

|Cover 1

Relevant results in this cover: 9

Content pages range: [2, 21]

Groups range: [1, 8]

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

- 000001.txt — ranks: #1
- 000002.txt — ranks: #2
- 000003.txt — ranks: #3
- 000004.txt — ranks: #4
- 000005.txt — ranks: #5 · #10
- 000006.txt — ranks: #6
- 000007.txt — ranks: #7
- 000008.txt — ranks: #8

Group 1/59

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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-purplish 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.

Group 2/59

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He glanced behind him, studying the intimidating crowd before his eyes settled on Alden and Della. “I wish I could remember you. I wish I could remember anything. But since I can’t, all I’ll say is . . . whoever did these horrible things that you’ve accused me of—that’s not me. Maybe it used to be. And if that’s the case, I’m truly sorry. But I promise I’m not that person anymore.”

“Right,” Fitz muttered, loud enough for the word to echo off the walls.

“I understand your skepticism,” Councillor Emery told him. “We have doubts as well.”

“Then let me prove myself!” Alvar begged. “I realize the chance of regaining my freedom is slim. But if you did decide to grant it—”

“We’d be endangering the lives of everyone in the Lost Cities,” Councillor Emery finished for him. “Whether you remember your past or not, your connection to the Neverseen poses a threat we cannot ignore.”

Alvar’s shoulders slumped.

“But,” Emery added, and the whole room seemed to suck in a breath, “your current imprisonment also creates quite the conundrum.”

Fitz’s hand shook and Sophie tightened her hold, twining her gloved fingers with his as Councillor Emery closed his eyes and rubbed his temples.

Ro leaned down and whispered to Keefe, “Settle in for a long debate, Betting Boy. And get ready to prance around school in our tiniest armor.”

Keefe shrugged.

But Emery stood, pacing twice along the platform before pausing to face Alvar. "I'll admit, none of us are entirely comfortable with what I'm about to say—but we're also not willing to issue a sentence while there are so many uncertain variables."

"WHAT?" Fitz blurted, jumping to his feet.

"We understand that this is an emotionally challenging situation for you," Emery told Fitz. "That's why I'm tolerating your interruptions. But surely you can agree that the primary goal of any punishment must be to prevent further crimes from being committed. And we cannot determine what's necessary for your brother in that regard until we discover who he is now. We need to witness how he interacts with others and study how he behaves in ordinary situations—which cannot happen in his isolated cell. But since we can't trust him either, we must move him to an environment where we can keep him constantly monitored and separated from our larger world while still providing ample opportunities for us to take his measure."

Sophie noticed the total lack of surprise on Alden's and Della's faces the same moment she realized that this was why she'd been invited for moral support.

A quick glance at Keefe told her he'd come to the same conclusion.

So neither of them gasped with the rest of the crowd when Emery announced the Council's decision. But she still felt a sour wave of dread wash through her when he said, "For the next six months, Alvar will be returning to Everglen."

BUT HE'S A MURDERER!" FITZ shouted. "Are you forgetting that Alvar helped bring down Lumenaria?"

"Absolutely not!" The hall fell silent as Councillor Terik rose from his emerald-encrusted throne.

Sophie hadn't seen him since the devastating Peace Summit, when the majestic castle had crumbled around them—and he actually looked better than she'd been imagining, given his injuries. His pale skin showed no sign of any scars, and his cobalt blue eyes were bright and clear. But when he stepped forward . . .

His right leg moved smoothly, but his left leg was much stiffer and slower. If it weren't for the silver cane he pulled from the folds of his cloak, he would've toppled over.

"As you can see, I'm still adjusting." He tapped his left leg with his cane, filling the hall with a soft clanking that confirmed what was hidden underneath the thick fabric of his clothes.

Elvin physicians were light-years ahead of human medicine, but even they couldn't regrow a severed limb. Instead, a team of Technopaths had built Terik a custom prosthesis.

But metal would never work exactly the same as muscle and bone.

In fact, when Terik took another wobbly step, he couldn't hide his grimace—which was probably why he told Fitz, “I understand your fury better than anyone. But . . . we must not let our anger make us overlook potential.”

The last word rippled through the room as his meaning sank in.

“Yes,” he said, tucking a loose piece of his wavy brown hair back under his emerald circlet. “I performed a new reading on Alvar.”

Terik was the Lost Cities' only Descryer, which meant he could sense the potential of anyone he tested. But he rarely put the ability to use, claiming it caused too many problems.

He turned to study Alvar. “I told myself that if the results were the same as my prior reading, I'd push for a life sentence. But something's changed.”

Alvar sucked in a breath. “What does that mean?”

“Truthfully? I have no idea,” Terik admitted. “Readings can be difficult to interpret.”

“Then how do you know he's not worse?” Fitz countered.

“I don't. Potential is a tricky thing. We have to live up to it in order for it to matter. But it shouldn't be ignored either—especially in a situation like this.

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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 4/59

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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.”

“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. Tiergan gave 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."

"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."

Group 5/59

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But if they're intending for you to be an unwitting accomplice," Fallon warned, "you'd be assisting them without any knowledge of what you're doing. And I know you're going to claim that's far too challenging of a feat for the Neverseen to achieve," he told Alina. "But who among us ever thought they could bring down Lumenaria? Or flood Atlantis? Or burn the glittering city we're standing in? Underestimating our opponents has not fared us well."

"Neither has giving the rebels more credit than they deserve," Alina argued. "When we think of them as these ridiculous supervillains, we end up second-guessing ourselves and hesitating—which has also cost us greatly."

"But if we . . ." Fallon's voice trailed off, and he tilted his head, studying her. "I had a counterpoint to your argument, but I keep hearing music when I look at you, and it's breaking my concentration. Do you know why that is?"

Alina rolled her eyes. "Absolutely no idea."

Fallon hummed a few bars of a soft melody, and Sophie wondered if he realized he was losing credibility with every note. "That doesn't sound familiar?"

"Can't say that it does," Alina told him.

He hummed a few more beats, rocking back on his heels. "I believe it's from a wedding. I can see the gown so clearly. It looked like . . . spun sunlight. And I think there was some sort of commotion. Wait! You were the one who interrupted!"

Alina's face turned tomato red. So did Alden's. And Della's.

It was no secret that Alina had once dated Alden and then tried to stop him from marrying Della. But clearly none of them appreciated the reminder.

“Well,” Alina rasped, smoothing her hair, “that was a long time ago, and it worked out in the end.” She pointed to her peridot circlet.

“Serving on the Council is a tremendous honor,” Fallon told her. “But it shouldn’t be your life. I gave the same advice to another, once. Sadly, I don’t believe she listened either.”

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?”

Norene 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.”

Group 6/59

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He led her into the main building, which was divided into six different wings by the towers, one wing for each lower grade level. The walls of the Level Two wing were the same blue as her uniform, and the banners bore a halcyon in midflight. Dex switched halls so many times Sophie lost count, and she was beyond confused when they entered an enormous quad with glittering crystal trees scattered throughout the room. A statue of a halcyon filled the center, sparkling like it was carved from sapphire instead of stone. Prodigies chatted as they put books and supplies into the narrow doorways lining the walls, but everyone fell silent when they noticed Sophie. "Okay, this is the atrium," Dex explained, ignoring the spectacle they were creating. He checked her schedule and led her toward the far wall, to a door marked with a rune she couldn't read. "This is your locker. See that silver strip?" He pointed to a shiny mirrored rectangle just underneath the symbol. "Lick it. The lock uses your DNA." "That's gross." "It tastes good." She doubted that, but she could feel everyone watching her so she licked the silver rectangle. "Mallowmelt?" "The faculty picks the flavors. They change every day—but watch out for Elwin's picks. Last week it was pepper. Made everyone sneeze like crazy." Dex's locker was two doors down, and a loud croak sounded as he opened the door. Dex yelped and slammed it closed, but the whole room filled with the stench of rotten eggs mixed with morning breath and a dash of dirty diaper. "She put a muskog in my locker!" he screamed. A high, wheezy snicker erupted behind them. They whirled around to face a girl towering over them like a giant stick insect. The girl's head was covered with a mass of frizzy brown curls, so it took Sophie a minute to recognize her as the bald girl from Slurps and Burps. Two girls stood next to her cackling like evil hags. "How did you get in my locker?" Dex demanded, stalking up to Stina's towering body. His head barely cleared her shoulders. "You left it open, idiot. I guess remembering to close doors is too hard for the son of a bad match to remember." Dex ground his teeth. Then his eyes lit up, and he pointed to a row of scraggly hairs along her jaw. "Nice beard you're growing there. Hope you know how to shave." Stina felt her chin and shrieked. She grabbed Dex by the shirt. "You little—" "That's quite enough, Miss Heks!" a slender woman in a deep blue gown and cape ordered as she stepped through the wall and pulled them apart. "What's going on here? And what on earth is that smell?" "She put a muskog in my locker!" Dex told her. "He put balding serum in my lushberry juice on Friday!" Stina retorted. The woman shook her head, her long raven hair swishing behind her. "Such behavior—and in front of our new prodigy." Her almond-shaped eyes darted to Sophie. "I'm sorry you had to see this, my dear." "You just walked through a wall," was all Sophie could think to say. "Phasers do that sometimes." She turned back to Dex and Stina. "You two should be ashamed of yourselves. Apologize." Dex scowled. Stina glared. But they both mumbled, "Sorry." "You two obviously need time to bond, so you can spend all week together in lunch detention." "But, Lady Alexine—" "I don't want to hear it. Dex, get that muskog out of here before it stinks up the whole place. And, Stina? You seem to have some strange hairs on your chin. You might want to have Elwin check them." Dex cracked up and Stina turned beet red. She covered her beard with her hand and stalked off, followed by her minions. Lady Alexine swept across the atrium, disappearing through the far wall. "See what I mean?" Dex asked as he kicked his locker. "She's evil." Sophie nodded. "What exactly is a muskog?" "It's kinda like a frog, but it burps stinky gas when it's scared. So you should probably get away from here—unless you want to smell like muskog fumes all day." He didn't have to tell her twice. She was already the weird new girl. She didn't need to be the stinky, weird new girl. "Hey, you're the prodigy Dame Alina told us about, right? The new one?" a small boy asked, catching up with her as she set off through the halls. He was a couple of inches shorter than her, with messy brown hair and a very round face. "Sophie," she corrected. "I'm Jensi—whoa—you have really weird eyes—cool—anyway—so—everyone wants to talk to you—but they're all afraid—so I decided to show them how it's done." "Um . . . thanks," she said, struggling to keep up with his rapid-fire speech. He talked like he'd had buckets of sugar for breakfast. "See, I told you she'd be nice," he shouted, making several kids around them turn bright red. Sophie's cheeks were probably redder. "I've never heard of you before—and I know pretty much everyone—so where

have you been all this time?" Jensi asked. She'd been hoping no one would ask that question. Alden had instructed her to be honest. "I was living with humans," she whispered. "Humans!" Everyone fell silent. Sophie managed a nod. "Well—that's weird—but cool—you'll be 'Human Girl'—it'll be awesome!" She cringed. "How about just 'Sophie'?" "If that's what you want." They hit a fork in the hallway, and she took the right path on a whim. Jensi followed her. "Where are we going?" "Elementalism." She didn't miss the fact that he used the word *we*. He laughed. "Boy, are you going the wrong way. Come on. I'll take you there." Part of her wanted to run from the humiliating boy who was drawing way too much attention to her. But she did need help, so she swallowed her pride. They backtracked, making so many twists and turns Sophie had to admit she never would've found it without him. Finally, they entered a narrow hall that smelled like a storm, right before the first drops of rain fell. Jensi pointed to a warped wooden door. "Your session's in there—oh—and be careful—I'd hate you to get zapped on your first day!" "Okay—wait!" she added as his words sank in. "What do you mean, 'zapped'?" Jensi was already gone. She stared at the door, wondering if he was kidding. This was a school. They wouldn't allow anything dangerous around the prodigies, would they? She took a deep breath to calm her nerves, squared her shoulders, and pushed the door open. A loud thunderclap shook the floor, and a bolt of lightning shot out of the ceiling, knocking her off her feet.


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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. "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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"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 prickle. 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!" Dex shouted over the still blaring alarm. "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 2

Relevant results in this cover: 9

Content pages range: [23, 40]

Groups range: [9, 17]

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

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- 000010.txt — ranks: #11
- 000011.txt — ranks: #12
- 000012.txt — ranks: #13
- 000013.txt — ranks: #14
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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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]
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She had no intention of ever using the button. But it was nice to have Dex back on her side. He left her then, and she went back to the mind-numbing task of studying runes. She'd only made it through a few more pages when Edaline peeked her head through the doorway, letting her know she had another visitor waiting for her in the living room. She expected to find Fitz, Keefe, or Biana with news of the Black Swan. Instead, she found Magnate Leto standing under the crystal chandelier. He looked strange in his orange cape and tunic. Less intimidating than the silver clothes he used to wear as Beacon. Or maybe she just trusted him now. "I can't stay long, I'm afraid," he told her as she offered him a seat on the couch. "I have a number of things still to arrange. But I wanted to stop by when I saw you were absent again today—and not to pressure you. I understand you might need further time to adjust. However, your sessions are waiting for you whenever you're ready to return. All of them." "Even my ability sessions?" Sophie asked. "Of course." "But . . . doesn't this"—she pointed to her circlet—"make them kind of impossible?" "Ah, I was under the impression that nothing was impossible." He tapped his lips, making it clear her secret was safe. "But even if I'm mistaken in that regard," he added, "all of your Mentors still see value in your sessions. I know Tiergan is very much looking forward to ensuring your thorough understanding of the rules of telepathy." "What about Bronte and Lady Cadence?" Sophie had to ask. "Lady Cadence assures me that there are tricks for successful mimicking that go beyond simply being a Polyglot. And Councillor Bronte actually came to me, insisting your session not be cancelled. I almost didn't allow it, given his role in your current predicament. But I told him I would leave the decision up to you. So he asked me to give you a message. Repeated it four times to ensure I remembered it." Magnate Leto's eye roll told her how he felt about that. "He said, 'It takes a special person to see darkness inside of someone and not condemn them.' Any idea what he means?" "Not really," Sophie admitted. Unless Bronte was referring to their rather dramatic last session. But she had condemned him. She'd been ready to have Keefe go lie detector on him to find out if he was the leak in the Council. Good thing they hadn't done that. Now Bronte was one of the only Councillors still on her side—even if she did still think he was hiding something. "Was that his whole message?" she asked. "No, there was one other part. He said, 'Inflicting comes from the heart, not the head.'" "Wait. Does that mean he thinks I can still—" Magnate Leto smiled. "So should I assume you'll leave your schedule as is?" "I guess," Sophie mumbled, hardly believing that she was voluntarily keeping her session with Bronte. But the thought of taking the ability back sent prickles of hope flaring in the back of her mind, clearing some of the clouds choking her concentration. Especially when Magnate Leto squeezed her shoulder and told her, "Take the time you need to adjust to your new situation. But know that Foxfire is waiting for you. We need our star prodigy back." "I'm not a star," she told him as he pulled a slender pathfinder from his sleeve. "That's not what I've seen. I have it on good authority that nothing can stop you from being who we need you to be." Then he was gone, leaving her with renewed energy as she returned to her room and focused on Jolie's journal. Her thoughts were still slower, and her headache couldn't dull completely. But this time she felt confidence—and the confidence made her realize she was on the wrong track completely. Jolie had wanted the Black Swan to have this journal, otherwise "swan song" wouldn't have been part of the key. So she had to have left a clue to tell them how to read it. And the clue had to be hidden in the only runes written in the Black Swan's cipher. "Reflections," Sophie whispered, tracing her fingers over the careful lines and squiggles. What was Jolie trying to tell her? To reflect on something inside the journal? But how could she do that if she couldn't even read it? What would she use to . . . Sophie dropped the journal, not sure if she wanted to kick herself or jump up and down. She decided to see if she was right before she made her decision. She'd been reading the title like it meant "musings" or "observations." But what if Jolie meant it much more literally? "Please please please," Sophie whispered, holding the human mirror in Jolie's blue compact up to the first page. If Sophie was right, the letters should inverse in the reflection and . . . She had one second to celebrate as the squiggly lines morphed into words she could finally understand. Then she read the first

sentence. If you found this journal, it's too late to stop him. SIXTY-TWO WHO?" SOPHIE SHOUTED AS SHE squinted at the page. Jolie didn't seem ready to tell her. In fact, the first sentence must have been added later, because after that it switched to an account of why Jolie had joined the Black Swan in the first place. Translating the runes was tedious, and forced Sophie to work at a glacial pace. Jolie must've been copying down a reflection of an original entry, and her writing was sloppy and nearly impossible to read. Still, when Sophie took it one letter at a time, she was able to piece together the words to Jolie's story. Prentice had recruited her for the Black Swan toward the end of her first year in the elite. He'd been the Beacon of the Golden Tower, and overheard her tell a friend that the old ways didn't apply to the present day. She'd meant it in regards to matchmaking, but Prentie had spent the next weeks revealing why she should apply it to the entire Council. At first she'd resisted such traitorous statements, but then he'd shown her a scroll written in an ogre's hand. The message made it clear that some sort of information exchange had been occurring between the ogres and a small band of elves. But when Prentice had shown it to the Council, the matter had been ruled a "misunderstanding" and dismissed without investigation. Same with several other disturbing bits of intelligence the Black Swan had uncovered. Which was why they'd formed their organization. Someone needed to start acting, before it was too late.

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A GIFT WITH ALICORNS: Sophie's unique telepathy allowed her to track the thoughts of what turned out to be an incredibly rare female alicorn—the only creature capable of resetting the Timeline to Extinction—and bring her safely to Havenfield. And since Sophie could communicate with the creature (the alicorn even informed Sophie that her name is Silveny), the Council opted to leave her in Sophie's care, which allowed Sophie to discover Silveny's ability to teleport. Unfortunately, Sophie also followed the Black Swan's instructions and took Silveny to one of the Black Swan's hideouts, where the Neverseen managed to track them down and stage an ambush. Silveny's wing was broken during the attack, but Sophie used her teleporting to get herself, Keefe Sencen, and Silveny safely back to Havenfield. And Silveny's injury did heal completely, much to everyone's relief. Afterward, Sophie convinced Silveny to move to the Sanctuary, both for Silveny's protection and to unite her with the male of her species (Greyfell). And Sophie discovered soon after that she was able to remain in contact with Silveny telepathically, despite the distance between them—which turned out to be a very good thing. The Neverseen tried numerous times to steal both alicorns from the Sanctuary, and when Sophie learned that Silveny was pregnant (which would surely make the Neverseen even more desperate to capture her), she convinced the Council that it would be safer to set the alicorns free so that no one would know where they were. She promised to maintain regular contact with Silveny and Greyfell and provide detailed reports on their safety and wellness—though Silveny made that promise difficult for Sophie to keep. She started ignoring Sophie when she reached out to her telepathically and refused to come to Havenfield for any medical checkups, all of which turned out to be some sort of protective instinct related to the fact that Silveny was pregnant with twins. But she did call on Sophie for help when she went into labor early. And Sophie relied on Vika and Stina Heks—as well as the trolls—to save both babies (a male named Wynn and a female named Luna) and ensure that Silveny survived the delivery. The alicorn family currently lives at Havenfield but is free to go whenever and wherever they want. Sophie remains their point of contact.

A MAGNET FOR TROUBLE: Since Sophie's arrival in the Lost Cities, she has had numerous—occasionally heated—interactions with the Council. She was tested by a committee of three (Councillor Oralie, Councillor Bronte, and Councillor Kenric) and granted provisional attendance to Foxfire—which she nearly lost due to poor performance in several of her sessions. But as of now, she maintains her standing at our prestigious academy. She has also faced Tribunals for accidentally bottling quintessence—and bringing the dangerous substance to school—as well as for illegally leaping to the human world to bottle a sample of their firestorm in order to prove the flames were Everblaze (a charge she was sentenced to “time already served” in light of her kidnapping). Several members of the Council also suspect that she has possession of an unregistered Spyball, but no proof has been found to support these theories. After her abilities were reset, Sophie requested permission from the Council to attempt a “healing” on Alden Vacker's shattered mind, which turned out to be wonderfully successful. As a result, she was ordered to perform a healing on a former Councillor (Fintan Pyren) in the hope that she would be able to retrieve the secrets he'd protected during his memory break. Unfortunately, that healing resulted in Councillor Kenric's death and Fint-But final punishment was left up to the Council, and the Councillors voted to constrain her abilities with a prototype “ability restrictor” designed by Dex Dizznee instead. The gadget appeared to cause Sophie some discomfort, but it also succeeded in limiting her power. an's escape, along with an inferno of Everblaze that destroyed half of Eternalia. And while Sophie was at Kenric's planting, she attempted to read King Dimitar's mind (she evidently considered him to be suspicious) and was nearly dragged away to an ogre work camp for violating the elvin-ogre treaty. But final punishment was left up to the Council, and the Councillors voted to constrain her abilities with a prototype “ability restrictor” designed by Dex Dizznee instead. The gadget appeared to cause Sophie some discomfort, but it also succeeded in limiting her power. And Sophie cooperated with the

punishment—until she “lost” the ability restrictor through suspicious circumstances, right before illegally teleporting to the human world. She—and all of her friends—fled the Lost Cities not long after, hiding with the Black Swan until they were captured while attempting to liberate Prentice Endal from Exile. During the confrontation, Sophie revealed her possession of Councillor Kenric’s cache and bartered a deal for her and her friends’ freedom by agreeing to formal banishment and attendance at Exillium. Her group’s role in finding a cure for the gnomish plague restored their citizenship and admission to Foxfire. Sophie also convinced the Council to free Prentice from Exile and performed a healing on Prentice’s mind—but she was unable to recover any of his memories. She was also selected to participate in the ogre treaty renegotiations at Lumenaria, and her warnings during the Neverseen’s attack on the castle saved numerous lives, including the Councillors’. Despite that, her relationship with the Council has remained tenuous. Sophie often questions their authority and refuses to play by their rules—particularly after her human parents were captured by Vespera. Miss Foster’s desperate rescue led to the discovery of one of the Lost Cities’ more dangerous secrets, and she continues to advocate for that information to be made public, despite the chaos that would likely ensue. She and her friends have also become the “faces” of the revolution, both for saving Atlantis from flooding, and because they were broadcast standing up to the Neverseen during the troll attack that occurred at the most recent Celestial Festival. In light of Sophie’s growing support, the Council elected to begin working with her and appointed Sophie and several of her friends as Regents in the nobility, forming Team Valiant, which Sophie was assigned to lead. The team was sent to Loamnore to negotiate with King Enki, to mixed results—though King Enki has since been outed as a traitor, so it’s possible the lack of success was not Team Valiant’s fault. As of this writing, the Council remains committed to the project, but only time will tell if it will find true success, or whether Sophie will fall back into her ways of disobedience and rebellion and finally end up exiled. **DECEASED BUT NOT DEAD:** Sophie was kidnapped by the Neverseen, along with her best friend (Dex Dizznee). But their disappearance at first seemed to be a tragic accident. Evidence at their last known location, as well as the recovery of their registry pendants from the bottom of the ocean, led the Council to believe that both Sophie and Dex had been washed away by a tidal wave. With no evidence to suggest any alternative, both Sophie and Dex were declared “deceased.” Plantings were held, and their Wanderlings remain in the Wanderling Woods to this day, since it would be wrong to destroy innocent trees simply because they were planted prematurely.

Group 12/59

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Oh wow. It was amazing she didn't melt into a puddle of goo right there. She might have, if she hadn't caught a glimpse of Elwin heading toward them. And she was trying to decide what to do about the fact that she was still holding Fitz's hand, when Fitz made the decision for her, giving her fingers a reassuring squeeze before gently letting go.

"Just like old times," Elwin announced, setting down the trays of medicine he'd been carrying. "But first, let's see how you're doing." He flashed several colorful orbs around Sophie's arm, not looking happy about her knuckles swelling. And Fitz apparently had some similar swelling in his bad leg.

"Well, I can't say I'm surprised, since I heard about the crazy day you guys had with those alicorn babies. That's why I called you in—well, that, and Lady Zillah is wondering about your echoes. Do they still stir?"

Fitz nodded, rubbing his chest. "I'm good most of the time, but big mood swings get me." "Pretty much the same for me," Sophie agreed. "And I still take sedatives every night to avoid nightmares."

Elwin reached up to muss his hair. "Well, I know this is going to sound risky, but Lady Zillah said it might help if she knew exactly how many seconds it takes before the echoes react. So do you think you could each take turns thinking about one of your triggers so I can time it? I'll be right here to help with anything you need."

Sophie and Fitz shared a look before Fitz hopped up on the cot and sat leaning against the wall. And Sophie had a feeling he let himself think about Alvar, because in about ten seconds he was clutching his chest and gulping down breaths.

Sophie's reaction took a little longer. She started with Gethen's taunts, letting his horrible voice flood her mind—and she could feel the monster lift its head. But the beast didn't get up, staying put through each of the other haunting voices that Sophie let join the punishing chorus. Until she dredged up the one she'd buried the deepest.

Sophie, please—stop!

The second her sister's terrified voice rang through her mind, the monster was thrashing and kicking—and so was she. "It's okay," Fitz told her, taking her hand again. "Just breathe." She was trying. But the monster fought back, clawing and scraping against her consciousness. "Breathe with me," Fitz told her, setting the rhythm—and she clung to his hand like an anchor as she let their breaths fall in sync.

Slowly, steadily, the beast skulked back to the shadows. "The good news," Elwin said, sounding a bit shaken as he flashed an orb of light around her, "is that I don't see any damage. So you are getting stronger. And hopefully these readings will help Lady Zillah find an answer." Sophie hoped so too. But until then, she had to stay far, far away from that memory—even if it killed her to be so close to the truth and leave it buried.

"You okay?" Fitz asked as she chugged her medicine with trembling hands. She nodded. But she must not have been very convincing, because Fitz checked on her again before she went to bed that night.

Are you sure the sedative will be enough to keep the nightmares away? he asked.

I think so. Especially since Flori sang a little bit of her new song to me. She only has one verse right now, but... it's crazy how the melody makes everything warm and tingly. It does seem like it might be the solution, once she figures out the rest of the verses.

Does she know how long it'll be?

No. But she said she works on it every night while we sleep. So hopefully soon.

By the end of that first week back at Foxfire, Sophie's life had fallen into a new pattern with school in the mornings followed by training in the afternoons with any friends who gathered at Havenfield. Fitz always went home to Everglen, hoping to find some trace of the old troll hive. But every night he'd check in telepathically—and even though he never had any news to report, all those conversations really helped things feel less strange and scary between them. They sat next to each other every day during lunch, and if their friends noticed, they didn't bring it up. Even Biana. Even Keefe—though he wasn't around very much. He landed in lunch detention on day two for some random prank he never bothered to explain. And his father was still insisting on having their private Empath lessons, so he had to rush home every day as soon as Foxfire ended. And Tam had to leave Havenfield by sunset for his shadowflux lessons with Lady Zillah. And Dex still spent most of his time with Tinker. But he'd stop by when he had completed creations to deliver, like their newly enhanced panic switches—which could now send a quick voice recording of what they were facing—and these fancy new gadgets that reminded Sophie of a twenty-sided die and unleashed a cloud of mist meant to scatter someone's concentration.

Flori spent her days making everyone new clothes so they'd all have plenty of pockets to tuck things away in, and her nights wandering the forest in search of song lyrics. So Sandor, Tarina, and Bo took turns training Sophie, Linh, Marella, Biana, and Wylie—though the rest of them could train much longer than Sophie's arm would let her. But whenever she had to stop early, she spent the extra time

keeping Silveny and Greyfell company.

The anxious alicorns had not been happy when Sophie warned them that visiting their babies might give away their location. But they didn't argue. Silveny seemed to realize that all the months she'd spent ignoring Sophie's advice had nearly cost the babies their lives, and she was determined not to make the same mistake again—even if it was breaking her heart to stay away from them. Sophie tried to keep Silveny's spirits up by passing along the updates Tarina got every morning from the trolls who were keeping an eye on the babies. But there wasn't a whole lot of actual news to share. Luna and Wynn were stable, but progressing slower than expected. In fact, by the end of the second week, the trolls were convinced the babies wouldn't be hatching during the coming eclipse. Which made sense, considering how much time should have been left in Silveny's pregnancy. But Silveny was devastated. And after three days of watching her mope around her pasture, ignoring food and treats and everyone, Sophie tried a new tactic.

Fly with me? she asked, pointing at the sky. Fly? Silveny repeated, not sounding nearly as excited as Sophie wanted. But Sophie kept pushing, sending memories of all the times they'd flown together, and reminding Silveny of how long it'd been. And when that still didn't convince her, Sophie played her secret weapon. Please? she asked. It might help me have better dreams tonight. Help Sophie? Silveny said, her mind turning over the words until they shifted from a question to an answer. Help Sophie! Help Sophie! Help Sophie!

"What are you doing?" Linh asked as Sophie pulled her hair back into a ponytail and headed for the enclosure. "Are you guys going to fly?" "That's the plan," Sophie agreed, and Linh let out a giddy squeal. "Can I come too? I'm so over battle training. And Tam just left. And... okay, I just really really really want to fly with the pretty, sparkly horses!" Sophie laughed and glanced at Greyfell, transmitting Linh's request. He sized Linh up for a second, then lowered into a crouch—his way of saying sure, climb aboard—causing a whole lot more squealing as Linh sprinted into the pasture and practically leaped onto Greyfell's muscled back. And Silveny seemed much more excited by the idea as she bent to let Sophie climb on. Thanks, Mama Glitter Butt, Sophie told her, wrapping her arms around Silveny's neck as Silveny flapped her enormous wings, launching them airborne.

They didn't fly far, just circled the pastures as the sky shifted from twilight to glittering night. A full moon lit up the sky, bouncing off the clouds as they dipped and dove and swooped through the sea of stars. And the higher they flew, the more Silveny's heart seemed to lift, until she sounded much more like her usual self. SOPHIE! FRIEND! FLY! Fly! Sophie agreed. And they did. For hours and hours until they all felt ready for a good night's sleep.

But Grady was waiting for them when they landed. And he had a note from Mr. Forkle, which had Sophie wide awake again. There were no clues or mysteries like in the messages the Black Swan used to leave her. Just a simple, clear instruction: Prepare yourself. The Council has finalized your meeting with Fintan. At the end of the week, I'll be bringing you and Fitz to his cell.

```
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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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]
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Tinker's gaze shifted to the sling supporting Sophie's arm. "They don't know why you brought them here?" "Not yet. So perhaps we should head to your laboratory. Seems like a more fitting place for that conversation, don't you think?" Sophie shared a look with Dex—a look that said they both found those words to be uncomfortably ominous. But it didn't stop them from following Tinker through the atrium, to a gilded path that ended in a round silver room with a narrow iron staircase that corkscrewed all the way to the top of the tower. "Is this a vortinator?" Sophie asked as Tinker motioned for her to go first. "Do you want it to be?" Tinker countered. "Not really." Her morning medicine was still sloshing around her stomach—and she only had one good arm, so clinging for dear life while the staircase spun like a tornado wasn't really something she felt like doing with her day. "It's Tinker's version of one," Mr. Forkle explained. "But I promise you'll find it to be a much gentler experience." "Want me to go first?" Dex offered when Sophie still hesitated. She gave him a grateful nod, and he stepped onto the bottom stair, steadying his balance as the staircase sprang to life. But the motion was slow and smooth, just like Mr. Forkle had promised. In fact, when Sophie climbed up behind Dex, she couldn't feel any sign that they were moving. She only knew they were because the crystal skylight grew closer and closer. "Did you design all of this yourself?" Dex asked, running his hand along the silver wall. "Don't you work alone?" Tinker wondered. "Mostly," Dex admitted—which wasn't the answer Sophie had been expecting. She'd always thought of Dex as part of her same team. But then she remembered how often Dex had to stay home, working on gadgets by himself while the rest of their group tackled some other project. "It's lonely speaking a language few others understand, isn't it?" Tinker asked him. Dex looked away as he nodded, and Sophie tried to think of something to say. But all thoughts slid out of her head when she caught a glimpse of Tinker's laboratory. The room was bigger than she'd been imagining, and much, much messier. Each of the long steel tables was piled with gadgets that were still in the process of creation, their gears left exposed, wires tangling in every direction. And the copper floor was covered in screws and nuts and bolts and shards of metal and glass. The air smelled like grease and metal and oil—but not unpleasantly so. It was the scent of a place where hands got dirty and set to work. And all the whirring and humming and ticking gave the space a buzzing energy that made Sophie want to grab the nearest tool and build something. Dex looked desperate to do the same thing, his eyes staring hungrily at the half-finished gadgets as they followed Tinker deeper into the lab. They had to weave around enormous springs that connected the floor to the ceiling, like columns, and they eventually stopped in front of a cluster of widemouthed pipes jutting from the floor, unleashing white swirls into the air that somehow made the room feel colder. Tinker motioned for them to sit at a table that was mostly empty—just two small gray puffs of fur in the middle, along with what looked like an antique jewelry box. Sophie sank onto the bench, not caring that it was made of frigid metal. Her head was spinning, and she couldn't decide if it was from the cold, the altitude, or the fact that her still-healing body was weaker than she wanted. Then again, the dizziness could've been triggered by the thousands of gears whirling all around her. The lab's glass walls were filled with interlocking cogs all spinning in perfect unison, dragging a web of copper wires sideways and slantways and longways until they fed into a circuit in the center of a foggy round window at the far end of the room. "Are we inside the clock?" Sophie asked, glancing up to find five iron bells dangling from the peaked skylight. "Or whatever it is?" "It won't chime again until later tonight, in case you're worried," Mr. Forkle assured her. "It only peels five times a day. Though even if we were here for one of them, the sound is strangely muffled." "That's because of the pillars," Dex explained. "The springs absorb the vibration. And see all those tiny holes?" He pointed to the nearest coil, and Sophie was surprised to notice its texture was more like steel wool. "Those absorb the sound." Tinker's eyebrow raised. "How long did that take you to puzzle out?" Dex shrugged. "I don't know—it's pretty obvious, isn't it?" "I told you his talent was special," Mr. Forkle said. Tinker nodded, flicking through the different lenses on her eyepiece as she studied Dex closer, making Dex's cheeks

flush the same shade as his hair. He reached for one of the gray puffs resting on the table, like he needed something to fidget with. "It's cool you have tomples. I've always wanted one." "That thing's alive?" Sophie realized as the puff stirred in his palm. Dex held the creature out to her. "Yep. Wanna see?" She'd started to reach for it when he added, "They're kind of like what you'd get if you crossed a hedgehog, a kitten, and a really big cockroach." Sophie jerked her hand away just in time to avoid the six spindly brown legs that emerged from the fur. "Okay, that's just wrong," she said, scooting as far as she could from the fluffy bug-of-doom. "Why would you want one of those?" "Aw, don't listen to her," Dex whispered to the tomples as he set it back on the table. "She doesn't know what cute is—trust me." He winked and Sophie felt her jaw fall, wondering when they'd reached a point where they could joke about that. "Besides," he added, "tomples feed on dust, so they're awesome to have in labs." I've been asking my dad to get one for Slurps and Burps for years. But he's worried all the alchemy stuff we do could mix with the dust and make the tomples sick. So I'm stuck cleaning all the shelves myself." The tomples skittered back toward its fluffy friend, and Sophie tried not to squeal like a five-year-old. But she couldn't help it when she noticed a blur of black fur snatch something from the next table over and duck behind one of the larger contraptions. "Okay, what was that?" she asked, only half sure she wanted to know. "I believe that's Sprocket," Mr. Forkle said as the same clawed black hand reached around a tangle of wires, grabbed what looked like a small circuit board, and yanked it back. Tinker rushed over and scooped up a black furry creature with a shiny nose and folded ears like a puppy—a gremlin, Sophie realized. And it wasn't letting go of its new treasures, no matter how hard Tinker pulled. "I can't believe you keep a gremlin around all of this tech," Dex murmured as Sprocket won his tug-of-war and leaped from Tinker's arms, quickly breaking the circuit board into itty-bitty pieces. "Gremlins love to dismantle things," Mr. Forkle explained to Sophie. "And I've made the same observation, Mr. Dizznee. Many times. All Tinker ever tells me is . . ." "Aren't some challenges worth it?" she finished, reaching into her tool belt and pulling out a tiny metal cube, which she traded with Sprocket for whatever remained of the circuit board. The happy gremlin scurried under the table and immediately set to work prying the cube apart, tossing each piece over its shoulder—which might explain why the floor was so messy. Maybe even why so many of the gadgets looked unfinished. Sophie wondered how much time Tinker spent redoing what Sprocket had undone. "It's a way to fill the day, isn't it?" Tinker asked, somehow guessing what Sophie was thinking—and Sophie finally understood what Mr. Forkle meant about her way of communicating. All questions, no answers. "It is," Mr. Forkle told Tinker. "But I've found a better way—as you already know." He turned to Dex. "I haven't brought you to Tinker before, because it allowed you to come at each other's projects with fresh eyes. But I think we're to a point where it would be far more beneficial for you to put your heads together. Lady Iskra is a brilliant Mentor—and you'll still work with her during your Foxfire sessions. But her approach is very traditional, and we both know that traditional isn't where you excel. So I'd love you to start coming here after school and training with Tinker." "Every day?" Dex asked. "As often as you can," Mr. Forkle told him. "Okay, but . . . I'm not going to be able to keep ditching Lovise. She won't fall for the triplets' tricks again." "Lovise is a goblin?" Tinker confirmed. "A very loyal goblin," Mr. Forkle clarified. "You can trust her. But I know that will be a challenge, given your past experiences." Tinker's hands curled into fists, the metal guards covering her pointer fingers making a clinking sound. "Would the goblin be willing to wait outside?" "I suspect that can be arranged," Mr. Forkle agreed. Tinker's grip relaxed—slightly. And she dipped her chin in a nod. "Excellent," Mr. Forkle said. "Then I have your first project." He reached into his cape pocket and retrieved two clear marble-size spheres, each glinting with tiny colorful jewels set inside—and Sophie's stomach soured as Dex hung his head and looked away.

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Bone crunched as Fintan punched himself in the face. Then again. Then in the stomach. Again. Again. Sophie watched in dazed horror until Biana's scream snapped her out of it, followed by several thumps and crashes. "She needs help," Fitz said, cupping his hands around his mouth and shouting, "HOW DO WE GET UP THERE?" Another scream was Biana's only answer. Fitz grabbed Sophie's arm. "Please tell me you can track her." "I'm trying," she promised. "But I think I need help." She took his hand to enhance him and Fitz squeezed his eyes shut. His whole body shook as he told her, "She's somewhere above us." "I know—but I can't tell how she got up there. Can you?" Sophie asked. Sweat streamed down Fitz's face as he shook his head. "Scour the room for a staircase," Grizel ordered when glass shattered and Biana screamed again. "It's not in here," Ro warned. "Biana's scent leads out the door. She must've slipped free before they locked us in." "Then, how's it going on that lock, Dex?" Fitz shouted. Dex rattled the door. "I'm trying everything I can think of. But Vespera wasn't lying about how this place doesn't use technology." "Does this help?" Sophie asked, grabbing his hand. He shook his head. "It's not a gadget. I can't talk to it—I don't know what to do." "Stand back!" Ro commanded, shoving Dex aside and slamming her body against the door. Sandor and Grizel joined her, but even with their combined strength, they only managed to warp the metal. "I'll make Fintan open it," Grady said, gritting his teeth. Veins bulged across his forehead and Fintan turned, eyes full of pure, black hate as he stumbled out of sight, heading their way. The small victory only lasted until Biana shouted, "RUN!" followed by an agonized scream and a whole lot of shattering glass. Vespera's voice hissed around the room. "You want to see ruthless?" The air sizzled and popped as the force field unraveled—and the gorgodon bared its fangs and leaped for their throats. Seventy-nine NOW WOULD BE a really good time for us to figure out how to get that door open," Keefe yelled as they all tucked and rolled out of the gorgodon's path. The beast slammed into the wall, crashing through layers of glass and sending jagged shards flying as it scrambled to its feet and roared. "On it," Dex called back, pulling a melder out of his cloak and popping off the back. "I'm going to blast through the whole stupid door." "We'll keep the gorgodon away while you work," Sophie told him. "Everyone spread out and try to distract it." Her friends obeyed—though Fitz kept screaming Biana's name, asking if she was okay. "She's probably hiding," Grady told him, glass crunching under his feet as he stumbled to the nearest wall. "And you'd better work fast, Dex. I'm no longer controlling Fintan." "Does that mean he can torch this place?" Tam asked as he blanketed Dex in shadows. "No. I could feel my hold slipping, so I made Fintan knock himself out. But I don't know how long the unconsciousness will last." Grady slumped against the wall, his face sweaty and gray. "Are you okay?" Sophie asked. He closed his eyes and nodded. "Fintan fought me pretty hard." "I'll cover you," Marella offered, gathering flames as she ran to Grady's side and held them in front of her like a weapon. "Uh, I think that's making the gorgodon angrier," Tam warned. He pointed to the snarling beast, which had crouched into a pounce stance, its yellow gaze locked on Marella. Marella snuffed out her flames, but the gorgodon still leaped—and it would've been a perfect strike, if a wave of water hadn't slammed it into the far wall, shattering more mirrors. The gorgodon was back on its feet immediately—shaking its feathers dry and raising its wings as it launched off the floor and circled above them. "Oh good, now it's airborne!" Keefe said as Linh gathered water for another attack. "Any chance you feel like manifesting as a Psionipath, Foster? Because a new force field would really come in handy right now." "I wish," she mumbled. But maybe she could control the beast a different way. She closed her eyes, stretching out her mind the way she'd done with Verdi and Iggy and Silveny, hoping she could convince the gorgodon that they should be friends. But the gorgodon's mind was a swirling pool of nothing. No sounds. No images. Only shadows of what used to be—as if everything had been blotted out by its cavernous grief. The bleakness made Sophie's eyes water—made her want to help the tortured creature. Maybe if she— "WATCH OUT!" Sandor screamed, dragging Sophie behind him. He raised his sword at the gorgodon, which was diving straight for them. Fitz threw out his arms, whipping dozens of fallen shards toward the beast with telekinesis. But nothing slowed the gorgodon's plummet—until Linh knocked it back

with a massive geyser. Glass rained down as it slammed into the ceiling, and Tam shrouded Linh in shadows while the beast scanned the room for its attacker. “Anyone have a plan yet?” Tam shouted. “Besides ‘don’t die’?” Keefe asked, leaping over rubble as he sprinted across the room. “How about you guys keep that thing away from me so I can get Foster’s parents and we can flee this death trap the second Dex gets that door open.” “Do you need help?” Sophie called as Sandor struggled to keep her shielded. “Nope, I got this. Just keep the gorgodon distracted.” “Done!” Ro hurled a dagger at the beast’s flank. The knife bounced off the gorgodon’s thick skin—but definitely got the creature’s attention. Grizel tackled Ro to save her from a tail-sting to the face, and Linh knocked the beast back with another wave. Sophie tried to think of a way to help, but she couldn’t take her eyes off Keefe as he charged straight into the tallest section of flames.

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"'Bout time you got here," Keefe said as Sophie followed Fitz down the twisting silver staircase. He stood next to Dex in Everglen's glittering round foyer, both of them looking very human in hoodies and dark jeans. Keefe flashed his famous smirk and patted his carefully mussed blond hair, but Sophie could see the sadness clouding his sky blue eyes. During their confrontation with the Neverseen, Keefe had discovered that his mother was one of their leaders. She'd even attacked her own son, before fleeing to the ogre capital and abandoning her family. "Hey, no worrying about me, Foster," Keefe said, fanning the space between them. He was one of the few Empaths who could feel Sophie's emotions rippling through the air. "I'm worried about all of you," she told him. "You're all risking your lives because of me." "Eh, what else is new?" Dex asked, flashing his dimpled grin. "And will you relax? We've got this! Though I'm not sure about my shoes." He pointed to his soft brown boots, which were a typical elvin style. "All the human ones Fitz had were too big for my feet." "I doubt anyone will notice," Sophie told him. "But I guess it depends on how long we'll be around humans. How far away is the hideout after we get to Florence?" Fitz smiled his movie-ready smile. "You'll see." The Black Swan had taught Fitz how to sneak past Sophie's mental blocking and view the secret information hidden in her brain. But for some reason he wouldn't share what he'd learned. All Sophie knew was that they were headed to a round window somewhere in the famous Italian city. "Hey," Fitz said, leaning closer. "You trust me, don't you?" Sophie's traitorous heart still fluttered, despite her current annoyance. She did trust Fitz. Probably more than anyone. But having him keep secrets from her was seriously annoying. She was tempted to use her telepathy to steal the information straight from his head. But she'd broken that rule enough times to know the consequences definitely weren't worth it. "What is with these clothes?" Biana interrupted, appearing out of thin air next to Keefe. Biana was a Vanisher, like her mother, though she was still getting used to the ability. Only one of her legs reappeared, and she had to hop up and down to get the other to show up. She wore a sweatshirt three sizes too big and faded, baggy jeans. "At least I get to wear my shoes," she said, hitching up her pants to reveal purple flats with diamond-studded toes. "But why do we only have boy stuff?" "Because I'm a boy," Fitz reminded her. "Besides, this isn't a fashion contest." "And if it was, I'd totally win. Right, Foster?" Keefe asked. Sophie actually would've given the prize to Fitz—his blue scarf worked perfectly with his dark hair and teal eyes. And his fitted gray coat made him look taller, with broader shoulders and— "Oh please." Keefe shoved his way between them. "Fitz's human clothes are a huge snoozefest. Check out what Dex and I found in Alvar's closet!" They both unzipped their hoodies, revealing T-shirts with logos underneath. "I have no idea what this means, but it's crazy awesome, right?" Keefe asked, pointing to the black and yellow oval on his shirt. "It's from Batman," Sophie said—then regretted the words. Of course Keefe demanded she explain the awesomeness of the Dark Knight. "I'm wearing this shirt forever, guys," he decided. "Also, I want a Batmobile! Dex, can you make that happen?" Sophie wouldn't have been surprised if Dex actually could build one. As a Technopath, he worked miracles with technology. He'd made all kinds of cool gadgets for Sophie, including the lopsided ring she wore—a special panic switch that had saved her life during her fight with one of her kidnappers. "What's my shirt from?" Dex asked, pointing to the logo with interlocking yellow W's. Sophie didn't have the heart to tell him it was the symbol for Wonder Woman. "Why does Alvar have human stuff?" she asked. "I thought he worked with the ogres." "He does," Fitz replied. "Or he did before you almost started a war with them." Fitz said the words in a light, teasing way, but the truth behind them weighed heavily on Sophie's shoulders. They'd be in a lot less trouble if she hadn't ignored the rules of telepathy and tried to read the ogre king's mind. She'd known it was a dangerous risk, but she'd been desperate to know why the ogres had snuck into the Sanctuary and hidden one of their homing devices in Silveny's tail. The rare female alicorn wasn't just essential for the survival of her species, she was one of Sophie's closest friends. If only Sophie had known that ogres' minds could detect Telepaths—even genetically enhanced Telepaths like her. She hadn't learned anything useful,

and she'd nearly voided the elvin-ogre treaty and started a war. "But that still doesn't explain why Alvar has human stuff," Sophie reminded Fitz. "Ogres hate humans even more than elves do." "They do," Fitz agreed. "But these clothes are from years ago, back when Alvar used to go out looking for you." "He did?" Sophie asked. "I thought that was your job." Fitz was the one who'd found her on her class field trip about a year earlier and brought her to the Lost Cities. It was the best thing that ever happened to her. Also the hardest. Fitz smiled sadly, probably remembering the same thing: the moment she'd had to say goodbye to her human family. He was the only one who really understood what she'd lost that day, and she couldn't have gotten through it without him. "I started searching for you when I was six," he told her, "after Alvar started his elite levels and wasn't able to sneak away from Foxfire anymore. But my dad searched for you for twelve years, remember? I couldn't go on secret missions when I was a toddler." "What a slacker," Keefe interrupted. "I totally could've pulled that off. But then again, I'm Batman, so"—he draped an arm over Sophie's shoulders—"I could be your hero any day." Dex pretended to gag, while Biana stared at Keefe's arm around Sophie. "Aren't we supposed to be leaving?" they both asked at the same time. Sophie pulled away from Keefe as Alden called "Wait!" from the top of the stairs. His elegant cape swished as he rushed to catch them. "You can't leave wearing your registry pendants." Sophie grasped the choker around her neck, hardly believing she'd overlooked that essential detail. The pendants were special tracking devices from the Council. She wondered what other important things she might be forgetting. . . .

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SIXTEEN. THIS IS OFFICIALLY MY NEW happy place,” Keefe said as he sank into a giant pile of pillows and took a huge bite of some sort of fancy chocolate cake—which felt like a particularly bold statement, given the reason he was in London and his rather depressing history there. But he was developing a special kind of love for this foggy city and all the people and foods and sights within it. Didn’t hurt that his day was turning out to be made of win. Not only had the flat white given him so much energy that he probably could’ve run three of those marathon things back-to-back-to-back. But that little visualization trick? IT WORKED!!! He had no idea why—and he wasn’t going to try to figure it out, since that could make his brain be like, You’re right! This makes no sense. Let’s go back to Misery Mode! All that mattered was that after he’d unraveled that last mental thread, the blaring emotions faded to a soft, steady hum—a sound he could easily tune out without needing anything to distract him. So he’d dumped that horrible pebble out of his shoe and kicked it as far away as he could. Then he turned down the busiest street to make sure nothing changed when he was around a bigger crowd—and thankfully, the emotions remained a harmless buzzing that his brain was more than happy to ignore. It made him want to pump his fists and jump around shouting a bunch of particularly saucy taunts at Mommy Dearest and her little cloak-wearing buddies. Sure, he still had his other weird abilities to deal with—but he was actually making some real progress. It felt like he’d been holding and holding and holding his breath, and he’d finally had a chance to exhale. Part of him wanted to sprint back to the park, find that jogger, and tackle-hug him across the grass—or at least get his name so he could write an epic ballad in his honor. But he’d have to settle for adding another grateful portrait in his sketchbook. And he’d have to make sure to credit him for the awesome hotel recommendation. The building looked a little plain from the outside—and the inside had that weird kind of human fanciness where all the furniture looked super rigid and uncomfortable, and everything was decorated with flowers.

Cover 3

Relevant results in this cover: 3

Content pages range: [42, 58]

Groups range: [18, 20]

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

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Sophie stared at her fingers, which looked like big marshmallows under all the layers of fabric. “So... this is how it’s going to be now? I’m stuck with puffy fingers and people afraid to touch me?”

“No,” he assured her. “You’ve simply entered another period of adjustment. Try not to panic, Miss Foster. There’s always a solution. And while it may be hard to see it at the moment, this is good news. You’ve now become far, far more powerful than your enemies.”

“No, anyone who touches me is more powerful,” Sophie corrected, “so really, I’m actually way more vulnerable.”

Her imagination happily painted her a new nightmare.

A moonlark in a cage.

Forced to empower anyone who shoved their hand through the bars.

And the truly terrifying part was how easily her captors shifted in her mind, from the Neverseen to the Council—even to the Black Swan.

After all: Who wouldn’t want to exploit a resource like that?

“We wouldn’t,” Mr. Forkle assured her, and she wasn’t sure if he’d read her mind or if he’d simply noticed the way her eyes had narrowed with suspicion. “We would never use you against your will, Miss Foster. You always have a choice.”

“How?” She held up her marshmallow hands. “This ability is automatic.”

“I actually wonder if that’s true anymore,” he murmured, scratching his chin. “With a power this

strong—and a brilliant mind like yours—I wouldn't be surprised if there's some sort of internal trigger you've yet to discover, one that allows you to rein in the ability through concentration or sheer willpower."

Sophie blinked. "If that did exist... how would I find it?"

"That would be up to you to determine," he told her. "Journeys of self-discovery must be embarked upon alone."

"Great," Sophie grumbled, making no effort to hide her eye roll. "You realize that's not actually an answer, right?"

"It is—it's just not the answer you seek," Mr. Forkle countered. "You want a ready solution, and I cannot give that to you. But I can assure you that if you become more mindful as you use this ability—more aware of the tiny shifts and connections occurring within you as it works—you'll likely discover whole new worlds of strength and control. Remember, this ability wasn't one we chose for you—it was one your genetics naturally dictated. Which likely means your genetics have given you the means to manage it on your own."

Sophie sighed. "That's still not helpful."

"It will be," he insisted. "You just need to give yourself a chance to process."

"Yeah, well, in the meantime, I'm stuck with eight zillion pairs of gloves and trying not to let my enemies get anywhere near me. Might as well lock me in my room."

"I'm on board with that plan," Sandor jumped in. "I'll happily stand guard at the door."

Mr. Forkle smiled. "That won't be necessary. Miss Foster simply needs to remember to rely on her friends."

He called Dex over and had Dex hold one of Sophie's fingernail gadgets in one hand while letting her fully enhance him.

"Oh wow," Dex breathed, his knees buckling the second her fingertips touched his skin—and miraculously, no one made any jokes about Sophie knocking a boy off his feet as Stina and Biana lunged to hold Dex steady. No one mentioned how many additional times Dex whispered, "Wow," before he pulled his hand free and sank to the grass, staring at the sky.

"Think you can make some adjustments to Tinker's design?" Mr. Forkle asked him after several seconds. "Create a more powerful shield for Miss Foster's ability until she learns how to manage it with her mind?"

"I think so, yeah," Dex mumbled, followed by a bunch of techy words that sounded like gibberish.

"I'll take him inside," Biana volunteered, hooking Dex's arm around her shoulders and hauling him to his shaky feet. "He's going to need a notebook to write this all down and make some sketches."

"See?" Mr. Forkle said, turning back to Sophie. "Your teammates are already working on a technical solution. And while they do that, I want you to get some rest—and spend the whole day in bed tomorrow if you can. Try to clear your mind of all other worries and start that mental journey."

"How?" Sophie asked.

Mr. Forkle smiled. "That's up to you. But the first step is sleep."

As it turned out, mental journeys were every bit as pointless and annoying as Sophie expected—and also, surprisingly exhausting.

Her mind didn't want to "clear."

Focusing on her breathing just ended up making her spend hours counting.

And when she tried to listen to her body, all it told her was that she was restless. And hungry. And really hated wearing so many pairs of gloves.

So Sophie literally tackled Dex with a hug the next day, when he showed up with Lovise and Mr. Forkle to deliver her newly designed fingernail gadgets.

The gadgets were clear this time and had to be worn on every finger—and the sequence of taps to activate and deactivate them was much more complicated. But once the gadgets were in place and active, they seemed to do their job perfectly, blocking her enhancing both for Dex and Mr. Forkle.

"You should probably test them on Keefe," Dex suggested, "since he was even more sensitive to your ability than we were. And I'd still recommend wearing double gloves—and keeping a couple of extra pairs in your pockets."

Mr. Forkle clicked his tongue. "Have you so little faith in your talent, Mr. Dizznee?"

"No. I just also know technology isn't perfect. It breaks. Or other stuff interacts with it. So it's good to have a backup plan."

Sophie nodded, pulling Dex into another hug, relieved that it still didn't feel a tiny bit weird between them.

"Thank you," she told him. "You saved me from being Lady Marshmallow Hands."

Dex grinned, flashing his dimples. "See, now I kinda want to take back the gadgets."

"Don't even think about it," Sophie warned.

"Oh, I'm thinking about it, Lady Marshmallow Hands," Dex countered.

Mr. Forkle cleared his throat. "In all seriousness, Miss Foster, I still hope you'll keep searching within yourself, because I feel quite strongly that you have more to discover. In fact, I'm regretting that I never made self-reflection and meditation into a habit for you when you were younger. I should've considered that the uniqueness of your abilities would require a measure of deep introspection, since only you can truly understand the workings of your mind."

Sophie wanted to roll her eyes and tell him how pointless everything she'd tried the day before had been. But it was easier to just say, "I'll do my best," and change the subject.

"What are you working on today?" she asked Dex.

"I asked Forkle to take me back to Watchward Heath, because I had a few thoughts about the cameras while you were enhancing me. The tweaks I made to the feed already are solid—but they're slow because there are so many different cameras. And I think I came up with a way to make it all work much faster. See? It's a good thing you had your abilities reset. I know you've been lying here regretting it."

She had, actually—though she hadn't even admitted that to herself.

She'd just lost so many days.

And now her enhancing was so much more complicated.

And she still couldn't even use her inflicting—still didn't even know if it worked any better than it had before.

"It was the right call, Sophie," Dex assured her. "Just give yourself time to adjust."

"Mr. Dizznee is very wise," Mr. Forkle told her. "And I've been meaning to add one more thing. I think it's quite telling that both Mr. Sencen and Mr. Vacker were so much more sensitive to your enhancing."

"Fitz needed the same number of gloves as you," Sophie reminded him.

"Yes, but my telepathy is far more honed than his, so for him to be at my same level is fascinating. And I realize you've always had strong connections with both boys in different ways. But I wonder if having them assist during the reset amplified those bonds. I think it might be worth exploring. I'd recommend working with both of them in tandem to see what you discover. Perhaps complete a few trust exercises."

Dex snorted. "You want Sophie, Fitz, and Keefe to do trust exercises together."

"I think it would be very enlightening," Mr. Forkle agreed.

"Oh, it'll definitely be that," Dex said with a particularly huge grin. "Can I, uh, be there when you do?" he asked Sophie.

"No, it'll work best if it's just the three of them," Mr. Forkle informed him. "Try it today, if you're up for it," he advised Sophie. "And if you're not, then I hope you'll work on more self-reflection."

Sophie couldn't decide which sounded more miserable.

But.

She already knew self-reflection was a total fail.

So even though she could definitely recognize the potential for disaster with Mr. Forkle's suggestion, she hailed Keefe and Fitz after Mr. Forkle and Dex left and invited them over to work together. And both boys reluctantly agreed to meet her in the Havenfield pastures in a few hours.

Group 19/59

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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.

```
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It's okay—Tinker knows Miss Foster is an Enhancer. I've actually asked her to see if she can come up with her own means to control the ability."

"You did?" Dex asked, frowning when Mr. Forkle nodded. "Why?"

"Because I'd rather you focus on this. And, truthfully, I thought the project might need some fresh eyes."

Dex's frown turned to a full-fledged scowl. "It doesn't—I've got it covered."

"Are you sure?" Tinker asked, reaching for the jewelry box in the center of the table. "Would you like to see my solution?"

That threw Dex for a second. "You already made something?"

She dipped her chin and flipped open the gilded lid, filling the room with a tinkling melody that felt familiar even though Sophie couldn't place it. The final note was still ringing as Tinker plucked out four tiny, curved pieces of smooth metal that almost looked like . . .

"Are those supposed to be fingernails?" Sophie asked, imagining all kinds of horrifying application scenarios.

Tinker reached for Sophie's hand. "Why do you assume I would design anything to hurt you?"

Her fingers were ice-cold but careful as she pulled off Sophie's glove and placed one of the metal pieces over Sophie's thumbnail, lining it up before tapping it once and . . .

. . . the metal suctioned perfectly into place.

She repeated the process with a second curl of metal on Sophie's pointer finger. "Can you tap five times like this?" she asked, clicking her fingertips together the way someone would play finger symbols.

Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap.

Sophie copied the gesture, and a warm tingle rippled across her skin.

"That's pretty cool," Sophie had to admit.

It got even cooler when she pressed her fingertips against Dex's palm and nothing happened.

No surge of heat sparking between them.

No transfer of energy.

No enhancing.

And when she tapped five times again, cold prickled across her palm, undoing whatever the first taps

had done.

Dex sighed and leaned closer, squinting at her silver nails. "It's the same kind of force field I used in my design. All she did was make hers turn off and on without being removed."

"And camouflaged them quite cleverly," Mr. Forkle noted. "A little metallic polish on the other nails and no one would ever be the wiser—though I still recommend wearing your gloves," he told Sophie. "The Neverseen might grow suspicious if you stop. Plus, it's always wise to have backup, in case technology fails."

"True," Sophie agreed.

She shook her hand as hard as she could to see if the nails would loosen.

They held strong.

Maybe a little too strong.

"How am I supposed to take these off?" she asked.

"Why would you need to?" Tinker wondered.

"I don't know. Won't they look weird when my nails grow?"

Tinker tapped the base of each nail twice, and a puff of air loosened the gadgets, allowing Sophie to slide them up or down as needed. All she'd have to do is trim her nails to keep them hidden.

"Is this a better solution than what you were planning?" Tinker asked Dex, with no bravado in her tone. Only curiosity.

But Dex still wouldn't look at her as he nodded. And his sigh was somewhere between a grumble and a harrumph.

"You have a competitive streak, don't you?" Tinker noted.

Sophie and Mr. Forkle both said "yes" while Dex said "no."

"I'm not being competitive," he argued. "I'm allowed to be annoyed that I got replaced."

"You weren't replaced," Mr. Forkle corrected. "This project, for whatever reason, seemed to be stumping you. So I thought it'd be wise to have someone with a new perspective take a look. Plus, I know you've been busy adjusting the panic switch rings—"

"You have?" Sophie asked.

Dex shrugged. "I'm trying to build a code into them, like 'slide the stone up for one kind of attack, right, left, and down for others.' But I'm not sure how to group it all, since there are so many different threats, and the code has to be simple enough to remember."

"I have some thoughts," Tinker told him, and Dex's jaw tightened, like he was stopping himself from snapping at her.

"Perhaps you could discuss that later," Mr. Forkle suggested, "once Mr. Dizznee has had a bit more time to adjust to collaboration. In the meantime, were you able to come up with anything for those other projects I described?"

Tinker nodded, reaching into the jewelry box and setting two other items on the table in front of Sophie: a plain silver bangle, and a cloak pin shaped like a soaring eagle.

"Is that the Ruewen crest?" Sophie asked, reaching for the pin and comparing it to the one securing her cape. The designs were nearly identical, though hers had touches of color and the new pin was

solid silver.

"I sent her a sketch of it," Mr. Forkle explained. "That way it will keep the null better hidden."

Dex peeked over Sophie's shoulder. "You had her build a null? Seriously?"

"What's a null?" Sophie asked when Tinker dipped her chin.

"They block signals," Dex told her. "Or, I guess 'absorb' is a better word."

"Any technological means the Neverseen might have for tracking you will now be halted," Mr. Forkle clarified. "Your parents have swept everything you own with reveldust—and Bo has done several other tests for ogre enzymes. Everything has come back negative. So if the rebels do still have a way of monitoring your location, they're most likely using a gadget of some sort—"

"Hidden where?" Sophie asked, glancing at her wrist.

The Neverseen couldn't have implanted something during her kidnapping, could they? Under Brant's burns?

"Relax," Mr. Forkle told her as she scratched at her skin. "This is just a precaution."

"You realize a null is also going to block her registry pendant, right?" Dex jumped in. "And any trackers that Sandor hid in her clothes. Probably my panic switch, too. Why do you think I never suggested anything like that?"

Tinker pointed to the eagle's beak. "What does that do?"

Dex pressed his finger to the tiny point and sighed. "Oh. I guess it lets you approve certain frequencies. I . . . didn't know you could do that."

"Which is why I want Tinker to train you," Mr. Forkle reminded him gently. "There is much for you to learn. But there are also many things you can teach her as well."

Dex gave half a shrug and kept fiddling with the pin's tiny beak.

When it came to pouting, he was a master.

"So as long as I wear that pin, the Neverseen won't be able to track me?" Sophie confirmed.

"They won't be able to track you using technology," Mr. Forkle corrected. "It's still possible there's some other means we're unaware of. But that's why you have an abundance of bodyguards. This is just an extra layer of protection."

"What's the bracelet for?" Sophie asked, reaching for the silver bangle.

"It's an ionic booster, right?" Dex asked Tinker. "Pretty sure that's a bad idea. Elwin won't want you messing with her recovery."

"Who said it was for her injury?" Tinker asked, rifling through her tool belt and pulling out a piece of V-shaped steel with a spring in the center. She handed the contraption to Sophie. "How hard can you squeeze that with your left hand?"

"Apparently not hard at all," Sophie mumbled when she could barely get the spring to compress.

"Don't worry," Mr. Forkle told her, "we're all weak in the hand we don't favor. But since you'll be relying on your left for the next few weeks, I asked Tinker if she could improve your strength. Go ahead and try the bracelet on."

Dex helped Sophie carefully remove her pin-covered cuff, and she tucked it safely in her cape pocket before she slipped on the simple bangle. It slid past her hand, all the way to her elbow, but Tinker

tipped her arm forward, making the bracelet settle around her wrist before she pointed to the V-shaped tool. "Now how hard can you squeeze?"

"That's crazy!" Sophie said as both ends of the tool crashed together hard enough to make the metal clink. "I don't even have to try." She squeezed it again and again. "I could do this all day!"

"I wouldn't recommend it," Mr. Forkle warned. "Boost or no boost, your muscles are still doing all the work. And if you push too hard, you could tear something—just like if you kept punching with your Sucker Punch, you'd bruise your fingers and throw out your shoulder."

"Why is the bracelet so big, though?" Dex asked as it slid back down to Sophie's elbow. "Why not make it fit snug around her wrist?"

"Is her hand the only place that needs more strength?" Tinker countered. "Or will her arm and shoulder also require a boost for training?"

"Training?" Sophie repeated, her heart coming to a stop when Mr. Forkle's lips spread into a satisfied smile.

"Yes, Miss Foster," he told her. "That's the real reason I brought you here today. I know how impatient you've been to begin physical training. And with that bracelet, you should be able to."

She could train.

The news whirled around Sophie's head and part of her wanted to sob happy tears and leap across the table and tackle-hug Tinker.

But the practical side of her had to ask: "You don't think training will mess with my recovery?"

"Caution and moderation will be key—as will be Elwin's approval, of course," Mr. Forkle told her. "I'm sure you'll need to limit yourself to simpler exercises and shorter intervals—and obviously you'll only be able to train with your left arm. But honestly, it'll be better for you to become a bit more ambidextrous."

All of that she could live with.

She traced a finger over the precious bracelet and glanced at Tinker. "Thank you."

Tinker's cheek flushed a deep pink, and she looked away as she nodded.

"Well," Mr. Forkle said as he dug out his pathfinder, "I hate to grab these brilliant gadgets and run, but I need to stay on schedule to make my meeting with the Council. Plus, Miss Foster's family is waiting, and I'm sure she's eager to see them."

"Eager" was an understatement.

Cover 4

Relevant results in this cover: 6

Content pages range: [60, 79]

Groups range: [21, 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

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

Group 21/59

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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.

FORTY-EIGHT

“WHERE DID YOU GET THIS?” SOPHIE asked, not sure if she should feel excited or terrified. Mostly she felt confused.

Especially when Keefe told her. “I found it in my cape pocket this morning—no idea how it got there. You didn’t get one?”

She checked her pockets to make sure, surprised at how disappointed she was when they were empty. She felt even worse when she read the Black Swan’s message:

Careful plans have now been changed

So a meeting must be arranged.

In three days time, when the evening star ascends

Find us where the lost have no end.

“They want to meet with you,” Sophie mumbled, reading the message again to be sure.

"I know—they're finally including me on the team! Hope they know this means their little rule book just went out the window—and the first change I'll be implementing is clearer stinking directions. Any idea 'where the lost have no end'?"

"Probably in the Wanderling Woods, by my tree. They've left me notes there before."

"And the evening star ascends . . . ?"

"Right after sunset," Sophie finished.

"Cool. Party with the Black Swan in three days. Bring your dancing shoes, Foster. And maybe try to look a little less miserable than you do right now, because it's a serious bumner. Come on, this is good news!"

"Is it?" she asked. "How do you know it's not a trap?"

"I don't," Keefe admitted. "But even if it is, remember: Last time we met with them you got your abilities fixed and that Forkle dude gave you some answers."

"And then we almost died," she reminded him.

"Details, details." He laughed when she didn't smile. "I'm kidding, Foster. I do realize it's a risk. But I think it's worth it—especially since they want us to meet in the Wanderling Woods. I mean, how bad could that be?"

"Well, for one thing, they only gave a note to you. Not me. Don't you find that suspicious?"

"That is weird," Keefe admitted. "When was the last time you checked the cave?"

"Not since we realized they had a leak."

"Then maybe there's a note there waiting for you. That would make sense, if you think about it. Sandor's got so many security things around here, the cave is probably the closest they can get."

“Maybe . . .”

“Gee, try to sound less excited. Actually, never mind. Get your shoes on—we’re going to the cave. And get ready for an epic ‘I told you so’ when we find your note waiting.”

Keefe kept true to his word, and his “I told you so” was so loud, it was still echoing around them as Sophie unrolled the tiny scroll. Her note showed the same instructions—but it also included an extra verse:

```
[
  {
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    "chunk_filename": "002026.txt",
    "chunk_info": "[Chunk 196/510 | Source: keeper_of_the_lost_cities/txt/book_06_nightfall.txt | chars:337232-339535 | tokens:538]"
  }
]
```

Unfortunately, she was right—which was probably why Sophie’s stomach felt like she’d been swallowing shards of ice as Lady Cadence dragged the thrashing mosasaur closer to the steel pole and knotted the end of the lasso through the loop again. She repeated the process with the next beast, and the next, until all five were secured, then gripped the two bars, almost like she was holding the handles of a bicycle. “Everyone ready?” she asked, not bothering to wait for their answer before she stomped down a lever, raising a massive silver anchor out of the water. Her whole body strained as she locked her legs and cranked the handles toward the center of the river, making the houseboat lurch as the beasts dragged them the same direction. Keefe would’ve face-planted onto the deck if Sophie hadn’t grabbed his arm before he hit. “Whoa, you’re catching me?” he asked. “I know—what’s happening to the universe?” Sophie caught him again as Lady Cadence jerked the handles the opposite way. “Better hold on to the rails,” Blur advised, pointing to the rapids ahead. “This part will be bumpy,” Lady Cadence agreed. The houseboat was too wide to go around the rocks, so they sailed straight over, launching the craft airborne before it crashed back to the water’s surface—up-down-up-down-up-down. Water sprayed the deck every time they landed, and the wind was punishing on every rise, making Sophie wish she’d worn her hair in a tight bun like Lady Cadence had. Drenched strands kept whipping her cheeks, and she scooted closer to Keefe, partially to shield herself behind him, but mostly because he was slumped against the rail like a piece of soggy laundry. “You okay?” “Oh yeah, never better.” He looked as gray-green as the river. “He needs some of this,” Lady Cadence said, tossing Keefe a vial with something milky inside. “It helps with seasickness.” Blur took one as well. “Whew, that stuff is strong!” “Bring it on,” Keefe said, downing his in one gulp—and then nearly gagging it back up. “Ugh. It’s like drinking liquefied hair!” Sophie declined the vial Lady Cadence offered her. Her stomach wasn’t happy, but she didn’t feel all that different than when she’d ridden roller coasters with her human family. And strangely, her balance wasn’t thrown off. If anything, it was improved. Her feet seemed to instinctively know how to move, making tiny adjustments to keep her legs steady. “Is this what normal people feel like when they walk on regular ground?” Sophie asked, crossing the main deck and back without losing her footing once. “It’s a little drier,” Blur said. His outline was becoming clearer as the cold spray spritzed him again and again. He was skinnier than Sophie had imagined, and shorter too, but he kept his face turned away, hiding his features. “I’m ninety-nine-point-nine percent sure that I’m dying,” Keefe croaked. “Aw, is the elixir not helping?” Sophie asked. “If it was supposed to make me feel like sludgers are swimming around my stomach, then it’s doing a great job!” “Try this,” Lady Cadence told him, tossing Keefe something that looked like a gray walnut. When he cracked the shell, it was filled with a reddish-brown goop that smelled like burnt garlic. Keefe gagged. “Yeah, that’s a big nope.” He held the remedy as far away from his nose as he could. “I don’t know if I’m going to make it, Foster. And in case I don’t, there’s something I need you to know.” He motioned for her to lean closer—so close she could feel his breath on her cheek, and a fresh wave of goose bumps streaked across her skin. “You need to know,” he whispered, “that—” “Oh, stop being so melodramatic!” Lady Cadence interrupted, cranking the handles left, to change the boat’s direction again. “Either slurp down that bilepod, or quit whining.” “Does that mean I can whine all I want if I eat this thing?” Keefe asked. “Because that might be worth it.” “This is going to be a very long day,” Lady Cadence muttered. “Wait—what were you going to say?” Sophie asked when Keefe closed his eyes and curled up tighter. His lips were half grimace, half smirk as he said, “I’ll tell you later. Right now I’m focusing too hard on not throwing up on you.” Sophie scrambled away. “Everybody, brace yourselves,” Lady Cadence called. “We’re coming up on the first fork, and the river changes can be a little jarring.” “Jarring” didn’t begin to describe it. It felt like they were tipping over as Lady Cadence cranked the handles all the way to the right, and the boat jackknifed onto the narrower tributary. “Anyone see my stomach back there?” Keefe moaned, forcing himself to suck down the bilepod like an oyster. “How many more river changes do we have?” Sophie

asked. "Three," Lady Cadence said. Keefe whimpered. "Someone hold me." He was so pale and soaked and shaky that Sophie had a feeling he wasn't kidding. And since she couldn't stop shivering herself, she moved behind him, wrapping her arms around his shoulders and pulling them both down so they were sitting on the slick deck, leaning against each other. "If you need to throw up, do not turn around," she warned as she wrapped her cape around both of them to keep in whatever warmth she could. "Actually, this is helping," Keefe said. "Your cape smells way better than this miserable boat." "Thanks . . . I think?" His breathing seemed to calm, and his trembling eased. But a rough patch of waves had him tensing up again. "Drink this," Lady Cadence said, tossing him a yellow vial. "And plug your nose before you open it." Keefe squinted at the liquid. "Why does it look like pee?" "Kelpie urine is the absolute best way to regain your equilibrium." Keefe tossed the vial into the river. "Not even if I really was dying." "You're going to regret that when we make the next change," Lady Cadence warned. "Yeah, I don't think I will." But he didn't look good when the houseboat turned onto the choppiest river yet. "I think you need to take your mind off of it," Sophie told him. "Try going to your happy place." "I have no idea what that sentence is supposed to mean—unless you're offering to teleport us out of here." "I wish." Sophie could only teleport when she was free-falling. Plus, the ogres had force fields protecting their city, and there was no way to know what would happen if she tried teleporting through. "But seriously, it's a visualization technique. You imagine yourself in your favorite place to take your mind off everything going on around you." "What's your happy place?" he asked. "Probably flying with Silveny." There was nothing quite like racing through the sky, surrounded by fluffy white clouds. "That's a good one," Keefe said. "I'm going to picture myself there too. Just you, me, and Glitter Butt." "Glitter Butt?" Lady Cadence asked. "That's Keefe's nickname for Silveny," Sophie explained. "Because her fur is so shimmery." Keefe elbowed Sophie. "Tell her the real reason." Sophie rolled her eyes. "Alicorn poop also tends to be sparkly." "It's one of the greatest things in the whole world," Keefe added. "And Glitter Butt loves her nickname, by the way. Almost as much as she loves me. Foster tries to deny it, but I'm totally her favorite." "It's a tie," Sophie corrected. "Keep telling yourself that." Keefe closed his eyes and rested his head against the rail. The color was slowly returning to his cheeks and his features were beginning to relax. "Remember that flight we made to the High Seas hideout?" Sophie smiled. "Yeah, I think you whined the entire way." "We all have our gifts. And speaking of whining—" "No whining in the happy place! Seriously, Keefe, try to concentrate." Everyone got quiet after that, and Sophie watched the smooth green hills race by, trying to spot anything familiar.

```
[
  {
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    "chunk_filename": "000155.txt",
    "chunk_info": "[Chunk 155/287 | Source: keeper_of_the_lost_cities/txt/book_01_2012.txt | chars:312129-315846 | tokens:878]"
  }
]
```

It was a relief to reach the safety of the Level Two wing, which was packed with prodigies running around, popping the prize-filled bubbles. She poked a bubble floating by her locker and a box of Prattles dropped into her hands. “Good catch,” Dex said, running up beside her. He jumped for a bubble but didn’t quite reach it. Before he could try again, Stina shoved by, raised a bony arm, and popped it. She waved the bottle of lushberry juice in Dex’s face. “Must get frustrating being shorter than the average dwarf.” Sophie snorted. “This coming from someone who looks like a giant lollipop. If your head gets any bigger, you’ll topple over.” Dex cracked up. “Awfully brave words coming from a girl who’s going to flunk out of here today,” Stina growled. Sophie opened her mouth but couldn’t find a snappy comeback. Stina could be right, and Sophie was trying very hard not to think about that. Especially after Tiergan’s comment. Stina giggled. “Enjoy your last day at Foxfire, loser.” She bumped Sophie into the wall and stalked away. “Don’t let her get to you—and if Lady Galvin fails you, I’ll organize a protest.” Dex pointed to her thinking cap, which was overflowing with presents. “Look at how many people care about you here.” He frowned at his own, half-empty cap. Sophie nudged his arm, pulled a package from her satchel—the Disneyland watch she’d been wearing when she moved to the Lost Cities. She figured he’d get a kick out of that—and dropped it in. He grinned, flashing his dimples. “I slipped your present in before you got here.” His eyes dropped to his feet. “I hope you like it.” “I’ll love it. Just let me drop off Biana’s gift and we’ll go to the cafeteria.” “Ugh—why did you buy Biana a present?” “She’s my friend.” “Yeah, and like a month ago you guys hated each other.” “That was a misunderstanding.” “Yeah, well . . . I don’t trust her. I don’t think you should either. Why would she reach out to you for—” Sophie shushed him as Biana entered the atrium, followed by Maruca. They looked like they were talking, but when Sophie got closer she realized they were arguing. Biana bit her lip. “Oh, hey, Sophie.” Marca glared at Biana. Sophie cleared her throat. “Sorry. I just wanted to drop this off.” She handed Biana a pink box—the charm bracelet she’d bought her—and turned to leave. “Wait.” Biana pulled out a slim purple parcel and handed it to Sophie. “You’re coming over for dinner tonight, right?” “Of course. I can’t wait! Well . . . I’ll see you later,” Sophie said, wondering why Marca was glaring at her. Then again, so was Dex. “What?” she asked as soon as they were out of earshot. “You’re going over there for dinner?” He said something else too, but the chiming bells drowned him out. Sophie froze. The bells signaled the start of parent-Mentor conferences. Which meant Grady and Edaline were finding out right now if she was going to stay at Foxfire. DEX DRAGGED HER TO THE celebration feast in the cafeteria, but Sophie couldn’t relax—even surrounded by friends. The bells chimed every twenty minutes. Four had already passed, which meant in twenty minutes Grady and Edaline would know if she’d failed alchemy. Her palms were so damp she struggled to unwrap her presents. “What do we have here?” Keefe asked, snatching a red box from her thinking cap. He was definitely back to his old self without his father around. He glanced at the card and cracked up. ““Dear Sophie. I really enjoyed our dance, and I hope we can do it again sometime. Love, Valin.”” Her face burned as everyone at the table laughed—even Fitz. “Who’s Valin?” Dex asked. “Vice president of the Sophie Foster Fan Club. Don’t worry, I’m president, so I’ll take care of her.” He winked as he tossed the present back to her. “Go on. Open it.” There didn’t seem to be a way to avoid it, so she tore off the paper, wishing she could disappear when she unwrapped a bracelet of little heart charms. Keefe cracked up again. “Aw, Foster has a boyfriend.” “She does not!” Dex snapped. “You don’t, right?” She shook her head so hard her brain rattled. “I’m just teasing—sheesh.” Keefe nudged Dex’s arm, then grinned at Sophie. “Interesting.” “What?” Dex asked. “Which one’s your gift, Dex?” Sophie interrupted. She didn’t have to be a mind reader to know what Keefe was going to tease Dex about. Dex glared at Keefe as he grabbed a small package wrapped in plain white paper and handed it to Sophie. “Sorry, we didn’t have any ribbon.” “Please, I still can’t believe you made me something.” She tore through the paper and gasped. “My iPod.” She tapped the screen and the gadget sprang to life. “Yeah.” He pointed to a green rectangle about the size of his fingernail set into the back. “It’s

solar powered now, and it has a speaker in case you don't want to use those ear thingies." She stared at Dex for a minute, so amazed she wanted to hug him. "This is amazing, Dex. How did you do it?" He shrugged, pink coloring his cheeks. "Well, thank you. Best. Gift. Ever." "I dunno," Keefe interrupted. "You haven't opened mine yet." She bit her lip, a little afraid of what Keefe might give her. "Which one's yours?" "Your hat was overflowing, so it's waiting in your locker." "How did you get in my locker?" "I have my methods." She shook her head in disbelief as Marella shoved a box wrapped with crooked green paper into her hands. "Open mine next." Marella gave her a variety pack of flavored air, plus she got a ton of candy from prodigies she barely knew. Biana gave her a set of edible lip glosses, and Jensi gave her a speckled spider snapper—a plant that fed off spiders. Clearly, he didn't know how to shop for girls. The only real disappointment was Fitz's gift. He gave her a riddler—a pen that only writes the words of a riddle until someone writes the correct answer. It was kind of cool, except he also gave one to everyone else. She'd spent forever trying to find him something personal, settling on a miniature Albertosaurus covered in deep violet feathers. She knew it was silly, but it reminded her of the day they met, and in the card she thanked him for showing her what dinosaurs really looked like. Fitz giving her a fancy pen—especially the same fancy pen he gave everyone else—made it seem like he hadn't thought about her at all. But maybe he hadn't. He'd hardly looked at her gift when he opened it, too distracted by the tunic Keefe gave him, which had i know what you're thinking—and you should be ashamed of yourself embroidered across the front. She tried not to let that bother her. The doors burst open and parents streamed in. Sophie couldn't breathe as she scanned the faces, desperate to find Grady and Edaline. Dex squeezed her shoulder and told her it would be okay no matter what, but she barely heard him. She'd found Grady and Edaline, and their faces were unreadable as they searched the room, not seeing her as she shoved toward them. She was halfway there before she locked eyes with Grady. A huge grin lit up his face. "You passed," he shouted over the crowd. A hysterical laugh erupted from her lips as she ran the rest of the way and threw her arms around them. When her brain caught up, she wondered if she'd crossed a line, but their arms wrapped around her, and when they let her go their eyes were misty. "I really passed?" she asked, needing to hear it again. "Even alchemy?" "You got a seventy-nine on your purification. Still room for improvement, but within passing range." She squealed, hugging them again. Grady grinned. "I'm sensing you're happy about this." She laughed so hard tears streamed down her face, but she didn't care. She passed! She could stay at Foxfire. Sure, she still had to face Bronte and the Council in five months about permanent enrollment, but right now she was going to celebrate. She raced back to the table and threw her arms around Dex. "I couldn't have done this without you." His face was tomato red when she let go, and she couldn't help giggling. Everyone congratulated her—except Keefe, who leaned in and whispered, "Told you so," when his dad wasn't looking. All her friends had passed their exams. In fact, it looked like most of the school had. A few parents had to comfort sobbing prodigies, but everyone else was tossing confetti and partying. Unfortunately, that included Stina. Her face twisted into a sneer when she noticed Sophie celebrating. Then she rolled her eyes and stomped away. Sophie giggled. She wanted to stay for the party, but she could tell Grady and Edaline were a little overwhelmed. She ran back to the atrium to pick up Keefe's gift, so she would be ready to go home. Inside her locker she found a giant box of mood candy, a small black cube, and a note: For the Mysterious Miss F— If you don't relax, this candy will always taste bitter—so snap out of it! And try to stay out of detention! —K The candy tasted like sugarplums, and inside the black cube she found a round silver pendant with a cobalt blue crystal in the center. The candy turned sour. Since when did Keefe give her jewelry? He didn't like her— She wouldn't finish the thought. There was no way a guy like Keefe would ever, could ever—why was she thinking about this? Marella's boy-craziness must be rubbing off on her. It was just a necklace. He probably gave them to all the girls. She didn't know what to do with it, so she shoved the pendant to the back of her locker, and was glad she didn't see Keefe before she left. She needed to figure out how to thank him for such a strange present.

Group 24/59

```
[
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]
```

Twenty-six

“OUCH,” Dex mumbled, “you don’t have to look that horrified.”

“I’m not horrified,” Sophie promised, barely stopping herself from dropping the crush cuffs. “I just . . .”

How on earth was she supposed to explain this?

There’d been times when Dex had made her wonder if maybe . . .

But she’d always shrugged it off, or pretended not to notice. And lately he’d been better—way less pouty and pushy—which had been a relief, because Dex was sweet and hilarious and brilliant and a million other awesome things.

But, he was just a friend.

“Relax,” Dex told her. “Like I said, the cuffs are only for camouflage. Remember when I told you I’d build a gadget to block your enhancing? I figured that might be a good thing for you to have in Ravagog, in case Dimitar makes you take off your gloves.”

He clicked a hidden latch on one of the snaps, flipping back the top to show a ton of intricate circuitry.

“See? I designed these microtransmitters to put a force field around your hands so that anyone touching your skin isn’t actually making contact—and it’s a nonreactive force field, so you won’t zap anyone if you touch them.” “But we should probably test it, to make sure everything’s working.”

Sophie peeled off her gloves in a daze and snapped on the cuffs, which fit snug, resting right where her wrists ended and her hands began.

"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.

"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?”

```
[
  {
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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. "Edaline'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.

Cover 5

Relevant results in this cover: 10

Content pages range: [81, 98]

Groups range: [26, 35]

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
- 000028.txt — ranks: #30
- 000029.txt — ranks: #31
- 000030.txt — ranks: #32
- 000031.txt — ranks: #33
- 000032.txt — ranks: #34
- 000033.txt — ranks: #35
- 000034.txt — ranks: #36
- 000035.txt — ranks: #37


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And then... it was time to pick a trust exercise. “We could play something like Two Truths and a Lie?” Sophie suggested—and then immediately un-suggested it once she saw how excited Ro was by that idea. But every other trust exercise she’d done with Fitz would be so much worse with Keefe as part of it. So. Much. Worse. In fact, Sophie was starting to think the best idea would be to feign exhaustion, flee to her bedroom, and hide under her covers until the boys and their bodyguards left. But then Keefe stood, pacing past Sophie a few times before he asked, “This is about inflicting, right?” “What do you mean?” Sophie asked. “I mean, that’s why you went through all of this, isn’t it? And that ability comes from both the head and the heart, doesn’t it?” Sophie nodded. “All right, then forget trust exercises!” Keefe decided. “Fitz can cover the head stuff, I’ll cover the heart stuff, you’ll do your Ragemonster thing and you’ll start getting a feel for your shiny, improved ability.” “I don’t know what any of that means,” Fitz said, glancing at Sophie, and Sophie was right there with him. Keefe dragged a hand down his face. “I’m saying we focus on letting Foster practice inflicting. You and I will be here to make sure she doesn’t lose control of anything. But that’s what’s most important, right?” “But Elwin and Livvy think it’s going to set back her recovery,” Fitz reminded him. “Right... but... if it’s going to do that anyway, then why not test it out, let it set her back, and then she can focus on recovering?” Keefe countered. “I don’t think it works that way,” Fitz insisted. “And I don’t know how to just... inflict,” Sophie added. “I have to be angry and afraid—” “So we’ll make you angry and afraid,” Keefe interrupted. “I mean, I feel like if there’s one thing Fitz and I both excel at, it’s making you angry.” “I can help with afraid!” Ro volunteered. “No, you can’t!” Sandor warned. “Actually, this might be a good idea,” Grizel told him, stopping Sandor from drawing his sword. “You can’t be serious,” Sandor snapped back. “Why not?” Grizel asked. “We’ll all be here to keep her safe.” “How can it be safe if there are no physicians to monitor her?” Sandor countered. “And why don’t we see what her parents have to say?” Round and round they went, and Sophie honestly didn’t know which side she was on—but then it didn’t matter because someone was clearing their throat behind them and they turned to find Mr. Forkle standing on the path, watching them. And he seemed... Nervous. It almost looked like he wanted to raise a crystal and leap away before any of them could ask why he was there. And maybe that was because he knew Keefe would ask, “You found him, didn’t you? The guy in my drawing?” “We did,” Mr. Forkle agreed. “Mr. Dizznee’s latest adjustments gave us the speed we needed to also search the archive, starting with the year we estimated you first saw the man, since we knew his appearance would match most completely at that point.” “You have an archive?” Sophie had to ask. “A very thorough one,” Mr. Forkle agreed. “And... that’s where we found him. The video didn’t give us his location, but it did give us a name that Mr. Dizznee and I were able to search for in several human databases.” “You have access to human databases?” Sophie blurted out, even though she probably shouldn’t have been so surprised—and she definitely should stop interrupting Mr. Forkle because Keefe looked ready to combust with impatience. “We do,” Mr. Forkle agreed, “and... I gave you my word that I’d let you know anything we found immediately. So... even though this goes against my better judgment... your mystery man’s name was Ethan Benedict Wright II.” “Ethan Benedict Wright II,” Fitz and Keefe both repeated. But Sophie was stuck on a different word—one she almost didn’t want to point out, since Keefe clearly hadn’t noticed that Mr. Forkle had used it, and she hated to snuff out the triumph and enthusiasm she could see in Keefe’s eyes. Still, she forced herself to ask, “Was?” And her heart thudded into her stomach when Mr. Forkle winced. “What do you mean ‘was?’” Keefe asked her. “That’s what I’m asking him,” Sophie said gently. “Mr. Forkle said his name ‘was.’ Not is. Did he legally change it?” she asked Mr. Forkle, trying to give Keefe what little hope she could. Mr. Forkle sighed. “No. I said was because I found this.” He reached into his cape and pulled out what looked like a crinkled printout of a newspaper clipping. And at the top, in big black letters, was the word “Obituaries.”

```
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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 . . . ohhddd.” “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.

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Righty and Bunhead rushed Sophie and Edaline back to their locked rooms, and Mr. Forkle convinced the goblins to let him tag along.

"I don't understand what's happening in there," Edaline said, collapsing onto a settee in their sitting room.

Mr. Forkle took one of the armchairs. "I think . . . Dimitar spent much of his life believing ogres were actually the superior species, and planning to someday use the plague to take power. It's why he fell for Fintan's lies—and now that he's been properly humbled, he's trying to cut his losses and protect his people. Which has nothing to do with you, Miss Foster. Everything you brought upon Ravagog was provoked and necessary."

"I know," Sophie mumbled.

But it still didn't feel good being called a monster—especially by one of the creepiest people she'd ever met.

Then again, the Dimitar speaking in the Circle wasn't the bloodthirsty beast she'd come to expect. He was articulate. Logical. Clearly concerned for his people. Much more like the king Lady Cadence had described. And the thought that Sophie had played any role in convincing him the best course of action was total isolation made her glad she hadn't eaten any breakfast.

"Did either of you notice how many of the leaders nodded along when Fintan went into his tangent about humans?" Edaline asked quietly.

"Everyone but King Dimitar," Mr. Forkle said. "And I suspect that's simply a refusal to agree with Fintan. Humans truly are quite the conundrum—creatures we're forbidden to help, with weapons powerful enough to destroy the whole planet."

"But what's the solution to that?" Sophie asked.

"Ours is a work in progress," Mr. Forkle admitted.

"And Sophie plays a part in it?" Edaline pressed.

"That will be up to her. She's running her own life now. Has been for quite some time."

"Unless Fintan pulls off his 'vision,'" Sophie mumbled, her nerves knotting up just thinking about it.

This is what they want.

Had Lady Gisela meant those words for this potential prison break—assuming they were right about that threat? Or for some much grander, much darker scheme?

"Perhaps you should use these moments to check on Mr. Sencen," Mr. Forkle suggested. "Rather than worrying yourself sick with unanswerable questions."

He made a good point—though Sophie's heart seemed to lodge in her throat as she transmitted her call with Keefe's name.

If he didn't answer . . .

'Bout time you reached out, Foster.

Tears burned Sophie's eyes and she had to blink them back. Edaline pulled her into a hug to keep her from wobbling.

You're safe? she asked.

I'm better than safe. I'm free! And FREEZING. I had to ditch all my cloaks—and this cave is not blocking the wind like it's supposed to. I mean, it's an ocean cave—it has one job to do!

Does that mean you're here?

Yep. The security patrols don't seem to know this cave exists. So if you need me, I'm close. Call me and I'll find a way to reach you. In the meantime, I'll be practicing my body temperature regulation and hoping nothing with lots of teeth and fangs also calls this cave home.

How did you escape? Was it as rough as you thought it would be?

A little better. A little worse. But I made it. What about you—how's it going at the summit?

Super weird.

She'd just started to tell him about the strange speeches by both Fintan and King Dimitar when Righty and Bunhead knocked to notify them the recess had ended.

King Dimitar was the last to return to the Circle, and refused to take his seat. "I've said my piece," he told everyone. "And have no further reason for debate. I've named the terms I'll agree to for this treaty. You should all find them more than reasonable."

Group 29/59

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Ravagog (OR SADLITZAGVATKA IN OGREISH): Previously called Serenvale (when the land served as the gnomes' homeland—before the ogres stole it), the ogres' capital city is not considered a welcoming place for other species. Ravagog is tucked among dark, jagged mountains and protected by force fields and massive gates, and King Dimitar has made it clear that anyone who enters the city without his permission will face consequences. Half of the city is carved into the side of a mountain (in a network of ledges and staircases built around misty waterfalls), and the other half is underground (in a huge swampy cavern). Other notable features include the King's Path and main palace, the Eventide River (which glows green from a special enzyme), a recently rebuilt dark metal bridge lined with arched towers, the Triad (where King Dimitar holds court), the Armorgate (the ogres' military university), and the Spateswale River (which provides the most direct path into Ravagog). Much of Ravagog was damaged or destroyed after King Dimitar made the cruel decision to unleash a plague upon the gnomes. Sophie Foster and her friends infiltrated the city in order to find the cure and were forced to cause a flood in order to escape. The ogres were punished for their crime, and the city has been largely rebuilt—as has the relationship between the elves and the ogres.

Loamnore (OR NYMTYRANYTH IN DWARVEN): The dwarven capital is an enormous underground maze of intricately woven tunnels that snake deep into the earth and lead to marketplaces, plazas, and even bubble-shaped living quarters. Visitors unable to tunnel into the city must wade to the middle of a muddy quagmire and sink down through the muck into a cavern known as the Visitor Center. Two paths are available from there: one narrow but bright enough to see (for those heading toward the main city), and the other a wide, black void of nothingness previously called the King's Path. (The name will likely be changed to the Queen's Path in light of the dwarves' new leader.) The path can be a disturbing journey and should not be braved unless a visit to the ruler of the dwarves is both approved and absolutely necessary. Parts of Loamnore were recently rebuilt after King Enki's betrayal (and the battle that followed), and residents of the city hope that Queen Nubiti's rule will bring a new era of peace and prosperity.

Choralmere: Quan and Mai Song's stunning beachfront estate is tucked between a pristine cove and the edge of a rainforest. Choralmere's massive, elegant house has a series of courtyards crowned with golden roofs and framed by amber and garnet walls. Golden lanterns light the residence, and hundreds of wind chimes create a peaceful ambiance—much like the compositions that Mai Song is famous for creating (most of which are composed in her studio at the property). Their children (Tam and Linh) left Choralmere after Linh was banished—and Tam has long contended that Linh would've been spared such harsh punishment had Quan and Mai been willing to move her farther from water. As a result, even though Tam and Linh have returned to the Lost Cities, they choose not to live with their parents—though Linh temporarily agreed to stay with them (at Tam's request) while Tam was trapped with the Neverseen.

Rimeshire: The Dizznees are known for being quirky and untraditional, so many are surprised by the refined beauty of their family home. Rimeshire resembles an ice castle with its blue cut-glass walls and swirling towers that look like upside-down icicles. It's located in the Gloaming Valley (near the

Alenon River, where the wild kelpies live), surrounded by snow-capped mountains and twisted evergreen trees—which makes Rimeshire one of the colder places in the Lost Cities. But the temperature is still pleasant—and it’s also fitting, given that Juline Dizznee is a Froster. Part of her garden even includes a collection of shockingly lifelike ice sculptures, which she creates as a compromise with her rambunctious triplets, who would prefer to have a pet, but are willing to settle for new ice creatures every day (which is much easier for their already overwhelmed parents to manage).

Riverdrift: When King Dimitar refused to let Lady Cadence Talle set up a permanent residence in Ravagog, she built Riverdrift as a solution. The craft was primarily docked along the Eventide River, but it’s capable of journeying across any body of water thanks to the massive paddle wheels mounted to the back of the steel barge. Riverdrift is as large as any of the other elvin manors but is comprised of a wide variety of structures built from different metals, as well as a small glass pyramid and several chimneys spewing multicolored mist. The design may not be as aesthetically appealing as the Lost Cities’ usual architecture, but it was built to be practical rather than beautiful. Riverdrift allowed Lady Cadence to spend years researching the ogres, and she still lives there—despite being forced to return to the Lost Cities to serve as a Mentor to Sophie—in the hope that someday she’ll be allowed to sail back to Ravagog to properly continue her research.

Portraits. WHEN MY PUBLISHER APPROVED MY plan for including a series guide in this book, my first question was, CAN WE HAVE ILLUSTRATIONS? And I happy-danced around my house when the answer was, Absolutely! But then I was left with the NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE task of deciding which pieces to include. (When it comes to Keeper art, imagine me like Silveny: MORE! MORE! MORE!) In the end, I picked characters, locations, and moments we haven’t gotten to see yet—and it all turned out so much more amazing than I ever could’ve hoped! And so, without further ado, I present a selection of awesome Keeper portraits, and they are as follows: A PORTRAIT OF SANDOR AND GRIZEL (standing outside of Everglen), A PORTRAIT OF BO AND RO (standing outside of Candleshade), A PORTRAIT OF FLORI (under Calla’s Panakes tree), THE TWELVE ORIGINAL COUNCILLORS (seated on their thrones in Tribunal Hall), A PORTRAIT OF SOPHIE WITH HER HUMAN FAMILY (in San Diego, from before Sophie moved to the Lost Cities), A PORTRAIT OF WYLIE WITH HIS PARENTS (happy together, before tragedy struck their family), A PORTRAIT OF TAM AND LINH WITH THEIR PARENTS (standing in front of Choralmere, from before they were banished), A PORTRAIT OF ELWIN AND LIVVY (with Bullhorn!), A PORTRAIT OF THE BLACK SWAN’S COLLECTIVE (standing in Alluveterre). Art by Laura Hollingsworth.


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He flipped the silver notebook over and held out a photo-realistic drawing of... A really nerdy-looking guy. Between the tweed blazer and the bow tie and the ruddy cheeks and the wild hair, he looked like some sort of professor stereotype. All he was missing was a pair of thick spectacles and... “He’s human,” Sophie realized, focusing on the man’s deep brown eyes. She’d gotten so used to being surrounded by blue-eyed elves that it was almost jarring to see someone with the same eye color as her—and someone with deep smile lines and strands of gray peppered through his messy red hair. The elves remained ageless after they became adults. Only their ears changed with time, growing points along the tops after a few thousand years. “Look at what he’s holding,” Keefe told her, pointing to the man’s left hand, which held an envelope sealed with a symbol they’d only seen one other time: two crescents forming a loose circle around a glowing star. “That’s the letter your mom gave you,” Sophie murmured. “Yep. Looks like I didn’t follow Mommy’s delivery instructions as strictly as she wanted me to.” “Which surprises no one,” Ro jumped in. “Of course not,” Keefe agreed, a hint of his smirk returning. “But now we know for sure that I did deliver the letter. And I saw the guy she was contacting. And now that I know what he looks like? I can track him down again and find out what Mommy Dearest wanted from him.” FOUR BUT... YOU KNOW HOW MANY humans there are in London, right?” Sophie had to ask, even though she hated being the hope crusher. “It’s a huge city. Like, millions and millions of people.” And the man that Keefe had drawn was a pretty generic-looking British guy—from his bright ginger hair down to the elbow patches on his blazer. There were probably ten men on every block who looked similar to him—not that wandering the zillions of London streets trying to find someone more unique would honestly be much easier. “That’s where Dex comes in,” Keefe said, snapping the silver notebook shut with a smug grin. “I did some research—which, uh, don’t tell the Forklenator about, by the way. I’ll never hear the end of it if he finds out—and it turns out, London has lots of surveillance cameras. So Dex is going to hack into their system and set it up to search for anyone who looks like my drawing. He says the art is detailed enough that he should be able to find an exact match—and it’ll tell him which camera caught the image, so we’ll know right where the guy is. All Dex needs is a few minutes with one of their computers so he can do his thing, and then we just sit back and wait for the alerts to go off.” Sophie wanted to point out that they were assuming the guy was still living in London, and he could’ve easily moved away in the years that had passed. But her brain was too busy getting stuck on something that was probably way less important. “You’ve been working on this with Dex?” She managed to leave off the “without me.” But the unspoken words still felt like they were staring them down, demanding to be acknowledged. Keefe tapped his fingers against the spine of the silver notebook. “Well... I needed a Technopath. And Dex is the best.” “He is,” Sophie agreed. He was also her best friend. And she knew it wasn’t fair to feel left out after all the times she’d chosen to hide what she was working on from everybody. But that didn’t stop a piece of her heart from turning very prickly. “I was going to tell you,” Keefe assured her. “When?” “Soon.” That didn’t feel like a good enough answer—and Ke

Group 31/59

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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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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,” Ke

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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.”

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He tiptoed closer and... A cabin! He'd found a cabin! A very dark, very quiet cabin—though whether that was because no one was home or because whoever lived there was currently asleep was impossible to tell. Thick curtains covered the small front windows, and the door was shut tight. But when Keefe closed his eyes and searched for nearby emotions, all he felt was his own silly hope that he'd actually found somewhere warm! And when he crept over to the door and pressed his ear against the wood... Silence. So... Now what? He was pretty sure there were human laws against entering a house he didn't own without permission—and if someone was there, they'd totally wake up and freak out. But what was he supposed to do? Knock? Stare at anyone who answered with his sad, desperate eyes and hope they decide to invite in the strange, non-talking guy who kept rubbing his temples because he couldn't block a bunch of obnoxious alicorn transmissions? If he could at least use his voice, he'd tell them... Actually, he wasn't sure what kind of story would motivate a human to invite him into their home in the middle of the night. Stranger Danger was a much bigger thing in the Forbidden Cities. And he probably looked extra suspicious in his elvin clothes. Sure, it was just a plain blue tunic and basic gray pants—but to human eyes, they'd still look a little off. But none of that would matter if the cabin was empty. Only one way to find out. He stared at the door, needing several deep breaths before he raised his arm and gave a quick knock. The sound was barely audible—but it still made him jump. It'll be fine. I can handle this. He repeated the pep talk as he waited. And waited. And waited some more. Another long minute passed—which could mean the place was empty. Or it could mean his pathetic knock wasn't loud enough to wake whoever lived there.... Keefe sighed and rubbed his hands together, trying to generate a little warmth before he forced himself to knock louder. Silence stretched on again, and he cleared his throat and croaked out a raspy "Hello?" Maybe the fact that he could use his voice without any struggle proved his senses knew there was no one around to hear him. Or maybe he was just getting desperate. The temperature kept dropping, and he swore he could feel ice crystals forming in his hair. "Anyone here?" he tried again as he wiggled his toes, hoping to regain some feeling. No response. No footsteps. No sound of any kind. "I guess no one's home." Somehow saying it out loud made it feel more like a fact. Keefe reached for the door—then paused with his fingers just above the polished brass doorknob. What if it was locked? It probably was. Humans were known for being super private. And even though he couldn't stop shivering, he also couldn't justify breaking a window to get in. But what if the cabin wasn't locked? Seemed worth checking. Then again... was he really going to walk into a strange house, kick off his shoes, hang his clothes to dry, and crawl into bed? YES, his freezing brain shouted. It would just be for one night—and if I try not to touch very much and I clean up before I leave, they probably won't even know I was here! Though it'd be kind of weird if they didn't know he'd stopped by... wouldn't it? Seemed like he should at least leave a note to thank them or something. Sorry for letting myself in! Don't worry, I didn't steal any of your stuff! —Random Dude Who Slept in Your House Okay, yeah. Probably not the best idea. But there had to be something he could do to make amends for invading their privacy. He stood a little taller when he remembered he'd filled his backpack with some of his mom's jewelry. He was planning to sell it so he'd have money to buy food and stuff—but he took a bunch, so he could definitely spare a piece. Whoever owned the house would probably still think it was odd to find a necklace on their table along with a vague note saying, Thanks!—but Keef had a feeling they'd get over it once they saw the sparkly jewels. Plus, a fresh round of howls was echoing through the dark—and they sounded much closer. "Okay," Keefe decided, blowing out another huge cloud of breath as he hitched his backpack farther up his shoulders. "One night here, and then I'll figure out a new plan in the morning." He turned the doorknob before he could change his mind. HELLO? KEEFE CALLED, SURPRISED his voice sounded so steady. He was even more surprised that the cabin really was unlocked. The doorknob had stopped midturn, and he'd thought that was the end of it—but then he'd heard a soft click, and the door creaked open. He leaned his head inside. "Um... I hope it's okay if I come in. It's really cold out here—and I think I just heard a bunch of yetis howling." He wanted to

smack himself when he remembered that humans thought yetis were imaginary. Great. Why couldn't he have said "wolves"? "Um, what I meant was—AHHHHH!" Bright lights flooded the room, and Keefe scrambled to shield his eyes. When his vision adjusted, he expected to find an angry human aiming some sort of weapon at his head. But the cabin was empty. He must've triggered a motion sensor and turned on the giant silver chandelier. He collapsed against the doorframe, waiting for his heart to feel a little less like exploding. "At least it's safe to say no one's here," he mumbled. His scream could've woken a sleeping gulon. In fact, he wouldn't have been surprised if Silveny heard it all the way back at Havenfield. Plus, he could see the cabin clearly now, and it looked like no one had been there for a while. Everything was dusty, and the air had a stale smell, like the windows hadn't been opened in months. Hopefully that meant no one would be showing up while he was crashing there. "Okay," Keefe said as the door swung shut and the full warmth of the cabin enveloped him. "I guess this is home for the night. Who knew it'd be so... fancy?" He'd been expecting rugged wood furniture and a couple of tacky knickknacks. Not sleek glass tables and pristine white armchairs, white woven rugs, and giant silver vases filled with carefully arranged branches.


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A cookie fight sounded way more fun than discussing biological-parent theories. But she'd already lost the majority of the day to a mix of fuming and sulking and avoiding everybody. So she set down the other half of her jam-covered weapon as a cookie surrender and caught Keefe up on what she'd discussed with the rest of her teammates—how she'd agreed to let Biana and Stina help, as well as Stina's theory about Lady Cadence. Keefe whistled at that last revelation. "Wow, that does kinda make sense. I don't know how I missed her when I made my list—and if she is your bio-mom, please tell me we can dump a bunch of curdleroots on her head for lying to you." "I'd be good with that," Sophie told him, needing an extra second to work up the courage to ask, "So... you have a list?" "A short one, yeah." He hesitated for a beat before he offered, "Want me to go get it?" Sophie chewed her lip. "Maybe just tell me one of the names as a start?" "Sure—though you don't know any of them, so I'm not sure if it'll mean a whole lot. But one of the genetic-mom options is Lady Pemberley. She's blond and a Telepath, so it seems worth looking into. But she's also married and has a kid, and I kinda feel like we're looking for someone who lives alone, since they'd be putting their family in danger by getting involved in all of this." "Makes sense." Sophie told herself to leave it there, but somehow she still found herself asking, "So... she has a kid?" Keefe nodded. "A son. Actually, I think you've met him—his name's Dempsey. He was a Level Six when you were a Level Two, and I feel like I remember you showing him who's boss in a splotching match one time." "That does sound familiar," Sophie agreed. She didn't recall him being all that nice—though she had just defeated him in front of the whole school and splattered his face with bright orange goo. "Want me to see if Biana and I can coordinate a confrontation for Lady Pemberley?" Keefe offered. "I don't know," Sophie admitted. "I think we're going to need to be careful about how many people find out what we're searching for. The more times we're wrong, the more we risk that rumors will start flying and my biological parents will go into hiding—or at least be prepared to lie if we confront them." Plus, it could cause a lot more speculation about her matchmaking status, but Sophie wasn't in the mood to remind him about that. "I was wondering about that too," Keefe said, finally peeling the Jammie Dodger off his face. "We might need a new strategy." "Like what?" Sophie asked. He popped the cookie into his mouth, then licked his thumb and set to work removing the sticky jam residue left on his cheek. "Still working on it. Might have to get a bit creative." "I like creative!" Ro agreed. Sandor muttered something unintelligible—though Sophie was pretty sure she caught the word "ridiculous." "In the meantime," Keefe said, swiping the last of the raspberry smear off of his face, "you still haven't answered the extra-super-duper-important question, Foster." "And what's that?" Sophie asked. He motioned for her to lean in closer, like he was afraid his father might be eavesdropping. "The question is"—his eyes locked with hers—"when are you taking me to go get some of these magical E.L. Fudge thingies? Because they're officially a need, Foster. I neeeeeeeeeeeeeed tiny elf-shaped cookies in my life. I can't believe you've never brought me any before! In fact, I kinda feel like that's a betrayal of our friendship!" The question was so unexpected that Sophie couldn't stop the loud snort-laugh from bursting out, which of course was followed by a fit of embarrassed giggles. "You're not laughing your way out of this one either, Miss F!" Keefe warned her. "I expect another cookie delivery ASAP—and this time it needs to have all those kinds you mentioned, plus anything else shaped like an elf. And you'd better be able to answer all my questions about them and not give me any excuses about..." "About?" Sophie asked when his voice trailed off—right before she realized his eyes were focused on something over her shoulder. Or someone. Sophie had never thought she'd hope to turn around and find Lord Cassius standing there watching her—but she definitely would've preferred him over the handsome, teal-eyed guy with the crossed arms and the surly brow. "Hey, Fitzy's here!" Keefe said, shooting a quick glare at Sandor—though this wasn't totally Sandor's fault. Fitz hadn't come through the door that Sandor had been guarding, instead using a side patio entrance that Sophie hadn't even noticed. Grizel stood several steps behind him, and Lord Cassius loomed several steps behind her,

tucked in the shadows of the arched doorway, almost like he'd intentionally snuck Fitz onto the patio. Then again, that didn't explain why Ro and Sandor hadn't warned them that they had visitors—unless the reason for that was because no one needed a warning. Once again, Sophie had to remind herself that she and Keefe weren't doing anything wrong. Keefe had asked for biscuits. She'd brought him biscuits. Then they'd talked for a bit—because they were friends. And Fitz knew they were friends. "You need to get in on this, Fitzzy," Keefe said, holding up the box of Jaffa Cakes. "Foster and Dizznee proved that they'll do anything I ask them to"—he made a dramatic, evil laugh—"and brought me a bunch of human cookies. They're mostly disappointing, I'm not gonna lie. But! There are still a few we haven't tried, and who knows? They might be the life-changing ones. And you can help me convince Foster to go get us these elf-shaped cookies I'm just now learning about—though I also think she owes us all an apology for not telling us about the elf-shaped cookies sooner, don't you? And I think she needs to use her teleporting way more often. I'm thinking we should give her a weekly Forbidden Cities item to track down for us. Maybe then I'll finally be able to try Ding Dongs. I don't know what they are—but I read something about them in my research, and I mean, they're called 'Ding Dongs,' so I'm here for it. You with me?" He held up his hand like he was hoping Fitz would stride over and give him a high five. Fitz did not. "Looks like you're having an interesting day," Grizel said, her voice extra husky as she sauntered over to Sandor. "You have no idea," Sandor squeak-murmured. "And I'm pretty sure it's about to get worse." Sophie had the same feeling, especially when she forced herself to meet Fitz's eyes and was not gifted with one of his perfect smiles. "Have you tried hailing me today?" she asked, really, really, really hoping he hadn't. "Three times," he told her. Even Keefe winced at that. Okay, so maybe that was why Sophie felt so bad. "I'm sorry," she said, standing up from the swing to face him. "It's been kinda a rough day—but I guess that's not a very good excuse." "It isn't," Fitz agreed. Silence followed, and Sophie wished Keefe would break it with another ramble about E.L. Fudges. But he was too busy glaring at his father, while Lord Cassius raised one eyebrow back at him. She cleared her throat and took a few steps toward Fitz—stopping before actually reaching him. "How did you know I was here?" "I didn't," he admitted, "though maybe I should've guessed?" "Yeah, we were working on"—she glanced at Lord Cassius and corrected the rest of that sentence—"that project Keefe's helping me with—trying to come up with an alternate strategy in case we need to be a little subtler." And because she didn't want him to think she was hiding anything from him, she added, "We also talked through a couple of other things I still need to tell you about." "How come you're here, Fitzzy?" Keefe asked, jumping in before Fitz could ask any of the harder questions, like when Sophie had been planning to tell him about those things or why she hadn't come to him first. "Finally ready for that bramble rematch? If so, I say loser has to eat the rest of the Digestives." He pointed to the slightly smashed package he'd tossed at Ro earlier. "Actually, Fitz is here to help me," Lord Cassius interceded, smoothing the sides of his hair. Keefe's eyes narrowed at his dad. "With what?" "With a new project of my own." Lord Cassius studied his cuticles as he added, "It's not lost on me, Keefe, that you've been drawing so tediously lately because you're attempting to sort through your memories, searching for fragments of things your mother might've erased. I don't understand why you're working by hand when it would be so much more efficient to have a Telepath assist you with a task like that—and clearly Miss Foster would be more than willing. But regardless of your foolish planning, your little mission got me wondering whether your mother dared to erase anything from my mind over the years." "I bet she did," Keefe warned him. "It sounded like she had a Washer on standby in case we saw anything or heard anything she didn't want us to." "Yes, that's the conclusion that I reached as well," Lord Cassius noted, his eyes and voice darkening as he said it. "I've worked with Telepaths before, searching for clues your mother might've let slip around me. But we weren't checking to see if anything had been stolen away. So young Mr. Vacker here has agreed to help me search my memories yet again. And this time, we'll see if I can find what your mother tried to hide from me."

Cover 6

Relevant results in this cover: 7

Content pages range: [100, 119]

Groups range: [36, 42]

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

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- 000037.txt — ranks: #39
- 000038.txt — ranks: #40
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- 000040.txt — ranks: #42
- 000041.txt — ranks: #43
- 000042.txt — ranks: #44

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Sophie squeezed her tighter, breathing in Flori's earthy scent, which reminded her so much of Calla that it made her heart both lighter and heavier. And when she'd soaked up every possible drop of strength, she let go and stood to face Mr. Forkle. "Okay. If you want to give me back my memory, I'm ready. But... I don't understand why you brought me here to do it."

He turned to the stately manor, his gaze centering on one of the upstairs windows. "You're not the only one who needs to have a memory returned."

"What?" Sophie raced in front of him, shaking her head so hard, it made her neck hurt. "No. We're not doing that. Amy doesn't..."

Her voice trailed off as her sister's screams flooded her mind.

Sophie, please—stop!

"No," she repeated as Flori started humming again.

Mr. Forkle wrung the edge of his cape. "How much have you remembered?"

"Not much," Sophie admitted. "Just that... I hurt Amy somehow. She was begging me to stop." Her voice cracked, and she turned away, wiping her eyes. "What did I do to her?"

"That is a question better shown, not told," Mr. Forkle said as he slowly stepped around her.

Sophie scrambled in front of him again. "Maybe it is—but you're only showing it to me. She doesn't need to know that."

He slipped by her again, his steps more determined. "She disagrees."

The words took a couple of seconds to sink in. "Wait. Amy knows about this?"

"Of course. We talked at length this morning. Mind you, I didn't give her any more specifics than I've given you. But I made it clear that it was a difficult moment for both of you, and that I thought it would be best if you faced those complicated truths together. And she agreed. She's far stronger than you're giving her credit for. She's..." His steps faltered for a beat, and his voice had thickened when he added, "She's something I never expected. I knew I'd be aiding your parents in the birth of one child, and that it was possible they might have children on their own afterward. But I'll admit, when your mother told me she'd gotten pregnant again, I was mostly concerned about how that would complicate things for you. Your differences from humans would be more noticeable with another child providing a constant direct comparison—and your sister had no problem teasing you as she got older, which sometimes posed a challenge, like it did in your lost memory. But... there was something so special about the bond you two formed. And that connection shouldn't be ignored, especially when you're facing a decision like this."

"And what decision is that?" Sophie demanded.

"One thing at a time," he told her. "First, we must give you all the facts."

"But—"

Loud barking cut her off.

They'd gotten close enough to the house for her family's beagle—Watson—to realize they were there and switch into guard-dog mode.

"It's fine," Mr. Forkle promised when Sophie, Sandor, and Flori all froze. "As I said, Amy knows we're coming. And in case you're wondering, I asked her to clear your parents from the property. She said she'd invent an urgent errand to send them away on."

That was probably better—the idea of facing her parents now that she'd been erased so thoroughly from their memories would be a special kind of misery.

And yet, the part of Sophie's heart that would never forget how it felt to have them tuck her in at night and kiss her cheeks and call her "Soybean" felt like it had been jabbed with a sharp pin at the missed opportunity. So she had to ask, "Why couldn't they be here? I thought seeing me can't trigger anything anymore, now that I'm... you know... gone."

"That's correct," Mr. Forkle told her, placing a hand on her shoulder. "But it would be very hard to explain why a strange adult male is at their house asking for alone time with their daughter and another young girl, don't you think?"

Sophie grimaced. "Yeah... They'd definitely call the police."

"As well they should," Mr. Forkle agreed. "And that's why we should stop stalling. I doubt your sister was able to buy us more than a couple of hours—and while returning the memory itself won't take long, you two will need time to process and discuss. So once again, I have to ask: Are you ready?"

He offered her his hand again, and Sophie reluctantly took it, letting him guide her the rest of the way up the path, to a short flight of stone steps that led to the front door.

Watson's barking grew more desperate, his paws scratching at the other side of the door, but Sophie was too busy taking in all the tiny unfamiliar details to care. The house had a new welcome mat since the last time she'd been there, the kind that said WIPE YOUR PAWS in big, bold letters, surrounded by doggy paw prints, and three pairs of beat-up sneakers were lined against the wall, along with a few pots of prickly succulents. But what really caught Sophie's eye were the wind chimes.

Dangling from the highest eave, the chimes were gleaming silver interspersed with strands of dangling crystals, and they were so sparkly and fancy, they looked like they belonged in the Lost Cities.

In fact...

"Are those leaping crystals?" Sophie had to ask.

"No, but they look like it, don't they?" Amy's familiar voice said behind her, and Sophie's heart wedged so hard in her throat, it nearly choked her as she turned toward the now open door and faced her younger sister.

Amy's smile was shy, her green eyes watery and darting between her feet and Watson, who she held tightly by his collar—though the beagle had gone very still now that he was facing a goblin warrior. "That's why I had Mom and Dad buy them," Amy added, swallowing hard as she shifted her gaze up to the chimes. "It seemed like there should be something around here to represent... everything. You know?"

Sophie nodded, her voice not working as she studied her sister more closely.

Amy's hair was longer and straighter, with a few soft layers framing her face. And her skin had picked up a whole bunch of freckles. Somehow the combination made her look so much older than Sophie wanted her to be and much too young for what they were there for, all at the same time.

She still couldn't find any words, so she threw her arms around Amy and pulled her into the tightest hug she could manage.

"I take it that means you've missed me?" Amy grunted out as Watson broke free from her hold and started thwapping Sophie with his wagging tail.

Sophie cleared her throat, realizing she needed to get herself together.

She was supposed to be the strong one—and she knew she should say something fun and teasing—keep the mood light given the heaviness they both had coming. But she blurted out, "I have to tell myself not to hail you every single day."

A shiver rocked Amy's shoulders, and her voice sounded choked as she whispered, "Me too."

They'd been ordered not to communicate unless it was an absolute emergency—part of the deal they'd struck with the Council in order for Amy to keep her memories of the Lost Cities.

And speaking of memories...

"You're sure you want to do this?" Sophie asked, pulling back to meet her sister's eyes—the first time they'd really faced each other since she'd gotten there. "Whatever happened between us that day, it... seems like it was pretty bad."

Amy chewed her lip and went back to staring at the wind chimes. "Bad like... what happened to Mom and Dad?"

"No," Mr. Forkle assured her. "What happened was an accident. Nothing more."

Amy nodded, shifting her focus back to Sophie. "Then I want to know. I want to know everything. The good and the bad. You're my sister, and... that's how it works with family."

She emphasized the last word, and it nearly undid Sophie.

A few tears leaked from her eyes, but she blinked hard to fight back the rest.

"You're really doing okay?" she whispered, tucking Amy's hair behind her ears. "It's not too hard, hiding everything you're hiding?"

Amy shrugged. "I mean... sometimes I wish I had some mallowmelt, but..."

"I'll bring you some," Sophie promised, not caring how many rules she'd have to break to make that happen.

"What about you?" Amy asked, studying Sophie like she was checking her for injuries. And somehow, even though Sophie's right hand showed no new scars, Amy's focus lingered there.

"Oh, you know how it goes," Sophie told her, forcing a smile. "Lots of near-death experiences. But nothing I can't handle."

Amy didn't look convinced. But she changed the subject. "How about the cute boys? Still trying to decide which one makes your heart flutter the hardest? I haven't changed my vote, by the way, in case you were wondering."

Mr. Forkle cleared his throat. "I realize you two have lots to catch up on. But now really isn't the time. I'm assuming your parents will be home soon."

Amy sighed. "I mean, I convinced them to go to the boring farmers market they always spend hours and hours at, since apparently looking at stalls of avocados and tomatoes and fresh-churned butter is super exciting when you get old. But I don't really know when they'll be back."

"Then we should get started," Mr. Forkle said gently, turning to Flori and asking her and Nubiti to keep watch for the parents' return.

Amy and Sophie shared a long look—and Amy seemed every bit as nervous as Sophie felt. But her determination was clear.

"We're doing this?" she asked Sophie.

Sophie fought the urge to tug on her eyelashes. "Yeah, I guess we are."

Amy nodded, taking Sophie's hand.

And they clung to each other as Amy opened the front door wider and they stepped aside to let Mr. Forkle take the lead.

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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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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.

Group 39/59

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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 Keefe 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 40/59

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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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]
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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 Keefe

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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.

Cover 7

Relevant results in this cover: 5

Content pages range: [121, 139]

Groups range: [43, 47]

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

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- 000044.txt — ranks: #46
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- 000046.txt — ranks: #48
- 000047.txt — ranks: #49

Group 43/59

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Costume?

“PLEASE TELL ME THIS IS a joke,” Sophie begged as she trudged down the stairs into Havenfield’s living room in a tight bodysuit covered in a shaggy brown fur.

It had sewn-in feet.

Feet!

Apparently her Foxfire uniforms, along with the monstrosity they called an “Opening Ceremonies costume,” had arrived the day before. But Sandor—who had given her a twenty-minute lecture on how dangerous it was for her to leave Slurps and Burps without telling him—had insisted on inspecting the package before delivering it to her.

What was next? Was he going to start searching her laundry before the gnomes delivered it to her room? Worried the kidnappers might attack her with deadly socks?

“You forgot your headpiece,” Edaline said, picking up a folded piece of brown fabric from the pile on the couch. She slipped the band of fur around Sophie’s forehead, adjusting the narrow strip of cloth attached so that it hung down the center of Sophie’s face and ended just below her waist. “There. Now you’re a mastodon.”

There were many, many questions racing through Sophie’s mind as she scratched her neck where the furry collar was tickling it. But the most important one was probably, “Why am I dressed like a shaggy elephant?”

“Mastodons are the Level Three mascot.”

Right, but . . .

Edaline fanned out the elbow-length crescents of fabric that draped off the sides of the headband like droopy ears. "It's part of the Opening Ceremonies."

"You're going to love them," Grady added as he came in from the front pastures. Neon feathers stuck out of his hair, which made him look more like himself again. "Everything okay?"

The nervous lines creasing his face told her he wasn't referring to the elephant-costume-of-doom.

"Yeah. Everything's good." She'd find a way to prove to him that he was wrong about the Black Swan. And in the meantime, she was happy to settle on a truce.

If only she could find such an easy solution to her furry-bodysuit problem.

"I seriously have to wear this?"

"Don't worry, all the other Level Threes will be too," Edaline promised. "And you'll see how fun it all is when you're at rehearsal on Monday."

Somehow she doubted that.

"Wait—rehearsal? What am I rehearsing?"

Grady smiled. "The choreography."

EXCITEMENT AND NERVES TANGLED IN Sophie's stomach as she and Dex arrived at Foxfire on Monday morning. The grounds buzzed with strange activity, but it was still the same familiar campus, and walking the paths with Dex safely at her side felt healing, somehow. Like she'd taken another piece of her life back—even if she was currently being trailed by a seven-foot goblin and everyone was staring at her because of it.

At least they weren't whispering about "the girl who was taken."

Plus, it was nice to have a morning off from bathing the verminion—especially since she was also dealing with a restless alicorn and a jealous imp. Silveny hated to be alone, but she still wouldn't let anyone except Sophie near her. And Iggy had started hiding sludgers—the giant slimy worms he ate—in Sophie's shoes and pillows to punish her for spending so much time outside. Grady and Edaline

thought it was hilarious, but Sophie kept worrying about Silveny's slow progress. If she didn't find a way to make the stubborn alicorn start trusting people, Bronte would have Silveny shipped off to the Hekses for sure.

Dex knew a shortcut through the fields of purple grass, but they had to weave around gnomes poking the ground with thin metal rods. More gnomes were balanced on the roof of the U-shaped main building, draping the crystal walls with garlands of dark green leaves. Each of the six colored towers now bore a banner with a jeweled mosaic of the mascot for that grade level: an onyx gremlin for the Level Ones, a sapphire halcyon for the Level Twos, an amber mastodon for the Level Threes, an emerald dragon for the Level Fours, a ruby saber-toothed tiger for the Level Fives, and a diamond yeti for the Level Sixes.

Sophie couldn't decide which costume would be more embarrassing.

Then again, mastodons were the only ones with a trunk.

"What are they doing?" Sophie asked, pointing to another group of gnomes struggling to brush the outside of the five-story glass pyramid in the center of campus with teetering copper poles.

"Decorating for the Ceremonies."

As they got closer Sophie could see that the gnomes were actually painting a snotlike slime over the pyramid's walls. She gagged when she caught the musty smell.

Hadn't the elves heard of streamers and balloons?

The Opening Ceremonies would be in Foxfire's main auditorium, and rehearsal was held there as well. The huge stadium had a gleaming golden dome and thousands of empty seats inside. Mentors in bright orange capes separated the prodigies by grade level, and Sophie felt a little smug as she passed the Level Twos to join the Level Threes.

Sir Harding—a broad-shouldered elf with warm brown skin and shoulder-length black hair woven into a simple braid—introduced himself as their physical education Mentor and called for everyone to gather around him so he could demonstrate their choreography. Sophie ordered Sandor to try to hide as she lined up with her classmates.

When Sir Harding finally had their attention, he tossed his cape to the side, held out his hands, and launched into the most complicated dance Sophie had ever seen, stomping and spinning and jumping. He ran through the full routine three times—none of which made any sense to Sophie—and then told everyone to split into small practice teams so they could get a feel for how the choreography worked as a group.

"I still don't see what this has to do with school," Sophie grumbled as she followed Dex and Biana to a patch of empty floor space. Jensi rushed up beside Biana, and for a second Sophie didn't recognize him. His usually messy brown hair had been slicked with too much gel, making his round face look even rounder.

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In order to guard those who must be protected, our plan has changed and been perfected. A team of three will unite for the trip to the Head of the Sky, on the northern tip. A cave of horrors will set the stage, where green boots rest, and never age. Further plans will await your arrival, destroying this note will ensure your survival. Seek the moonlark to set you on your way, then find us at sunrise on the third day.

"Sunrise on the third day?" Sophie asked. "That was today."

"No. They gave these to us this morning. They were hidden in our lockers at Foxfire."

"Foxfire?"

She hadn't realized she'd been missing school. Not that it mattered. Her ability sessions would all have to be replaced, and those were the only subjects she'd been doing well in.

"So you're the moonlark, right?" Keefe asked, like he could feel her mood plummeting. "That's what that line means?"

"I think so," she mumbled.

"Good, because that's pretty much the only thing we could translate," Biana admitted.

"And we aren't fans of that 'cave of horrors' line," Fitz added.

"Yeah, please tell me that's a joke or something, Foster. 'Cause I already did a cave of horrors thing with you a few weeks ago, and it wasn't awesome."

"I'm sure they mean a different cave. But . . . I've never heard of the Head of the Sky or green boots or . . ."

Her voice trailed off as a hazy memory filled her mind—a lecture from one of her old high school science teachers, back when she was living with humans.

"Actually," she said, rereading the note again, "I think they mean Mount Everest. The Head of the Sky is another name humans use for it sometimes—and the Sanctuary's built into the Himalayas, right? So if Silveny's the ruse, it would make sense that the Black Swan would choose there. The northeast ridge has a cave where a climber in green boots froze to death. They call it Green Boots Cave because the body's still there, preserved in the ice."

"Ewwwww—why haven't the humans taken the body away?" Biana asked.

"Because it's way up in the dead zone of the mountain, where the conditions are too treacherous to move it. I remember my teacher telling me there's, like, hundreds of bodies scattered all over Mount Everest."

"That might be the saddest thing I've ever heard," Fitz said quietly. "Why would the Black Swan pick there?"

"Maybe they wanted to creep the Neverseen out," Keefe suggested. "And if so, I'm pretty sure it'll be mission accomplished!"

"But how are you supposed to get there?" Sophie asked. "You can't teleport"—though she realized with a pang that she couldn't teleport any more either—"and you can't walk from the entrance to the Sanctuary in less than three days. Even if you could, you'd need a team of Sherpas, and oxygen tanks, and years of training. Climbing Everest is one of the most dangerous things humans do."

"Then why do they do it?" Biana asked.

Sophie had asked her teacher the same thing. And he'd given her the same answer she gave them. "To see if they can."

Biana crinkled her nose. "Humans are weird."

"Maybe," Fitz agreed, "but you gotta admire the bravery it takes to look at a massive mountain, knowing how deadly it is, and think, You know what? I'm going to climb anyway!"

"Sounds a bit like our Foster, doesn't it?" Keefe asked. "Maybe that's why she's set a new record for near-death experiences."

"Not anymore," Sophie mumbled.

Now she was just the message translator, sitting in her cushy house while her friends risked their lives for her. "You guys shouldn't do this. It's crazy."

"But it's smart, too," Fitz argued. "Think about it. If it's that dangerous for us—and we have time to prepare—how much worse will it be for the Neverseen when they show up and find themselves at the top of a deadly mountain. I bet that's another reason the Black Swan picked it."

"And my note came with this," Biana added, holding out a tiny black swan charm.

Sophie looked away, wishing she didn't feel so replaced.

But that used to be her charm.

"That still won't get you there," she said after a second. "Not without some sort of special light or something."

"Yeah, but they'll probably give it to us that day, just like they did last time," Keefe reminded her.

"Better hope they give you oxygen, too. You won't survive up there without it. And none of your clothes will be warm enough. And even then, you'll still have to deal with the Neverseen—and trap or no, they will fight back . . ."

Her voice trailed off when she realized she was technically talking about Keefe's dad.

Keefe patted his sleeve full of weapons again, his face as white as bone. "I have to stop him from hurting anyone again. Fitz and Biana don't have to, but—"

"We're going with you," Biana insisted.

"Yeah, you're not doing this alone," Fitz agreed.

Sophie sighed. "Did the Black Swan have you tell your dad that they're going instead of me?"

"I told him Fitz is coming to handle your telepathic stuff with Silveny. But he doesn't know Biana will be there—and I'm going to make sure it stays that way."

"I'm the secret weapon," Biana said, vanishing again to prove it.

Sophie stared out the windows, watching the sun creep toward the horizon. "It's really hard to sit back and let you guys risk your lives for this."

"Tell me about it," Grady called from the top of the stairs, making everyone jump. "Did you really think I wasn't listening up here?"

"I did," Keefe admitted as Grady came down to join them. "Please—you can't tell anyone about my dad. If he finds out—"

"I know," Grady interrupted, holding out a hand to calm him. "But before I agree, I have to ask—are you sure he's with the Neverseen?"

"Yeah," Keefe mumbled, squeezing his Sencen crest pin.

When he didn't elaborate, Sophie explained about the aromark they'd found on Keefe's hands and how the Neverseen kept finding them. Grady's expression turned murderous.

"You can't tell anyone," Keefe reminded him. "We need him to lead us to the others first."

"Right," Grady said, running his hands down his face. "You can't crush the first ant you find. You have to wait for the queen. So I will keep your secret—for now. But I will have goblins on standby near Candleshade in case things don't go as planned. And you two need to tell your father," he told Fitz and Biana. "I'm sure he will see the logic behind the Black Swan's strategy—especially with the Council's current uselessness. But he should know what his children are doing, and have the chance to make adjustments to keep you safe. Okay?"

They glanced at each other before they both nodded.

"Good. I'm going to make a few adjustments of my own," Grady added. "First—Sandor's coming with you."

Sandor frowned. "But Miss Foster—"

"Will be perfectly safe right here," Grady interrupted. "You should be with everyone on that mountain. And I should mention that this is the only way I'll agree to this plan. Otherwise I will find a way to stop you."

Keefe shrugged. "It's fine with me, so long as Gigantor's cool with it."

Sandor surprised him by bowing his head. "It would be my honor, Mr. Sencen."

"Ugh—can we stick with 'Keefe'? I'm not exactly a fan of that name right now."

Sandor nodded.

"Then I guess that settles that," Keefe said, holding out his hands to Fitz and Biana. "I'll need your scrolls. It says to destroy them."

"I can do that," Grady said, removing a silver flint from his pocket.

He lit the scrolls with a purple flame, letting the fire crawl over the paper like glowing moss, until there was nothing but a pile of ash.

"By the way, Keefe," Grady said, dusting the ash off his fingers. "I'm sorry your father is caught up in this. I'm hoping there's been a mistake. But if not, I want you to know that you can come to me with anything. Same goes for all of you," he told Fitz and Biana. "We have enough fighting against us at the moment. If we're going to survive the coming days, we're going to have to trust one another and work together. Can we do that?"

Everyone nodded.

“Good. Then let’s all have another piece of mallowmelt. I have a feeling this will be our last peaceful meal for a few days.”

Group 45/59

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“Okay, we have an alliance. Now tell me how we save Silveny’s babies.”

“Perhaps we should go somewhere with a bit less of an audience,” Tarina suggested, her eyes flicking to Timkin, who’d gone from looking suspicious to looking seriously concerned.

When Sophie nodded, Tarina switched back to the Enlightened Language and said, “We’re going to take a quick walk so I can contact my empress.”

Edalie sucked in a breath. “Does that mean you’ve thought of something that might help?”

“It’s possible,” Tarina agreed. “And I realize time is of the essence, so if there’s anything you can do to slow the progress of the alicorn’s labor—do it. We’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Sophie could feel everyone’s stunned stares trying to hold her there like mental tractor beams. But no one argued as Tarina led her down the beach, their feet kicking up sand as they tried to hurry without seeming frantic—even though Sophie had never felt so impatient.

She managed to wait until they’d rounded a bend and left Silveny’s cove for a wider, rockier stretch of shoreline. Then she reeled on Tarina and whisper-hissed, “Okay, what’s the plan?”

“It’s best if we continue in my language, just to be safe,” Tarina warned, and the chirpiness of the words made it clear she’d already switched. “I wouldn’t be surprised if we have a few eavesdroppers. Your boyfriend in particular.”

“He’s not my boyfr—” Sophie started to tell her, but she cut herself off when she realized that might not actually be true.

Fitz had almost kissed her.

And he'd told her he wanted to find her name on his match lists.

And she'd told him she'd liked him forever.

And he'd been so helpful and amazing ever since.

But . . . none of that actually meant they were dating.

She wasn't even sure if she was ready to date Fitz, knowing it would cause all kinds of changes—new rules from her parents, possible drama among their friends.

But that definitely wasn't what she should be thinking about at the moment. So she shoved all those complicated new worries into another mental box she'd deal with later and asked again in Tarina's language, "How do we save Silveny's babies?"

Tarina turned to watch the dark waves crashing against the shore. "This is likely going to sound very strange. But remember when I told you that those in my species are hatched when they're born and you assumed I meant hatching from eggs?"

Sophie nodded. "You made it sound like eggs weren't really a part of it."

"They're not," Tarina agreed. "At least not the way you might be picturing them. Our young do not develop inside any sort of shell, like birds or reptiles. Instead the process is much closer to marsupials. And what I mean by that is, our babies are born at an incredibly early stage—but instead of moving to a pouch to develop, they're implanted into a hive, where they can finish developing and grow to a proper size."

"A hive," Sophie repeated, her mind immediately conjuring up images of giant beehives filled with thousands of unborn trolls thrashing around inside honeycomb shells waiting to burst into the world as violent newborns—and she really hoped her brain was wrong. "So . . . you're thinking we'd put Silveny's babies into the hive and let them finish growing in there?"

Tarina nodded. "The hive should be able to provide them with everything they need to reach viability."

"Okay, so . . . how do we do that?" Sophie wondered. "We can't move Silveny—"

"No, we'll need to retrieve two of our transport pods."

“Transport pods.” Sophie knew she needed to stop repeating everything Tarina was saying like a parrot. But her brain seemed to require that extra second to process.

“Think of them like portable wombs,” Tarina told her. “Something our scientists invented in order to ensure that every baby reached the hive with enough time to be safely implanted with the rest of the colony. Before them, we used to lose a few babies every year. It’s strange how nature sometimes isn’t enough, don’t you think? Strange that we have to invent ways to survive something that should be automatic—like what’s happening with your alicorn.” You would think her body wouldn’t have become pregnant with twins unless it could support them. But . . . sometimes nature needs a little help.”

Sophie couldn’t think of what to say to any of that, so she went with a nod—and tried her best not to look thoroughly grossed out. It wasn’t fair to be bothered by something just because it was different from what she considered normal. But it wasn’t easy when Tarina was using words like “pods” and “colony” and “implanted”—all of which sounded like something straight out of human science fiction and made her think of aliens or giant bugs.

“If it helps,” Tarina told her, “I had a similar reaction the first time I learned that some creatures have bellies that stretch and bulge as the baby develops fully inside them, and then the mother has to push the baby out through a process that looks rather slimy and painful.”

When she put it that way, it definitely didn’t sound a whole lot better.

“I think I’m never having kids,” Sophie decided.

Tarina laughed. “I’m pretty sure we all feel that way at some point.”

“Probably,” Sophie said, shaking her head to clear away the biological horror show going on in her brain.

It didn’t matter how weird it all sounded.

It only mattered that it worked.

“Okay, so . . . two questions,” Sophie told Tarina. “Where do we get the pods? And why was this such a big secret that I had to swear to an alliance before you’d tell me? Isn’t a lot of what you just explained something I’ll be taught in school someday?”

“Well, I doubt your mentors will get quite as specific. But . . . the answer to both questions is related. Our birthing process is not a secret.

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]
```

Grady snapped out of it first. He jumped to his feet and nudged Sophie. “Let’s show you your new room.” “THIS IS REALLY ALL MINE?” Her bedroom took up the entire third floor. Star-shaped crystals dangled from the ceiling on glittery cords, and blue and purple flowers weaved through the carpet, filling the room with their sweet scent. A giant canopy bed occupied the center of the room, and a huge closet and dressing area took up an entire wall. Bookshelves full of thick, brightly colored volumes filled the other walls. She even had her own bathroom, complete with a waterfall shower and a bathtub the size of a swimming pool. “I hope it’s okay,” Edaline said, biting her lip. Was she kidding? “It’s awesome,” Sophie said, feeling more excited about her new home already. She dropped her backpack off, but decided to keep Ella with her. It helped having something to hold. Half of the second floor was Grady and Edaline’s bedroom, and the other half was a long hall with three closed doors. Two were their personal offices. One they didn’t explain, but Sophie assumed it was Jolie’s room. They didn’t forbid her from going to that part of the house, but they didn’t give her a tour either, and with the way their voices strained as they spoke about it, she decided it would be best to stay away. After an awkward but delicious dinner of soupy green stuff that tasted like pizza, Grady and Edaline left Sophie alone to unpack—which turned out to be a good thing. Unpacking made everything real. She lived here now, in this strange, slightly too perfect world where everything she knew was wrong and all she had to show for the past twelve years of her life was a backpack stuffed with wrinkled clothes she’d never wear, an iPod she couldn’t charge, and a scrapbook full of memories that had been erased from everyone except her. At least she knew her family wasn’t missing her the way she missed them. Their new life—wherever it was—would be better without her. Alden and Della would’ve made sure of it. Tears welled in her eyes as she put the last remnants of her human life away. Then she curled up on her bed with Ella and let herself have one last good cry. When her eyes finally dried, she promised herself she wouldn’t look back anymore. Grady and Edaline weren’t like her parents, and Havenfield wasn’t like her old house—but maybe that was better. Maybe it was easier if they were different. And maybe, with time, it would really feel like home. SIXTEEN. SOPHIE WOKE TO AN AMAZING SUNRISE—pink, purple, and orange streaks blending the ocean and sky into mirror images. She enjoyed the view, but she would need to figure out a way to darken her glass walls. Sunrise was too early to be awake every day. Grady and Edaline were in the kitchen finishing up breakfast when she came downstairs. Sophie hovered in the doorway, not sure if she should interrupt. “Either you’re an early riser,” Grady said as he moved the scrolls he was reading to make room for her, “or you didn’t close the shades.” She sank into a chair next to him. “How do I do that?” “Just clap your hands twice.” “How about some breakfast?” Edalie asked. Her voice sounded tired, and the shadows around her eyes were so dark they looked like bruises. At Sophie’s nod she conjured up a bowl of orange glop and a spoon. Each bite tasted like warm, buttery banana bread, and Sophie was tempted to ask for seconds, but she didn’t want to impose. She didn’t know how to talk to them, so she stared at Grady’s scrolls. The sloppy handwriting was impossible to read upside down, but she did notice a symbol in the corner: a hooked bird’s neck, with the beak pointing down. The image tickled her mind, like she should know what it meant, but she couldn’t find the memory it belonged to. Grady caught her looking and rolled them up. “Boring stuff from a long time ago.” He said it with a smile, but it was obvious he didn’t want her seeing the scrolls, which only made her more curious. Especially when she spotted a line of runes running along the bottom, and this time they made sense. “‘Project Moonlark,’” she blurted, before she could think it through. “You can read that?” Grady asked. Sophie nodded, scooting back a little when she saw the look in his eyes. Anger, confusion—and fear. “Usually I can’t, but this time I could. What’s Project Moonlark?” she whispered. Grady’s mouth tightened. “Nothing you need to know about.” But Alden had said the word she used to babble as a baby might mean “moonlark.” That couldn’t be a coincidence. She tugged out an eyelash. Grady ran a hand across his face and took a deep breath. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you. It’s just, these are extremely classified documents,

and those are cipher runes. No one is supposed to be able to read them unless they've been taught the key." She swallowed, trying to get enough moisture on her tongue to make it work. "Why can I read it, then?" "I have no idea." He shared a look with Edaline. "Maybe the way humans taught you to read, or write, made your mind see things a little different." That was the same excuse Alden had given for why she couldn't read normal runes. It wasn't particularly believable, but she couldn't think of anything better. She was pretty sure she'd remember being taught to read cipher runes. "If you're ready to go, we should get those medicines Elwin prescribed," Edaline interrupted, standing. Each word was drawn out, like the whole sentence was one long sigh, which didn't exactly make Sophie eager to go. But she couldn't really say no, so she rose, fidgeting with the ruffles on the purple dress she was wearing. It was the simplest dress Della bought her, but she still felt ridiculous. Did the elves have something against jeans? Grady nodded. "Say hi to Kesler for me." Edaline groaned. "This is going to be interesting." Sophie glanced at Grady, hoping he wasn't mad about the scrolls. He gave her a small smile. Then Edaline took her hand, and they glittered away. THEY LEAPED TO AN ISLAND called Mysterium. Small, identical buildings lined the narrow streets like they'd been cut from a mold. Street vendors filled the air with the scent of spices and sweets, and conversation buzzed around the crowded sidewalks. Sophie's and Edaline's gowns stood out among the simple tunics and pants of the other elves. "Hey, how come they don't have to dress up?" Sophie complained. "Mysterium is a working-class city." "Oh. But wait—doesn't everyone get the same amount of money in their birth fund?" Edaline nodded. "Money has nothing to do with social rank. Our world is 'talent based.' Those with simpler abilities work simpler jobs—and they dress correspondingly." "Seems kind of unfair," Sophie mumbled. "You can't control how much talent you're born with. Why should you live a lesser life?" "Their lives aren't lesser. They have houses just as fine as Alden's or ours. But when they come to work, they come to a different type of city. A city designed for their kind of work." Edaline's grip tightened on Sophie's hand as several people waved at her. "You okay?" Sophie asked. "Yes, I'm just not used to being around so many people." She kept her head down as she led Sophie through the busy village, avoiding the other elves they ran in to. Everyone seemed to recognize Edaline, though, and whispers followed them wherever they went. "Look, it's Edaline Ruewen—can you believe it?" "I thought she never left the house." "She doesn't." Edaline pretended not to notice, and they didn't slow their pace until they reached the only building that was different: a store painted twenty different colors, with curved walls and a crooked roof—like it belonged in a nursery rhyme.

Group 47/59

```
[
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FIFTY-TWO

THE CODE IS simple,” Dex mumbled, staring at Sophie’s memory log, where she’d projected everything Keefe had shown her. “What code?”

“No idea,” Sophie admitted. “Keefe was hoping you’d be able to figure that out.”

“Great.” Dex flopped back on her bed, repeating the clue over and over.

Fitz, Biana, and Dex—and their bodyguards—had met Sophie at Havenfield that morning to brainstorm, while Tam and Linh stayed in Alluveterre to see how Maruca’s visit with Wylie went.

“So there’s a symbol that’s also a map, projected by a gadget,” Dex said, “and we need a key that’s probably related to a code that’s simple.”

“Wow, my brain hurts just trying to follow that sentence,” Biana said, blinking in and out of sight as she paced across Sophie’s flowered carpet. “But, if Alvar can understand this, I’m sure we can too.”

“Yeah, but they probably gave Alvar the key,” Fitz reminded her as he slumped into Sophie’s desk chair and petted Iggy through the bars of his cage. “We’re stuck guessing. And don’t forget there are also runes and star names and black disks hidden in cloaks and—”

“Okay, so we need to work on this piece by piece,” Sophie decided, trying to massage away the headache she could feel forming. “Keefe seemed to think the gadget part was crucial, that’s why he wanted me to talk to Dex.”

She flipped to the page in her memory log where she’d recorded Keefe’s memory of the crystal sphere. “Notice anything that might help us?”

"Maybe if I had the gadget in front of me and could open it up and see all the inner workings," Dex told her. "But I can't tell much from a picture. The only thing that stands out is this line." He traced his finger over a glowing strip of purple down the center of the crystal sphere. "That could be some sort of scanner."

"And what would a scanner do?" Fitz asked.

"Well, the obvious answer is 'scan stuff,'" Dex said, "which might fit, since scanners usually scan codes. So maybe there's a code hidden in the symbol? And the gadget scans it, and that somehow tells it to make a light path—maybe using the light from the corresponding star?"

"I guess that does make sense," Fitz said. "But, dude, couldn't they just use a Leapmaster or a pathfinder?"

"Maybe they think this method is more secure," Dex said, "since crystals can get lost or stolen, and this would only work for people they train. Or, maybe the Technopath who designed it wasn't very good."

"I thought you said their Technopath was super talented," Biana reminded him. "When we went through Alvar's registry records you seemed super impressed."

"They did do a lot of crazy tricks I never would've thought of," Dex admitted. "So maybe this was designed by a different Technopath. Or . . ."

"Or?" Fitz prompted when Dex didn't finish.

"Hang on. I need to think for a second," Dex said, sitting up and flipping back through the memory log until he found a page showing the symbol.

One second turned into two—then three and four and five and on and on, until Sophie got tired of counting.

"While he does that"—she turned to Biana—"did Dex ever tell you what he and Marella were talking about yesterday?"

"Oh! That's right, I only told Fitz. I guess Dex decided to ask Marella if we could talk to her mom about the day Cyrah faded—and she freaked out. Partially because he wouldn't tell her why. But mostly because her mom can't handle that kind of stress. She told him her mom's gotten so bad lately that she won't even leave the house, and Marella thinks it's because she's heard about the awful things

the Neverseen have been doing. So she can't risk freaking her out more by talking about painful memories."

"That makes sense," Sophie said quietly. "And must be so hard for her."

"I know. Dex said she cried. Makes me feel super guilty for not checking on her sooner—but now if I try, she'll think I'm just trying to get information about Cyrah."

"Probably. But there has to be something we can do," Sophie said. "Maybe if we—"

Dex jumped to his feet. "Do you remember those number chains I uncovered in Alvar's registry records well enough to project them?" he asked Sophie.

"Of course."

She took the memory log back and recorded the four chains of ones and zeroes, plus all the extra dashes and symbols and asterisks.

0-11-<<-1-1-1-0*

*0-1->-1->-111-0

*0->-111->>>-1-0

0-<<-1-1-11-<-0*

Dex stared at the numbers for so long that Sophie was about to turn back to her Marella conversation.

But before she did, Dex laughed and pumped his fist, shouting, "I know what the clue means!"

FIFTY-THREE

THE NUMBERS AREN'T numbers!" Dex said. "Well, I guess they kinda are—it's the symbol that's not

really a symbol. Or maybe it's both, depending on which way you're looking at it."

He sighed when they gave him nothing but blank stares.

"Okay, let's try this another way," he said. "Can I get something to write with?"

Sophie gave him one of her school notebooks and a pencil and he flipped to a clean page.

"Biana, can you read me the first sequence of numbers we found in Alvar's records—and give me all the dashes and symbols and stuff too?"

"Sure. It's zero, hyphen, one, one, hyphen, less than, less than, hyphen, one, hyphen, one, hyphen, one, hyphen, zero, asterisk."

Dex grinned as he stared at what he'd written. "See what happens when I convert the whole thing to pure symbols?"

He held up his drawing.

[Images]

Everyone sucked in a breath.

The markings looked exactly like one of the rays in the Lodestar symbol—and not just any ray. The ray they'd connected to the Paris hideout—which happened to be where Alvar was when his registry pendant had given that code.

"And you can do the same thing with all four of the codes I found," Dex added. "The asterisk tells you which zero is the center. See?"

He drew the three remaining codes and held them up, each one matching a ray of the symbol perfectly.

[Images]

"Wow, how did you figure that out?" Fitz asked.

"It was Fintan's clue," Dex said. "I remembered whining about how using a code made of ones and zeroes was too simple. And the really crazy part is, this isn't simple at all. It's a seriously brilliant system. The code is hidden but not hidden, still useable and scannable in both forms, and it keeps perfect track of their locations. See? This top one? That's the hideout that Alvar went to when he was The Boy Who Disappeared."

Sophie's stomach soured. "That's the same hideout they just moved Keefe to."

It shouldn't surprise her—and it shouldn't make her so nervous. But it really did.

Cover 8

Relevant results in this cover: 10

Content pages range: [141, 160]

Groups range: [48, 57]

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

- 000048.txt — ranks: #50
- 000049.txt — ranks: #51
- 000050.txt — ranks: #52
- 000051.txt — ranks: #53
- 000052.txt — ranks: #54
- 000053.txt — ranks: #55
- 000054.txt — ranks: #56
- 000055.txt — ranks: #57
- 000056.txt — ranks: #58
- 000057.txt — ranks: #59

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The emotions in the room faded to a blur.

"Honestly, sometimes I wonder that myself," his father murmured. "The best answer I can find is that while humans have their share of problems, they're also incredible creatures—full of beauty and kindness and creativity. And they can be so much more open-minded than we are. I disagree with many of the Black Swan's decisions, but one thing they truly got right was having Sophie grow up believing she was human. The perspective she gained from the experience is truly invaluable—and while you cannot ever achieve the same effect, I hope you'll use your time in the Forbidden Cities to experience as much as you can. I realize you'll be focused on your mother and your abilities—but I hope you'll occasionally let yourself get distracted. Taste their foods. See their sights. Embrace their cultures. Let their world shape you. You'll be a better person by the end of it."

Keefe could tell his father meant every word—and it made him want to shout, IF IT MAKES YOU A BETTER PERSON, WHY ARE YOU SUCH A JERK?

But all he said was "Right. So... is that everything—or are you going to try to give me some art tips, too?"

His father's irritation surged. "I suppose I shouldn't have expected a thank-you—even though I deserve one. But despite your lack of gratitude, I am here for you. If you get into trouble, come find me. And if you run out of money—"

"I won't," Keefe jumped in. "I took some of mom's jewelry. As soon as I find somewhere to sell it, I'll be all set."

"Clever," his father admitted. "I'd recommend seeking out what's called a pawnshop. But be careful—those tend to not be in the safest neighborhoods. A young man carrying a bag of jewelry—or a bag of cash from selling that jewelry—would make an easy target. I'd also suggest breaking the pieces apart and selling them stone by stone. Jewels are much rarer in the Forbidden Cities, since they never learned dwarven mining techniques. So they will place a very high value on an entire piece of our jewelry, which would make things rather complicated, since humans rarely make payments of that size in cash."

"Noted," Keefe said, digging out the blue pathfinder.

"Actually, wait—I almost forgot." His father opened one of his desk drawers and removed a lumpy black pouch. "I gathered a few of our most vital elixirs, since I'd hate to have you at the mercy of human remedies. There's Fade Fuel in there. I suggest you drink some before leaping again."

Keefe was really getting sick of taking his father's help.

But... he should've thought to pack some medicine.

And he honestly wasn't sure he could handle another leap without it.

So he chugged the Fade Fuel—which felt like ice surging through his veins. And he decided to grab the bottle of Youth that was sitting on his father's desk, since he wouldn't get to have it for a while.

In fact, he was probably going to need a detox when he came back.

If he came back.

"You will," his father said, somehow guessing what he was thinking. "But wait until you're truly ready—and not just to challenge your mother. Wait until you're ready to face your new reality. Like it or not, you've changed, Keefe. It's time to find out who you are."

The words could've been inspiring. But since it was his father, they came out like an order—which made Keefe want to spin the pathfinder to any facet other than the one his father had marked.

But he needed to learn how to avoid the surveillance—especially before London.

"So you're finally learning to trust me," his father said smugly as Keefe spun the crystal to the facet he'd memorized from the map.

"I'm not doing this for you."

"I know. Remember to watch for the sparkle," he added as Keefe held the crystal up to the moonlight. "Oh, and one last thing."

It was the perfect moment to tell his son he'd miss him.

Or that he was proud of him.

If nothing else, he could tell him to be careful.

Instead, he smoothed his hair and told him, "Do yourself a favor. Before you leave the next place, make sure you try one of their churros."

WATCH FOR THE SPARKLE," Keefe grumbled, mimicking his father's snooty tone as he glared at the crowded courtyard. "How is this the best place to do that? There's sparkle everywhere!"

Twinkling lights in the trees.

Shimmering banners hanging from the lampposts.

And at least half the crowd was wearing something glittering or glowing.

It was pretty and all—but definitely not helpful for trying to find some sort of sparkly surveillance. Especially since it was also nighttime, and the lights illuminating all the paths seemed to amplify anything shiny.

Keefe closed his eyes and stepped on the pebble in his shoe to clear away the anticipation and frustration and exhaustion and excitement hammering his senses.

This was the biggest crowd he'd been in since he found a bit of control, and they seemed to be waiting for something to happen—but there was no sign telling him what it was.

At least the lake he was standing by looked more like a fountain, so if some sort of boat was involved, it would have to be pretty tiny.

In fact, everything about this place felt smaller than he would've expected.

Maybe he'd been spoiled by Eternalia and Lumenaria, but the pink-and-blue castle everyone kept taking pictures of almost seemed more like a mini replica.

So did the snow-covered mountain in the background.

Honestly, everything felt like a facade, built to create a very specific aesthetic, with spotlights on every tree and music playing from hidden speakers. The street even had all these weird tracks and grooves, as if the carriages and carts were stuck following the same path over and over.

But none of that was as bizarre as the people walking around in costumes with oversize animal heads.

Was one of them a giant mouse?

And was the mouse... famous?

He seemed to be, since people were lining up to take pictures with him.

There was also a life-size statue of him in the center of the courtyard, holding hands with some human dude.

In fact, the mouse was also on people's shirts—and Keefe had a feeling that some of their hats and headbands were meant to look like mouse ears.

Normally he would've loved that kind of randomness—probably would've even gotten himself a pair of sparkly ears.

But he was tired.

And his foot hurt.

And he was still weirded out by the lovely chat with Daddy Dearest.

And he had no idea where he was—and his handy map was buried in his backpack and—

“Wait... something about this feels familiar,” Keefe mumbled, realizing Foster had mentioned a place like it before—or had it been Dex?

His brain was too tired and overloaded to find the exact memory. But he was pretty sure it was called something like Dizzneehaven or Dizzneeglen, and that Foster gave Dex a watch from there as one of her midterm gifts.

Keefe spun around and... yep!

There were stores selling jewelry and knickknacks and shirts and all kinds of other stuff—and one of the moms near him was holding a giant shopping bag that said DISNEYLAND.

“So this is where Foster went as a kid,” he said, wondering if she’d worn a little crown like so many of the other girls in the crowd—or maybe a pair of sparkly wings.

```
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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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He one thousand percent didn't recommend it. Especially since his next leap brought him somewhere even less helpful: a ruin high in the mountains, with nothing but fallen stones and a few curious llamas. Even the locals didn't know why the city had been built or what had happened to the people who used to live there—which made Keefe wish he'd paid more attention in elvin history. Elves tended to be connected to most of the weirdness in the ancient human world, so he was sure there had to be some sort of story there. But he'd only memorized the bare minimum from his textbooks so he could pass with a grade that would make his father's eye twitch. And this place didn't look familiar. Someday he'd have to find out what happened—but right now, he had bigger mysteries to solve. Like, seriously, where was he going to buy some better clothes? Definitely not in this current city, which had a huge festival going on in front of the bronze lion-lady statue, with tents and booths and music and a huge crowd of people dancing and singing and clinking heavy-looking glasses. There were so many different emotions pummeling his senses that he had to rub his foot back and forth, even when he was standing, to keep the pebble in his shoe constantly on his mind. And the only outfits he saw for sale were a bunch of embroidered shorts with suspenders attached, paired with knee socks and funny little hats—and he doubted he could pull that off. Actually, no, he totally could. He would rock those shorts and knee socks like no one had ever rocked them before. But. He needed to stay focused. He'd added a very important fourth step to his plan, and it was his new top priority: Get back to London. His mom had been going there for a reason, and it was time to find out what she'd dragged him into—even if he was more than a little terrified of the answers. But getting there could turn out to be an obnoxiously slow process. He'd counted the facets on his father's pathfinder, and there were one hundred forty-two. And with his luck, the London facet would end up being the last one he tried. He'd only tested about a dozen facets so far—and given how exhausting it was to adjust to each new place, he didn't think he could handle more than five or six a day. So the math didn't look good. Unless... Surely some of the other facets went to places that were close to London, right? In fact, the architecture of some of the buildings around the festival reminded Keefe of the style he'd seen while he was there! "Excuse me," he called to a woman working at a booth selling giant heart-shaped cookies dangling from strings. "Yes, hello, which one?" she asked, gesturing to a display where the hearts were all decorated with little sayings like I love you and Hug me and Little Sparrow. Keefe pointed to a cookie with a blue loopy border that said My Snuggle Mouse. Why not? Most of the crowd seemed to be wearing the hearts around their necks, so he might as well blend in. Plus... cookie! "Quick question," he said as he fished through his stack of money, trying to find the right currency. "How do I get to London?" "London?" she repeated as she guided him to the right bills. "You mean... London, England?" Keefe was pretty sure that was correct, so he went ahead and nodded. She frowned. "But... we're in Munich." "I know," he said—even though he didn't. He had no idea where he was—or even what language he was speaking at the moment. "But how long would it take to get to London from here?" "Well... I don't really know." She told another customer browsing the cookies that she'd be with them in one minute. "Depends on if you fly or take the trains, I guess." "You can fly? Please tell me it isn't like going on one of those boat things—but in the sky." She laughed and took the cash he handed her. "Sounds like you might need to stay away from the tents for a little while." Keefe had no idea what that meant, but he could tell she was getting tired of his questions. Plus, he was starting to see why it might seem strange to ask how to get to a place that was actually quite far away. Traveling had to be a much bigger deal when you couldn't jump on the next beam of light. So he thanked her for her help and slipped his new cookie necklace around his neck, focusing on the pebble in his shoe as he headed deeper into the festival. 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.

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]
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The crowd at Foxfire was even larger than Sophie had been expecting. It leaked out the ornate golden doors to the main amphitheater—where the inauguration was being held—and spilled into the grassy courtyard, crushing the bushes shaped like the different mascots and blocking the path. A tiny, less-than-nice part of Sophie wished one of the glaring people would accidentally find one of the effluxers and trigger an epic stink blast—especially when she spotted Marella standing with Stina. There was a pocket of space between them, like neither girl truly wanted to be with the other. But when Marella noticed Sophie watching her, she tossed her hair and turned away. Sandor kept a loose grip on Sophie's wrist, leading her straight to a security checkpoint outside the main entrance. A dozen elves in bright orange capes were scanning everyone's registry pendants and dividing them into two lines, one leading up to the arena's seats, and one to the floor level. Only noble families were given access to the floor—but not all of them. And as far as Sophie could tell, there seemed to be no reason for the division. Her family was sent to the floor. The crowd was thinner there, filled mostly with stern-looking elves dressed in very fancy capes. So Sophie was surprised to recognize a familiar face. "Dex?" she called, rushing over to his seat in the second row, near the center. He was sitting right behind the seats marked for her, and his whole family was with him—even the triplets. Sophie had never seen Kesler and Juline dressed so fancy—though their capes were still far simpler than the finery that surrounded them. "I didn't know you'd be here." "Thought I'd be up in the common area, didn't you?" he asked, his wide grin making it clear that he didn't mind if she had. "Not anymore! They stopped us on our way in and told us that because one of my inventions would be featured prominently in the assembly, they wanted me nearby in case they needed any assistance." "That's awesome," Sophie told him, knowing it was the reaction he was expecting. But . . . why would the Council want to demonstrate a weapon? Kesler patted Dex on the back, his pride obvious—though he still looked like he'd rather be back in his lab coat, whipping together some sort of crazy concoction. "Oh—before I forget," Dex said, glancing over his shoulder as he dug into the pocket of his jeweled blue cape. "I finally had a chance to fix this." He handed over her iPod, which now had a small silver triangle sticking out of the base. "I still don't get why you need this. But that receiver will pick up pretty much any kind of signal you want. And I made a few tweaks to the way it works, because, well, man that thing was slow." He touched the screen, tapped one icon, and instantly the Internet loaded. "That's what you needed, right?" "Yeah—it's perfect." Sophie shoved it into her pocket before anyone could notice—though Sandor had already seen, and was giving her his Do you really think this is the time or place to have human technology out in plain sight? look. "You're the best." "I know." She elbowed him, and he laughed. But he turned serious as he studied the packed audience above them. "I heard the Councillors saying something about an announcement regarding you. Everything okay?" "I hope so." She said it with a smile, but what little she'd choked down of her dinner turned to prickles in her stomach. Despite Grady's assurances, she couldn't help worrying that the Council was going to expel her. That wasn't something they would need a unanimous vote for. Only a majority—and she wasn't sure she had seven supporters. She wasn't sure she even knew seven of the Councillor's names. Still, it had to help that Dame Alina was the newest member to the Council. She'd seen firsthand how well Sophie did at school—surely she'd be able to come to her defense. "It's time to take your seats," a snooty sounding elf told them, shuffling past in a silver-and-black cape. "The inauguration will begin in a moment." Sophie had barely settled into her chair next to Edaline—which was also conveniently in front of the steps for the stage—when the bells chimed a slow, tinkling peal, and the Councillors and their bodyguards appeared. They weren't wearing their usual gowns and capes. Instead, they wore identical silver suitlike garments, with simple, fitted jackets and tailored pants. Their long silver cloaks had hoods, which they all tossed back in unison, revealing matching silver circlets. The female Councillors even had their hair pulled back, making it hard to tell which Councillor was which. The only one easy to recognize was Councillor Emery, whose dark skin gave him an air of importance as he welcomed everyone to the assembly. He explained that the inauguration

would happen first, followed by a brief speech from the Councillors, which would conclude with an announcement—and Sophie was pretty sure he glanced at her when he said the last part. Sophie reached for Edaline's hand as the Councillors stepped back, leaving room for Magnate Leto to move to the center of the stage. His orange robes were a vivid flame among the muted silver of the Council, and when the floor beneath him lifted to create a pedestal, he looked like a torch—a torch that suddenly had an unearthly green glow as the lights dimmed in the auditorium. "Foxfire," Sophie whispered, realizing the glow was the same shade as the luminous mushrooms the academy was named after. No matter how many times the elves explained the "illumination in a darkened world" analogy, she would never stop thinking it was weird to have a school named after glowing fungus. Councillor Emery's booming voice snapped her out of her spore-related musings, and he unrolled a golden scroll, reading a long, boring oath for Magnate Leto to repeat—most of which Sophie tuned out. All she really caught was the final stanza—and only because Councillor Emery raised his voice to make it echo around the auditorium. "Do you swear to put the safety and success of your prodigies above all else—even your own life?" "Yes!" Magnate Leto called, lowering into a deep bow as polite applause filled the arena. One by one the Councillors dipped their heads, paying their respects to the new principal of Foxfire. And when they reached the last of the twelve, Dame Alina, she stepped forward, holding a narrow scepter with a glowing orange F on the end. For a horrible second Sophie thought they were going to brand the F onto Magnate Leto's skin, like farmers did to cattle. Instead, Dame Alina pressed the glowing end against the center of the pedestal and turned it like a key, making the room rain with glittering orange sparks. The sight should've been breathtaking, but it reminded Sophie too much of the Everblaze. And from the squeamish looks on the Council's faces, she clearly wasn't the only one fighting flashbacks. "That's the key to Foxfire," Edaline whispered as the pedestal lowered and Dame Alina handed the scepter to Magnate Leto. He dropped to his knees and vowed that the light would never go dark on his watch. Then he pressed the key into the floor and the room flooded with light, so bright Sophie had to rub her stinging eyes. By the time her vision cleared, the pedestal was gone and Magnate Leto had stepped back to the shadows. "Under normal circumstances, our festivities would end here," Councillor Emery said as the Councillors moved to center stage. "But we all know our circumstances are hardly normal at the moment. We thank you for your patience and trust, and we're happy to announce that the gnomes have reported to us just this morning that the cleanup in Eternalia is now complete. Every speck of ash and refuse has been washed away—a truly incredible gift these remarkable creatures have given us, and we all owe them a debt of gratitude. In the months ahead we will owe a similar debt to the dwarves for their help rebuilding what we've lost. And we always owe a debt to the goblins for standing at our side, ready to serve and protect. All of these creatures support us—not just because they are generous, compassionate beings—but because they rely on us for something as well. Something that recently we've been failing to deliver." He paused for a second, letting the audience lean forward in their seats, before he told them: "Peace." The word triggered a murmur in the crowd, and Councillor Emery waited for them to fall silent before he continued. "We did not ask for the role of peacekeepers on this complicated, ever-changing planet. And yet it is the role we were born to take. Our unique gifts and abilities have enabled us to secure stability amongst our world, as well as the five protected kingdoms, for millennia. And despite recent turmoil, our role has not changed. Our rule will not fall to threats, or rebellion. Nor will we stand back and let insubordination go unpunished." Sophie was pretty sure every eye in the room was on her at that point, but she didn't scoot down in her chair. Her legs didn't even tremble as she stood at Councillor Emery's command—but her heart pounded so hard it hurt as she climbed the stairs and took center stage.

Group 52/59

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“It’s them or me.”

The words sank into the pit of Sophie’s stomach like big sour lumps.

“Say that to yourself every chance you get,” Ro told her. “Because in a battle, it’s the only thing that’s true. If you don’t take them down, they will take you down. You believe that, don’t you?”

Sophie’s mind flashed through all the wounds she’d had Elwin treat—all the times she’d almost died and somehow pulled through.

It’s them or me.

She nodded.

“Then say it,” Ro told her.

Sophie cleared her throat. “It’s them or me.”

“Eh, your voice is a little squeaky—but keep at it and you’ll get there. And don’t you dare shove Hope in a drawer the second I leave because all of this feels super ridiculous to you. Give it a chance, okay?”

Sophie sighed. “I’ll try.”

“You better. When I get back, I expect to see some serious progress!” Ro scanned the room again. “All right, I guess my work here is done—for now. Eat lots of pastries while I’m gone—and try not to have too much fun without me. Oh, and before I forget...” She reached into her corset and pulled out a thin gold packet. “If Hunkyhair shows up before I’m back, spread some of this on your skin immediately.”

Sophie backed up a step. “What does it do?”

“Nothing to be afraid of. And look, it’s shiny! You love shiny!” She shook the packet, making the gilded paper glint.

“Yeah, I think I’ll pass.”

“Wow, an elf who can resist sparkles. You really are one of a kind! But you can relax. This is basically a biological version of that little talky square thing you love so much. Every colony of Linquilloso shares a single consciousness—whether they’re near each other or not. So the microbes in this packet”—she shook it again—“are connected to the ones living here.” She traced a line on her thigh, right below her daggers. “The second you rub some on your skin, the Linquilloso I’m carrying will have the same reaction—”

“What kind of reaction?” Sophie asked, imagining hives or scabs or pus or...

“Kind of a tickly feeling? And your skin will turn a bluish-purple color—but it’s not a bruise. It’s just the Linquilloso being like, Whoa, it’s bright here! And mine will turn blue too, like We’re used to it, but we feel you! And I’ll know it’s time to get my butt back to Sparkle Town.”

Sophie scratched her arms, already feeling itchy. “How about I just give you an Imparter instead?”

Ro shook her head. “I love how you elves think your technology is better than everybody else’s.”

“Well, I mean, it doesn’t require rubbing bacteria on my skin, so...”

“Harmless bacteria,” Ro insisted. “Which can’t be dropped or broken or lost like your little talky square thing. And the Linquilloso give their message silently, so if you happen to reach out when I’m within earshot of Cadfael, I won’t have to worry about you giving me away.”

Sophie had to admit that the Linquilloso had a few advantages.

She reluctantly took the golden packet—but she really hoped Ro came back quickly so she wouldn’t have to use it. “How do I clean it off?”

“With this.” Ro pulled a green packet out of her corset—but held it out of Sophie’s reach. “Nope! No erasing the message until I’m back.”

“But that could be weeks! If you’re still hunting Cadfael—”

“I won’t be. Like I said, I should be able to catch him in the next few days. And odds are, Hunkyhair won’t come to his senses before then—but if he does, catching Cadfael can wait! No way am I missing the big Team Foster-Keefe reunion—or all the...”

She made a very loud smooching sound, and Sophie tried to decide if she should crawl under her bed or reach for her dagger.

“Scowl at me all you want, Blondie—I see that adorable blush!”

Sophie pulled her hair around her face. “That just means I’m sick of this conversation.”

“Does it, though?” Ro asked. “Pretty sure there’s a whole lot more to it than that.”

“Yeah, I’m trying to decide if I should use you for stabbing practice,” Sophie muttered.

“I’d actually love to see you try that—but no changing the subject. I can hear your heart beating about a hundred times faster than normal right now. And your breath is all hitched. And your voice is all high pitched and squeaky. So clearly you’re feeling excited and fluttery and—”

“I don’t know what I’m feeling!” Sophie shouted.

It might’ve been the truest thing she’d ever said.


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SEVEN. Sophie had been in quiet places before, but she'd never experienced anything like the silence of the Wanderling Woods. There was no chirping or tweeting. No branches creaking or rustling. It was like all sound—all life—had been sucked out of the scenery, leaving nothing but a thick, almost tangible emptiness. Even the silver pebbles didn't crunch under her feet as she followed Grady and Edaline down a winding path, which seemed to glow as she moved, shining the way to the narrow gateway ahead. A vine with white star-shaped flowers trailed up two gilded columns to an arched golden sign with looping, intricate letters that spelled out: Those who wander are not lost. "I've heard that before," Sophie said, mostly to herself. She racked her brain, needing to be sure it was her own memory, not something someone put there. An image of a short poem flashed in her mind and she stopped walking. "That's from The Lord of the Rings. Well—not exactly. But it's close." "The Lord of the Rings?" Edaline repeated. "It's a series of human books. And it has elves in it." Elves that had some similarities to what elves really were, now that she thought about it. "Are the books older?" Grady asked. "I think Tolkien wrote them during the Nineteen Thirties or Forties." "That's back before the Human Assistance Program was banned." Grady smiled when her eyebrows shot up. "We used to send members of the nobility in disguise to try to teach humans our ways. The treaties had fallen apart, but we still hoped to guide them, bring them out of the darkness and into a new age of light. In fact, most of the great human innovations of the last few centuries happened under elvin tutelage. Electricity. Penicillin. Chocolate cake. But too many of our gifts backfired, and a few decades ago the problems escalated to a point where the Council had no choice but to terminate the program and ban all human contact." "What does that have to do with The Lord of the Rings?" "Let's just say there were some who couldn't resist manipulating the legends about elves a bit." "So... you're saying J. R. R. Tolkien met an elf, and that's where he came up with some of the story?" "I wouldn't be surprised. Though I'm sure he was only told bits and pieces. Do the books talk about the Wanderlings at all?" "I don't think so." "Then he didn't know what the statement meant." Grady motioned for her to follow him. Edaline trailed silently behind as they crossed under the arch and entered the woods. "These are the Wanderlings," Grady whispered. It was unlike any forest Sophie had ever seen. The glowing path wound through a sea of carefully arranged trees, each one surrounded by meticulously groomed shrubs. No two trees were alike. Some were short and broad. Others tall and slender. Some had graceful branches that swayed in the silent breeze. Others looked stout and strong. There were leaves in every shape, size, and color. Some had flowers. One even had thorns. And at the base of each tree was a round white stone with a name carved in plain black letters. Grady led Sophie to the nearest tree, which reminded her of a weeping willow—if weeping willows had red leaves and bloomed with thousands of tiny purple flowers. "Each Wanderling's seed is coiled with a single hair from the one who's been lost," he explained. "When it sprouts, it absorbs their DNA, taking on some of the attributes of the life they now share. Letting the lost live on." Those who wander are not lost. "Cyrah had straight auburn hair," Edaline whispered, running her hand through the swaying red leaves. "And flecks of violet in her eyes." Soft purple petals showered them, and Sophie caught as many as she could, hating that they would wither on the ground. "Did you know her?" Grady brushed the bits of flower off his cape. "Not well. She was Prentice's wife." The petals slipped through Sophie's fingers. Prentice had been a Keeper for the Black Swan, back before everyone knew they were working against the real rebels. Now he lived in Exile, his mind shattered by the memory break that the Council had ordered so they could find out what he was hiding. And the secret he'd refused to tell them was her. Where they hid her. Why they'd made her. Who she was. His wife died not long after his mind was shattered. Lost her concentration during a light leap somehow and faded away before anyone could save her. Leaving Wylie, their only son, orphaned. Sophie had never met him—he was in the elite levels at Foxfire and lived in the secluded elite towers—but she sometimes wondered if he knew she existed. And how he felt about her if he did.

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I think he needs some air," Biana warned. "You take him—I'll stay here and keep an eye on things." Sophie nodded, hooking Fitz's arm around her shoulders and leading him back out to the clearing. "How's that?" she asked, pointing to a spot in the shade where he could lean against the side of the house. "I think I need to get away from this place," he admitted. "Can we walk for a bit?" "You sure you're up for that?" "Yeah, the echo's calming down. I just need to clear my head." Sophie glanced at their abundance of bodyguards. "Is that okay with you guys?" "Stick to the grounds," Grizel told her. "And plan on a few of us trailing behind." "That's fine," Sophie said, bending her knees to get a better hold on Fitz before leading him out of the clearing. "Where do you want to go?" she asked when the path split ahead. "Left," he decided. "There's something I want to show you." THIRTY-FOUR "WOW, THIS IS REALLY BEAUTIFUL," Sophie murmured, spinning in a slow circle to fully admire the clearing. The trees looked ancient. Lots of crackling bark and knobby branches dripping with tendrils of moss as they formed a wispy canopy. And the long grass was peppered with swaying wildflowers. But the best part was the sculptures that seemed to sprout out of the uneven ground—thin strands of dark metal twisting and spiraling around colorful glass orbs. "So where exactly are we?" Sophie asked, turning again and squinting through the trees to where she could see the halo of Everglen's perimeter fence. Tarina stood in the glow from the bars, keeping watch from a respectful distance. Sandor and Grizel had opted to stay at Alvar's apartment—which had definitely surprised Sophie. But she couldn't blame them if they'd wanted some alone time after everything they'd been through. She'd also lost track of Bo and Flori, though she was sure they were out there, along with two other goblins who kept marching slowly around the clearing. "It doesn't really have a name," Fitz told her, stepping closer and leaning in to whisper, "but this is where the emergency override is. That's what I wanted to show you." Sophie's eyebrows raised as he led her toward one of the larger statues and pointed to the teal orb supported by intricate swirls of metal. It was the size of a basketball, with silver circles speckling the thick glass. "This is it?" Sophie asked, keeping her voice low. Fitz nodded, leaning closer again. "I thought you should know how to find it. And . . . I think you should know the code that activates the panel." "Why?" Sophie whispered. His lips curled into a small smile, and their eyes locked. "I told you—you're the only one I trust." She sucked in a breath. The words sounded even better out loud than they had in her head. And she was pretty sure her heart was going to punch through her ribs any second. "Is it okay if I transmit the code?" he asked, and she hadn't even finished her nod before her mind filled with his crisp voice. Scion. She repeated it to make sure she'd understood. Yep. And you key it in like this. He placed his palm in the center of the orb and the glass flared with a subtle glow, making each of the silver flecks light up with a tiny letter. Is it reading your fingerprints? she asked. Nope, just responding to touch. And there was no rhyme or reason to the letter arrangement, so it took Fitz several seconds to locate the S-C-I-O-N. But as soon as he pressed the final letter, the glass orb rotated, revealing the thin seam of a small square. He tapped the center and the glass swung open like a hinged door, revealing a hidden metal sensor. That's where you put the DNA to trigger the override, he explained. And Alvar's DNA no longer works? Sophie verified. That's what my dad keeps claiming. But that doesn't mean Alvar can't use ours. One good punch and he'd have some of our blood. Sophie shuddered. That's why you have guards. And the Warden. I know. But I'm trying to be ready for anything. That's why I wanted you to know where the override is, and how it works. I don't know why it might come up, but it's better to be prepared. Do you think you'll be able to find your way here again, if you ever needed to? I think so, she said, trying to remember which path they'd taken. It hadn't had very many splits to keep track of, but she was feeling turned around. Are we back near the main gate? No, the override is in the opposite corner of the property. Why? If you're trying to open the gate, wouldn't you want the override to be near it? I asked my dad the same thing when he first showed it to me, and he said Luzia thought it was better to have it near the back entrance, since that's a lot smaller and easier to move manually. There's a back entrance? I didn't know there was one either. We never use it. But it's over there. He pointed toward the spot Tarina had been watching them

from a few minutes earlier. She'd moved closer to the clearing now, probably trying to figure out what they were doing. Luzia hid the button to open it between those two trees right there. And then I guess there's a DNA sensor hidden in the bushes outside to open it from that side—but it's probably all crusty and gross. Honestly, I don't even know if it works. But that's another reason I'm glad my dad posted guards here. Me too. Okay, Sophie thought, focusing her photographic memory on recording every detail around her. I should be able to find my way here if I ever need to, but, uh . . . what good does that actually do? Without your DNA— That's why I brought you this, he told her, pulling a tiny vial from the pocket of his navy blue cape, packed with something that looked sorta solid. Cotton maybe? I know it's kind of weird, Fitz added, but it's the only way I could think of to give you a sample. Wait—is that . . . is that your DNA? she asked, trying not to grimace. Actually, it's Biana's DNA. I refused to give you a vial of cotton soaked with my spit. Sophie appreciated that immensely—not that it was much better knowing it was Biana's. But it helped a little. So I guess that means Biana knows you're doing this, she said, not feeling ready to reach out and take the spit vial yet. I told her last night—and she wanted me to tell you she swabbed her cheek for the sample right after she brushed her teeth. So it's clean. Well, as clean as it can be—it's still cotton soaked with spit, so . . . Yeah . . . Sophie had to squirm a little. She'd never been a fan of the elves' lickable DNA sensors—but this was definitely a new level of yuck. Though what was the alternative? Using blood, like Lady Gisela had? Or fingerprints, like humans did, with sensors that were much easier to fool? Still, seeing the logic to the system didn't make it any easier to grab the spit vial—but at least she had lots of pocket options. This was definitely something that screamed hide it in your boot.

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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. OceanofPDF.com 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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SEVENTEEN. WHAT DOES RED MEAN?" SOPHIE asked, not sure if she should scream or flail or run to the nearest bathroom and wash her hands with an entire bar of soap. "It means you need to get to the Healing Center. Does Elwin keep piquatine on hand?" "I don't even know what that is." Lady Cadence sprinkled the silver power on her own hands and rubbed it in. "It's an acid, second in strength only to alkahest, so it should be strong enough to remove aromark. Honestly—have you learned nothing in alchemy?" Alchemy had been Sophie's worst subject—by far—and she'd barely managed a passing grade. But she did remember that alkahest was the universal solvent, able to dissolve anything. Wood. Metal. Flesh. "What's aromark?" she asked, more than a little afraid of the answer. Lady Cadence held her nonglowing hands up to sniff them. "Something I'm very thankful not to have on me. It won't hurt you. Not by itself, at least," she added when she noticed the way Sophie had started to tremble. "But you must get rid of it—quickly. Did anyone else handle the device besides you?" "Alden and Keefe. And Jurek at the Sanctuary. And maybe some of the Councillors. Plus it was tangled in Silveny's tail, so I'm sure it touched her." Lady Cadence rubbed her temples. "They'll all have to get tested." She handed Sophie the vial of powder. "Have them sprinkle this on their skin. Anywhere that glows red has to be purged. And if you need more, let me know. I have plenty of reveldust with my supplies." "Reveldust?" Sophie repeated, trying not to think about the word "purged." "It's a special type of spore that reacts to various ogre enzymes. It doesn't get rid of them. But it'll let you know they're there." Sophie studied her glowing hands. "How come Alden and Sandor didn't know about this stuff?" "Because they never asked. And most of the reports I sent the Council seemed to vanish into some sort of void, never to be mentioned again. I sent them all kinds of information about what I discovered of the true nature of ogre technology. For instance." She reached into her pocket and pulled out a necklace with a round silver pendant. "This is a Markchain. King Dimitar, the ogres' supreme leader, gave it to me when he finally granted my residency in their capital—which was no easy feat, I can assure you. He told me I had to wear it at all times if I wanted to remain safe, and for years I thought it was a gadget, like the registry pendants we wear. But I was wrong." She rubbed her finger along the edge of the sphere and held out her hand. After a few seconds, her fingertip glowed green. "That's the essenceal reacting with the reveldust still on my hands," she explained. Sophie shook her head, struggling to keep all the weird names straight. "What does that have to do with aromark?" "Because they're both enzymes. That's the ogres' true brilliance. Their technology is actually quite simplistic. But their biochemistry! I had no idea until I knocked over a vat of reveldust while I was working, and walked through the cloud it created. My skin glowed bright green everywhere my pendant had touched me, and I realized that the Markchain is actually an ecosystem. A tiny, self-sustaining world of microorganisms." She dangled the silver pendant in front of Sophie's face, pointing to the nearly microscopic black holes that covered the outside like tiny pinpricks. "Essenseal is an enzyme secreted by the colony of microorganisms living inside this sphere. As elves we can't see the enzyme, smell it, or taste it without reveldust. But the ogres can. And if they don't detect it on someone walking through their city, they know they're dealing with an intruder." Sophie frowned at her glowing red fingers. "If the scent is so strong, why didn't Sandor notice it?" "Goblins are the ogres' greatest enemies—aside from humans. Of course their defense mechanisms evade goblin detection. The fact that elves can't see or smell them is just a bonus." Sophie had to agree with the ogres' logic—though once again she found herself wishing that Sandor's goblin supersenses were a lot more super. "So then what does aromark on the tracker do?" she asked, bracing for the worst possible answer. Still, nothing could've prepared her. Lady Cadence held her green finger next to Sophie's red ones. "Green would mean it's a tracker, Sophie. Red means it's a homing device. All of their weapons—and they do have them, though they're supposedly for 'defense only'—use aromark as their targeting system. As long as they lock onto the enzyme, they're guaranteed a direct hit." "You're sure Lady Cadence said piquatine?" Elwin asked as he searched the shelves of tiny bottles that lined the largest wall in the Healing Center. He cringed when Sophie nodded, removing his iridescent spectacles and resting them

on his forehead, amidst his wild, dark hair. "Well then. I'm going to have to prep your skin." Nothing about that sentence sounded good. "Relax, Foster," Keefe said as he flopped back in the bed across from her. "I swear I'm feeling more stress vibes from you than from Gigantor over there." He pointed to Elwin's office, where Sandor was pacing back and forth, using his triangular-shaped gadget to convey the newest information to the captain of his army. The thin wall that separated the office from the larger treatment area muffled most of the conversation. But Sophie could still hear the tremble in Sandor's squeaky voice. "I look like I've been dipped in foxfire," Keefe said, wiggling his glowing red fingers. "Think Dame Alina would give me extra credit if I told her I did this for school spirit?" "I think Dame Alina is more worried that we might have gotten aromark somewhere else," Sophie told him. The entire Foxfire campus was currently being swept with Lady Cadence's supply of reveldust, even though Lady Cadence had assured Dame Alina that ogre enzymes only transferred when they were freshly released—like how ink only smeared when it was wet—and only stuck to living skin through direct contact with the aromark's source.

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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." Alden smiled. "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."

Cover 9

Relevant results in this cover: 2

Content pages range: [162, 170]

Groups range: [58, 59]

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

-
- 000058.txt — ranks: #60
 - 000059.txt — ranks: #61

Group 58/59

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TWENTY-SIX

UH-OH, DID SOMETHING happen?" Fitz asked as he stumbled into the solarium carrying a black trunk that looked like it weighed as much as he did. "You haven't heard from Grady and Edaline, right?"

Sophie double-checked her Imparter. "Nope. Still nothing."

Fitz set the trunk down in the center of the X and took the empty sleeping bag closest to Sophie. "Then why do you look like you want to tug on your eyelashes?"

Sophie sighed. "Biana told me about a conversation she overheard Alvar having. I'm trying to figure out what it could mean."

"What conversation?" Dex asked as he brought an equally enormous trunk and set it down next to the one Fitz brought.

Biana repeated the story while Dex sank onto the only empty sleeping bag, between the two Vackers.

"So . . . you're worried that Project Moonlark is a bust?" Fitz guessed.

Sophie couldn't look at him as she nodded.

"Okay, but even if it is," Fitz said, "haven't you hated feeling like you're some sort of puppet?"

"Yeah, but it's way scarier thinking there's no safety net," Sophie mumbled. "I didn't like feeling controlled—but I did like thinking the good guys had a plan."

"I don't know, wouldn't it be kinda weird if the Black Swan knew all these horrible things were going to happen and didn't do anything to stop them?" Fitz asked.

"And just because parts of their plans have changed doesn't mean all of them have," Biana added. "You still have crazy powerful abilities. And you have us. We've got this!"

"I guess," Sophie said. "I just wish we had any idea what the Neverseen are planning, or what the Lodestar Initiative actually is. I mean, why would your brother be talking about 'test subjects' and 'criterion'? That sounds like some sort of experiment."

Dex sucked in a breath. "Okay—this is going to sound crazy—but hear me out. What if the Lodestar Initiative is the Neverseen's version of Project Moonlark?"

"I'm not sure I know what that means," Biana told him.

"I do," Fitz said. "And please tell me you don't actually think they're trying to build another Sophie."

"Why not?" Dex asked. "They've known she exists for a while. Don't you think they'd try to do something to counter her?"

"They did," Fitz argued. "They tried to find her. And capture her. And now they're trying to control her."

"Maybe," Dex said. "But they could do all of that and try to re-create her."

"Can everyone stop talking about me like I'm Dr. Frankenstein's monster?" Sophie grumbled.

"Is that a human thing?" Biana asked.

"Yeah, it's this big scary guy with bolts in his neck, who's pieced together from dead things," Fitz said. "I remember seeing pictures of it one of the times I visited the Forbidden Cities. I think it was a movie?"

"And a book," Sophie mumbled.

"Sorry," Dex said. "I didn't mean it like that. But . . . it would explain what Alvar meant by 'test subjects.' I've also heard the word 'criterion' used with DNA and genetics and stuff."

Sophie hugged Ella so tight all the stuffing bulged in the elephant's head.

"Hey," Biana said, patting Sophie's shoulder. "Even if he's right, it doesn't change anything about you—or Keefe."

"I don't think he's right," Fitz added. "Keefe's mom helped create the Lodestar Initiative, and she's definitely not a scientist. And don't even try to convince me Keefe's their version of Sophie. He's older than she is. And he wasn't raised by humans. And he only has one ability. And he's not nearly as awesome."

He grinned at Sophie, but she was too busy panicking to return it.

"He does have a photographic memory, though," Biana said—which did not help. "And his empathy is more powerful than other Empaths. Do you think his mom could've had his genes tweaked somehow after he was born?"

"I guess we could ask Forkle about it," Dex said.

"And he'll tell us we're being ridiculous," Fitz assured him.

"Maybe. But they did for sure mess with Keefe's memories," Dex argued. "So maybe all they did was plant secrets in his head, like the Black Swan did with Sophie. You have to admit it's at least possible."

Sophie wasn't going to admit anything.

It was too weird.

Too wrong.

Too . . . no.

Just no.

She tried to bury the theory deep—lock it away with all the other Things She Didn't Want to Think About.

But the idea had already dug its claws in deep.

So had the bigger, scarier question it raised, echoing around her head on autorepeat.

If Dex was right, and the Lodestar Initiative was the Neverseen's version of Project Moonlark . . . did that mean Keefe was meant to be her nemesis?

TWENTY-SEVEN

YOU WERE MADE to be the hero," Sophie mumbled. "I was raised to be something . . . else."

"What?" Fitz, Biana, and Dex all asked.

"That's what Keefe told me. At the Lake of Blood. When he ran off with the Neverseen. Do you think he meant . . . ?"

She couldn't finish the question.

"Hey," Fitz said, scooting next to her on her sleeping bag. "I don't think it means what you're thinking it means. Brant and Fintan were there—and Keefe needed to convince them he was joining for real. He had to sound like a guy trying to explain to his friend why he was betraying her—and remember, I'm saying that as someone who still has trust issues with Keefe."

"I guess," she said quietly. "But you think it proves your theory, don't you, Dex?"

"I don't know," Dex said. "I mean . . . it could. But I am also just guessing."

"Exactly," Biana jumped in. "All we really know is that we don't know anything."

Somehow, that was the most depressing thought of all.

Sophie flopped onto her back, rubbing the knot under her ribs and trying to tie all the complicated things she was feeling into it. She stared at the sky through the curved glass ceiling, wishing she could stretch out her consciousness to Keefe and pummel him with questions. But it was still early in the day—way too soon for their check-in. And she probably didn't want to know what he was doing anyway.

Group 59/59

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The next three pages were a detailed account of all the different notes and clues and hoops the rebels made Jolie jump through, trying to decide if they could trust her. She'd been to more than a dozen of their "meetings"—which were nothing more than her finding another note they'd left her—before she even learned they called themselves the Neverseen. And for months after, they continued to live up to the name.

She'd find random messages, or hear whispers—but never meet an actual member. She was starting to think the whole thing was just shadows and games when—

"Hey, Sophie?" Edaline asked, nearly giving Sophie a heart attack.

She gave a small smile as she set a bowl of pink soup and a plate of black-and-white speckled cubes on the floor next to Sophie. "Looks like you found a way to translate that."

Sophie nodded. "I'm writing a version you can read when I'm finished—not that I'm learning much."

Fascinating as Jolie's history was, she hadn't given any actual answers. And it wasn't like Sophie could skim ahead. The confusing runes made it way too easy to miss something crucial.

"What is this stuff?" Sophie asked, pushing the slimy cubes around the plate.

"They're not the best tasting, I'll admit," Edaline warned her. "I tried some as I was slicing them and they're rather sour. It's a fruit called clarifava. The gnomes gave it to me, because it's supposed to help the body resist the influence of technology. Honestly, I have no idea how that works. But I know that gnomes believe anything beyond nature is corrupting. And when they heard about your circlet they insisted you eat a serving every night. Claimed it would clear your head and sharpen your body's defenses. So I thought I'd leave it up to you if you wanted to try it."

"It can't hurt, right?" Sophie decided—though she regretted the decision when the first bite zinged the glands near her ears.

“Rather sour” was a bit of an understatement.

Still, she forced herself to finish the plate, and by the time she’d choked it all down, she did feel a little better. It could’ve been the placebo effect, but her headache seemed like it had dulled around the edges.

“I actually think it helped,” she said, shoving aside her soup so she could get back to work. “Can you thank the gnomes for me the next time you see them?”

Edaline pushed her soup back to her. “I will. But you still have to eat some actual dinner, Sophie. The journal can wait ten more minutes.”

Sophie scowled, but didn’t argue, devouring the still-too-hot soup so fast, she was pretty sure she burned off all her taste buds.

“Okay?” she asked, showing Edaline the mostly empty bowl.

“I suppose.” She snapped her fingers, making the bowl disappear, then again to bring a plate of custard bursts. “I made them with caramelized sugar this time, and I have to say, it might be my best batch ever. I’ll have to remember it the next time I bring them to Brant.”

“Can I get in on those?” Grady asked, helping himself to two as he joined them. “What? I need one for each hand!”

Sophie smiled—and totally copied him.

And Edaline was right, they were the best custard bursts she’d made. Rich and creamy, like the world’s best crème brûlée had been stuffed inside the thin sugary shell. She could’ve eaten the whole plate—or, she could have until Grady killed the mood.

“A package just arrived for Sandor from the Black Swan,” he said quietly. “They gave him a heavy white cloak and some sort of silver gadget to help him breathe at the high altitude.”

Sophie fiddled with the flowers on her carpet, not looking at Grady as she asked, “Did they tell him any more about their plan?”

“Actually they were surprisingly specific. I still had to read between the rhyming lines, but it sounds

like they want everyone to meet at Kenric's Wanderling at sunrise, where they'll find whatever they need to leap to that awful cave you told them about."

"And then?"

"Then they'll find a hidden door that the Neverseen should think is a secret path to the Sanctuary. But it actually dead-ends in a small cavern, where they'll wait while the Neverseen set up whatever ambush they're planning. Then the Black Swan's dwarves will ambush them. And you don't have to worry about Silveny. Somehow they've convinced Jurek to secure both her and Greyfell for the night with unbreakable chains. And Keefe, Fitz, and Biana will never leave the cavern. All the fighting will be done by the Black Swan."

"Is that it?" Sophie asked, wondering if she was missing something. "That sounds so . . . simple."

"Simple plans are always the best."

"Maybe. But . . . so . . . Fitz, Biana, and Keefe are just going to sit in a cave and hide while the Black Swan attacks? Why do they even need to be there?"

"Because the Black Swan needs the Neverseen to see another easy, unsuspecting target and have their guard down. It sounds like they're basically re-creating the same scenario that happened in the cave you and Keefe visited. Only this time you guys know they're coming. And that is the only difference that matters."

"I guess," she agreed, not sure why it felt so disappointing.

She should be glad that her friends were going to be safe. But somehow it felt wrong to catch the bad guys so easily. For all their notes and theatrics, she'd expected more from the Black Swan than dwarves popping out of the snow.

"They're going to be okay," Grady promised, misunderstanding her frown. "Sandor will make sure of it. And if their Pyrokinetic is with them . . ."

He didn't finish the sentence. But the look he shared with Sandor made it clear an arrangement had been made between them. A deadly one.

"Are you okay with this?" Edaline asked, reaching for Sophie's hand. "I know it can be hard to sit on the sidelines."

"It's weird," Sophie admitted. "But . . . I have stuff to keep me busy."

She tensed when she remembered Grady was in the room.