

Lodestar (5) (Keeper of the Lost Cities)

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Dark schemes unfold and Sophie's loyalty is pushed to the limit in this thrilling fifth book in the Keeper of the Lost Cities series.

Sophie Foster is back in the Lost Cities-but the Lost Cities have changed. The threat of war hangs heavy over her glittering world, and the Neverseen are wreaking havoc.

The lines between friend and enemy have blurred, and Sophie is unsure whom to trust. But when she's warned that the people she loves most will be the next victims, she knows she has to act.

A mysterious symbol could be the key-if only she knew how to translate it. Every new clue seems to lead deeper into her world's underbelly and the Black Swan aren't the only ones who have plans. The Neverseen have their own Initiative, and if Sophie doesn't stop it, they might finally have the ultimate means to control her.

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. Lodestar ONE

"THIS IS A security nightmare!" Sandor grumbled, keeping his huge gray hand poised over his enormous black sword.

His squeaky voice reminded Sophie more of a talking mouse than a deadly bodyguard.

Several prodigies raced past, and Sandor pulled Sophie closer as the giggling group jumped to pop the candy-filled bubbles floating near the shimmering crystal trees. All around them, kids were running through the confetti-covered atrium in their amber-gold Level Three uniforms, capes flying as they caught snacks and bottles of lushberry juice and stuffed tinsel-wrapped gifts into the long white thinking caps dangling from everyone's lockers.

The Midterms Celebration was a Foxfire Academy tradition-hardly the impending doom Sandor was imagining. And yet, Sophie understood his concern.

Every parent roaming the streamer-lined halls.

Every face she didn't recognize.

Any of them could be a rebel.

A villain.

The enemy.

Sandor watched Sophie tug on her eyelashes-her nervous habit, back in full force. "Nothing is going to happen," he promised, tucking her blond hair behind her ear with a surprisingly gentle touch for a seven-foot-tall goblin warrior.

It definitely helped having Sandor back at her side-especially after almost losing him during the battle on Mount Everest. And Sandor wasn't the only goblin at Foxfire anymore. Each of the six wings in the main campus building had been assigned its own patrol, with two additional squadrons keeping watch over the sprawling grounds.

The Council had also added security throughout the Lost Cities.

They had to.

The ogres were still threatening war.

And in the three weeks since Sophie and her friends had returned from hiding with the Black Swan, the Neverseen had scorched the main gate of the Sanctuary and broken into the registry in Atlantis.

Sophie could guess what the rebels had hoped to gain from the elves' secret animal preserve-they obviously didn't know that she'd convinced the Council to set the precious alicorns free. But the registry attack remained a mystery. The Councillors kept careful records on every elf ever born, and no one would tell her if any files had been altered or stolen.

A bubble popped on Sophie's head, and Sandor caught the box of Prattles that had been hovering inside.

"If you're going to eat these, I should check them first," he told her.

Sandor's wide, flat nose scented no toxins in the nutty candy, but he insisted on examining the pin before handing them over. Every box of Prattles came with a special collectible inside, and in the past, the Black Swan had used them to send Sophie messages.

He fished out the tiny velvet pouch and Sophie caught herself clutching her allergy remedy necklace. She still kept the silver moonlark pin that Calla had given her attached to the cord-a reminder of the friend she'd lost, and a symbol of the role she needed to figure out how to play.

"Looks like we're good," Sandor said, handing her the small boobrie pin-a strange black bird with bright yellow tail feathers. "Can't imagine that means anything important."

Sophie couldn't either. Especially since the Black Swan had been annoyingly silent.

No notes. No clues. No answers during their brief meetings.

Apparently they were "regrouping." And it was taking forever.

At least the Council was doing something-setting up goblin patrols and trying to arrange an ogre Peace Summit. The Black Swan should at least be . . .

Actually, Sophie didn't know what they should be doing.

That was the problem with having her friend join the enemy.

"There you are!" a familiar voice said behind her. "I was starting to think you'd ditched us."

The deep, crisp accent was instantly recognizable. And yet, the teasing words made Sophie wish she'd turn and find a different boy.

Fitz looked as cute as ever in his red Level Five uniform, but his perfect smile didn't reach his trademark teal eyes. The recent revelations had been a huge blow for all of her friends, but Fitz had taken it the hardest.

Both his brother and his best friend had run off with the Neverseen.

Alvar's betrayal had made Fitz wary-made him doubt every memory.

But Keefe's?

He wouldn't talk about it-at all.

Not that Sophie had many chances to bring up the subject. Only a handful of people knew the truth. The rest believed the Black Swan's carefully crafted lie, and thought Keefe was taking time away to mourn his mother's disappearance. Even the Council had no inkling, and Sophie hoped it would stay that way. The less everyone knew, the easier it would be for Keefe to come home.

If he came home.

"You okay?" Fitz asked, making her realize she'd forgotten to say hello. "I hope you're not worrying about your tests. There's no way you didn't pass."

"I don't know . . ."

Her photographic memory helped-but lately she'd struggled to concentrate during her school sessions. Honestly, though, she'd barely given her midterms a second thought. She wasn't the same girl she'd been the year before, who thought failing out of Foxfire would be the end of the world. Now she'd been kidnapped, presumed dead, banished from the Lost Cities, and helped stop a plague from killing off the entire gnomish species. She'd even snuck into the ogres' capital and helped destroy half the city-which happened to be why the Council was struggling to negotiate a new elvin-ogre treaty.

"Relax," Fitz said as her mind spun to nightmares of lumpy-faced ogres tearing through the elves' glittering streets. "We're supposed to be celebrating."

His cheer sounded forced. But she knew Fitz was trying.

That's what they did now.

Try.

Wait.

Hope.

"Just let me grab my thinking cap," she told him, heading for her locker. The long floppy hat was required during midterms, designed to restrict Telepaths and preserve the integrity of the tests-not that anything could block Sophie's enhanced abilities. But after the exams, the hats became present sacks, and everyone filled them with treats and trinkets and treasures.

"I'll need to inspect your presents before you open them," Sandor warned as he helped Sophie lift her overstuffed hat.

"That's perfect," Fitz said. "While he does that, you can open mine."

He pulled a small box from the pocket of his waist-length cape and handed it to Sophie. The opalescent wrapping paper had flecks of teal glitter dusted across it, and he'd tied it with a silky teal bow, making her wonder if he'd guessed her favorite color.

She really hoped he couldn't guess why. . . .

"Hopefully I did better this year," Fitz said. "Biana claimed the riddler was a total fail."

The riddle-writing pen he'd given her last time had been a disappointment, but . . .

"I'm sure I'll love it," Sophie promised. "Besides. My gift is boring."

Sandor had declared an Atlantis shopping trip to be far too risky, so Sophie had spent the

previous day baking her friends' presents.

She handed Fitz a round silver tin and he popped the lid off immediately.

"Ripplefluffs?" he asked, smiling his first real smile in days.

The silver-wrapped treats were what might happen if a brownie and a cupcake had a fudgey, buttery baby, with a candy surprise sunken into the center. Sophie's adoptive mother, Eddaline, had taught her the recipe and helped her invent two flavor combinations.

"How did you know that chocolate and mint is my favorite?" Fitz asked, peeling off the silver wrapper and devouring the whole fluff in one bite.

"I didn't," Sophie admitted. "If I had, I wouldn't have given you any of the butter toffee ones."

"Those look amazing too," he said, then frowned at his present. "Aren't you going to open it?"

"Shouldn't I wait until we're with the others?"

"Nah. It'll be better if it's just the two of us."

Something about the way he said it made her heart switch to flutter mode, even though she knew Fitz didn't think of her that way. Her mind raced through a dozen theories as she carefully tore the shimmering paper. But she still wasn't prepared to find . . .

"Rings?"

"They go on your thumbs," Fitz explained. "It's a Cognate thing."

She wasn't sure what thumb jewelry had to do with their rare telepathic connection. But she noticed Fitz was wearing an identical set. Each ring had initials stamped into the verdigris metal. SEF on the right-Sophie Elizabeth Foster-and FAV on the left.

"Fitzroy Avery Vacker."

"Your full name is Fitzroy?" she asked.

"Yeah. No idea what my parents were thinking with that one. But watch this. Try opening your thoughts to mine, and then do this."

He held his hands palm-out, waiting for her to do the same.

As soon as she did, the rings turned warm against her skin and snapped their hands together like magnets.

"They're made from ruminel," Fitz said, "which reacts to mental energy. It doesn't change anything, but it'll show us when our minds are connected, and I thought it would help us concentrate and . . ." His voice trailed off. "You hate them, don't you?"

"Of course not!"

She liked them a little too much, actually.

She was just trying not to show it.

There were a lot of kids staring at them.

And whispering.

And giggling.

Fitz twisted his palms, breaking the rings' connection. "I guess I should've gone with the necklace Biana showed me. You just have so many necklaces-and the last one you got . . ."

He didn't finish the sentence.

It would've meant mentioning Keefe.

"I'm glad you got me these. Seriously. They're my fave." She pointed to the "FAV."

That earned her another smile, and Fitz brushed his dark hair off his forehead. "Come on, I'm sure Dex and Biana are getting sick of waiting for us."

"Where did Grizel go?" Sandor asked as they turned to leave. "She's supposed to stay by your side."

"I'm right here," a husky female voice said as a lithe gray goblin in a fitted black jumpsuit seemed to melt out of the shadows. Fitz's bodyguard was just as tall as Sandor, but far leaner-and what she lacked in bulk she made up for in stealth and grace.

"I swear," she said, tapping Sandor on the nose. "It's almost too easy to evade you."

"Anyone can hide in this chaos," Sandor huffed. "And now is not the time for games!"

"There's always time for games." Grizel tossed her long ponytail in a way that almost seemed . . . Was it flirty?

Sandor must've noticed too, because his gray skin tinted pink. He cleared his throat and turned to Sophie. "Weren't we heading to the cafeteria?"

She nodded and followed Fitz into the mazelike halls, where the colorful crystal walls shimmered in the afternoon sunlight. The cafeteria was on the second floor of the campus's five-story glass pyramid, which sat in the center of the courtyard framed by the U-shaped main building.

Sophie spent most of the walk wondering how long it would take Dex to notice her new accessories. The answer was three seconds-and another after that to notice the matching rings on Fitz's thumbs.

His periwinkle eyes narrowed, but he kept his voice cheerful as he said, "I guess we're all giving rings this year."

Biana held out her hand to show Sophie a ring that looked familiar-probably because Sophie had a less sparkly, slightly more crooked, definitely less pink version on her own finger.

"I also made one for you," Dex told Fitz. "It's in your thinking cap. And I have some for Tam and Linh, whenever we see them again. That way we'll all have panic switches-and I added stronger trackers, so I can home in on the signal even if you don't press your stone. Just in case anything weird happens."

"Your Technopath tricks aren't necessary," Sandor told him, pointing to their group of bodyguards-four goblins in all.

"But it's still good to have a backup plan, right?" Biana asked, admiring her ring from another angle. The pink stone matched the glittery shadow she'd brushed around her teal eyes, as well as the gloss on her heart-shaped lips. Biana reminded Sophie of the dolls her human parents had tried to get her to play with as a kid-too beautiful and stylish to be real.

"Thank you again," Biana told Dex. "I'm never taking it off!"

Dex's cheeks turned the same color as his strawberry-blond hair.

Sophie smiled, glad to see Dex and Biana getting along so well-especially after all the years Dex had spent resenting the Vackers. He used to call Fitz "Wonderboy" and claimed their legendary family was too snobby and perfect.

Nobody thought that anymore.

In fact, both Fitz's and Biana's thinking caps looked emptier than they'd been the previous year. Their parents had decided not to let the Black Swan cover for Alvar's disappearance like they'd done for Keefe. Alvar had lied for more than a decade and used his position in the nobility to spy on his father and the Council-and helped kidnap Sophie and Dex. He didn't deserve protection, even if it brought undeserved shame on the family.

Awkward silence settled over their table and Sophie tried not to look at the empty chairs. Not only was Keefe missing, but Jensi had chosen to sit with his old friends. He'd reconnected with them during the months that Sophie and the others had lived with the Black Swan, and he seemed reluctant to come back, like he was worried they'd abandon him again. Marella was avoiding them too-though she also wasn't at Stina Heks's table, like Sophie would've expected. Marella sat by herself in the farthest corner, while Stina sat with Biana's former best friend, Maruca.

Stina caught Sophie watching her and didn't return her smile-but she didn't offer her usual glare either. Apparently that was as nice as Stina was going to get, now that her dad was working with the Black Swan.

"Here," Dex said, placing a white box into Sophie's hands. "Made this for you-and sorry it's not wrapped. Rex and Bex used up all the ribbon tying Lex to a chandelier."

Dex's younger triplet siblings were notorious troublemakers. Sophie had a feeling the loudest shouting on the other end of the cafeteria was coming from them. And she'd expected to open the box and find another Dex-ified gadget. But his gift reminded her that he was also an amazing alchemist.

"You made me Panakes perfume?" she asked, shaking the fragile crystal bottle and watching the pinkish-purplish-bluish petals swirl through the shimmering syrup.

She twisted open the top and closed her eyes as she inhaled the rich, sweet fragrance. Instantly she was back in the Havenfield pastures, standing under the swaying branches of Calla's tree. A Panakes only grew when a gnome willingly surrendered their life and shifted into their final tree form. Calla had made the sacrifice for her people, to let her healing blossoms end the deadly plague the ogres had unleashed.

"I'm sure you smell them all the time," Dex said, "but I know how much you miss her. And this way, when you wear the perfume, you're keeping a small part of her with you everywhere you go."

Sophie's voice failed her, so she grabbed Dex and hugged him as tight as she could-but she might've held on a bit too long. When she let go, D...

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