

The Traitor's Shadow

CHAPTER 9



Ethan sighed and turned another brittle page, careful not to tear the ancient parchment beneath his fingertips. Dust clung to the margins. He rubbed his temples, blinking against the amber glow of the enchanted sconces. They had remained buried in this hidden chamber for what felt like forever. He'd expected forbidden secrets, maybe even something worth bragging about. Instead, he'd gotten aching eyes, stale air, and enough dust to choke on. Across the table, Luna remained hunched over her own book, absorbed in another wall of faded script.

"This is hopeless," he said, snapping the tome shut with a muffled thud. A puff of dust rose between them. "Weeks, Luna. Actual weeks. And what do we have to show for it? A bunch of fragments that don't even fit together."

Luna lifted her head, the usual sharpness in her eyes dulled by exhaustion. "Come on, Ethan. You didn't honestly think this would be easy, did you? People buried these secrets for centuries. We're lucky we've found anything at all."

Ethan blew out a breath and dragged a hand through his hair. “Yeah, except every answer dumps us right back where we started. The Shadow Consortium, the Sphere, the prophecies. It all circles around and disappears into another riddle.”

“Then maybe we’re following the wrong circle,” Luna said, sliding her book aside. She tapped one finger against a passage on the open page. “These texts keep mentioning ‘uncontrollable energy’ and ‘a price paid in blood.’ What if we’ve been staring at the clue this entire time?”

“Maybe we need actual facts instead of piling on more theories and wild guesses,” Ethan said, the words coming out sharper than he intended. Luna flinched, barely, but he caught it. Guilt tightened his chest. He let out a breath and lowered his voice. “Sorry. I just... can’t shake the feeling that we’re running out of time.”

Luna crossed her arms and held his gaze. “Yeah, the project deadline’s practically breathing down our necks. But biting my head off isn’t going to make the runes translate themselves.”

She was right, which somehow made it worse. For days, the pressure had followed Ethan everywhere, tightening whenever he imagined facing the Professors empty-handed. What if they had nothing to show for all these weeks? What if someone else found the Sphere first? His stomach knotted. And beneath all of that lurked the question he hated most: What if everyone at the Academy eventually realized he didn’t belong there?

“I think I’m just tired,” Ethan admitted quietly.

“I am, too,” Luna said. Weariness shadowed her face, but determination still burned in her eyes. “But I really think we’re getting close.” Before Ethan could answer, she grabbed a cracked, leather-bound book and flipped through its old pages with practiced speed. “Here, look at this.” Her finger landed beside a faded line of text. “We already knew the Sphere was hidden, but this says an old mage concealed it to protect the world - from the Shadow Consortium and from the Sphere’s own unstable power.”

Ethan raised an eyebrow. “I figured as much.”

“Of course you did, you know-it-all,” Luna shot back, a smirk tugging at her mouth despite her exhaustion. “But here’s the twist: it wasn’t sealed with just any spell. It was blood magic. And blood magic-”

“Exactly,” Ethan said, his expression darkening. “Blood magic that powerful can only be broken by someone just as strong - or someone from the same bloodline. He didn’t just hide the Sphere. He made sure only he or his descendants could ever unlock it.”

“At least that tells us something about his intentions,” Luna said, her voice softening. “He wasn’t trying to destroy anything. He was protecting it.”

“Sure, but how do we get to it? And how are we supposed to find his descendants?” Ethan dragged a hand over his forehead. “The records don’t even give us his name. All we

know is that he was one of the greatest Arcanes in history.” A groan escaped him. “Because apparently this needed to get even more complicated.”

Luna’s mouth curved into a faint smile. “Maybe. But now we finally have something solid. His bloodline has to lead somewhere.”

Ethan glanced at her, his frustration beginning to loosen its grip. “Alright, alright. Let’s keep digging. Maybe there’s something else about this mage - who he was, where he came from, how he sealed the Sphere.”

“Exactly,” Luna said with a grin. “And maybe next time, try not to bite my head off.”

Ethan chuckled. “No promises.”

He knew sitting there sulking wouldn’t get them any closer to the truth. Luna’s determination had a habit of pulling him out of his own frustration. With fresh purpose stirring in his chest, Ethan began pacing the chamber, wiping dust from the ancient stone shelves while Luna carefully eased open another brittle scroll.

Two more days crawled past without a single breakthrough. Then, on the third evening, after another grueling day of training, a faded marking in one text made Ethan freeze. The enchanted sconces cast a soft glow across the page as he leaned closer, exhaustion forgotten.

“Luna,” he whispered, almost afraid that speaking too

loudly might somehow make the discovery disappear. “I think I found something.”



She looked up and followed his stare. Tucked into the corner of the page was an ornate circle etched with twisting runes. Luna sucked in a breath and hurried to his side.

“That’s... that’s the medallion,” she whispered, tracing a fingertip just above the parchment. The pattern was unmistakable: the same intricate design carved into the medallion they had pulled from the lake. “It’s almost identical.”

Ethan bent closer, squinting at the faded markings surrounding the symbol. “There’s writing here,” he murmured. “Hold on... let me see.”

He worked through the worn lettering beneath his breath. He murmured, “It’s that same riddle again - ‘In the shadow of light, where day meets night, the Sphere will be found when wrong becomes right.’” His finger shifted to the bottom corner of the page. “And look. There’s a map. It’s faint, but that shape looks like the Academy grounds... and this has to be the forest around it.”

Luna’s eyes brightened. “So it is a map,” she said, a faint

smile tugging at her lips. “But it doesn’t point to one exact place. Just... somewhere nearby?”

Ethan nodded slowly. “There’s no specific marker, but it’s close. The Sphere has to be somewhere around here. I think this path,” he said, tracing a faded line that disappeared into the forest, “has to be followed during the eclipse. But that still leaves us with a lot of ground to cover.”

Luna leaned over his shoulder, her brow tightening. “And this part...” She tapped the last line of the riddle.

Ethan frowned at the words. “‘When wrong becomes right.’ We already figured out that ‘shadow of light’ means the lunar eclipse, but this part...” He shook his head. “I’ve got nothing.”

“Maybe it isn’t talking about a place,” Luna said, studying the page. “Maybe something has to be set right. Something that went wrong a long time ago.” Her eyes narrowed. “But what?”

Ethan blew out a tired breath. “I don’t know. But whatever it is, we have to figure it out during the eclipse, and if we don’t-”

“Then we’ll miss our chance,” Luna finished, the tension tightening her voice.

He gave her a weary look and rubbed his aching eyes. “We’ve been staring at this for hours. Let’s call it a night.”

As they climbed out of the hidden chamber, cool air

rushed over them, carrying away the stale scent of dust and ancient parchment. Their footsteps echoed through the deserted hallway while the sconces along the walls flickered softly, stretching their shadows across the stone.

“We’ve got just over a week before the eclipse,” Ethan said, glancing at her. “We need to crack the riddle before then. But the map... I don’t think it’ll make complete sense until that night. Next Friday, when the eclipse starts, we have to be ready.”

“Friday...” Luna stopped mid-step, her eyes widening. “But that’s the night of the dance.”

Ethan blinked before recognition dawned across his face.

He groaned. “Oh, right? The Academy’s ball.” His brow furrowed. “Yeah, and?”

She hesitated, catching her lower lip between her teeth.

“Luna, seriously?” Ethan sighed and pushed his glasses higher up his nose. “We’re this close to finding the Sphere. A dance is-”

He never finished. The moment they rounded the corner, Alden stepped into their path so suddenly that Ethan nearly walked straight into him.

“Well, well,” Alden said, grinning like he’d caught them sneaking cookies from the kitchen. “You two have been awfully secretive lately. What’re you plotting?”

“None of your business,” Ethan shot back. Alden’s smirk only widened as his gaze slid toward Luna. Ethan fixed him with a warning glare that practically shouted, Don’t. You. Dare.

Alden grinned as if he’d just stumbled onto the Academy’s juiciest piece of gossip. “Oh, how mysterious,” he said, his eyebrows bouncing. “You two keep disappearing for hours, but sure, totally innocent.”

“It’s for our project,” Luna said earnestly, tilting her head. “Why would we be sneaking around?”

Ethan fought the urge to introduce his forehead to the nearest wall. He couldn’t exactly announce the existence of a secret chamber filled with ancient, potentially disastrous magic in the middle of the hallway. Besides, he and Luna had agreed - no one else could know.

Still, Alden’s grin practically screamed, I know something you don’t.

Ethan scowled. Luna was his friend. Just his friend. Completely, absolutely, one-hundred percent his friend.

He groaned inwardly. Damn Alden and that stupid, smug face of his.

Alden lifted both hands in mock surrender. “Alright, alright! Just asking.” The sideways glance he gave Ethan, however, said something entirely different: I don’t buy it. Ethan rolled his eyes so hard they nearly hurt.

“Relax, Alden,” Ethan said, giving him a light shove. “Not everything is one of your detective dramas.”

“Got it, detective,” Alden said with a grin. Still, something about his smirk lingered - too curious, too knowing. “Anyway, I’ve got to run. Try not to uncover any dark secrets without me.” He winked and headed down the hall. “See you two around.”

As soon as Alden disappeared around the corner, Luna folded her arms and stared after him. “Well, that was weird,” she muttered.



Ethan gave a quiet laugh. “Alden’s always weird. The guy collects gossip like it’s an Olympic sport.”

They started walking again, but suddenly every footstep seemed to crackle through the corridor. A cold prickle crawled up the back of Ethan’s neck. Something wasn’t right. He glanced down the hallway. Empty. Nothing moved.

He leaned closer to Luna without breaking stride. “Play it cool,” he murmured. “I think someone’s following us.”

Luna stiffened, her eyes darting toward him before she

gave the smallest nod. They kept moving, forcing themselves not to look back, though their steps grew quicker with every echo. Ethan guided her into a side corridor lined with ancient portraits, their painted eyes seeming to track them as they passed.

Then light exploded from the darkness. A spell tore through the corridor, crackling with energy as it hurtled straight toward them before either could draw breath.

“Luna, move!” Ethan shouted, shoving her aside, but she was already turning. Her eyes narrowed as light flared between her palms. A gleaming shield snapped into place just as the spell struck, bending the blast in a burst of white fire. The magic ricocheted off the wall, leaving behind a smoking black scar.

“Who’s there?” Ethan demanded, pulse hammering as he searched the darkness.

A figure stepped from the far corner into the half-light - tall, cloaked in shadow, their face buried beneath a hood.

The stranger gave no answer. One hand rose, and a beam of dark energy tore toward Ethan. He lifted his arm a heartbeat too late. The blast clipped his shoulder, sending a burst of searing pain through him. Ethan hissed and stumbled backward, his fingers clamping over the wound.

“Ethan!” Luna’s shout cut through the corridor. Panic flashed across her face, but her hands were already moving. She unleashed a volley of light-charged shards, each one streaking through the darkness before exploding in a blinding flare. The

figure retreated, and for a split second, the light caught their outline - tall, lean, impossibly quick. Then they twisted aside and hurled another spell, splitting the stone floor where Ethan had stood moments earlier.

Ethan staggered, still gripping his injured shoulder, but forced his feet beneath him. Luna surged forward instead of retreating, her eyes glowing as one spell followed another in rapid succession.

“Show your face!” she demanded, throwing up a radiant shield with one hand while a fresh blaze of light gathered in the other.



The attacker staggered back beneath Luna's relentless barrage, their footing finally slipping. With a sharp sweep of one hand, they hurled a final spell - a churning orb of shadow that tore toward her. Luna thrust both palms forward. Light erupted

between them, striking the darkness in midair and cleaving straight through it. The collision burst across the corridor in a searing wash of white.

The hooded figure recoiled, throwing an arm across their face. For one suspended heartbeat, they hesitated. Then they spun and fled, boots pounding against the stone until the

darkness swallowed them whole.

Luna remained where she was, chest rising and falling as the last traces of magic shimmered around her fingers. She stared into the corridor where the attacker had vanished. “Did you see that?” she asked, her voice low. “The way they moved... that training looked familiar.” Her brow tightened. “Ethan, I think that was a student.”

Ethan’s breath caught. He stared at the empty hallway as the meaning settled over him. “You mean... someone here?” His stomach twisted. “There’s a traitor in the Academy?”

Luna didn’t answer. Instead, she dropped beside him and pulled a handkerchief from her pocket. “Hold still,” she murmured, carefully wrapping it around his injured shoulder. Her fingers worked firmly but gently, and Ethan made a determined effort not to notice how close her face was, or the crease of worry that refused to leave her brow.

His thoughts raced faster than he could organize them. Who would attack them over this? More importantly, who knew enough about what they were doing to care?

When Ethan finally met Luna’s eyes, the uncertainty there stopped him cold. “What is it?” he asked quietly.

She hesitated, catching her lower lip between her teeth before whispering, “Do you think... Alden could somehow be involved?”

Ethan went still. “Alden?” he echoed, surprise flashing

across his face. “Why would you say that?”

Luna shifted uneasily and folded her arms. “Think about it, Ethan. He’s always around when we’re working on the project. He’s always asking questions, always just... appearing out of nowhere.” Her eyes searched his, silently urging him to see the pattern she saw.

Ethan gave a short, disbelieving laugh, but there was no humor in his eyes. “That’s just Alden. He’s nosy. Like a gossipy old lady with way too much free time. And he thinks I’m in lo-” He cut himself off, heat rushing into his cheeks. “Look, that’s all it is. He’s my best friend. He wouldn’t hurt me.”

Luna glanced away, uneasiness still tightening her expression. “What if that’s just an act?”

Ethan’s jaw clenched. He turned fully toward her. “We literally just saw him down the hall,” he said, his voice sharpening. “If he wanted to catch us doing something, he already had the chance. Why would he bother sneaking after us?”

Luna’s brow pinched tighter, but she held her ground. “I know, Ethan. But something about him felt off. And the timing...” She shook her head. “It’s too coincidental.”

Ethan’s hands curled into fists at his sides. “Well, I trust him. He’d never betray me.” His voice stayed controlled, but the firmness beneath it left no room for argument. Silence settled between them, hard and uncomfortable.

Luna folded her arms and released a slow breath. “Fine,” she said, though the word sounded more like surrender than agreement.

They walked on, their footsteps echoing through the corridor. The easy teasing that usually filled the space between them was gone. Suddenly, it felt like those first awkward days all over again - two people searching for common ground while somehow stepping farther apart.

Ethan barely heard their footsteps anymore. Luna’s words kept circling through his mind. Alden might be pretending. His best friend might have been lying to him all along. His stomach tightened, but he shoved the thought away. He couldn’t deal with that now.

He exhaled slowly, forcing the tension from his voice. “Look, Luna, we’re close. And now that we know someone’s watching us, we can’t afford to waste time. We have to move fast.”

Luna nodded, but unease still clouded her face. “I know, but-”

“We’ll meet on the night of the dance,” Ethan cut in, glancing down the hallway. “Everyone will be preoccupied. It’ll be our best chance to find the Sphere.”

Luna caught her lower lip between her teeth. “During the dance?” she repeated softly. Disappointment flickered across her face before she could hide it, and Ethan felt an unexpected ache beneath his ribs.



He swallowed against it. “This is what we’ve been searching for, Luna,” he hissed. “Everything we’ve done has brought us here.”

Luna’s expression softened, though the usual brightness in her eyes had faded.

“Alright,” she whispered. “I’ll be there.”

Ethan managed a faint smile, equal parts apology and gratitude, but Luna turned away before she could see it. Their footsteps continued down the corridor, and neither of them found anything else to say.