

Neverseen (4) (Keeper of the Lost Cities)

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A New York Times bestselling series
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Sophie battles the rebels-and recovers dark memories from her past-in this jaw-dropping fourth book in the bestselling Keeper of the Lost Cities series.

Sophie Foster is on the run-but at least she's not alone.

Her closest friends from the Lost Cities have gone with her to join the Black Swan. They still have doubts about the shadowy organization, but the only way to find answers is to start working with them. And as they settle into their new lives, they uncover secrets bigger than anything they'd imagined.

But their enemies are far from done, and unleash a terrifying plague that threatens the safety of an entire species. Sophie and her friends fight with everything they have-with new allies joining them-but every choice has consequences. And trusting the wrong person could prove deadly.

In this game-changing fourth book in the Keeper of the Lost Cities series, Sophie must question everything to find a truth that will either save her world-or shatter it. Shannon Messenger graduated from the USC School of Cinematic Arts, where she learned-among other things-that she liked watching movies much better than making them. She's studied art, screenwriting, and film production, but she realized her real passion was writing stories for children. She's the New York Times and USA TODAY bestselling author of the award-winning middle grade series, Keeper of the Lost Cities, as well as the Sky Fall series for young adults. Her books have been featured on multiple state reading lists, published in numerous countries, and translated into many different languages. She lives in Southern California with an embarrassing number of cats. Find her online at ShannonMessenger.com. Neverseen ONE

"WE HAVE TO go," Fitz said, bursting through the doors of Everglen's upstairs guest room.

He found Sophie sitting alone on the edge of the giant canopy bed, already dressed in some of her old human clothes.

"I thought we were waiting another hour?" she asked, glancing out the window at the endless black sky.

"We can't. The Council is already convening to vote on our punishments."

Sophie took a slow breath, letting the words pulse through her veins, steeling her nerves as she reached for her purple backpack. It was the same bag she'd used when she'd left her human life nearly a year earlier. And now she would use it again to leave the Lost Cities.

"Is everyone ready?" she asked, proud of her voice for not shaking. She also resisted the urge to tug out an itchy eyelash.

This was not a time for nervous habits.

It was time to be brave.

The Council had vowed to punish anyone associated with the Black Swan—the mysterious organization responsible for Sophie's existence. But Sophie and her friends knew the real villains were a group called the Neverseen. Fitz, Keefe, and Biana had even tried to help the Black Swan catch the rebels on Mount Everest. But the Neverseen guessed their plan and turned the mission into an ambush. Sophie had discovered the trap in time to warn her friends, and they'd escaped with their lives—and managed to capture one prisoner. But they'd each broken numerous laws in the process.

Their safest option now was to flee to the Black Swan and go into hiding. But Sophie had mixed feelings about getting up close and personal with her creators. The Black Swan had tweaked her genes to enhance her abilities as part of their Project Moonlark—but they'd never given her any clue as to why. They'd also never told her who her genetic parents were, and Sophie had no idea if she'd finally have to meet them.

"?Bout time you got here," Keefe said as Sophie followed Fitz down the twisting silver staircase. He stood next to Dex in Everglen's glittering round foyer, both of them looking very human in hoodies and dark jeans.

Keefe flashed his famous smirk and patted his carefully mussed blond hair, but Sophie could see the sadness clouding his sky blue eyes. During their confrontation with the Neverseen, Keefe had discovered that his mother was one of their leaders. She'd even attacked her own son, before fleeing to the ogre capital and abandoning her family.

"Hey, no worrying about me, Foster," Keefe said, fanning the space between them. He was one of the few Empaths who could feel Sophie's emotions rippling through the air.

"I'm worried about all of you," she told him. "You're all risking your lives because of me."

"Eh, what else is new?" Dex asked, flashing his dimpled grin. "And will you relax? We've got this! Though I'm not sure about my shoes." He pointed to his soft brown boots, which were a typical elvin style. "All the human ones Fitz had were too big for my feet."

"I doubt anyone will notice," Sophie told him. "But I guess it depends on how long we'll be around humans. How far away is the hideout after we get to Florence?"

Fitz smiled his movie-ready smile. "You'll see."

The Black Swan had taught Fitz how to sneak past Sophie's mental blocking and view the secret information hidden in her brain. But for some reason he wouldn't share what he'd

learned. All Sophie knew was that they were headed to a round window somewhere in the famous Italian city.

"Hey," Fitz said, leaning closer. "You trust me, don't you?"

Sophie's traitorous heart still fluttered, despite her current annoyance. She did trust Fitz. Probably more than anyone. But having him keep secrets from her was seriously annoying. She was tempted to use her telepathy to steal the information straight from his head. But she'd broken that rule enough times to know the consequences definitely weren't worth it.

"What is with these clothes?" Biana interrupted, appearing out of thin air next to Keefe.

Biana was a Vanisher, like her mother, though she was still getting used to the ability. Only one of her legs reappeared, and she had to hop up and down to get the other to show up. She wore a sweatshirt three sizes too big and faded, baggy jeans.

"At least I get to wear my shoes," she said, hitching up her pants to reveal purple flats with diamond-studded toes. "But why do we only have boy stuff?"

"Because I'm a boy," Fitz reminded her. "Besides, this isn't a fashion contest."

"And if it was, I'd totally win. Right, Foster?" Keefe asked.

Sophie actually would've given the prize to Fitz-his blue scarf worked perfectly with his dark hair and teal eyes. And his fitted gray coat made him look taller, with broader shoulders and-

"Oh please." Keefe shoved his way between them. "Fitz's human clothes are a huge snoozefest. Check out what Dex and I found in Alvar's closet!"

They both unzipped their hoodies, revealing T-shirts with logos underneath.

"I have no idea what this means, but it's crazy awesome, right?" Keefe asked, pointing to the black and yellow oval on his shirt.

"It's from Batman," Sophie said-then regretted the words. Of course Keefe demanded she explain the awesomeness of the Dark Knight.

"I'm wearing this shirt forever, guys," he decided. "Also, I want a Batmobile! Dex, can you make that happen?"

Sophie wouldn't have been surprised if Dex actually could build one. As a Technopath, he worked miracles with technology. He'd made all kinds of cool gadgets for Sophie, including the lopsided ring she wore-a special panic switch that had saved her life during her fight with one of her kidnappers.

"What's my shirt from?" Dex asked, pointing to the logo with interlocking yellow W's.

Sophie didn't have the heart to tell him it was the symbol for Wonder Woman.

"Why does Alvar have human stuff?" she asked. "I thought he worked with the ogres."

"He does," Fitz replied. "Or he did before you almost started a war with them."

Fitz said the words in a light, teasing way, but the truth behind them weighed heavily on Sophie's shoulders. They'd be in a lot less trouble if she hadn't ignored the rules of telepathy and tried to read the ogre king's mind. She'd known it was a dangerous risk, but she'd been desperate to know why the ogres had snuck into the Sanctuary and hidden one of their homing devices in Silveny's tail. The rare female alicorn wasn't just essential for the survival of her species, she was one of Sophie's closest friends. If only Sophie had known that ogres' minds could detect Telepaths—even genetically enhanced Telepaths like her. She hadn't learned anything useful, and she'd nearly voided the elvin-ogre treaty and started a war.

"But that still doesn't explain why Alvar has human stuff," Sophie reminded Fitz. "Ogres hate humans even more than elves do."

"They do," Fitz agreed. "But these clothes are from years ago, back when Alvar used to go out looking for you."

"He did?" Sophie asked. "I thought that was your job."

Fitz was the one who'd found her on her class field trip about a year earlier and brought her to the Lost Cities.

It was the best thing that ever happened to her.

Also the hardest.

Fitz smiled sadly, probably remembering the same thing: the moment she'd had to say goodbye to her human family. He was the only one who really understood what she'd lost that day, and she couldn't have gotten through it without him.

"I started searching for you when I was six," he told her, "after Alvar started his elite levels and wasn't able to sneak away from Foxfire anymore. But my dad searched for you for twelve years, remember? I couldn't go on secret missions when I was a toddler."

"What a slacker," Keefe interrupted. "I totally could've pulled that off. But then again, I'm Batman, so"—he draped an arm over Sophie's shoulders—"I could be your hero any day."

Dex pretended to gag, while Biana stared at Keefe's arm around Sophie.

"Aren't we supposed to be leaving?" they both asked at the same time.

Sophie pulled away from Keefe as Alden called "Wait!" from the top of the stairs. His elegant cape swished as he rushed to catch them. "You can't leave wearing your registry pendants."

Sophie grasped the choker around her neck, hardly believing she'd overlooked that essential detail. The pendants were special tracking devices from the Council. She wondered what other important things she might be forgetting. . . .

Alden pulled out a pair of sharp black pliers and said, "Let's start with Fitz." He spoke with the same crisp accent as his children, but his voice sounded weak and wobbly.

Fitz flinched as Alden cut the thick cord and the crystal pendant clattered to the floor.

"Whoa. This just got real." Keefe whispered.

"Yeah it did." Fitz traced his fingers across his now-bare neck.

"Are you okay?" Alden asked Biana, who was clutching her pendant in a white-knuckled fist.

"I'm fine," Biana whispered, lifting her long dark hair to expose her necklace.

Alden hesitated only a second before he sliced through the silver band. Her pendant landed next to Fitz's, followed by Keefe's.

"Yours will be trickier to remove," Alden reminded Dex and Sophie.

The Council added extra security measures after the Neverseen used their pendants to convince everyone Sophie and Dex had drowned instead of been kidnapped. Both of them even had trees in the Wanderling Woods-the elves' equivalent of a graveyard-from the funerals their families had held.

Alden's brow beaded with sweat as he pried at the thick metal until the cords broke free. "I'll need to remove your nexuses, as well," he said, pulling out a dime-size disk.

Sophie sighed.

Another very important detail she'd overlooked . . .

A nexus was a safety device meant to hold their bodies together during light leaps, but the force field it created could be tracked.

"I guess I didn't plan this running-away thing very well, did I?" Sophie mumbled.

"It's not the kind of thing one can plan for." Alden reassured her. "And do not expect yourself to think of everything. You're part of a team now. Everyone works together and helps."

The words would've been a lot more comforting if her "team" hadn't forgotten the same important things-though Fitz, Keefe, and Biana were already nexus-free. Their concentration strength had reached the required level. Dex was almost there too. The meter on his wide blue cuff had less than a quarter of the way to go.

When Alden pressed the tiny disk against it, the level surged to full.

"I've been tempted to do that myself," Dex admitted as he slipped the nexus off his wrist. "But I didn't want to cheat."

"Wise choice," Alden agreed. "Having the ability to do something does not mean it's the safest course of action. It also does not give us permission to break the law."

"It does when the law is stupid," Keefe argued.

"I wish I could disagree. But look at where we are." Alden gathered their fallen pendants and tucked them into his cape pockets along with Dex's nexus. "There was a time when I believed in the infallibility of our world. But now . . . we must rely on our own moral compasses. Right here"-he pressed his hand to his heart-"we know what is necessary and true. You all must hold to that and let it guide you through what lies ahead. But I've let myself get sidetracked. Sophie, let's take care of those nexuses."

Thanks to Elwin, her overprotective physician, Sophie had to wear one on each wrist. He'd also locked her nexuses so they couldn't unlatch, even though both of her meters were full. She'd faded several times during leaps-one of which had nearly killed her. But that was before the Black Swan had enhanced her concentration and healed her abilities.

Still, Sophie reached for the Fade Fuel she wore around her neck in case of emergencies. It hung next to her allergy remedy, both vials tucked safely under her T-shirt. She hadn't needed either elixir in weeks, but she felt better having them. Especially as Alden produced a twisted silver key and unlocked each of her nexuses.

She stopped him as he examined her third black cuff. "That's one of Dex's inventions."

"I call it the Sucker Punch," Dex said proudly. "It releases a burst of air when you swing your arm, so you can punch way harder than normal."

"Very clever," Alden told him. "And a good thing for you to have. Though, Dex, I'm hoping you've learned the dangers of inventing new weapons."

Dex's shoulders drooped as he promised that he had. Dex had built the painful ability-restricting circlet that the Council had forced Sophie to wear, not realizing it would be her

punishment for what had happened with the ogre king.

She nudged him with her elbow and smiled to remind him that she'd forgiven him. But he kept his eyes fixed on the floor.

"I think that takes care of everything," Alden said. "Though you all must remember to look out for one another. Fitz and Biana, share your concentration with Dex when you're leaping. And Keefe, I want you to help Sophie."

"Oh, I will," Keefe promised with a wink.

"We all will," Fitz corrected.

"Hey, I can take care of myself," Sophie argued. "I'm the one bringing us to Florence, remember?"

The blue leaping crystals all led to the same place in each Forbidden City, which would make it easier for someone to follow them. So they'd be teleporting to Italy, an ability only Sophie had—thanks to a surprise side effect of the way the Black Swan had altered her DNA.

"All of you can take care of yourselves," Alden said, "but you are stronger when you work together. You must also have a leader to keep the team organized, so Fitz, since you're the eldest, I'm putting you in charge."

"Hey, wait a minute," Keefe argued. "he's only older by a few months."

"Uh, by 'few,' you mean eleven," Fitz corrected.

Dex snorted. "Dude, you guys are old."

He glanced smugly at Sophie, and she blushed, hating that she'd been thinking the same thing.

Well . . . she didn't think Fitz and Keefe were old, but they were definitely older than her.

She'd guessed that Keefe was fourteen, which would make Fitz at least fifteen—but they could be even older than that. . . .

It was hard to keep track of age in the Lost Cities. The elves didn't pay that much attention to it, thanks to their indefinite lifespans. In fact, Sophie had no idea how old any of her friends actually were. No one ever mentioned their birthdays. Maybe that meant Sophie wasn't supposed to care about age either—but she was very aware that she was only thirteen and a half, and the difference between her and the boys felt huge.

"Hey, I'm the one who knows where we're going," Fitz said. "So I'm in charge, and . . . I guess

we should probably head out. Though, wait-what about Mom? Shouldn't we say goodbye?"

Alden glanced at Biana. "Your mother has to take care of something at the moment. But she told me to tell you she'll see you soon."

Fitz didn't look very satisfied by that answer. But he didn't argue, either.

Alden turned to Sophie, not quite meeting her eyes. "I . . . offered Grady and Edaline a sedative a few minutes ago, and they decided to take it. We feared what would happen when they actually had to watch you leave. So they told me to tell you that they love you and that they left a note for you in your backpack."

The lump i...

Other Books

The Christian Union.

“ Do stay and help me ! ” I am sent to stay , you will let me . “ as long as And you will sit in the chair , and keep order , and decide for ine ? ” “ Nay ; it is your chair , and no one can use it save yourself . ”