

Secrets Beneath the Academy

CHAPTER 8



Luna's barrier shattered for the seventh time, spraying pale sparks across her boots with a sharp crack. The air smelled of ozone and singed wool, while a low hum of concentration vibrated beneath the hiss of flames and muttered incantations. Around her, blue fire coiled between fingers, glassy shields trembled, and one failed charm coughed gray smoke across a nearby desk. A few students glanced over before returning to their work, but heat still crept into Luna's cheeks. Protecting herself had always come naturally. Protecting someone else, apparently, was determined to humiliate her.

Students lobbed spells across the room while Professor Eldrin paced between them, his gaze catching every stray spark and wobbling charm. Ribbons of color shimmered overhead - some blazing bright, others collapsing into smoke. Luna stood at the center of it all, palms raised and fingers trembling as she wrestled with her magic. She'd been trying for what felt like forever, yet the barrier before her refused to hold.

"Focus, Luna," she whispered, squeezing her eyes shut.

Ethan's voice surfaced from their study sessions - patient, measured, annoyingly certain - as he explained how a barrier drew strength from every connected thread of energy. She had always insisted magic should flow on instinct. Now she pictured each particle locking into the next while the bitter tang of smoke caught at the back of her throat.

She opened her eyes, drew a slow breath, and swept her hands through the familiar pattern. A wall of light sprang up, flickered, then broke apart in a shower of pale sparks. Luna exhaled through clenched teeth. Wrapping magic around herself came as naturally as breathing; its protective hum settled against her skin without resistance. But stretching that protection toward someone else pulled at her arms and hollowed out her chest.

"Come on, Luna," she muttered. She shook the weariness from her hands, planted her feet, and summoned the light again.

A sudden flash snagged Luna's attention, a glowing orb hurtling toward another student's unprotected back. Her body moved before her mind caught up. She thrust both hands forward and reached for every lesson Ethan had drilled into her. Light cracked through the air. A barrier sprang up, bright and solid, stronger than anything she had summoned before. The orb struck with a muffled thump and burst into silver mist, leaving the startled student untouched.

The classroom fell silent. Then gasps rippled through the rows. Luna stared at her hands as the barrier's last sparks melted into the air. She had done it. Not almost. Not for a fleeting second. She had done it.

“Well done, Luna.” Professor Eldrin’s calm authority rose above the murmurs. He crossed the room, robes whispering over the stone floor, approval gleaming in his eyes. “Your control has improved. That execution was flawless.”

Luna’s heart hammered against her ribs, but she kept her face composed. “Thank you, Professor,” she said, even as adrenaline tingled through her fingers.

Professor Eldrin answered with a brief nod. “Keep refining it. I expect great things from you.” Then he moved on to another student, leaving Luna rooted in place with her pulse still racing.

As the lesson ended, Luna gathered her books with a smile she could not suppress. Weeks of collapsed barriers, aching hands, and nagging doubt had led to that single perfect moment. At last, the pieces had locked together. The memory of the orb dissolving against her barrier drew a smile to her lips. She had done it when it mattered.

Luna was still grinning as her friends hurried over, buzzing with excitement and questions.

“There she is - our luminary prodigy!” Tessa called, mischief and pride dancing in her voice. She reached Luna first and hooked an arm around her shoulders, while Vera followed with her usual quiet smile.

“You’ve grown even stronger, Luna,” Vera said, warmth shining in her dark eyes.

Heat crept into Luna's cheeks. "Thanks," she said with a shy smile. "I've just been practicing a lot lately."

"Oh, please." Tessa lifted an eyebrow. "You can retire the humble act. And you've always been amazing, but that spell? You completely owned it."

The Academy hallways thrummed with conversation as students poured toward the dining hall. Luna walked between her friends, the glow of success still warm beneath her ribs.

Ethan's name nearly slipped from her lips. She wanted to tell them how much he had helped, but the words caught in her throat. Would they understand? She had always trusted instinct, letting magic guide her instead of dissecting it. Yet Ethan's patience had opened a door she had never bothered to notice, revealing how much power had been waiting inside the theory.

Before Luna could speak, Tessa leaned in with a teasing grin. "I don't know how you juggle dueling practice and the Convergence project. So, how's life working with the Academy's resident weirdo?"



Luna's shoulders tightened. Tessa was clearly waiting for her to laugh, but nothing about the comment seemed funny. Not after everything Ethan had contributed to the project. Not after the rare moments when he had lowered his guard and trusted

her.

“It’s actually going well,” Luna said, keeping her voice steady. “He understands magical theory better than anyone I’ve worked with. Better than I expected.”

Vera and Tessa traded a glance, their eyebrows lifting in perfect unison. Tessa’s mouth curved into a half-smile. “Really? I still don’t understand how someone like him even got into the academy. Have you figured that out yet?”

Luna tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear as tension climbed her spine. She knew fragments of Ethan’s past - enough to sharpen her curiosity, but nowhere near enough to reveal the whole picture. Besides, repeating what little he had shared felt like a betrayal, especially when every truth had cost him something to give.

“No,” she said at last, her tone measured. “I haven’t.”

A pause stretched between them. Tessa shifted her weight, the scrape of her shoe against the stone suddenly louder than the surrounding chatter, while Vera’s gaze slipped away from Luna. Even Ethan’s name seemed to cast a shadow between them. Luna straightened, bracing herself to defend him, but Vera noticed the shift and smoothly guided the conversation elsewhere.

“Anyway, can you believe the Academy dance is almost here?” Vera said, an unusual spark of excitement brightening her normally composed voice.

Tessa's entire face lit up, her cynicism vanishing as quickly as a snuffed flame. "I've been planning my outfit for weeks!" she exclaimed, bouncing beside them. "I found a dress that's going to leave everyone speechless. You have to help me choose the shoes, Luna!"

Luna released the breath she had been holding, and a smile softened her face. "I'm still trying to decide what to wear," she said as the tension eased from her shoulders. In truth, excitement had been fluttering through her ever since Alden mentioned the dance. When things with Ethan had been strained, she had pretended it meant nothing. Lately, however, she kept picturing the music, the glowing decorations, and magic sparkling above the dancers.

"I'm thinking of something simple but elegant," she said as they followed the stream of students toward the dining hall. "Maybe a pale-blue gown with silver details?"

Vera smiled softly and nodded. "That would look beautiful. With your magic, you could enchant the fabric and make it shimmer when you move."

Luna laughed as the idea took shape. "Maybe I'll add a charm that makes it sparkle in the moonlight," she said, her eyes bright with mischief.

Tessa gasped, widening her eyes in mock offense. "Excuse me? The second you figure that out, I'm getting one too."

Their laughter rolled through the hallway as they traded ideas about the dance. But near the dining hall, Luna's attention

caught on a figure standing at the mouth of a side corridor - Ethan. He shifted from one foot to the other, torn between approaching and slipping away.

The moment her friends noticed him, the warmth vanished. Tessa's smile flattened, and Vera's face cooled, one lifted eyebrow speaking for her. Their stiffened posture twisted Luna's stomach. Guilt pulled at her from both sides - for their reaction, and for her own hesitation. She wanted to defend him, but the words stayed trapped behind her teeth, leaving the silence to stretch between them.

Ethan stepped closer, nervousness and hope flickering across his face. "Luna," he mumbled, his voice swallowed by the crowd. "Can we talk for a minute?"

Tessa's eyes narrowed, and Luna saw the sharp remark forming before it reached her lips. "I'll catch up with you both in a minute," Luna said, offering a smile she hoped would reassure them. It didn't. They walked away, glancing back over their shoulders with open suspicion.

Once they were gone, Luna turned back to Ethan, her voice softening. "What's up?" she asked. Only then did it hit her - this was the first time he had approached her so openly, with half the academy watching.

Ethan rubbed the back of his neck. "I, uh... I wanted to talk to you," he said, the uncertainty in his voice nothing like his usual composure. "About the riddle you found."

Luna blinked. Restless energy seemed to hum beneath his

skin, and his gaze kept darting toward the students passing behind them, as though the crowded hallway had no place shaped for him.



“Yeah,” she said, offering him a gentle smile. “Why don’t we find somewhere quieter?”

He gave a slight nod, glancing toward the corridor where her friends had disappeared. “I didn’t mean to interrupt or... make things awkward,” he murmured. “It just seemed like my best chance to catch you.”

“You didn’t interrupt.” Luna’s smile warmed. “C’mon. Let’s go.”

Ethan followed her into one of the quieter hallways, and the Academy’s noise faded behind them with every step. Dim light pooled across the stone floor, lending the passage an almost secretive stillness. Luna glanced at him, curiosity flickering awake. Perhaps this time, the riddle would finally surrender one of its secrets.

“I’ve been thinking about the text,” Ethan began, his voice steadier now that the corridor had emptied. “Especially the line, ‘In the shadow of light.’”

Luna's brows rose. The words had followed her for weeks, surfacing whenever her thoughts went quiet. "What about it?" she asked, leaning closer.

Ethan slowed, confidence gathering in his stride. "I think it refers to a lunar eclipse. The moon passes into Earth's shadow because of the sun, right? Magic always surges during an eclipse. We can measure the increase. I think that's what the prophecy means. We have to solve the remaining clues before the next one."

Luna blinked as the pieces clicked together. The answer felt almost obvious now. "A lunar eclipse..." A smile tugged at her mouth. "That actually makes perfect sense. I can't believe I missed it."

They reached a quiet bend in the hallway, where Luna stopped beside an aging statue and leaned against the wall. As she turned Ethan's theory over in her mind, her fingertips wandered across the rough stone. They caught on a slight ridge. A cool thread of air slipped over her knuckles, and she went still.

"What the-?" she murmured. She drew her hand back, then pressed it against the spot again.

Ethan stepped up. "What's wrong?"

"There's air coming through here." Luna swept her palm across the stone, following the faint chill.

Ethan leaned closer, pressing his palm to the stone. "You're right," he intoned. "There's definitely something

behind this wall.”

Luna drew a slow breath and pressed her palm flat against the stone. Magic pulsed from her palm in soft waves - once, twice, three times. On the third attempt, the spell caught. The gargoyle beside them groaned as stone scraped against stone, sinking backward into the wall. A hidden panel cracked open, exposing a narrow passage choked with shadows.

They stared into the darkness, neither of them moving.

“What is this doing here?” Ethan whispered.

Luna’s pulse raced as excitement warmed her chest. She looked at him, curiosity shining in her eyes. “Want to find out?” she asked, unable to contain her grin.

For a moment, doubt slowed her. The last time Ethan had followed her into the dark, they had barely escaped disaster. But when their gazes met, he gave a small, certain nod.

Together, they crossed the threshold.

The passage sloped downward beneath their feet, winding through darkness before opening into an enormous chamber. Luna stopped short, her breath catching. Ethan remained close to the glowing orb hovering beside her shoulder, its pale light struggling through the dusty air. Damp stone chilled the passage, and the musty scent of ancient parchment filled her nose. Each footstep returned to them as a hushed echo.



“What is this place?” Luna murmured. Her words disappeared into the darkness. Shelf after shelf stretched ahead, sagging beneath ancient tomes and brittle scrolls, their cracked spines and crumbling edges erased

by time. Some looked forgotten. Others looked deliberately buried.

Ethan’s gaze traveled across the chamber, widening with every shadowed aisle. “This... this is incredible,” he breathed. “I’ve read stories about chambers hidden beneath the Academy, but I never thought they were real.”

Luna moved toward a stone pedestal at the center of the room and swept a layer of dust from the enormous book resting open upon it. The parchment crackled beneath her fingertips. Its ink had faded to a ghostly brown, but strange curling symbols still clung to the page.

Ethan stepped beside her and leaned over her shoulder. “What’s this?” he asked, his whisper cutting through the stillness.

Luna’s stomach tightened as the symbols resolved into words she recognized from their studies. The Shadow Consortium.

She bent closer, following the faded lines with one finger. Most of the account matched what they had learned in class - the terror, the forbidden rituals, the organization's collapse centuries ago. Then the text changed.

Her finger stopped.

"What is it?" Ethan murmured.

Luna read the passage again, slower this time. The Consortium had not merely searched for the Celestial Sphere. They had intended to use it to weaken the boundary between Zephyra and the shadow realm until darkness swallowed both.

"The Sphere disappeared after their last attempt," Ethan said, leaning over the page.

"Because someone hid it from them." Luna turned another brittle page, careful not to tear its crumbling edge.

A familiar symbol appeared beneath a sketch of a twisted, smoke-like figure. Her breath caught. Umbra Wraiths.

The surrounding text described chains of shadow magic woven through the creatures, forcing them to hunt, destroy, and obey. Luna's gaze lifted slowly to Ethan's.

"The wraiths we saw," she whispered.

The color drained from his face. He looked back at the page, but neither of them needed to read the passage again.

Luna began pacing between the pedestal and the nearest shelf. The Consortium had vanished after failing to claim the Sphere. Now she and Ethan had begun following its trail - and the Umbra Wraiths had returned.

She stopped. Dust curled around her shoes. "That isn't coincidence." She spun toward Ethan. "That timing is too perfect."

Ethan dragged a hand through his hair, his eyes fixed on the ancient book. "You think the Consortium survived."

"Or someone continued what they started." Luna glanced at the drawing of the wraith, its ink-black limbs reaching across the page. "Either way, they're searching for the Sphere."

Silence settled over the chamber. The pale orb beside Luna's shoulder flickered, throwing their shadows against the shelves.



“If they find it first...” she began.

Ethan met her gaze.

“The realms won’t stand a chance.”