

"I'm sorry," he told her again.

"You keep saying that."

"I know." Keefe paced across the alley a couple of times before he said, "I just... can't help feeling like I did something—or didn't do something—that makes me responsible for all this, and I just don't remember it."

She fidgeted with the sleeves of her sweatshirt. "So that's why you brought us flowers and stood there drawing in your little journal."

Keefe nodded.

"Can I see it?"

"The sketch? It's nothing special."

"I'd still like to."

"You realize in order to do that, I'll have to reach into my coat pocket. Figured I'd mention that because I'd really rather not be tackled again."

Her lips twitched, like he'd almost gotten her to smile. "Move slowly, and we should be good."

Keefe reached for his pocket.

"Ugh, you can move faster than that!" she grumbled when he set his pace just slightly faster than a sleepy ghoul.

Keefe smirked and pulled out his silver journal, flipped to the sketch of the graves, and held it out to show her.

"Nope!" he said when she tried to grab the journal from him. "Lots of stuff in there you don't get to see."

She rolled her eyes and leaned closer, studying his drawing.

“Wow, that’s... brilliant, actually.”

Keefe’s cheeks warmed. “Why do you sound so surprised?”

“I mean... it’s a drawing of headstones. I figured it’d be boring. But I like the way you captured the shadows and the drizzle. Very... moody. Kind of like you.”

```
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They would need to find somewhere to sleep soon.

She was about to call it a day when she spotted a small, curved line at the base of a lantern toward the center of the bridge. An elvin rune—one she could actually read.

“Dex, get over here,” she called. She pressed on it, searching for the edges of a secret compartment, but found nothing.

“Did you find it?”

“I found something.” She pointed to the rune. “That means Eternalia. This has to be what the note wanted us to find.”

“How does it help us get home?”

“I have no idea.” Her eyes examined the lantern inch by inch, finally focusing on the tip of the highest lamp. “Look, Dex—there’s a crystal. None of the other lanterns has that.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yeah. I know these lanterns by heart now, and this is the only one that has it.” She squinted, smiling when she saw the crystal only had a single facet. “It’s a leaping crystal—and I bet it leaps straight to Eternalia.”

“You did it! We can go home.” He threw his arms around her and spun her around. A second later he jumped back, blushing from head to toe. “Sorry. I’m just happy.”

She shrugged, hoping her face wasn’t as red as it felt. “No problem.” Her smile faded. “But we still

don't have nexuses. How are we supposed to get home?"

"People leap without them all the time."

"Yeah, people who don't need them anymore."

"We're close enough—and we'll concentrate extra hard when we do it. We might come back a little faded, but that only lasts a few days."

Easy for him to say. His meter had been three quarters full. She wasn't even to the half. If simple mathematics applied, that would mean she'd lose more than half of herself, which might make her fade away.

But it was their only option.

"Well, we can't do it until sunrise." She pointed to the angle of the crystal, which clearly needed dawn light to create a path. "Maybe we should find somewhere to sleep for the night."

Dex nodded. "I can't believe there's a crystal to Eternalia hidden in the Forbidden Cities. Do you have any idea how illegal that is?"

She frowned. "I wonder why it's here."

"So we can come and go as we please," a gruff voice said behind them. Sophie and Dex whipped around to find three figures cloaked in black pointing a silver weapon at their heads.

The kidnappers had found them.

FORTY-SIX

I WOULDN'T SCREAM IF I WERE YOU," THE FIGURE with the weapon warned them. "I'm not afraid to use a melder, and you will not enjoy it." He pointed the metal gadget at Sophie's forehead. "A few seconds will only stun you. Any more will cause permanent damage. Do you understand?"

"You wouldn't do that with humans around," Sophie said, hating her voice for shaking. The bridge

wasn't crowded, but there were a few people out for evening strolls. One of them would notice the three figures in black hooded cloaks threatening children and call the police.

All three figures laughed, and the one with the weapon—who appeared to be the leader—moved a step closer. “They have no idea we’re here.” He pulled a small black orb from his cloak. “This is an Obscurer. It bends light and sound around us like a force field. All anyone can see or hear right now is wind and a slight distortion in the air, like heat waves radiating off the ground.” Sophie reached for Dex’s hand. They were on their own.

“I don’t know how you escaped,” the leader hissed as he handed a coil of silver rope to one of his goons. “But you can rest assured it won’t happen again.”

Sophie bit her lip so she wouldn’t cry out as the goon jerked her hands behind her back and tied them tight. “How did you find us?”

“The Black Swan must’ve thought we wouldn’t check our own pathways. Let that be a lesson to you. Never underestimate your opponent.”

“If you’re not the Black Swan, who are you?” Sophie demanded.

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” the goon sneered as he tied her ankles. The cold metal wire cut into her skin, but she barely felt it as she focused all her concentration on calling for help.

Please, Fitz, she transmitted, imagining him in the halls of Everglen. Her brain buzzed with energy, and she pushed her mind further than she ever had before. We’re in Paris—Pont Alexandre III. We need help. Tell your dad and please hurry!

Maybe adrenaline enhanced her concentration—or maybe it was wishful thinking—but the message seemed stronger this time, like she could actually feel it swirl inside Fitz’s mind as he struggled to ignore it.

Please listen to me. I’m not dead—but I might be if you don’t come. Please send help.

Strong arms shook her shoulders so hard her brain rattled, severing her connection.

“She was transmitting again,” the goon yelled. “Never heard a call that loud either. We should get out of here in case anyone heard her.”

"Agreed—and don't try that again unless you want to find out what the melder would do to your powerful little brain. Understood?" The leader pointed the weapon between her eyes.

She swallowed the bile filling her mouth. "What are you going to do with us?"

"That's none of your business. Let's go."

Dex hadn't said a word since the kidnappers appeared. Sophie figured he was in shock, but he must've been channeling, because in one rapid burst he ripped apart his bonds and jumped free. "Duck, Sophie," he screamed.

```
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I found him!" She pointed the way Della, Biana, and Wraith had gone. "You're sure?" Mr. Forkle asked. "It's strange that they would place him near the exit." Sophie checked again, and the sound was definitely coming from that direction. But Prentice's voice was slipping away. She took off running. Dex caught up with her first, "You okay?" "I've been better," she said as the path forked, and she turned down the narrower hall. No one questioned her, even as the hall shrank with each curve of the spiral. The third turn led them to another fork. "An adjunct within an adjunct?" Granite asked. "How is that even possible?" "One path goes up to higher ground." Mr. Forkle turned to Sophie. "Which way?" Sophie listened for Prentice, but his ghostly voice had gone silent. She transmitted her name again, and when he didn't respond, she tried Black Swan! Follow the pretty bird across the sky! Wylie! The last word brought him back. "Left," Sophie said, taking the path that went up. "Why would they want him closer to the surface?" Mr. Forkle asked Granite as they followed. "That seems illogical." "Perhaps there was no more room for additions. Or—" A groaning alarm drowned out the rest of Granite's sentence. Sirens rumbled and croaked, reminding Sophie of a didgeridoo. "Sounds like they know we're here!" Mr. Forkle shouted. Their run turned to a sprint, leaving them breathless as the hallway widened again. Sophie could feel Prentice ahead, each step turning his presence warmer. Warmer. WARMER. "There," she said, dashing up a flight of stairs. They dead-ended in an unmarked silver door and Dex set to work on the enormous padlock. "This is different than the one you gave me to practice on," he grumbled. "But you can open it?" Granite asked. "I hope so." "How are you feeling?" Fitz asked Sophie as she shivered against the frozen wall. "Have you blocked out the voices?" She rubbed her throbbing head. "Some are a little too strong right now." "Then let me give your mind a boost." Fitz reached for her temples, and as soon as his fingers touched her skin, a burst of energy rushed into her consciousness. It felt like her brain had guzzled about fifty of Elwin's healing elixirs and then got showered with caffeine. "Is that better?" he asked, his hands shaking as he lowered them. Sophie nodded. "What did you just do?" "He shared his mental energy," Mr. Forkle said. "Impressive, Mr. Vacker." Fitz blushed. "I've been practicing." "Got it!" Dex shouted, and they all spun toward the door. Something passed between Granite and Mr. Forkle then, a look equal parts fear and hope as they pulled open Prentice's cell. The room was massive—easily as big as Sophie's bedroom at Havenfield, which took up the entire third floor of the house. And it was empty, save for a large bubble of glass in the center, lit by silvery spotlights. Curled on the floor inside, lying on a thin blanket, was Prentice. His dark skin glistened with sweat and his hair was a tangled, matted mess. Drool streamed from his lips as he whispered words they couldn't hear. "Is there a way in?" Sophie asked as Dex placed his palms against the bubble. "I don't know. This glass feels solid. But there has to be a door." "Perhaps underneath?" Mr. Forkle suggested. Dex dropped to his knees and put his ear against the floor. The room made Sophie's nerves prickly. Why waste all this space if they were going to keep Prentice locked in a bubble? And why was the ceiling a web of roots and wires and metal rods? Everything else in Exile was solid metal, to prevent anyone from tunneling in. And now that she was thinking about it, hadn't the Collective said that today was some sort of special day, before extra security arrived? "I can't figure out how this stupid cage works! It's like they designed it specifically to resist Technopaths. But don't worry, I came prepared." He pulled open the left side of his cloak to reveal a half-dozen small metal cubes strapped to his chest. "I wasn't sure what we'd need, so each of these does something different. And at least two of them should be able to shatter the glass." "Wouldn't Prentice get speared by the raining shards?" Fitz asked. "Perhaps we could shield him using telekinesis," Granite said to Mr. Forkle. "I do not like leaving so much to chance," Mr. Forkle said. Sophie shook her head, no longer able to ignore the prickles. "This is wrong. It has to be a trick." "Finally, someone who sees wisdom," a voice said behind them. The alarm went silent as they turned to face all twelve Councillors, blocking their only escape. TWENTY-NINE SURRENDER IS YOUR only option," Councillor Emery told them, his eyes looking as dark as his skin and hair. Once upon a time, Sophie had counted

the spokesman for the Council among her advocates. But she heard no trace of compassion in his velvet voice.

|Cover 5

Relevant results in this cover: 6

Content pages range: [75, 94]

Groups range: [20, 25]

Deep intent (search) query

Interested in example of human technology
being presented as equal or superior to magic

Ranking query (reranker)

Interested in example of human technology
being presented as equal or superior to magic

- 000020.txt — ranks: #22
- 000021.txt — ranks: #23
- 000022.txt — ranks: #24
- 000023.txt — ranks: #25
- 000024.txt — ranks: #26
- 000025.txt — ranks: #27

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She brought the fire toward the Noxflares—but Maruca grabbed Marella's arm. "Are you sure this is safe?"

"Not really," Marella admitted. "It's fire—it's never safe. But... maybe you should put a force field around me and the boulder. That way if anything happens, I'm the only one who has to deal with it."

"Yeah, but... you'd be trapped with it," Sophie argued.

Marella shrugged, and the gold highlights in her hair reflected the fire as she said, "I can handle a few flames."

Sophie was pretty sure it would be more than a few.

But before she could argue, Marella told her, "Trust me, I'm not planning on joining the 'almost dying' club anytime soon. I'm a big fan of living. But... I really want to try this. I know it probably sounds weird, but it feels like Fintan showed me that memory for a reason. And maybe this is why."

Sophie tugged out an itchy eyelash before she nodded. "Just be careful—and if there's anything I can do..."

"I'll let you know," Marella promised.

She waited until Maruca had formed a flickering force field around her and the boulder—then lowered her torch toward the Noxflares.

Sophie held her breath as the vine erupted with white flames.

But nothing changed.

“That’s only the first layer,” Marella reminded everyone as she added purple flames to the torch, letting them burn for a second before she added them to the Noxflares.

She did the same with the yellow fire.

Then added the pink—jumping back when the Noxflares sparked and shimmered like fireworks.

But no illusions melted away.

And the rocks didn’t suddenly glow with power.

“Are we ready to give up yet?” Keefe asked.

“Nope,” Marella told him. “Fintan kept saying that something was missing, even after he added the pink. So I think there’s still one more step. I just don’t know what kind of flame it would be. Green? Red? Or...”

“Or?” Sophie prompted when Marella squatted and grabbed one of the smaller pieces of rock.

“There’s a lot of heat in this thing,” Marella murmured, squeezing the rock in her fist. “Maybe it absorbed some of that special light from the sixth unmapped star or something. I could find out. Spark it into a flame and see what happens.”

“What do you think the odds are that it’ll explode on you?” Fitz asked.

“I don’t know,” Marella admitted. “But... my instincts are telling me it’ll be okay. I think I need to trust them.”

She closed her eyes and squeezed the rock tighter, gritting her teeth as her whole body shook.

Five seconds passed.

Ten.

Then a strangled grunt slipped through Marella's lips as pale blue flames curled out of the rock like smoke.

"Here goes nothing," she whispered before sending the blue fire straight to the Noxflares.

They flared brighter than the sun, whiting out everything as Sophie screamed at Maruca to lower the force field so they could get Marella out of there.

"No, it's okay," Marella called from somewhere in the glaring white. "I'm okay. And I think it worked, but... it's weird. You'll see once the flames burn themselves out."

Sophie circled the force field, desperate for a glimpse of her friend—and whatever was in there with her.

And on her third time around, the light faded.

"What is that?" Sophie whispered, rubbing her eyes to make sure they'd adjusted properly.

She'd never seen anything like it—even in the Lost Cities.

The rocks had vanished, replaced with what looked like some sort of small, round... gateway.

The burning Noxflares hovered in the air—a perfect circle of flickering blue, yellow, white, purple, and pink. And everything around them was the same normal Elysian scenery.

But inside...

Sophie couldn't tell.

It looked very, very bright and very, very colorful.

"Can you lower the force field?" Sophie asked Maruca.

"What are you going to do?" Keefe asked as Sophie stumbled closer.

She had no idea.

She just had to get a better look, because her gut was telling her, This is it.

This is what you've been looking for.

The power for stellarlune is in there.

Sophie picked up a rock as she approached, warning everyone to duck before she tossed it into the center of the burning circle as soon as the force field blinked away and—

The rock disappeared.

Or maybe she just couldn't see it anymore, because she could still hear it crashing and clanging as it landed somewhere just beyond them.

"Is this an illusion?" Sophie asked Vespera, who was staring at the fiery circle with a mix of awe and confusion.

"If it is, then it is remarkable," Vespera breathed. "And if it is not, then it is impossible."

Sophie turned to her friends. "I need to check."

"What are you going to do—climb through?" Keefe asked.

"Maybe," Sophie admitted. "It can't be that much weirder than teleporting, right?"

No one could necessarily argue with that—though Sandor certainly tried. But Sophie didn't see any other option.

"If you go, I should be in front of you," Maruca told her. "Just in case the situation needs a force field."

"And I'd better go too, to make sure the fire doesn't close in on you two," Marella added.

There wasn't space for anyone else, but Keefe and Fitz moved closer, promising to drag them back if anything tried to trap them—and Sandor paced around them with his weapon drawn.

"What are we doing?" Sophie whispered, sharing a look with Marella and Maruca that seemed to confirm they were all seriously questioning their life choices.

But they still stepped closer and closer, slowly leaning past the circle of flames to see...

Stained glass.

Lots of it.

Thousands of panes in thousands of colors. Forming curved walls that seemed to vanish beyond the Noxflares.

"I think it is another illusion," Sophie mumbled. "Or where we are right now is—I don't know. But I wonder..."

She reached into her belt and pulled out Dex's Illusion Breaker.

"I'm going to hold this in the light of the flames on three," she warned her friends.

Maruca's palms glowed white and Marella held her torch up higher, all of them holding their breath as Sophie said, "Three... two... one...", and raised the crystal cube near the flickering fire.

Beams of light exploded everywhere, and Sophie forgot to close her eyes, too distracted by the world dissolving around her.

She could hear screams and crashes, but her head was spinning, spinning, spinning—and then she was falling back and back and back, into...

...a pair of strong arms.

"Easy there, Foster," Keefe said. "I guess that's why Dex warned us that the Illusion Breaker could cause dizziness."

"Is that what happened?" Sophie asked, blinking hard, trying to get her eyes to focus. "Was it just an illusion?"

"Honestly? I have no idea what's going on. See for yourself."

Keefe helped her stand back up, and she realized the burning Noxflares were gone—and they were definitely still in Elysian, surrounded by rolling hills and fall-colored trees.

But beyond that was a massive dome of intricate stained glass, closing everything in.

"What is this place?" Sophie asked, wondering if the dome was the reason she hadn't been able to teleport to Elysian the first time.

Though if it were, how had the starstone let them slip through?

"I have no idea," Vespera murmured, reminding Sophie she was still with them. "So many illusions on top of illusions on top of illusions."

"So... do you think this dome was built to keep something out?" Keefe asked. "Or keep someone in?"

"I was just asking myself the same thing," a new voice said—one that made Sophie want to scream loud enough to shatter all the glass.

"Whatever it is," Lady Gisela said as she stepped out of the shadows and smiled her much-too-tight smile, "it makes for a very convenient trap, don't you think?"

IF YOU WANTED TO TRAP us, you shouldn't have come here alone!" Sandor snarled, raising his sword and charging toward Gisela like a gorgodon on a rampage.

Gisela's smile stretched wider. "But I'm not alone."

She clapped her hands, and two enormous beasts tore out of the ground—growling blurs of fangs, claws, and muscle that slammed into Sandor, knocking his weapon from his hands and grabbing him by his throat as they dragged him back into the earth.

NO!

Sophie barely had time to scream—barely had time to register the glowing white force field that flared to life around her.

Too late. Too late. Too late.

"Before you do anything you'll regret," Gisela warned as Sophie's vision rimmed with red and she dove into her boiling rage, letting it sear through her veins, "you should know that the only reason your bodyguard is simply a captive at the moment—instead of getting shredded into tiny pieces by two very hungry trolls—is me. Without my regular commands, your bodyguard becomes dinner."

She grinned and tapped her ear, highlighting the silver earpiece running along the outer edge. "My Technopath has been very busy since we teamed up properly, making sure I have a means to control these unruly beasts. After all, what good is having an army of trolls in my arsenal if they're going to run wild during battle and forget who their enemy is? Empress Pernille has been quite impressed with the result. She was all but ready to abandon her enhanced newborn project before I reached out."

"So that's how you got the trolls to cancel their treaty negotiations and turn against the Council?" Sophie asked, trying to keep Gisela talking so she wouldn't call any more trolls—while her brain kept screaming, SANDOR, SANDOR, SANDOR.

She would get him back.

Even if she had to claw her way into the earth.

"That definitely helped," Gisela said, patting her sleek blond updo, which was draped in a net of ability-blocking metal chain. "But the real turning point was when I offered them more land. It's amazing how much loyalty a few human islands can buy."

Sophie stumbled back—the words cutting through her like a throwing star—and she was grateful someone was there to catch her and keep her steady.

She'd forgotten about the disappearing islands her sister had asked her to look into.

How many other vital clues had she ignored?

"Being a leader isn't easy, is it?" Gisela asked, her voice dripping with mock sympathy. "There's so much more to it than setting a fire and carving a symbol into the dirt, isn't there?"

"You're one to talk!" Fitz snapped, making Sophie realize he was the one keeping her steady.

So where was Keefe?

She craned her neck, spotting him crouched near the far edge of their force field, resting his head in his hands.

He's okay, Fitz transmitted. I already checked to make sure he wasn't having a breakdown. But he's just trying to find a command to control his mom. I guess his ability isn't cooperating.

Of course it isn't, Sophie grumbled. The one time we actually need it.

Exactly—but I'm sure he'll get there. So I'm just trying to keep his mom talking in the meantime.

That's what I was doing too, she admitted, mostly so I can figure out how to get to Sandor.

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"Might be a good idea," Tam said. "Since I'm not really sure what I'm doing."

"Just so you know, that's not making me more excited for this," Keefe informed him.

"It'll be quick," Tam promised. "I think."

"One second," Sophie said when Tam reached for her hand.

She closed her eyes and took a slow breath, feeling for the nerve buried deep in her chest and letting her will slide down it.

Click.

"You've gotten pretty good at that," Keefe noted as her enhancing switched on. "Maybe you can teach me some of your ability-controlling tricks."

"Sure—but only if you want," she added, trying not to sound too eager. She even threw in a shrug—then rolled her eyes at herself.

"Ready?" she asked Tam, trying to focus.

He nodded, and she took his hand, letting sparks of her energy flow through her fingertips into his skin.

"Wow," Tam breathed. "I forgot how intense that is."

"Foster has that effect on people," Keefe said with a smirk that made Sophie want to shout, Seriously—what does that mean?

Instead she watched Tam close his eyes and stretch out his other arm.

His lips moved, whispering words too softly for any of them to understand, and his dark brows scrunched together as he curled his fingers, like he was grabbing an invisible rope.

"Okay. I think I know how to call the darkness free. You might feel a little pull," Tam warned as he flicked his hand in a strange pattern—then yanked his arm back like he was playing tug-of-war.

Keefe jerked forward and let out a startled grunt as a tiny whiff of darkness blasted out of his chest and hovered a few feet in front of him.

"It's kinda sad that this isn't even in my top five weirdest experiences," he mumbled, squinting at the shadowy cloud.

"Does it hurt?" Sophie asked when he reached up to rub his chest.

Keefe shook his head. "Not anymore. But that tug was like getting kicked in the ribs."

"Sorry," Tam told him. "I was worried if I went slow, it'd drag out the pain."

"It probably would have," Keefe admitted. "It's all good—thank you for, uh... Huh. I can't think of a non-weird way of saying, 'Thanks for dragging the freaky ripple-tracker thing out of my heart.'"

Tam grinned. "You're welcome."

"You're sure you got it all?" Sophie had to ask as she mentally switched off her enhancing.

Tam nodded and called the shadowflux closer, letting it hover over his palms.

"What are you going to do with that?" Dex asked.

"No idea," Tam admitted. "It'll probably evaporate if I release my hold, but there's a chance Umber did something to it that'll make it unwieldy."

"Oooh—I know!" Keefe jumped up and raced for the trash can, returning with an empty water bottle. "**Trap it in there.** Then it'll go out with the recycling, and if the tracker is somehow still working, it can lead my mom to a big pile of trash."

"Works for me," Tam said, taking the bottle from him and filling it with the puff of darkness before sealing the lid.

Keefe called the front desk and buried the water bottle in the bottom of the bin before leaving it out in the hall for housekeeping.

"Sooooo," he said, plopping back onto the couch once that had all been taken care of. "Does this mean you're ready to tell me the rest? And don't give me the confused eyebrow crinkle, Foster. You told me about the tracker, but you've conveniently not told me how you came across a bunch of very specific information about ripples and eleventh hours and altered Spyballs. So hit me with it—what's going on? What is my darling mommy up to now?"

Group 22/69

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"I take it that means you've met Mommy Dearest."

"No—but I saw her."

"When?"

"Doesn't matter."

"See, but it really does." Keefe tried to dust some of the street grime off his raincoat as he stood up to face her. "Where did you see my mom? And how long ago was it?"

Eleanor shook her head and stared into the distance. Her green eyes looked about a million years old. "I told you, it doesn't matter," she said quietly. "None of this does because it doesn't change anything. In fact, I probably shouldn't have followed you. I'd just... never seen anyone visit the graves, and then I realized you were the boy who disappeared, and I had to at least try to get some answers."

Keefe cringed. Maybe someday he'd laugh at the irony of him and Alvar both having the same nickname. But right then, it didn't feel very funny. "You really are good at sneaking," Keefe told her. "I mean, I was a little distracted at the cemetery. But I don't remember seeing anyone else there—especially someone with bright red hair." "That's probably because I wasn't there," she admitted, tucking her hair behind her ears. "I can't sit in a cemetery all the time waiting to see if someone shows up, can I? So I hid a small camera in a bush with a proper view of the headstones, and it syncs with an app in my phone and sends me an alert anytime anyone stays longer than a few seconds. It's usually just people visiting the nearby graves, but today I saw you and... I'm not sure why I'm telling you this."

"What do you think I'm going to do? Go find the camera and steal it? I'd rather talk about why you have a grave. Also how you have one—since I'm assuming that's not an easy thing to pull off. Did you...?" His voice trailed off as a horrifying possibility hit him. "Wait. Did my mom help you and your dad fake your deaths?" If she did—and then let him blame himself for what happened to them... "No, your mom thinks we're dead," Eleanor assured him before he had a total mental breakdown. "And it needs to stay that way. You can't tell her—" "Uh, I would've thought the whole she's-been-erasing-my-memories thing would've made it pretty clear that my mom and I aren't really

on speaking terms right now." "That can change, can't it?" "Trust me, it won't." He could tell she didn't believe him, so he added, "Let me put it this way. You know how some stories have supervillains? My mom makes those guys look cute and cuddly. So the next time I see her, we're not going to have a chat or hug it out. I'm going to do everything in my power to end her." He would've thought Eleanor might look a little shocked by that kind of confession. Maybe even a little scared of the guy openly talking about killing his mom. But she stared him dead in the eyes and told him, "Good. The sooner the better." She opened her mouth to say something else, then shook her head and said, "I should go. I've been here too long." She started to hand him back his pathfinder but kept it just out of his grasp. "Before I give you this, I need to be very clear: You never saw me. We didn't speak. And you still think I'm buried in that cemetery. Just like I never saw you move anything with your mind or do any other tricks that I'm betting your kind—whatever they are—wouldn't be happy about you exposing. Deal?" "No way. You don't get to decide when this conversation is over! Do you have any idea what I've been going through, trying to find the truth about what happened to you? I've walked every street in London searching for your old house, to see if going there would trigger any memories. I've been to libraries all over the world trying to learn something about your dad's research—" "You need to stop that!" she cut in. "No—I mean it. Leave my dad out of this—especially his research." "Why?" She crossed her arms and looked away, taking several breaths before she said, "Because... I'm pretty sure that's what got him killed." Keefe cleared his throat, feeling like a total jerk for what he was about to say. But her emotions were too jumbled up for him to make any sense of them. "I want to believe you," he said. "It's just a little hard to do when the same obituary said you were dead too, and... here you are." "I know." She closed her eyes, wrapping her arms around herself. "My dad's the one who wrote that." "I thought you said he's dead." "He is!" Tears streamed down her cheeks, and she tried to smear them away with the backs of her hands—but new ones kept trickling down. Yep—he was definitely a jerk. And he was pretty sure if he tried to hug her, he'd end up with a fist to his throat. So he told her, "I'm sorry," even though that always sounded so empty. "Do you... want to talk about it?" She wiped her nose and sniffled. "There's not much to say."

```
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]
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FORTY-SEVEN. IF WHAT'S TRUE?" DEX REPEATED, "And if you tell me it's 'nothing,' I swear I'm going to slip an honesty elixir in your next bottle of lushberry juice." "You don't even make those," Sophie argued, hoping it was true. "I can figure out how," he promised. Sophie glared at Sandor, wondering what the point was of having a goblin constantly eavesdropping outside her door if he couldn't give her a heads-up about surprise visitors. He shrugged innocently—but the glint in his eye told her he'd kept silent on purpose. Probably his punishment for the trouble she'd caused with King Dimitar.

"Seriously, what were you guys talking about?" Dex asked. "I'm not going to 'freak out.'" "It was just a joke, okay?" Fitz told him, looking like he wished he could leap out of there. "What kind of joke?" Dex pressed. "And what is that?" Sophie shoved Mr. Snuggles behind her back. "Just something Fitz brought to cheer me up." "How nice of him." "It was, actually," Sophie said—a little sharper than she meant to. She'd been trying not to let it bother her, but . . . she'd been through a fire, a funeral, and almost been kidnapped by an ogre king, and Dex hadn't even hailed her on her Imparter to make sure she was okay. "I'm sorry I haven't come by sooner," Dex mumbled, like he knew what she'd been thinking. "I've been stuck working on an assignment from the Council." "Really?" Fitz asked, the same time Sophie asked, "What assignment?" "I'm not allowed to talk about it. But you don't have to worry, it's totally safe. I'm just testing some gadgets to see if I can improve them. Oh—and get this. I showed Councillor Terik my telepathy enhancer and he thought it had great potential." "Seriously?" Fitz asked. "He actually thinks you can enhance someone's abilities?" "No," Dex admitted. "But he thinks I might be able restrict someone's ability instead. I haven't had time to tweak it yet because they needed me to finish the other weap—um, gadgets, first. But I think I know what I need to do to make that change." "Why would the Council want to restrict someone's abilities?" Fitz asked, clearly disgusted by the idea. Sophie was more bothered by Dex's little slip. Were the Councillors making weapons? "Uh, because some people shouldn't be allowed to have abilities," Dex argued. "Allowed," Fitz repeated. "Yeah. Allowed. Think about it. Restricting Fintan's ability would've saved Councillor Kenric's life. And his own life. And all of Eternalia." "But . . .," Sophie started, then realized she had nothing to say. The Councillors had done everything they could to keep the healing safe. But they could only control the temperature, their clothes, how many people were in the room. They couldn't control Fintan. "Okay, but . . . controlling people with gadgets?" Fitz asked. "That's creepy." He turned to Sophie, like he was expecting her to agree. But she was too stuck on the idea that the whole fire could've been prevented with a simple silver circlet. "They wouldn't be controlling everyone," Dex argued. "Just the people who need it." "And who decides that?" Fitz asked. "The Council, obviously. What?" Dex asked when Fitz cringed. "I thought your family was like, the Council's number one fan club." "You clearly know nothing about my family. But I'm not saying I don't trust the Council. I'm saying I don't think it's right to mess with people's brains." "Ha—this coming from a Telepath!" "Telepaths have rules and restrictions to follow to make sure we don't abuse our abilities. Sounds like Technopaths need the same." "Um, the Council is the one asking me to make that gadget, remember?" "Yeah. That's what worries me. I think I'm going to go home and see if my dad knows about this. Want to meet up tomorrow to try again?" Fitz asked Sophie as he packed away his memory log. She nodded, still struggling to process the information overload from the last few minutes. Fitz gave one quick longing look to Mr. Snuggles as he pulled out his home crystal. Then he left him behind and stepped into the light. "So what was the 'joke' I'm apparently going to freak out about?" Dex asked the second Fitz glittered away. Sophie sighed and set Mr. Snuggles on her bed. "It was nothing, Dex. Really, honestly, nothing." "You're seriously not going to tell me?" "Not right now, okay? It's not important, and maybe you haven't noticed, but I'm having kind of a bad week." Her voice caught on the last words. "You're right," Dex said, moving closer. "I just . . . No—no excuses. I'm sorry." "Thanks," Sophie mumbled, wiping her nose. He reached for her hand, then stopped halfway there, leaving his fingers dangling. "I'm sorry I didn't check on you. I begged my dad to let me help with the

Everblaze—mostly so I could make sure you were okay. But he said I wasn't experienced enough to handle quintessence. So I stayed up all night, watching my panic switch in case you called me. I even kept my shoes on so I wouldn't have anything to slow me down. But you never called." "I'm not going to drag you into danger, Dex." "But I want you to. That's why I made you that ring. And I'm sorry I let the Council's assignment keep me from checking on you. I should've made time—though I also wasn't at the planting, so I didn't know about King Dimitar until today. That's why I rushed over." "Why weren't you at the planting?" "Councillor Terik needed all the gadgets back by this morning, so he could pass them on to the next Technopath—and they needed a ton of work." "You can stop calling them gadgets, Dex. I know they're weapons." He hesitated before he said, "Not all of them. Besides, don't you think it's good that the Council is realizing they need to be prepared? My dad said that if they'd had a batch of frissyn on hand, most of Eternalia would still be standing." "Yeah, I guess." But if the elves needed weapons . . . She sat on the edge of her bed and Dex sat beside her—not so subtly knocking Mr. Snuggles to the floor in the process. "You sure you're okay?" he asked. "You look . . . pretty awful." "Gee, thanks." "No, I just mean . . . you can talk to me, you know. Maybe I can help?" Sophie wished he could. But unless he knew how to find a random window in Italy . . . "Wait," she said, rushing to her desk and digging through the drawers. If she wanted to learn about anything human, she was going to need to access human information. She pulled out her old iPod and switched it on, showing Dex how it said Searching on the screen. "I know this is probably going to sound weird, but do you think there's any way you could make this pick up human signals from where we are?" He'd already made it solar powered a few months back. Maybe he could use his ability to amplify the antenna or something. Dex traced his fingers along the screen. "What kind of signals?" "Anything. Satellite. Wi-Fi. I just need to access the Internet. Remember how I used it to find the bridge we needed when we were in Paris?" "Yeah, and I still can't believe that clunky machine was able to help us." But—he flipped the iPod over and squinted at the back—"I can sense a receiver in here, and it's super weak. I'm sure if I boost that it'll pick up whatever you want. It might take me a few days, though. Councillor Terik wanted that ability restrictor as soon as possible." "A few days is fine," she told him—though she hoped it would be sooner. And that there was a FamousRoundWindowsInItaly.com, complete with detailed directions. But even if there wasn't, she was going to find that building. After Dex left, Sophie spent the rest of the afternoon trying to make a dent in the other half of her punishment: cleaning and organizing Edaline's office. She was up to her elbows in tiny silver butterflies when someone behind her snapped their fingers, making all the shimmering insects spring to life and fly around her. "Whoa, too bad those aren't spiders or stinkbugs or something," Keefe said from the doorway. "I could cause some serious chaos." "I'm sure you could," Sophie agreed, watching the butterflies flit and flutter. "It really would've been a beautiful wedding, wouldn't it?" "Maybe," Keefe agreed. "But robotic spiders would've been cooler. They could've put them under everyone's chairs and triggered them during the vows." "Wow—you should be a wedding planner." "Nah. I'll save it for my own wedding. Make my bride feel even luckier." He winked. "So what's up?" Sophie asked, before the conversation got any weirder. "You don't know why I'm here?" "Should I?" "I don't know. Didn't you get one of these?" He stumbled through the maze of boxes and handed her a tiny scroll. The wax seal had been broken—split in half from when Keefe must've opened it. But Sophie could still perfectly make out the sign of the swan.


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FIFTY-SEVEN

THE SECOND THE LIMBIUM HIT her tongue it started to swell, and Sophie barely managed to choke the liquid down before she started to gag. Breathing became impossible, and the more seconds ticked by, the more her lungs screamed for air.

The room dimmed and the sounds dropped to a hum—but her consciousness didn't fade away. She felt every second as the liquid burned through her like she'd swallowed something hotter than fire. Like she'd swallowed the sun. Her stomach heaved and her limbs flailed and she tried to think through the pain, count the moments passing, search for some sign that relief was on the way. But the agony was too all-consuming.

She wasn't afraid of the needle anymore. She wanted it—needed it. Where was it? She couldn't hold on much longer. Still the fire burned, rushing into her head and searing so hot she was sure her brain would melt in the inferno. Maybe it did. White light burst behind her eyelids, and for a second she felt the pressure ease.

Was that it? Was she fixed?

She couldn't tell—the relief was too fleeting. And the darkness that rushed in to replace it was so much worse. Cold and thick and empty, and she could feel herself sinking into it, following it somewhere much deeper and blacker than unconsciousness, and she knew with every fiber of her being that she'd never come back. She was shutting down. Slipping away.

Then something stabbed her hand and the new pain dragged her free. Her body thrashed and her insides wanted to explode from the pressure as a soft gray mist swelled inside her mind. She latched on to it, using it to float above the shadows as her insides heaved again, and the pressure in her chest grew so unbearable she wanted to scream. But as she opened her mouth, a rush of air filled her body.

Her first breath.

Followed by another.

And another.

She wanted to count them—cling to them—celebrate each one. But the fog in her head was growing thicker, and she couldn't fight the clouds any longer. She set her hopes and trust upon them and felt them carry her away.

"I LET YOU OUT OF my sight for a few minutes and you go and almost die again," Keefe said, his words like a hammer pounding on her brain.

Sophie forced her eyes open—and immediately closed them as the light burned too bright. She tried to speak, but all she could do was cough and hack, which made her realize her body ached in about a million places.

"Hey, easy. I'm not joking about the almost dying thing. Some wrinkly dude brought you here and said he'd almost lost you—twice—but he thinks you're okay now. Well, other than a truckload of pain, which he said he can't help you with because your mind needs to stay 'unaffected' by any medicines for at least twenty-four hours. Any of that sound familiar?"

"Bits and pieces," she managed to rasp between coughs.

"Good. Then maybe you can translate for me, because he kind of lost me at she almost died. Pretty sure Grady's going to kill me when I bring you home like this."

"I'm fine."

"Uh . . . you can't see what I see. You've got this whole sweaty, slightly green thing going on—not to mention this wicked bluish-purple splotch on your hand."

Sophie ripped her eyes open again, and when they'd focused, she stared at the huge bruise from the needle. Add it to her list of reasons why she never wanted to see a syringe again.

"I'm fine. They had to give me limbium to fix me, and then a shot of some human medicine to stop the allergy."

"Sounds . . . fun."

"Yeah, it's awesome to be me."

She tried not to think about the other things Mr. Forkle had told her about her genetics, but it was hard to do with Silveny transmitting, Friend! Sophie! Friend!

"You're really fixed, though? Like, you think you'll be able to help . . . ?"

He didn't say the name, and Sophie didn't want him to. Not until she knew for sure. "I don't think I'll know until I try and see what happens. Did Mr. Forkle give you any other instructions when he brought me here?"

"He gave me a tiny, sealed scroll—said it was for Grady or Elwin. Who was that guy, by the way?"

"The guy who posed as my old next-door neighbor to keep tabs on me around humans. And apparently he's the guy who made me."

"Made you? So, like . . . he's your father?"

"I—I don't think so." She'd never considered that.

Could he be?

He was a Telepath. An impenetrable Telepath.

And he created her.

And he cared.

She shivered so hard her teeth rattled.

She refused to believe it. A father would never play with his daughter's genes the way Mr. Forkle had. And a father would never be able to leave her half-drugged and alone on the streets of Paris—even if he did believe she'd be okay. Nor would he drop her off on the hard ground of a cold cave with nothing

more than her friend, a flying horse, and a scroll, after she'd almost died—again.

Unless he was the worst father in the world.

Then again, Grady and Edaline had let her risk everything to find the Black Swan. . . .

"Hey, you okay?" Keefe asked as she curled into a ball.

She didn't want to know any more horrible things about her past or who she was. It just kept getting worse and worse.

One sob slipped through her lips, and once the floodgates were open, there was no stopping it. She waited for Keefe to tease her, but he just scooted closer, lifting her head so it rested on his knee instead of the rocky ground.

"Sorry," she mumbled when the crying fit finally passed.

"For what?"

"I should be braver than this."

"Um, I don't know if you realize this, but you're the bravest person I know—by far. Freak out all you want. If anyone deserves to, it's you."

"Thanks." She concentrated on taking slow, deep breaths to calm down, but each one only made her more aware of how sore she was. She could definitely feel that they'd almost killed her this time. Every part of her ached. A deep kind of pain, like a sharp pin in every cell.

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The sound of snapping fingers brought back her vision, leaving Sophie squinting through tear-blurred eyes at where Sandor, Grizel, and Fitz had collapsed in the sand, limbs thrashing and faces scrunched with agony. All three members of the Neverseen were perfectly fine. “We came prepared,” Gethen explained, tossing back his hood and pointing to the fitted hat made of shimmering chain mail that covered most of his blond hair. “You know how well these block your little mind tricks. And in case you’ve manifested something we don’t know about, let’s get you more contained, shall we? Though I’m pretty sure the only ability you’re hiding has to do with those gloves.” Sophie was so thrown by the fact that he seemed to know about her enhancing ability that it took her a second to catch his threat—and another to realize she was still holding a throwing star. By then, the figure on Gethen’s left had raised his arms and trapped her in a glowing white force field. Panic bubbled up her throat as three more domes of energy appeared, imprisoning Sandor, Fitz, and Grizel. But she choked it down, knowing the best thing she could do was feign confidence. Make them wonder why she wasn’t freaking out. “I guess I’m not the only predictable one,” she said, taking a steadying breath as she stared down the cloaked figure that had to be Ruy. “How many times have you played the force field card now?” “Why stop if you keep falling for it?” Ruy countered, his voice every bit as familiar as it was nauseating. She shrugged, trying to channel Keefe’s snark—which was easier than she’d expected. All she had to do was look at the crooked line of Gethen’s nose and remember how good it had felt to deck him with the full strength of her Sucker Punch. “I like it in here,” she told him. “It means I don’t have to smell you guys while you give your boring speech. That’s what you’re here for, right? If you didn’t want to talk, you would’ve drugged me by now. So let’s get on with it, okay?” Gethen’s piercing blue eyes twinkled. “This is why I enjoy our little chats. It’s always so adorable watching you play tough while you try to trick information out of me. You’re attempting to break into my head right now, aren’t you? Slamming that strange telepathy of yours against the force field, hoping you’ll be able to sneak into my mind and dig out all of our secrets? But even if I took my hat off, you’re not strong enough without the Vacker boy, are you?” He nudged his chin toward Fitz—who, thankfully, looked less pained than he had a few seconds earlier. “And you’d both need your little Shade to help. Pity he’s not here.” Unfortunately, he was right. Tam’s shadows were the only thing that had ever broken through Ruy’s force fields. Well . . . unless Sophie wanted to use the trick that Biana had discovered when they’d first clashed with Ruy in the Neutral Territories. The monocle pendants that the Black Swan gave them when they swore fealty had a special lens set into the curve of dark metal. And when Biana hurled hers into the force field that Ruy had been hiding behind, the energy hit the glass and exploded, covering Ruy in white flames. If Sophie tried the same method now, she’d be the one showered with fire. And she’d have to take out three members of the Neverseen by herself with only one throwing star. She’d call that plan B. Not that plan A sounded a whole lot better. Her panic-switch ring was carefully hidden under her glove, and if she pressed the center stone, it would send Dex an alert and allow him to track her. She hated using it, because it meant asking him to risk his life—but she knew he’d tell her that that’s what he’d designed it for. And he’d have his bodyguard with him. But . . . Dex and Lovise would still be outnumbered—and totally unprepared, since the ring didn’t let her warn them about what they’d be facing. She’d have to suggest that as an upgrade. Assuming they survived . . . “You’ve gone quiet,” Gethen noted. “Beginning to grasp the gravity of your situation? Or are you still trying to think of a way out? Or maybe you’re realizing that if you’d used the weapon you’re holding when you first saw us, you would’ve had a better chance than you did with your pathetic inflicting.” “Actually, I’m waiting for you to tell me what you want,” she said, pressing the center of her ring before she could change her mind. There was no way to know if the signal was strong enough to transmit through the force field, but she had to believe that it would—and she had to try to stall until Dex and Lovise got there. “Or, wait, am I supposed to guess?” she asked. “Let’s see. . . .” She closed her eyes, pressing two fingers against one of her temples and pretending to read his mind. “You’re here because you’ve finally realized that your cause is totally

creepy, and that you're never going to win, so you're hoping to cut a deal for your cooperation. Not a bad move, honestly. But you're forgetting that the Council holds a grudge." "Do they?" Gethen asked. "Seems to me like they've gotten rather lenient lately." His smile made it clear that he was well aware of Alvar's sentence—and she refused to rise to his bait. She polished the blades of her throwing star with the edge of her tunic. "Don't worry, when your time comes I have a long list of suggestions for how they can punish you. My favorites involve flesh-eating bacteria." "Ugh, now I get why Keefe was always going on about this one," the figure on Gethen's right grumbled. "They both think they're so clever." Her voice was soft and raspy, like curls of smoke. And the shadow at her feet seemed darker than the others.

Cover 6

Relevant results in this cover: 10

Content pages range: [96, 114]

Groups range: [26, 32]

Deep intent (search) query

Interested in example of human technology
being presented as equal or superior to magic

Ranking query (reranker)

Interested in example of human technology
being presented as equal or superior to magic

- 000026.txt — ranks: #28
- 000027.txt — ranks: #29 · #38 · #46
- 000028.txt — ranks: #31
- 000029.txt — ranks: #32
- 000030.txt — ranks: #33
- 000031.txt — ranks: #34 · #68
- 000032.txt — ranks: #36

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So if she was understanding the markings correctly—and she was pretty sure she was—all she had to do was find where those five rivers connected, and she'd find Elysian.

EIGHTEEN. “UGH, SCROLLS ARE SERIOUSLY THE worst,” Sophie grumbled, wrestling with a particularly stubborn piece of paper that kept rolling back up the second she tried to smooth it out on the kitchen table. “Why do we still use them? Even humans moved on a few centuries ago. Now they have this handy thing called Google Maps—you should really check it out.” Grady laughed and set his bottle of lushberry juice on the scroll to help weigh one end down. “Scrolls make it easier to control who’s able to view the information. Remember: our world is designed to be found only by those allowed to have access.” “Yeah, well, there has to be a way to be mysterious and efficient,” Sophie argued. “I’m with Blondie,” Ro jumped in, waving one of the scrolls like it was a sword and she was challenging Sandor to a scroll duel. In the Armorgate we have these grids that... Actually, I’m not sure if I’m allowed to tell you about those—especially with a goblin around. She poked Sandor’s side with her scroll-sword—and he did not look amused. “But they’re way cooler than these dusty things.” “Pretty much anything is,” Sophie muttered. Ro groaned as Edaline strode into the kitchen carrying another armload of paper—and Sophie was right there with her. She was tempted to run back upstairs, grab Iggy, and let the destructive little imp do some serious shredding. When she’d asked Grady and Edaline if she could check all their maps, she’d had no idea what she was getting herself into. The entire kitchen table was now buried under scrolls. So were the empty chairs. And most of the floor. Now she understood why Grady and Edaline had insisted she get some sleep before she started her search for the mysterious rivers. “This shouldn’t be so hard,” she’d said, letting her eyes go out of focus so she could see the lines of the rivers without as many distractions. So far, she hadn’t found even one match. Some maps didn’t have any rivers—and most of the ones that did only showed a small portion. It would’ve been really nice if she could’ve clicked a “zoom out” button—but nope! She lifted Grady’s lushberry juice and moved the current scroll to her “not it” pile, which looked depressingly small compared to the mountain of scrolls she still needed to search—and that was just the maps that Grady and Edaline had in their offices. There had to be thousands of others sitting in dusty libraries throughout the Lost Cities, and she’d have to start tracking them all down if she couldn’t find what she needed. “I’d be happy to help,” Edaline offered, planting a kiss on the top of Sophie’s head as she dumped the new batch of maps onto the table. “We have a Spinosaurus arriving in the next minute or two, and I’ll need to get it settled into a pasture—but I should be free in a few hours.” “Thanks,” Sophie said, trying not to think about how numb her butt was going to be by that point. The kitchen chairs were not as comfortable as she would’ve liked. “I’m ready to jump in anytime too,” Grady said as he helped Sophie weigh down the next scroll. “But I’ll be way more useful if you tell me what this is all about.” Sophie became very interested in examining the newest rivers. She wasn’t sure how much she was allowed to share about Elysian, so she was keeping everything extremely vague. They knew she was looking for rivers that matched the pattern of her projections, and that it had something to do with the letter E—but nothing else. “You can trust me,” Grady promised. “I won’t—” Sophie was saved by a ground-shaking ROAR! “That’s my cue,” Edaline said, rumpling Sophie’s hair before she rolled up her sleeves and headed out to the pastures. “Holler if you need me!” Grady called after her. “Eh, it’s one Spinosaurus,” Edaline shouted back. “It’ll be easy.” The next ROOOAAAR seemed to suggest otherwise. “Don’t worry,” Grady told Sophie. “Edalie’s the dinosaur whisperer.” Sophie watched through the windows—and the Spinosaurus did seem to calm when Edaline approached with slow, careful steps and outstretched arms. The scene reminded her a little of the first time she’d sat in

Havenfield's kitchen staring at the creature-filled pastures through the wide windows—back when taming feathery dinosaurs seemed as impossible as feeling at home in this glittering house with these beautiful strangers. So much had changed since then. Now this was her family—her world. And she had to make sure the Neverseen couldn't destroy it—even if it meant checking every map in existence. She reached for the next scroll, coughing when it unleashed a giant plume of dust. "Maybe I should hail Dex and see if he can think of any gadgets that might speed up this process." "What about that 3-D map thing you said the Forklenator has in his office?" Ro asked. "Would that be useful?" "It depends on what you're looking for," a familiar wheezy voice said behind them.

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“Uh, not really.”

“Shocking.”

“Oh, come on—you left out all the details, like what the doctors did—”

“I don’t know what they did,” Alvar cut in. “I told you, I don’t understand the language.”

“Then how have you found clothes and money and food and—”

“It hasn’t been easy,” Alvar admitted, dragging his toe through the sand. “I knew some stuff about the Forbidden Cities from all the trips I made for my dad. So I knew I needed to sneak out of that hospital the first chance I got. I also had a ring with me that I was able to sell. The rest has just been trial and error—plus occasional kindness from strangers. That’s the thing about humans—most are pretty generous and helpful. Especially for a guy recovering from an injury”—he pointed to his scars—“who doesn’t speak the language and lost his memory.”

“You lost your memory,” Keefe repeated, raising one eyebrow.

“No. But that’s the kind of story that earns a lot of sympathy. It’s also a convenient way to get out of having to answer a bunch of questions.”

“And it’s probably pretty easy to pull off since you’ve faked memory loss before,” Keefe muttered.

“That wasn’t fake! It just... wasn’t permanent.”

“No, it was a ploy, so we’d let our guards down and you could betray us at exactly the right moment.”

“And it worked out super well for me, didn’t it?” Alvar countered.

“Oh boo-hoo—I feel so sorry for you.”

“You’re not supposed to!” Alvar blew out a long breath, swiping his hair out of his eyes again. “I don’t want your sympathy, Keefe. I don’t want anything. You’re the one who started following me—”

“Yeah, so I could make sure you weren’t...”

"What?" Alvar asked when Keefe didn't know how to finish that sentence. "What exactly did you think I was doing in that library? Gathering intel so I can form my own human army?"

Honestly, Keefe wouldn't put it past him.

But that wouldn't be a very realistic plan.

"Or maybe you thought I was there for you," Alvar said slowly. "That's it, isn't it?"

"Uh, you wouldn't be the first person who tried to capture me or kill me," Keefe reminded him. "Or use me to get to my friends."

"No, I wouldn't. But again—you followed me. And do you really think I didn't see you first? I spotted you the moment you walked into that library and started annoying the librarian."

"So you were watching me," Keefe noted.

"Yeah, at first. I wanted to make sure my brother didn't send you. Or my father. Or anyone else who'd try to drag me back to the Lost Cities and lock me up in some miserable underground prison—or Exile's creepy little somnatorium. But then I realized you were totally oblivious to my existence, and I figured I'd keep it that way."

"So why didn't you leave?" Keefe asked.

"Well, for one thing, it was kind of fun seeing how terrible you are with basic human technology. But mostly, I wanted to make sure I was right about why you were there."

"Regretting that now?"

"Kind of." Alvar swiped the sweat off his forehead. "I'll admit, I didn't expect to end up on a sweltering little speck of sand in the middle of the ocean. But I guess I should've known you'd overreact. So tell me this, Keefe. What's your next move? Since I think we both know you're not going to drag me back to the Lost Cities."

"And how do we know that?"

"Because you're clearly on the run. Human clothes. No bodyguard. No registry pendant. None of your friends with you—especially Sophie. I'm assuming you're hiding from your mom, probably so she won't know you manifested another ability—and I'm not talking about the fact that you're clearly a Polyglot now. I'm sure that comes in very handy—but it isn't worth fleeing your world to keep hidden. So you must be a triple threat: Empath, Polyglot, and something else...."

He raised his eyebrows at Keefe, daring him to deny it.

Keefe tried to come up with a joke to cover, but his mind went blank.

"Don't worry—I'm not going to ask you what it is. Honestly, I don't care. I'm done with all of that. I'm done with the Lost Cities. I have absolutely zero desire to ever go back again. I realize, given my past behavior, that you're going to find that hard to believe. But truly, all I want to do is spend whatever time I have left in a world where the people cared enough to save me. So why don't you take me back to where you found me and let me get on with my incredibly ordinary existence? I haven't caused any problems for anyone since I've been there, have I?"

"Doesn't mean you won't."

"No, I suppose it doesn't." Alvar stared at the ocean for several long breaths before he said, "I get it. You're never going to trust me. And that's fine. I don't need you to. I just need you to realize I'm not a threat. So I'm going to share something I was planning to keep to myself because it leaves me pretty vulnerable, and hope it at least proves you don't have to worry about me." His gaze shifted to Keefe, and he took one more deep breath before he said, "I can't light leap anymore. Maybe it was the

human medicine, or how close I came to dying—I don't know. But my concentration isn't even close to strong enough. Why do you think I screamed when you dragged me into the light? If you hadn't shielded me with your concentration, I would've faded away long before we reappeared. That's why I'm standing here"—he waved his arms around the island—"drenched in sweat and covered in scratchy sand, instead of snatching your crystal and heading home for pancakes. And if you leave me here... I'll be stuck living off coconuts." He shuddered. "I'm really hoping you won't do that. Just like I'm hoping you'll use your concentration to bring me back to the city where you found me—and if you do, that's where I'll stay. I can't go anywhere else."

"You could use human forms of travel," Keefe argued.

"Which wouldn't get me anywhere near the Lost Cities," Alvar reminded him. "Those also require things I don't have. My resources are limited—and that's fine. I like where I am. I like being insignificant. No pressure. No past. No legacy."

Keefe flinched at the last word.

"Still fighting it, then," Alvar noted. "Good. I meant what I said at Candleshade. You'll never be what your mom wants—and the more you focus on that, the better chance you'll have of stopping her."

Keefe closed his eyes, trying to keep any emotion off his face.

But he was sure Alvar could see it.

And even though Alvar probably wasn't the right person to ask this question, he had to know. "Do you actually think I can stop her?"

"I think," Alvar said, dragging out the word, "that you're stubborn enough to do pretty much anything you want. You also have some superpowerful friends to back you up. So you've got a really good shot. But."

"Ugh—there's always a 'but,'" Keefe grumbled.

"Annoying, isn't it? But your mom's been planning this stuff for a really, really, really long time. It may seem like she's making it up as she goes along because the Neverseen are so divided and disorganized and always changing up who's in charge. But sometimes I think she did that on purpose."

"Did what? Let herself get overthrown? Ended up in an ogre prison?"

"Probably not the ogre thing," Alvar admitted. "But your mom loves being underestimated—and it's actually a smart strategy. Let your opponents think they know what to expect—then hit them with something they'll never see coming. So whatever you've pieced together about her plan, I guarantee there's way more to it."

"And I'm assuming you won't share what you know," Keefe said, not bothering to phrase it as a question.

Alvar sighed and kicked the sand. "Honestly, Keefe, I wish I had something worth sharing. I could use a good bargaining chip right now. But I spent way too much energy on my own agenda during my days with the Neverseen. So the best I can offer you is another piece of advice: Whatever you're doing right now with your little trip to the Forbidden Cities—whatever plans you're making—do it for your future. Don't get so caught up in exposing the past that you forget there's a whole lifetime ahead of you. Otherwise you'll end up like me, on borrowed time in a borrowed world—and I'm not trying to make you feel sorry for me. I like my life right now. That's why I'm standing here, trying to figure out how to convince you to take me back. I'm assuming I haven't won you over yet?"

"Nope," Keefe agreed, even though he wasn't sure what else he was going to do with Alvar.

If he dragged him back to the Lost Cities, he'd probably get stuck there too.

But if he let him go and something happened...

He turned to pace.

"Guess I'll just stand here and sweat," Alvar said after Keefe passed him a couple of times. "And hope the fact that I'm not tackling you earns me some points."

"Is that seriously supposed to make me trust you?" Keefe asked.

Alvar shrugged. "Why not? It's true. I'm not restrained.

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She checked her pockets, wishing she were more like Dex, always carrying interesting things. Then she remembered the trackers. She felt along the edge of her cape, relieved when her fingers touched the outline of a penny-size disk near the front corner. She didn't have scissors—or time—so she tore the fabric with her teeth, grabbing the copper circle and slipping it in the box just as two silhouetted figures appeared in the cave's entrance. "I said I'd be right out," she yelled as she ran to meet them, tripping a few times on the rocks. Keefe smirked. "Don't even try to pretend you didn't find anything." "I wasn't going to." She handed him the mirrored box, and he dumped the contents into his palm. "Twigs and a piece of scrap metal? Can't they just say, 'go here, do this, and have a nice life'? Seems like it would save a lot of time." "It's not scrap metal," Sandor corrected. "It's a tracker." He glanced at Sophie and she looked away. "A tracker? Like, to lead us to them?" Keefe asked. "I think it would only tell them where we are," Sophie mumbled, heading out of the cave. Keefe caught up with her. "So what's the plan, then—and don't lie to me, Foster, I can feel you hiding something." "It's just a theory right now—I need to think it through." "You mean we," Keefe said, hooking his arm through hers. "We need to think it through. Team Foster-Keefe!" "Uh, now it's team Foster-Dex-and-Keefe," Dex said, marching over and taking her other arm. Keefe shook his head. "That doesn't have the same ring. Though it could be handy having a Technopath around." "Look, guys, I really appreciate the help, but . . . I'm kind of tired, and there's a lot of stuff floating around in my brain. Can we talk about this tomorrow?" "Depends," Keefe said, narrowing his eyes. "Are you trying to get rid of us so you can go on secret adventures by yourself?" Sophie willed herself to feel calm as she said, "I just want some time to think." "Uh-huh. Fine, you can have the night to think—but we will be revisiting this tomorrow. Come on, Dex, let's go mess with some gadgets before dinner. I know the perfect place!" Sophie tuned them out as Keefe plotted and schemed the whole way up the stairs. Dex secured the lock on the gate and asked her if she'd really be okay. She promised him she would, and the boys leaped away to cause who knew what kind of trouble. Sandor stayed silent as she greeted Silveny, promised her she'd spend time with her later, and made her way inside. But as Sophie closed the door to her bedroom, he held out his hand. "I'll need to ask the gnomes to re sew that tracker into your cape before you go to school tomorrow." "Oh. You caught that, huh?" Why did he have to be so obnoxiously good at his job? "What was really in the box?" She stared at her feet. "Another charm. And a note." "I thought you weren't going to hide things from me." "I had to this time—you're not going to let me go and I have to. They say they can fix me, Sandor—and if anyone can, it's them." "I thought you didn't trust them?" "I don't know what to think about them. I just know I have to try. It might be the only way." His frown sank so deep it looked like his face was cracking. "I'm coming with you." "You can't—" "We made a deal. I'm coming with you or I go to your parents." "You can't come with me, Sandor. Not if I'm right about the clue." She stalked to her desk, digging out the other pieces they'd given her. One pin, two charms, and two vague notes. Not a lot to go on, but if she put it all together . . . "See this?" she said, holding up the newest note. "It says the same thing Prentice told me. 'Follow the pretty bird across the sky.' And I think it means this." She held up the black swan charm. If a dwarf had delivered the charm, then maybe it was made of magsidian—and maybe the rough, crude cuts affected the pull of the stone, just like the flask that drew water and the pendant that drew light. She held her breath as she picked up the charm bracelet and hooked the tiny swan next to the compass. Then she opened the locket and held the compass flat in her palm, watching the needle spin and come to a stop on . . . Somewhere between north and west. I knew it! The magsidian is changing where the compass points. So if I follow this direction, it should lead me straight to where the Black Swan needs me to go. "That can't be right. It could be an impossibly long journey." "On foot, maybe. But the note says, 'across the sky'—and they gave me an alicorn pin." Sandor's eyes widened. "Absolutely not. You know that unstable creature won't let me near her and I cannot allow you to fly off alone—especially without even knowing where you're going." "But I have to. If they can fix me, then

maybe I can fix Alden and—and maybe even Prentice.” “That’s not worth risking your life for. You could be flying into a trap.” “I’m risking my life anyway. You’ve seen what the light keeps doing to me. If I don’t take this chance, who knows . . .” “I can’t Sophie. Maybe if your parents agree—” “I can’t tell them about this.” “Why not?” Grady asked, pushing his way through the door with Edaline right behind him. He glanced at the notes, and his face turned so red it looked almost purple. “You have a lot of explaining to do, Sophie. Starting right now.” SOPHIE HAD NO CHOICE BUT to come clean about everything: the clues, her plan to fix Alden, her journal, the way the light was affecting her, Wylie’s theory. Elwin not knowing how to help . . . “How could you not tell us about this?” Edaline asked as she reread the notes from the Black Swan. “I don’t know,” Sophie mumbled. Grady ran his hands through his hair, making it stick out. “Sophie, if your health is in danger, you have to tell us. We could get you help and treatment and—” “Elwin already tried everything. If it’s really in my genes, then the only ones who can fix me are the ones who made me.” Edaline sighed. “I can’t believe you told Elwin before us.” “I didn’t. I blacked out at school. And Elwin agreed that we should wait to tell you guys until we knew more. You have enough to worry about already.” “We do have a lot to worry about,” Grady said, gazing out the windows as the sunset streaked the sky with red. “But we still always want to know what’s going on with you. Honestly, Sophie, I know you’ve had to keep a lot of secrets in your life, but you have to stop hiding things. We’re here to help.” “I know.” Sophie sat on the edge of her bed and twisted the ripped end of her cape. “I guess I was just . . . embarrassed.” Edaline sat beside her, taking her hand. “You have nothing to be embarrassed about.” “Of course I do—I’m the Town Freak. Have you noticed how people react when they see me? And how would you feel if you had people tell you that you were malfunctioning—especially if it were true?” Grady took the notes from Edaline, squinting at them as he sat on Sophie’s other side. Several seconds passed before he asked, “So this is why you keep fading?” “It has to be. How else could I fade with two nexuses?” She held out both of her wrists, and her heart ached when she realized both were gifts from the Vackers. Grady squeezed the Ruewen crest pin on his cape. “And you really believe they can fix you?” “I believe they’re my best chance. My only chance.” Grady got up to pace. He’d worn a small rut in the petal-covered carpet before Edaline stood and said, “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I think we should let Sophie go.” “What?” Sophie, Sandor, and Grady asked at the same time. “They made her. So if there’s something wrong—and Elwin doesn’t know what it is—I think we have to let them try to fix it. Otherwise what do we do? Let her keep blacking out and fading? How many times can that happen before she doesn’t recover?” “So we send her blindly into a den of murderers?” Grady snapped back. “We don’t know that for sure,” Edaline said quietly. “But we do know that clearly the Black Swan can get to Sophie any time they want”—she pointed to the notes in Grady’s hand—“so if they wanted to hurt her, they could’ve easily done it by now. And they haven’t. Maybe Sophie’s special because they made her. Or maybe it’s because we’re wrong about them. Either way, I just can’t believe that they mean Sophie any harm. And if they can fix her . . .” Grady shook his head. “I don’t trust them.” “I know,” Edaline whispered, wrapping her arms around him. “But I think this time we have to try. For Sophie’s sake.” “This isn’t just about me,” Sophie reminded them when Grady didn’t say anything. “If they fix me, I might be able to fix Alden, too. Don’t you want that?” “Of course.” Grady pulled away from Edaline. “I miss my friend terribly. But . . . do you know why I agreed to become an Emissary again, Sophie?” “You said it was because Alden had done so much for you.” “It was.” Grady wiped away a tear. “And what I wanted to pay Alden back for was you. Bringing you into our lives.” Sophie felt her eyes burn. “I’m glad he brought me into your lives too.” Grady strangled her with a hug. “I would give almost anything to have him back,” he whispered. “But I won’t give up you.” “You won’t have to,” Sophie promised. “They want to fix me, Grady. I need to believe that. I don’t want to be broken anymore.”

“I think it means this.” She held up the black swan charm. If a dwarf had delivered the charm, then maybe it was made of magsidian—and maybe the rough, crude cuts affected the pull of the stone, just like the flask that drew water and the pendant that drew light. “I knew it! The magsidian is changing where the compass points. So if I follow this direction, it should lead me straight to where the Black Swan needs me to go.”

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I realize this is probably the last thing you feel like enduring. I haven't forgotten how much you've already been through. It's also my fault. What Livvy and I did to reset your brain clearly went awry." "Clearly," Sophie muttered, "considering I almost died." "Yes, you did. I still have nightmares about it sometimes." He stared at his hands, wringing his fingers back and forth. "It was me with you that day, in case you were wondering. Not my twin brother. It's why I was chosen to be the one to reset your abilities the second time—everyone felt I had 'experience' with the situation—though truthfully, both times I've never felt so out of my depth or terrified in all of my life." He cleared his throat again. "That first time, when I heard the screaming and saw what was happening, I hailed Livvy for help immediately. Then I carried you and your sister into my house, hoping no one else in the neighborhood had noticed anything. By the time Livvy got there, I'd already erased both of your memories—but of course, I had to erase another from your sister when her sedative wore off not long after Livvy's arrival. I hadn't wanted to overdo how much I gave her, considering she was so small and had just been through such an exhausting trauma. But I clearly underestimated—the first of many mistakes I made that day." "I'm assuming the second mistake was when you gave me limbium?" Sophie guessed. "Actually, that was the third. The second was before Livvy came up with the idea of limbium. I grew impatient and gave you a half dozen other medicines I thought might help, and ended up making you vomit all over yourself." Sophie cringed. "This just keeps getting better and better." "That was my thought too. And then we gave you the limbium, and I got to discover exactly how dire things could truly get. You started making a horrible sound as your airway closed off, unlike anything I'd ever heard before, and then your whole body was convulsing and I just... froze. If Livvy hadn't been there, I don't know what would've happened. I might've lost you. She was the one who kept you breathing and suggested we rush you to the nearest human hospital. Her reasoning was flawed—though we didn't know it at the time. She suspected our treatments were negatively reacting with some human toxin or virus that you'd been exposed to, which sounded logical enough. And it got you to the place that saved your life, which was all that mattered. Then Livvy had to go, so no one could wonder who she was or how she knew you, and your human parents arrived, and I just sat there, watching you hooked up to those horrible machines, hoping nothing irreparable had happened. And when you woke up..." His voice choked off, and he dragged a hand down his face, lingering on his eyes. She couldn't tell if that meant he was crying. Part of her was glad she couldn't tell—her world made so much more sense when Mr. Forkle was a strong, reliable presence, even if his stubbornness drove her crazy at times. "When you woke up," Mr. Forkle continued, his voice steadier this time, "it felt like one of those 'miracles' that humans are always going on about. You were you. Your inflicting had been switched back off, and everything else seemed fine. And you and your sister both had no idea what had happened between you." "Wait," Sophie had to interrupt. "Aren't you always saying that abilities can't be switched off once they've been triggered?" "For ordinary elves, yes," Mr. Forkle agreed. Sophie groaned, knowing this was going to lead to another "let me explain how very weird you are" speech. And sure enough, he told her, "In your case, I made your genes slightly more flexible in certain ways. That way, if something we'd planned needed adjusting, we'd have the option of doing so—which has been both an advantage and a disadvantage. I often wonder if that flexibility is the reason we've had to reset things in your mind." He tilted his head and sighed in a way that seemed to say, It's so challenging experimenting on someone. Which definitely helped Sophie choke back any fuzzy feelings she might've been fighting when she'd thought he was crying. "Anyway," Mr. Forkle said, moving the conversation back to what they'd been discussing. "I swore I would be a thousand times more vigilant from that moment on to ensure that nothing like that ever happened to you again, and yet, somehow I still managed to misunderstand the role that the limbium had played in your allergy until it happened again. And I didn't anticipate any problems when I triggered your inflicting, either. So imagine my horror when I heard Mr. Dizznee's account of how your inflicting had operated in Paris and realized our enhancements to the ability had somehow been switched off. I'd hoped the

problem was connected to all of the other glitches you were experiencing during that same time, and that once I reset your abilities, all would go back to the way we originally designed it. But it didn't recover as well as your other abilities. And now, here we are." "Okaaa AAAAY," she said, trying not to drown in that deluge of information. She had a feeling she'd be wading through it for weeks and weeks to come. But at the moment she had one very important question. "Why would resetting the ability again change anything? We already know it didn't help—" "It's not an exact science," Mr. Forkle interrupted. "Nor does the limbium affect everything evenly. I was so focused on your telepathy that day—and the gaps in your mental blocking—that I didn't give your inflicting the care that it needed. I also failed to realize that your inflicting was working incorrectly even before you faded, and therefore needed a much more fundamental adjustment. This time the ability would be my entire focus, and I'd target it differently." "But you still can't guarantee that it will work, right?" Sophie pressed. "There are no guarantees with any of this," Mr. Forkle reminded her. "It's all theoretical until we implement the treatments and see what happens." "Great. So... basically, you're asking me to trust you with my life—again—while also admitting that you don't actually know what you're doing," Sophie had to point out. "Awesome." "I don't blame you for feeling that way, but—" "Good, because it's true!" Sophie jumped in. "I'm pretty sure I'd be better off—" Her snarky comment was interrupted by a soft moan from her sister, who uncurled her legs and rolled onto her back. "Amy?" Sophie asked, cringing as her sister opened her eyes and Sophie saw how red and puffy they looked.

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He started almost every sentence with 'you kids.' The man who rescued us said it too. "That could be a coincidence." "It was him." She scooted back, like she needed room to fit her huge epiphany. "Mr. Forkle is an elf." Alden sank down beside her. "You're sure?" She wanted to say yes, but . . . She grabbed the memory log and projected Mr. Forkle the way she remembered him. Wrinkled. Overweight. There had to be a mistake. Alden gasped as he looked over her shoulder. "He is an elf." "But he's old." "That's exactly what someone looks like when they've eaten ruckleberries. See the way the skin looks stretched? The body swells and wrinkles as the berries digest." "He did smell like feet," Sophie remembered. "That could've been from the berries." Alden swept his hair back and stared into space. "That explains why the kidnapper backed down. He could tell your neighbor was more powerful than him. I'm sure the Black Swan had their most skilled operative guarding you." He shook his head. "I should've guessed they wouldn't leave you alone. They'd want someone nearby in case anything went wrong." He was right. Mr. Forkle had always looked out for her. He'd called 911 when she hit her head. And he was always asking about her headaches. He must have known she was a Telepath. "But . . . why could I hear his thoughts? Shouldn't his mind have been silent?" "Another part of his disguise. A highly skilled Telepath can broadcast thoughts the way humans do. He gave you what you needed to hear to not suspect him. I bet that's how they planted some of the memories in your brain. He certainly had enough access to you to broadcast subliminal messages when he needed to." Mr. Forkle? A Telepath? She sucked in a breath. "He was there when I fell and hit my head—the accident that started my telepathy when I was five. Do you think he did something to me?" "It's possible. I'm not sure why they'd want to trigger an ability in you at that age. But he might have decided to take advantage of you being unconscious. Telepathy can be easier to activate that way—not that I've ever tried it. In fact, I wonder . . ." "What?" she asked, when he didn't finish. "I wonder if he's the reason you've developed more abilities. He might have triggered some after he rescued you. They were exactly the skills you needed to survive." She didn't remember that much of what happened, but she did remember feeling five years old again. Was that because he'd done the same thing he'd done back then? She shook her head. It was too much. Her whole life she'd been controlled and manipulated—and they were still doing it. "Why?" she asked, wishing she had something to throw. "Why put me with humans? Why all the secrets? What was the point?" "I don't know," Alden whispered as he rose to pace. "I'd always assumed it was to hide you from us. But maybe there was more to it than that. Tell me this—why did you risk everything to bottle the Everblaze?" She was surprised he had to ask. "People were dying." "Humans were dying," he corrected. "And no one cared enough to stop it. Except you. I think you can hardly deny your upbringing played a big role in that decision. Maybe that's what the Black Swan wanted all along. If you're right—and they're working against these other rebels, who seem to want to destroy the human race—then perhaps they thought it would be wise to have someone who cared about humans on their side." "I'm not on their side." "That doesn't mean they don't want you to be." He paused to stare out the window. "The only ones who'll know for sure are the Black Swan. It's time we find them and ask them." He made it sound so simple, like he could just look up their address in the phone book. "They've been hiding from you for years. What makes you think you can find them now?" He held up the memory log. "We'll run these images through the registry database. Your neighbor might be hard to match, but we'll check every Telepath until we find him and force him to lead us to the Black Swan. In the meantime, we'll use the other picture to find the identity of the kidnapper. Once we catch him, we'll be able to probe his mind to find the others." She curled her knees into her chest, shaking her head. "I told him I recognized him. I'm sure he's in hiding now." "It's not that easy to hide from us." "No offense, but it doesn't seem like it's that hard. The Black Swan hid me for twelve years—and you only found me when they led you to me. The kidnappers hid us somewhere in Paris and you had no idea. They have secret leaping crystals hidden among humans that no one knows about—except the other rebels. I think it's easier to hide

here than in human cities. At least they have security cameras and detectives and police. Alden sighed. "I see why you might feel that way, but you have to understand, Sophie. Humans have those measures in place because conspiracies and arson and kidnapping are common. Those are unheard of here. Or they used to be." He shook his head. "For thousands of years the Council reigned supreme. They were the wisest, most talented members of our society, working together for the greater good. No one questioned their authority. But the past few decades have changed everything." "Why?" "Humans. They've developed weapons powerful enough to destroy the planet. So about sixty years ago a measure was brought before the Council to create a new Sanctuary specifically for humans, to relocate them for the good of the earth—and their own safety. It had a lot of support. Some very influential people have grown tired of hiding in the shadows while humans run amok throughout the globe. But the Council rejected it, refusing to imprison an intelligent species. For the record, I agree with their decision." Sophie nodded. Humans would be devastated if their lives were uprooted that way. "The supporters of the initiative were angry with the Council. Some called for members to resign—especially Bronte, since he was the most outspoken against the idea—and there were threats to go ahead with the plan anyway. The Council didn't take the threats seriously, but they forbade human contact of any kind and recruited Telepaths like myself to keep our minds open for suspicious activity. All talk of rebellion vanished, and the Council was satisfied. Crisis solved." He sighed. "I'd always suspected the rebels moved underground—though I never would have guessed there was more than one group. I'm afraid I've been almost as blind as the Council." His shoulders sagged as he stared at the ground. "Even when I found your DNA, none of the Councillors would believe you really existed, or that if you did, that it had anything to do with rebellion. That's why things have been handled so poorly. But they can't ignore it anymore. "An elf tried to burn the Forbidden Cities to the ground with Everblaze. A team of alchemists had to spend days making Frissyn to put out fires all over the globe. Two children were kidnapped by an unregistered Pyrokinetic and held prisoner while we held funerals for them." His voice cracked, and he paused for a second, clearing his throat. "The Council has been forced to admit the rebellion exists, and you can rest assured that this threat will be resolved. We have tremendous power at our disposal. We just haven't been using it." Sophie reached for Ella, hugging her to her chest to hide her shaking. She wanted to believe him, but it was hard. The rebels were smart, and very well organized. If they wanted to get to her, she had no doubt that they could. But she had a bodyguard now. He would keep her safe—though she wasn't in love with the idea of a giant gray goblin following her around all the time. "I can tell you're still worrying, Sophie, and I don't blame you. But trust me on this. The rebellion will be stamped out very quickly now that the Council is willing to acknowledge it. Anyone involved will be brought to justice." "I hope so," she whispered, trying not to think about the ghostly voiced elf who was out there somewhere, plotting revenge. "I'll see if I can trigger any memories that might help." "No." Alden sat beside her. "I don't want you involved. You've been a big help, and you have incredible powers at your disposal, but you're twelve years old." "Thirteen," she corrected, realizing her birthday had passed a few months ago. Elves didn't pay attention to birthdays—given their indefinite life spans—so she'd forgotten. "Fine. Thirteen. That's still too young to be wrapped up in a conspiracy. I want you to make me a new promise." He waited until she met his eyes. "I want you to promise you will just be a normal, happy, thirteen-year-old girl. Go to school. Make friends. Get crushes on boys. Have fun. No more worrying about secret messages or plots or rebellions. Leave that to boring grown-ups like me." "But I'm not a normal thirteen-year-old girl. I have abilities no one understands—and secrets stored in my brain that people are willing to kill me for." "That may be true, but being special doesn't mean you can't have a normal life. You only get seven years to be a teenager. Enjoy them. Promise me you'll try." A normal life. It sounded too good to be true.

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TWENTY-NINE

HOW—WHEN—WHY—” SOPHIE STARTED, not sure which question she wanted to ask first. Or maybe she knew. Can you still hear me? “Yep!” Fitz said, bouncing on the balls of his feet. “Though, wow, your thoughts are racing. I can’t make sense of any of them.” Sophie covered her ears, like it could somehow shield her mind—which was when she realized she knew a better way to shield. “No—don’t—” Fitz tried to tell her, but he was too late. “Ugh, you just blocked me.” “Good.” She focused on the invisible wall she’d built around her mind, imagining it as thick and solid as possible. “I thought you trusted me.” “I do. I just . . .” How could she explain that it was terrifying to have him poking around her brain—especially when he had no problem letting her do the same thing to him? “I imagine it’s rather jarring, given Sophie’s upbringing,” Tiergan said quietly, reminding them they weren’t alone. “We must remember that Sophie didn’t grow up in a world of Telepaths, and even now that she’s with us, she’s gotten rather used to her mind being impenetrable. Can you blame her for panicking?” “I guess not,” Fitz mumbled. But he still looked annoyed. Tiergan turned to Sophie. “I’ll confess, I’d hoped you’d handle the connection a bit differently.” “Wait—you knew Fitz would be able to read my mind? Why didn’t you warn me?” “Because it was only a theory. You’d told me this Mr. Forkle—whoever he is—can slip past your mental blocking. And if the barrier around your consciousness is free of imperfection—which it has to be, otherwise the madness of a broken mind could seep in—there would be no way he could sneak through. So I began to wonder if it’s your mind that pulls him in, because your mind trusts him.” “But I don’t trust Mr. Forkle.” Especially not now that she knew the Black Swan had a leak. “Consciously, that may be true—and with good reason. His preference for subterfuge and disguise hardly instills confidence. But subconsciously, I suspect your minds share a mutual trust based on years of close training. Don’t you believe that it was Mr. Forkle who planted the Black Swan’s secrets carefully within your memories?” “Yes,” Sophie admitted. “But . . .” She didn’t know what she wanted to say. Her mind was still too overloaded with the realization that Fitz got into her head. “So you’re saying all Sophie has to do is trust me enough to let me in, and then I can read her mind?” Fitz asked. “In the simplest of terms, yes,” Tiergan told him. “But trust is rarely so simple. That’s why I came up with today’s exercise. I’d hoped that if you were forced to share things you’d never shared with anyone else, it would trigger an even deeper connection between you two. Obviously it worked. But I’m not sure how easily it can be replicated—especially now that Sophie knows to have her guard up.” Sophie felt her cheeks flush. “Sorry. I guess I shouldn’t have freaked out the way I did.” “There’s no need to apologize, Sophie,” Tiergan assured her. “But I meant what I said about trust being your greatest asset. Letting Fitz into your mind will only make you both stronger during this healing. So I hope you’re willing to try the exercise again—and to not shove Fitz away if he does manage to bypass your blocking.” Sophie glanced at Fitz as she nodded, wondering if he was thinking the same thing she was. He must have been, because he asked Tiergan, “Does that mean we have to share three more secrets?” Tiergan smiled as he sank back into his chair. “No, I think this time it should be five.”

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"So what's going on with you and Wonderboy?" Dex asked as soon as Sandor had left them alone. He'd stopped by after school to make sure Sophie was feeling okay. But she wasn't really in the mood for company. "I saw the way he ignored you in study hall," he pressed as he plopped down beside her. "Something has to be up." Sophie stared at the elvin history book she was pretending to read. What was up was that she'd been so busy trying to keep her mind clear of anything embarrassing that she'd barely listened to the secrets Fitz had shared with her. Even now, the only thing she could remember was that he'd put *Fart a la Carte* in Biana's breakfast before her Level One Opening Ceremonies, and gave her a raging case of stinky gas. And the secrets she'd shared had been fairly lame. So basically, the entire exercise had been a total failure, and Fitz hadn't talked to her since. Dex nudged Sophie's elbow, making it clear he wasn't going to let it go. So she closed her book—a little harder than she meant to—and told him, "Fitz was just upset because I freaked out when he got past my blocking and—" "Wait," Dex interrupted. "He got past your blocking?" "Yeah. Tiergan had us do this exercise where we had to share all these secrets, and something about the process made my mind pull Fitz past my defenses. Which is cool—but I wasn't expecting it. So I totally freaked out and blocked Fitz again. And then we couldn't re-create it, so now he thinks I don't trust him." "Do you trust him?" Dex asked. "Of course. It was just super weird having someone in my head. But I have to get over it. Tier's given me this long lecture on how crucial it is that I let Fitz in, and I know he's right." "Why?" Dex asked. "I mean, you're the one with all the superspecial telepathy. What do you need Fitz for?" "For backup. Plus, my telepathy is strongest when I'm working with him—and his is strongest with me. It's like we have a connection or something." "A connection," Dex repeated. He shook his head as he walked over to her wall of windows, keeping his eyes focused on the glass. "He's not that special, you know. I could make a gadget that does everything he does. In fact, I could make one that does it better." "I'm . . . pretty sure you can't," Sophie said gently. "Why? You don't think I'm talented enough?" "Of course not. It's just, if someone could invent a telepathy gadget, don't you think they would've done it already?" "Maybe no one's ever tried." Sophie actually didn't see why they would. If anyone needed a Telepath for something, they could just ask a Telepath. Luckily she stopped herself from saying that. Dex's ears had turned the same color her elixirs used to turn in alchemy, right before they exploded. "Listen, Dex. I didn't mean your ability isn't awesome—" "Not awesome enough, apparently." "That's not what I meant. There are just some things only a Telepath can do." "Yeah, well, we'll see about that." "What do you mean?" He didn't answer as he pulled out his home crystal. "Are you leaving?" "Yup." But he didn't sound angry. He even flashed a confident smile as he told her, "I'm going to build you a gadget that does everything Wonderboy can do—and then you'll see which one of us you should trust."

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"Oh—I thought Dex was here," Edaline said from the doorway. She held a crystal tray with three extra-thick slices of mallowmelt balanced on it. Standing behind her was Biana. "He just left," Sophie told them as they made their way into her bedroom. Clearly Edaline thought that was strange, but all she said was, "Well, I guess you'll just have to share his piece, then," and set the tray on the bed. She left them alone with their snack, and they each grabbed their plates of mallowmelt, letting the gooey sweetness—and the sound of chewing—fill the awkward silence. "Sorry to drop by out of the blue again," Biana eventually told her. "You left so fast after study hall that I didn't get a chance to ask if you were busy." "Yeah. Sorry. I kinda just wanted to get out of there." "I know. So did my brother. You guys must've had quite an interesting telepathy session." Sophie could feel her blush burn her ears. "So how mad is he?" "Oh, he wasn't mad. When he's mad, he yells—though I guess you already know that." She stared at her plate, squishing what was left of her cake with her fork. "Today he just seemed . . . disappointed." "Disappointed," Sophie repeated. Somehow that felt so much worse than mad. "Can you tell him I'm sorry?" she asked, but Biana was already shaking her head. "Uh-uh. I'm so not getting in the middle." "Yeah, that's probably better," Sophie agreed. Not that there was anything for Biana to be in the middle of—unless she knew something Sophie didn't, which Sophie couldn't

exactly ask her. "So what's the deal with Dex?" Biana asked, switching from one awkward subject to another. Sophie told her about Dex's new invention plan, figuring Biana would think he was as crazy as she did. Instead she told Sophie, "Aw, just try to go easy on him. He's fighting such an impossible battle." And something about the way she said it made Sophie wonder if she was even referring to the invention. She cleared her throat. "Anyway, how come you came over? Nothing's changed since the last time you were here." Well, nothing she was ready to talk about. Her newest Jolie revelations had been carefully tucked away into the I'm not ready to deal with this section of her mind. "I figured, since you hadn't told me anything," Biana told her. "But . . . I did a little searching on my own. I snuck into my dad's office and vanished, so I was there while he did his nightly update with the Council." Sophie leaned closer, not sure if she should feel excited or guilty about what Biana had done. "Most of it was boring stuff. Complaints he was getting about tomorrow's healing. Something about Grady not making any progress on the dwarves. But there was one thing I knew I had to tell you. A goblin patrol found some new tracks outside the Sanctuary. They were far away from the gates, and whoever made them was only there briefly. But one of the footprints definitely belonged to an ogre."

THIRTY

SOPHIE HAD WANTED TO HAIL Alden, but Biana wouldn't let her. They couldn't risk that he'd figure out how they'd heard about the footprints, and if he did, they'd never be able to use that trick again. Plus, Biana would probably be grounded for the rest of eternity. But Sophie had to make sure Silveny was okay.

Group 32/69

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SIXTY-FOUR

IS THAT REALLY WHAT YOU want?" Sophie shouted as Brant raised his arm to hurl the Everblaze. "Your own parents abandoned you—but Grady never did. Is this how you repay him?"

"It's how he repaid me," he said, showing her his blackened stump. "But maybe I should let him live. Then he can wake up every day knowing he lay there useless as I killed another of his daughters."

Sophie's hands curled into fists, feeling cold metal bite into her fingers.

Her ring.

She pressed the panic switch, not sure how Dex was going to help her—if he could even find her. But she was too drained to inflict again. Calling for help was the only play she had left.

Well, she did have one other—but it might be the stupidest thing she'd ever done.

"You don't want to kill me," she whispered, taking a slow step away from Grady to keep him safer.

"No, I really think I do."

"You don't. If you did, I'd already be dead. You had plenty of chances when I was your hostage."

"I had orders not to kill you."

"Orders?" Sophie asked, stunned to realize Brant wasn't the leader. "From Fintan? Or was it the

ogres?”

“Nice try. And stop trying to distract me—it won’t save your life.”

“Then what are you waiting for?” Sophie asked, hoping she was right about why he was hesitating.

She held out her arms, fighting the urge to cower and close her eyes.

Brant didn’t move.

“You can’t, can you?” she asked, lowering her arms back to her sides. She took a shaky breath as she asked, “It’s because I remind you of her, isn’t it?”

“No!” Brant shouted, but his face said otherwise.

And for once Sophie was glad she reminded someone of Jolie.

“I know you didn’t mean to kill her, Brant. It was a horrible, tragic accident. Don’t make the same mistake again. Let me live this time—like you wish you could’ve done for her.”

For a long second Brant looked tempted.

Then he whipped back his arm and screamed, “If she doesn’t get to live—no one does!”

“That’s what you think!” Dex shouted, charging out of the smoke and tackling Brant before he could launch his attack.

They rolled across the uneven ground as the fireball crashed behind them, igniting the rocky soil and forming another fire line.

“Dex, get out of there!” Sophie screamed as she grabbed Grady and tried to shake him awake.

Whatever she’d done with the Inflicting had really knocked him out, leaving her no choice but to drag

him as far from the fire as she could—which was only another hundred feet. Then she reached the sheer edge of a cliff.

“I’m serious, Dex, we have to go—now!”

“Do you?” Brant asked, parting the wall of Everblaze so he could walk through—and dragging Dex by the throat with his good hand. “Lovely gift you’ve brought me. A chance to take care of both the kids that got away. Remember me, boy?” he asked as his hand turned red-hot, searing Dex’s neck.

Dex eyes watered and his body shook from the pain, but he didn’t scream.

“So here we are again, Sophie,” Brant said, shoving Dex in front of him. “What is this—the third time today? Are you as weary of the games as I am?”

“No—I just got here,” Dex answered for her. “Let’s keep playing.”

Brant rewarded him by burning Dex’s cheek, leaving a finger-shaped blister.

“Ready to lie down and die yet?” Brant asked him.

“Not even close.” Dex shifted his feet to steady his balance. Then he spun around and punched Brant.

It was a solid punch—square in the jaw. Still, Sophie was surprised when Brant toppled backward, rolling head over feet into the neon yellow flames.

“Grab his arms!” Sophie shouted, hardly believing she was saving Brant as she ran to the fire line and tried to drag him free.

Dex stumbled over, and together they pulled Brant’s thrashing body from the flames. He wasn’t as scorched as Sophie thought he would be—but he didn’t look good. His skin was covered in blisters and boils and he could barely breathe from all the coughing and wheezing.

So the last thing Sophie expected him to say was, “Will one of you hand me the leaping crystal from my inner pocket? My arms are a bit immobilized at the moment.”

Dex snorted. "Like we're going to do that."

Brant laughed, the same breathy, haunting laugh that had filled Sophie's nightmares for weeks. "I think you will. I have information you need—and there's only one way I'll share it."

"There's nothing we need to know that badly," Sophie promised. She was dying to find out if he knew about the ogres or the missing dwarves—but that information could wait.

"Even if it's about your friends?" Brant asked. "The ones who think they're setting up an ambush for us today—if you're wondering who I mean."

"How do you know about that?" Sophie shouted, pressing him harder into the ground.

Brant coughed and wheezed in her face as he told her, "First, give me the crystal."

"He's just saying that so you'll let him go," Dex argued as Sophie bit her lip.

"Yes, but it's also the truth," Brant promised. "And if you hurry, you might still have time to save them. But only if you let. Me. Go."

"You can't trust him," Dex warned her, and Sophie knew he was right.

Cover 7

Relevant results in this cover: 8

Content pages range: [116, 134]

Groups range: [33, 40]

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being presented as equal or superior to magic

Ranking query (reranker)

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being presented as equal or superior to magic

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He sank back onto the cot and rested his head against the wall—right beneath the framed pictures of him and her in their embarrassing Opening Ceremonies costumes. Elwin had hung them as a joke, to commemorate their record-breaking number of emergency Healing Center visits. Some days it didn't feel so funny. "You almost died," Keefe whispered. "So did Fitz—and I mean really almost died. I've never seen it that close. Bullhorn was watching every breath you guys took, and Elwin was begging Tam to rush over. And all I could do was sit there, trying to figure out how I'd make the Neverseen pay. But I couldn't think of anything. Even now . . ." "Well," Sophie said, forcing a smile, "maybe that's progress. At least you didn't race off to Ravagog and challenge King Dimitar to another sparring match. Then again, if you had, you could be joining in the Foxfire slumber party. Now Fitz and I get to have all the fun without you." She waited for him to laugh, or tease her, or . . . anything. But he just thumped the back of his head against the wall and tugged on the fraying string until it snapped off in his hand. "How did you know I was here?" she asked. "Dex hailed Elwin and told him you'd hit your panic switch, so he should head to the Healing Center and be ready. Elwin hailed the rest of us so we'd know what was going on. Then we all got to sit here imagining all kinds of horrible things. Oh, and brainstorming ways to punish Dex for not telling anyone where he was going. His mom had some particularly brutal ideas. Remind me never to get on Juline's bad side." "Dex's parents were here?" "Only his mom. His dad stayed home with Rex, Bex, and Lex, probably so they couldn't break everything." "Good call." Dex's triplet siblings could cause more chaos in five minutes than a pack of saber-toothed tigers. "How long were you guys waiting here?" she asked. "I don't know. It felt . . . endless. And then Wylie showed up first, and he had Fitz. And Sandor stumbled in with Grizel and Lovise. And there was still no sign of you or Dex, and blood was everywhere, and Bullhorn was screaming, and for a second I thought . . ." He twisted the loose thread around his finger, pulling tighter, tighter, tighter. "I'm okay," Sophie reminded him. "For now. Umber's smart. She wouldn't have wrecked your pendant unless they had other ways of tracking you. Probably something else that's going to turn out to be my fault." "Please stop saying that. But you might have a point about other trackers." The last word was swallowed by another yawn, and she had to blink to fight the fresh wave of drowsiness. "Maybe Grady should test all of my stuff with reveldust. And if that doesn't work, maybe we can convince the Council to let us—" "Please don't say 'talk to Fintan,'" Keefe interrupted. "Sorry—I know you think he's the answer to everything. But . . . come on, Foster—have we ever gotten anything useful from him? In fact, have we ever gotten anything useful from anyone in the Neverseen? I mean . . . I lived with them for months, and I can't even tell you Umber's real name or what Ruy looks like!" "You can't?" Sophie asked. "Ruy . . ." She closed her eyes, searching for the words to describe him. But . . . "I don't know what he looks like either." Which didn't make any sense. She'd helped capture him. There was no way she wouldn't have pulled back his hood and seen his face—and she had a photographic memory, so . . . "He wears an addler." Keefe explained. "Like Alvar wore the day you saw the Boy Who Disappeared. Though his doesn't look like an addler, so no one can tell he's wearing it. He bragged about it. A lot." Addlers were gadgets that made it impossible to focus on someone's face. "Well," Sophie said, struggling to wrap her weary mind around that. "That's . . . weird. But we know his full name is Ruy Ignis, so we just have to look up his registry file—" "Won't help. He told me he had their Technopath wipe any records of his appearance. Don't ask me why he cares, but . . . yeah. And you know what else we don't know? Who their Technopath is. The only other member of the Neverseen I met is Trix—and the only things I know about him are that he's a Guster and Trix isn't actually his name. See what I mean? All this time—all our planning and scheming and searching. All the risks we've taken. All the times we've almost died. And we still don't know anything about our enemies or what they're planning or what they want. We don't even know who's actually in charge right now! And we've never figured out what the Lodestar Initiative is—or maybe I should say was, since we also don't know if they're still going by it. Just like we don't know why Fintan was

keeping a list called Criterion, or why they made all those barrels of soporidine, or what the Nightfall facility my mom built was supposed to be used for, or why Vespera and Fintan abandoned it and moved to the facility under Atlantis—we couldn't even find my mom's stupid Archetype, remember?" Sophie definitely hadn't forgotten. The last time they'd seen the thick book that supposedly outlined all of Lady Gisela's plans, Vespera had been holding it in Nightfall—and Sophie had been sure they'd find it when they went back and searched the facility. But the Black Swan had scoured every nook and cranny, and there'd been no sign of it. No sign of anything, except broken mirrors and empty halls and the last remaining gorgodon—the hybridized creature Keefe's mom had created to be her guard beast. It was huge and ugly, with giant claws and fangs and a scorpion-like tail—and it could fly, breathe underwater, and climb walls. So caring for it was an adventure—even with it being kept in a very secure, very isolated pasture. And yet, somehow the deadly behemoth was the least of their problems. "I'm with you, Foster," Keefe said, gesturing to her frown. "It's like . . . could we fail any harder?" "Hey—we've done some things," she argued. "We saved Atlantis. And we caught Fint2an and Alvar. And Mr. Forkle killed Brant. And we have the key to your mom's Archetype—and even figured out the trick to piece it together. And . . ." Wow. Was that really all they'd done? There had to be more. . . . "I know we've done stuff, Foster. But it's not even close to enough. And the scariest part is how little we know. I mean . . . I can't even tell you if I've gotten back all the memories my mom erased. Meanwhile they know everything about us: where we live, where we go to school, what our abilities are, who our friends and family are, how to find us—do you need me to keep going? Because we both know I can." "No . . . I get it," she mumbled, wishing she could come up with a single argument against what he was saying. But Keefe was right. They were hopelessly and gloriously out of their depth. Far more than she'd ever let herself admit. "So what are you saying?" she asked. "You want to give up?" "Of course not. I just . . . don't know how to beat them. Everything I try only makes it worse—even when I think I've been so careful, it turns out I played right into their scheme." "That's because they think we're predictable," Sophie informed him. "And they're right. We always do what they expect. We have to break the cycle somehow. We have to . . ." Nope. She had no end to that sentence. And as the seconds dragged by, she realized there was freedom in admitting that. Power in letting her heart sink to that absolute low. Maybe hitting the bottom gave her something new to stand on. Or maybe the medicine was seriously starting to mess with her head. Either way, something was stirring inside her—something that went against everything she'd been telling herself to resist. "I'm tired of being weak," she whispered, remembering Gethen's taunts in the desert. "I want to fight back—and I mean really fight." "Like . . . with weapons?" Keefe asked. She nodded, waiting for the queasiness to hit. When it didn't, she told him, "Yeah. With whatever it takes."

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[
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Things had not gone according to plan. She could still see the pitying looks on the matchmakers' faces as they'd shown her the ugly red words on the screen. Words that would define her—destroy her—if people found out about them. That was why she'd begged for this meeting. If she could convince Mr. Forkle to give her one tiny piece of information—something she deserved to know anyway—everything would get back on track. She'd been gearing up for a fight, since getting information from the Black Swan was a lot like prying open the jaws of a thrashing verminion. But if he trusted her enough to bring her to his secret office... "Shall we?" Mr. Forkle asked, gesturing to the entrance. Sophie nodded and crossed the threshold, shivering as a blast of cold, metallic-tinged air seeped through the thin fabric of her lavender tunic. The room was too dark to see, but it felt like stepping into a refrigerator, and she pulled her dove gray cape tighter around her shoulders, wishing she'd worn thicker gloves, instead of the silk ones she'd chosen. The light flared to life when Mr. Forkle followed, as if the sensor only responded to him. "You don't look impressed," he noted as Sophie blinked in the sudden brightness. "It's just... not what I was expecting." She'd been imagining his secret office for years—and she'd always pictured a cross between a spaceship and Hogwarts, with fancy architecture and all kinds of high-tech gadgets and mysterious contraptions. Plus clues to who Mr. Forkle truly was, and plenty of hints about Project Moonlark. Instead, she'd found herself in a curved white room that made her feel like she was standing inside a giant underground egg. Soft light poured from a single bulb, which dangled off the end of a thin chain above a round, silver table. The walls were smooth and bare—as was the floor—and several small grates in the ceiling flooded the room with icy drafts. That was it. No windows. No doors—except the one they'd come through, which had sealed silently behind them. Nowhere to sit. No decor of any kind. Not even any books or scrolls, despite Mr. Forkle's love of research. "And here I thought you'd learned that things in the Lost Cities are rarely what they seem," Mr. Forkle said, pressing his palm against the wall. The light bulb flickered twice before it flared much brighter and projected a grid of images across every surface of the room, as if the office was tapping into thousands of camera feeds displaying elves, goblins, ogres, trolls, dwarves, gnomes, and humans going about their daily lives. Every few seconds the images shifted, making Sophie wonder whether she'd catch a glimpse of the entire planet if she stood there long enough. "Still nothing?" Mr. Forkle asked. She shrugged. "It's not that different from Quinlin's office in Atlantis. And I'm pretty sure a lot of human leaders have rooms like this too—not showing all the other species, but... you know what I mean." "Do I?" Mr. Forkle tapped the wall to make the images disappear before he placed his palm flat against the silver table. "What about this, then?" The metal surface rippled at his touch, stretching and splitting into a million thin wires that made it look like a giant version of one of those pin art toys Sophie used to play with as a kid. He tapped his fingers in a quick rhythm, and the pins shifted and sank, forming highs and lows and smooth, flat stretches. Sophie couldn't figure out what she was seeing until he tapped a few additional beats and tiny pricks of light flared at the ends of each wire, bathing the scene in vibrant colors and marking everything with glowing labels. "It's a map," she murmured, making a slow circle around the table. And not just any map. A 3-D map of the Lost Cities. She'd never seen her world like that before, with everything spread out across the planet in relation to everything else. Eternalia, the elvin capital that had likely inspired the human myths of Shangri-la, was much closer to the Sanctuary than she'd realized, nestled into one of the valleys of the Himalayas—while the special animal preserve was hidden inside the hollowed-out mountains. Atlantis was deep under the Mediterranean Sea, just like the human legends described, and it looked like Mysterium was somewhere in the Bermuda Triangle. The Gateway to Exile was in the middle of the Sahara desert—though the prison itself was buried in the center of the earth. And Lumenaria... "Wait. Is Lumenaria one of the Channel Islands?" she asked, trying to compare what she was seeing against the maps she'd memorized in her human geography classes. "Yes and no. It's technically part of the same archipelago. But we've kept that particular island hidden, so humans have no idea it exists—well, beyond the convoluted stories we've occasionally leaked to cause confusion." "Huh."

Lumenaria had reminded her of Camelot when she'd been there, so that must be where some of those legends came from. The elves liked to play with the lore of their world, weaving in conflicting fantastical details, to make it that much harder for humans to believe in it. She leaned closer, wondering how accurate the map's details were. She hadn't been to Lumenaria since the collapse, and it looked like the glowing castle was now fully rebuilt—with much higher walls. A new tree also stood next to the Four Seasons Tree, perhaps as a memorial for those who'd died in the attack.

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TIME LOST ITS MEANING IN the blackness. Each second felt like the next—until a burning in her nose jerked her back to reality. She wanted to sneeze and gag with every breath. “Are you sure this is necessary?” The voice loomed over her. “It’s either this or give up.” A very loud sigh. “I hope you know what you’re doing.” Her chest constricted, heaving into a cough—but a cloth blocked her mouth, keeping the cough in. Her body thrashed in pain. “The gag is choking her.” “She’ll live,” a gruff voice insisted. “I don’t want her talking.” “This better work,” someone else added. The choking grew worse and she started hyperventilating. “Wonderful. Well, go ahead—before she suffocates.” It felt like they pulled off her lips when they ripped the gag away. Her throat was dry and a sick, sour taste coated her tongue, but the cool air felt wonderful. She gulped as much as she could, coughing and hacking until her chest calmed down. “Don’t even think about screaming, Sophie. No one will hear, and you will not like how we’ll punish you. Nod if you understand.” Her head felt like lead, but she managed a couple weak nods. “Good. Now let’s get this over with.” Rough hands pressed against her temples, squeezing her already throbbing head. “Why?” she croaked. She tried to open her eyes, but something covered them. “Why are you doing this?” “You’ve served your purpose,” a ghostly whisper hissed. “Now alter her memories so we can relocate her.” She held her breath, wondering if she would actually feel her memories being stolen—if it would hurt. But she felt nothing. ‘Is it working?’ the gruff voice demanded. Silence, followed by an exhausted grunt. ‘No.’ The single syllable echoed through the room. Something heavy hit the wall. Then a sweet cloth pressed over her mouth, and the drugs pulled her back to the darkness. “WAKE UP, SOPHIE,” SOMEONE CALLED through the swirling mist of her mind. Her nose stung again. Then the coughing started. She wasn’t gagged this time, but her eyes were still covered and she was strapped to a chair, bound by her wrists and ankles. “Who are you?” she whispered, struggling to pull her mind from the haze of the drugs. “That’s not important,” the ghostly whisper informed her. Shivers tickled down her spine. “What do you want?” “Me? Oh . . . many things. Would you like me to list them all?” His voice was hollow, empty. She wished she could recognize it, but she’d never heard it before. “What do you want from me?” “Ah, see, that’s much more specific.” He laughed an eerie, breathy laugh—more like a wheeze. “I want to know why you’re here.” “You tell me,” she spat. “You’re the one who captured me.” “Oh, I didn’t mean here. I meant why you exist at all. Why anyone would go to so much trouble to create such a unique little girl? And what are they hiding in that impenetrable little brain of yours?” Venom seeped into the last words as hot hands brushed across her temples, leaving a trail of warmth everywhere they touched. “I don’t suppose you’d be willing to tell me what you’re hiding in there?” “Get your hands off me.” Another breathy laugh. “You’ve got gumption—I’ll give you that. But you leave me in quite a predicament.” Steady footfalls told her he was pacing. “The easiest thing to do would be to kill you and your little friend and be rid of you both. But it’s never easy, is it? Sure—it is with your friend. He’ll be disposed of soon enough.” “Why? It’s me you want. Why don’t you let him go?” “And cast suspicion on your disappearance? No, we can’t have that. Don’t worry, he won’t feel a thing. I’m not a monster, after all.” “You’re worse than a monster!” she screamed. “You kill innocent children and don’t even have the guts to show your face.” “Innocent? Innocent?” She could feel his hot breath on her face and pressure squeezing her arms. “If you’re so innocent, how did you know the location of Elementine? How do you know about Everblaze?” He released her arms and the blood rushed back in a throb of pain. “No, Miss Foster. You may be ignorant, but you are certainly not innocent. The Black Swan made sure of that.” “Wait. Aren’t you part of the Black Swan?” He laughed—louder this time—almost a cackle. Apparently, that was all the answer she would get. “So what do I do with you?” he asked, mostly to himself. “Do I keep you here so I can see what you can really do?” “I can’t do anything,” she screamed. “I’m not special—I’m just me.” “Ah, but that’s where you’re wrong. You’re their little puppet. So maybe I should just get rid of you and take their precious toy away.” Panic made her shake despite the bonds. Would he kill her now? “You’ll never get away with this,” she whispered. “I already gave the Council the sample of the Everblaze. They’ll come for you.” “How will they know it was me?”

“Because you’re the only one who can ignite Everblaze.” “Am I? And I suppose you think you know who I am.” “You’re Fintan.” He laughed. “I guess you’ve got it all figured out, then.” He rushed her, gripping her arms again. “Tell me what your mind is hiding and maybe I’ll let you live.” She screamed as the burning increased—like her skin was melting. “Please, you’re hurting me.” His breath was hot on her face. “This is your last chance.” Please! She tried to concentrate so she could send out one last desperate call for help. She had no idea if she could reach anyone, but it was her only hope. Her mind buzzed with a reserve of energy as she pictured Everglen until it was all she could see. Fitz, she transmitted, imagining him inside, eating dinner in the dining room. It seemed so real she could see his beautiful eyes widen in surprise. Please, Fitz. I need your help. If you can follow my voice, please find me.

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Sophie leaned back, trying to read the shadows on Edaline's face. Rings under her eyes hinted that she wasn't sleeping, and a crease between her brows gave away her stress. But otherwise she looked pretty normal. A sniffle from the doorway made them turn to where Dex stood. "Sorry," he mumbled, wiping his eyes. "Just... you know." Dex's mom and Edaline were sisters, and they looked a lot alike—same wide turquoise eyes and soft, amber-colored hair. "Come here, Dex," Edaline said, stepping aside to include him in the hug. "Your family is going to be so jealous when I tell them I got to see you." "They don't know you're here?" Sophie asked. "No, even Grady doesn't. He's off with Alden. I was out working in the sasquatch pasture when Mr. Forkle appeared." "Sorry to catch you by surprise," Mr. Forkle said. "The Council is monitoring Havenfield extremely closely." "Are they doing the same to my family?" Dex asked. "Of course," Edaline said. "But your dad's enjoying it. He's been rigging traps all over Slurps and Burps to catch anyone snooping. Several Emissaries have left covered in pink slime." Dex grinned. "Wish I could be there." "He wishes you could too. But he's so proud of you. Your whole family is—Oh! I can't believe I forgot!" She reached into her pocket and pulled out a wriggling bundle of orange fur. "IGGY!" Sophie and Dex shouted at the same time. The tiny imp squeaked and flapped his batlike wings, fluttering over to Sophie's waiting hands. She kissed his furry cheeks, gagging from the Iggy breath. Dex coughed. "Whoa, I think he's gotten stinkier." "He has," Edaline agreed. "He's been refusing to clean himself. And if I leave him in his cage, he flings his poop. So I've been carrying him in my pocket and bribing him with treats." Sophie poked Iggy's belly, which felt chubbier—though it was hard to tell under the orange dreadlocks. His natural fur was gray, but Dex had a habit of slipping Iggy elixirs. "Next time you're getting shorter fur," Dex told Iggy. "So it won't hold the stink in." "You should make him blue," Biana said. "With sparkles!" Iggy responded with an extraordinarily loud fart. "Fine, no sparkles," Sophie said, rubbing his fuzzy chin and filling the room with his squeaky purr. "I didn't realize how much I missed him. I wish Grady..." "I know," Edaline said. "What is he doing with Alden?" Della asked. "Does it have to do with the scrolls I saw you reading through my Spyball," Sophie asked. Edaline smiled. "I've wondered if you were watching." "What's in the scrolls?" Mr. Forkle asked. "We're honestly not sure. The Council had ordered them destroyed, so Alden snuck them home to figure out why. So far they've all been about testing trees for something called drakostomes." Sophie, Dex, and Biana shared a look. "Why do I feel like there's something you haven't told me?" Mr. Forkle asked them. Dex explained what he'd found in the archive, and how the drakostomes seemed like something the ogres held as leverage against the Council. Mr. Forkle rubbed his temples. "That's the kind of information I expect you to tell me." "We meant to," Dex said. "But things have been crazy." "Yes, I suppose they have," Mr. Forkle agreed. "But if the Council wants those scrolls destroyed, they're clearly trying to cover their tracks." "So you think the ogres are behind the plague?" Sophie asked. "And that the Council knew it could happen?" Mr. Forkle sighed. "It's looking more and more possible." "Then why hasn't the Council sent the goblins into Ravagog to shut the ogres down?" Dex asked. "Because war with the ogres will kill thousands," Mr. Forkle reminded him. "And presently the plague hasn't killed a single gnome." "It could," Sophie pressed. "Any day we might get the bad news. How could the Council not warn the gnomes that this could happen?" Mr. Forkle glanced over his shoulder, lowering his voice before he said, "You must be very careful with these accusations, Miss Foster. That is the kind of revelation that would shake the very foundation of our world. Let's also not forget that the only gnomes currently affected are those who chose to live beyond the protection of the Lost Cities—and that we don't even know what these drakostomes are.

```
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ELEVEN. PRENTICE," SOPHIE WHISPERED, not sure what to feel. Relief? Hope? Fear? Yeah... it was mostly fear. And then of course there was the shame—mostly because of all the fear. Prentice had allowed his mind to be broken in order to protect her. And healing him was the only way to be sure Alden's sanity would never shatter again. But... Prentice had been trapped in his madness for thirteen years, and his whole life had fallen apart during that time. His wife had died—faded away during some sort of light-leaping accident. His orphaned son, Wylie, had been adopted. And even though Sir Tiergan—Sophie's telepathy Mentor—had surely been a good father, Wylie was now all grown up, a Prodigy in Foxfire's elite levels, having spent most of his life never knowing his dad. That was a lot of heartbreak for someone to wake up to. What if Prentice shattered all over again once he faced those cold realities? "Whatever concerns are causing that crease between your brows," Mr. Forkle told her, "we do share them. But we cannot stall Prentice's rescue any longer. He is too important." "And we're not saying that because we miss our friend," Granite added, clearing his throat several times. "We've also long suspected that Prentice's mind is hiding something crucial. It would explain why he called 'swan song' before he was captured." "Swan song" was a code the Black Swan used if they feared their life was in danger. "Prentice used the code the day before his capture," Mr. Forkle said. "I've always wondered how he knew they were coming for him." "As have I," Granite agreed. "I'd been monitoring Alden's investigations most carefully, and he'd had no suspicion toward Prentice whatsoever. Then Prentice called swan song and suddenly he was arrested." Della looked away, twisting and retwisting her graceful fingers. Granite turned to Sophie, his stony eyes almost pleading. "No one is more aware of the risks that come with healing Prentice than we are. But don't you think it's worth it, to find out what happened, and give him a chance at happiness?" Sophie pictured Prentice the way she'd last seen him, locked in a lonely cell, rocking back and forth, muttering to himself, drooling.... "Okay," she whispered, not sure if her heart wanted to race or explode. "But isn't he still in Exile?" "We're working on a plan," Granite said. "And it's going to take everyone's help. Biana—you'll need to be able to hold your vanish far longer than you currently can. Dex—we managed to get our hands on one of the bolts used on the cells. We'll need you to master opening it quickly and silently. Sophie and Fitz—we'll need your minds at their absolute strongest. So we've prepared notebooks with exercises to further your Cognate training. And Keefe—we have several Empathy books we need you to familiarize yourself with." "Books?" Keefe asked. "You're giving me books?" " Never underestimate the power of the page," Mr. Forkle told him. "Miss Foster would not exist without the decades I spent researching genetics—and you have just as much to learn about your ability." "It will take us a few days to make the arrangements for this mission," Granite added. "But when we're ready, we'll need to move quickly. So tonight, prepare your minds to swear fealty to our organization. And tomorrow, get ready to work." "Well that was interesting," Dex said as they climbed the stairs to their tree houses.

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They aren't too tight, right?" he asked, tugging on the fabric. "I didn't want them sliding down your arm, in case that weakened the force field, but I don't want them cutting off your circulation either. And I went with snaps because you can pull them off way faster than a button or a clasp."

She tried to focus on the practical points he was making, which truly did make a lot of sense. But all she could think about was how anyone who saw her wearing them would assume that she and Dex were . . . well, something they weren't.

"Ready to test them?" he asked.

When she nodded, he grabbed both of her hands, and Sophie pressed her fingertips against his skin, half hoping she'd feel the familiar warm tingle and be able to call the whole thing a fail.

But Dex pumped his fist. "Woo! I don't feel anything!"

Why—WHY—did he have to be such a talented Technopath?

He held on a few seconds longer, then checked the snaps again. "Everything looks okay. But it's probably a good idea to wear gloves tomorrow too, since I threw all of this together a couple of hours ago and there might still be some glitches. I'll make something more permanent now that I know the concept works."

"OH!" Sophie let loose a breath she hadn't noticed she was holding. "So these are only temporary?"

She could live with temporary.

Maybe she could even turn them inside out in the meantime.

“And you’ll make the permanent ones with normal bracelets, right?” she added.

“Why? They’d be way more noticeable. Crush cuffs are one of the only things people never take off.”

“They also never take off nexuses,” Sophie reminded him. “Wasn’t that what you said you’d use to make these?”

“That was the plan. But nexuses have complicated clasps—and even when I simplified the latches as much as I could, they were still way harder to take off than these. Isn’t it smarter to have something you can snap off super quick in case you need to enhance someone in a hurry—and put back on really easily when you’re done?”

Unfortunately, he had a point.

“Well . . . what if we went with a plain cloth bracelet, then?” she asked.

“I don’t think anyone makes those. Cloth bracelets are always crush cuffs. If they don’t have names on them, it’ll look super weird.”

She shrugged. “I have brown eyes and grew up with humans. Everyone expects me to be weird.”

“Right, but I thought you also didn’t want to have people asking questions about your hands. Isn’t that why you’re dressing all fancy now, so the gloves won’t stand out?”

She really wished he’d stop making such well-reasoned arguments! It meant she only had one option left, and it was the extra, extra, extra, extra, extra awkward one.

Group 39/69

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FOUR

IT HAS TO be Brant," Sophie whispered as she watched the firemen rush around the Piazza della Signoria.

They'd ignored the shopkeeper's warnings, using their obscurer to slip past the police blockades. The fire hadn't killed anyone, and it had been extinguished before it spread to other buildings. But the famous Palazzo Vecchio's stone walls were blackened and crumbling, and the clock tower was leaning more than the Tower of Pisa. The crowds behind them were crying, and Sophie understood their grief. She'd felt the same way the day she watched the elves' capital city of Eternalia consumed by Everblaze.

"That wasn't the building we needed, was it?" Fitz asked as they jumped out of the way of two firemen. "I thought the entrance to the corridor was in some place with a weird name?"

"The Uffizi," Sophie agreed, pointing to the arched building next to the ruined palace. "But the police have closed all the landmarks, and an obscurer won't fool sensors and alarms."

"Well, I don't think we should stay here," Fitz said. "The Neverseen could be watching."

"How do you know it's them?" Dex asked. "Don't humans have fires all the time?"

"Can't you smell it?" Sophie asked.

Keefe sniffed the air. "It smells like burned sugar."

"Exactly. I should've recognized it earlier. That's how the San Diego fires smelled. And Brant set those." She glanced over her shoulder, half expecting to spot a figure in a hooded black cloak.

"But how could it be him?" Dex asked. "He was super messed up when he fled to the ogres. He'd lost a hand and, like, most of his face."

Sophie shuddered, trying not to picture Brant's bloody, blistered skin. He hadn't been able to walk on his own—couldn't even reach for his pathfinder. He'd forced her to get it for him as part of their deal to save her friends.

"He survived Jolie's fire," she said, remembering Brant's old scars.

She hoped a few of them were left. He deserved to be reminded of the life he'd destroyed.

"Or maybe the Black Swan set the fire themselves," Dex suggested, "to hide from the Council or something."

"Do they have any Pyrokinetics?" Biana asked.

"I hope not," Sophie said. "But even if they do, why would they burn the place they instructed us to go?"

"Because this place wasn't part of their instructions," Fitz reminded her. "This is the building next door."

"But it still makes it ten times harder for us to get to them," Sophie said.

"Uh, you guys are totally ignoring the much more important question," Keefe interrupted. He pointed across the courtyard to a weathered marble statue. "Am I the only one who's noticed that dude is naked?"

Sophie rolled her eyes. "That's the David."

"I don't care what his name is," Keefe said. "I still don't want to see his stuff."

"I'm with Keefe on this one," Dex jumped in.

"Me too," Biana agreed, blushing bright pink.

"Yeah, why isn't he wearing clothes?" Fitz asked, looking anywhere but at the statue.

"Because it's art!" Sophie said. "Most of the old painters and sculptors did nudes. They were studying the human body or something, I don't know—why are we talking about this?"

"You're right," Fitz said. "We need a plan. Personally, I think we should keep following the Black Swan's clues. Once we get into that corridor, I bet the rest of their instructions will make sense. We just need to figure out how to get past security and—"

"I'm on it," Dex said, heading toward the Uffizi.

Fitz grabbed his arm. "We all have to walk together to stay in the range of the obscurer."

Dex muttered something about "power trips" as Fitz took the lead. They wove carefully around all the firemen and reporters, reaching the entrance of the museum without bumping anyone.

Dex pressed his palms against the stone facade. "You were right about the crazy security, Sophie."

"Can you disable it?" Biana asked.

"Only temporarily. How do we get to this corridor thing?"

"On the upper floor, through a plain, unmarked door." Sophie could see it perfectly in her mind, which felt strange, since she'd never been there.

"Okay, I can buy us some time," Dex said, "but I'm going to have to ruin the obscurer."

"Is that the only way?" Fitz asked.

"No, I thought it'd be fun to make things extra hard and dangerous!"

"Hey," Sophie said, stepping between them, "no time for fighting."

Dex glowered at Fitz as he went back to work, twisting the obscurer apart and tinkering with the gears. He pulled out several cogs and springs and shoved them into his pocket before closing it back up. "Here, Wonderboy. Catch."

Fitz caught it with his mind.

Telekinesis.

It was an elvin skill Sophie rarely used, thanks to an epic splotching match where she'd accidentally flung Fitz into a wall. But Fitz clearly didn't share her reservations. He spun the obscurer a few times, probably to annoy Dex, then dropped the gadget into his hand.

"As soon as I open the door," Dex told Fitz, "roll that in. Then we run. Everyone ready?"

Dex didn't bother waiting for a reply before he tapped his fingertips against the lock and the door clicked open. "Now!"

Fitz bowled the obscurer into the museum and it streaked across the floor, blaring white noise and blinding everyone with a flash.

"How are we supposed to see where we're going?" Sophie asked as Dex pulled her into the museum.

"We aren't," Dex said. "But no one can see us, either."

"Ow, I just hit my shoulder," Biana cried.

"Maybe it was on another naked statue," Keefe suggested.

"EWWW, WHAT IF IT WAS?!"

"Will you two be quiet?" Fitz yelled. "Everyone follow my voice. I found the stairs."

They climbed to the second floor, where the light was slightly less blinding.

"Which way?" Fitz asked.

"I think we're supposed to go west," Sophie said. "Everyone look for a green room and a plain wooden doorway."

They walked by it at first, but Biana doubled back and called them over.

Fitz rattled the locked doors until Dex pushed him aside. "Leave this to the experts."

Several agonizing seconds passed.

"Any time now," Fitz said.

"Sorry, this lock makes no sense. Wait—got it!"

They raced into the corridor, and Dex flicked on the lights before turning to latch the doors behind him.

"Whoa, this place is huge," Sophie whispered as they climbed the grand stairway. She'd been expecting a dark, cramped hall, but this really was the Path of the Privileged. The entrance ceiling was gilded and decorated with frescoes, and the walls were covered in priceless paintings.

"Better hurry," Dex said, running to catch up with them. "The tweaks I did to the lock won't last. Plus, I can feel cameras, and it would waste too much time trying to deal with them. The obscurer flash might've fried their circuits, but it's better to keep your head down. And let's get cracking on that next clue."

"Wasn't it the one with the blood?" Biana asked. "If it was, think it has anything to do with this?"

Group 40/69

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FIFTY

WELL, IF IT ISN'T OUR mighty princess—cowering with a bunch of worthless goblins!" the tallest ogre of the four said as he circled the force field that Ro, Sandor, Grizel, Lovise, and Woltzer were currently trapped in. "Seems fitting, doesn't it?"

The other three ogres grunted and jeered.

They each wore spiked metal diapers, spiked shin guards, and spiked forearm bracers—but the ogre harassing Ro had two swords instead of one, both strapped across his massive back in crisscrossed sheaths. Swirls of tattoos decorated his chest, and his head had a thin shock of slicked white hair.

Ro studied her painted claws, not bothering to look at him as she said, "I don't know, Cadfael. It seems much more fitting that you let the Neverseen call for you like you're their little pet. Do you do tricks for them if they toss you a treat? Is that what today is?"

Cadfael raised one of his eyebrows—which was pierced with four silver spikes. "You want to talk about pets? I hear you spend your days serving at the heels of some scrawny, worthless brat." He glanced over his shoulder at Sophie and her friends. "It's the one in the middle, isn't it? He keeps glaring at me." He swaggered over, and Sophie found herself feeling grateful for the force fields around them when Cadfael stepped right in front of Keefe. "Oh yeah, it's definitely this one. Look at the way his little hands are all curled up like he wants to punch me."

"Actually, I was thinking more about cutting off that ruby," Keefe told him, pointing to a large stone pierced through the skin on Cadfael's stomach, right above the dip of his spiked metal diaper. "I could keep it with the jewel I sliced out of Dimitar's ear when I beat him at sparring. And I'd be doing you a favor, 'cause, dude, that is not a good look."

Bad idea to anger the scary ogre, Sophie transmitted.

See, and I think it sounds like a whole lot of fun, Keefe countered.

He didn't even blink when Cadfael drew a dagger from a sheath hidden in one of his bracers and said, "I bet Ro likes that smart mouth of yours. So maybe I should cut out your tongue."

Keefe smirked. "I'm pretty sure she'd thank you for that."

"I would," Ro agreed.

Cadfael gritted his teeth. "Then maybe I should gut him, so you have to crawl home to Daddy—or your pathetic husband."

"No gutting today," Gethen cut in as Sophie's stomach turned all kinds of sour. "We have a different message to send."

"And if you want your payment, I suggest you cooperate," Vespera added to Cadfael.

"Oh, so you are getting a treat!" Ro said, standing up and clapping her hands. "Tell me, Cad—what's the going rate for treason these days?"

"Anything I want." He sheathed his dagger and turned back to face her. "That's the beauty of setting my own rules. But have fun sulking with your goblins."

"Are we ready?" Ruy asked.

Vespera turned back to Sophie. "Since you have all started arming yourselves, I expect you to empty your pockets before we go. Same goes for you, troll."

Sophie's chest tightened with each weapon she was forced to toss aside. But she managed to keep one dagger and a couple of throwing stars in the hidden pockets in her boots—and she hoped her friends were able to do the same.

Before she could transmit to check, their force fields blinked away, leaving the clearing much darker as the ogres herded them into a clump.

This is good, Fitz transmitted, nudging his way closer to Sophie while the Neverseen were busy

searching Tarina for any weapons she might still be concealing. It's going to be even darker once we're away from the glow of the gates. So if we stay close, we might be able to teleport away before they notice what we're doing.

But we can't abandon Sandor and the others, Sophie reminded him. Plus, I don't think we can leave until we know what the Neverseen are really up to. We need to figure out a plan. Is it . . . is it okay if I hold your hand? Only because enhancing should make it easier for us to form a mental link with everyone. Not for . . . anything else.

He reached for her, and she could feel the rough scabs crusting his wounded knuckles as their fingers tangled together. You don't have to ask to do this.

Sophie looked away, her eyes burning as much as her cheeks. I just . . . figured I should make sure, after . . .

Fitz sighed. It's a bad day, but . . . I meant what I said—I don't blame you. You couldn't have known about the null. And I wouldn't have backed down on Alvar if I didn't realize you were right.

She risked a glance at him, surprised at how calm he looked.

I know, he said, reminding her that he could hear what she was thinking. In a weird way, it's like . . . things finally make sense. Alvar's exactly who I thought he was. The Neverseen are trying to pull off some elaborate plan. So now it's just time to do what we always do and focus on stopping them.

Sophie nodded, knowing there was probably more they needed to say—but he was right about focusing. We need to figure out how to get our bodyguards back, she transmitted, and Fitz used the energy pouring from her fingertips to send the message to all their friends—who did an impressive job of not flinching as her voice filled their heads.

Already on it, Biana told them—which made everyone realize Biana was missing. I'm fine, she promised. No one saw me sneak away, and I'm just bringing Sandor one of Dex's gadgets so he can take out their force field. I'll be back in a second.

It was actually eighteen seconds before Biana made it safely back to their group—and Sophie was pretty sure each second shaved a year off her life.

Why isn't the force field flashing? Dex asked.

Because they have to wait to use it until Ruy's gone, Biana reminded him, otherwise Ruy will just trap

them again. So I put it right next to the force field—close enough that if they dig, the shift in the soil should make it roll into the wall of energy. And I asked them to hang back for a few minutes once they're free.

Why? the rest of their friends wondered.

Sophie understood, even before Biana said, Because I want to see what the Vacker legacy is—don't you? And Sophie agreed.

It had to be something huge if Alvar was willing to go through so much to expose it—and if his memories of it made him revert back to his old self so fully.

"Now are we ready?" Umber asked as Gethen shoved Tarina back into Sophie's group.

"We are," Vespera said, turning to Alvar, who nodded and led them away from the gates.

Into the dark.

Soon, the only light came from the eerie red moon, which was slowly shifting back to silver as the eclipse progressed.

"So are you going to tell us where we're going?" Keefe asked. "Or do you want us to guess? My money's on Fitz's room, since the amount of hair products in there is kind of a legacy."

"We're not going to the house," Gethen told him.

"What about the lake?" Tarina asked.

"No," Vespera said, which ruled out Sophie's theory that this had something to do with the destroyed troll hive.

Cover 8

Relevant results in this cover: 6

Content pages range: [136, 154]

Groups range: [41, 46]

Deep intent (search) query

Interested in example of human technology
being presented as equal or superior to magic

Ranking query (reranker)

Interested in example of human technology
being presented as equal or superior to magic

- 000041.txt — ranks: #47
- 000042.txt — ranks: #48
- 000043.txt — ranks: #49
- 000044.txt — ranks: #50
- 000045.txt — ranks: #51
- 000046.txt — ranks: #52

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I'm not asking for your forgiveness, Keefe. Nor am I trying to earn it. I think we both know that would be a pointless endeavor. But I do need you to listen to me—for once in your life. I have far more experience with the Forbidden Cities than you do. I know how to play by their rules. And you're going to need my help if you want to remain there for any extended amount of time."

"Ahhhh, so that's what this is about! You're trying to keep me out of sight before the rumors start flying about your son's freaky new abilities!"

"I assure you, it's far too late for that." He met Keefe's stare. "There is plenty of speculation about what you can and can't do—and none of it is good."

"Great." Keefe kicked the side of his shoe, leaving a nice big scuff on the pristine white—which his father definitely noticed.

Keefe could tell he wanted to launch into one of his lectures about showing proper care and respect for his possessions.

Instead, he told him, "I'm not going to pretend you have an easy road ahead, Keefe. Or promise that things will go back to normal."

"Normal. Has my life ever been normal?"

"I used to think so. But... no." His gaze turned distant. "Like it or not, you're part of your mother's plan. So until you're ready to challenge her, it's best to ensure that she cannot find you."

"Oh, I'm ready."

"Are you? So you've mastered your new abilities?" He studied Keefe's face. "That's what I thought. Your control at the moment feels... tentative."

"It is," Keefe agreed. "So you should be careful about how angry you make me. One wrong word and..."

He left the threat hanging.

His father looked more curious than afraid. "Do you even know what the new abilities are?"

Keefe wished he could say, Of course!

But his father would know he was lying.

"The only thing I need to know is how to end her," Keefe reminded him. "And I have plenty of plans for that."

His father trailed his fingers through the air. "Interesting. I can feel your resolve all the way over here—which does suggest you might be ready to face that decision. But you're forgetting something."

"And I'm sure you're going to tell me what it is."

"You're forgetting that your mother will only show herself when the timing is right for her. How did that work out for you in Loamnore?"

Keefe went back to tracing the desktop with his finger. "Not my favorite day. But I survived."

"You did. But do you really think your mother is done with her little experiments?"

Keefe didn't have an answer for that.

He wanted to believe the whole almost-dying thing was the last of it.

But... could there be more?

His father's mood had shifted again, to a churning, bitter unease—as if he knew something he wasn't saying.

"I don't mean to scare you," his father said, stepping closer.

"I'm not scared!"

"We both know that's a lie." He placed his hand on Keefe's shoulder, and Keefe jerked away. "There's nothing wrong with fear, Keefe. It can be a powerful motivator. Look where it's led you. You've found the perfect place to hide while you adjust to your new abilities. And I can help you—"

"I DON'T NEED YOUR HELP!"

"That's a strange tantrum to throw when you're standing in my office, searching my desk for the map to my pathfinder while wearing my clothes, with my money in your pocket."

"Yeah, except you didn't have anything to do with any of that."

"Didn't I? Do you honestly think I leave my cabin unlocked so that any wandering hiker could make themselves at home?"

Keefe really, really, really wanted to argue.

But... he actually had been surprised the cabin had been unlocked.

And then he remembered the way the handle had stopped turning for a second before it clicked open.

"There's a fingerprint sensor built into the handle," his father explained. "And I programmed it to accept your prints."

"Why?"

"Hard to say." He turned away, staring out through the window at the moonlit ocean as his mood

turned pensive—with a hint of nervousness trickling through. “I suppose I figured if you ever found your way there, it might be time for us to have some longer conversations. And I might as well open the door, so to speak.”

The words were an invitation.

But Keefe was too tired to accept.

Too angry.

Too lost.

“Anyway,” his father said, clearing his throat, “it worked out well. Now you have a safe place to hide out.”

Keefe shook his head. “I’m never going back there.”

“I had a feeling you were going to say that. And it’s a mistake. You can resent me all you want and still take advantage of having a warm bed that no one can trace you to. Where will you sleep otherwise?”

“I’m still figuring that out.”

“Right. And how many more leaps can you put yourself through while trying to piece together a plan? You’re already looking faded—”

“No, I’m not!”

“Have you looked in the mirror? If you turn any paler, you’ll be verging on translucent. The shadows under your eyes also look like bruises. I’m guessing you’ve only gotten a few hours of restless sleep since you ran off—and then pushed yourself through at least a dozen leaps before you turned up here. And I know you’re going to tell me you don’t need my help. But why don’t you see what I have to offer before you turn me down?”

Keefe crossed his arms and leaned against the desk. “Fine. Impress me.”

"You say that sarcastically—but you will be impressed. After I convinced Bronte to give me this"—he handed Keefe the pathfinder map—"which you never would've gotten otherwise, I also went to see a friend who's a Technopath and had him make you this."

He reached into the pocket of his jeweled cape and pulled out a small blue booklet.

Keefe raised one eyebrow. "Is that all you've got?"

"Actually, no. But you don't know what this is, do you? It's called a passport, and it's a form of human identification—an incredibly vital one. The Forbidden Cities are split into hundreds of different countries, most with their own currency, language, culture, and government—and a passport allows you to gain access from one to the next. You may also be asked to show it from time to time, to prove that you belong."

He waved it under Keefe's nose, waiting for him to take it.

Keefe sighed. "I'm assuming you had to give me a fake name. Let me guess—I'm Kay Lordeson?"

"Actually, I figured you might struggle to respond to a new first name. So I only altered the last name. But I think you'll approve of what I selected."

"Only if it's Hunkyhair." Keefe flipped to the last page, which was shinier than all the others—and couldn't stop his jaw from falling open.

There was a photo of him, flashing his trademark smirk.

Next to the name: KEEFE IRWIN FOSTER.

OceanofPDF.com

THIRTEEN

UGH, YOU COULD'VE AT LEAST given me a new middle name," Keefe grumbled, choosing to ignore the much bigger weirdness he was staring at.

His father shook his head, and a haze of annoyance thickened the air. "I honestly don't understand why you have such a problem with 'Irwin.'"

"Seriously?"

"It's a family name. Your great-great-great-great-great-grandfather is Irwin Sencen."

"Yeah, well, have you ever looked at my initials? You named me K.I.S.!"

He made a few kissing sounds for emphasis.

His father's lips twitched ever so slightly—but the annoyance didn't fade. "I'll admit, I didn't notice that when I chose the name. But you turn absolutely everything else into a joke—why not this? In fact, given your fondness for flirting, I'd think you'd embrace it."

Keefe rolled his eyes. "Yeah, because everyone wants to kiss an Irwin."

"You're not an Irwin—you're a Keefe. But I'm done with this discussion. The new last name fixes the problem with your initials, doesn't it?"

Keefe studied the map to the pathfinder, deciding it was easier to ignore the question.

He had no idea what his father was trying to imply by naming him Foster—but he wasn't in the mood for it.

```
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He could've been referring to anyone, of course, but...

Councillor Oralie's cheeks had turned the same shade of pink as the tourmalines on her throne. Her azure eyes also looked glassy with unshed tears—which broke Sophie's heart. She'd long suspected that Oralie had resisted her feelings for Kenric in order to remain on the Council. And now Kenric was gone.

"Okay," Emery said, clapping his hands to get everyone's attention. "We've gotten way off track."

"We have," a new voice agreed as yet another Vacker stood—a female with vivid red hair and small points to her ears. "And no one has asked the most important question. How do you think people are going to react when they hear that a notorious criminal is living back home with his family instead of being locked away? And don't tell me they won't find out. This kind of gossip never stays quiet."

"Interesting word choice, Norene," Alina said with a chilly smile. "Tell me, is it public unease you're worried about? Or public outcry against your family?"

Noreie raised her chin, her indigo eyes flashing. "I won't deny that I'd hoped today's proceedings would put an end to at least some of the rumors currently tarnishing our hard-earned reputation. But as an Emissary—with centuries more experience than you, I might add—my only concern is ensuring the safety of our world. People are frightened. They need to see their Council taking action. And this—"

"Is our way of reminding everyone that our job is to ensure justice—not vengeance," Bronte finished for her. "We do not act out of fear or anger, nor do we pursue revenge. And we do not hand out a life sentence without ensuring that it is absolutely necessary!"

"But if he escapes—" Norene argued.

"We'll make sure he doesn't," Emery jumped in. "Not only will he have the guards we've already mentioned, and additional security at the property, but we've also arranged for a rather unique means

of monitoring his every move.” He craned his neck, focusing on something toward the back of the hall as he commanded, “Please come forward!”

A hush fell over the room as another goblin marched toward the Council—a female warrior who Sophie recognized immediately. And she knew the strawberry blond boy trailing behind even better.

“Dex?” she asked, watching her best friend step onto another section of the floor, which then rose and connected to Alvar’s platform. “What’s going on?”

“Whatever it is, make it quick,” Keefe added. “Some of us are running out of time.”

Ro snickered.

“This will be quick,” Emery assured him. “Mr. Dizznee is here to deliver a gadget he’s designed per our specifications.”

Unease swirled in Sophie’s stomach as Dex pulled a small metal box from his cape pocket and held it out. He was one of the Lost Cities’ most talented and innovative Technopaths and had created all kinds of brilliant gadgets—like her Sucker Punch bracelet. But one time he’d gotten a little too reckless with a circlet he invented, and the Council had forced her to wear it. She’d never forget the brutal headaches that the ability restrictor had caused, or the hopelessness she’d felt having her talents stripped away.

“Don’t worry—this will only work on Alvar,” Dex promised, his periwinkle eyes locking with hers as he removed a wide golden cuff from the box. “It’s keyed to his DNA. I call it the Warden, because I got the idea from a human movie I saw, where the criminal had to wear a tracker around his ankle. The Warden will report every move Alvar makes, and every word he says. It’ll also monitor his heart rate, so we’ll be able to tell if he’s nervous or lying. And it’ll make sure he can’t go anywhere without permission.” He turned to Alvar and pointed to a silver circle in the center of the cuff. “This piece is like a reverse nexus. If you try to leap without the Council’s approval, you’ll scatter and fade, no matter how strong your concentration is.”

Alvar blanched. “Is that safe?”

“As long as you don’t try to escape.” Dex unhinged the cuff and crouched. “Take off your left boot.”

Alvar did as he was told, and Dex snapped the cuff around his ankle with a loud click.

“That’s... a little tight,” Alvar told him.

Dex nodded. "It has to fit under your boot. Plus, it's not supposed to be comfortable. It's supposed to remind you that we're tracking every single thing you do." I wouldn't recommend trying to take it off, either. It'll shock you if it senses you tampering with the latch—and I don't mean a little sting. You'll need a physician to treat the burns with a gross balm made out of yeti pee. And if you try to leave Everglen any way besides leaping, I've programmed it to zap you harder than a melder. It'll knock you out for a couple of days."

Keefe whistled. "Remind me never to get on your bad side, Dizznee."

Dex didn't smile. His eyes narrowed on Alvar. "I know you don't remember me. But I remember every single thing you did—and I have a scar to prove it. That's why I have this."

He held out his wrist, pointing to a narrow gold cuff with a black jewel set into the center. "The Warden sends alerts to me if you do anything suspicious. All I have to do is press this button, and you'll wish you were back in that stinky cell." Got it?"

Alvar swallowed hard as he nodded—and Dex looked pretty proud of himself. But his dimpled grin faded when Biana said, "So... if you had time to make the Warden, then you knew this was happening—and didn't tell us."

"I didn't know for sure," Dex mumbled. "The Council told me they were considering it and wanted to know if I could make something, just in case. But it wasn't a done deal."

"How long ago was that?" Fitz demanded.

"A week," Councillor Emery jumped in. "And we made it clear that the project was classified, so do not blame Mr. Dizznee for his silence. He was following our orders—and we expect you to as well." He turned back to Dex. "Thank you. You're dismissed."

"I was just trying to help," Dex told Fitz and Biana as his platform lowered back to ground level. "I figured this way we'd have some control, you know?"

Neither of them nodded.

Dex's eyes shifted to Sophie, and she gave him as much of a smile as she could. She knew he'd been in an impossible position. But he was still going to have to give Fitz and Biana time to cool off.

“Before we’re interrupted by any further outbursts,” Emery said as Dex slunk toward the exit, “I want to make it clear that this decision is final. As soon as the security at Everglen is ready, Alvar will be moved to his new apartment, where he’ll remain for the next six months—unless he gives us any reason to remove him earlier. And while he’s there, we’ll be providing weekly lists of tasks to test his behavior. All observations will be taken into account during his final sentencing.”

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So the last thing Sophie expected him to say was, “Will one of you hand me the leaping crystal from my inner pocket? My arms are a bit immobilized at the moment.” Dex snorted. “Like we’re going to do that.” Brant laughed, the same breathy, haunting laugh that had filled Sophie’s nightmares for weeks. “I think you will. I have information you need—and there’s only one way I’ll share it.” “There’s nothing we need to know that badly,” Sophie promised. She was dying to find out if he knew about the ogres or the missing dwarves—but that information could wait. “Even if it’s about your friends?” Brant asked. “The ones who think they’re setting up an ambush for us today—if you’re wondering who I mean.” “How do you know about that?” Sophie shouted, pressing him harder into the ground. Brant coughed and wheezed in her face as he told her, “First, give me the crystal.” “He’s just saying that so you’ll let him go,” Dex argued as Sophie bit her lip. “Yes, but it’s also the truth,” Brant promised. “And if you hurry, you might still have time to save them. But only if you let. Me. Go.” “You can’t trust him,” Dex warned her, and Sophie knew he was right. But the fact that Br

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[
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The more she talked, the more Keefe couldn't decide if he felt left out or impressed by how hard everyone had been working. And when she shared a fun little story about a memory his father had recovered—and the possibility of there being a third step to stellarlune—Keefe wanted to shove his head in a pillow and scream and scream and scream. But there was no time for that kind of pity party because Foster had saved the scariest stuff for last. Apparently there'd been a meeting with the Neverseen. And in that meeting, Vespera had proposed that they form a temporary alliance and team up against his mom because it was in all of their best interests to stop her, so they might as well work together. Keefe waited until Foster finished explaining all of that madness. Then he jumped to his feet, fighting the urge to grab his stuff and flee to the farthest human city. Instead he slowly crossed the room and stopped in front of Foster's chair, wishing he could reach for her hands—but her shoulders were safer, since they were covered by multiple layers of fabric. He placed one hand on each shoulder, making a squishy sound as his fingers sank into her soaked cape. And he waited for her to look at him before he said, "Please tell me you didn't agree to this horrible plan. I know you're the queen of huge risks, but—" "I didn't agree," Foster assured him. "We're going to find Elysian on our own." Keefe nodded and stepped back to pace as she explained that Wylie was trying to find the starstone, and how she was convinced they'd be able to see through the illusions. Then Dex chimed in, saying he had plans for a gadget to separate beams of light and help them. Keefe let them finish, watching the rain streak down one of the windows. "We'll be careful," Foster promised. "And once we get that power source—" Keefe spun back to face her, no longer able to stay quiet. She was talking about rocks. Probably the same rocks Ethan Benedict Wright II died trying to protect. "You have to destroy it, Sophie!" Keefe hoped using her real name would prove how serious he was. "I mean it. I need you to listen to me on this. If you actually do find Elysian and track down these special glowing rocks—or whatever they are—you have to destroy them. Otherwise everyone is going to come after you. The Council. The Neverseen. My mom. Who knows—maybe the other species will even get in on the action. Sounds like the trolls definitely will. And there's no way you're going to be able to protect it through all of that. So you have to destroy it. Otherwise you'll put yourself—and everyone you care about—in worse danger than they've ever been in before. And the power will probably still end up in the wrong hands." "No, it won't," she argued. "I'll hide it—" "And they'll start hurting people you love until you tell them where it is," he insisted, moving back to her side and taking her by the shoulders again. "You know I'm right." She shook her head, holding his stare as she mumbled, "The thing is... you might need it." And there it was. The real reason. She was willing to take all these huge risks... for him. He had to smile at that—even though it made him want to scream into his pillow again. "I had a feeling you were going to say that," he said quietly. "And I appreciate it—you have no idea how much. I've never had anyone try to take care of me the way you do, and..." He started to say something else, then changed his mind, taking a deep breath before he added, "But this is bigger than me, Sophie. And it's bigger than you. It's bigger than everyone. So I need you to promise me that if you get anywhere near that power source, you'll do everything possible to destroy it." "Fine. I promise." She really was a terrible liar. Even without being able to read her emotions, Keefe could tell there was no way she was going to keep that promise. Which meant it was time for a change of plans, even though he'd barely had time to think it through. "Clearly you still haven't learned that you can't lie to an Empath," he said, feeling his lips curl into a smile as the reality of what he was about to do settled in. "So I guess that only leaves me one other option." "Wait—where are you going?" she asked as he marched toward his bedroom. "To get my stuff. I'm coming with you." FORTY WOW, AM I REALLY DOING this?" Keefe asked as he fumbled around his room, hastily filling his new duffel bag with all the little human snacks and souvenirs he'd been accumulating—plus his journals and sketchbook and maps.

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But you should stay with them too, Fitz. You guys will move faster if you carry Biana together—and you'll have twice the backup if you run into any problems. Maybe Bangs Boy should stay with you too."

"You're going to need my shadows to slip through the city unnoticed," Tam argued. "Plus, Ruy's going to be there, so there could be a force field. And I'm not leaving Linh alone in Atlantis—and don't roll your eyes," he told his sister. "I know—you have amazing control now. But I'm your brother. It's my job to have your back, even if you think you don't need it."

"I love how you're all talking about this like it's a done deal," Ro said. "I swore to Sandor that I'd protect all of you."

"Eh, as long as you stay with Foster you won't have to face the wrath of Gigantor," Keefe argued. "And if there's a chance we can grab Vespera, we have to try."

Ro sighed, shifting to study Biana. "Are you really okay with this?"

"I'll be in good hands," Biana said, offering a weak smile at Dex and her brother.

"Then I'm going to leave it up to the moonlark," Ro decided, turning to Sophie. "That way you get to take the heat if things turn ugly—and keep in mind that they probably will."

Sophie tugged hard on her eyelashes.

Dividing their group again probably wasn't a smart idea—and taking on Vespera in a public place definitely wasn't.

But she kept thinking about what Vespera had said about the innocent people she'd make suffer to punish Sophie for saving her friends and family.

"Let's go get her."

Eighty-two

I DON'T SEE her," Sophie mumbled, knowing she'd said the words twice already, but needing something to fill the agonizing silence.

Tam had shielded them with shadows their entire trek to the promenade, and shrouded their hiding place under the arch of one of the gleaming silver skyscrapers so they could study the crowd bustling along the canal without anyone noticing.

"Do you think she's already gone?" Linh whispered, voicing the question Sophie hadn't wanted to touch. "It did take us a while to stop the gorgodon and find Biana and head here."

"Or she's hiding," Tam countered. "She's an escaped prisoner. She can't just wander the city. And if she could build an entire underground facility, it seems like she could easily have a few spots where no one can see her unless she wants them to. Especially since we know she's good with optical illusions."

"And I'm guessing you can't feel her thoughts?" Keefe asked Sophie.

She shook her head. "But that could just mean she still has her headdress on."

"So then, what's our plan?" Ro asked. "Stand here until our feet go numb and hope she comes out of hiding? BooOOOOOOOOoring. And how are you going to capture her, by the way? I'm guessing you don't want a massive tackle-brawl in the street. Want me to pelt her with daggers? That could be fun!"

"And dangerous," Sophie reminded her. "You could accidentally hit the wrong person. Plus, we need to bring her in alive."

"Oh, I can keep her alive," Ro promised. "Though, are you sure that's a good idea? She already escaped once."

"After thousands of years," Tam argued.

“Still seems like a problem Future You isn’t going to want to deal with,” Ro noted. “But I get it—you want a chance to poke around her head without that ugly hat blocking you. Fair enough. You need to figure out how you’re going to restrain her, though. Because she will put up a fight. And this place is super crowded—and she totally seems like the type who’d grab a couple of hostages to force you to back off.”

“Okay, got any ideas?” Keefe asked.

“Of course. I go down there, wave my sword around to herd everyone somewhere I can defend them—like maybe I get them all to the other side of the canal. While I’m doing that, I can lure her out by shouting about how creepy she is, and how she has a

secret lair underneath the city, and how she’s going to drag you into war with humans—”

“You think that’s her plan?” Sophie interrupted.

“Seems pretty obvious after that long, boring speech about ruthlessness,” Ro said. “Sounds like she’s been studying humans to figure out how to make you guys info elf-y killing machines, and she’s probably teamed up with the traitors who fled Ravagog, to learn some proper battle tactics. I bet she’ll use the soporidine to drug your enemies, so all you have to do is slaughter them while they sleep—which actually isn’t a horrible strategy. It’s brutal—and kinda cheating. But she doesn’t seem like she’d be too broken up about that.”

Dozens of new worries squeezed Sophie’s heart from all sides. “If you’re right, we need to get her back in custody—now.”

“Does that mean we’re going with my plan?” Ro asked.

“Uh, if you go down there covered in Biana’s blood, waving a sword, everyone will run from the scary ogre,” Tam told her. “And not in the direction you want them to run. I also didn’t actually hear any explanation for how you’re going to restrain her.”

Ro glanced down at her breastplate, which was smeared with red. “Fine—amended plan. We send in the moonlark. Let her bat those big brown eyes and give everyone a nice, pretty speech about your world’s tainted history, full of enough insults that Vespera won’t be able to resist showing herself—and then I jump in and shove this in her mouth.”

She opened a tiny compartment at the edge of her breastplate and pulled out something that looked like a slimy ball of tapioca and smelled like a rusted-out septic tank.

“Ugh, what is that?” Keefe asked, plugging his nose.

"A handy colony of a bacteria we grow to make you elves violently ill. Aren't you glad none of you have made me angry enough to use it?"

Sophie's mouth went dry. "Do all ogres carry that?"

"Oh, don't look so freaked. You already know I'm carrying dozens of blades. At least this won't kill you."

"I guess," Tam mumbled.

"Any chance I can get a dose of that for my dad?" Keefe asked.

"Not until I'm not stuck living with him. Even I can't take the smell of what comes out of you when you take this stuff."

"Uh, guys?" Linh whispered. "Look."

She pointed to the eastern end of the promenade, where a figure in a long black cloak with the hood raised was descending the steps from one of the bridges arching over the canal.

"Good old Ruy," Keefe grumbled, white showing on his knuckles. "Looks like he's heading for that curve in the embankment."

Sophie nodded.

It was the spot she'd focused on the most when she'd listened for Vespera's thoughts, thinking the gleaming silver lanterns lining the railing might help shape an illusion.

Ruy skirted the edge of the crowd, managing to avoid their notice as he took up a position in the center of the curve.

One second he stood alone, his cloaked form facing toward the water. And the next second Vespera stood beside him.

"I'll give her this—she's got the dramatic-entrance thing mastered," Ro said under her breath. "But her clothes need work."

Vespera had added a hooded cloak to her outfit, and the thick golden fabric cascaded over her in layered ruffles, hiding any hint of her figure—and disguising any injuries she might have sustained in her scuffle with Biana.

"Okay, you guys have five seconds to tell me your plan," Ro warned, "or I'm charging in for an epic slashfest."

Before any of them could respond, a flash of white light triggered a wave of gasps and screams through the promenade.

"I don't understand," Sophie whispered, blinking hard to make sure she really was seeing what she thought she was seeing.

Ruy had trapped Vespera under a dome of white pulsing energy.

"This isn't going to be good," Keefe said, pointing to a second black-cloaked figure carving a bold path through the scrambling masses.

The newest member of the Neverseen kept their face covered as they headed straight for Ruy, and Sophie assumed it had to be Gethen—until the figure raised their arms and shouted, "You're welcome!"

The voice was Lady Gisela's.


```
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FORTY-FOUR

THE FIVE FRIENDS held hands as they leaped away from Exillium, and all the Coaches and Waywards stared. “I don’t think we’re doing so great at the whole ‘blending in’ thing,” Keefe said as they reappeared in a gray-skied forest. “Which is why you guys are my favorite.” “What happened here?” Biana whispered as she turned toward the trees. Their trunks were unnaturally bent and crooked. “It’s not the plague, is it?” “No, the forest has been like this for decades,” Sophie said. “I remember seeing pictures of this place on the Internet.” “The Internet,” Dex snorted. “Humans and their technology.” “It looks like somebody bent them intentionally,” Fitz said, tracing his hand down one of the C-shaped trunks. “I did.” Calla dropped into the clearing from the top of one of the trees. “I sang to them, and they followed my voice.” “Why only these trees?” Sophie asked. There were hundreds with the same distinct shape, but the forest beyond was straight and normal. Calla placed her palm against the sharpest part of the curve, where the tree stood only inches above the ground. “These trees were dying. My friends told me I should uproot them to spare the rest of the forest. But I could feel too much life in their trunks to pluck them from the ground.” “How did you save them?” Biana asked. “I listened. And I realized their voices had been silenced. So I gave them mine. I sang of sunlight and rain and rich soil. And hope. Always hope.” She moved to another tree, one that had the widest curve of them all, and lay in the slope of its trunk. “For a week I stayed right here. I didn’t stop, even to rest my throat. I could barely rasp by the end, but I could feel their strength returning. They’ll forever bear the mark of their trials, but they are survivors. Proof that anything can be overcome.” Keefe sat on one of the curved trunks, and Sophie waited for him to make a joke. But he just slid his fingers over the rough bark. “I thought we could all use the reminder that nature tells us what it needs,” Calla whispered. “That’s why I chose this as our meeting place.” She closed her eyes, singing a slow melody. It was the sweetest song Sophie had ever heard, and the forest shimmered in response. The crooked trees rustled as if they were joining in the chorus, and the wind whistled through their leaves. “It’s beautiful,” Biana whispered, waving her fingers in front of her face. “I think I finally see the glints of life you told me about, Calla.” “If that’s true, then you now know how I see you.” Calla smiled when Biana’s eyes lit up. Calla repeated the song again, and the sparkles intensified, until the whole forest looked painted with glitter. It faded when she kneeled at the foot of the tree. Her song turned softer, and the roots twisted and twirled until they’d swept aside the soil and formed a tunnel. Calla motioned for everyone to follow her underground, and as Sophie stepped into the earth she swore she heard a new song take over—a hushed whisper circling around her, prickling her consciousness. Her eyes found Calla’s in the dim light, wondering if Calla could hear it too. “I don’t know where it’s coming from,” Calla said. “It’s as if the earth itself has joined the call, trying to tell us what it needs.” Goose bumps peppered Sophie’s skin as her mind translated the lyric. A single word, sung over and over and over. Panakes. “What if we’re focusing on the wrong thing?” Sophie asked when they’d regrouped in the girls’ common room, after they’d eaten and changed out of their uniforms. “Maybe we should be searching for the Panakes instead of the drakostomes.” “If you’re saying we should sneak into ogreville instead of sitting here watching Dex poke a gadget with sticks, I’m in,” Keefe said. “Easy there,” Sophie told him as Keefe tried to drag her toward the door. “That’s not what I’m saying—not yet at least. I meant we should be searching for information about the Panakes.” Keefe flopped back into his chair with a sigh so dramatic it had to have hurt his throat. “And excuse me,” Dex said, “this happens to be an incredibly technical process.” He held up the Twiggler, which now looked like some sort of twig-and-wire spider. “You try merging six different technologies into one gadget.” “I’m not

saying it's not important," Keefe said. "But the rest of us are just sitting here wasting time." "Speak for yourself," Biana said, appearing by the waterfall. "I think I figured out how to hide from Calla. I just need to make sure I can hold it." "Yeah, and Sophie and I are about to do some Cognate training," Fitz added. "But what do you mean by focusing on the Panakes?" Dex asked Sophie. "I meant we should be trying to find information about the cure, not the cause of the plague. Calla said nature tells us what it needs, and nature was singing about the Panakes. We need to figure out what they are and how to find them." "Assuming they're real," Fitz reminded her. "If the earth is singing about them, wouldn't they have to be?" Sophie asked. "And if there's any record of them, I'm betting it's in there." She pointed to the Twiggler, wishing it didn't look so ready to fall apart. "Are you getting any closer to making it search by keyword?" "I'm trying," Dex said. "But the different technologies are super specific. They'll each only serve a single function. The elvin tech provides all the power I need, and the dwarven stuff works like a backup. The goblin tech is my security, the trollish tech is what breaks through the barriers and whatnot, the ogre tech is the really sneaky stuff that gets me past the subtle defenses. And the gnomish tech seems to smooth out all the connections between everything. That's why I keep adding more sticks, hoping it'll make the parts cooperate better." But none of that helps with searching. It almost feels like that comes from a totally different technology. But I already have all the intelligent species represented, so I don't know what that means." "What about humans?" Sophie asked. "I know they're not part of the treaties anymore—but they were." "The archive is super old, right?" Fitz added. "So it could've been built before the humans betrayed everyone, and that would mean it includes their technology." Dex scratched the top of his head. "I guess. But I have no idea what I'm supposed to use for human technology." "There's my iPod," Sophie offered, even though she really didn't want it destroyed. The small human gadget had been her constant companion growing up, her only way to drown out the bombarding human thoughts before she knew how to shield. Plus, it was one of the few human things she had left from her old life—and Dex had made all kinds of cool tweaks. "Nah," Dex said. "Anything modern would be too advanced. I don't even know if humans knew electricity existed back when this archive was made." They didn't, Sophie realized. "Okay . . . so we have to figure out what they did have." Chariots? Plows? Bows and arrows? Were any of those thousands of years old? "I remember learning in school about an Iron Age, a Bronze Age, and a Stone Age," she told them. "Where humans made tools from those different materials." "Hmm. I'm already using bronze and iron for some of the other creatures," Dex said. "But I guess I could try stone—though I have no idea how stone counts as 'technology.'" "It makes a pretty decent weapon," Keefe mumbled. "Just ask my mom." He rubbed his head where she'd given him a gash during her attempt to steal Silveny. No one seemed to know what to say to that. "I think that's my cue," Keefe said, heading for the door. "Call me if you decide on an ogre invasion." Dex stood too, stuffing the Twiggler into his satchel. "Guess I need to go rock hunting. Wanna come with me?" he asked Sophie. "We really need to work through some Cognate exercises," Fitz reminded her. "We lost a whole week when I was sick." The old Dex would've glowered and muttered something about Telepaths. But the new Dex just nodded and said, "Yeah, that makes sense." "Can I go with you?" Biana asked him. "If I don't let Iggy get some exercise, he's going to shred another one of my favorite shoes." Biana must really love the little imp if she was willing to forgive footwear destruction. "At least he's doing well on his diet," she told Sophie. "I think he's finally getting a taste for vegetables!" It turned out Iggy had most definitely not gotten a taste for vegetables, and Biana stomped back an hour later, muttering about "stubborn imps." Sophie assumed it had something to do with the giant moth wing Iggy was crunching on. Della returned not long after, looking uncommonly frazzled. Her hair was tied back in a sloppy bun, and her gown was stained and wrinkled. "Everything okay?" Sophie asked. Della shook her head. "Physic had done some research on human comas, and she'd come up with a treatment plan for Prentice, with cold and hot compresses and balms and elixirs. We tried it today, but somewhere in the process he stopped breathing and everything unraveled. We got him breathing again—don't worry. But . . ." Della stared at the ceiling. "I think we're officially out of ideas. Nothing seems to matter." If words could cast a shadow, they would've darkened the whole house. "I'm sorry," Della said, heading toward her room. "I don't mean to despair. I'm just tired of sitting at Prentice's bedside telling happy stories and trying to pretend I'm not partially there for completely selfish reasons. I want him to get better, but . . ." Sophie knew what she meant. Della was still worried about how Prentice's condition would affect Alden. "Anyway, good night." Della kissed her son on the top of the head, then did the same to Sophie before she headed for her room. "Don't stay up too late working. You'll need plenty of rest before another day at Exillium. Sophie knew Della was right, and went to bed an hour early. She also ate a double portion of breakfast the next morning in case they were in for another round of appetite suppression. She was prepared for anything Exillium could throw at her—until they leaped to campus and arrived in the heart of a plague zone.

|Cover 9

Relevant results in this cover: 12

Content pages range: [156, 175]

Groups range: [47, 57]

Deep intent (search) query

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being presented as equal or superior to magic

Ranking query (reranker)

Interested in example of human technology
being presented as equal or superior to magic

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- 000048.txt — ranks: #55 · #69
- 000049.txt — ranks: #56
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"So it doesn't trigger any memories?" Dex asked. His shoulders slumped when she shook her head. "I was hoping I'd say the word and the memory would click and you'd have all the answers." Sophie sighed. "Welcome to working with the Black Swan. It's full of disappointments!" "Or maybe the Black Swan doesn't know either," Fitz reminded them. "Well, whatever they are, they seem to be something the Council really wants," Dex said. "And I'm guessing the Neverseen allied with the ogres because of them, probably after they realized they'd never get their hands on Silveny and Greyfell. Wouldn't that explain why the Council's gotten so weird lately? Haven't their craziest decisions happened since the ogres got involved? Then suddenly Sophie was the number one enemy and they were vowing to hunt down the Black Swan instead of the Neverseen?" "It does explain a lot," Della agreed. "Alden and I have had many conversations about how the ogres have slaughtered hundreds of goblins without punishment. They also stole the gnomes' homeland—dammed up the river and starved the gnomes out. And even after the gnomes came to us for aid, the ancient Council let the ogres keep Serenvale as part of the treaty." "I thought that was because the ogres refused to leave," Fitz said. "So the only way to force them out would've been war." "That's true," Della agreed. "And they offered the gnomes protection in the Lost Cities—and not because they suspected how useful the gnomes would become. I've heard stories from the ancient Vackers about how stunned they were the first time the gnomes shared their harvest, and it was the gnomes who volunteered to help with other tasks. Still, the Council made the trolls return the dwarven mines they'd stolen—but in that case, the trolls needed our medicine." "Exactly," Dex said. "And these drakostomes seem to work the opposite way. Something the Council wants—or maybe something they're afraid of—that gives the ogres the upper hand." "But what are they?" Biana asked. "What would make the Council grant the ogres' demands?" A question formed in Sophie's mind—one she didn't want to ask, even after all the times the Council had sided against her. "Do you think they have something to do with the plague?" she whispered. "I thought of that," Dex said, "but . . . this scroll is ollllllllld. So if the ogres have had the drakostomes all this time, why would they suddenly be like, 'Let's use it on Wildwood!'" Sophie didn't have an answer. Could trying to read King Dimitar's mind have been that big of a deal? "And that's all you've found about the drakostomes?" she asked. "So far. But there's a lot to sort through." Dex tapped his gadget, shutting down the hologram. "I'll search as fast as I can. But right now I have to check each scroll one by one. I'm hoping I can make some tweaks to search by keyword or something." "Please be careful," Della said. "It's amazing that you've been able to gain access this quickly, but doesn't that worry you? I don't mean this as an insult—you're clearly a brilliant Technopath—but doesn't it almost seem too easy?" Dex flipped over the gadget to show her a tightly coiled wire. "Don't worry. This emits a signal that erases any trace of where I've been. No one will have any idea I was there." "Assuming you haven't missed a security protocol," Della reminded him. "Let's all try not to underestimate the Council. If these drakostomes are a crucial secret, they'll have gone to great lengths to protect it." "She's right," Sophie said. "And we should be really careful who we tell about this—especially Calla." If the drakostomes were related to the plague, they wouldn't just have proof that the ogres were behind it. They'd have proof the Council knew this could happen and never warned the gnomes. TWENTY-FIVE THE NEXT FEW days were quiet—too quiet for Sophie's liking. The dwarf stationed in Merrowmarsh kept reporting "no change," as did Sior when he'd check in with the Collective to update them on his search for Keefe's mom with Lur and Mitya. Keefe hid in his room, searching his memories, and so far he hadn't found anything worth sharing. Even Dex didn't make any progress with his new gadget. He'd named it the Twiggler, because it seemed to grow more powerful with every stick he added. But he still couldn't make it search the scrolls any faster. Mr. Forkle must've sensed everyone's angst, because he kept reminding them to focus on their training. The Collective was still moving forward with their plan for rescuing Prentice. She kept busy by working through trust exercises with Fitz, which did at least seem to be helping. By the end of the week Fitz could transmit to Sophie

even when Calla had led her deep into the forest. And Sophie could feel herself needing way less concentration, even when she worked alone. She barely had to strain when she called Silveny to check on her, and the alicorn's memories were so sharp Sophie often had to remind herself she was still in her tree house. Biana made progress as well. She could hold her vanish for so long, Sophie would forget she was in the room. But Biana couldn't figure out how to hide from Calla, and neither could Della. Calla kept explaining that she saw "glints of life"—which sounded a bit like pollen—gathering on their skin and giving them away. But they couldn't sense those glints, so they didn't know how to block them. Biana was determined to figure it out, though, and tried all kinds of crazy methods, most of which did nothing more than give her a headache. When they weren't improving their abilities, Della insisted they learn basic fighting skills, since self-defense was a type of violence the elvin mind could tolerate. The moves weren't all that different from human martial arts. And of course Sophie's clumsy limbs refused to cooperate, while Fitz, Biana, and Dex excelled. Sophie quickly grew tired of feeling sore and pathetic—and even more tired of only seeing Keefe when he sulked out of his room for meals—so when Fitz, Dex, and Biana were practicing some sort of scissor-kick that would surely tear every muscle in her body, she slipped away and pounded on Keefe's bedroom door. "I'm not leaving until you talk to me," she told him. When Keefe finally relented, she ducked under his arm and snuck into his room. "Um . . . wow," she whispered, stepping back to take in the full effect. Three of his four walls had been covered floor to ceiling in scribbled-on pieces of paper, like something a serial killer would do. More notes were scattered on the floor, his desk, the bed. "So . . . you've been busy," Sophie said carefully. "Did the fathomlethe make you remember all this?" Keefe kicked a crumpled note under the bed. "It gave me a surge. But the rest is just me." Sophie crossed to the most cluttered wall and squinted at his messy writing. First day of Foxfire—where was she? Level Four midterm gift—reason? Why did she make them test me twice to see if I'd manifested as a Conjurer? Keefe kicked another crumpled note that said something about the Celestial Festival. "It's a lot to search through, y'know? Photographic memory." Sophie nodded. She turned to the wall that sat catty-corner, where the notes seemed to be focused on his more recent memories. Dad's missing blue pathfinder—was it her? Where did she go? When did she rig my Sencen Crest? Was she one of Sophie and Dex's kidnappers? Did she hurt them? What is she "preparing" me for? Sophie traced her fingers over the last note. "Can I help?" "I don't see how. It's all about what's in my memories, and lucky for you, you didn't grow up in that house." "I'm a Telepath," she reminded him. "I can search your memories and project them in a memory log. Wouldn't it be nice to have the whole picture, instead of just scraps of paper?" Keefe ran his hands through his hair. "I don't know." Sophie picked up a note that said: Did she ever love me? "Please let me help," she begged. Keefe sank onto his bed. Scraps of paper fluttered to the floor and Sophie checked the messages: Door on level thirty-three—where does it go? Why so many books in her office—she never reads! Did she ever wear the necklace I gave her? "Please," she whispered. "Working alone is so much harder—it's what I used to do, remember? Until someone forced me to include them." One side of his mouth twitched with the hint of a smile. "Sounds like that person is a genius. Probably shockingly good-looking, too." "Eh." She laughed when he actually looked wounded. "Oh please, you know you're a heartbreaker. You don't need me to tell you that." "Hey, I have never broken any hearts." "Maybe not intentionally. But come on. When you or Fitz start dating, there will be crying in the Foxfire halls. I bet there are girls crying now, wishing you guys hadn't left." "Not if they've heard how awesome my mom is." "There are still just as many Keefe fangirls, trust me. Everyone loves the bad boys." She expected some epic Keefe teasing about her use of the word "everyone." Instead, his shoulders dropped and he asked, "So . . . you think I'm bad?" She grabbed a note that said "The Great Gulon Incident" and handed it to him. His half smile returned. "Point taken." She brushed more notes off the bed and sat next to him. "You haven't answered my question, by the way. Will you let me help?" Keefe stared at his ceiling. "I don't know if it's a good idea." "Why not?" "Let's just say my head is not an awesome place right now." "So? I've been in Prentice's head, remember? And Fintan's. And Brant's!" "Great. So you think I'm the same as a bunch of psychos." "I never said that. And Prentice isn't psycho." "Close enough. For right now." Sophie hated that he was right. "All I meant was that nothing could shock me." "I seriously doubt that." "I don't. I've also been in Alden's mind after it shattered, remember? Shoot, I've been in an ogre's mind—though that was surprisingly soft and calm. But still. An ogre brain! And I've been in Lady Galvin's head too, when I stole the Alchemy midterm questions." "I forgot about that. Who knew you were such a rebel?" "I have my moments." He almost looked proud. "But . . . now you're used to spending your days trading secrets with Captain Perfect. And I guarantee you, my mind is nothing like his." "Who said it should be? And Fitz isn't perfect, by the way." "He's close enough." He moved to the one wall in his room not covered in paper scraps. "I hate watching it," he whispered. "Them and Della. It's all so happy and easy." Sophie moved to his side. He didn't look at her as he added, "I used to wish I was a Vacker. I'd be over at their house, dreading the moment I had to go home. But nope. I'm a Sencen. And it just keeps getting worse and worse." No words existed to make

anything better. So she reached for his hand. On the wall in front of them was a particularly small note with only three words: Who am I? "Easy question," she said, taking it down. "You're Keefe Sencen. Master mischief-maker. Tormentor of principals. Frequenter of Detention. And one of the best guys I know." He raised one eyebrow as he turned to study her. "I'm not the best?" "It's a three-way tie. And you're also always there when your friends need you. So how about you let one of us be there for you for a change?" He looked away again. "You really think you can handle it?" "Psh, I can handle anything." She usually didn't feel comfortable making such bold, confident statements. But for once it actually felt right. "Please? Don't keep doing this alone." Keefe sighed. "

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“And option number two is?” Keefe held up a second finger. “Or I bring you with me when I leave here, so I can keep an eye on you.” “And what? I’m your prisoner?” “Yes and no. I’m not going to tie you up—but I do expect you to be on your best behavior—and if you try anything, I’ll have no problem leaping you to the top of a mountain or the middle of a desert and leaving you there.” “How is that better than taking me back to my city and being free of me?” “It’s not. But I’d still know I didn’t just take you at your word—and I also didn’t assume the worst and punish you before you did anything. Either way, I’m giving you an opportunity to prove yourself.” He didn’t want to be like Fitz, refusing to give Alvar another chance. He also had a feeling that if Foster was there, she’d make Alvar the same offer. Actually, no, she’d probably come up with a way smarter plan. She was way better at this stuff. But he was on his own, and this was the best his exhausted brain could come up with. Maybe he’d regret it later, but... he’d just be taking Alvar back to London. There wasn’t much Alvar could do there except maybe mess up his hotel room. “So...,” he said, meeting Alvar’s stare. “Which option will it be?” Alvar sighed. “It’s not really a choice, is it? Stay stranded on a deserted island or let you drag me around the planet? Guess I have to go with option B—but. If I’m a good little elf and stay out of trouble, I want some assurance that you’ll eventually take me back to my city. That whole ‘maybe’ thing isn’t good enough.” The fact that Alvar chose that as his stipulation said a lot about his priorities. It might even mean he really was just a guy trying to live some kind of ordinary existence. Only one way to find out. Keefe shrugged. “Fine. Do we have a deal?” “I guess—but I hope you know what you’re doing,” Alvar warned. “So do I.” Keefe retrieved his coat and dug his pathfinder out of the pocket. “Ready?” Alvar picked up his coat too. “I take it we’re going somewhere cold.” Keefe nodded, and Alvar sighed and shook the sand off his coat before slipping it on. “Remember, I’m counting on your concentration—and you better take me somewhere with pancakes,” he said as Keefe grabbed his shoulder and dragged them both into the rushing warmth. TWENTY-THREE “YOU JUST MADE A HUGE mistake,” Alvar warned as he took a giant bite of cake. “You never should’ve shown me how easy this room service thing is.” “It’s pretty awesome, right?” Keefe asked, even though he was only half paying attention to the conversation. Mostly he was trying to process the fact that Alvar was sitting on the couch in his suite stuffing his face with desserts, wearing the other fluffy white robe from the closet and a pair of padded hotel slippers. Especially since the day had started out so normal... He’d had breakfast in the park. Shared his croissant with his little fox buddy. Then he’d wandered a few more London streets searching for the elusive might-not-be-green door—and hadn’t found it, of course—before he’d headed to the next library on his list for more research. Somehow it’d all escalated from there, and now... He had Alvar Vacker staying with him. If Fitz knew... Well, it wouldn’t be good. Punches would definitely be thrown. Add that to the list of reasons Ke

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And the guy in line behind him—a dad with two kids in long brown robes who kept referring to themselves as Jedi—told him that if he wasn’t going to treat himself to a churro, he needed to at least try something called Mickey beignets.

It took Keefe much longer than it should have to track down the sugar-coated, mouse ear-shaped goodness—but they were worth the effort. Similar flavor to a butterblast, but sweeter and lighter, with a bonus dipping sauce.

And the more he wandered around the “park,” as he heard people calling it, the more he couldn’t help smiling—even with the pebble digging deeper and deeper into his foot.

Magic seemed to be a big theme in the land of Disney, and it was absolutely hilarious. Magic wands. Magic keys. Not to mention an abundance of “magical” creatures. Fairies that looked like tiny girls with sparkly wings. A bright blue genie attached to a gleaming golden lamp. And a red-haired, green-fish-tailed mermaid, just like he’d thought he’d seen before. Plus a ton of talking animals with oversized eyes and cutesy smiles—and a whole other galaxy full of Ewoks and Jawas and Wookiees. It made him want to buy a bunch of silly souvenirs—especially the shiny pins that reminded him of the prizes in Prattles.

But as he tried to find a pin that said “Disney” to bring to the Dexinator, he realized he had no idea when he would give it to him. Even if he did make it back to the Lost Cities, Keefe wasn’t sure if Dex would want to see him. After all, he was the guy who could ruin one of Dex’s brothers’ lives. Yeah, he probably wasn’t the reason that Rex hadn’t manifested a special ability when the other triplets did—but he could get him labeled as Talentless way earlier than he should be. And now Dex was going to have to spend years pretending he didn’t know what was going to happen to his brother, which would totally change their relationship. All because Rex touched Keefe’s hand.

Keefe had hoped that leaving the Lost Cities would mean he could forget about that horrible, empty sensation he’d felt—and the enormous ramifications that came with it. But it wasn’t something he could run away from. Like it or not, he’d manifested an ability that could change everything—and he couldn’t tune it out with a pebble in his shoe. That’s why he needed to figure out what Mommy Creeptastic was planning—before she showed up again and used him to sort everyone to her liking. Or worse... Honestly, he couldn’t begin to imagine all the awful ways she might use that power. And even if he took her out of the equation, it still wasn’t safe. The Council could abuse his ability just as easily. So could the Black Swan. It was the type of power that no one should have—and even if he learned how to control it, he might still have to stay away to make sure no one ever found out what he was capable of. He’d known that when he left, of course. That’s why he’d taken the time to write

Foster that letter. He'd been very aware that his goodbye could be forever. But standing outside a land that was supposed to be a human vision of the future, he had to admit that some part of him kept hoping he'd find a way to erase all these new abilities and have things go back to the way they were. Even now, his brain wanted to convince him everything would be okay. But... as annoying as it was to admit... his father was right. He'd changed. It was time to start accepting that. "I may never go home," he said out loud, trying to make it feel more real. "Same, bro," said a guy holding a long, thin, cinnamon sugar-covered stick in each hand, before taking a bite of one. "I might just stay here eating churros forever." Before Ke

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But they were running out of subject changes. All she had left was, “Any luck with your memories?” “I wish.” He snatched the gold notebook off of her desk and tucked it into his cape pocket before picking up the silver one and slowly flipping through. “I’ve logged a bunch more stuff. But nothing useful. And Dex told me yesterday that he still hasn’t gotten any hits from the London cameras, so... I don’t know. Maybe the drawing I gave him wasn’t good enough for the facial recognition.” “Or the guy might’ve moved,” Sophie hated to tell him. “Humans do that way more than elves do.” “I know. I thought of that. But... London’s the only lead I have, so...” He slumped lower in his chair. “Well... it hasn’t been that long since Dex set up the cameras,” Sophie said, trying to be positive. “And the guy could’ve been on vacation. Or battling the flu and not leaving the house or something. Just because we haven’t found him yet doesn’t mean we won’t.” Keefe looked about as convinced by those suggestions as she was. She wished she could think of some brilliant solution, but... the man Keefe remembered could literally be anywhere on the planet, and they only had cameras searching one city. If only they could tap into, like... a human spy satellite or something. Then they could at least cover a lot more ground. But she doubted Dex’s Technopath skills stretched all the way to outer space—and even if they did, there would still be lots of places the satellite didn’t cover because human tech wasn’t that powerful. And the elves didn’t... “Wait,” Sophie said, wincing as she straightened up. “Is Mr. Forkle still here?” “He might be,” Keefe said. “Why?” “Go check,” Sophie told him, wishing she’d thought of this sooner. “If he is, tell him I need to talk to him right now.” “About what?” Mr. Forkle asked from the doorway, and Sophie jumped—then winced. “Whatever it is, it can wait,” Livvy cut in, shoving Mr. Forkle aside to make her way over to Sophie, with Elwin right at her heels. Edalie was with them too, and she held Sophie’s hand the whole time that Elwin and Livvy did their exam—which was mostly Livvy asking, “Does this hurt?” before poking Sophie somewhere, while Elwin flashed various orbs of colored light around Sophie’s body and studied her through his funny spectacles. The answer, unfortunately, was always, “Ow, yes.” And the final verdict seemed to be that everything was on the right track—but Sophie still had a long way to go. They also didn’t think she’d be up for taking any elixirs for at least another day. Including pain medicine. “Why is it so much worse this time?” Sophie asked, sucking air through her teeth as Livvy made her lie back flat again and her muscles punished her for the movement. “I mean, I know you messed with my heart a little, but last time you gave me double the amount of limbium so...” “The heart is much more sensitive than people realize,” Livvy said gently. “And so much more vulnerable. It can’t defend itself the way the mind can—and I don’t mean physically,” she added when she noticed Sophie’s frown. “From a physical standpoint, they’re both vital organs, and any sort of serious strike or blow would be Game Over. But from an emotional standpoint, the brain can think through feelings and talk us into or out of them.” “Tell me about it,” Ro muttered from Sophie’s closet. “See?” Livvy said. “The ogre princess knows what I’m talking about. It’s a defense mechanism that the heart simply doesn’t have. The heart feels what it feels, whether we want it to or not. So messing with it the way I did takes a much bigger toll, even on a physical level. This isn’t a perfect metaphor, but... try to think of it as I poked a hornet’s nest. And you got stung. And I’m really sorry.” “Me too,” Elwin said. Edaline squeezed Sophie’s hand. “The good news,” Mr. Forkle told her, “is you made the right decision with the pill you selected. I can already feel your heart and mind communicating in ways they never have before.” Sophie’s eyes widened. “Are you reading my thoughts right now?” “Not in the way you’re assuming,” Mr. Forkle assured her. “I realize you haven’t given me permission. So you’re going to have to tell me what it is you needed to discuss—unless you want me to find the answer myself.” “No, it’s fine,” Sophie said, glancing at Livvy and Elwin and deciding it wouldn’t matter if they heard. “I need you to do me a favor.” Mr. Forkle sighed. “If this has to do with—” “It doesn’t,” Sophie interrupted. “I’m not focusing on that right now—though the fact that I trusted you with my life again when you still won’t trust me with that information—” “What information?” Livvy interrupted. “It doesn’t matter,” Mr. Forkle insisted. Sophie decided it did. So she told Livvy and Elwin, “He won’t tell me who my biological parents are. Even though I deserve to

know." "You definitely deserve to know that," Elwin agreed, narrowing his eyes at Mr. Forkle. "Some secrets must be kept, even from those deserving," Mr. Forkle countered. Livvy groaned. "I'm not saying that to pressure anyone into telling me right now," Sophie emphasized, turning back to Mr. Forkle. "But I need something else—and since I just took a huge risk for you, and you still won't give me the other information I really need, I don't think you should be allowed to say no to this. Especially since it's a very reasonable request." Mr. Forkle pursed his lips, looking both wary and amused by her assertiveness. "That's quite the sales pitch, Miss Foster. But you realize you're going to have to actually tell me what you want before I can decide if I'll be able to help you, right?" Sophie glanced at Keefe and said, "

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She reached for the handle of her door, hesitating before turning the knob. “Everything okay?” Councillor Terik asked. “Yeah . . . it’s just Can I have a few minutes alone?” As the words left her mouth, she realized she’d basically just asked a member of the Council to go away. “Sorry, I didn’t mean—” “It’s okay,” Councillor Terik told her with a smile. “Take all the time you need.” Sandor looked like he wanted to stay, but Councillor Terik placed a hand on his shoulder and Sandor sighed, saying, “I’ll be right downstairs.” “Thanks,” she whispered as they walked away. Their heavy footsteps echoed through the quiet space, and Sophie couldn’t help smiling when she heard the couch springs creak, trying to imagine a goblin and elvin royalty lounging in her old living room. Then she squared her shoulders, turned the doorknob, and stumbled inside, not daring to look until the door was safely closed behind her. Her jaw dropped slightly. Every tiny detail of her room had been precisely recreated, right down to the way she used to arrange her stuffed animals by height—though there was a gap where Ella should’ve been. She sank onto the bed, running her hands over the tattered blue-and-yellow quilt her mom had made for her. The fabric felt coarser than the elvin fabrics she was used to now, and she could see the stain from the time she’d spilled orange juice as a kid, but she still wanted to curl up in a ball and bury her face in it. She hadn’t realized how much she’d left behind. Textbooks and notebooks and trophies and ribbons from her days in human schools. Tacky knickknacks and figurines her parents had given her over the years. Silly crafts she’d made with her mom and sister. Books she’d read so many times the bindings were creased and frayed—though they looked a bit ridiculous now with their wizards and dragons and demigods on the covers. In fact, everything looked ridiculous. Dull and dusty and completely useless—at least in her new world of power and light. It was hard not to feel just as useless. She clutched her registry pendant—proof that despite her differences, this world was where she belonged. Then she stood, smoothing the wrinkles she’d left on the bed and focusing on the reason she was there. She pulled open the bottom drawer of her desk, coughing as bits of dust and cat hair erupted in a plume. It was stuffed with notebooks and old school projects and cell phone chargers, and she was starting to worry it wasn’t there when her fingers brushed against the scratchy edge of something covered in glitter. She couldn’t help smiling when she saw the hot pink cover with sparkly unicorns staring at her. Their purple eyes and rainbow manes and tails were almost as absurd as the rainbow walkways they were posed on or the floating hearts in the sky. She wanted to pore over it page by page, but she wasn’t sure how long she could keep Councillor Terik waiting. As she turned to leave, a small part of her wanted to take more, keep a few more memories and things that were her. But was this her? Or was this just her past? She glanced around again. Then left everything behind. “Is that what you were looking for?” Councillor Terik asked as she came down the stairs. He pointed to the journal she’d been hugging to her chest, and she nodded. “Can I see it?” Sophie froze. “It’s okay,” he promised. “I just want to satisfy my own curiosity, nothing more. In fact”—he reached up and removed his circlet, and held it out to her—“let’s trade. For the next few minutes, consider me a citizen.” Her grip tightened on the journal and her head screamed for her to keep it secret. But he’d trusted her enough to bring her there without question. Couldn’t she do the same? Besides, any runes she’d written would be the Black Swan’s cipher. She doubted he’d be able to translate. Still, her hands shook as she took his circlet and gave him the journal. She stared at her warped reflection in the enormous emeralds as he flipped through the pages. And then flipped through them again. And again. He finally laughed. “Well, as far as I can tell, other than being a rather humorous glimpse of how much your younger sister drove you crazy, there’s nothing significant in here. Though there are a few pages missing toward the end.” He held out the journal, pointing to scraps of torn paper running along the inner spine. She had no memory of tearing those out. Tears burned her eyes—but not sad tears. Angry tears. “I’m guessing you don’t want to tell me what you were hoping to find,” Councillor Terik asked quietly. “Remember—the crown’s still off.” “It doesn’t matter. It’s not there.” She tried not to imagine Mr. Forkle’s chubby, wrinkled body skulking

around her house when she wasn't home, tearing out the pages. Or maybe she had been home. An image of him looming over her while she slept filled her mind. When else would he erase her memories? "Are you okay, Miss Foster?" Sandor asked as she started to sway. Mr. Forkle may have cared that day in Paris, but he'd also messed with her life in so many creepy, unimaginable ways. She had to get out of there. "Thank you for bringing me here," she said as she handed Councillor Terik his circlet and fumbled for her home crystal. "Anytime, Sophie. And don't forget this." He held out her old journal. Sophie couldn't make herself take it. Sandor grabbed it for her, and Sophie tried to act normal as she held her crystal to the light. But inside she was panicking. The Black Swan had stolen more than her memories when they tore out those pages. They'd stolen her only lead to save Alden. FORTY-EIGHT THERE YOU ARE!" KEEFE CALLED from outside the pterodactyl enclosure. Grady was brushing the teeth of a bright orange male and Keefe was leaning against the bars watching. His gray tunic was streaked with mud, and tufts of purple fur were stuck in his especially messy hair. "Grady's been keeping me busy while you were gone," Keefe explained. "I can see that. Sorry. I told you I'd be home later." "Yeah, well, my dad started into one of his lectures on the importance of me living up to my potential. Anything's better than that. Plus, it gave me a chance to play with Glitter Butt." "Glitter Butt?" "Way better name than Silveny, right?" "Wait—you've been playing with Silveny?" "It's bizarre," Grady answered for him. "I had him help me feed her, since she responded to him last time. Next thing I knew she was nuzzling his neck, just like she does with you." "What can I say? Glitter Butt loves me." "Her name is not Glitter Butt." "It should be. She likes it better." "She does not." "Wanna bet?" "I wouldn't do it, Sophie," Grady warned her. "She really likes Keefe. Which is great for us. She's finally accepting another person." But . . . did it have to be Keefe? Sophie rushed to Silveny's enclosure, and as soon as the gleaming horse spotted her, the transmissions began. Friend! Fly! Trust! Fly! But there was a new word in the mix. Keefe! "See? I told you she likes me." "You don't know that." "Actually, I do. I can feel her emotions without touching her—just like I can with yours. I didn't notice it the last time I was around her because I assumed what I was feeling came from you. But now I can tell the difference." Keefe! "Hey, Glitter Butt—did you miss me?" Keefe! Keefe! Keefe! Do you realize he's calling you Glitter Butt? Sophie transmitted. She sent a picture of a large, sparkly horse hind to illustrate. Glitter Butt, Silveny repeated. Keefe! Sophie rolled her eyes. "If you're jealous because you don't have a cool nickname, we can start calling you Sparkle Fanny," Keefe offered. "Thanks, I'll pass." "Suit yourself. Personally, I insist that you call me Shimmer Booty from now on." Keefe! Silveny added. Keefe! Fly! Keefe! Glitter Butt! Sophie rubbed her temples. Just when she thought the transmissions couldn't get any more annoying. "So where were you anyway?" Keefe asked. "Yeah, I've been wondering the same thing," Grady said behind them. When Sophie didn't answer, everyone looked at Sandor. "She was perfectly safe," he assured them. "

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[
  {
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    "chunk_filename": "000573.txt",
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```

FIFTY-EIGHT

NOT AGAIN.

It was Sophie's only thought as the black-cloaked figures grabbed the net, pulling it tighter around them. Keefe shouted something she didn't hear as she closed her eyes, waiting to feel the fear and rage swell inside her head. But all she could muster was a shudder. She must be too weak to inflict. A flash of light shot past her, hitting one of the figures and making him collapse in a trembling heap. "They have a melder!" another figure shouted as Silveny reared in the loosened net. "Where did you get that?" Sophie yelled as Keefe raised the silver weapon and fired another shot. "Grady insisted I take it, but he didn't want me to tell you in case it freaked you out." He fired again, but his aim was wrecked by Silveny's thrashing. The four remaining figures closed off their circle and one of them reached for a melder of his own. "Don't hit the alicorn!" one of the others shouted at him. "Isn't this the point where you develop some new, impossible ability and get us out of here?" Keefe yelled as they ducked a melder blast aimed at them. "I wish." Sophie squeezed her eyes shut and tried to rally her concentration. "Nothing's working right now." Even her arms and legs were too weak and slow. All she could do was cling to Silveny's neck with what little strength she had and hope Keefe could either take out the attackers or that the Black Swan would send help. Keefe aimed at the figure who was armed, but before he fired, one of the other figures nailed Keefe in the head with a rock. The melder slipped from his hand. "Oh, so that's how it is?" Keefe shouted, whipping one of Sandor's weird throwing stars at him. The silver blades clipped the figure's shoulder, tearing his cloak and making him drop his end of the net. "Don't let the alicorn get away!" the attacker shouted, flailing to regrab the ropes. Keefe flung another pointed star, but he missed. "These things are hard to aim!" "How many weapons do you have?" Sophie asked him. "Hopefully enough." Keefe tossed a third throwing star, missing again. "Try cutting the ropes!" Sophie shouted. Before Keefe could try, Silveny bucked again, rearing back so hard she pulled partially free of the net—enough to spread her wings. A powerful flap had them airborne, but they'd only moved a few feet off the ground before a black lasso swung around Silveny's neck and jerked her down so hard her legs collapsed. Silveny's right wing bent backward as she toppled to her side. The majestic horse screeched in pain, and Sophie and Keefe tumbled off her back, rolling across the rocky ground until they crashed into the side of the cave. "What have you done?" one of the figures shouted as the remaining four of them rushed for Silveny. Sophie struggled to pull free from the tangle of rope, surprised that none of them seemed concerned with capturing her. Before she could decide what that meant, there was a blinding flash of light and the ground shook, cracking around their attackers and sending them sprawling. Through the thick dust Sophie caught a glimpse of Mr. Forkle and a cluster of dwarves running toward them. "Get out of here," Mr. Forkle screamed as the hooded figures advanced on him and the dwarves. "Leap Sophie home, Keefe!" But Sophie wasn't leaving Silveny. Keefe must've been thinking the same thing because he pulled himself up and jumped over the fissure to where Silveny lay thrashing on her side. "Come on, Foster!" he shouted, holding out his arms to catch her. Sophie pulled herself upright, summoning as much strength as she could as she ran for the opening, jumping at the last possible second. Only one foot caught the ground on the other side, but Keefe grabbed her arms and dragged her over. He wiped her cheek, and when he pulled his hand away it was smeared with red. Sophie wasn't surprised. He had a huge gash over his eyebrow. She was sure she was just as scraped. Get up, Silveny, she transmitted, and the injured alicorn struggled to her feet. Keefe lifted Sophie onto

Silveny's back and crawled on behind her. As soon as his hands locked around her waist, Sophie transmitted, Fly! Silveny ran toward the edge of the cliff and leaped off. She flapped her shimmering wings, but the right one was crooked and bleeding and when the wind hit the feathers, it bent backward, sending them dropping like a stone toward the ocean below. Fly! Sophie's mind screamed, but no matter how hard Silveny flapped and flailed, her wing wouldn't work. "Now what?" Keefe shouted. Teleport! Sophie repeated the command over and over, but Silveny's mind was too clouded by fear and pain to respond. Teleport now or we're going to die! "Uh . . . Sophie?" Keefe screamed as several precious seconds slipped by. Silveny, you have to get us out of here! Help! the terrified horse transmitted. I don't know how! But Silveny just kept repeating Help! over and over. And as Sophie imagined them splattering over the rocky shore, something inside her clicked. She wasn't sure if it was instincts or pure desperation, but it felt like her brain switched into autopilot, feeding off her adrenaline to generate warmth and energy and swirling the two forces together until it felt like an explosion rocketed from her mind. The blast tore an opening in space, and a split second later they crashed through it, into the void.

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He spotted someone selling giant, twisted, breadlike things and figured that was a justifiable use of his budget. After all, it was bread as big as his head. Apparently, it was called a pretzel—at least according to the lady who sold him the pretzel-y goodness. And he could smell lots of other delicious things he wanted to try. But the emotions kept ramping up every time people spilled out of the various tents, and it was getting harder and harder to keep his focus on the pebble in his shoe. He looked around for a deserted place to leap—and spotted something that could be the answer to all his problems. “WAIT—WHERE DID YOU GET THAT?” he shouted as he rushed over to a gray-haired couple, making them both jump. “Sorry,” he said, flashing his best I-swear-I’m-not-a-creeper smile. “Didn’t mean to startle you. I was just wondering where you got that map.” He pointed to the folded paper in the woman’s hands, which didn’t just show all the streets in the city—it had cute little drawings of the various landmarks, along with handy labels telling what they were and footnotes sharing the history behind each place. If he could find something like that with all the different human cities on it, it would be an absolute game changer. Then every time he leaped somewhere, he could match whatever weird statue or buildings he saw against the map, and he’d know exactly where he was—and if it was close to London. “Our tour guide gave them to us when the bus dropped us off,” the woman explained. “But you can have mine,” the guy added, pulling an identical map from his back pocket. “All the maps I need are up here.” He tapped his temple, and the woman laughed. “That’s why we get lost so often,” she told Keefe as he took the map the man handed him. “So a word to the wise—don’t be afraid to ask for directions.” “And always listen to your wife,” the man added with a wink. “Or... whoever calls you their Snuggle Mouse.” He glanced back at the woman, and they exchanged such sweet, sappy smiles that Keefe wasn’t sure if he wanted to hug them or beg them to share all their other life lessons. Instead, he thanked them for their help and ducked out of the way so he could study his glorious new treasure. “Perfect!” he said when he spotted his new destination. He had no idea what a Hugendubel was, but the little drawing showed books—and where there were books, surely there would also be maps. It took him longer than he was proud of to find his way there—and he might’ve stopped to try a vegan currywurst along the way because, wow, those smelled amazing and the sign made it clear they were totally meat-free. But he eventually made it to a store that would’ve made the Forklenator very proud of him. Books everywhere! All sorted into different categories and alphabetized. He kind of wanted to stop at the FANTASY—ADVENTURE section and see if there were any pointy-eared elves on the covers—but he was too excited to waste any time. “Excuse me,” he said, stopping a guy he hoped worked there. “Do you know where I can find a map of the world?” “Sounds like you need an atlas.” He motioned for Keefe to follow him, and they wound through the stacks, over to a section where the books all looked very thick and boring. He handed Keefe the thickest one, and Keefe flipped through the pages, which were filled with intricate maps covered in tiny lines and writing. “Actually, I was hoping you’d have something more like this”—he showed him the map he’d been given and pointed to the illustrations—“but of the whole planet.” The guy frowned. “I don’t think we have that.” “We might in the children’s section,” a woman nearby jumped in. She motioned for Keefe to follow her over to the most colorful section of the store, where most of the books had kids doing adventurous things on the covers—and if Keef hadn’t been trying to stick to a budget, he totally would’ve grabbed one that showed a girl flying on an alicorn. But then the woman handed him a book called My Very First World Atlas, and it was perfect. The map on the cover was decorated with dozens of the drawings he needed—plus a bunch of smiling children and cute animals. “Is this a gift?” the woman asked as she rang up the sale. “Nope. It’s for me.” He could tell she was judging his taste in literature, but he didn’t care as he handed over the money. The first two pages were exactly what he needed. As soon as he was outside the store, he pulled the pages free from the binding so he could keep them handy in his pocket and shoved the rest of the book—and his Snuggle Mouse cookie—into his backpack for safekeeping. “Let’s try this again,” he said as he ducked down an

alley and pulled out his pathfinder. “Look out, London. Here I come!” NOPE. Keefe was getting very tired of saying that word. He’d already used it when he reappeared near a tall red building with a bunch of different roofs stacked on top of each other—which his handy map told him was called the Chureito Pagoda in Japan. It was a beautiful place, especially with the snowcapped mountain in the background. But it was nowhere near London. Neither was the row of enormous ancient trees called the Avenue of the Baobabs in Madagascar. Or the super-fancy white-domed building surrounded by a bunch of towers called the Taj Mahal in India. Or the Leaning Tower of Pisa in Italy, which really did look like it was about to fall over.

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parity or complementarity. The dialogue frames human technology as critical in a context
where elvin magic alone is insufficient.",
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TEN. Sophie had to let the sentence slosh around in her mind before the words could soak in. Once they did, something still felt wrong. "You mean memories, right?" she asked. "You stole two." "We are only offering one—the memory I know you desire the most." "The Boy Who Disappeared?" Sophie asked, and the Collective nodded. Sophie turned to her friends, knowing she wouldn't get a better offer. When she had their approval, she told the Collective, "Okay." "All right, then," Mr. Forkle said, reaching for her temples. Sophie flinched back. "Wait—you're doing it now? Since when is anything with you guys ever that easy?" She glanced at her right hand, where a small star-shaped scar commemorated the time Mr. Forkle reset her abilities. He'd had to give her an entire ounce of limbium and then inject her with a modified human remedy to stop the allergic reaction from killing her. Mr. Forkle cleared his throat. "Returning memories is a simple process—though you should prepare yourself for the fact that this memory was taken to spare you additional worry." "I still want it back. Just like I want the other memory." She turned to the Collective, trying to find their eyes amid their crazy disguises. "If you won't return it now, I think I deserve a guarantee that you'll give it back to me eventually." "You deserve that and more," Granite said. "So we can agree to your term—as long as you understand that we will choose when to return the other memory."

```
[
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The crowd moved forward, and Keefe kept his eyes on his feet as he followed, trying to count how many times Foster had almost died, to keep himself distracted. She'd been kidnapped. Attacked with Silveny outside the Black Swan's hideout. And who could forget the freezing battle on Mount Everest, when he'd first found out Mommy Dearest was behind everything? Then King Dimitar had tried to kill them in Ravagog. And Fintan and Brant made the castle in Lumenaria crumble around her. And his mom tried to drown everyone in Atlantis. He didn't want to think about Umber's attack, or how long Foster was stuck in the Healing Center battling those horrible echoes. Then they had to battle a small army of bloodthirsty mutant newborn trolls. And then of course there was all the creepy stuff that happened in Loamnore. None of that counted the times her allergy had almost taken her out. Or when the Black Swan made her reset her abilities. Honestly, those last few made Keefe angrier than anything the Neverseen had done. Sure, his mom and her black-cloaked minions were cruel and evil—but at least everyone agreed they were the villains. The Black Swan were supposed to be the heroes. Everyone was expected to trust them and follow their orders—even though they mostly wanted everyone to sit back and read a bunch of boring books while the Neverseen ran wild. Keefe wondered how Forkle and crew felt about Foster's little firestorm at the Neverseen's storehouse. Were they celebrating, like they should be? Or lecturing her for being too reckless? Probably both. And if he was right, he hoped Foster stood up for herself and told them exactly why she— A voice snapped him back to the present, and it took his brain a second to piece together that someone was talking to him. A human. Keefe looked up and realized he was about to cross through some sort of narrow structure—but the path was blocked by a guy in a dark blue shirt. The guy's skin was all droopy and wrinkly, and he had big, bushy white eyebrows and a shiny bald head—and if Keefe hadn't had his jaw clenched so tight, he probably would've blurted out, Whoa, I forgot how weird humans look when they get old! So maybe it was better that he was fighting back a command. Then again, the guy had clearly asked him a question, and Keefe had no way to respond—and nowhere to go. The crowd had pressed in behind him, and there were metal rails closing in both sides of his path. If Foster was there— WAIT, NO "IF"—KEEP UP THE DAYDREAM! But Keefe couldn't picture her anymore. His brain was racing in too many different directions, most of which wanted him to leap over those rails and RUN, RUN, RUN! At least his panic seemed to drown out the other emotions. All he could feel was his racing heart and his shaky breaths. All he could hear was his pounding pulse—and a few garbled words that sounded like "ticket" and "poncho." And yes, he could grab his pathfinder and leap away—create the kind of spectacle that would turn him into a human legend and make it way easier for his mom to pick up his trail. But if this plan was ever going to work, he had to find a way to actually interact with people. So he forced himself to make eye contact and slowly cupped one of his hands around his ear, hoping the old guy would take that to mean, "Uh, didn't hear what you said." The guy nodded and said something that got drowned out by a particularly loud gust of wind—then pointed to the group Keefe had been trying to blend in with and shouted, "ARE YOU WITH THEM?" The group was now crossing some sort of ramp—and they all had their blue coverings on. Keefe chewed his lip. Lying probably wasn't a smart idea—but the only other option was fleeing. So he gave a quick nod and held his breath. The guy studied him for a long second. Then shrugged. "BETTER HURRY! WE'RE ABOUT TO TAKE OFF." Keefe had no idea what that meant. But the guy moved aside to let him pass, so he rushed to catch up with the others. The moment he stepped onto the ramp, he regretted all his life choices. The floor dipped under his feet, and he recognized the sensation much too well. A boat. He'd boarded a boat. A HUMAN boat. Weren't there a bunch of those at the bottom of the ocean??? "Welcome to the Maid of the Mist," a voice blared from some sort of hidden speakers. Keefe spun around, but the old guy had blocked off the path. It's fine. It's a totally sturdy boat. Heading toward three giant waterfalls... "Welcome to the Maid of the Mist," the voice repeated. Relax, Keefe told himself. Feel how excited everyone is? The nervousness he'd picked up earlier had vanished, replaced with an almost audible hum of anticipation. Would people be feeling like that if they were worried about drowning? Probably

not. But they also trusted their technology way more than he did. Plus, they probably didn't get seasick... His stomach squirmed and soured as he remembered his miserable journey in Lady Cadence's weird houseboat contraption. He'd ended up collapsed on the deck in a shaky, sweaty Keefe-ball—and that was after he'd choked down a bilepod. How was he supposed to survive without even a basic nausea elixir? A horn blared as the boat lurched forward, and Keefe barely managed to grab one of the rails before toppling over. No way was he letting go—even to reach for his pathfinder. "Please keep your hands and arms inside at all times," the voice told him. Keefe tightened his grip. The boat steered toward the falls, and the mist thickened into a downpour. This wasn't going to end well. FIVE THE GOOD NEWS WAS, KEEFE survived—and he only barfed once before the boat lurched back to the dock and he could release his death grip on the railing long enough to leap back to the nice, solid mountain. Okay, fine, he barfed twice. Well... three times, if he counted the little bit he accidentally swallowed before he burped it up again—but he was trying very hard not to think about that. Just like he was trying super hard not to think about the bad news... Operation Foster Distraction had turned out to be an epic fail. Yeah, he'd made it through the unexpected river adventure without unleashing any commands on unsuspecting humans—but he'd also accidentally ended up on a crowded boat, weaving around enormous waterfalls and getting so drenched that his boots were now squish, squish, squishing with every step. Clearly, thinking about Foster only worked when he ignored everything else. And how was he supposed to function—or accomplish anything he needed to—if he had to wander around completely oblivious to the rest of the world? Plus, it probably wasn't going to help his sanity if he spent all his time hanging out with an Imaginary Sophie. I'll find another way, he promised, even though he mostly wanted to bury himself in pine needles and sulk at the stars. Didn't help that his head was now filled with a constant chorus of KEEFE! KEEFE! KEEFE!

```
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But then Edaline had gently reminded Sophie that her group had gotten Tam back, and that everyone who'd gone on the mission had also come home alive. And Sophie had begrudgingly admitted that those things did count for something. Plus, when Dex, Stina, and Biana stopped by to share their account of what had happened in the main marketplace, it did sound like a pretty clear win for their group—though it helped that Gethen and Vespera had left almost immediately. Stina and Dex were convinced their success was because of their “mad fighting skills and super-awesome gadgets.” But Biana had a different, much more interesting theory. Biana thought Vespera wanted her plan to fail—at least a little. After all, Lady Gisela had forced Vespera into their alliance, and Vespera had made it clear that they had opposite visions. So maybe Vespera had decided that the perfect moment to take control was when Lady Gisela was distracted by all of her grand schemes for her son's legacy. It would explain why Vespera and Gethen had shown up, triggered every single alarm, said a bunch of half-truths to get everyone riled up, and then fled, leaving the dwarves to fight for them—which definitely didn't have the spectacle and flair of Vespera's usual schemes. And it would give Biana's group time to finish up their fight and head over as backup against Lady Gisela. And if Biana was right—Vespera had almost gotten what she wanted. Tam had knocked Lady Gisela out—and bound her with shadowflux bonds.

```
[
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]
```

Linh was the one who spotted the thin palm-length slit tucked among the gold filigree painted on the wall, and when she slipped her fingers in, the wall tilted ever so slightly. The light shifted, revealing an arched opening behind them. And through the gap was a winding staircase. “I don’t understand these illusions,” Keefe mumbled, shoving his arm through the archway, even though the wall had been solid a few seconds earlier. “Who cares?” Fitz snapped. “What are we waiting for?” Ro grabbed Fitz’s shirt to stop him from heading up the stairs. “I’m going first—and none of you are going to follow me until I give the all clear. Got it?” She didn’t let go until Fitz nodded. Then she was gone, squeezing her muscled body into the narrow stairway and winding up and up and up. “Biana has to be hurt,” Fitz said, tearing his fingers through his hair. “Otherwise she would’ve come back by now. Or she’s a prisoner.” “We’ll get her back,” Sophie promised, wishing she could reach for his hand. But she had to save her enhancing energy for when they might actually need it. “We got Foster’s parents back, didn’t we?” Keefe added. No one wanted to mention how injured they’d been. “Okay,” Ro whispered down. “Head on up—and get ready for some serious weirdness.” “Weirdness” didn’t begin to cover it. The attic-style space was part theater catwalk, part funhouse maze—a tangle of wooden walkways and dangling lights and silks, lined with mirrors in every shape and size. Everything was attached by gossamer threads to an elaborate system of pulleys and hooks that dangled from the sloped ceiling. It was like stepping into a magician’s workshop. “There’s no motor for any of this,” Dex mumbled, crouching to examine one of the larger mirrors. “I wonder if they . . .” His question trailed off when he spotted a splash of red near his foot. Ro nodded and pointed ahead to another splatter. And another. A gruesome trail leading into the shadows. “It’s not just Biana’s,” Ro whispered as Sophie clung to a nearby railing, trying to clear her spinning head. “I’m picking up Vespera’s scent too, so Biana must have given as good as she got.” None of them found that comforting. “Does that mean Vespera’s still here?” Tam asked, keeping his voice as low as possible. “And what about Fintan?” “I’m not feeling either of them,” Grady murmured. Sophie stretched out her consciousness again. “Neither am I.” “But that could be a trick,” Dex reminded them. “I think I smell Fintan,” Ro said, pulling herself up to a higher catwalk and sucking in several deep breaths. “I can’t tell how fresh the trail is. But he went that way.” The narrow ledge she pointed to went the opposite way from Biana’s red-stained trail—disappearing around a sharp curve. “You’re sure?” Grady asked, lowering himself onto the rickety walkway. Sophie grabbed his sleeve. “What are you doing?” He leaned closer. “If Fintan’s still here, he’s either knocked out, or planning something. Either way, someone needs to check.” “You can’t go alone,” she whispered. He brushed a strand of her hair off her forehead. “I’ll be fine. It’s you I’m worried about. Stay behind Ro, do everything she tells you, and get out of here as soon as you find Biana.” “You can’t handle Fintan by yourself,” Sophie argued. “Look how much he wiped you out last time.” “I’ll go with him,” Marella offered. “Seeing me spark a few flames might distract Fintan enough for Grady to get control of his mind.” “I’m not putting you in that kind of danger,” Grady told her. “Uh, it’s not like the other path is any safer.” Marella pointed to the red splatters around their feet. “The girl has a point,” Ro admitted as Marella hopped down onto the same platform as Grady. Sophie hated this new plan with every fiber of her being. But . . . if they had a chance to find Fintan, they had to take it. “Be careful,” she begged both of them. “Right back at you,” Grady told her, kissing her cheek before leading Marella down the creaky path. Sophie’s group went the opposite way—and with every step she expected to hear Grady’s scream or Fintan’s taunts or the crackle of flames. But the only sounds were from their feet scraping along the splintered floor as they struggled to follow Biana’s bloody trail through a maze of mirrors and ledges and sharp curves they couldn’t see until they’d nearly fallen off an invisible edge. And then—in the middle of a wide platform, with a steep drop on one side and mirrors lining the other—the trail just . . . ended. “You don’t think she . . . ?” Tam didn’t finish the question. But the way he peered over the edge said enough. “Easy there,” Ro said as Fitz sank to his knees. “I can still smell her.” “I can feel her too,” Sophie added. “Her thoughts are blurred—but they’re close.” “Then where is she?” Fitz snapped. “There must be another trick,” Linh

assured him, reaching for his hand. "The illusions seem to be about the angle of the light," Dex said slowly. "So I wonder . . ." He studied one of the mirrors hanging from a gossamer thread and tilted the glass enough to send the light bouncing toward a different mirror. "Can someone tilt that one down a little?" Keefe did as he asked, and the light refracted toward the edge of a new mirror, then bounced to another and another and . . . One of the mirrors seemed to vanish, revealing a cramped cubby of space. And tucked into the shadows was Biana. Passed out in a pool of blood. Eighty-one GLASS CRUNCHED UNDER Fitz's knees as he knelt next to Biana. "Biana? Can you hear me?" He shook her shoulders and her head lolled to the side, giving them a better glimpse of the spiderweb of red gashes covering the left half of her face. Thick shards of glass jutted out of her arm, hip, and leg along that same side of her body, as if she'd been slammed into a mirror and shredded as it shattered. "Biana?" Fitz tried again, choking on the word. "Do you think they drugged her?" Sophie couldn't tell. But judging by how much red was splashed around them . . . "

Cover 10

Relevant results in this cover: 10

Content pages range: [177, 195]

Groups range: [58, 67]

Deep intent (search) query

Interested in example of human technology
being presented as equal or superior to magic

Ranking query (reranker)

Interested in example of human technology
being presented as equal or superior to magic

- 000058.txt — ranks: #65
- 000059.txt — ranks: #66
- 000060.txt — ranks: #67
- 000061.txt — ranks: #70
- 000062.txt — ranks: #71
- 000063.txt — ranks: #72
- 000064.txt — ranks: #73
- 000065.txt — ranks: #74
- 000066.txt — ranks: #75
- 000067.txt — ranks: #76


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    "chunk_filename": "003037.txt",
    "chunk_info": "[Chunk 87/643 | Source: keeper_of_the_lost_cities/txt/book_08.0_legacy.txt | chars:134787-136141 | tokens:327]"
  }
]
```

"No need to apologize. You're right. I am supposed to be part of the bad guys."

"That doesn't mean—"

"Relax, Foster. I'm not going to freak out on you. I'm aware of my situation—the question is, are you?" He thwapped the notebook harder. "I can swear fealty to anyone I want. Be friends with anyone I want. Fight on any side I want. That's my choice, no matter what my mom wants—and I say, 'Go, Team Good-Guys!' But. I don't get to stop being the dude who was raised by one of the leaders of the Neverseen. And it doesn't make whatever plans my mom has for me go away. Just like it doesn't erase the things she's already had me do—like delivering that letter. Who knows what other stuff I've done and don't remember?" Thwap! Thwap! Thwap! "That's why I can't let Mommy Dearest scare me away. We're always complaining that we don't have any good leads. But I'm the lead. And I can't help you guys if I'm hiding."

"Nobody said anything about hiding," Sophie argued.

"No, you just talked about locking me up."

"That was Tam," Sophie corrected. "And I'm pretty sure he was joking. Or using hyperbole."

"But I wouldn't be opposed to the idea," Sandor noted.

"Neither would I," Ro agreed.

"All I'm saying," Sophie said, snatching the silver notebook from Keefe's hands, "is that you don't have to be with us to help us. You've done a huge thing already. You remembered the guy's face! Now Dex and I can work on hacking the security feed in London, and—"

"Oh, so I'm not invited to London now?" Keefe asked, lunging to steal back his notebook—but Sophie was faster.

She tucked the silver book into the inner pocket of her cape. "No, you'll be staying here doing something way more important."

"If you say research—"

"Nope. You'll be adding to these." She put the brown, gold, and green notebooks into his lap. "This was a good plan, Keefe. I mean... I wish you'd lay off the fathomlethes. But cataloging your memories already worked, so keep at it! Plus, you're making some seriously gorgeous art."

"Oh sure, now you want me drawing until my hands cramp! What happened to the whole 'I could've helped you project your memories' thing, with the sad eyes and the 'Why don't you trust me?' I guess you're fine with me working alone now that you found a reason to ditch me?"

"The boy does make a valid point," Ro noted.

"I'm not ditching you."

“Good! Because, to quote Gigantor”—Keefe shifted his voice into an uncanny impersonation of Sandor’s squeaky tone—“I go where you go.”

“I don’t sound like that,” Sandor huffed.

Ro snickered. “You totally do.”

Sophie sighed. “I’m not trying to ditch you, Keefe.”

“Awesome, because there’s no way you’re investigating my past without me.”

“It won’t be without you. You’ll be working harder than any of us. Kinda like how Dex works on his own when he’s doing his Technopath thing—”

“Yeah, because Dex never feels left out.”

“Okay, but Dex is... sensitive.”

“You were going to say ‘pouty,’ weren’t you?” Ro asked.

“Hey, don’t dis the Dexinator!” Keefe told her. “He’s my hero. Master elixir maker, ultimate gadget manipulator, and he scored a Foster kiss before Fitzy.”

Ro’s eyes widened. “He did?”

“It’s not what it sounds like,” Sophie mumbled. “It was... never mind—stop trying to distract me, Keefe! Working alone doesn’t make what you’re doing any less important. And I’ll keep you updated on everything. I’ll check in as many times as you want me to, answer all your questions—I’ll even project everything I learn into a memory log so you can see it all for yourself. It’ll be exactly like you were there, only better because you’ll be safe.”

Keefe whistled. “Wow, you say that like you honestly expect me to go along with this plan. It’s like you don’t even know me.”

“Oh, I know you,” Sophie said through a sigh.

```
[
  {
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human-created address ('221B Baker Street'), implying human technology can interface with
elven magic. Keefe's mimicry of Sophie's telepathic training suggests human adaptability to
magical systems. The phrase's efficacy demonstrates human innovation being leveraged
against or alongside magic.",
    "chunk_filename": "001392.txt",
    "chunk_info": "[Chunk 401/415 | Source:
keeper_of_the_lost_cities/txt/book_04_neverseen.txt | chars:760204-761712 | tokens:382]"
  }
]
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So what was his plan? And why hadn't he told her?! "I must say"—Fintan raised his hands, ready to call down flames—"you've really outdone yourself, Mr. Sencen. Miss Foster is an excellent addition to our bargain." Keefe jumped in front of Sophie. "She's not supposed to be here." Brant's scarred smile crawled straight out of Sophie's nightmares. "Then we'll consider her an excellent bonus." Sophie hadn't noticed that Alvar had vanished until she felt his arms wrap around her. She screamed and thrashed and kicked, but he was too strong. He pinned her arms behind her with one hand while he ripped her Black Swan pendant off her neck and tossed it to Brant. "Let's leave the fires to the professionals, shall we?" Brant asked as he crushed the monocle under his heavy black boot. "I'll take yours, too." Keefe jerked away as Brant yanked the pendant off his neck. "Must we really do this again?" Brant asked, snapping his fingers and creating a sphere of Everblaze. "Not if you let her go," Keefe said. "I'm finding it rather hard to believe your commitment," Fintan told him. "Surely you've realized that switching sides means betraying your friends." Sophie's stomach switched to vomit mode. "What is he talking about, Keefe?" "You can't guess?" Brant asked. She was developing some terrifying theories—but none of them made sense. Or they didn't until Fintan asked Keefe, "Where's the cache?" The only way they would know she had the cache was if Keefe had told them. He must be running the same trick she'd had him use on King Dimitar, offering something the Neverseen wanted in order to get information. But what kind of information? And then she knew. There are better ways to save your mom, she transmitted to Keefe. Let's get out of here and we'll figure it out together. Not that she had any idea how they were going to get away. Her home crystal was gone, and Keefe didn't seem to have one either. But the mountains weren't that far away. If they made a run for it they might be able to get high enough to teleport—assuming she could get out of Alvar's viselike grip. "We should finish this at the hideout," Alvar said, as if he knew what she'd been planning. "Ruy will be wondering where we are." "Not until he proves he can deliver the item," Fintan said. "Show us the cache." "Let her go first," Keefe snapped back. "There you go again, making it hard to trust you. So let's make this easier." Fintan shoved Keefe to the ground and grabbed Sophie from Alvar. He squeezed her arm so hard she wondered if the bone might snap. Everblaze erupted in his free hand and he held the flames under Sophie's nose. "Give me the cache," Fintan said, "or I'll start giving her scars like the ones she gave Brant." "Okay," Keefe said, stumbling to his feet. "I'll get it right now." Sophie was trying hard to think of a way to help him out of his bluff when she heard the sound of her voice saying, "221B Baker Street." The cache dropped into Keefe's palm with a plop, and Sophie's jaw fell. "How did you . . ." Keefe wouldn't look at her. "I pieced it together after I heard you training with Fitz. And mimicking's easy." "Give it here," Fintan ordered. Don't do it, Sophie transmitted. Keefe kept his focus on Fintan. "You'll honor the rest of our deal?" "If you prove your loyalty," Brant snapped. "I brought the cache—what more do you need?" Keefe asked. "You haven't actually given it to us," Fintan reminded him. He pointed to Alvar, who was the only one with free hands. Sophie couldn't breathe when she saw the look on Keefe's face. There were so many emotions stretched across his features: Pain. Sorrow. Regret. But the worst was shame. "Don't do it," she begged. "That cache could destroy everything." "That's the point," Fintan agreed. "Three seconds, Mr. Sencen, then things get ugly." Sophie couldn't fight back her sob as Keefe handed Alvar the cache. She tried to grab it telekinetically, but Alvar's grip was too tight. And as soon as he had it, he leaped away. Gone. "Now we're getting somewhere," Fintan said, still holding the flames under Sophie's nose. "But you still have one more test before I'll trust you. And since the strongest bonds are created with fire . . ." Brant smiled and picked up the bent frame of Sophie's ruined monocle pendant. He passed the dented metal through the flames of Everblaze, then offered it to Keefe. "Brand her a traitor and maybe we'll believe your commitment." "Why are you doing this?" Sophie asked as Keefe took the red-hot pendant. "How can you join them after everything they've done?" Keefe's eyes stayed focused on the brand. "I can't pretend I'm who you want me to be anymore." "What does that even mean?" she

screamed. Keefe's voice was choked now, but Sophie was too angry to cry. "It means I got more memories back," he said. "I'm not like you. You were made to be the hero. I was raised to be something . . . else." He reached toward her face, and she braced for searing pain. But all he touched was the necklace he'd given her. "I wanted you to have this before I left," he whispered. "I thought it would be good for you to have something to remember me by. In case someday . . ." "I'm growing impatient, Mr. Sencen," Fintan warned. "Give me a second!" Keefe traced his fingers over the beads, lingering on the one he'd made. "I know why my dad hated it now. It looks like our Exillium necklaces, doesn't it? That's why my mom must've liked it. She knew I was meant to be the outcast. You keep trying to fix everything, Sophie. You even fixed Exillium. But you can't fix me." His eyes met hers then, and they held some sort of plea. He glanced to his left, and she followed his gaze, spotting the faintest trace of a light path, glinting out of the tiny crystal on the new bead he'd painted for her. "You understand, right?" Keefe asked. "No." But she did. Sort of. Come with me, she transmitted. "I have to do this," he said. "Please don't hate me." Their eyes met again and he nodded toward the faint trail of light he was still holding in place. Sophie swallowed hard, wishing there was something—anything—she could do to take him with her. But her only choice was to channel the full force of her mental strength and twist free of Fintan's iron grasp. She fell toward the path, taking one last look at Keefe's anguished face as the light he'd created for her pulled her away.

Group 60/69

```
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]
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"Wait, so you have been holding secrets back? After all the speeches about how you're done with that life—"

"I am done with it! The only reason I didn't share this last tiny thing is because you're going to say it's ridiculous."

"Try me!"

"Ugh, fine." He tore his fingers through his hair a little harder than necessary before he mumbled, "Stellarlune... apparently has something to do with... rocks."

Keefe blinked. "Rocks."

"See why I didn't tell you?"

" Yeah—but I'm hoping you're not talking about a pile of pebbles."

"I might be. I have no idea. All I know is that I heard your mom muttering under her breath one night about how she needed 'the rocks' for the next step."

"So... you mean the ethertine and magsidian she used on me in Loamnore."

"Maybe? But didn't you say those were a throne and a crown? It sounded more like she meant rock-rocks."

Keefe snorted. "Okay, you're right, that definitely wasn't impressive."

"Agreed! But do you at least trust me now?"

"Not really, no."

Alvar gritted his teeth.

"Oh, come on, you knew 'rocks' wasn't going to do it!"

"I did. But sadly, that's all I've got."

"Well then, I guess we're done here."

Keefe stood up.

"Wait!" Alvar chewed his lip for a second before he said, "I do actually have one more secret—but it's personal."

"Then why would I care?"

"Same reason you wanted to know how I was still alive."

Keefe studied him for a beat. "And you're willing to share this 'personal' secret?"

"I might be. I don't know."

"Wow, you're really that desperate to know about my abilities?"

"Nope. I seriously don't care what you can do, Keefe. And I'm not trying to redeem myself either—not that I think helping you would do that. I just... I know you've been given a rough deal. And I've always liked you. And I don't know if you can do this on your own—and even if you can, I don't think you should have to. And I'm here, so..." He shrugged. "But you didn't say whether sharing my secret would even help."

"It depends on what the secret is."

"I suppose that's fair. I could tell you I got so scared that I peed my pants during a few Neverseen missions—and that might make you laugh, but it probably wouldn't be enough to make you really open up. Right?"

"Pretty much."

"Great. So... it sounds like I'm going to have to share the secret either way, and hope it turns out to be enough to sway you."

"It does seem that way," Keefe agreed.

Alvar went back to chewing his lip, watching the guy in the blue box fly across the TV screen, before he said, "Fine—but this leaves me super vulnerable, so it'd be awesome if you didn't share it with anyone. I realize that's a big ask, so if nothing else... whenever you see my brother again, don't tell him, okay?"

Keefe wasn't willing to make that kind of promise.

Best he could give him was "Maybe."

Alvar fidgeted with his sleeves for a second before he closed his eyes and blurted out, "Fine. You already know I'm still alive, so... why not? Light leaping isn't the only thing I can't do anymore. I can't do anything elf-y. No telekinesis. No levitation. No breath control or body temperature control or appetite suppression. No skills. And... no ability."

Keefe froze. "You mean..."

Alvar nodded. "I'm not a Vanisher anymore. I'm as good as Talentless."

TWENTY-SEVEN.

"But I saw you vanish!" Keefe argued. "Right before I dragged you to that deserted island. I was following you, and then you disappeared, and I thought I lost you—until you reappeared behind me."

Alvar shook his head. "That wasn't vanishing. I just wanted to make it clear I knew you were following me. And I knew that block had an easy way to loop back without being seen."

"Okay, but what about. ..?"

Keefe tried to think of any other times he'd seen Alvar vanish while he'd been in London, but his brain came up blank.

And now that he was thinking about it, Vanishers often blinked in and out of sight when they walked—without even trying—and Alvar hadn't done that.

Not even once.

"Wow. That's... huge," Keefe mumbled, sinking back into a chair.

"Tell me about it. I never realized how much I relied on the ability until it was gone. Sneaking out of the hospital was an adventure."


```
[
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The pendant's blue crystal is later linked to elven leaping tech, but human tech is framed
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| chars:438859-439547 | tokens:170]"
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FITZ AND BIANA DIDN'T SEEM surprised when she caught up with them on their way to the Leapmaster to let them know she was coming home with them. "I figured you'd have a lot to talk to my dad about," Fitz said. He glanced at Biana. "Yeah, how are you doing?" Biana asked. "I'm fine." Her heart skipped a beat—and for once it had nothing to do with meeting Fitz's eyes. Alden wouldn't have told them about the Black Swan, would he? Fitz pulled her to a quiet corner. "Sophie. My dad told us about Grady and Edaline. I'm really sorry." "Me too." Biana reached out and took her hand. "Is there anything we can do?" Sophie looked away, blinking to stop the flood of tears she could feel coming. "Thanks. I'm fine." One stubborn tear slipped down her cheek, and Biana wrapped her in a hug. Fitz draped one arm across her shoulders. "It's going to be okay. Really," Biana whispered. "Sorry." Her voice was thick enough to cut. She pulled away from the hug and wiped her eyes. "I don't want to talk about it." "I know. That's why I didn't say anything yesterday," Biana said. "You knew yesterday?" Biana nodded. "My dad told us a couple days ago, because he and Mom are applying as replacement guardians." Sophie's head whipped up. "What? Really?" "Yep. I mean, the Council still has to approve it, but my dad made it sound like it would kinda be a done deal." Warm tingling rushed through Sophie, and it took her a second to realize it was hope. It didn't totally heal the wound from Grady and Edaline's rejection, but it eased some of the fear and uncertainty. "I . . . don't know what to say," she whispered. "You guys wouldn't mind?" "Are you kidding? Then I wouldn't be the only girl anymore. You have no idea what it's like having two brothers." Sophie's eyes darted to Fitz, wondering how he felt about the idea. He grinned. "Of course I don't mind. You're already like my little sister—this would just make it official." "Oh. Great." She knew he meant it as a compliment, but the word "sister" still stung. Biana hooked an arm through hers and led her toward the Leapmaster. "See? Everything will be okay." Sophie wanted to believe her, but she couldn't shake the feeling that things were going to get a lot worse before they got better. ALDEN SAT QUIET AFTER SOPHIE told him her recent discoveries. Too quiet. She'd tugged out so many eyelashes she was afraid there might be a bald spot. She dropped her hands to her lap. Finally, Alden cleared his throat. "Can I see the necklace they gave you?" Her shoulders slumped. "I didn't bring it." "Why not?" "I was afraid it might be a bug." "An insect?" "Oh. Sorry. That's what humans call tiny recording devices. I didn't want to bring it into your house in case it was a way to spy on us." "Human technology." Her face burned. "But why would they give me a necklace, then? It's just a crystal pendant—nothing special." "It has a crystal?" "A blue one." He dug out his black pathfinder from his pocket and pointed to the cobalt crystal at the end. "Was it this color?" Her eyes widened. "I think it was. Do you think it's a leaping crystal?" "Actually, I think it's an illegal crystal for leaping to the Forbidden Cities." He rose to pace, shaking his head. "They gave this to you at midterm?" She nodded. "I still don't understand how they could get in my locker." "A skilled Vanisher could sneak into Foxfire undetected, and we already know they have your DNA." He crossed the room back and forth four times before he spoke again. "I'll have to get that pendant from you—as soon as possible."

```
[
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keeper_of_the_lost_cities/txt/book_09.5_unraveled.txt | chars:439903-441514 | tokens:375]"
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]
```

"Sitting might be wise," Tam told him, and Keefe plopped down on the nearest chair, finally risking a glance at Foster. "It's okay to be nervous," she told him, reaching for his hand and then stopping herself—then staring at him with a crease between her eyebrows that kept getting deeper and deeper and deeper. He could tell there was some serious emotional turmoil going on in her head—but he still couldn't read a single thing she was feeling. Was she worried about him? Annoyed that she was stuck there helping with this when she had way more important things to do? Or was she just awkward because of his confession? Whatever it was, she was so distracted by the noise in her head that she totally missed Tam's question. "You with us, Foster?" Keefe teased, trying to snap her out of it. "Tam just asked if you wanted to enhance him for this." "Oh! Sorry." She hid her flushed cheeks behind her soggy hair. "Whatever you think would be best," she told Tam. "Might be a good idea," he decided. "Since I'm not really sure what I'm doing." "Just so you know, that's not making me more excited for this," Keefe said, hoping it sounded like a joke. But this was all starting to remind him way too much of Loamnore. "It'll be quick," Tam promised. "I think." He reached for Foster's hand. "One second." She closed her eyes and took a slow breath before she nodded. Apparently that was all she needed to switch on her enhancing. "You've gotten pretty good at that," Keefe noted, trying not to feel super envious. "Maybe you can teach me some of your ability-controlling tricks." "Sure—but only if you want." She said it with a shrug and an eye roll, and Keefe had to stop himself from shouting, SERIOUSLY—WHAT ARE YOU FEELING RIGHT NOW? He definitely wasn't a fan of this new emotional obscurity. "Ready?" Foster asked, taking Tam's hand when he nodded. "Wow," Tam breathed. "I forgot how intense that is." "Foster has that effect on people." Keefe said it with a smirk that hopefully hid the fresh wave of jealousy that crashed over him. He wasn't necessarily worried that there was anything going on between Foster and Bangs Boy—but he couldn't completely rule it out. Mostly he just wished he could hold her hand—or anyone's hand—without worrying about what he might sense or trigger in them. But he should probably be focusing on the fact that Tammy Boy was doing that creepy whispering thing he did when he used his power. His brows were also scrunching together, and he was curling his fingers like he was grabbing something only he could see. "Okay. I think I know how to call the darkness free," Tam murmured. "You might feel a little pull." "Little" was definitely an understatement. Tam flicked his hand in a strange pattern, then yanked his arm back like he was playing tug-of-war, and Keefe jerked forward, letting out a startled grunt as pain slammed against his ribs. A tiny whiff of darkness blasted out of his chest and hovered a few feet in front of him as the pain slowly faded. "It's kinda sad that this isn't even in my top five weirdest experiences," Keefe said, rubbing his chest as he squinted at the shadowy cloud. "Does it hurt?" Foster asked. "Not anymore. But that tug was like getting kicked in the ribs." "Sorry," Bangs Boy mumbled. "I was worried if I went slow, it'd drag out the pain." "It probably would have. It's all good—thank you for, uh... Huh. I can't think of a non-weird way of saying, 'Thanks for dragging the freaky ripple-tracker thing out of my heart,'" Keefe admitted. Tam flashed one of his still-mostly-surly grins. "You're welcome." "You're sure you got it all?" Foster asked—beating Keefe to the question. Tam nodded and called the shadowflux closer, letting it hover over his palms. "What are you going to do with that?" Dex asked. "No idea," Tam admitted. "It'll probably evaporate if I release my hold, but there's a chance Umber did something to it that'll make it unwieldy." "Oooh—I know!" Keefe jumped up and raced for the trash can, returning with an empty water bottle. "Trap it in there. Then it'll go out with the recycling, and if the tracker is somehow still working, it can lead my mom to a big pile of trash." "Works for me," Tam said, taking the bottle from him and filling it with the puff of darkness before sealing the lid. Keefe called the front desk and buried the bottle in the bottom of the bin before leaving it out in the hall for housekeeping. Then he plopped back onto the couch, trying to pretend like he wasn't freaking out—but he couldn't stop thinking about the fact that his mom could've ambushed him any day she'd wanted. That had to mean she was waiting for some sort of opportune moment. And even though the tracker was gone now, Keefe doubted that would stop her. She always had a backup plan. "Sooo," he

said slowly, “does this mean you’re ready to tell me the rest? And don’t give me the confused eyebrow crinkle, Foster. You told me about the tracker, but you’ve conveniently not told me how you came across a bunch of very specific information about ripples and eleventh hours and altered Spyballs. So hit me with it—what’s going on? What is my darling mommy up to now?” “Honestly, we’re not sure,” Foster said, hesitating a second before she sank into the armchair across from him and told him about a ton of memories they’d found in Kenric’s cache.

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Edaline disappeared to her room when they returned to Havenfield, and Grady tried to teach Sophie how to light leap alone. She'd never been so horrible at anything in her life. The first twenty times she tried, she couldn't feel the warm feathers—no matter how many times Grady told her to concentrate on the tingle in her cells. After that she couldn't hold on long enough to do anything except break out in a full body sweat from the heat. On attempt fifty-seven she finally made a solo leap to the other side of the property. She completed the next five in a row and felt ready to collapse, so she wanted to cry with relief when Grady announced she'd practiced enough. But when he checked her nexus, he frowned. He pointed to the gray rectangle, which displayed only a sliver of blue. "That means your concentration is at ten percent. Everyone your age is at least at thirty percent by now." Yeah, and they'd been light leaping their whole lives—but she chose not to point that out. She didn't want Grady to think she was difficult. "I'm trying as hard as I can." "I know," Grady said, worrying the edge of his tunic with his hands. "But I don't think you have any idea what you're up against. Alden told me Bronte doesn't want you at Foxfire, which means he'll be watching you like a hawk. He'll check with your Mentors. He'll monitor your tests. And at the first sign of weakness, he'll step in and try to have you expelled. I wouldn't be surprised if he pushes for you to be transferred to Exillium—and let's just say it's somewhere you don't want to go." She nodded, swallowing a mouthful of bile. If she hadn't been freaked out about starting Foxfire before, she was now. How was she supposed to pass when she was so far behind? Grady forced a smile. "I know you're struggling to adjust and have a ton to learn, but you're going to have to push yourself as hard as you can. And I promise I'll help you every way I can. Edalie will too." A flash of light pulled her out of her mounting panic attack, and two people appeared a few feet up the path. She recognized Dex from Slurps and Burps, and the woman he was with resembled Edaline, except her hair was messy and her yellow gown was wrinkled and plain. "Had to come see for yourself, Juline?" Grady asked. "I'm allowed to visit my sister, aren't I?" she asked, her eyes riveted to Sophie. Grady laughed. "Where's the rest of the family?" "Home with Kesler. I didn't want to overwhelm you." "And maybe you wanted time to gossip without interruption?" Grady teased. "Sophie, why don't you show Dex your room? I have a feeling the girls have a lot of talking to do." SOPHIE HAD NO IDEA WHAT to do with Dex. She'd never had a friend before—much less a boy—much less an elf. Dex seemed pretty comfortable, though. He wandered her room, touching everything that caught his interest. He thought her human clothes were hilarious, and was even more excited when he found the scrapbook she'd hidden on the bookshelf. "Hey, is that you?" he asked, pointing to the photo mounted to the cover. Sophie's eyes stung as she glanced at the picture. Her dad and sister waved at the camera while she hid in the background building a sand castle. "Yeah. That was last summer." "Is that your dad?" "Yeah. Well—um—that's the guy who raised me," she corrected, blinking away the tears that had formed. It was going to be hard to get used to saying that. But she had to. She wasn't his daughter. He didn't even know she existed anymore. Dex frowned. "What happened to them?" "I'm not allowed to know." She couldn't keep the sadness out of her voice. As much as she didn't want it to matter, it was hard not knowing where they were or how they were doing. "Sorry." He shuffled his feet. "Do you want to talk about it?" "Not really." She wasn't sure she was ready to look through the scrapbook, but Dex already had it open and was flipping through the pages. She hoped there weren't any naked baby pictures in there. "Why did you take your picture with a guy in a giant mouse suit? Actually—better question: Why would anyone wear a giant mouse suit?" "We're at Disneyland." His head snapped up. "I have my own land?" "What?" "My last name is Dizznee." She laughed. "I'm pretty sure it's a coincidence." He squinted at the picture. "Are you wearing fairy wings?" "Okay, I think we've had enough fun with the photos." She pulled the scrapbook away from him before he found anything else to make fun of. "Sorry. I just can't get over it. I mean, I've never seen a human, in real life. And you lived with them." He shook his head. "How come you live with Grady and Edaline? Are you related to them?" Her jaw tightened. "I'm not related to anyone." "You're

alive. You must have parents." She shook her head. "My real parents didn't want me to know who they are, so as far as I'm concerned, they don't exist." Dex didn't seem to know what to say to that. Honestly, she didn't either. "Hey, this is one of those music things," he said, picking up her iPod. "Yeah. How did you know?" "My mom's into human movies. She doesn't have many, but one of them had one of these things in it, and I've always wanted to see one. We don't have anything like them." "Really? Why not?" "Elves aren't really musical—not like dwarves. They have some awesome music." He slid his fingers across the screen. "It's dead." "No outlets here. No way to charge it." Dex flipped it over. "I don't know much about human technology, but I bet I could make it solar powered." "Really?" "Well, I can give it a try." He slipped it into his pocket and went over to her desk, rifling through all her Foxfire stuff. He scanned her schedule. "Sir Conley's pretty cool, I hear. But good luck with Lady Galvin. She has the highest fail rate of any Mentor—ever. I'm pretty sure she failed her last prodigy a few weeks ago." Sophie's heart slammed so hard she was surprised it didn't punch through her chest. Were they trying to make her fail? She wouldn't have put it past Bronte to rig her schedule. But . . . this was school. She'd always been great at school. She took a deep, calming breath. "Hey, I could help you find your way around tomorrow," Dex offered. Relief flooded through her. She wouldn't have to do this alone. Except . . . "You wouldn't mind being seen with the weird new girl with the weird brown eyes and the weird human past?" "Are you kidding? I can't wait to tell everyone you were my friend first." She smiled. "We're friends?" "Yeah. I mean—if you want to be." "Of course!" Dex's smile widened, flashing his deep dimples. "Cool. I'll see you tomorrow morning." SEVENTEEN SOPHIE WAS STILL TRYING TO FIGURE OUT which of the strange gadgets from Della were school supplies when the chimes rang.

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"Not quite yet." His father retrieved a bundle of colorful bills from his cape pocket and handed it to Keefe. "I'm sure you need more cash—but try not to carry more than this when you're out. The Forbidden Cities have all manner of different thieves, so it's best to limit how much they can steal. That's why I also had my friend make you one of these." He offered Keefe a small black rectangle with a string of numbers on the front, along with the name KEEFE I. FOSTER. "It's called a credit card—and that one is particularly powerful." "One quick tap on the right human machine, and any purchase will be covered"—but don't use the one you took from my cabin. You may get asked to show ID when you use it, so you'll want the name on the card to match your passport." Keefe squinted at the small chip set into the card. "Can anyone track this?" "They shouldn't be able to—but if they did, it would only lead them back to Cass Lordeman. "I've set up several human accounts over the years, and this is tied to those for the monthly payment." Keefe stared at his father, wondering how many other secrets he was keeping. "As I said, if you prove yourself trustworthy, no one watches you too closely," his father reminded him. Keefe refused to be impressed. After all, if Daddy Dearest had spent a little less time creating a fake life in Humanland, he could've occasionally tried being an actual father. Who knew? He might've even figured out that his wife was an evil murderer running experiments on their son. "Is that everything?" Keefe asked, trying to shove the cash and credit card into his pocket—but his handy world map was in the way. "Not yet. "You may have already noticed that humans are incredibly reliant on small gadgets they call smartphones—but those can be monitored by the various human governments, so I wouldn't recommend acquiring one. I've also made some general notes"—he dug through his cape pocket and retrieved a palm-size notebook—"on things like foods to try. Which to avoid. Common expressions and customs. Tips to find places to stay or where to find important information or "how to use human transportation." I'm sure your instinct will be to ignore this the same way you ignore all my other advice. But you'll regret it if you do." Keefe doubted that. But he shoved the notebook into his backpack, along with his handy world map and the cash—then put the credit card in his pocket, since that seemed like something he might need to use fairly often. "Now can I go?" "Almost. You probably noticed that I marked three of the facets on the pathfinder map. The first is the facet that takes you to the cabin—though I'm sure your photographic memory can already help you with that one. The second is the facet to London, since I'm assuming that's where you're heading next. And the third is—" "What makes you think I'm heading to London?" Keefe interrupted. "Because you're smarter than you like people to realize." He held Keefe's stare, daring him to deny it. "I doubt you'll find what you're looking for, but it's the right place to start, regardless. I wouldn't recommend staying very long—" "I'm not planning on it," Keefe assured him. It was clearly the most predictable place he could go, so the sooner he got out of there, the better. "Good," his father told him. "The pathfinder map should help you follow any leads from there. But before you do any of that, you must visit the third facet I've marked and learn how to recognize surveillance." "Surveillance?" Keefe repeated as his insides dropped with a sloshy thud. "Yes. The Black Swan has the most extensive network. But the Council watches the Forbidden Cities as well. And I'm sure it's safe to assume the Neverseen are also monitoring as much as they can." Keefe had to lean on the desk. He knew Forkle had zillions of cameras—but he'd forgotten all about them. How could he be so careless? "Don't be so dramatic," his father told him—though it sounded more snippy than supportive.

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Keefe sank to the grass, no longer able to stay standing, and Sophie sank down next to him, keeping the photo where he could see it. And he stared. And stared. And stared. Ro peeked over Keefe's shoulder. "Wow. Leave it to Mommy Dearest to make Lord Jerkypants seem like the good parent." "She really did kill the guy," Keefe whispered. "And his daughter—what was she, ten?" "Yeah," Sophie murmured, glad the obituary hadn't included a photo. "I mean... I knew it," Keefe said, mostly to himself. "But that's different than knowing it, you know?" Sophie bit her lip, trying to decide if what she wanted to say would make things better or worse. Focusing on truth and facts seemed like it had to be the best way to go, though, so she reminded him, "Technically we still don't know that she killed them. I know coincidences are hard to believe, but they do happen. It is possible that she went and visited the guy, and then a few hours later he got hit by a bus—or that he got hit by the bus before their meeting and she was trying to figure out what happened." "That photo is from after the accident," Mr. Forkle chimed in. "It has a time stamp." Sophie's eyes took a second to find the string of tiny white numbers hidden in the corner, and if she was reading the time stamp correctly, then Lady Gisela had been standing in front of Big Ben at 8:14 p.m. The obituary said the accident happened at 7:09 p.m. "Does anyone know how close Big Ben is to the British Library?" Sophie asked, realizing how silly the question was as soon as she'd said it. She was talking to elves, goblins, and an ogre. And yet, Mr. Forkle told her, "I looked it up on the map before I left my office. It takes an average of fifty minutes to walk from one to the other—and significantly less time if one takes something they call 'the Tube.'" "That's their underground train system," Sophie said, because that was so much easier to think about than the fact that Lady Gisela definitely would've had enough time to kill Ethan Benedict Wright II and Eleanor Olivia Wright, and then walk—or ride the Tube—over to Big Ben for a little sightseeing before she left. "See?" Keefe asked, obviously picking up on her mood shift. "She killed them." It was looking more and more that way. But... "We still haven't technically proven anything," she had to point out. "If this was a human murder trial and the only evidence the prosecution had was this photograph, there'd be plenty of reasonable doubt. It shows your mom nowhere near the scene of the accident—and I'm guessing she's not in the accident footage, either, otherwise Mr. Forkle would've brought that." She glanced at Mr. Forkle to verify. "Actually, there is no footage of the accident," he informed them. "None?" Fitz asked. Mr. Forkle shook his head. "As I said, the system at Watchward Heath is unprecedented. But it's not without its gaps." "Well... that's... convenient," Fitz said slowly. "So the accident just happened to take place in one of the rare gaps in the Black Swan's surveillance? Nobody else thinks that's odd?" "Oh, I think it's very odd," Mr. Forkle told him. "And I think it proves my mom did it," Keefe added with a hollow sort of authority. "Come on, Foster, even you have to admit that's one too many coincidences." Sophie sighed. "I just... I wish I understood why she would do something like that." "Because she's a creepy psychopath!" Keefe crumpled the photo and flung it as far as he could—which wasn't all that far thanks to the wind. "Keefe," Sophie called as he stood and stalked to the fence of the nearest pasture. But he ignored her, leaning against the rails with his back to everyone. "Give him a minute," Mr. Forkle told Fitz when he moved to follow. Sophie sighed again and used her telekinesis to retrieve the crumpled photo, laying it flat on the grass to try to smooth out the wrinkles. "What do you think she's looking at?" Fitz asked as he squatted beside her. "I don't know—does it matter?" Sophie wondered. "She's on a busy city street. She's probably trying to avoid a car or a pedestrian or something." "But she's not moving," Fitz said. "See? Her feet are planted. And her head is turned to her right, her eyes focused on something taller than she is." He traced Lady Gisela's invisible eyeline across the photo, following it up and off the paper, to some point beyond the frame. "Well... maybe there's another building over there?" Sophie guessed. "Or a billboard?" "What do you think she's looking at?" Mr. Forkle asked when Fitz frowned. "I don't know," he admitted, squinting at the photo and tilting his head. "I guess it's not important." "I wouldn't say that," Mr. Forkle corrected. "Do you know that for the entire five minutes and forty-three seconds of

footage that I have of Lady Gisela standing there, she doesn't look away from that spot once? Even when the wind blew back her hood—which is the moment I captured for this still shot—her eyes remain trained on that single point.” “Do you know what she’s looking at?” Sophie asked him. “I have my theories” was all Mr. Forkle said. “But they’re just theories. I checked the feed from every nearby camera and couldn’t get a view of that portion of the street to confirm.” “Well that’s... also convenient,” Fitz said, reaching up to run a hand through his hair. “It’s like she knows where your cameras are.” “That does appear to be the case,” Mr. Forkle said, staring up at the sky. “And it’s not altogether surprising, considering how rarely I’ve ever captured footage of any members of the Neverseen. I’d just been hoping that was because they stayed mostly underground or in their hideouts. But it seems they might know exactly how to evade detection. Which is particularly unsettling when you consider how many cameras I’ve hidden.” “They’re always ahead of us,” Sophie muttered, giving in to an eyelash tug.


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After everything they'd been through together, Elwin . . . felt like family. "Well," she told him, "now you're my favorite." "You're mine, too. And it's a good thing. Because we're going to be spending lots of time together. I set your bones as much as I could, but the shattered parts have a lot of missing pieces, which means a lot more marrow regenerator—and you can't move any part of your arm or hand until everything's sealed. That's why I have you wrapped up like that. And even after the bandages come off, you won't be able to light leap for at least a couple more days, because breaking your body down would undo some of the recovery. So I told your parents to plan on at least a week before we can move you to Havenfield—that's why they're not here right now, in case you were wondering. They were by your side the whole time Tam and I were treating you. But since you didn't seem to want to wake up, Edalie went to pack up your stuff. She figured you'd probably want something better to wear—though I think you look awesome." That was when she realized she was wearing one of his tunics, with the right sleeve chopped off to accommodate her bandage. The blue fabric was decorated with eurypterids, but Sophie was far less disturbed by the idea of wearing sea scorpions than she was by the thought that someone had to have changed her into it, and she decided she didn't want to know the who or when or where or how. She knew the why, and the rest was better left unanswered. "Edalie should be back pretty soon," Elwin added. "And Sandor, Grady, and Alden went to talk to Magnate Leto about how to adjust the campus's security while you're staying here." "Wait, I'm staying at Foxfire?" Sophie asked—then wanted to kick herself for focusing on such an unimportant detail when there was a much better question. "Sandor's okay?" "Yep to both," Elwin said, making her swallow a third dose of the floral medicine. "It's going to be a Foxfire slumber party! And Sandor's fine—he wasn't exposed to the kind of shadows that you and Fitz were, so he just had a broken nose and some cuts and bruises." "And a lot of rage," Tam added. "Even Ro looked scared of him." "Ro was here?" Actually, now that Sophie was thinking about it, she remembered a blue breeze swishing through her head and helping her sleep. "Was Keefe here too?" They'd discovered that if Keefe held her hand when she wasn't wearing gloves, her enhancing allowed him to send rushes of energy into her mind that could affect her moods. "I'm sure he's still around somewhere," Elwin said, stopping her from sitting up to look and reminding her that she wasn't supposed to move. Tam grinned. "Elwin made him wait out in the hall—and he was not happy about it." "It was either that or strap him down to one of the cots so he'd stop all the frantic pacing," Elwin explained, adjusting her pillow to prop her head up a little more. "I would've voted for that," Tam noted. Sophie sighed. Tam and Keefe had been feuding since the moment they'd met—even though they were so similar it was kind of hilarious. "I think Ro went with the others to talk to Magnate Leto," Dex added. "Are Grizel and Lovise with them too?" Sophie wondered, wishing she'd thought to ask about them sooner. "I don't think so—but they're both okay," Dex promised. "I wouldn't say they're okay," Elwin argued. "They both have broken ribs, and Grizel has a few other hairline fractures. But instead of letting me treat them, Lovise gave her some sort of goblin battlefield remedy that's supposed to boost her strength. They're both refusing to rest until the security's reorganized. Sandor's even less happy about it than I am. He threatened to call their queen and ask her to order them back to Gildingham, but Grizel said if he did that, she'd cover all of his weapons in Ro's flesh-eating bacteria." "And it's not like Sandor's letting you treat him, either," Tam added. "He didn't even wipe the blood off his face." "I know," Dex said. "I can't imagine being that tough." "Um, you already are." Sophie pointed to the giant bruise on his cheek, then to his left arm, which she could now see was supported by a golden sling. He tried to shrug—then winced. "It's just a sprained shoulder." "There's no 'just' about that, Dex," she said, reaching for him with her good hand. Tears blurred the room as her gloved fingers tangled with his. "If you hadn't answered when I pressed my panic switch—or made it for me in the first place . . ." Dex cleared his throat. "I'm just glad you used it. Thank you for trusting me." "Thank you for saving us." He tightened his grip. And as the last fragments of space vanished between them, so did any lingering

wisps of the awkwardness that had rattled their friendship after their epic fail of a kiss. "Uh . . . should I leave you guys alone?" Tam asked. Dex laughed, his dimples making a quick appearance. "Nope. We're good." And the best part was: They really were. They were also safe—and Sophie clung to that word as hard as she clung to Dex. But then she realized . . . "Where's Wylie?" She hated herself for not asking about him sooner. After everything Wylie had risked and how hard he'd fought, and— "He went home to protect his dad," Dex told her. "WHAT? Did the Neverseen—" "He's just being cautious," Elwin assured her. "In case Gethen searched his mind during the attack and found out where he's living." Her heart stumbled. "I . . . didn't even think about that." "Don't worry—the Black Swan's on it," Dex promised. "Blur and Wraith both went as backup, and Granite's setting up somewhere for them to move to. In fact, I bet they're already in their new place."

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"Are you sure you want to do this?" Sophie had to ask. "Why wouldn't I?" "Uh, because it's super dangerous. And it's going to be miserable. And it's not like you even know my human family." "I don't have to know them to want to help. Besides, I hate to break it to you, but just because the Neverseen came after your family this time doesn't mean they won't come after mine next—or any of the other people we care about. Look at what happened with Wylie. We're all targets." She was right—but the reality of it felt like a huge stone being dropped on Sophie's back. "Don't you wish we could build some sort of protective bubble and put everyone we care about in it?" she asked. "I'd rather lock the bad guys up and keep our freedom. Here, try this." Biana handed Sophie a sleeveless black tunic made out of the kind of slinky, skin-hugging fabric that Sophie usually avoided. When she tried it on, it was even tighter than she'd been imagining. "Oh, that's perfect!" Biana told her. "And stop crossing your arms over your stomach—you look fierce!" Biana found a similar tunic in a dark gray and changed into it before heading into the bathroom to pull back her hair. Sophie did the same, and the end result made them look like something out of a human action movie—though Sophie wished she had the muscles to complete the effect. "Ugh, I'm going to miss my eyeliner," Biana whined as she splashed water on her face. "My eyes look so boring without it." "You have teal eyes," Sophie reminded her. Biana reached for a towel. "Said the girl with the eyes everyone's always talking about—and don't you dare roll them. When are you going to realize that brown eyes are amazing? It's—" She frowned at the counter. "What are those?" Sophie lunged to snatch the crush cuffs she'd forgotten about—but Biana was much too fast. "Those, um... they're to block my ability." Sophie mumbled. "The snaps put a force field around my hands to prevent anyone from actually touching my skin." "Okay," Biana said slowly. "But that doesn't explain why they say this." She pointed to the giant Sophie Foster + Dex Dizznee, and if Sophie could've jumped out her window and teleported away, she would've. "That was camouflage," she tried. "Dex thought crush cuffs would be the least suspicious, since they're one of those things people wear all the time." And he thought they'd be easier to take off than nexuses." "I guess that does make sense," Biana agreed. "But, then, why aren't you wearing them?" Sophie had really been hoping she wouldn't think to ask that. "I... told Dex I was worried it might cause... confusion." Biana blinked. "Wow. I bet that was a fun conversation." "It was pretty much the worst." "So this is why Dex seemed weird when I hailed him, huh? Poor guy. I mean, I knew something like this was going to happen eventually, but—" "You knew he—" "Everyone knows, Sophie. You were the only one I used to wonder about. You can be kinda oblivious when it comes to this stuff." "I'm not oblivious," Sophie argued. Biana raised one eyebrow. Sophie sighed. "I don't know why we're talking about this. We're supposed to be getting ready to risk our lives again." Biana gestured to their outfits. "We're ready. And, I can still hear them arguing downstairs. Besides, this seems like... kind of a big deal. You okay?" "I'm fine." Biana didn't look convinced. "What about Dex? You guys are still going to be friends, right?" "I hope so. He said we would. He just... needs a little space." "I'm sure he does." Biana set the crush cuffs down and moved closer, wrapping an arm around Sophie's shoulder. "Well, if you ever need to talk, I'm here, okay? I can't believe you didn't tell me sooner." "Dex asked me not to. And I figured I owed him that, even though I told him he had no reason to be embarrassed." "He doesn't. But I get why he would be. It's not fun having to admit that what you want just... isn't going to happen." She said it like she'd been through it, and Sophie couldn't help wondering if she was talking about Keefe. She thought about asking—but if she was wrong... "I guess this is just the process," Biana said, leaning against the counter and fidgeting with the crush cuffs. "There's a reason we get hundreds of matches to choose from, you know?" She tilted her head to study Sophie. "Do you realize you always cringe when anyone mentions matchmaking?" "Do I?" "Yep. I know it's different than how you grew up, but it's really not as awkward as you're imagining. You'll see." Sophie forced herself to nod.

Cover 11

Relevant results in this cover: 2

Content pages range: [197, 201]

Groups range: [68, 69]

Deep intent (search) query	Ranking query (reranker)
Interested in example of human technology being presented as equal or superior to magic	Interested in example of human technology being presented as equal or superior to magic

-
- 000068.txt — ranks: #77
 - 000069.txt — ranks: #78

Group 68/69

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The pen had a much more cagelike feel than any of the other Havenfield pastures. But the warps and dents in the metal proved how necessary that added security was, each a souvenir from a moment when the gorgodon had slammed its muscled body against the sides, or struck with its barbed tail, or tried to crunch through the bars with its long, curved fangs.

Sophie always needed a moment to process the sight of the massive beast with its reptilian face, lionlike limbs, and sharply angled wings. And the gorgodon stared right back at her with its slitted yellow eyes—but only for a second. Then it turned back to the half dozen gnomes surrounding the enclosure, snarling at each one before settling on Grady, who stood next to a basket of what looked like purple cantaloupes.

Shards of the same violet fruit littered the ground both inside and outside the enclosure, and Grady's gray tunic was splattered with purple pulp. But that didn't stop him from scooping up another melon and shouting, "NOW!"

All six gnomes reached into their pockets and flung tiny black pellets into the cage, peppering the gorgodon's silver feathers.

ROOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAAR!

As soon as the beast's mouth opened, Grady hurled the purple fruit, sending it sailing between the gorgodon's long fangs and landing on its slimy tongue. The beast tilted its head to roar again, sending the fruit rolling to the back of its throat and forcing it to swallow.

"That's nine!" Grady shouted, pumping his fist. "One more to go!"

The gnomes tossed another batch of black pellets, which were probably seeds to regrow the trampled grass.

ROOOOOAaaaAAAR!

Grady hurled another purple melon, but the gorgodon was faster, slinging its tail with a perfect strike and showering Grady and several of the gnomes in purple juice.

“Need help?” Sophie called as Grady wiped his face with his soggy sleeve and reached for another piece of fruit.

Grady’s head whipped toward the sound of her voice, and before she could blink, he was tossing the purple melon over his shoulder and sprinting to her side, scooping her into a hug that somehow managed to be gentle and crushing—and very, very sticky.

“Sorry,” he said, wiping a smear of purple off her arm. “I’m covered in tangourd.”

He was. And he smelled like sweat and mud and something strongly peppery. But Sophie didn’t care one bit as she wrapped her good arm around him and leaned in.

“I missed you,” she whispered into his shoulder.

“Right back at you, kiddo.” He bent to kiss her cheek, and she could feel his tears mixing with hers before they both eased back to study each other.

His gaze washed over her sling before settling at the base of her neck, and it took her a second to figure out why he was frowning.

“I still have the Ruewen crest you gave me,” she promised, patting the same cape pocket that held Krakie and his friends. **“But Tinker made me this one to block any trackers.”**

She explained what little she knew about how the null worked, as well as **the bangle on her left arm and the silver gadgets covering her nails.**

“Sounds like those are all great ideas,” Grady said, lifting her wrist to study her new bangle. “But what was that part about starting training?”

“Not without Elwin’s approval,” Mr. Forkle assured him.

“And mine,” a squeaky voice added—and Sophie spun toward the sound, wondering how long Sandor had been standing in the shadows of the gorgodon’s enclosure without her noticing.

His nose was back to its usual flat shape, and all his cuts and bruises seemed to have healed. He'd also made some additions to his armor: Two wide black belts lined with throwing stars crisscrossed his bare chest, and he had a twisted dagger sheathed on each of his burly arms, all of which made him look decidedly less than huggable—but that didn't stop Sophie from closing the distance between them and wrapping her good arm around his waist.

"Thank you for staying with me," she whispered, leaning into his side and getting a noseful of the musky goblin scent that used to gross her out but now seemed like the best thing in the world.

"Thank you for trusting me," Sandor murmured, his voice thickening as he held her tighter. "I don't deserve it—"

"Yes, you do. I don't deserve to have you risking your life to protect me."

"That's my honor," Sandor corrected.

"And mine," another voice said as two child-size arms wrapped around Sophie's waist from behind.

She pivoted into the hug, breathing in the scent of flowers and tree sap and freshly tilled earth, then trailed her hand across Flori's plaited hair.

"I'm so honored to have this chance to keep you safe," Flori told her. "Calla would be so happy."

Sophie stepped back, meeting the tiny gnome's wide gray eyes. Flori's green-toothed smile looked heartbreakingly earnest—and her new outfit made Sophie's heart even heavier. Flori's usual straw-woven dress had been replaced with stiff pants stitched from pieces of bark, and a tunic sewn from dried husks, both of which were probably meant to serve as armor. Mostly they looked scratchy and uncomfortable and like they wouldn't provide nearly enough protection.

"I'm pretty sure Calla would want you to stay safe," Sophie whispered.

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SIX. HOW CAN WE have a stowaway?" Fitz asked as Mr. Forkle shouted, "Show yourself!" Nothing happened for a moment. Then Della appeared behind Biana. "Mom?" Fitz said, rushing to tackle-hug her before he shouted at his sister. "HOW COULD YOU KEEP THIS SECRET?" "I made her swear not to say anything," Della explained. "And I only involved her because I needed to hold on to someone while we were teleporting." "Why the subterfuge?" Mr. Forkle asked. "Please tell me you don't doubt our ability to protect your children?" "Quite the opposite." Della straightened her gown, looking like an ocean goddess in aquamarine silk. "I'm here to join the Black Swan." The words seemed to dangle, waiting for someone to reach out and grab them. "Does Dad know?" Fitz asked. "Of course. He wanted to join, but we decided he'd be more useful if he stayed working with the Council. And my talents are far better suited for covert activities." "Ms. Vacker—" Mr. Forkle started. "Della," she corrected. "Your offer is very generous, Ms. Della," Mr. Forkle emphasized with a slight smile. "But we already have a Vanisher working with us." "No one can vanish the way I can. Not even my son—and I'm sure you've heard how valuable Alvar has been to the Council." She blinked out of sight, reappearing a second later knee-deep in the river. Sophie wasn't sure what was crazier, how fast Della had moved, or how she hadn't caused ripples in the water. "Impressive," Mr. Forkle admitted when Della reappeared next to Biana and showed how her gown was still dry. "But the question is whether letting you join would be wise. Someone as high profile as yourself—" "Could be an influential advocate," Della finished for him. "When the Council finally comes to their senses, do you think the public will instantly trust you? The Vacker name may have had a few controversies lately, but it still holds incredible influence and power." Mr. Forkle studied Della. "I see you've already removed your registry pendant." "I would never put any of you at risk. Plus, I wanted to prove that I'm committed." "And yet you make the commitment too lightly." "Do I?" Della's melodic voice hardened. "I've trusted my children—and three others who might as well be my family—to your care." "Your children's situation is different," Mr. Forkle argued. "We both know we can't leave them to the Council's caprice." "But I could protect them on my own." Della vanished again, reappearing with a melder pressed to Mr. Forkle's head. "Do not underestimate me, sir." "You're not the only one with tricks up their sleeve," Mr. Forkle warned her. He tapped his right temple, and Della's arm dropped to her side. "Are you a Mesmer?" Sophie asked, remembering Grady's similar feats. "My tricks are more limited," Mr. Forkle admitted. "But the mind is more powerful than the body—never forget that." "I won't," Della said, vanishing the same instant Mr. Forkle collapsed. She reappeared, balanced on his belly with one of her jeweled shoes pressed against his throat. He kicked and thrashed, but couldn't throw her off. "I believe you've proven your point, Ms. Vacker," he wheezed. She pressed her shoe down harder. "I told you to call me Della." "Whoa, remind me never to get on your mom's bad side," Keefe said. "A valuable lesson for everyone," Della agreed, jumping to the ground and offering Mr. Forkle a hand up. "Everyone believes I'm the fragile beauty hiding in my husband's shadow. But I'm far more powerful than anyone imagines." "I can see that." Mr. Forkle wiped mud off his long black tunic. "But I alone cannot approve your admittance into our organization. All I can promise is to bring the matter before our Collective." "Collective?" Sophie asked. "Our ruling order," Mr. Forkle clarified. "Five overseers, each with equally weighted votes." "So there are four other leaders we've never met?" Keefe asked. "There are many members you haven't met. But that is a good thing. The more people we have helping our cause, the more chance we have of making a difference." "All the more reason to let me join," Della said. "Perhaps," Mr. Forkle agreed. "I'll make the suggestion when I speak with the Collective. But first we have a problem. I did not plan for a stowaway, so we are short one lufterator." "I can tweak mine so two can share," Dex said, bending his into a Z-shape. He made a few more tweaks before holding up the mouthpiece proudly. "Now it works on each end." "They'll have to keep their faces very close together," Mr. Forkle noted. "Foster and I volunteer!" Keefe shouted. "Uh, if anyone's going to share with Sophie it should be me," Dex argued. "Wait, why do I have to share?" Sophie asked. "Yeah, I

nominate Dex and Keefe," Fitz agreed. "So do I," Mr. Forkle decided. "Keefe, give your lufterator to Della." "Wait—what just happened?" Keefe asked. Fitz, Biana, and Sophie cracked up. Dex fumed as Mr. Forkle ordered him and Keefe to test the gadget to make sure the lufterator still worked. They had to stand so close their noses practically touched. "Gross," Keefe whined, spitting out his mouthpiece. "The air tastes like Dex breath." "Keefe breath's just as nasty," Dex snapped. "But you can breathe?" Mr. Forkle clarified. When they nodded, he ordered everyone into the water. They gasped as the cold soaked through their clothes—except Della, who strode through totally dry. "Did you know your mom could do that?" Sophie asked Fitz. "I did," Biana jumped in. "And I will figure out how to do it." She blinked out of sight, and when she reappeared her hair was dripping wet and stuck to her face. "It's going to take some practice." "I still can't believe you didn't tell me Mom was with us," Fitz grumbled. "Now you know how I felt when you and Dad were busy planning all your secret visits to the Forbidden Cities." Sophie had never considered how much the search for her had affected the Vacker family. They'd all lived with secrets—and broken the law—for twelve years.