

A close-up, high-contrast photograph of a woman's face. Her eyes are a vibrant orange with black pupils, looking directly at the viewer. Her lips are painted a bright red. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and shadows. The background is dark and out of focus.

THE KEY

THE WITCH
HUNT
ENDS

Sara B. Elfgren
&
Mats Strandberg

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About the Book

It's been over a month since the tragedy in Engelsfors High School. But before the Chosen Ones have a chance to recover, their world is turned upside down again.

Time is running out for them to fulfil the prophecy and save the world. Whether they succeed or not, one thing is certain:

Everything is about to change ...

In this final instalment of the Engelsfors story that started with *The Circle* and continued with *Fire*, questions will be answered, secrets revealed and loyalties tested to the limit.

About the Authors

Sarah B. Elfgren started her career in the film industry as a screenwriter and script editor. She has been involved in several Swedish film and television productions and has written the screenplay and film adaptation of *The Circle* together with director Levan Akin. She has a degree in Film Studies and is also a graphic novel writer. She is currently writing a new fantasy book series.

Mats Strandberg is an award-winning journalist. He has been named Columnist of the Year by Sweden's Newspapers and Magazines Organisation, and has published three previous novels, with rights sold in several countries. He is currently writing a horror novel set on a cruise ship going across the Baltic Sea.

Also by Sara B. Elfgren and Mats Strandberg

The Circle
Fire

THE KEY

by SARA B. ELFGREN &
MATS STRANDBERG

Translated from the Swedish by Anna Paterson



WITCHES, ALIVE AND DEAD

THE CIRCLE OF CHOSEN ONES IN ENGELSFORS



ANNA-KARIN NIEMINEN – A natural witch.

Element: Earth.

Ability: controlling people's minds and actions.
Her familiar is a fox.



LINNÉA WALLIN – A natural witch. **Element:**
Water.

Ability: communicating through thought. Can
control water.

MINOO FALK KARIMI – A natural witch. **Element:**
None.

Ability: blessed by the guardians and able to
channel their magic. Can visualise and manipulate
other people's memories and remove the life-force
and soul of others. Minoo can break demonic
blessings and is the only one who can see the
active magic of the demons and the guardians,
which she sees as black smoke.



VANESSA DAHL – A natural witch. **Element:** Air.

Ability: making herself invisible at will. The wind
occasionally behaves strangely when she is
around.



ELIAS MALMGREN – A natural witch. **Element:**
Wood.

Ability: changing his appearance. Was murdered by Max before he found out that he was one of the Chosen Ones.



REBECKA MOHLIN – A natural witch. **Element:** Fire.

Ability: telekinesis – moving objects using the power of her mind. Could control fire. Murdered by Max.



IDA HOLMSTRÖM – A natural witch. **Element:** Metal.

Ability: can communicate with spirits, receive visions and also control electricity. Murdered by Olivia.

OTHERS



ADRIANA LOPEZ (born EHRENSKIÖLD) – A trained witch and a member of the Council.

Element: Fire.

Ability: her talent for magic is weak, but she can control fire to a certain degree. Tried to leave the Council but was punished with the application of a magic link that prevents her from escaping and also makes it very hard for her to disobey direct orders. She is Alexander's younger sister but changed her surname to her mother's maiden name. Her familiar was a raven.



ALEXANDER EHRENSKIÖLD – A trained witch and a leading member of the Council. **Element:** Fire.

Ability: turning the elements of other witches against each other. Led the investigation into Anna-Karin's alleged breaches of the Council's rules and was chief prosecutor in the Council's court case against her. He is Adriana's older brother and adopted Viktor and his sister.

HEDVIG ELINGIA - A natural witch. **Element:** Unknown. Member of the Council in the seventeenth century. Matilda's mother, Nicolaus's wife. Threw herself on the pyre when Matilda was burnt at the stake.



MATILDA ELINGIA - A

natural witch. **Element:** All. The previous Chosen One in Engelsfors. Lived 1660-1675; daughter of Nicolaus and Hedvig. When she relinquished her powers, the Council handed her over to the civil authorities; they convicted her of witchcraft. She was burnt at the stake. Her soul has been caught between the worlds ever since.



MAX ROSENQVIST - A natural witch. **Element:** Earth.

Ability: controlling people's bodies. Was once the demons' Blessed One. Minoo broke his blessing, since when Max has been in a coma. Murdered Elias and Rebecka.

MONA MOONBEAM - Unknown background.

Element: Unknown.

Runs a shop called the Crystal Cave. Uses her magic power in the shop to make her customers believe what she foretells. Also has a non-magical

instinct for saying exactly what her customers want to hear.



NICOLAUS ELINGIUS – A natural witch and ex-member of the Council. Hedvig's husband and Matilda's father. **Element:** Wood. **Ability:** controlling plant growth.

Has been alive since the seventeenth century when he was the minister in Engelsfors. When his wife and daughter died, he made a pact with the guardians. He murdered the high officials in the Council's Swedish contingent in a ritual that made it possible for him to live on and so help the next Chosen One. Calls himself the guide of the Chosen Ones. No one knows where he is. His familiar was a cat.



OLIVIA HENRIKSSON – A natural witch. **Element:** Metal.

Ability: controlling electricity. Olivia can charge amulets with magic and use them to control others. Was the demons' Blessed One. Murdered Ida, Elias's parents and many more. The Council removed Olivia after her defeat by the Chosen Ones.



SIMON TAKAHASHI – A natural witch. **Element:** Air.

Adriana's boyfriend and Alexander's friend. Was executed almost twenty years ago because he and Adriana had attempted to leave the Council.



VIKTOR EHRENSKIÖLD (born ANDERSSON) – A natural witch. **Element:** Water. Works for the Council, but has not yet sworn the oath of allegiance.

Ability: can detect lies, control water and communicate with other water witches by telepathy. Has a twin sister who fell ill after misusing her magic. They were both adopted by Alexander.

THE BORDERLAND

1

The dazzling white light is growing fainter.

Ida blinks a few times, looks around.

She isn't in the church any more. She is nowhere. Surrounded by greyness, like a fog but not quite. Much more like *nothingness*.

Matilda still stands next to her in her white smock, holding her hand. Matilda's reddish-blond hair, ice-blue eyes and freckles contrast with the greyness around them.

Ida tries to tug her hand free, but Matilda won't let go.

'Where are we?' Ida asks.

'In the Borderland.'

'What is—'

Matilda shushes her.

'Be quiet,' she whispers. Her fearful eyes scan the grey nothingness. 'Or they might find us.'

Ida suddenly feels glad that Matilda is holding her hand.
Her hand.

Moments ago, when Ida was still in the church, she had reached out for Minoo, but Minoo had walked straight through her. But apparently Matilda can hold on to her.

So maybe I'm not all that dead yet, after all, Ida thinks. Can't be.

She looks at herself and realises that she is wearing her usual clothes. Dark jacket. Pale blue V-necked sweater and jeans.

She touches the silver heart that hangs on a chain round her neck.

Matilda's grip tightens.

'Ouch,' Ida hisses.

Matilda starts running, pulling at Ida, who stumbles until they find a shared rhythm.

The ground is hidden under the veil of mist. It is yielding, almost marshy, underfoot, and Ida can't hear their footfalls. But at least there is something like ground. She can feel it. And running speeds up her breathing, makes her pulse beat faster. The silver heart bounces against her chest.

I just can't be totally dead, she thinks. I mean, like, not *totally*.

They keep running. There is nothing to catch your eye in the greyness; perspectives disappear and, seemingly, they're getting nowhere.

Ida glances behind her. Only greyness.

No. Something else. A sound like a faint whisper.

Something is there.

Ida can't see it, but is still certain that it's there. She runs faster. By now she is pulling Matilda along. Onwards, onwards, through nothingness.

Another whisper. Now, she hears it close behind her.

Ida chokes back a cry. It feels as if all she ever feared about darkness is chasing her.

She can make out a change ahead of them, then sees that there really *is* something, though no more than a shift in the depth of the greyness, as if it were thinning out. Beyond the grey veil, she senses a hint of light, like the sun behind the clouds on an overcast day; a dull shade of yellow, of light diluted and scattered in moisture.

They have almost reached the light when Matilda stops abruptly. Her ice-blue eyes, so like Nicolaus's, drill into Ida.

'I must distract them but I'll find you again,' Matilda says. 'Time and space here are different from what you know. While you're here, you must keep on the move. Look for the lights.'

And then she gives Ida a firm push.

It is like falling in slow motion. The air is thick and resists her.

Suddenly, Ida is somewhere different.

A stone-flagged floor. A grand gallery. Tall columns vanish into the dark space above her head. Their shafts are decorated with patterns and shapes in clear colours: red, blue, yellow, green, black. The air is hazy with incense and the strong, spicy scent makes her dizzy.

The only source of light seems to be the teenage girl in the middle of the gallery. Light radiates from her body and filters through her white linen shift. Her dark wavy hair falls over her shoulders. Her head hangs down; her chin rests on her chest. Only her toes lightly touch the floor.

She is hovering.

'Excuse me ... but ... hello?!' Ida hears how shrill she sounds.

The girl's head is lifted, as if pulled up by an invisible hand under her chin. She wears a necklace, a small pottery object on a chain. Her mouth opens slowly and she starts to speak, straight out into the gloom around her.

'We are here now,' she says.

The language is alien to Ida, but she understands all the same.

From somewhere, the grating voice of an old man.

'We greet you.'

For the first time, Ida becomes aware of other people in the gallery. She can hardly make them out where they are sitting in the shadowy spaces beyond the reach of the girl's light. There are about twenty of them, at a guess. Perhaps more.

Ida is about to say something else, but holds back. Even if this lot is able to understand what she says, attracting attention could be an horrendous mistake. She has no clue who they might be. And no clue where she might be, for that matter.

'All of you have been called in your dreams to come here,' the girl tells her audience. 'All of you are witches. All of you

are masters of magic in different forms. We called you and you came.'

'Who are you?' A woman's voice comes from somewhere in the dark. 'Are you spirits who speak through this girl?'

'Yes, spirits of a kind,' the girl replies. 'We are your guardians.'

The guardians. They must be able to help Ida. Explain what's happening here.

'Hello?' Ida walks up to the girl. 'It's me ... Ida!'

But the girl looks straight through her.

'We have watched over you since the beginning of time,' the guardians pronounce in the girl's voice. 'We have been watching over you, seen you build your communities and fight your wars. We have not interfered. But circumstances changed.'

'Hi!' Ida waves her hand in front of the girl's face.

No response. She attempts to hold on to the girl's arm, but her hand grips empty air. It is just as it was in the church.

'Evil beings, demons, are trying to force their way into this world,' the girl continues.

'Demons?'

It is a young man's voice.

Ida backs away but doesn't want to end up in the shadows. Especially not when they're talking about demons.

'They are able to move between worlds,' the girl tells him. 'They have only one purpose: to bring order into chaos.'

'That is good,' the young man says. 'Chaos should be eliminated.'

'You do not understand. When the demons arrive in other worlds and discover its life-forms, they see taming them as their task. They attempt to reshape that world in their image. The demons despise feelings, disorder, differences. They regard themselves as flawless and eternal; no other

beings can live up to their ideals. When the demons fail to tame a world according to their intentions, they exterminate everything alive there. Devastate it utterly.'

A restless, worried mumble rises from the congregation.

'So far, we guardians have succeeded in stopping the demons,' the girl says. 'But, in the battles between the demons and us, the veil between the worlds was ripped in seven places. Seven weakened areas were created. They serve as a set of doors through which the demons can gain entrance. We have managed to close them temporarily, but they must be sealed.'

Ida has heard all this before. To be precise, she has *said* it herself before, after Matilda took possession of her and used her as a medium.

'The first portal to be sealed is here, in your town,' the girl continues.

The first? Matilda had said that six of the seven portals had been closed by other, earlier Chosen Ones, and that the Engelsfors portal was the last.

A shiver runs down Ida's spine.

The *first* portal must be closed and sealed. So, the question isn't just *where* she is. It is also *when* she is wherever she is.

'The portal gives your town a special magic status. Just now, we are in a period of high magic. Its level will increase, and when the power is at its peak, the veil between the worlds will be at its thinnest. Only then can the portal be sealed. And the young woman, through whom we are currently speaking, is the only one who can do it. She is the Chosen One.'

The first portal. The first Chosen One.

'This must be a dream,' Ida tells herself, shutting her eyes tightly. 'Such a long bloody dream, but I'll wake up soon and everything will be back to normal. I'll be in the first year of senior school. There won't have been a night of

a blood-red moon. Everything has to be a dream – it's so much more likely.'

She tries to make herself wake up. She even pinches her arm. But when she opens her eyes again, she sees the glowing, hovering girl.

Tears begin to flow down Ida's cheeks.

At least, if I can cry, I can't be totally dead, she thinks.

But then, she can't figure out what's worst. To be dead, or just stuck in another time.

'What is supposed to be so special about this girl?' the young man asks.

'She has a particular connection to this place,' the guardians reply. 'And she is in control of more magic than any of you ever will be.'

The cross old man's voice speaks again.

'You are insulting us.'

'We tell you the truth. You were called here because of your magic talents. But your reach is limited because you do not truly understand your powers. You have got much to learn.'

Someone sniffs derisively. The girl turns her head slightly to look in that direction. Once more the silence is complete.

'You don't even know the most fundamental structure of magic,' she tells them.

'Really? Then do enlighten us!' the old man says.

'In this world, there are six elements,' the guardians state. 'The elements are the basic essentials of all magic. Each one of you is able to control one element.'

The girl raises her hands. No she doesn't, Ida reminds herself. *The guardians* raise the girl's hands.

Two yellow flames flare up in her palms.

'Fire,' the first of the Chosen Ones says.

The next moment, the flames are put out by a glittering fall of light rain.

'Water.'

A joint intake of breath from her audience.

The girl moves her hands in a sweeping gesture and a gust of wind makes the incense whirl in the air in front of her. Then it forms a small vortex that soon dies away.

‘Air.’

She claps her hands. The slapping sound echoes through the gallery. When she spreads out her hands again, her palms are cupped around black soil.

‘Earth,’ she says. Suddenly, two frail green stems sprout from the black matter. ‘Wood.’

Both plants and soil change colour, become shining silver.

‘Metal.’

She makes fists of her hands, then opens them. Glittering silver-sand drizzles softly to the floor.

‘The Chosen One is able to control all six elements. She has a connection to this place. And her powers form the Key that can seal the portal.’

‘A key can also be used to open doors,’ an old woman says.

‘That is true,’ the girl replies. ‘And our enemies will try to steal it.’

‘How will they go about that?’ the old woman asks.

‘The demons cannot act freely inside our world, but instead they will persuade witches to take on tasks for them. They use demonic magic to bless any willing witch. Once blessed, he or she has only one goal. It is to kill the Chosen One; to take over her soul and her powers in order to open the portal and let the demons in.’

Ida realises that is why Max killed Elias and Rebecka. He needed their powers to open the portal. He actually needed all the powers of the Chosen Ones.

‘For a while, the Chosen One will be protected from the scrutiny of the enemy,’ the girl continues. ‘But the closer we get to the time of the battle, the weaker the protection becomes. Then she will need your help. That is why we are going to teach you more about magic.’

A roll of parchment appears in her hands. As she unwinds it, six signs slowly appear on the initially empty surface. Six signs which are only too familiar to Ida.

‘The signs represent the six elements. They hold their own power,’ the guardians intone through the medium of the girl. ‘Your task is demanding, but sacred. You are charged with saving this world from annihilation. From now on, you are no longer individuals. You are a unit. You are the Council.’

The first Chosen One, Ida thinks. And the first Council.

The incense smoke grows denser around her, then turns into a deep fog. The voices fade away. Suddenly, Ida is back in the greyness. The place Matilda called the Borderland.

She looks around. She can’t pick up any movements or sounds, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that she is alone. The invisible things that chased her and Matilda before might be watching her right now.

‘Search for the lights,’ she whispers to herself as she starts running.

She tries to grasp what she has just heard, what it signifies.

The powers of the Chosen Ones combine to make the Key to the portal. The Key that will either shut it for good, or open it.

All six elements are required, which means that the Key is not complete. It hasn’t been since Elias died.

But then, how will they be able to lock the portal? And how could someone blessed by the demons open it? Isn’t everyone stuck?

No, that’s not possible, thinks Ida, because if it was useless, surely the demons would have given up? Actually, they should have backed off ages ago, the moment Minoo liberated Elias’s and Rebecka’s souls from Max. Then, what was the point of blessing Olivia?

Also, surely the guardians would have told the Chosen Ones that they didn’t have a hope of closing the portal?

Why stay quiet about something that important?

How she wishes Minoo were here to explain everything.

Further ahead, Ida spots a new light in the greyness.

She focuses on it and throws herself out into the unknown.

I

Minoo opens her locker and is hit by a torrent of books, pens and notebooks. She manages to catch her biology textbook and *Crime and Punishment*, but all the rest clatters onto the floor.

As she bends over to pick it all up, her ears go hot with embarrassment. She listens out for someone sniggering. But no one seems to have noticed. People are focused on something else entirely and everyone is talking about it.

... it'll be such fun, something is happening at last, it's been fucking ages ... my big bro's mate will fix us up with drink ... please, can I borrow that dress ... whatever, everyone's going ...

Minoo shoves her things back into her locker. Then she pulls off her rucksack and starts packing it full to the brim.

'Paaarty!' someone roars.

It's a final-year guy who comes running along the corridor.

Minoo reminds herself that she never parties – everyone knows that. So, she's never invited. It's not that they hate her, but it simply doesn't occur to them. Which is fine by her. Really fine.

She slams the locker door shut, turns and meets two cornflower-blue eyes.

Viktor Ehrenskiöld is wearing an immaculate pale blue shirt and a sand-coloured cardigan. His ash-blond hair is in perfect order, as always. And, as always, he is utterly odourless. No perfume of any kind. His body has no smell at all. It still bothers her.

'Here, you dropped this.' He holds out one of her pens.

‘Thank you,’ she says as she takes it from him.

Which amounts to their longest conversation for more than a month. Ever since their talk in his car, when he had declared that he was still loyal to the Council, she has avoided him and he has left her in peace.

Minoo tugs the rucksack into place and braces the small of her back against the weight of the books.

‘That looks heavy,’ Viktor observes. ‘Are you working during the May First holiday?’

She doesn’t answer, only starts walking towards the entrance. He follows her.

‘Or are you going to his ... little soirée?’

He nods towards Levan, who stands a bit further along the corridor, surrounded by final-year guys. They all laugh and slap his back, which makes him have to push his glasses back up on his nose.

Levan. So she is not invited even when one of the other nerds in the class is throwing the party. It hurts more than she’s prepared to admit.

‘Well, are you?’ Viktor asks.

‘Why do you want to know?’

‘I’m just trying to keep our conversation going.’

‘Find someone who’s interested.’

‘Ouch.’ Viktor puts his hand to his chest in a theatrical gesture.

They are in the entrance hall by now and Minoo catches sight of one of the posters with Olivia’s photograph.

Underneath the picture it says: HAVE YOU SEEN OLIVIA HENRIKSSON? in big letters, and gives a contact number for the police.

Olivia’s face is covered in whitish foundation and framed by a cloud of blue hair. Her big brown eyes are shining. Her cheeks are full. This Olivia is someone very different from the ruined figure that Alexander picked up from the floor of the gym.

‘Minoo,’ Viktor says. ‘I realise that you and I disagree about a lot of things, but surely we can still talk to each other?’

Near the front door, Minoo stops suddenly and looks straight at him.

‘Of course we can,’ she says quietly. ‘Actually, there are quite a few things on my mind. Things I’d like answers to. Like, where is Olivia? Is she alive? Why are you and Alexander still in Engelsfors? You don’t even believe in the apocalypse, or that we are the Chosen Ones. You must have better things to do than staying here?’

‘You know that I can’t answer your questions,’ Viktor tells her.

‘Then we have nothing to talk about.’

He places his hand on her shoulder to stop her from leaving.

‘Do you truly believe that I’m your enemy?’

‘You are certainly not my friend.’

Viktor takes his hand away.

‘I see,’ he says. ‘You do mean it.’

It seems that his lie-detector magic has revealed to him just *how much* she means it, because he looks quite hurt. For a fleeting second, Minoo feels bad. Then she reminds herself that this is probably what he intended. She has no idea who Viktor really is, which part of him is truthful and which is manipulative. All she knows is that she has promised herself never to trust him again.

‘Just leave me alone.’ She walks outside and he doesn’t follow her.

The schoolyard is bathed in a pale, grey light that is bright enough to make her squint. Gustaf, wearing his green army jacket, is standing by the football goal. The wind ruffles his blond hair as he smiles and waves at her.

Minoo’s body goes on high alert. Her ears go hot again. As she walks towards him, her wrists seem to buzz with

electricity. She tries to stay calm; she must not let him see how she feels.

‘Hi there.’ Gustaf hugs her.

‘Hi, Gustaf,’ she says, and forces herself to let him go; otherwise she’ll start clinging to him like a koala bear on a eucalyptus.

‘You wanna go for a walk?’ Gustaf asks.

The clouds form a lid over Engelsfors. They walk past Lilla Lugnet. Coltsfoot and crocus glow along the verges. They walk past the lovely white wooden house with its decorative carved details where Adriana Lopez lived until only a few weeks ago. It looks deserted; Adriana stays at the manor house now. Minoo wonders what it is like for her. How she feels. She hasn’t seen her since she concealed all Adriana’s memories of what’s happened since she arrived in Engelsfors. Concealed them to protect Adriana from the Council.

They carry on southwards, in the direction of the canal. Gustaf talks about which universities he’d like to go to this autumn. He has applied for lots, but would prefer law school in Uppsala. Minoo tries to sound encouraging and to ignore her pain.

Uppsala. Stockholm. Lund. Linköping. Umeå. Göteborg. Every university on his list feels like another knife-cut. A few months from now, Gustaf will be off to one of these cities and no longer be part of life here. It will probably be just as well, of course. It’ll be best to let their relationship, whatever it amounts to, fade anyway.

As they pass Olsson’s Hill, Minoo’s eyes wander to the top, where there is a huge pile of firewood. People have dragged branches and boards and things up there to be burnt.

‘Are you coming along to watch the May Day Eve bonfire?’ Gustaf asks.

'No ...' she begins, but is interrupted by a small, sharp explosion that makes her jump. She turns around and spots a group of middle-school kids just down the road, laughing loudly.

'I thought kids of that age weren't even allowed to mess around with bangers,' she says, realising she sounds like a grumpy old man.

Gustaf is smiling.

'Did you get scared?'

'I simply don't see the point.'

'But didn't you used to think blowing things up with bangers and crackers was the best thing ever. Like sandpit explosions. We did.'

Minoo shakes her head. Of course Gustaf had played with bangers. And of course she hadn't.

She thinks back to the Gustaf she used to watch at a distance when they were in middle school. During lunch break, he would always be outside, usually on the football pitch, and surrounded by his mates and fans. Minoo used to hide in the school library to escape having to go outside.

It makes her uneasy to think about Gustaf and herself as children and how totally unlike each other they had been. Because it reminds her that they are fundamentally different.

What do they truly have in common? Why be friends now? And that other feeling – what is it? Something she had better not think about. Whatever it is, it made Gustaf take her hand when they were sitting side-by-side on his bed, that evening before the Spring Equinox.

'Are you coming to the party?' Gustaf asks.

New bangs echo behind them.

'Oh, do you mean Levan's party?' Minoo says, and realises that it might come across as though she is pretending she has at least two tempting parties to choose between.

'Yes.'