The Last Thing He Heard

CHAPTER 11

Darkness. Heavy and unyielding. Ethan's head throbbed as if someone had cinched iron bands around his skull. Muffled sounds drifted through the haze - voices, footsteps, the scrape of a boot against stone - each one echoing faintly through the cavern, but none of it made sense.



"Ethan." The voice came faintly at first, soft and threaded with worry.

He groaned, his name giving him something to hold onto. Pain stabbed through his temple as he forced his eyes open. The world swam, then slowly settled into blurred shapes and smeared colors. A faint coppery taste coated his tongue, and cold stone pressed through his clothes into his back.

"Ethan, can you hear me?" The voice came again, closer now.

He blinked until the haze cleared, and the first thing he saw was a pair of familiar blue eyes.

“Luna,” he rasped, his throat dry and raw. “You’re here.”

Her lips lifted into a small smile. The tightness around her eyes eased. “Yes! You... you had us worried.”

He turned his head slowly and found Alden and Elara hovering behind her. Alden’s jaw was clenched, while Elara’s hands twisted together at her waist. Confusion pressed through the pounding in his skull. “Why are you all here? What-”

Then he remembered. The cave. The Sphere. The blinding light. Something striking him from behind. His breath snagged as the pieces slammed back into place.

The rest came with it - the Sphere glowing in the darkness; the shadow lunging toward him, the impact. Ethan's pulse jumped. With a groan, he struggled upright, but the chamber tilted violently around him. He pressed one hand against the cold stone to steady himself, blinking against the dizziness. Pain throbbed behind his eyes, and his injured shoulder protested with every movement. His knees trembled beneath him. Whatever had struck his head had done more damage than he wanted to admit.

“Here.” Luna reached for his arm to steady him.

“No.” The word came out sharper than he meant. Luna flinched, hurt flashing across her face before she lowered her hand and stepped back.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. The words trembled in the cold air. “I should’ve been here. Shouldn’t have left you alone.

I've... I've been a terrible friend." Ethan swallowed, the metallic taste still lingering at the back of his tongue.

The word friend landed harder than it should have. Ethan looked at her - really looked - and watched her gaze drop, her mouth tightening as if she couldn't quite make herself meet his eyes. Part of him wanted to tell her it was fine, that none of it mattered now. But the hurt still sat there, stubborn and sour.

"Forget it," he said, his voice flat. "We don't have time for this. Someone knows we're here. They knocked me out, and they might still be nearby. We need to get the Sphere back to the Academy."

Ethan looked away before Luna could answer, fixing his attention on the Sphere. He wasn't ready to meet her eyes again. Not yet.

Luna drew a breath as if she wanted to say more, but whatever she saw in his expression stopped her. Her shoulders sank slightly, and she let the silence stand between them.

Luna then followed his stare and went still. "No way..." she breathed as the Sphere pulsed faintly in the dim cavern.

Alden frowned and edged closer. "Wait... is that the Celestial Sphere? The one from our lecture?"

Ethan rubbed the back of his neck, wincing when his fingers found the tender spot where he'd been struck. "Yeah. And I still haven't figured out how to get through the barrier."

Luna stepped nearer, her eyes widening as the Sphere's pale light moved across them.

Ethan instinctively reached for her arm, but his hand stopped halfway. For a heartbeat, neither of them moved. Then he reached for her again.



"Luna, wait. Be careful," Ethan warned, but her hand was already moving toward it. The instant her fingertips touched the barrier, the Sphere brightened, spilling pale light across the cave walls. A low hum vibrated through the stone beneath Ethan's feet, and the hairs along his arms lifted. A sharp, metallic scent filled the cavern, like the air just before a storm.

Ethan sucked in a breath. "How-"

She looked back at him without wavering. "We started this together, Ethan. So we finish it together."

She held out her hand. Ethan stared at it. His chest pulled him forward while his pride dug in its heels. He still remembered her leaving. He still felt the sting. But he also saw the certainty in her eyes, and despite himself, he felt drawn to it - drawn to her.

At last, he took her hand. The hurt hadn't disappeared, but neither had everything that came before it. His fingers tightened around hers, tentative at first, then certain. "Just... be careful. The Sphere's protection-"

He never finished. The Sphere pulsed again, its protective barrier blazing gold at Luna's touch. But when Ethan joined her, a jagged line of shadow split its shimmering surface. He instinctively started to pull away, fearing the magic would reject him again. Luna tightened her grip, meeting his eyes with unwavering determination. She stepped forward beside him, refusing to let go. Only then did the shadow fracture dissolve. Ribbons of gold and silver intertwined across the barrier, sealing the divide before the protection melted away completely. Warmth rushed through Ethan's arm - bright, electric, strangely familiar. Somehow, the Sphere had recognized more than their joined hands. It had responded to their choice to trust each other.

Ethan lifted the Sphere free. Light danced over his face. It was smaller than he had imagined, perfectly smooth and almost painfully bright, as though an entire galaxy turned slowly beneath its surface.

“It’s incredible,” he murmured before passing it to Luna.

She cradled it carefully, her gaze fixed on the glowing center. “I can feel it,” she whispered. “The power inside. It feels alive.”

Ethan forced himself to look away. Wonder could wait. Whatever had attacked him might still be lurking nearby. “We need to move. Now.”

Elara stepped forward and drew a familiar embroidered purse from her bag. Faint silver runes shimmered along its

enchanted lining. “Here. Put it in this. It'll be safer.”

Luna nodded, carefully placed the Sphere inside the purse, and slipped it into her own bag. Its brilliant glow vanished beneath the enchanted fabric, leaving no trace of its powerful magical presence.

Ethan scanned the cavern. The hairs along the back of his neck lifted. Shadows crawled across the walls, shifting at the edges of his vision. He couldn’t tell whether magic moved around them or whether his fear had invented monsters.

“Let’s go,” he said quietly, urgency sharpening every word.

The cave light flickered as they moved, stretching their shadows across the stone. Cold air scraped Ethan’s skin. He led the way, listening to every drip, scrape, and echo that their footsteps did not make.

“Ethan,” Luna said suddenly, breaking the silence. “There’s something you need to know.”

He kept walking and offered a slight nod for her to continue.

“The Academy was attacked,” she said. Her voice dropped. “By Wraiths.”

Ethan stopped so abruptly that Alden nearly walked into him. He turned. “What?”

“They crashed the dance.” Luna rubbed her arms, as though the memory had brought the cold back. “You said they couldn’t get through the wards.”

“They can’t,” Ethan said. His stomach tightened. Then the answer struck him. His eyes widened. “Unless someone let them in.”

Luna inhaled sharply. “The traitor? The student we saw before?” Her eyes flicked toward Alden.

Ethan shook his head. “No. A student couldn’t do something like that alone.” His voice hardened. “Whoever opened those wards had help - powerful help.”

Moonlight shimmered faintly ahead, marking the cave mouth. Relief loosened Ethan’s shoulders for the first time since waking. Then a thought caught at him, soft but relentless, refusing to let go.

“Wait.” He slowed and looked toward Luna. “How did you find me?”

“Elara helped,” Luna answered. “She brought us to the place in the forest where she last saw you. After that, I used a tracing spell.”

Ethan frowned. A tracing spell didn’t reach far. If Elara had truly lost him in the forest, Luna should never have been able to pinpoint the cave. His steps slowed. His fingers curled at his sides as he turned the thought over once, then again. There was only one explanation.

He turned. “Elara?”

She had stopped walking.

“Elara,” he said again, quieter this time. His stomach tightened. “We need to keep moving.”

Elara slowly raised her head. The warmth Ethan remembered was gone. Something colder had settled into her face. A small smile touched her lips.

Without a word, she reached into Luna’s bag.

Light spilled between her fingers as she pulled out the Sphere, bathing her face in an eerie glow.

“Elara…” Ethan kept his voice steady, even as his heartbeat kicked against his ribs. “Put it back.”

She now held the Sphere against her chest, fingertips gliding over its surface with almost reverent care. “Do you have any idea what this is? What it can do?” Her voice drifted from somewhere distant, wrapped in a glassy trance.

Alden’s eyebrows drew together. “What’s gotten into her?”

Elara smiled, first sweetly, then with an edge that turned Ethan’s stomach. “Gratitude,” she said. “Without you, I never would’ve made it this far.”

Ethan's hand again went to the tender spot on the back of his head. His fingers froze against the bruise. Elara had known exactly where to find them. Exactly where to find him.

"It was you."

Her gaze slid toward him, cool and unwavering. "For someone so clever, you miss an awful lot sitting right in front of you." She let the words hang between them. "How's your head, Ethan?"

Ethan suddenly remembered the silver needle on Elara's purse and the strange warmth he'd felt when she touched his pocket watch outside the dance. His stomach twisted as the pieces fell into place. "You marked my watch," he said, staring at her. "That's how you followed me into the forest. You knew exactly where I was."

Elara's smile widened. "Very clever. Eventually." She tilted her head, enjoying his realization. "My locator charm led me straight to you. Once I'd found the cave, all I needed was to bring Luna close enough for her tracing spell to work. You see, Ethan, I couldn't retrieve the Sphere without both of you."

Alden stared between them. "Okay, someone needs to explain what's happening before my brain explodes."

Ethan never took his eyes off Elara. "She's the traitor." His jaw tightened. "She's been working with the Shadow Consortium."

Luna's eyes widened, one hand rising to her mouth.

“You? Why?”

Anger twisted Elara’s features. Her fingers clamped around the glowing Sphere. “You want a reason?” she snapped. “The Realm of Knowledge has been ignored for generations, reduced to a footnote in the history of arcanes. Without us, the other realms would still be stumbling through the darkness.” Her voice shook as the Sphere brightened in her hands. “Now they’re going to learn what being forgotten feels like.”

Ethan took one careful step toward her, his palms open. “Elara, please. The Sphere isn’t what you think it is. It’s dangerous. You don’t know what it can-”



“I know exactly what it can do!” she shouted. The Sphere flashed with her answer, it's light throbbing with her anger.

Her eyes met Ethan’s. The smile slipped from her face, and her grip on the Sphere loosened for just a moment. “I’m sorry I used you, Ethan. I mean that. But I needed both of you to fulfill the prophecy.”

Luna stared at her, breathing faster. “What prophecy?”

“The Sphere will be found when wrong becomes right,”

Elara recited, almost playfully, rolling the glowing orb between her hands.

The Sphere suddenly flared. A pulse of energy ripped outward, blasting dust from the cavern floor. Ethan threw an arm across his face and stumbled back as Luna braced herself against the stone wall.

When the light settled, Elara was still smiling.

Ethan lowered his arm. She knew the prophecy. But how?

Luna pushed away from the wall. “How do you know the prophecy? And why did the Sphere let me through the barrier?”

Elara’s smile widened as she turned toward her. “Because it needed a descendant of the old mage.” She tipped her head, studying Luna’s reaction. “That’s where our dear Luna became useful.”

Luna went rigid. Her lips parted. “What?”

Ethan looked at her; the rest of the cavern seemed to fall away. He had always known there was power buried in Luna’s bloodline, but this was something else entirely.

Elara studied Ethan for a long moment, then continued. “But that wasn’t enough. The descendant had to become equals with the heir of the man who once tried to steal the Sphere.”

Ethan edged toward her, his attention fixed on the glowing orb in her hands.

Elara caught the movement. She flicked two fingers, and a bolt of light struck the stone inches from Ethan's boots. He jerked back as rock chips scattered across his legs.

Her eyes locked onto his. "That would be you."

For one breath, Ethan heard nothing. The cave seemed to tighten around him. His father's lessons flashed through his mind. The hidden library. The forbidden books. Every question he had buried suddenly clawed its way to the surface.

For years, other students had treated his family name as proof that he didn't belong. Now Elara was telling him that the very blood running through his veins held a secret powerful enough to shape the fate of the realms. But his ancestry hadn't stayed awake studying through endless nights, passed his examinations, or endured the whispers that followed him through the Academy. Whatever this revelation meant, it couldn't erase the work he'd done to earn his place. That belonged to him alone.

"No," he whispered.

Luna stepped forward, shaking her head. "That's ridiculous!"

"Believe whatever makes you feel better," Elara said. Her grip tightened around the Sphere. "Your ancestor tried to unite the realms, Luna. He trusted a scholar of Knowledge to help protect the Sphere, but that scholar betrayed him and tried to steal it. Their broken alliance poisoned the relationship between

their realms for generations." She glanced between them, her smile growing colder. "The Sphere's protection was designed to remain sealed until their descendants chose trust over the betrayal of their ancestors. Not because their bloodlines made them powerful, but because they willingly stood together as equals. That's what the prophecy meant. Wrong becomes right when the hatred of the past finally gives way to trust. And you two fulfilled it without even realizing."

Luna moved directly between Elara and Ethan, planting her feet. "Put the Sphere down. Now."

Alden stepped up beside her. The usual humor vanished from his face, replaced by a hard, focused stare.

Elara laughed, the sound bouncing harshly through the cavern. "You actually think you can stop me?" Her eyes narrowed. "You're nothing. Less than nothing actually."

She thrust out her palm. Darkness exploded from it, writhing through the air like something alive. Luna snapped up a barrier just in time. Golden light burst around her as a shadow slammed against it. The impact cracked through the cavern and sent dust raining from the ceiling.

"Ethan! Stay back!" Luna shouted. Her arms trembled as she pushed against the darkness, then flung a blast of golden light straight at Elara.

Elara simply raised the Sphere. It blazed in her hand, and the shield around her swallowed Luna's attack without so much as a ripple.

Alden darted aside, muttering an incantation. Molten shards spiraled from his palms, glowing red as they tore through the air. They shattered against Elara's defense and fell at her feet like dull flakes of ash.

Elara barely reacted. "That's it?" She flicked her wrist, and black tendrils burst from the stone floor, twisting toward them like striking snakes.

Luna moved quickly. A blade of white-gold light sliced through the shadows, but Ethan saw the hitch in her breathing, the tremble in her hand - the exhaustion already dulling the surrounding glow.

"Elara, stop!" he shouted. Desperation cracked his voice. "The Sphere is too powerful. You can't control it!"

Wild triumph flashed in Elara's eyes. "Too powerful?" Her laugh rose with the Sphere's growing light. "That's the whole point!"

The Sphere pulsed once against her grip. Elara's laugh faltered. Her fingers tightened around it, but the light kept swelling, brightening to a rhythm that wasn't hers.

Then darkness detonated from her. Ethan threw up an arm as the force ripped across the cavern. Luna and Alden flew backward and slammed into the rock wall before crumpling to the ground.

"Luna!" Ethan sprinted toward her and dropped beside

her, one hand gripping her shoulder. For one awful heartbeat, she didn't respond. Then she groaned, barely awake, the last sparks of her magic fading around her fingers. Ethan's breath escaped in a shaky rush. Nearby, Alden coughed up blood and tried to push himself up, only to collapse again. Ethan started toward him, but another wave of dizziness forced him to brace himself against the ground. Alden struggled onto one elbow, clutching his ribs as another painful cough shook his body. Ethan's stomach tightened. Neither of his friends was in any condition to fight, let alone escape.

Elara's laughter rang through the chamber, sharp and wild. "Do you see me now?" The Sphere burned in her hands. "None of you can stop me!"

Ethan's pulse pounded in his ears, dread and fury tangling together until he could barely think. His gaze snapped from Luna to Alden, searching for the rise and fall of their chests. Both were still breathing. For now. His jaw locked, and his hands curled into fists, nails biting deep into his palms.

Then another voice cut through the chaos, calm and unmistakably commanding. "Well, well."

The Sphere's glow dimmed as every head turned toward the mouth of the cave.

A tall figure stepped into the pale light - Professor Eldrin, his expression impossible to read.

Relief rushed through Ethan the instant he recognized him. Beside him, Luna's strained expression softened with

exhausted hope. “Professor!” she breathed, managing a faint smile.



Ethan released a shaky breath, some of the tension finally leaving his body. “Thank the stars. Professor, help us. Elara has the Sphere!”

Eldrin said nothing. His footsteps rang evenly against the stone as he walked past them, calm and unhurried. Instead of stopping Elara, he came to a halt beside her.

Then he smiled.

“What...” Luna’s voice cracked. Confusion drained the relief from her face as Eldrin turned and stood beside Elara. “No...”

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, Luna,” he said in the same calm, measured voice he used during lectures, “but you have both done exceptional work with this assignment.”

Ethan could not stop staring at him, his mind refusing to accept what his eyes were telling him. “Professor...?”

Luna’s voice trembled. “You’re really with them?”

Eldrin folded his hands neatly in front of him, as though they were discussing an assignment instead of betrayal. “Yes. With both of you at the Academy, the Consortium finally had the pieces we’ve spent decades waiting to align.”

“No…” Luna whispered, her knees nearly buckling.

Eldrin’s calmness made Ethan’s skin crawl. “It took some convincing to get Professor Hawke to assign you this task,” he said almost fondly. “She thought it would be too dangerous. But I reminded her of your family name, Luna. I told her you deserved the opportunity.” His smile deepened. “I knew the two of you would lead me straight here.”

Ethan’s jaw tightened. “We didn’t help you.”

Eldrin looked amused. “Oh, but you did. Did you really think the Sphere would be that easy to find? I planted the clues, provided the scroll. Made certain the prophecy reached you. I even ensured Luna knew the spell needed to open the chamber.” A quiet chuckle escaped him. “You were remarkably useful pawns.”

Luna stepped forward, anger flashing across her face. “And the attack on the Academy? The Wraiths at the dance? That was you, too?”

Eldrin's smile widened. “Of course. The Academy entrusted me with overseeing the protective wards for the evening. The visiting musicians provided the perfect excuse to adjust the outer seals. Once the celebration began, I simply opened another passage and disabled the ballroom's protective

runes. The Wraiths entered through the opening I created, and the resulting chaos kept the professors occupied while you pursued the Sphere."

Ethan felt his stomach turn. All those students fighting for their lives, the terror, the injuries, the destruction. None of it had been an accident. Eldrin hadn't merely betrayed the Academy. He had deliberately sacrificed the safety of everyone inside to advance the Consortium's plans.

Luna was pale. Her hands trembled at her sides, and seeing it twisted something deep inside Ethan.

"Why?" Ethan demanded. "Why make us chase clues if you already knew where the Sphere was?"

Eldrin sighed as if Ethan had asked something painfully obvious. "For years, I gave the Academy discoveries they were too frightened to pursue. They buried my research, locked away my work, and called it dangerous whenever it challenged what they thought they knew." His mouth tightened. "I used to call that wisdom. Eventually, I understood it for what it really was. Fear." His gaze hardened. "The Consortium offered me something the Academy never would - the freedom to follow knowledge wherever it led."

He glanced at Luna. "And because I needed Silverwind blood to bypass the protections. Now that you've learned far more than you were meant to..." His expression hardened. "I'm afraid neither of you can leave here alive."

The casual way he said it froze Ethan's blood. Beside

Eldrin, Elara smiled with feverish devotion. “Allow me the honor, master.”

She began chanting, tracing glowing symbols through the air with her hands. The pressure around her thickened until every breath felt heavy. Ethan’s heartbeat surged. He knew that sensation. Something terrible was coming.

“Elara, wait!” Eldrin's voice cracked through the cavern, sharp for the first time, but she kept chanting. The Sphere blazed between her hands as light and shadow bent unnaturally around her. Ethan stared in disbelief. No ordinary Scholar could command such opposing forces with that much raw intensity. The Sphere was amplifying Elara's magic far beyond its natural limits, allowing her to wield powers that should have required years of specialized training.

Then -

A scream tore through the cave.

Ethan flinched and snapped his head up. It wasn’t Luna. It wasn’t Alden. Elara screamed again, her fingers locking in place as the Sphere pulsed violently. Its crimson glow flashed into a blinding white.

“No!” she shrieked. Light swallowed her. Cracks spread across her skin as gray ash crept over her body. The Sphere slipped from her weakening fingers and struck the stone floor. “Help me!” she cried, reaching desperately toward Eldrin.

He didn’t move. He only watched, his head tilting slightly

as if witnessing an experiment. “Fascinating,” he murmured.

Ethan couldn’t tear his eyes away. Elara crumbled into ash, her final scream fading into a terrible silence. The Sphere rested in the center of the cavern, pulsing steadily - alive, watchful, hungry.

Then it rolled across the stone and stopped between Ethan and Eldrin. Its glow rose and fell like a heartbeat. Ethan sucked in a breath. Now or never.

Eldrin lunged first, but Ethan reacted faster. An immense pressure surged through his arms, startling him with its familiarity. It was the same strange energy he'd accidentally released during training with Luna, only now it burned with an intensity he had never experienced. Remembering her advice, Ethan stopped trying to force it into a spell and allowed the energy to flow through him. He thrust both hands forward. A devastating shockwave exploded across the cavern, slamming Eldrin into the far wall. The impact thundered through the stone, and the Professor dropped motionless to the floor. Ethan stared at his hands, stunned by what he'd unleashed.

“Let’s go!” Ethan shouted. He grabbed the Sphere and reached for Alden, but pain tore through his injured shoulder as he tried to lift him. Gritting his teeth, Ethan hooked his good arm beneath his friend's and hauled him upright. Alden staggered, coughing painfully as he struggled to stay on his feet. Luna rushed to his other side, helping Ethan guide him toward the cave's mouth. Every step felt painfully slow, and Ethan's vision blurred whenever he moved too quickly. “Luna, seal the cave! Full barrier. Put everything you have into it!”

"But that'll-"

"Do it!" Ethan shouted as Eldrin stirred behind them, blood trailing from his temple.

Luna reacted instantly. Golden light erupted around her hands and spread across the cavern, coating stone, floor, and ceiling in a shimmering barrier. Energy vibrated through the cave so violently that cracks began to spider through the walls.

Eldrin screamed, his calm finally gone. "No!"

The ground bucked beneath them. Jagged fractures split the floor as Eldrin raised his arms. Darkness gathered between his hands, twisting together until it formed a shape Ethan knew far too well.

A Wraith.

Its skeletal hand shot across the cavern, fast and cold, clamping around Ethan's ankle before he could escape.

Ethan slammed onto the ground, the impact driving the air from his lungs. Jagged stone tore across his back as the Wraith dragged him backward, its freezing fingers tightening around his leg.

"Ethan!" Alden shouted, rushing toward him, but a wall of debris crashed between them. Dust exploded through the cavern, thick enough to choke on. They had seconds. Maybe less.

The Sphere pulsed violently against Ethan's chest, its energy beating through him like another heart. He held it tighter for one brief moment.

Then he made his choice.

Luna reached for him through the dust. Ethan reached back on instinct, his fingers stretching toward hers, but the distance between them was too great. For one heartbeat, he wanted nothing more than to close it.

Then Ethan pulled his hand back. "Take it! Go!" he shouted, throwing the Sphere toward her.

Luna barely caught it. She shook her head immediately. "We're not leaving you!"

"Ethan, don't!" Alden yelled, ducking as another boulder crashed beside him.



A deafening roar rolled through the cave. Ethan looked at Luna one last time. Her blue eyes shimmered through the dust and chaos, wide with fear. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

He remembered Luna's lessons, the

countless failed shields, and the strange force he'd accidentally unleashed during training. This time, he understood what he needed to do. Instead of fighting the energy, he let it flow through him, shaping it with everything he had left. He slammed his palms together. Power erupted from him, stronger than anything he'd ever summoned, forming a shimmering barrier that struck Luna and Alden and hurled them toward the cave entrance. Agony tore through his arms as the magic drained the last of his strength, but he held the barrier long enough to send them beyond the collapsing stone.

The ceiling collapsed. Darkness swallowed everything. Through the darkness, Luna screamed his name.

And this time, there was nothing left for Ethan to hold onto.

EPILOGUE

Luna hit the forest floor hard, the Celestial Sphere clutched against her chest. Behind her, the cave entrance vanished beneath an avalanche of stone. The earth trembled as the last fragments crashed down, sending a cloud of dust billowing into the night. Then came a silence so complete it terrified her.

"Ethan!" she screamed, scrambling toward the rubble. Her hands clawed at the fallen rocks, desperately searching for an opening. "Ethan, answer me!" She shoved against a massive stone, but it refused to move. Tears blurred her vision as she tried again. Somewhere beneath all that rock was the boy who

had challenged her, frustrated her, made her laugh, and ultimately sacrificed everything to save her.

Alden stumbled toward her, clutching his injured side. Blood stained his lips, and every breath seemed to hurt. He reached for her shoulder. “Luna, we can't stay here. The cave could collapse further.”

“I'm not leaving him!” she cried, pulling away.

Alden looked at the sealed entrance, his expression crumbling. “He's my best friend,” he whispered. “You think I want to leave him?”

Luna froze. For a moment, neither spoke. The Sphere pulsed gently in her arms, its warmth a cruel reminder of what Ethan had given them. They had found the legendary artifact, uncovered the Consortium's betrayal, and escaped with their lives. Yet none of it felt like victory.

Luna turned toward Alden, guilt tightening her chest. “Alden, I owe you an apology. I thought you might be involved with the traitor. Even when you offered to help rescue Ethan, I doubted you.” Alden looked at her, a flicker of hurt crossing his face. “I noticed,” he admitted quietly. “But Ethan's my best friend. I wasn't about to abandon him because you didn't trust me.” Luna swallowed hard. “I should have listened to Ethan. He never doubted you, and neither should I have.” Alden glanced toward the collapsed cave, his expression softening. “We can talk about it later. Right now, we need to get help.”

Through the trees, the distant towers of Aetherion Academy stood beneath the blood-red moon. Its protective wards had been breached, and the danger was far from over. Eldrin's fate remained uncertain, and the Wraiths could still be threatening everyone inside.

Luna carefully secured the Sphere in her bag before slipping an arm around Alden to support him. They needed help, and the Academy needed to know what had happened. But she couldn't stop looking back at the mountain.

"I'm coming back for you, Ethan," she whispered, her voice trembling with determination. "I promise."

Then she turned toward the Academy, carrying the Sphere that might save their world and the unbearable hope that somewhere beneath the darkness, Ethan was still alive.