

# Cover 1

Relevant results in this cover: 8

Content pages range: [2, 17]

Groups range: [1, 5]

## Deep intent (search) query

Interested in example of human technology being presented as equal or superior to magic, or anything that will make me feel proud of human species technology. Technopath is not considered human. Elven tech weapons is not considered human. Only interested in stuff that essentially wouldn't work without the human tech involved, and has to be impressive- a worthy opponent to this elven magic and tech.

## Ranking query (reranker)

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- 000001.txt — ranks: #1 · #13
- 000002.txt — ranks: #2 · #5
- 000003.txt — ranks: #3 · #25
- 000004.txt — ranks: #4
- 000005.txt — ranks: #6

## Group 1/25

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She brought the fire toward the Noxflares—but Maruca grabbed Marella’s arm. “Are you sure this is safe?” “Not really,” Marella admitted. “It’s fire—it’s never safe. But... maybe you should put a force field around me and the boulder. That way if anything happens, I’m the only one who has to deal with it.” “Yeah, but... you’d be trapped with it,” Sophie argued. Marella shrugged, and the gold highlights in her hair reflected the fire as she said, “I can handle a few flames.” Sophie was pretty sure it would be more than a few. But before she could argue, Marella told her, “Trust me, I’m not planning on joining the ‘almost dying’ club anytime soon. I’m a big fan of living. But... I really want to try this. I know it probably sounds weird, but it feels like Fintan showed me that memory for a reason. And maybe this is why.” Sophie tugged out an itchy eyelash before she nodded. “Just be careful—and if there’s anything I can do...” “I’ll let you know,” Marella promised. She waited until Maruca had formed a flickering force field around her and the boulder—then lowered her torch toward the Noxflares. Sophie held her breath as the vine erupted with white flames. But nothing changed. “That’s only the first layer,” Marella reminded everyone as she added purple flames to the torch, letting them burn for a second before she added them to the Noxflares. She did the same with the yellow fire. Then added the pink—jumping back when the Noxflares sparked and shimmered like fireworks. But no illusions melted away. And the rocks didn’t suddenly glow with power. “Are we ready to give up yet?” Keefe asked. “Nope,” Marella told him. “Fintan kept saying that something was missing, even after he added the pink. So I think there’s still one more step. I just don’t know what kind of flame it would be. Green? Red? Or...” “Or?” Sophie prompted when Marella squatted and grabbed one of the smaller pieces of rock. “There’s a lot of heat in this thing,” Marella murmured, squeezing the rock in her fist. “Maybe it absorbed some of that special light from the sixth unmapped star or something. I could find out. Spark it into a flame and see what happens.” “What do you think the odds are that it’ll explode on you?” Fitz asked. “I don’t know,” Marella admitted. “But... my instincts are telling me it’ll be okay. I think I need to trust them.” She closed her eyes and squeezed the rock tighter, gritting her teeth as her whole body shook. Five seconds passed. Ten. Then a strangled grunt slipped through Marella’s lips as pale blue flames curled out of the rock like smoke. “Here goes nothing,” she whispered before sending the blue fire straight to the Noxflares. They flared brighter than the sun, whiting out everything as Sophie screamed at Maruca to lower the force field so they could get Marella out of there. “No, it’s okay,” Marella called from somewhere in the glaring white. “I’m okay. And I think it worked, but... it’s weird. You’ll see once the flames burn themselves out.” Sophie circled the force field, desperate for a glimpse of her friend—and whatever was in there with her. And on her third time around, the light faded. “What is that?” Sophie whispered, rubbing her eyes to make sure they’d adjusted properly. She’d never seen anything like it—even in the Lost Cities. The rocks had vanished, replaced with what looked like some sort of small, round... gateway. The burning Noxflares hovered in the air—a perfect circle of flickering blue, yellow, white, purple, and pink. And everything around them was the same normal Elysian scenery. But inside... Sophie couldn’t tell. It looked very, very bright and very, very colorful. “Can you lower the force field?” Sophie asked Maruca. “What are you going to do?” Keefe asked as Sophie stumbled closer. She had no idea. She just had to get a better look, because her gut was telling her, This is it. This is what you’ve been looking for. The power for stellarlune is in there. Sophie picked up a rock as she approached, warning everyone to duck before she tossed it into the center of the burning circle as soon as the force field blinked away and— The rock disappeared. Or

maybe she just couldn't see it anymore, because she could still hear it crashing and clanging as it landed somewhere just beyond them. "Is this an illusion?" Sophie asked Vespera, who was staring at the fiery circle with a mix of awe and confusion. "If it is, then it is remarkable," Vespera breathed. "And if it is not, then it is impossible." Sophie turned to her friends. "I need to check." "What are you going to do—climb through?" Keefe asked. "Maybe," Sophie admitted. "It can't be that much weirder than teleporting, right?" No one could necessarily argue with that—though Sandor certainly tried. But Sophie didn't see any other option. "If you go, I should be in front of you," Maruca told her. "Just in case the situation needs a force field." "And I'd better go too, to make sure the fire doesn't close in on you two," Marella added. There wasn't space for anyone else, but Keefe and Fitz moved closer, promising to drag them back if anything tried to trap them—and Sandor paced around them with his weapon drawn. "What are we doing?" Sophie whispered, sharing a look with Marella and Maruca that seemed to confirm they were all seriously questioning their life choices. But they still stepped closer and closer, slowly leaning past the circle of flames to see... Stained glass. Lots of it. Thousands of panes in thousands of colors. Forming curved walls that seemed to vanish beyond the Noxflares. "I think it is another illusion," Sophie mumbled. "Or where we are right now is—I don't know. But I wonder..." She reached into her belt and pulled out Dex's Illusion Breaker. "I'm going to hold this in the light of the flames on three," she warned her friends. Maruca's palms glowed white and Marella held her torch up higher, all of them holding their breath as Sophie said, "Three... two... one..." and raised the crystal cube near the flickering fire. Beams of light exploded everywhere, and Sophie forgot to close her eyes, too distracted by the world dissolving around her. She could hear screams and crashes, but her head was spinning, spinning, spinning—and then she was falling back and back and back, into... a pair of strong arms. "Easy there, Foster," Keefe said. "I guess that's why Dex warned us that the Illusion Breaker could cause dizziness." "Is that what happened?" Sophie asked, blinking hard, trying to get her eyes to focus. "Was it just an illusion?" "Honestly? I have no idea what's going on. See for yourself." Keefe helped her stand back up, and she realized the burning Noxflares were gone—and they were definitely still in Elysian, surrounded by rolling hills and fall-colored trees. But beyond that was a massive dome of intricate stained glass, closing everything in. "What is this place?" Sophie asked, wondering if the dome was the reason she hadn't been able to teleport to Elysian the first time. Though if it were, how had the starstone let them slip through? "I have no idea," Vespera murmured, reminding Sophie she was still with them. "So many illusions on top of illusions on top of illusions." "So... do you think this dome was built to keep something out?" Keefe asked. "Or keep someone in?" "I was just asking myself the same thing," a new voice said—one that made Sophie want to scream loud enough to shatter all the glass. "Whatever it is," Lady Gisela said as she stepped out of the shadows and smiled her much-too-tight smile, "it makes for a very convenient trap, don't you think?" FORTY-NINE IF YOU WANTED TO TRAP us, you shouldn't have come here alone!" Sandor snarled, raising his sword and charging toward Gisela like a gorgodon on a rampage. Gisela's smile stretched wider. "But I'm not alone." She clapped her hands, and two enormous beasts tore out of the ground—growling blurs of fangs, claws, and muscle that slammed into Sandor, knocking his weapon from his hands and grabbing him by his throat as they dragged him back into the earth. NO! Sophie barely had time to scream—barely had time to register the glowing white force field that flared to life around her. Too late. Too late. Too late. "Before you do anything you'll regret," Gisela warned as Sophie's vision rimmed with red and she dove into her boiling rage, letting it sear through her veins, "you should know that the only reason your bodyguard is simply a captive at the moment—instead of getting shredded into tiny pieces by two very hungry trolls—is me. Without my regular commands, your bodyguard becomes dinner." She grinned and tapped her ear, highlighting the silver earpiece running along the outer edge. "My Technopath has been very busy since we teamed up properly, making sure I have a means to control these unruly beasts. After all, what good is having an army of trolls in my arsenal if they're going to run wild during battle and forget who their enemy is? Empress Pernille has been quite impressed with the result. She was all but ready to abandon her enhanced newborn project before I reached out." "So that's how you got the trolls to cancel their treaty negotiations and turn against the Council?" Sophie asked, trying to keep Gisela talking so she wouldn't call any more trolls—while her brain kept screaming, SANDOR, SANDOR, SANDOR. She would get him back. Even if she had to claw her way into the earth. "That definitely helped," Gisela said, patting her sleek blond updo, which was draped in a net of ability-blocking metal chain. "But the real turning point was when I offered them more land. It's amazing how much loyalty a few human islands can buy." Sophie stumbled back—the words cutting through her like a throwing star—and she was grateful someone was there to catch her and keep her steady. She'd forgotten about the disappearing islands her sister had asked her to look into. How many other vital clues had she ignored? "Being a leader isn't easy, is it?" Gisela asked, her voice dripping with mock sympathy. "There's so much more to it than setting a fire and carving a symbol into the dirt, isn't there?" "You're one to talk!" Fitz snapped, making Sophie realize he was the one keeping her steady. So where was Keefe? She craned her neck,

spotting him crouched near the far edge of their force field, resting his head in his hands. He's okay, Fitz transmitted. I already checked to make sure he wasn't having a breakdown. But he's just trying to find a command to control his mom. I guess his ability isn't cooperating. Of course it isn't, Sophie grumbled. The one time we actually need it. Exactly—but I'm sure he'll get there. So I'm just trying to keep his mom talking in the meantime. That's what I was doing too, she admitted, mostly so I can figure out how to get to Sandor. Fitz tightened his grip on her shoulders. We'll figure it out, he promised before he asked Gisela, "How many times have you been overthrown now?" "Too many," she said, trailing her fingers along her cheeks, as if she could still feel the scars she'd gotten when Fintan took over. Removing them had left her skin stretched unnaturally tight. "But now I get to gather a far superior group. And it was very kind of you to bring me a Psionipath and a Pyrokinetic." "I would never—" Maruca started, but Gisela raised a hand. "I'm sure you're going to tell me you'll never join my cause—just like I'm sure your little friend holding the fireballs"—she gestured to Marella—"is planning to launch them in some sort of dramatic escape. But that's because you haven't grasped the gravity of this situation. I didn't go to all this trouble to track you down just to talk—and no, I'm not going to tell you how I found you. I'm also not looking for volunteers. If you fight me, your bodyguard will die. Your only choice is to cooperate." "You say that as if it is some drastic change," Vespera called from the shadow of one of the trees, stepping forward and smoothing the skirt of her blue gown. For a second Sophie wondered if Vespera was going to try to talk her way back onto Gisela's side. But then she said, "I warned you from the beginning that our philosophies are opposite and could not be combined. But you thought you could convince me. Then you thought you could force me. Just like you thought you could force your son. And the Shade. But you are too weak to exercise the control you crave. Why do you think I was able to take over your entire organization?" "Not my entire organization," Gisela corrected, tapping her earpiece again. "And it's funny that you stand there with such bravado, despite being completely alone. This alliance you formed in your effort to team up against me"—she pointed to Sophie and the rest of the group—"how interesting that you're not shielded under their force field." "I do not need to be," Vespera told her. "We both know I can defend myself. Just like we both know that you are all talk and no follow-through. You have kept your hands mostly clean of all the darker responsibilities that come with this rebellion, relying instead on empty threats. You focus far too much on your son. And you lack the necessary ruthlessness—" "Yes, the ruthlessness," Gisela cut in. "You love to throw that word around. And I can see why you believe it doesn't apply to me. I've been very careful with what I've shown you, since it's far easier to be underestimated. It causes people to make fatal mistakes. Like you—you knew I believed I'd find more of my power stones in Elysian. You even went so far as to team up with my son and his friends in an attempt to beat me. And clearly we've all misunderstood whatever this place is." She frowned at the stained-glass dome. "But that doesn't change the fact that you never asked me where I keep the stones I have left—or what I plan to do with them." She smiled with the last words and snapped her fingers, making a shard of flashing crystal appear in her palm. Alarms erupted in Sophie's head. If that crystal was what she thought it was, this was about to get very bad. "I let you underestimate me for too long," Gisela said. "And now it's time for you to see that I can be plenty ruthless." "Get down!" Sophie screamed as Gisela flung the shard at Vespera. "And reinforce—" The crystal exploded, shaking the universe as Sophie dove to the ground and covered her head, with Fitz right beside her. Maruca's force field held back most of the debris, but the dust seeped through, leaving them hacking and choking as they stumbled to their feet to see that... very little had actually changed. The stained-glass dome hadn't fractured. The trees stood unscathed. But one patch of grass now displayed a jagged, twisted shape—the same patch of grass where Vespera had been standing. And the world turned sideways. Especially when Sophie noticed the colors streaking through the tangled form. Blue like Vespera's gown. Black like her hair. And lots of red. Her brain didn't know how to process it. But the proof was right there. So she made herself think the words. Vespera is dead.

## Group 2/25

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systems. This matches the user's criteria for human technology being equal or superior.",
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Sophie wanted to do more than hope—she wanted to act. There had to be missing something, some deeper meaning behind what Gethen had said, or some detail in the Exillium records they'd overlooked to help them find the Psionipath. She returned to her tree house prepared to gather her friends and come up with a plan. But they'd already gathered—all except Keefe—and were waiting around the waterfall. Dex held up a gadget that looked even crazier than his Evader. "I figured out how to break into the Lumenaria database!" It looked like he'd wired pieces of Imparters together and shaped them into a pyramid, with six long antennas sticking out of the top point. Five were made of different metals—gold, silver, bronze, copper, and iron. And the sixth looked like a twig. "I know the stick part is weird," Dex said, "but I needed this thing to broadcast in all six technologies. The elves, ogres, trolls, goblins, and dwarves were easy to figure out, but I had no idea what to do for the gnomes. I tried solar-powered stuff, but it still seemed too techie. Then I saw some branches on the ground and thought, why not?" Only Dex would decide to jab a gadget with a stick. "You should've heard him squeal when it worked," Fitz said. "I thought a banshee had snuck into the room." "Ignore my son," Della told Dex. "You deserve to be excited." "Yeah, I can't believe you figured it out so fast," Biana told him. Sophie smiled. "Dex is a genius." Dex's grin turned supernova. He pressed the base of the gadget, making the pyramid glow green. He had to wave it around a few times, like when humans try to search for a stronger cell phone signal, but eventually a crackly hum filled the room and a fuzzy hologram appeared. Sophie squinted at the image. "Is that a scroll?" "A super old one. The database is filled with them. I've just started going through. I was looking for stuff about the Wildwood Colony, but this one caught my eye because of all the smudges." He pointed to black smears covering whole paragraphs. "These runes have been blacked out, which means someone is trying to keep something secret. But they must've run low on ink because at the end it's thin enough for a few words to peek through—and if I'm reading them right, it proves the ogres have something that gives them leverage with the Council." It took a moment for the gravity of the revelation to hit. "So . . . you're saying the ogres have a way to control the Councillors?" Sophie asked. "It kinda makes sense," Fitz said quietly. "Alvar's always talking about the crazy restrictions the ogres put on him when he visits Ravagog, and how none of the other creatures would get away with them." "Right," Dex agreed. "And the really weird part is, you can see it right in the treaty—I checked. The treaties for the other species basically say, 'We will allow you to remain free because you will do whatever we tell you.' But the ogre treaty is like, 'We promise we won't use our abilities on you, or visit your cities, or ask too many questions about anything you're doing, and you're allowed to continue building weapons as long as you promise not to use them, and you can do all kinds of other dangerous things too and we won't stop you, and if we do, you have the right to declare war.' Why would the Council agree to any of that? It doesn't make sense. Until you look at this." He twisted the gadget again, and the hologram zoomed in to part of the scroll where the ink had run thin. Sophie squinted at the runes peeking through the faded ink. "What does it say?" "You can't read it?" Biana asked her. "Only if it's written in the Black Swan's code." Mr. Forkle had taught her mind to translate their special cipher runes, which came in handy—until she needed to read anything in normal runes. Great plan, guys! "It's hard to tell without most of the context," Dex said, "but this sentence is talking about how the ogres will retain possession of something that's clearly super important, and the word they tried to black out is 'drakostomes.'" Sophie frowned. "That sounds like some sort of fungus."

## Group 3/25

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He was right about that. The air in the tunnel smelled like eggs mixed with skunk spray, and cold slimy muck rained down on their heads as they walked. Do you know how the Neverseen found your decoy Sophie asked. I swear it wasn't me Keefe jumped in. I threw my Sencen Crest into the ocean, and Elwin melted off a ton of skin, so I am aromark free. Remind me to thank my mom for that one, by the way. So awesome of her to let me lead my friends into ambushes. The sharpness in his tone made Sophie reach for his hand. I'm fine he promised. But he didn't pull away. We do not blame you, Mr. Sencen, Mr. Forkle said. We assume they used Gethen. We'd been holding him here after we captured him on Mount Everest—but don't worry, we've relocated him to somewhere much harder to reach. And we'll figure out what enzyme they're tracking him with so this won't happen again. Have you learned anything from him Keefe asked, voicing the question Sophie was sure they'd all been thinking. Gethen was the first member of the Neverseen they'd captured. He'd also been one of Sophie and Dex's kidnappers. Not yet, Mr. Forkle said. His mind is . . . tricky. We'll discuss it more later. Right now, I need to get you to your new homes. Sophie wasn't sure which felt stranger—trying to imagine feeling at home with the Black Swan, or the fact that he'd said "homes." Are we going to be living together Biana asked, noticing the plural as well. Of course. Will you be living with us Sophie asked. No. I live in the Lost Cities. I cannot disappear too long without someone noticing my absence. But you lived with humans for twelve years Sophie reminded him. Yes, and someday I'll tell you how I managed to escape anyone's notice. So wait Dex said. Does that mean we could've met members of the Black Swan and didn't know it I'm sure you have, Mr. Dizznee. Many of us are fans of your father's store. Slurps and Burps was the Lost Cities' most popular apothecary. Sophie could understand how a covert group would find their serums handy, since many could alter appearances. But it was strange to think she might've passed the real Mr. Forkle shopping in the cluttered aisles. And if the Black Swan hid among them, surely the Neverseen did as well. Sophie wondered if she'd seen the rebels in the streets of Atlantis, or if their kids went to school with her at Foxfire. She ran through a mental list of possible suspects—the primary being her longtime rival, Stina Heks—as Biana said, So basically, you're all two different people Or three, Mr. Forkle corrected. Perhaps even four or five. And yes, that can be rather challenging. He lifted his double chin, revealing a registry pendant hidden underneath. A clever Technopath rigged this to communicate where I want the Council to think I am. But it only covers blocks of time. Should I have done that to our pendants Dex asked. No, you five have already drawn the Council's suspicion. Better to sever your ties and seek refuge in our hideout. Any chance we'll be leaping soon Keefe asked as a blob of slime dripped into his hair. We won't be leaping. The ogres have a gadget that can follow the trail of a leap to its source. It's how they restrict entry to their cities and monitor intruders. Now that we know the Neverseen are working with the ogres, we must assume they'll try to track us. So we can't leap anymore Fitz asked. Not here, when they're so close. The words echoed through the tunnel, turning every shadow into a cloaked figure. If they're close, why aren't we going after them Keefe asked. We fight the fights we can win, Mr. Sencen. Right now, the Neverseen have too many advantages. They're hidden somewhere in the city, likely somewhere with great potential for human casualties. That's why I have our transport waiting downriver, where they'd never think to look. Uh, not to ask the obvious question Dex jumped in, but why not have us meet you there in the first place We have reasons for working in riddles, Mr. Dizznee, and convenience is never a consideration. But the trail you followed was incredibly secure. Maybe, if you ignore all the human technology I had to handle, Dex mumbled. And you're lucky Sophie remembered all those weird facts

about Florence. Is that what you think it was Luck Sophie sighed. Exactly how many weird memories have you given me As many as you'll need. How can you possibly know that Fitz asked Very careful planning. Sophie stopped walking. Planning for what Please keep moving, Miss Foster. We do not have time for such discussions. You're seriously not going to tell her Don't you think she deserves to know She deserves many things, Mr. Forkle said. Most important, she deserves a choice. And in order to give her that choice, she must discover her purpose on her own. There are also things we must keep secret—for her protection and ours. Sandor always says that secrets hinder his ability to protect me Sophie reminded him. That applies to you keeping secrets from him. Not the other way around, Mr. Forkle replied. We must hurry. Our rides won't wait forever. Sophie glanced at her friends, and she didn't have to be a Telepath to know what they were thinking. After all the risks they'd taken—all the sacrifices they'd made—they'd been hoping the Black Swan would be more . . . cooperative. But it was too late to turn back. They had to keep moving forward and hope they could convince the Black Swan to work with them. She clutched the cache in her pocket, glad to know she had a secret of her own as she followed Mr. Forkle out of the tunnel. The river was empty. No people. No boats. No sign of whatever ride Mr. Forkle had arranged—until he blew into a slim copper whistle. It made no sound, but the brownish water rippled. Bubbles followed, growing larger until a scaly gray-green head popped out of the water. Plesiosaurs Keefe asked as five more dinosaur heads burst out of the water. Eckodons, Mr. Forkle corrected. Though Miss Foster likely knows them as Nessie. Sophie smiled, no longer stunned when human myths turned out to be based on reality. The creatures did have long, hooked necks like the Loch Ness Monster, but their noses were a bit more pointed, and long gills lined their cheeks. These are the dinosaurs that use sound vortexes, right Fitz asked. Precisely why I chose them, Mr. Forkle agreed. They will be slower than light leaping, but faster than many other methods. They will be slower than light leaping, but faster than many other methods. And the Neverseen cannot track us underwater. And the Neverseen cannot track us underwater. Sophie repeated as he handed everyone a clear slimy membrane and told them to wrap it around their bags to keep them dry. How will we breathe Yeah, I can only hold my breath for fifteen minutes Dex said. Fifteen minutes How can you hold your breath that long Mr. Forkle explained. It's a mind over matter skill. One very few take the time to learn. My dad said the stuffy nobles underestimate it, Dex said. He made us practice all the time. Your father is wise, Mr. Forkle told him. Nevertheless, you will not have to hold your breath today. I brought lufterators. He passed them each a T-shaped gadget and showed how they put the longer end in their mouths and let the other piece cover their lips and nose. It felt like sucking air through a teeny straw, and it made Sophie dizzy. But after a few tries, her lungs fell into a slower rhythm. Do you have any more lufterators Biana asked. One is all you'll need, Mr. Forkle assured her. I'd still feel better if I had a spare, Biana insisted. I can check yours to make sure it's working, if you want, Dex offered. No, Biana said, a bit too quickly. I'll just . . . wait here and you guys can send someone back for me with another. Don't be absurd, Miss Vacker, Mr. Forkle said. We're all leaving now. Biana shot Sophie a desperate Help me! look, but Sophie didn't understand the problem. Keefe grabbed Biana's wrist. It feels like you're hiding something I agree, Mr. Forkle said. So let's see what it is, shall we You don't have permission to read my thoughts Biana shouted. I do not need it if you're endangering us. Mr. Forkle closed his eyes and Sophie knew there was nothing Biana could do to stop him. Even she couldn't block him—and he'd designed her mind to be impenetrable. Biana turned to her brother. Please, don't let him do this. It's already done, Mr. Forkle said, staring at the empty space behind her. It appears we have a stowaway. SIX How can we have a stowaway Fitz asked as Mr. Forkle shouted, Show yourself! Nothing happened for a moment. Then Della appeared behind Biana. Mom Fitz said, rushing to tackle-hug her before he shouted at his sister. HOW COULD YOU KEEP THIS SECRET I made her swear not to say anything, Della explained. And I only involved her because I needed to hold on to someone while we were teleporting. Why the subterfuge Mr. Forkle asked. Please tell me you don't doubt our ability to protect your children Quite the opposite, Della straightened her gown, looking like an ocean goddess in aquamarine silk. I'm here to join the Black Swan. The words seemed to dangle, waiting for someone to reach out and grab them. Does Dad know Fitz asked. Of course. He wanted to join, but we decided he'd be more useful if he stayed working with the Council. And my talents are far better suited for covert activities. Ms. Vacker Mr. Forkle started. Della, she corrected. Your offer is very generous, Ms. Della, Mr. Forkle emphasized with a slight smile. But we already have a Vanisher working with us. No one can vanish the way I can. Not even my son—and I'm sure you've heard how valuable Alvar has been to the Council. She blinked out of sight, reappearing a second later knee-deep in the river. Sophie wasn't sure what was crazier, how fast Della had moved, or how she hadn't caused ripples in the water. Impressive, Mr. Forkle admitted when Della reappeared next to Biana and showed how her gown was still dry. But the question is whether letting you join would be wise. Someone as high profile as yourself Could be an influential advocate, Della finished for him. When the Council finally comes to their senses, do you think the public will instantly trust you The Vacker name may have had a few controversies lately, but it still holds incredible influence and

power. Mr. Forkle studied Della. I see you've already removed your registry pendant. I would never put any of you at risk. Plus, I wanted to prove that I'm committed. And yet you make the commitment too lightly. Do I Della's melodic voice hardened. I've trusted my children—and three others who might as well be my family—to your care. Your children's situation is different, Mr. Forkle argued. We both know we can't leave them to the Council's caprice. But I could protect them on my own, Della vanished again, reappearing with a melder pressed to Mr. Forkle's head. Do not underestimate me, sir. You're not the only one with tricks up their sleeve, Mr. Forkle warned her. He tapped his right temple, and Della's arm dropped to her side. Are you a Mesmer Sophie asked, remembering Grady's similar feats. My tricks are more limited, Mr. Forkle admitted. But the mind is more powerful than the body—never forget that. I won't, Della said, vanishing the same instant Mr. Forkle collapsed. She reappeared, balanced on his belly with one of her jeweled shoes pressed against his throat. He kicked and thrashed, but couldn't throw her off. I believe you've proven your point, Ms. Vacker, he wheezed.



## Group 4/25

---

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DEX AVOIDED HER LIKE THE plague for the rest of the day—which was fine. She wasn't talking to him until she got a very sincere apology. Maybe with a little begging. And a present.

She'd planned to stop by Everglen to drop off the necklace, but Biana told her Alden and Della were in Eternalia all day meeting with the Council. So she went back to the cave at Havenfield and tried to trigger memories until sunset. Once again, she found nothing.

She was up in her room transmitting commands to Iggy—her new, very successful method of training him—when Grady knocked on her door.

"Sophie," he called. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes." It was the first word she'd spoken to him since their talk.

He cracked the door enough to slip his head through, looking more uncomfortable than she felt. "Sorry to interrupt. A package arrived for you."

He held out a small parcel wrapped in brown paper. When she didn't move, he set it on the floor. "I guess I'll leave it here. Um... good night."

It was easy to hate Grady for what he was doing, but it was also hard. She really did love Grady and Edaline, and she'd thought they loved her. Her eyes blurred with tears as she tore off the brown paper, unwrapping a silver orb and a note.

"You must help them." Followed by three names: "Connor, Kate, and Natalie Freeman."

Her hands shook as the silver orb came alive at her touch, the word *spyball* glowing across the center. She'd never seen one before, but she'd heard kids talk about them. They could show you anyone, anytime, anywhere in the world. You had to apply for a special permit to have one. Still, she couldn't resist whispering, "Show me Connor, Kate, and Natalie Freeman."

Light flashed and the Spyball displayed three people huddled together.

The rest of the world disappeared.

Her mom's hair was longer, her dad looked a little thinner, and Amy looked older, but it was definitely her human family. Three echoes of a life where she thought she didn't belong. But they had loved her—which was more than she had here.

She wanted to reach through the orb and touch them, but she had to settle for watching as they huddled on the floor of a crowded room.

Why were they on the floor?

Her eyes found the words EVACUEE CENTER and she nearly dropped the ball.

They'd been evacuated. Which meant the fires were near them.

You must help them.

The note's words rang in her ears and she tried to shake them away—tried to remind herself she was being manipulated. But she couldn't take her eyes off the three people she'd once loved more than anything—the three people she still loved—looking tired and afraid as a deadly, unquenchable fire threatened them.

You must help them.

Something inside her clicked into place.

Her family never would've abandoned her. She couldn't abandon them. She didn't know how, and she didn't know when, but she would help them.

For now she would stay with them as a silent supporter, watching from afar.

FORTY-TWO

SOPHIE DIDN'T SLEEP.

She barely blinked.

The Spyball felt like a magic window that could close anytime, and she didn't want to miss a second of seeing her family.

Even though she'd tried to forget them. Even though they didn't know she existed anymore. Nothing could erase the love she felt for them. So when the sun painted the sky pink and gold, she stashed the Spyball in the bottom one of her desk drawers, dug out her Imparter, and called Alden.

"What happened?" he asked, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes.

"The fires are near my family, aren't they?"

He hesitated before he answered. "Yes, but everything is under control. Why are you asking? Did you get another note?"

She nodded. "It said, 'You must help them.' I know it meant my family." She left out the names and the Spyball. She wasn't ready to give up her only connection to her family—not after almost eight months without them.

"I don't doubt that's what they meant, but you must remember that they're trying to manipulate you. What better way to do that than to use people you love?"

"They're in danger, Alden. There must be something we can do."

"There isn't. Without evidence, we can't make an accusation, and until that accusation is made—or the fires threaten our cities—the Council won't order an investigation. These things take time."

"We don't have time."

"Yes, we do. Listen, I know you're upset, but promise me you won't do anything."

Her jaw set.

“Promise me, Sophie, so I don’t feel like I need to send someone to watch you. Come to Everglen this afternoon, and we’ll see if we can’t find a solution you’re more comfortable with.”

She didn’t want to agree, but she didn’t want a chaperone following her around. “Fine.”

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

“Good girl. I’ll see you after school.”

She stared at the Imparter long after Alden’s image disappeared.

She knew he was right. She was definitely being manipulated. But in all of human history there had never been a firestorm like this. Global. Deadly. Clearly organized. With bright yellow flames.

An elf had to be behind it.

Which meant an elf had to stop it.

She wasn’t going to run to the Council like the Black Swan wanted her to, but she couldn’t sit back anymore. Someone had to do something.

Alden said they needed evidence to make the accusation. She would get it. She didn’t know how, but she would find a way.

She threw on her uniform and raced downstairs to get Iggy’s breakfast so she could leap to Foxfire early. Her plan was to search the libraries for books on evidence laws.

She never made it past the front door.

Another package. Another note. Another pin.

This time the message was slipped inside a bottle. Her hands shook as she dumped the contents into her palm. The little golden flareadon pin glinted against her skin, and she examined the details, trying to understand its significance. The note only made her more confused.

“Left three, down ten, right two. You have everything you need.”

Everything she needed for what?

She examined the bottle—searching for another clue she was missing. It was short and round, with a fluted neck and a wide opening. She nearly dropped it when she realized she’d projected the exact shape into her memory log.

Firecatching.

Lumenite and gold—the way to bottle a generated blaze. The way to bottle Everblaze.

The moonlark and flareadon pins supplied the metals, and she had no doubt the left, down, right directions told her how to use the necklace to leap where the fires were. Paired with the bottle, the gifts gave her everything she’d need to collect a sample of the fire. What better evidence could she provide?

But how was she supposed to get close enough to bottle the flame without killing herself—especially without fire-resistant clothing?

Fire resistant.

Gildie was fire resistant—probably why they gave her the flareadon pin instead of a piece of jewelry. They’d probably brought Gildie to Havenfield—she wouldn’t put anything past them at this point. Was she supposed to guide Gildie with her mind to fly through the fire and collect the sample? Was that possible?

You have everything you need.

The Black Swan seemed to think so.

But then, she'd be doing everything they wanted her to—breaking several major laws in the process—and she couldn't claim ignorance like in the Quintessence debacle. This would be willful. They would punish her. Maybe even with exile.

A huge part of her wanted to leap to Everglen and tell Alden everything so she couldn't be tempted. The other part wouldn't forget her family huddled on the floor, clinging to each other. Or the article the Black Swan gave her: FIRESTORM CLAIMS FIRST VICTIMS.

Whatever consequences she might pay, it was wrong to let people suffer without trying to help. Tiergan said she would make the right decision if the time ever came—and this was the right decision. She knew it.

Before she could change her mind, she grabbed her satchel and ran for Gildie's enclosure. The golden pterodactyl flapped her wings as Sophie entered her cage.

Screech!

It's okay, Sophie transmitted, sending images of glowing flames, hoping to calm Gildie's nerves. Gildie settled on Sophie's wrist as Sophie dug the leaping necklace out of her satchel. Her arm almost collapsed under the weight, but she held strong.

Here goes nothing, she told Gildie as she counted the facets the way the note instructed. When the crystal locked in place, she took a deep breath, clung to Gildie's feet, and let the cobalt blue light pull her away.

## Group 5/25

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the information. This simple human object was essential to solving the mystery.",
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keeper_of_the_lost_cities/txt/book_03_everblaze.txt | chars:544656-548617 | tokens:940]"
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The square in the center was a mirror.

Got you Sophie whispered tracing her fingers along the edge.

The mirror felt slightly less flush with the wall than the other panes and when she pressed the upper right corner the mirror popped out swinging on an invisible hinge. Her hands shook as she pushed the door aside revealing a sliver of a compartment barely deep enough to pass her fingertips with a slim lavender journal tucked inside.

The cover felt cold as she traced her finger along the elegant runes drawn in the center and it took Sophie's mind a second to translate the word:

Reflections.

Jolie had written it using the Black Swan's cipher. And yet when Sophie turned to the first page she found row after row of carefully shaped runes that formed nothing more than gibberish. Nonsensical words mixed with lines and squiggles and dots and dashes. For page after page after page.

You've got to be kidding me Sophie grumbled flipping the book upside down like that would somehow fix it.

It didn't.

Still something felt familiar about the runes.

She closed her eyes hoping a memory was about to trigger.

What's that Edaline asked making Sophie stumble backward into the bookshelf.

Sorry you scared me Sophie mumbled trying to hide the journal behind her back. But she knew Edaline had seen it. And when Edaline made her way over she realized she'd left the secret compartment wide open.

How did you find this Edaline whispered swinging the mirror back and forth on its hinge.

It's a long story.

Well I've got time.

Sophie was tempted to lie—or dart upstairs and lock herself in her room. But Edaline was Jolie's mother. So she followed Edaline over to the bed and explained about Prentice's memory and the mirrored compact and Vertina's clue and the gibberish journal.

Edaline didn't speak when she'd finished. Just took the journal and flipped back and forth through the pages.

Flip flip flip.

Should I not have told you Sophie asked hating the shadows that had crawled under Edaline's eyes.

No. In fact I think Jolie might have tried to tell me. She came home rather suddenly not long before the fire. I could tell she was stressed but she wouldn't tell me why. And one night I found her sitting pretty much right here staring at that wall. When I asked if she was okay she asked me What if someone wasn't who you thought they were

That's what she told Vertina Sophie whispered. I'd thought she'd discovered the leak in the Black Swan. But now we know they don't have a leak so do you have any idea who she meant

Edaline shook her head. At the time I'd just figured she was having a fight with her friends. They'd been pulling away from her after she got engaged and Jolie had been pretending not to notice. But I knew it was breaking her heart. So I told her There will always be people who disappoint us and it's up to us to decide when to forgive and when to walk away.

Did she say anything to that

She said I love you Mom. And I remember being surprised by it. I'd been Mother for a very long time. It was so nice to be Mom again.

There couldn't be a more perfect moment for Sophie to tell Edaline the same thing finally cross that line and start treating her like a parent not just a guardian.

But the moment slipped away.

Was that the last time you saw her Sophie asked hoping the question wasn't too painful.

No. I saw her the day of the fire. She stopped by out of the blue and I remember thinking she looked tired though of course I've since wondered if she also looked afraid. She told me she thought it was time to walk away and I thought she meant Brant. I thought the pressure of the bad match had finally gotten to her and I knew she'd never forgive herself if she gave up just because it was hard. So I told her to never let fear drive her. I told her

What Sophie asked when she didn't finish.

But Edaline shook her head handing Sophie the journal as she stood. Hindsight is a dangerous game to play.

She turned to head for the door. But before she left she whispered I'm not going to try to stop you from finding out what Jolie was into. But I am going to tell you what I should have said to her that day. Please be careful. And if whatever you're chasing starts to catch up with you run don't walk away.

FIFTY-SEVEN

A SCROLL ARRIVED THE NEXT morning bearing the Council's official seal.

Sophie had a horrible flip-floppy feeling since the deadline King Dimitar had given the Council was almost up. But when she mustered the courage to break the seal she found an invitation to an event at Foxfire that evening. As far as Sophie could tell it appeared to be some sort of hybrid between the inauguration of Magnate Leto and an official Council assembly—which sounded like a terrifying combination. But Grady didn't seem concerned.

They've always done an inauguration when a new Principal is appointed he said pouring himself a cup of some sort of strange red tea. And the Councillors are always there just like they are during the Opening Ceremonies. Remember Foxfire is a noble academy. The Council is a part of their celebrations.

Right but it says she picked up the scroll reading directly from one of the paragraphs Further updates will also be delivered by the Council and the event will conclude with an important public announcement. Is that normal



No he admitted. But this is a strange time for the Council. Both their official amphitheater and their tribunal hall burned in the Everblaze. They also have a brand-new Councillor a terrified populace demanding answers King Dimitar threatening war a city to rebuild and somewhere in there they also need to inaugurate a new principal. I'm guessing they figured that since we'd all be gathering anyway they might as well double up and address some of the people's questions.

I guess Sophie mumbled still staring at the scroll.

You're worried they're going to announce your punishment there aren't you

Shouldn't I be I mean doesn't it seem like the perfect place

It does. He dragged out the word as he rubbed a crease on his forehead. Listen Sophie I haven't wanted to tell you this but there's been a bit of drama surrounding your upcoming sentence. A rather vocal group of people have seized upon it as an opportunity to have you expelled.

All the blood drained from her face. From Foxfire

Grady nodded. They know you were indirectly involved with the fire—and then they watched you almost cause a war with King Dimitar. They're scared Sophie. And when people are scared they do crazy heartless things. Like blame an innocent girl for impossibly complicated situations and try to keep her away from their children.

Sophie stared at her sleeve flicking away a piece of lint. Do you think the Council's going to listen to them

No I don't. Alden's met with them several times and he's confident that they have a different punishment in mind.

And what punishment is that she asked no longer able to breathe

Unfortunately I have no idea. They're being extremely tight-lipped since they need to make sure King Dimitar approves it before the sentence is given. Alden still feels that it will likely involve time at the Sanctuary. But he also warned me that there might be something else in addition and judging by this invitation I'm guessing it'll be some sort of public reproof.

Do I want to know what that means she asked trying not to envision stocks and whips.

Basically they would deliver your punishment in front of everyone along with a stern lecture.

That's it

Grady laughed. And here I thought you'd be panicking.

Well I don't love the idea of being humiliated in front of my entire school. But compared to being expelled

It's definitely better Grady agreed pulling her in for a hug.

She rested her head against his chest letting the sound of his steady heartbeat calm her racing pulse.

Then Grady had to ruin the moment by adding It's probably going to be a pretty humiliating experience though Sophie. People see you as a threat to the peace and safety of our world. If the Council's not going to give them what they want they're going to have to come down very hard on you to prove they have you under control. I promise everything is going to be okay. But I think we need to prepare for the fact that tonight is going to be a very long night.

[]

# |Cover 2

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Relevant results in this cover: 12

Content pages range: [19, 38]

Groups range: [6, 15]

---

## Deep intent (search) query

Interested in example of human technology being presented as equal or superior to magic, or anything that will make me feel proud of human species technology. Technopath is not considered human. Elven tech weapons is not considered human. Only interested in stuff that essentially wouldn't work without the human tech involved, and has to be impressive- a worthy opponent to this elven magic and tech.

## Ranking query (reranker)

nterested in example of human technology being presented as equal or superior to magic, or anything that will make me feel proud of human species technology. Technopath is not considered human. Elven tech weapons is not considered human. Only interested in stuff that essentially wouldn't work without the human tech involved, and has to be impressive- a worthy opponent to this elven magic and tech.

- 000006.txt — ranks: #7 · #16
- 000007.txt — ranks: #8
- 000008.txt — ranks: #9
- 000009.txt — ranks: #10
- 000010.txt — ranks: #11
- 000011.txt — ranks: #12 · #28
- 000012.txt — ranks: #14
- 000013.txt — ranks: #15
- 000014.txt — ranks: #17
- 000015.txt — ranks: #18

## Group 6/25

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TWENTY-NINE

If I agree to what you're asking," Mr. Forkle said, glancing slowly between Sophie and Keefe, "and let's be clear that what I mean by that is, if I allow Mr. Dizznee to do his 'Technopath thing,' as you put it, to the cameras feeding into my private office, I expect to be fully kept in the loop on this project's progress from this point forward—and I don't mean simply with this particular memory. I mean with all of the memories you decide to investigate in the future."

He held Keefe's stare as he slowly flipped to the next page of the silver notebook, as if he was testing to see if Keefe would try to stop him.

"Flip all you want—I have nothing to hide," Keefe said, leaning back in his chair. "But I should warn you, that also means there's nothing else interesting in there. Mommy Dearest did a good job of making sure I wouldn't recover these memories. Why do you think Foster's pushing you so hard for this one?"

"What about the memories in those?" Mr. Forkle asked, pointing to the green and brown notebooks still sitting on Sophie's desk.

Keefe scooped them up and held them out. "I mean... if you're looking for a particularly inspired visual re-creation of the Great Gulon Incident, then you're about to be super excited. Otherwise, not so much. Oh, and if you flip the pages at just the right speed, you can watch the moment the gas erupts."

Mr. Forkle's lips twitched with a smile as he took the notebooks. "And here I thought you had nothing to do with that event."

Keefe smirked. "Not saying I did."

Sophie didn't bother asking. She'd been trying to get someone to tell her what happened during the Great Gulon Incident for years and had never gotten a straight answer.

And now definitely wasn't the time to sidetrack the conversation.

Especially when Mr. Forkle pointed to Keefe's chest and asked, "What about the notebook tucked away in your cape pocket? Are you going to show me the memories in there, or do you have something to hide after all?"

Keefe straightened up, placing his hand over the pocket, like he was afraid Mr. Forkle was going to try to snatch the gold notebook away. "How did you know?"

"I have very sharp eyes. Far sharper than you and your friends realize." He handed Keefe back the silver, brown, and green notebooks without paging through them. "Truthfully, Mr. Sencen, I neither want nor need to see your full recorded life history. I just need to trust that you'll come to me when and if you recover something pertinent. Given what happened with the Council and the meeting with King Enki, I'm realizing it's time for all of us to aim for a higher level of transparency."

"Said the guy who still won't tell me who my biological parents are," Sophie felt the need to point out.

"Ohhhhhh, she has you there!" Livvy added.

"She does indeed," Mr. Forkle said through a very long sigh. "But it sadly doesn't change where we stand on that particular issue. Sometimes a mystery must remain unsolved." His eyes locked with Sophie's. "And someday you'll understand why I had to protect this secret. In the meantime, I'm willing to grant your request. I'll bring Mr. Dizznee to Watchward Heath at his earliest convenience and let him program the cameras to search for the man in Mr. Sencen's drawing."

"And you promise you'll let us know the second you find him?" Sophie countered. "No holding back information while you conduct your own investigations?"

"Well, I suspect that Mr. Dizznee will program the feeds to notify him of any matches long before anything alerts me, so this is likely a moot point. But you have my word that if the cameras locate this mystery man and I'm the first to acquire that information, I'll pass it along to you and Mr. Sencen immediately—but note my use of the word 'if,' Miss Foster. I fear you're feeling a bit too confident in this plan's success and forgetting that there's no guarantee that we'll be able to find this man.

Watchward Heath is an unprecedented monitoring system—but it's not without its gaps. The man may also have altered his appearance in some significant way since Mr. Sencen saw him in this memory—a change of hairstyle. Adding a beard or mustache. Gaining or losing weight. Even the simple inevitabilities of human aging, like wrinkles and hair loss, could be significant enough to make

the cameras disregard him as a viable match.”

The words might as well have been a giant pair of scissors, snipping the threads of excitement that had been stitching Sophie’s newfound hope together.

She’d been living with the elves for long enough that she’d forgotten how much more humans change than the elves. Everyone in the Lost Cities stayed mostly static once they reached adulthood. An elf looked the same at thirty as they did at one hundred thirty and three hundred thirty and one thousand thirty and on and on and on.

Maybe that was even why the London cameras hadn’t found the guy.

“Don’t look so disheartened,” Mr. Forkle told her. “I should be able to help Mr. Dizznee create some basic algorithms that will allow the cameras to predict the most likely appearance alterations and search for those as well. There will still be a margin for error, of course, but—”

“You would do that?” Sophie interrupted.

“Of course! That shouldn’t come as a surprise to you, Miss Foster,” he chided. “I fear you’ve lost sight of who I am. Allowed the fact that I’m unable to share information about your genetic parents to feel like an enormous chasm between us. When the reality is so much simpler. We’re still on the same side. We still share the same goals. Still crave the same answers. So how about we endeavor to focus on those similarities from this point forward?”

He extended his hand for a handshake, and, after a quick glance at Keefe, Sophie reached out and took it.

“Excellent,” Mr. Forkle said. “I’ll explain all of this to Mr. Dizznee as soon as he returns from Loamnore this evening, so he can make any necessary preparations before I bring him to my office.”

“Why is he in Loamnore?” Sophie asked.

Mr. Forkle released her hand. “That’s classified information.”

“Right. And I’m the leader of Team Valiant,” Sophie reminded him.

“You are. But no one else in this room has the necessary clearance. And it’s best if you don’t use your

telepathy right now.”

“It’s best if you don’t do anything right now,” Elwin added, before Sophie could suggest asking everyone to clear the room, “except drink a bottle of Youth, have some broth, and try to sleep. Give us at least the rest of today to get you a little stronger before you start diving into all the stressful conversations. Save the updates and worrying for tomorrow.”

“Elwin’s right,” Livvy agreed, handing Sophie a bottle of Youth as Edaline conjured up a bowl of pale, purple-toned broth for her to eat. “I know you’re itching to get back to work—and I get it. Believe me. But right now, your focus needs to be on your recovery or you’re going to slow the process down. And the good news is, your friends are brilliant and talented and every bit as determined as you are, so it’s not like you have to worry that nothing’s getting done. They’re out there right now kicking butt and taking names. And you have to be here. So make it worth it. Get as much rest as you can.”

Sophie sighed and forced herself to take a bite of broth, which was somehow both a little sweet and a little salty. “What is this?”

“Panakes blossoms steeped with a few herbs Flori recommended,” Edaline explained. “She thinks it’ll speed your healing.”

Sophie finished the whole bowl, and it eased some of the aching in her limbs, which made her want out of that bed even more.

“Try to sleep,” Elwin told her, pulling her blankets back into place when she tossed them aside.

“But I’ve been sleeping for three days!” she reminded him.

“That wasn’t restful sleep,” Elwin insisted.

“It must’ve been, because I’m not tired,” Sophie argued.

“I can fix that,” Flori offered from the doorway. She padded over to the bed, singing a lullaby about windswept branches dancing in perfect harmony to the rhythm of the breeze, and the flowers on Sophie’s canopy filled the air with their sweet, soothing perfume.

“That’s not fair,” Sophie grumbled through a yawn.

"Yeah, wow," Keefe said, rubbing his eyes as he stumbled to his feet. "If I don't go now, I'm going to be drooling on your desk—unless you need me to stay."

Sophie couldn't tell if he was asking her or her physicians. Either way, she told him, "Go home, Keefe. You've been stuck here long enough."

He shook his head, studying her with sleepy eyes. "I'm never stuck with you, Foster. Someday I'm going to make you see that."

"Sounds like I'd better get Hunkyhair home," Ro said, striding out of Sophie's closet in a silky pink gown that somehow looked both right and wrong with her armor strapped on top of it. "I was bored," Ro added when she noticed the way everyone was staring, like that explained her new fashion choices. "I'll bring the dress back tomorrow."

"Keep it," Sophie told her. "You... look really good."

Ro glanced down, sliding her hands across the shimmering skirt, then rolled her eyes and muttered something about sparkles going to her head.

```
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]
```

"Yes, I suppose that does sum up the situation. It's all very complicated." "Most things are," Edaline agreed quietly. "But how are you training her in pyrokinesis?" Grady asked. "I don't see what fire has to do with telepathy—unless having a twin brother wasn't your only secret." "I have many secrets, Mr. Ruewen. But being a Pyrokinetic isn't one of them. And it's a good thing, because I would never be able to maintain the level of restraint that Miss Redek manages to hold. Nevertheless, you might be surprised by how many similarities there are between our abilities. Both require us to put barriers around ourselves in order to limit the power. And both can happen consciously and unconsciously. It's not a perfect fit, but it gives us a starting point to build on—and I'm hoping to eventually have her work with either a Guster or a Hydrokinetic, since there are stronger correlations between abilities that affect the elements." "If you want a Hydrokinetic to help," Tam said, "why did you make me promise not to tell my sister?" "I only made you promise not to tell her without Miss Redek's permission." "I don't care if Linh knows," Marella said. "And I'll tell Dex at some point. But please don't tell anyone else. I can't end up on the Council's watch list. If they start monitoring me all the time, I'll never be able to practice—" "That's starting to sound an awful lot like what Brant did," Grady interrupted. "I assume you know how that turned out?" Marella paled. "Forkle's told me the story, yeah. But that's why I'm training. Denying the ability only seems to make it worse." "And you're sure you can keep it under control in Nightfall?" Grizel asked. "Fear and adrenaline are powerful things, and you already lost your cool during this discussion." "Only for a second," Marella argued. "That's all it takes," Sandor snapped back. "One spark in the wrong place." "That's why Forkle has me carry this." She pulled a fist-size pouch from under her shirt and loosened the strings to show them a green-toned powder. "It's a **super-concentrated form of quicksnuff.**" "**A small sprinkle goes a very long way.**" Mr. Forkle assured everyone. "**Kesler Dizznee made it, and we all know how brilliant his alchemy can be.**" "I still think sending her to Nightfall is like lighting a fuse and tossing it into a room full of kindling," Grady warned. "Then I suppose it's a good thing you won't be making the decision." Mr. Forkle turned to Sophie. "It's your call." Sophie glanced at Tam and Biana. "What do you guys think?" Biana chewed her lip. "Will you be able to hold my hand without burning me?" she asked Marella. "Because I can't turn you invisible without contact." "Can you hold on to my wrist instead?" Marella asked. "My wrists rarely light up." "Wrists work," Biana said. "And her shadowvapor seems to be at a normal level," Tam added. Marella glared at Tam's shadow. "Uh, I don't remember giving permission for a reading." "You heard me say it was a deal breaker before you came in here," he reminded her. "Fine—but don't push it, or I'll burn the bangs right off your forehead." "Oh good," Sandor grumbled. "They haven't even left yet and she's already making threats." Marella shrugged. "Now he knows not to mess with me." Tam's answering smile seemed to say he was up for the challenge. "So do we have a decision, then?" Mr. Forkle asked. "Because it's getting quite late." "I have one last question," Sophie said, waiting for Marella to turn to her. "Are you sure you want to be involved in all of this? I know you got mad at us for leaving you out a while back—but I also remember you telling me that you didn't think you were cut out for dangerous things. And you won't get anything more dangerous than this. Especially since, if you use your ability around the Neverseen, Fintan may come after you." Marella struggled to swallow. "Forkle gave me those warnings when he asked me to come here. And at first I was thinking, 'Uh . . . hard pass.' But then I thought about how I'd feel if my parents were trapped like yours are. And I knew you'd probably be willing to do anything to help me get them back." "I would," Sophie promised. Marella nodded. "So . . . might as well find out if the whole 'almost dying' thing is as miserable as you guys make it look, or if you're just being babies about it. Besides, what good is being able to shoot fireballs if you can't fling them at freaky beasts every once in a while?" "To be clear," Mr. Forkle jumped in, "adding Miss Redek to the group will not change our original plan of using ash to sneak past the creatures, nor our aim to evade the Neverseen and focus on the most crucial victory." "And you're not to create a single spark unless you're in immediate and inescapable danger," Sandor



told Marella. “Understood?” Marella’s “Fine. Whatever” didn’t exactly fill anyone with confidence—and Sophie could tell Sandor, Grady, Fitz, and Grizel were all ready to go back to arguing that they should go instead. But weren’t people always saying you had to fight fire with fire? She dipped her hand in the sticky, freezing ash and swiped a gray-white streak down Marella’s arm. “Time to get ready. We’re going to Nightfall!” Forty-four

## Group 8/25

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[
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Sorry, brace yourselves, she transmitted to Sandor, Grizel, and Fitz—letting her fear and fury crackle through her veins as her knotted emotions unraveled. Mental energy fueled the storm until hints of red lit the edges of her darkened vision, and a primal scream slipped through her lips as she blasted the force from her mind. Rage spiraled like a hurricane, tearing down everything in its path. But when the tempest faded, Sophie could hear the soft clicking of a tongue. “Such a pity,” Gethen said. “You have so much potential, Sophie. But you rely on the same predictable defenses—though it does make our job easier. Look at how well you’ve handled your mighty guards.” The sound of snapping fingers brought back her vision, leaving Sophie squinting through tear-blurred eyes at where Sandor, Grizel, and Fitz had collapsed in the sand, limbs thrashing and faces scrunched with agony. All three members of the Neverseen were perfectly fine. “We came prepared,” Gethen explained, tossing back his hood and pointing to the fitted hat made of shimmering chain mail that covered most of his blond hair. “You know how well these block your little mind tricks. And in case you’ve manifested something we don’t know about, let’s get you more contained, shall we? Though I’m pretty sure the only ability you’re hiding has to do with those gloves.” Sophie was so thrown by the fact that he seemed to know about her enhancing ability that it took her a second to catch his threat—and another to realize she was still holding a throwing star. By then, the figure on Gethen’s left had raised his arms and trapped her in a glowing white force field. Panic bubbled up her throat as three more domes of energy appeared, imprisoning Sandor, Fitz, and Grizel. But she choked it down, knowing the best thing she could do was feign confidence. Make them wonder why she wasn’t freaking out. “I guess I’m not the only predictable one,” she said, taking a steady breath as she stared down the cloaked figure that had to be Ruy. “How many times have you played the force field card now?” “Why stop if you keep falling for it?” Ruy countered, his voice every bit as familiar as it was nauseating. She shrugged, trying to channel Keefe’s snark—which was easier than she’d expected. All she had to do was look at the crooked line of Gethen’s nose and remember how good it had felt to deck him with the full strength of her Sucker Punch. “I like it in here,” she told him. “It means I don’t have to smell you guys while you give your boring speech. That’s what you’re here for, right? If you didn’t want to talk, you would’ve drugged me by now. So let’s get on with it, okay?” Gethen’s piercing blue eyes twinkled. “This is why I enjoy our little chats. It’s always so adorable watching you play tough while you try to trick information out of me. You’re attempting to break into my head right now, aren’t you? Slamming that strange telepathy of yours against the force field, hoping you’ll be able to sneak into my mind and dig out all of our secrets? But even if I took my hat off, you’re not strong enough without the Vacker boy, are you?” He nudged his chin toward Fitz—who, thankfully, looked less pained than he had a few seconds earlier. “And you’d both need your little Shade to help. Pity he’s not here.” Unfortunately, he was right. Tam’s shadows were the only thing that had ever broken through Ruy’s force fields. Well . . . unless Sophie wanted to use the trick that Biana had discovered when they’d first clashed with Ruy in the Neutral Territories. The monocle pendants that the Black Swan gave them when they swore fealty had a special lens set into the curve of dark metal. And when Biana hurled hers into the force field that Ruy had been hiding behind, the energy hit the glass and exploded, covering Ruy in white flames. If Sophie tried the same method now, she’d be the one showered with fire. And she’d have to take out three members of the Neverseen by herself with only one throwing star. She’d call that plan B. Not that plan A sounded a whole lot better. Her panic-switch ring was carefully hidden under her glove, and if she pressed the center stone, it would send Dex an alert and allow him to track her. She hated using it, because it meant asking him to risk his life—but she knew he’d tell her that that’s what he’d designed it for. And he’d have his bodyguard with him. But . . . Dex and Lovise would still be outnumbered—and totally unprepared, since the ring didn’t let her warn them about what they’d be facing. She’d have to suggest that as an upgrade. Assuming they survived . . .

## Group 9/25

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    essential for survival. This represents human tech as a worthy counterpart to elven
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And when they re-formed... "Do you have any idea how dangerous that was?" Alvar asked, gasping for breath as he held up his hands to block the much-too-bright sunlight. "And for what? To drag me to a tiny island?" "It's deserted, isn't it?" Keefe reminded him, relieved the random leap had finally brought him somewhere isolated. The only signs of life were some coconut trees and a few crabs skittering across the white sand. "It's also a million degrees and humid!" Alvar tossed back his hood, and Keefe took the opportunity to study his face. His scars really did look better. Most were just thin, pale lines. And his cheeks were much fuller, and his dark hair wasn't so greasy. He still didn't look like the guy he used to be, with fancy clothes and big muscles from working out all the time. But he didn't look seriously ill anymore either—or like someone who'd almost drowned in a pod full of poisonous orange goo. "Go ahead," Alvar said, sweeping his hair out of his eyes. "Ask me. I know you're dying to." Keefe didn't bother pretending he wasn't sure what Alvar meant. He met Alvar's slightly defiant stare and said, "How are you still alive?" "Long story." Alvar laughed when Keefe's jaw went rigid. "Relax. I didn't say I wouldn't tell it. I just figured I should warn you in case you'd like to be smart and leap us out of here before the heat saps your concentration. It's not too late to go with my pancake idea. Did I mention the sweet ones are stuffed with brown sugar and cinnamon and nuts and—" "Quit stalling," Keefe interrupted—even though those pancake things sounded pretty amazing. He actually was starting to feel a little dizzy from the heat—but the privacy was worth a little sweat. He pulled off his coat and draped it over a nearby rock, then rolled up his sleeves as high as he could. "Fine," Alvar said, taking off his coat and dropping it to the sand in a heap. "Have it your way. But I'm at least moving to the shade." He stumbled across the beach and settled into the slim shadow of one of the palm trees. Keefe followed—not that the shade made much difference. "The short version," Alvar said, fanning himself with a fallen palm frond, "since I'd like to get out of here as quickly as possible, is... human medicine saved me." "Human medicine," Keefe repeated. His mind raced through some of the stories Foster had told him about her various human hospital visits, and he couldn't help cringing. "I figured that'd be your reaction," Alvar mumbled. "Elves love to think everything we do is better and smarter and safer than any of the other species. But the longer I'm around humans, the more value I see to their way of thinking." "So..." Keefe said when Alvar didn't continue, "you came to the Forbidden Cities because you wanted to meet with their doctors?" "No, I came to the Forbidden Cities to die." Alvar let that sink in before he added, "After Sophie convinced you to let me go, I leaped to your dad's beach house, figuring I should warn him that you'd discovered our deal. I was also hoping he'd let me stay, since that leap pretty much destroyed me. I was too weak to stand, and my body wouldn't stop shaking. But he said he'd already helped me more than I deserved, and the best he'd do was give me a vial of Fade Fuel and make me a path to wherever I wanted to go next. I had five minutes to choose a place." "Sounds like Daddy Dearest," Keefe mumbled, not sure why he was surprised that his father never bothered to mention any of this. "Doesn't it? I knew I wasn't going to survive that leap," Alvar continued quietly. "Pretty sure your dad knew that too. And as I tried to pick where to go, I realized I didn't want to die in the Lost Cities. It wasn't like anyone was going to do a planting for me—" "Your parents would," Keefe interrupted. "Would they? Or would they try—and then back down if the Council forbid it, or if they got pressured into protecting the 'family name'?" He spat the last words, and Keefe was sure Alvar was about to launch into some tirade about the Vacker legacy—and if he had to hear him pretend he knew what it was like to come from a horrible, evil family one more time, he might actually vomit. "Think whatever you want," Alvar said, probably reading the disgust on Keefe's face. "It won't change the fact that my brother tried to kill me—and almost succeeded." Keefe couldn't argue with that. He also couldn't claim that Fitz wouldn't try to do it again. But Alvar brought that on himself. "We both know you're not a victim," Keefe told him. "You made your choices." "I did," Alvar said, watching a wave crash against the shore. "And I stand behind most of them." "Most," Keefe repeated. Alvar shrugged. "Nobody's perfect." Keefe couldn't tell if that

was a joke. He kept trying to get a read on Alvar—but Alvar’s emotions felt like a whirlwind. Spinning and shifting and whisking away before he could even start to translate. “Anyway,” Alvar continued. “I thought about heading to a Neutral Territory and just... disappearing. But it felt like there should be some record of my passing—even if it was only an unsolved human file about a nameless body found on the street. Some tiny bit of proof that I’d existed.” “So you were feeling sorry for yourself,” Keefe noted. “Try being moments away from dying and see if you don’t do exactly the same thing.” He waited for Keefe to argue, but 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.

## Group 10/25

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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 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 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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They're described as 'Obscurers' that 'bend light and sound'. They're presented as human
technology that can make people invisible to elves.",
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CALM DOWN, WE’LL FIGURE THIS out,” Keefe promised as Sophie clutched her head and groaned from the migraine. “Are you doing anything different?” She took a slow, deep breath and tried to think through her panic. “No—I can picture exactly where we need to go. But it’s like my mind hits a wall when I try to take us there.” “Have you tried taking us somewhere else?” Keefe asked. “Maybe there’s some sort of security around the Sanctuary to keep Teleporters away.” Sophie doubted that, since she was the only elf who could teleport. But it was worth a try. She just couldn’t think of anywhere else to go. Her mind was racing a million directions, and they all ended in a blank. “How about home?” Keefe asked. “Can you take us home?” An image flashed in Sophie’s mind, so sharp and clear it made her eyes water. Or maybe the tears were for the narrow crack that finally split through the darkness. She had just enough time to tighten her grip on Keefe’s hand. Then the air filled with the boom of thunder as they blasted out of the void. [] They hit the ground hard, tumbling across sloshy grass before landing in a heap. Sophie sat up first, untangling herself from Keefe’s arms as she stared at the gray, overcast sky. “Uh . . . this isn’t Havenfield,” Keefe said, squinting at the narrow street lined with plain, square houses. “I know.” Sophie rallied her concentration, imagining an invisible barrier wrapping around her head to shield herself from the voices pummeling her brain. She’d forgotten how loud human thoughts could be. “This is San Diego.” Keefe scrambled to his feet. “You teleported us to a Forbidden City? Okay. That. Is. Awesome! Don’t get me wrong—I could do without the whole almost-getting-trapped-in-the-endless-black-nothingness thing. But this is epic! I mean, that’s a human!” He pointed across the street, to a mom in a bright blue tracksuit, jogging with her baby in a stroller. “Yeah, and she can probably hear us,” Sophie whispered. Surely everyone must’ve noticed the teenagers in strange clothes who fell out of the sky. But the few people outside weren’t even glancing their way, too busy walking their dogs or checking their mail. “I don’t think they know we’re here,” Keefe said, pointing to a small black orb nestled in an overgrown daisy bush. There was another next to the trunk of the giant sycamore in the center of the yard. And three more along the path. Obscurers. Sophie had only seen light-and-sound-bending gadgets once before, in the hands of her kidnappers when they ambushed her and Dex on a bridge in Paris. One of them was the same blond elf who’d tried to snatch her months earlier, posing as a human jogger on the very street she was standing on. She walked to the spot where she’d faced him, hoping it might help her remember something new. But all she could see was his face—and Alden had already entered his image in the Council’s database, which was supposed to have a record of every elf ever born. No match had been found.

## Group 12/25

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```
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    "chunk_filename": "001080.txt",
    "chunk_info": "[Chunk 89/415 | Source: keeper_of_the_lost_cities/txt/book_04_neverseen.txt | chars:157604-158938 | tokens:335]"
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FOURTEEN

IT TOOK SOPHIE several seconds to realize Dex's voice wasn't part of a dream. A few more after that, she caught the silhouette of him sitting on the edge of her bed. She gasped and pulled her covers around her neck, then remembered she was wearing her crazy pajamas. Dex looked just as furry, though his onesie was lime green. "What are you doing here?" she whispered, turning toward her wall of windows. A triangle of gray-orange light leaked in where the curtains parted slightly, so she assumed that meant it was dawn. "I had to show you this." Dex held up gadget that looked like a gutted obscurer. The sphere had been sliced in half, and all kinds of springy coiled wires stuck out of the center. "I know it's ugly, but now it's a really powerful Evader. It let me break into the Council's archives and find records on Exillium—and I know what you're going to say," he added quickly. "I know the Black Swan told us to drop it. But I think Exillium's worth looking into. If we could find the Boy Who Disappeared, we might be able to find the Neverseen. Plus, I knew I could sneak in without getting caught. I'm sorry I didn't tell you first—I wasn't sure if we were being watched." "You are." They both yelped as Della blinked into sight near the curtains. "Don't tell me you thought I'd let you sneak into Sophie's room while she's sleeping and not see what you're up to." "Good to know," Keefe said, striding into the room in a red furry onesie. "And don't think I was going to allow a Sophex meeting to happen. Hmm, maybe we should call it Deephie. Sophex sounds weird. Anyway, my point is, no secret meetings without me!" "And me!" Fitz said, trailing behind in furry gray pj's. "I'm here too!" Biana appeared in the corner wearing shaggy pink. "I followed my mom when she followed Dex." "Wow, it's really crowded in here," Sophie mumbled. "And really . . . furry." Even Della had a blue onesie that made her look like Cookie Monster. "Cool, your window is right across from mine!" Keefe said, opening Sophie's curtains.



```
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]
```

She explained about the warning note and the piece of her old journal attached to it. Okay first I definitely want to know their trick for breaking into lockers and second uh that s not a warning that s a dare now we know they still have the pages so we just have to figure out a way to steal them back. It s not that easy Keefe. Sure it is we just have to think one step ahead of them. More like five steps or ten think about it Keefe how do they even know I have the journal they have to be watching me they re probably watching us right now making notes on any plan we come up with so they can thwart it. Keefe glanced over his shoulder. You really think they re watching us How else would they know I guess but aren t there a ton of goblins trolling these grounds I swear I ve seen two or three skulking in the shadows. Goblin senses can be fooled. They can Keefe asked as Sandor shot her a death look. Yeah but it s a secret not a very well-kept one in Sophie s opinion anyway my point is how are we supposed to sneak up on someone who knows everything we re thinking about doing. Please you re talking to a master mischief maker I ll find a way. You do that in the meantime I need to practice flying with Silveny. She was only allowed to fly inside the pasture now and the Council was redesigning their plans for Silveny s appearance at the festival to make sure there were no more teleporting debacles. Silveny was not happy about it and gave the most pathetic sad eyes ever as Sophie made her way to the gate and reached for the cube-shaped padlock to press her thumb against the sensor. The sides of the cube parted to release the lock and a tiny velvet sack fluttered to her feet. A black velvet sack marked with a now all-too-familiar symbol. What s that Keefe asked as she bent to pick it up. Proof that we re not alone. Sandor drew his weapon and scanned their surroundings as Sophie untied the beaded threads knotting the bag and dumped two items into her palm. A tiny silver alicorn pin with orange topaz eyes and outstretched wings and a note. The Black Swan had given her pins as clues before and this one like the others looked like it was a Prattles pin. When she flipped it over she found a tiny digital readout that said 1 OF 2. So not only had they snuck into Havenfield tricked the goblin s senses to avoid getting caught opened the lock that needed her DNA to open but they d also managed to get their hands on the rarest Prattles pin of them all all so they could lead her around like the perfect little puppet. Well they could forget it she was done being controlled especially when she saw the message on the note. Face your fears. She started to crumple the paper but Keefe grabbed her wrist and pried it out of her fingers before she could destroy it. He grinned as he read the note. Bring it on. No way Keefe I m not playing their game anymore. She was tired of being asked to blindly trust a group who had been manipulating her life for years a group who probably messed something up in her DNA and made her defective a group who may have murdered Jolie. You hear that she shouted looking around for some clue as to where they were hiding she had no doubt that they were there I m done with the secrets you want to order me around you can come out and do it face-to-face. She held her breath waiting to see if they would respond. All she heard was the crunching sound of Silveny gobbling down swizzlespice and the chirping of a few crickets. Her hands clenched into fists and her body started to shake as the anger swelled inside her dimming her vision. Whoa easy now Keefe said jerking her shoulder. Calm Silveny added sending a rush of warmth that melted away the fog. Sorry she mumbled staring at her feet she really needed to get better control of her anger. Keep an eye on her Sandor told Keefe I m going to order the others to do a full sweep of the property. He ran for the trees and Sophie wanted to tell him not to bother the Black Swan were way too smart to ever let themselves get caught and hey maybe this was good news it probably meant their mysterious visitor had been from the Black Swan and not the kidnappers. Hey Captain Mood Swing Keefe said gently grabbing her arm he sighed when she didn t smile Look I get what you re feeling shoot I can feel what you re feeling and I don t blame you at all but remember what we re trying to do here we want to fix Alden right The last of her anger cooled as she nodded. Shame swelled in its place. Hey no feeling guilty either you have a right to be seriously ticked and as soon as this is done you and I are going to put our heads together and figure out how to send the Black Swan a few secret messages of our own

preferably covered in glittery poop but in the meantime I think we need to do what they say. Yeah she mumbled unclenching her fists and staring at the red dent where the alicorn pin she'd been squeezing had cut into her palm. So you're the pro at figuring out their clues any theories Keefe asked. I'm assuming this has something to do with Silveny she said holding up the pin especially since they left the clue at her enclosure. And the note She sighed no idea. They had to mean her fear since the message said Face your fears but what did they think she was afraid of besides a lifetime of being a useless malfunctioning creation she was already facing that. She didn't like doctors but she faced that fear all the time too. What else was she afraid of Her stomach turned sour as an idea hit her. You figured it out didn't you She nodded miserably and dug out her Imparter. Who are you calling We're going to need extra help for this part she said hating that she had to ask this favor but she had no other choice so she squared her shoulders and commanded Show me Dex.

## Group 14/25

---

```
[
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    "chunk_filename": "003233.txt",
    "chunk_info": "[Chunk 283/643 | Source: keeper_of_the_lost_cities/txt/book_08.0_legacy.txt | chars:493670-495037 | tokens:300]"
  }
]
```

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."

"Okaaaaaaay," 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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    Inflicting ability. It's presented as a less exhausting alternative to using her magical
    ability. The melder is a human-made weapon Sophie carries in her pocket. It's depicted as a
    worthy opponent to elven magic. The passage shows Sophie using it confidently, making the
    reader feel proud of human technology.",
    "chunk_filename": "004002.txt",
    "chunk_info": "[Chunk 409/506 | Source:
    keeper_of_the_lost_cities/txt/book_08.5_unlocked.txt | chars:762294-762817 | tokens:130]"
  }
]
```

Your stubbornness has gotten much stronger since you first arrived in our world, Lord Cassius noted. Perhaps this new separation from my son will help you learn better deference and respect.

You told him about that? she asked Fitz—then realized she probably should've transmitted the question.

Lord Cassius looked much too pleased with her response.

She couldn't take the words back, though, so she decided to remind Fitz, He went along willingly with Lady Gisela's plans for Keefe's legacy. So he's just as much to blame for what's happening to Keefe as she is.

The only thing I'm to blame for, Lord Cassius argued, is wanting the best for my son.

Sophie rolled her eyes. No, you wanted the best for yourself. You wanted to be the father of someone powerful and important and special, so that maybe people would think you were powerful and important and special too—but all they're going to think is that you're a creepy jerk who let his wife experiment on his family. And the really sad thing is, Keefe would've been all of those things without you messing with his abilities. So you put him through this nightmare for no reason.

Lord Cassius's glare felt colder than staring down a Froster. But when he spoke, all he said was Interesting.

What is? Fitz demanded when Sophie stayed silent.

Lord Cassius kept his focus on Sophie. Should I tell him what you're feeling right now?

Don't bother. She turned to Fitz. I'm trying to decide if I'd rather inflict on him or zap him a few times with this melder.

She patted the pocket hiding her weapon.

Interesting, Lord Cassius repeated, his lips twitching with something between a smile and a scowl. Seems you've also picked up my son's habit of using jokes to deflect attention. But they never fully mask what you're hiding, do they? He waved his hands through the air again before shaking his head and dropping his arms to his sides. Actually, it seems like you're even hiding these feelings from yourself—and I have neither the patience nor the desire to deal with adolescent drama. So I'm just going to say this: Hate me all you want—blame me all you want. It won't change anything. And it won't make you feel any better.

Probably not. That's why I'm leaning toward using the melder. Sophie patted her pocket again. It's so much less exhausting than inflicting, but equally painful.

Okay, it's official, Grizel said, applauding as she stepped out of the shadows near Candleshade's vortinator. I'm a big fan of this new Sophie. Don't get me wrong—you've always been a fierce little force of nature, she added when Sophie frowned. But this is a whole other level of confidence—and I'm here for it!

So am I, Flori agreed.

Me too.

Fitz's voice was quiet enough that Sophie almost wondered if she'd imagined it. But she dared a quick look at his face and found him focused right on her.

And when their eyes met?

Man, she'd missed having him smile at her.

His smile was more tentative than it used to be—and her heart was too shrapnel-filled to react.

But it was still a nice change.

A tiny shift that helped her believe they could save their friendship.

# Cover 3

Relevant results in this cover: 6

Content pages range: [40, 55]

Groups range: [16, 20]

## Deep intent (search) query

Interested in example of human technology being presented as equal or superior to magic, or anything that will make me feel proud of human species technology. Technopath is not considered human. Elven tech weapons is not considered human. Only interested in stuff that essentially wouldn't work without the human tech involved, and has to be impressive- a worthy opponent to this elven magic and tech.

## Ranking query (reranker)

nterested in example of human technology being presented as equal or superior to magic, or anything that will make me feel proud of human species technology. Technopath is not considered human. Elven tech weapons is not considered human. Only interested in stuff that essentially wouldn't work without the human tech involved, and has to be impressive- a worthy opponent to this elven magic and tech.

- 000016.txt — ranks: #19
- 000017.txt — ranks: #20
- 000018.txt — ranks: #21 · #29
- 000019.txt — ranks: #22
- 000020.txt — ranks: #23

## Group 16/25

---

```
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    "chunk_filename": "000853.txt",
    "chunk_info": "[Chunk 242/380 | Source: keeper_of_the_lost_cities/txt/book_03_everblaze.txt | chars:445820-448667 | tokens:655]"
  }
]
```

FORTY-SIX

WHERE IS THIS?" Sophie asked, flipping the page like it would somehow show her more of the scene.

"I was hoping you would know," Fitz admitted. "Seeing the memory again doesn't trigger anything?"

Sophie closed her eyes, willing her brain to pull the pieces together.

"I'm not getting anything."

"Well, then I guess I don't have a plan after all. I figured we'd go there and see what we can learn about the Black Swan. But that's kind of hard to do if we don't know where it is."

"And who knows if it's even safe? Remember, last time Keefe and I tracked down one of their hideouts, there was an ambush waiting for us." She slammed the memory log harder than she needed to. "It's all such a mess. I can't trust the Black Swan, and now the Council hates me and the ogres are out to get me and Eternalia is gone and Kenric . . ."

Just saying his name ripped the hole inside her a little wider.

"Here," Fitz said, handing her Mr. Snuggles.

He waved it under her nose until she took it, and she had to admit, hugging the super soft dragon did help.

"Sorry," she mumbled.



"No need to apologize. If anyone deserves to freak out, it's you. I seriously don't know how you deal with it all." He grabbed the memory log and flipped back to the Italian window, turning it round and round, like seeing it upside down would magically tell them which one of the dozens of cities in Italy they were supposed to go to.

"I still feel like this is the answer," he said quietly. "I mean, something had to trigger this, right? Your mind wouldn't have just pulled up some random memory, would it?"

"Who knows anymore?"

Her sulky tone made her realize how pouty she was being.

She took the memory log back and stared at the sign of the swan.

It was clever the way they'd hidden it—glaringly obvious now that she knew where to look, but perfectly camouflaged to everyone else.

She tried to think of any famous landmarks it could be a part of, but nothing seemed to fit. Sometimes she really missed the Internet. She doubted the answer was as easy as searching "round windows in Italy." But it had worked in Paris when she was with Dex. "Why would they give me an image of one of their bases? And what would've triggered me to think of it?" she asked.

She'd hardly been thinking about windows or Italy—or even the Black Swan—when she was racing to collect enough quintessence to save Eternalia.

She was so terrified she could barely think straight.

"Maybe that's it," she said slowly, trying to let the idea settle before she fed it any hope. "Maybe it was fear—like a panic switch."

She sometimes wondered how the Black Swan could send her into such dangerous situations and not seem to care what happened to her. Maybe they'd stacked her memories in a way to make her remember how to find them if she ever really needed them.

"Why didn't it happen the other times you've been in danger, then?" Fitz asked. "It's not like you haven't almost died a few billion times."

“True.”

Plus, she hadn’t been that scared when she was with Fitz on the beach. She’d actually felt almost . . . safe. They were away from the fire, and she wasn’t alone, and Fitz was helping her and—

“What if it was trust?” Sophie asked, sitting up straighter. “Sir Tiergan said it was our most powerful asset. And it helped me let you into my head once.”

“That’s true! And,” he took the memory log and turned to a blank page, “that would be awesome, because then we should be able to re-create it!”

“Re-create what?”

“Whatever you did to dig up that memory. We do exactly what we did that night, and hope it helps your mind dig up the missing pieces.” He stood, offering her a hand to pull her up. “How were we standing? You were behind me, right?”

“Yes,” Sophie said, blushing as she remembered how close they’d been.

Somehow she managed to make her legs drag her toward him, wishing for the fiftieth time that she’d had a chance to wash away the dino drool first.

“No—you were closer than that,” he told her. “I remember feeling more heat—body heat,” he corrected, like that somehow made it less embarrassing. “It was really cold, remember?”

Sophie had been trying not to relive even a second of that horrible night. But if she was going to make this work, she had to take her mind back.

She pictured the beach.

The vibrant, glowing waves.

The freezing ocean breeze.

Her arms were so weary from holding the heavy stellascope that she'd leaned on Fitz, clinging to him like he was all she had left.

"Yeah, it was more like that," Fitz said, making her realize she'd started to lean on him again.

She wrapped her arms around him, resting her hands on his wrists as he pretended to hold a stellascope.

"I think your hands were a little higher," he told her, "resting on top of mine."

She willed her palms not to sweat as she slid them into place.

## Group 17/25

---

```
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    "chunk_filename": "004852.txt",
    "chunk_info": "[Chunk 248/272 | Source: keeper_of_the_lost_cities/txt/book_09.5_unraveled.txt | chars:439903-441514 | tokens:375]"
  }
]
```

Sitting might be wise, Tam told him, and Keefe plopped down on the nearest chair, finally risking a glance at Foster.

It's okay to be nervous, she told him, reaching for his hand and then stopping herself—then staring at him with a crease between her eyebrows that kept getting deeper and deeper and deeper.

He could tell there was some serious emotional turmoil going on in her head—but he still couldn't read a single thing she was feeling.

Was she worried about him?

Annoyed that she was stuck there helping with this when she had way more important things to do?

Or was she just awkward because of his confession?

Whatever it was, she was so distracted by the noise in her head that she totally missed Tam's question.

You with us, Foster? Keefe teased, trying to snap her out of it. Tam just asked if you wanted to enhance him for this.

Oh! Sorry. She hid her flushed cheeks behind her soggy hair. Whatever you think would be best, she told Tam.

Might be a good idea, he decided. Since I'm not really sure what I'm doing.

Just so you know, that's not making me more excited for this, Keefe said, hoping it sounded like a joke.

But this was all starting to remind him way too much of Loamnore.

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

He reached for Foster's hand.

One second. She closed her eyes and took a slow breath before she nodded.

Apparently that was all she needed to switch on her enhancing.

You've gotten pretty good at that, Keefe noted, trying not to feel super envious. Maybe you can teach me some of your ability-controlling tricks.

Sure—but only if you want.

She said it with a shrug and an eye roll, and Keefe had to stop himself from shouting, SERIOUSLY—WHAT ARE YOU FEELING RIGHT NOW?

He definitely wasn't a fan of this new emotional obscurity.

Ready? Foster asked, taking Tam's hand when he nodded.

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

Foster has that effect on people. Keefe said it with a smirk that hopefully hid the fresh wave of jealousy that crashed over him.

He wasn't necessarily worried that there was anything going on between Foster and Bangs Boy—but he couldn't completely rule it out.

Mostly he just wished he could hold her hand—or anyone's hand—without worrying about what he might sense or trigger in them.

But he should probably be focusing on the fact that Tammy Boy was doing that creepy whispering thing he did when he used his power.

His brows were also scrunching together, and he was curling his fingers like he was grabbing something only he could see.

Okay. I think I know how to call the darkness free, Tam murmured. You might feel a little pull.

Little was definitely an understatement.

Tam flicked his hand in a strange pattern, then yanked his arm back like he was playing tug-of-war, and Keefe jerked forward, letting out a startled grunt as pain slammed against his ribs.

A tiny whiff of darkness blasted out of his chest and hovered a few feet in front of him as the pain slowly faded.

It's kinda sad that this isn't even in my top five weirdest experiences, Keefe said, rubbing his chest as he squinted at the shadowy cloud.

Does it hurt? Foster asked.

Not anymore. But that tug was like getting kicked in the ribs.

Sorry, Bangs Boy mumbled. I was worried if I went slow, it'd drag out the pain.

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

Tam flashed one of his still-mostly-surly grins. You're welcome.

You're sure you got it all? Foster asked—beating Keefe to the question.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then he plopped back onto the couch, trying to pretend like he wasn't freaking out—but he couldn't stop thinking about the fact that his mom could've ambushed him any day she'd wanted.

That had to mean she was waiting for some sort of opportune moment.

And even though the tracker was gone now, Keefe doubted that would stop her.

She always had a backup plan.

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

Honestly, we're not sure, Foster said, hesitating a second before she sank into the armchair across from him and told him about a ton of memories they'd found in Kenric's cache.

## Group 18/25

---

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  },
  {
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journal. 'The journal was written in a cipher that could only be read by reflecting it in a
mirror'. 'Jolie had wanted the Black Swan to have this journal, otherwise 'swan song'
wouldn't have been part of the key'. 'She had to have left a clue to tell them how to read
it'. The mirror is a simple human technology essential for accessing critical
information.",
    "chunk_filename": "000928.txt",
    "chunk_info": "[Chunk 317/380 | Source:
keeper_of_the_lost_cities/txt/book_03_everblaze.txt | chars:611044-615361 | tokens:974]"
  }
]
```

She knew only that the Council was capable of cold, unkind things, and now she was powerless to do anything about it.

Or was she?

She wasn't ready to face Foxfire yet, and when she checked Grady's office she found a runic dictionary thicker than her head. Her arms ached as she pulled it down and carried the heavy volume to her room, but it was worth the strain. Whatever code Jolie used in her journal had to have a pattern or a key. If she could figure out how it worked, she would be able to translate the pages.

Her circlet slowed her progress. Every few lines her concentration started to stray—and she was fairly certain her photographic memory wasn't working with the precision she was used to. But it felt good to do something productive. Even if it didn't seem to be helping.

Whenever she compared Jolie's markings against the runic alphabets in the dictionary, she couldn't find a match. In fact, the more she studied them, the more the writing looked unnatural—like Jolie had tried to copy something she'd been looking at, and sometimes her hand had failed her. Marks were scribbled on top of themselves, and many of the lines were bunched so close together that Sophie couldn't tell which rune they were connected to.

And yet, the whole mess still felt familiar.

Her eyes were starting to blur when Sandor announced that she had a visitor, and Dex shuffled nervously into her room.

"I wasn't sure if you'd see me," he mumbled.

"I thought you were Fitz."

She knew she was being cruel, but she couldn't stop herself.

Dex didn't rise to her bait. He just stared at the carpet, looking so sad and lost she had to tell him, "Sorry."

When he looked up there were tears in his eyes. "I'll take it off right now, Sophie. I don't care if they exile me."

"Yes you do. And you know it won't be just you. I can't let that happen."

"Then what should I do? Want me to wear one too? I will. I already started building it."

He reached into his Foxfire satchel and pulled out a dull metal circlet with a spikey pattern instead of swirls.

Sophie grabbed it from him and ran over to Sandor, who crushed it into a ball of mangled metal with his giant goblin hands.

"I know what you can do," Sophie said as she took the ruined circlet and handing it back to Dex. "You can never build another one—and stop making weapons for the Council!"

"I already did. I told them I wouldn't build them another thing."

"What did they say?"

He stared at the crushed ball, tracing his fingers over the individual bits of metal, like they were itching to repair it. "That they need my help to track down the Black Swan. And that even though things have calmed down with King Dimitar, that we still should be prepared from now on. They told me I could have some time to reconsider. But I won't. I don't trust them anymore. I never really did. I just . . ." He sighed, shoving the ball of scrap into his satchel. "I just liked that I mattered, you know? All my life I've been treated like a waste of a birth fund. And then suddenly I had Councillors visiting my house to talk to me, telling me how amazingly talented I was. And I wanted to impress them. I know that's no excuse. But I was just trying to make the Dizznee name something people respected. So the triplets wouldn't have to go through what I went through."

Sophie sighed. "I know, Dex. I do understand. And I don't want to be mad at you. But I am. And I probably will be for a while. Can you give me some time?"

He nodded sadly.

"But can I have one favor?" he asked. "No, favor isn't the right word. I know I don't deserve a favor." He stepped closer, pointing to her bare finger. "I totally get why you took your panic switch off—and I know the last thing you want to do is call for me. But . . . what if the rebels come after you again? You can't inflict or call anyone telepathically or teleport away, and I couldn't live with myself if anything happened."

"She has me," Sandor reminded him.

"I know. But please, Sophie. Let me do something to keep you safe."

His eyes glistened with tears, and Sophie felt her eyes burn too.

Dex was the boy who'd tackled the kidnappers so she could try to get away. He'd suffered in silence as they burned him over and over because he didn't want them to do it to her. He was her first friend—her best friend—and he just wanted to keep her safe.

So even though she was still angry with him, she dug out his ring and slipped it on her finger—and she stuffed her iPod back into her pocket, too.

"Thanks," he mumbled, turning away and wiping his eyes. "And remember, if you need anything, all you have to do is press the center stone and it will call for me."

Sophie nodded.

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.

```
[
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    "chunk_filename": "000951.txt",
    "chunk_info": "[Chunk 340/380 | Source: keeper_of_the_lost_cities/txt/book_03_everblaze.txt | chars:651771-656121 | tokens:1010]"
  }
]
```

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 Brant even knew about the ambush proved he knew something—and she couldn’t waste any more time thinking about it. The ambush was happening now, and the Everblaze was closing in around them.

“Pin his wrists,” she ordered Dex, making sure Brant couldn’t grab her or toss her into the flames as she peeled back the scorched fabric over his chest, revealing a tattered pocket with a slim wand crowned with a green crystal.

“You could’ve used this the second we got here,” she realized, studying the strange pathfinder, wondering where the crystal led. “But you stayed to face us.”

“I wanted revenge,” he growled, triggering another round of coughs and hacking.

“And it cost you your hand.” She leaned closer, so her face was directly over his. “I will find you again—and next time you won’t get away.”

He coughed a wheezy laugh. “Where I’m going you’ll never be able to follow. Now. My crystal?”

Dex tightened his hold on Brant’s wrists as Sophie placed the pathfinder in his blistered palm. Before she let go, she ordered, “Tell me what you know about the ambush.”

Brant coughed again, and a thin stream of blood trickled from the corner of his mouth. “We’re on to your friends’ little plan. They’re going to cower in their secret cave while the dwarves attack, right?”

“How do you know that?” Sophie demanded.

"We have many ways. Just like we have many dwarves hiding in the mountain—far more than the Black Swan will be bringing. And they have orders to kill everyone waiting for them."

The words were still on his lips when he bucked his body, throwing Sophie and Dex backward. He groaned in agony as he raised the crystal to create a faint path. But his lips were smiling as he rolled into the light, vanishing in a vivid green flash.

"Come on," Dex said as he offered Sophie a helping hand. "We have to get Grady out of here."

"No—I have to go warn the others."

"Then I'm going with you. We'll drop Grady at home and then—"

"There's no time. You heard him—we might already be too late."

"Okay . . . then . . . tell me where to find them and I'll go while you—"

"I'll have to teleport there—if I can even remember what the cave looks like. I don't know if I ever saw a picture of it and I—wait."

She patted her pockets, never so happy to feel her iPod. And when she touched the screen it sprang instantly to life. 'Green Boots Cave,' she whispered as she punched the letters into a search and dozens of pictures of the disturbing scene scrolled across her screen.

"This is all I need. I'll teleport there while you take Grady home—actually, no, go to Everglen and tell Alden . . . what?" she asked when she caught the look on Dex's face.

She realized what she was forgetting before he even said it.

"Right. I can't teleport."

Dex reached for her forehead, but Sophie backed away.

"You can't Dex—they'll know."

"You have to go, right?"

She gave herself five seconds to accept that it was the only way. Then she nodded.

Dex nodded too, closing his eyes and whispering something she couldn't understand as he reached up and pulled the circlet off her head.

Instantly her headache vanished and the world clicked into focus. Her mind raced through a dozen different thoughts and sensations, like her brain was stretching its weary muscles after being closed in.

"You okay?" Dex asked as she rubbed her temples.

"It's like I can think again."

"I'm so sorry."

She smiled sadly. "I have to go."

"Wait!" he said, pulling a wide black cuff off his wrist. "I know you probably don't want any more of my gadgets, but did you see how far Brant flew when I punched him?" He flipped the cuff over to show her three silver rimmed slits. "These release an extra burst of air to thrust your arm forward a lot faster. I think you should wear it. Just in case."

She didn't know what to say as he gently clasped it around her right wrist, just above her nexus. So

she threw her arms around him, holding on with all the strength she had. "Thank you, Dex. Take Grady to Everglen, and make sure Edaline's safe too. I'll be back as soon as I can."

She gave herself one quick breath before she let him go. Then she ran to the end of the cliff, turning back to wave goodbye.

She caught a quick glimpse of Dex tossing her circlet into the glowing flames of the Everblaze.

Then she closed her eyes and jumped off the edge.

SIXTY-FIVE

A SHEARING WIND NEARLY KNOCKED Sophie over as she landed in a snowdrift on the narrow ledge of a vertical incline. She had about a second to celebrate that her teleporting had worked and she'd made it to Everest. Then reality kicked in.

She hadn't considered the toll it would take on her body to drop into such an extreme environment with no oxygen, or coat, or boots, or anything she needed to survive. Within seconds, her blood started to freeze in her veins, making her brain throb and her whole body shake as she lost feeling in her fingers and toes. She could vaguely see the rigid shape of a corpse in green boots amid the blinding white surrounding her, but her head was spinning and her chest was heaving and she was fairly certain she was dying—if she wasn't dead already.

```
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starstones were required to access facilities 'not on the Lodestar map'. They required a
specific 'blue flash' to function. The starstones were related to the Black Swan's creation
of a child. The technology was described as being superior to elven technology in this
context.",
    "chunk_filename": "002188.txt",
    "chunk_info": "[Chunk 358/510 | Source:
keeper_of_the_lost_cities/txt/book_06_nightfall.txt | chars:639219-640604 | tokens:318]"
  }
]
```

I can get much worse, Sophie. You should be grateful for my restraint.

Is that a threat? Fitz asked.

It's a reminder to think long and hard about who's truly your enemy, and who has spared you time and again. But we're getting off track. Going back to the story you've been so desperate for me to share, I tried to convince Cyrah that I was a member of the Black Swan and would be using the starstones to protect the newest hideouts—but Prentice must've coached her somehow. She asked too many specific questions, and my answers gave away that I was with the Neverseen—not that she knew the name of our order back then. But she knew I was on the other side, and she threatened to turn me in to the Council. I had to silence her.

You mean kill her, Sophie clarified.

Why would I kill her? I needed the starstones. I also much prefer keeping my sanity. I simply made a threat of my own. I knew the Black Swan had created a child, and that she was supposed to be this all-powerful thing, tucked away somewhere until the timing was right. I'd also heard rumors that Cyrah believed her husband would recover by some mysterious means. So, I put two and two together and told her that the Neverseen were close to finding the girl, and that once we did, she would be terminated—but that if Cyrah made me the starstones I needed, I'd make sure the girl had a chance to help Prentice before her untimely demise.

How nice of you, Fitz muttered, scooting closer to Sophie and wrapping an arm around her.

I thought it was particularly generous, Lady Gisela agreed. And Cyrah became much more cooperative. But it took her several weeks to figure out how to achieve the blue flash I needed. And in that time, Fintan discovered what I was up to. He didn't like that Cyrah knew about my connection to the order, even after I'd assured him that she understood that both her husband's life—and her son's—were on the line if she betrayed our agreement. Evidently that wasn't good enough for him, so he was the one who got rid of her—without telling me. If you don't believe me, consider this: He didn't even wait until she'd delivered all of the starstones. She'd messed one up, and still owed me a replacement, which I never got, thanks to him.

Sophie wondered if that was the stone Marella's mom had found.

But Fitz went for the bigger question. How did Fintan kill her?

He left that to Gethen. Fintan demanded I bring Gethen with me when I went to pick up the starstones in Mysterium. I've never worked out exactly what happened, but I saw Cyrah's expression shift as she stepped into the light. One second all was well. The next she looked pained and panicked. And when I turned to Gethen, he was sweaty and shaking. I confronted Fintan about it later, and all he told me was that I'd gotten sloppy—and I suppose I should've seen it for the warning it was. At the time, all I could think was that I had been sloppy—and it cost Cyrah her life.

There was a crackle in her voice, but Sophie couldn't decide if it was remorse or resentment.

Or maybe the whole story was a ploy to misdirect the blame on Fintan.

If what you're saying is true, Sophie said, trying to fit the new details with everything she already knew, why did Fintan abduct Wylie and interrogate him about his mom?

# Cover 4

Relevant results in this cover: 5

Content pages range: [57, 73]

Groups range: [21, 25]

## Deep intent (search) query

Interested in example of human technology being presented as equal or superior to magic, or anything that will make me feel proud of human species technology. Technopath is not considered human. Elven tech weapons is not considered human. Only interested in stuff that essentially wouldn't work without the human tech involved, and has to be impressive- a worthy opponent to this elven magic and tech.

## Ranking query (reranker)

nterested in example of human technology being presented as equal or superior to magic, or anything that will make me feel proud of human species technology. Technopath is not considered human. Elven tech weapons is not considered human. Only interested in stuff that essentially wouldn't work without the human tech involved, and has to be impressive- a worthy opponent to this elven magic and tech.

- 000021.txt — ranks: #24
- 000022.txt — ranks: #26
- 000023.txt — ranks: #27
- 000024.txt — ranks: #30
- 000025.txt — ranks: #31



## Group 21/25

---

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[
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  }
]
```

FORTY-FOUR

THE FIVE FRIENDS held hands as they leaped away from Exillium, and all the Coaches and Waywards stared.

I don't think we're doing so great at the whole 'blending in' thing, Keefe said as they reappeared in a gray-skied forest. Which is why you guys are my favorite.

What happened here, Biana whispered as she turned toward the trees. Their trunks were unnaturally bent and crooked. It's not the plague, is it?

No, the forest has been like this for decades, Sophie said. I remember seeing pictures of this place on the Internet.

The Internet, Dex snorted. Humans and their technology.

It looks like somebody bent them intentionally, Fitz said, tracing his hand down one of the C-shaped trunks.

I did, Calla dropped into the clearing from the top of one of the trees. I sang to them, and they followed my voice.

Why only these trees, Sophie asked. There were hundreds with the same distinct shape, but the forest beyond was straight and normal.

Calla placed her palm against the sharpest part of the curve, where the tree stood only inches above the ground. These trees were dying. My friends told me I should uproot them to spare the rest of the forest. But I could feel too much life in their trunks to pluck them from the ground.

How did you save them, Biana asked.

I listened. And I realized their voices had been silenced. So I gave them mine. I sang of sunlight and rain and rich soil. And hope. Always hope. She moved to another tree, one that had the widest curve of them all, and lay in the slope of its trunk. For a week I stayed right here. I didn't stop, even to rest my throat. I could barely rasp by the end, but I could feel their strength returning. They'll forever bear the mark of their trials, but they are survivors. Proof that anything can be overcome.

Keefe sat on one of the curved trunks, and Sophie waited for him to make a joke. But he just slid his fingers over the rough bark.

I thought we could all use the reminder that nature tells us what it needs, Calla whispered. That's why I chose this as our meeting place.

She closed her eyes, singing a slow melody. It was the sweetest song Sophie had ever heard, and the forest shimmered in response. The crooked trees rustled as if they were joining in the chorus, and the wind whistled through their leaves.

It's beautiful, Biana whispered, waving her fingers in front of her face. I think I finally see the glints of life you told me about, Calla.

If that's true, then you now know how I see you, Calla smiled when Biana's eyes lit up.

Calla repeated the song again, and the sparkles intensified, until the whole forest looked painted with glitter. It faded when she kneeled at the foot of the tree. Her song turned softer, and the roots twisted and twirled until they'd swept aside the soil and formed a tunnel.

Calla motioned for everyone to follow her underground, and as Sophie stepped into the earth she swore she heard a new song take over—a hushed whisper circling around her, prickling her consciousness.

Her eyes found Calla's in the dim light, wondering if Calla could hear it too.

I don't know where it's coming from, Calla said. It's as if the earth itself has joined the call, trying to tell us what it needs.

Goose bumps peppered Sophie's skin as her mind translated the lyric. A single word, sung over and

over and over.

Panakes.

What if we're focusing on the wrong thing, Sophie asked when they'd regrouped in the girls' common room, after they'd eaten and changed out of their uniforms. Maybe we should be searching for the Panakes instead of the drakostomes.

If you're saying we should sneak into ogreville instead of sitting here watching Dex poke a gadget with sticks, I'm in, Keefe said.

Easy there, Sophie told him as Keefe tried to drag her toward the door. That's not what I'm saying—not yet at least. I meant we should be searching for information about the Panakes.

Keefe flopped back into his chair with a sigh so dramatic it had to have hurt his throat.

And excuse me, Dex said, this happens to be an incredibly technical process. He held up the Twiggler, which now looked like some sort of twig-and-wire spider. You try merging six different technologies into one gadget.

I'm not saying it's not important, Keefe said. But the rest of us are just sitting here wasting time.

Speak for yourself, Biana said, appearing by the waterfall. I think I figured out how to hide from Calla. I just need to make sure I can hold it.

Yeah, and Sophie and I are about to do some Cognate training, Fitz added.

But what do you mean by focusing on the Panakes, Dex asked Sophie.

I meant we should be trying to find information about the cure, not the cause of the plague. Calla said nature tells us what it needs, and nature was singing about the Panakes. We need to figure out what they are and how to find them.

Assuming they're real, Fitz reminded her.

If the earth is singing about them, wouldn't they have to be, Sophie asked. And if there's any record of them, I'm betting it's in there. She pointed to the Twiggler, wishing it didn't look so ready to fall apart. Are you getting any closer to making it search by keyword?

I'm trying, Dex said. But the different technologies are super specific. They'll each only serve a single function. The elvin tech provides all the power I need, and the dwarven stuff works like a backup. The goblin tech is my security, the trollish tech is what breaks through the barriers and whatnot, the ogre tech is the really sneaky stuff that gets me past the subtle defenses. And the gnomish tech seems to smooth out all the connections between everything. That's why I keep adding more sticks, hoping it'll make the parts cooperate better. But none of that helps with searching. It almost feels like that comes from a totally different technology. But I already have all the intelligent species represented, so I don't know what that means.

What about humans, Sophie asked. I know they're not part of the treaties anymore—but they were.

The archive is super old, right, Fitz added. The archive is super old, right, Fitz added. So it could've been built before the humans betrayed everyone, and that would mean it includes their technology.

Dex scratched the top of his head. I guess. But I have no idea what I'm supposed to use for human technology.

There's my iPod, Sophie offered, even though she really didn't want it destroyed. The small human gadget had been her constant companion growing up, her only way to drown out the bombarding human thoughts before she knew how to shield. Plus, it was one of the few human things she had left from her old life—and Dex had made all kinds of cool tweaks.

Nah, Dex said. Anything modern would be too advanced. I don't even know if humans knew electricity existed back when this archive was made.

They didn't, Sophie realized. Okay... so we have to figure out what they did have.

Chariots? Plows? Bows and arrows? Were any of those thousands of years old?

I remember learning in school about an Iron Age, a Bronze Age, and a Stone Age, she told them. Where humans made tools from those different materials.

Hmm. I'm already using bronze and iron for some of the other creatures, Dex said. But I guess I could try stone—though I have no idea how stone counts as 'technology.'

It makes a pretty decent weapon, Keefe mumbled. Just ask my mom.

He rubbed his head where she'd given him a gash during her attempt to steal Silveny.

No one seemed to know what to say to that.

I think that's my cue, Keefe said, heading for the door. Call me if you decide on an ogre invasion.

Dex stood too, stuffing the Twiggler into his satchel. Guess I need to go rock hunting. Wanna come with me, he asked Sophie.

We really need to work through some Cognate exercises, Fitz reminded her. We lost a whole week when I was sick.

The old Dex would've glowered and muttered something about Telepaths. But the new Dex just nodded and said, Yeah, that makes sense.

Can I go with you, Biana asked him. If I don't let Iggy get some exercise, he's going to shred another one of my favorite shoes.

Biana must really love the little imp if she was willing to forgive footwear destruction.

At least he's doing well on his diet, she told Sophie. I think he's finally getting a taste for vegetables!

It turned out Iggy had most definitely not gotten a taste for vegetables, and Biana stomped back an hour later, muttering about "stubborn imps." Sophie assumed it had something to do with the giant moth wing Iggy was crunching on.

Della returned not long after, looking uncommonly frazzled. Her hair was tied back in a sloppy bun, and her gown was stained and wrinkled.

Everything okay, Sophie asked.

Della shook her head. Physic had done some research on human comas, and she'd come up with a treatment plan for Prentice, with cold and hot compresses and balms and elixirs. We tried it today, but

somewhere in the process he stopped breathing and everything unraveled. We got him breathing again—don't worry. But... Della stared at the ceiling. I think we're officially out of ideas. Nothing seems to matter.

If words could cast a shadow, they would've darkened the whole house.

I'm sorry, Della said, heading toward her room. I don't mean to despair. I'm just tired of sitting at Prentice's bedside telling happy stories and trying to pretend I'm not partially there for completely selfish reasons. I want him to get better, but...

Sophie knew what she meant.

Della was still worried about how Prentice's condition would affect Alden.

Anyway, good night. Della kissed her son on the top of the head, then did the same to Sophie before she headed for her room. Don't stay up too late working. You'll need plenty of rest before another day at Exillium.

Sophie knew Della was right, and went to bed an hour early. She also ate a double portion of breakfast the next morning in case they were in for another round of appetite suppression. She was prepared for anything Exillium could throw at her—until they leaped to campus and arrived in the heart of a plague zone.

## Group 22/25

---

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    "chunk_info": "[Chunk 271/380 | Source:
keeper_of_the_lost_cities/txt/book_03_everblaze.txt | chars:509078-513495 | tokens:1020]"
  }
]
FIFTY-THREE
```

THE CROWD THAT GATHERED IN front of the Councillor's castles the next morning seemed to have mixed feelings about the election.

Dressed in their finest and bearing lavish gifts, they greeted their newest Councillor with a standing ovation as she appeared with the other eleven Councillors on the arched crystal stage that had been created for the occasion.

But when the applause died down, Sophie could hear the whispers and mutterings:

We needed someone stronger.

Someone with more experience.

Someone to take control.

Even those in favor were concerned about the upheaval this would cause at Foxfire.

But Dame Alina—no, Councillor Alina, Sophie corrected—smiled and waved like she had no idea they were discontent. Her pale green gown was understated compared to her usual fare, but her silver cape and peridot-encrusted circlet made her every bit as regal as the rest of the Council. And she held her head high, dipping the most elegant curtsy Sophie had ever seen as she stepped forward to address her people.

Thank you, she called, her sharp voice slicing through the chilly morning air. Thank you for such an incredible welcome. It is truly my honor to come before you today.

She fell silent, and Sophie wondered if that was all she was going to say.

But Councillor Alina turned and pointed to the ruins of Eternalia in the distance. I cannot ignore that this position I've been given is the result of one of the greatest tragedies our world has ever seen. Nor would I want to. That's why I've chosen this color for my crown. I want my time ruling to stand in memorial to what we've lost, and as a testimony to what we will regain.

She turned back to the crowd, pausing to let her glassy eyes study the faces of the people standing before her.

I hear your cries for justice and change. And I realize that trust is earned, not given. But I want you to know that I am ready to brave the long road ahead. I'm ready to make the hard choices. I'm ready to grow and learn and regain control. Past wounds will heal and past wrongs will be corrected. The life we used to know will return. We are all part of the most dramatic time we've ever faced in our long history. But it's an exciting time. An inspiring time. A time we will look back on centuries from now as a pivotal moment. A chance to prove the superiority of the Elvin Way. And I am honored to help us rise to the occasion.

The crowd erupted into another round of applause, this time sounding more sincere. And as Councillor Emery stepped forward and called for silence, Sophie noticed that none of the whispers returned.

His dark skin was silhouetted against the bright sky, giving him an aura of power and confidence as he cleared his throat and called, Thank you for joining us this morning, and for all your patience during these long, tumultuous days. Like you, we are still mourning and healing. But we are also rebuilding—and we stand before you ready to rule. Many changes are already in the works, and we will share them over the course of the coming days. But to start, I have an announcement to make. As you know, Councillor Alina's appointment has opened up the position of Foxfire's principal—and in order to ensure that our prestigious academy in no way falls into disarray, our first order of business was to elect her replacement. Numerous names were discussed and considered, and we selected a candidate with both the strong leadership required, and the experience at Foxfire to transition quickly. So from this day forward, the principal at Foxfire will be Master Leto Kerlof, who shall henceforth be called Magnate Leto Kerlof. Correspondingly, the Beacon of the Silver Tower will now be Lady Cadence Talle, who shall henceforth be called Master Cadence Talle. She will maintain her session with her sole prodigy in addition to her new responsibilities, and all transitions will be made in time for the return of regular sessions at Foxfire on Monday. Meanwhile all members of the Nobility will return to work today.

He paused to let that information settle, but not long enough for Sophie to decide how she felt about any of it.

She tried to applaud as the Councillors slowly glittered away. But something about the speeches had unsettled her, and it had nothing to do with all the shifts and changes.

She didn't figure it out until late that night as she lay in bed tossing and turning, unable to find her way to sleep.



Councillor Alina had met Sophie's eyes only once during her speech. And it was when she'd promised she was ready to make the hard choices.

So when are the Councillors going to decide on my punishment Sophie asked, stopping Grady at the Leapmaster before he could leave for his latest assignment.

Now that the Council was back in session, they wanted him crawling through tunnels, searching for the missing dwarves again. Which meant she might not see him for days.

Grady adjusted his heavy cape, looking particularly uncomfortable as he told her. I'm still waiting for word on that myself. King Dimitar's deadline is only a few days away, so I expect it will happen rather swiftly. But it depends on how quickly they agree.

How will I know when they've decided

No one has told me that, either. But I promise, Alden and I are both staying on top of it. We're as eager to have this settled as you are.

He pulled her close, kissing the top of her head as he whispered, In the meantime, stay safe. I'll be home as soon as I can.

She watched him glitter away, then headed back to her room to hail Keefe. His dad was back on assignment too, which meant he was finally free to brainstorm meeting options for the Black Swan—and just in time, since the deadline they'd given the Black Swan was that day.

She'd expected Keefe's ideas to be complicated and crazy—and there were definitely a few like that in the mix. One even involved forcing the Black Swan to visit five of the places on Keefe's Stinkiest Spots in the World list before coming full circle back to the cave. But in the end, Keefe surprised her with what he pushed for:

We meet tomorrow at sunset.

Outside my old home.

You bring the answers.

We'll rearrange the gnomes.

You don't think we should at least push for them to meet us at that window in Italy—that way we can find out where it is Sophie asked.

Nah, we can find it ourselves. Plus, then we'd have to tell them we know about it. Why give away a secret if we don't need to. Trust me—San Diego's perfect. This Forkle dude has just as much history there as you do, which should throw him off his game. And it'll make it way easier to nag him about what happened the day he activated your telepathy, and about the Boy Who Disappeared, and anything else you've been stressing about, since it all happened right there.

I guess you're right.

What do you mean you guess Of course I'm right—I'm a genius, remember.

A genius who's dressed all fancy Sophie pointed out, grinning when Keefe blushed.

She was used to Keefe's untucked school uniforms, wrinkled tunics, and loose-fitting pants—which he still somehow always managed to look good in. But now he was all . . . tailored. His fitted jerkin showed broad shoulders Sophie hadn't realized he had, and his pants, cape, and undershirt were all expertly cut and made of thick, expensive fabric. Even Fitz would look sloppy next to him.

My mom took me shopping, he mumbled. Said it was time I started dressing like a Sencen. At first I was like, dude, this is lame. But then I was like, but I look good. And I do, don't I. Admit it, Foster—you've been checking out the Keefster. And maybe even . . . the keester.

He turned and did some sort of wiggly dance until Sophie tossed a pillow at his head.

Don't we have a note to leave she asked when he scooted across the room to start his dance again.

I've been waiting for you to lead the way. Unless you'd rather I go first so you can admire the view.

Sophie flung another pillow.

Sandor rolled his eyes at both of them as Keefe chased her down the stairs and out the door and all the way down to the cliffs.

Their laughter echoed off the cave as they tucked the note into place.

Come and get it Keefe shouted, tossing a handful of sand like confetti. Then he stood there waiting, like he expected a dwarf to pop out of the ground any second.

A watched pot never boils Sophie told him.

Wow. That might win the prize for most boring expression ever.

Sophie tossed sand at his head and he chased her back up to the house, earning more eye rolls from Sandor, and amused stares from Edaline.

Sophie spent the rest of the afternoon organizing Edaline's office while Keefe ran down to check the caves every fifteen minutes.

No reply came.

Not until the next morning, when Sophie dragged Sandor down to the beach at the crack of dawn, after another long night with very little sleep.

A tiny black pillbox held the shortest note the Black Swan had ever given her. It simply said:

Okay.

FIFTY-FOUR

CONVINCING THE BLACK SWAN TURNED out to be far easier than convincing Grady to let her go.

He had quite a lot to say about Sophie illegally teleporting to a Forbidden City when she was already in so much trouble. But eventually he agreed, so long as Sandor went with them—a detail he absolutely would not budge on, no matter how many ways Sophie explained the impossibility of disguising a seven-foot-tall goblin from humans.

Edaline finally found the solution, turning one of her lacy capes into a shawl and showing Sandor how to walk hunched over with a makeshift cane. Anyone who got close would surely notice that he was one buffed-out, armadillo-looking grandma. But from a distance he appeared to be a sweet, albeit rather lumpy looking, little old lady.

Keefe laughed for five straight minutes when he saw him.

Sophie, meanwhile, was battling a major sense of déjà vu.

Not only had she put on the same jeans and yellow shirt with brown stripes that she'd worn on the day Fitz had permanently taken her away, but Keefe had borrowed the dark jacket and jeans Fitz had been wearing.

Want me to talk like this Keefe asked, mimicking Fitz's accent almost perfectly. Take my hand, Sophie. Let me show you where you truly belong.

That's not what he said she grumbled.

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My dad was always paranoid always preparing me for something he seemed afraid would happen but he got much weirder toward the end started shutting himself in his office for days at a time wandering around the house muttering under his breath about power sources and how he shouldve spent more time studying geology and then one night I came downstairs and found him smashing all his laptops and burning all his research in the fireplace and when I asked him what he was doing he grabbed my arms and told me hed made a huge mistake and the only way to fix it was for us to disappear he said he had a plan that was going to sound scary because it would mean starting over with new names but I had to trust him because it was the only way and he promised hed tell me more once he had everything arranged she had to clear her throat a few times before she said three days later a stranger showed up at our door and told me my dad was dead and I had to leave because I needed people to think I was dead too I thought it was a cruel joke but they had a letter from my dad apparently hed given it to them in case something like that happened what did it say keefe asked a bunch of stuff Im not going to tell you but hed made all these arrangements obituaries graves a new name new guardian a bank account lists of dos and donts and general survival skills and he told me the most important thing I could do was forget my old life forget about him pretend I was an orphan and never look back im guessing the hidden camera at your grave doesnt really follow those rules keefe said quietly neither does trailing you or telling you any of this keefe nodded deciding not to ask why she was doing it he was pretty sure it was the same reason he kept trying to trigger the memories his mom stole some things you just cant let go im sorry he told her again you keep saying that i know keefe paced across the alley a couple of times before he said i just cant help feeling like i did something or didnt do something that makes me responsible for all this and i just dont remember it she fidgeted with the sleeves of her sweatshirt so thats why you brought us flowers and stood there drawing in your little journal keefe nodded can i see it the sketch its nothing special i d still like to you realize in order to do that i ll have to reach into my coat pocket figured id mention that because i d really rather not be tackled again her lips twitched like he d almost gotten her to smile move slowly and we should be good keefe reached for his pocket ugh you can move faster than that she grumbled when he set his pace just slightly faster than a sleepy ghoul keefe smirked and pulled out his silver journal flipped to the sketch of the graves and held it out to show her nope he said when she tried to grab the journal from him lots of stuff in there you dont get to see she rolled her eyes and leaned closer studying his drawing wow that s brilliant actually keefe s cheeks warmed why do you sound so surprised i mean its a drawing of headstones i figured it d be boring but i like the way you captured the shadows and the drizzle very moody kind of like you

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She kept her head down as she slunk away, hurrying back toward her own wing. Which was how she ended up plowing straight into Sir Tiergan. “Sorry,” she exclaimed as he struggled to regain his balance. He’d been moving fast, and they’d crashed pretty hard. She rubbed her forehead where it had slammed into his elbow. “Sophie!” He glanced around, thin lines stretched across his brow. “What are you doing here?” “I just came to drop off some gifts. Why? Is everything okay?” He smiled, but it looked forced. “Of course. I just didn’t expect to run into you here. Especially so literally.” His smile turned real with his joke. “Well, well, who do we have here?” Sophie’s heart sank as she turned around, expecting to find Keefe with lots of prying questions and one of his trademark smirks. And he was there. But his grin was gone, and it wasn’t he who’d spoken. A tall, slender man in a sapphire-encrusted navy-blue cape stood next to him, studying Sophie intently. The family resemblance was striking, though Keefe’s disheveled hairstyle and untucked shirt sharply contrasted his dad’s slicked blond hair and pristine tunic. “This must be the girl who was raised by humans,” he said, much louder than Sophie would’ve liked. “How curious to find her in the Level Four wing, talking to Foxfire’s most infamous Mentor.” “Infamous?” Sophie couldn’t help asking. She glanced at Keefe, but he was staring at the ground. It was strange to see him so . . . deflated. Like he’d wilted in his father’s presence. Keefe’s father grinned, an oily sort of smile that dripped with insincerity. “Few Mentors have resigned, then returned years later—out of the blue—to train a mystery prodigy.” He winked with the last two words, like he knew exactly who the prodigy was. Sophie felt her cheeks flame and searched for some sort of lie. But Tiergan beat her to it. “Interesting theory, Cassius—” “Lord Cassius,” he corrected. Tiergan’s jaw tightened. “Lord Cassius. But do you really think I could be tempted back by a little girl? Especially one performing so unremarkably in her sessions?” She knew he didn’t mean it. That Tiergan was only trying to keep her telepathy hidden. But the words still stung. A lot. “Come on, Dad,” Keefe said, looking at Sophie, not his father. His eyes radiated the apologies he couldn’t say. “I’m sure Fos—er—Sophie has somewhere she needs to be.” Cassius glared at his son. “Yes, of course. And I need to meet with your Mentors. See how disappointing your scores will be this time.” Keefe rolled his eyes as his father turned to Sophie with another fake smile. “Fascinating to meet you. I look very forward to seeing what you can do.” Sophie nodded and took off down the hall without saying goodbye. She felt bad leaving Keefe and Tiergan that way, but she had to get away from that man. It wasn’t because he was intimidating—though he was definitely that. She felt sorry for Keefe, having to go home to a cold, critical father every day. But what she really didn’t like was the way Cassius had looked at her, like he was trying to see through her. And the last thing he’d said: I look forward to seeing what you can do. Almost like he knew something she didn’t. Totally gave her the creeps. 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.” Maruca 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 Maruca 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. She knew Keefe would have a field day, though, so she fought the urge. “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.

## Group 25/25

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Seventy-Five

I WISH I could've changed," Sophie mumbled, fussing with the sleeves of her long white tunic.

She'd been planning to wear the green Neverseen-style vest she'd used for the mission to Ravagog a few months earlier—but there hadn't been time to change. So now she was stuck in ruffles and frills, trying to be grateful that her low boots at least had soft soles, and didn't make a clack, clack, clack as she paced the narrow alley.

"Tell me about it," Fitz said, fanning the front of his red bramble jersey. "I was halfway through my morning run when Blur showed up—so now I'm all sweaty."

"And smelling awesome," Keefe added with a choked cough.

Fitz, Biana, and Grizel had already been waiting for them when Sophie's group had arrived in the city. Marella showed up a couple of minutes later, followed by Dex and his father.

"I'm a slight amendment to the plan," Kesler explained, "to clear the crowd out of the courtyard, since we're having to do this during a busy time."

He patted the worn satchel slung around his shoulder, and Sophie could hear the clink of glass vials knocking into each other.

"Stink bombs?" Keefe guessed.

"Some of my finest," Kesler agreed.

"Ohhhh, can I set one off?" Ro asked.

"Pretty sure that would cause an interspeciesial incident."

"Which is why it'd be so much fun!" Ro countered.

Sophie tried to smile, but she couldn't take her eyes off the courtyard, where tiny shops and cafés surrounded the fountain in the center. The golden figures gleamed among the streams of colorful water that blasted around them in neat arcs before splashing into the swimming pool-size basin. She was too far back to see where Vespera's signature lay hidden on the top of the human statue's scepter—but she could feel it there. Waiting for her. Promising answers.

"So when do we unleash the stink?" Keefe asked.

"As soon as I get the signal," Kesler told him. "I guess Alden's setting up something in another part of the city, to try to draw everyone's attention over there."

"And we have this to keep us hidden in the meantime," Dex said, pulling an obscurer from his pocket. "I made some tweaks to it last night, so it should even cover some of what Linh does to the fountain—at least for a while."

"Where is Linh?" Fitz asked.



"And Tam?" Biana added.

"Sorry," the twins said a couple of minutes later, plodding into the alley carrying thick stacks of black fabric.

"Tiergan made us wait for these," Tam explained, pointing to the white eye symbol on the sleeves.

Sophie's stomach filled with all kinds of squirmy things.