

When Light Meets Resistance

CHAPTER 3



Ethan pushed open the heavy oak door of the common study room, the familiar scent of parchment, ink, and old wood wrapping around him like a comforting blanket. The room was quiet since most students preferred to study in their own

Realms rather than in the shared spaces of the Academia. He eased the door shut and surveyed the room with cautious anticipation. Normally, this was his refuge, a haven of structure and order, but today, it felt charged with an unfamiliar tension.

Ethan's gaze darted across the rows of tables—empty, just as he'd expected. He was early, of course. Luna hadn't arrived yet, and a brief wave of relief washed over him. At least he had a few minutes to collect his thoughts and brace himself for what was sure to be an exhausting study session.

Ethan dropped his bag onto the table with a quiet thud and began unpacking: scrolls, books, notes, all meticulously organized. His fingers lingered on the worn leather of an old tome, one he'd nearly memorized over the past three days. He reminded himself to focus. The research had been done. He

knew what needed to be done. Unfortunately, his brain had other plans, and every thought somehow led straight back to Luna.

Luna Silverwind, the renowned prodigy of the Light Realm. Ethan remembered the first time he'd seen her during his early days at the academy. She'd seemed impossibly distant, a living symbol of excellence and privilege, having studied within these walls since childhood. He'd even nursed a foolish crush, like half the student body probably had. But that was before he learned how things truly worked here. Before he heard the whispers about his realm, about him. Before he understood what the divisions between realms meant – and that some lines between realms were never meant to be crossed.

The thought alone bordered on madness - that he, Ethan Grey of the Realm of Knowledge, would stand beside Luna Silverwind, prodigy of Light, to face one of the most defining trials of their academic lives. Logic insisted he see it as an opportunity, a test of skill and endurance. Yet reason couldn't silence the unease curling deep within him, a whisper that this partnership would challenge more than just his intellect - it would test his understanding of fate itself.

Why did they pair us up? He wondered out loud, dragging a hand through his hair. Luna was everything he wasn't - popular, confident, effortlessly talented. The kind of person who seemed to breathe magic without even trying. He, on the other hand, had fought tooth and nail to earn his place here, every achievement forged through long nights and relentless effort. He could still picture how her sharp blue eyes had met his the last time they spoke - steady, assured, and, if he was being

honest, annoyingly beautiful.

The door opened with a quiet creak, drawing Ethan's attention. Luna stepped inside, her arrival subtly shifting the atmosphere. A faint shimmer of magic followed her, brightening the space with warmth and light. Her poise was unmistakable; she moved with an easy, controlled grace, head held high, radiating an effortless confidence that Ethan both immediately recognized and, to some extent, envied.

"Morning," Luna said evenly as she crossed the room, her movements smooth and unhurried. She pulled out the chair across from him and sat with her usual composure.

Ethan nodded, his throat suddenly dry. "Morning," he managed, the word barely more than a mumble as that familiar sense of inadequacy crept back in.

For a long moment, neither of them spoke. The silence stretched, almost thick enough to feel. Ethan could sense her magic faintly humming in the air, weaving through the usual stillness of the room. It made the place feel different - alive, charged - and it made him feel like he didn't quite belong in it.

"Let's start with this," Luna said, pulling out the parchment. Her fingers moved with precision as she unrolled it, her gaze racing across the familiar words. "Most of this is stuff we already know. The Sphere vanished years ago; we're supposed to work together." Then her tone sharpened with focus. "But here, it says to start with its last known sighting... and that energy detection spells could help. That means divination is our first step."

Ethan frowned, already bracing himself. “Divination? Really?” He shook his head. “That’s not nearly accurate enough. The Professor said to focus on the Sphere’s last known location. We should keep digging through its history instead.”

He resisted the urge to add, which I’ve been doing for three days straight, thank you very much, but the exhaustion in his voice said it for him.

Luna gave him a look, one eyebrow raised. “We have enough clues right here,” she said, tapping the parchment. “Why waste time digging through dusty old books when we could just use magic to find it faster?”

Ethan’s posture stiffened instantly at the comment. “Those dusty old books hold valuable information,” he said tightly. “If we rush into this without understanding what we’re dealing with, we could miss something important.”

Luna sighed but chose not to push the issue. Instead, she turned her attention back to the parchment. “It says the Sphere once lived where the stars danced with the earth,” she read aloud.

Ethan frowned, the words already spinning gears in his mind. It sounded like a riddle - one with far too many possibilities. Still, something about it tugged at him, a quiet unease he couldn’t quite name.

“It’s strange, isn’t it?” Ethan murmured. “Why would they give us clues? Isn’t the point to figure things out

ourselves?”



Luna shrugged, completely unbothered. “Maybe they just want to see what we do with the information,” she said lightly, as if the whole thing were a simple test instead of a mystery tangled in riddles.

Although Ethan still wasn’t convinced, he decided not to argue. “Fine,” he said with a sigh. “But if we’re going to solve this, we need to understand the Celestial Sphere’s history first. There’s an ancient text in the archives that-”

“Ancient text?” Luna interrupted, raising an eyebrow. “You mean something that’s going to take forever to decode?”

Ethan bristled, but he kept his voice steady. “I can read it.”

Luna blinked, caught off guard. “You can?”

A faint flush crept up his neck, but he nodded. “I’ve studied archaic languages. I know how to decode them.”

Luna’s expression softened briefly, a hint of admiration touching her features. “That’s... impressive,” she said with a faint smile. Ethan felt a brief shock; praise was rare, and even

rarer from someone of her standing.

He launched into an explanation of the language's complexities - the layered structure of its symbols, the subtle nuances of syntax - but as he spoke, he noticed her attention waning. Her gaze wandered, her focus slipping away. She was losing interest.

"Okay, okay," Luna said, cutting him off with a wave of her hand. "You handle the reading, and I'll check the artifact room. Maybe there's something there that can point us in the right direction."

Ethan's patience finally snapped. "The Sphere's been gone for ages," he said sharply. "It will not be there."

Luna crossed her arms, unfazed. "Of course not," she said. "But there might be something I can use a divination spell on."

The tension between them thickened, and Ethan drew in a slow breath, forcing himself to stay calm. "Okay," he said at last. "Let's divide the tasks, then."

"Fine by me," Luna replied, already heading for the door without looking back.

Ethan watched her go, a faint pang tightening in his chest. They'd agreed on a plan, but somehow, it didn't feel like teamwork. It felt like distance.

Still, Ethan couldn't sit idle while questions burned without answers. He leaned over a thick tome, lamplight spilling

gold across parchment worn smooth by centuries. For nearly an hour he searched, the soft whisper of turning pages filling the vast silence.

Professor Eldrin's words guided him, each reference a step deeper into the labyrinth of history. Then came a flicker of discovery. Between two brittle pages lay a hidden scroll, its edges frayed, its seal long since broken by time.

With careful hands, he drew it out and unrolled it. The ink was faint but alive, curling across the parchment in a spidery script that spoke of ages past. And there, waiting in the stillness, lay a riddle - ancient, patient, and watching:

In the shadow of light, where day meets night,
the Sphere will be found when wrong becomes right.

Ethan couldn't help but grin. Finally, something. He grabbed the book and crossed the study room toward Luna, who'd just returned a few minutes earlier with a pile of artifacts and the same air of quiet superiority. She hadn't said a word to him since.

She hunched over a charm, her fingers moving like she was conducting an invisible orchestra. The charm flared - bright and impressive - before fizzling out with a sad little pop. Luna frowned, pure annoyance on her face, and Ethan had to fight the urge to laugh.

Ethan waited until she finished before walking over. "Luna," he said, holding up the scroll. "I think I found something."

She glanced up, one eyebrow arched. “What is it?”

“An old riddle,” he explained, handing her the parchment. “It was in one of the books Professor Eldrin suggested. I think it might be another clue. Look.”

Luna scanned the scroll, lips pressed as she thought. “Another riddle,” she muttered, placing it on the table.

Ethan leaned toward the parchment, tapping the first line. “If we analyze it segment by segment, we should be able to figure out what it means.”

“Or,” Luna interrupted, a spark of mischief in her tone, “we could just use magic to reveal the answer. I’ve got a few charms that might work.”

Ethan frowned right away. “What if the scroll’s protected?”

Luna rolled her eyes and waved a hand dismissively. “Sometimes you just have to trust your instincts. Magic can do more than just follow rules, you know.”

Ethan’s jaw tightened. “Instincts won’t help if we ruin our first clue. This riddle means something, and we need to think it through.”

Luna exhaled, her patience thinning. “Fine. Let’s hear your brilliant analysis.”

Ethan ignored the bite in her tone and focused on the scroll. “In the shadow of light, could refer to a place where light and darkness meet - maybe at dawn or dusk?”

“Or,” Luna cut in, “it could mean a literal shadow cast by light. Maybe we need to create the right conditions with magic.”

“Let me finish,” Ethan snapped, irritation creeping into his voice. “The part about day and night could mean a specific time or a place connected to both realms. But ‘when wrong becomes right’ - that’s the key. It means something has to change. Something that’s been out of balance.”

Luna drummed her fingers. “Sure, but how would you even spot what’s off? Magic leaves traces - we can learn a lot more with a quick spell.”



Ethan let out a sharp breath. “It’s not just about throwing spells at it, Luna. We need to be methodical.”

“And we’re not going to get anywhere just sitting here over-analyzing everything,” Luna shot back. She turned away, lifting her hands over the artifact. “I’m going to try something.”

Ethan’s fists clenched. “You’re just guessing!”

“And you’re not doing anything!” Luna snapped, jumping to her feet. They were suddenly face to face, tension thick in the air. The magic around them crackled faintly as neither backed down. Her eyes blazed - so blue, so fierce - and Ethan found himself unable to look away. Finally, she turned aside with a frustrated sigh. “We’re getting nowhere with this.”

Ethan wanted to argue, but she was right. They weren’t getting anywhere - at least, not together. A wave of defeat settled over him as Luna turned back to the artifact, weaving her magic while pretending he wasn’t there.

Maybe she was right. Maybe the riddle wasn’t worth the effort. But this, walking away from it... felt too much like giving up.

Ethan was debating whether he should just walk out when the door swung open, breaking the heavy silence. “Ethan, there you are!” a familiar voice called, slicing through the tension like a breath of fresh air.

Ethan looked up to see Alden standing in the doorway, his trademark grin firmly in place. Completely oblivious to the tension, he sauntered in with his hands shoved into his pockets. Then he spotted Luna, and his eyebrows shot up. Before Ethan could say anything, Alden had him in a headlock, dragging him aside with a smirk.

“What’s this?” he whispered teasingly. “Ethan Grey, working with the Princess of the Light Realm? And you didn’t even tell me? I thought we were friends.”

Ethan clenched his jaw, keeping his tone steady. “It’s not a big deal, Alden.”

“Oh, it’s definitely a big deal,” Alden said with a grin and a wink. “Why didn’t you tell me you got paired with royalty?”

Ethan shot him a look. “Because I knew you’d react exactly like this. Now, what do you want, Alden?”

Alden laughed, letting go and completely ignoring Ethan’s annoyed scowl. “Oh, right! I was actually looking for you. You’ve heard the rumor, right? They say there’s going to be a chimera at this year’s dance.” His grin widened. “Finally, a party with some bite.”

Luna didn’t look up from her work, her hands still moving over the artifact, but Ethan caught the faintest spark of interest in her eyes when she glanced their way. A strange unease tugged at him at the mention of the dance - something about it made his chest tighten, though he couldn’t say why.

Alden leaned in, lowering his voice as if sharing state secrets. “By the way,” he whispered, nodding toward Luna, “is she really as good at dueling as everyone says? You know, with that fancy light magic of hers?”

Ethan stiffened, sneaking a glance at Luna. She didn’t react, but he could tell she was listening. Heat crept up his neck. “I haven’t seen her duel,” he said quickly, aiming for casual and missing by a mile. “We’ve been... focused on other things.”

“Should I ask her to duel me?” Alden whispered, loudly enough for the next room to hear.

Luna didn't even bother hiding her smirk as she looked up. “You do know, I can hear you, right?”

Alden froze mid-grin. “...Oh. Good to know.”

Then he laughed, clearly unfazed at being caught. “Hey, it's not like we said anything bad! Just curious, that's all.” He turned his grin toward Luna, leaning casually on the table. “So, how's it going? Surviving the thrilling world of dusty books and mysterious scrolls?”

Luna shrugged, a sly smile forming. “Barely. But at least books don't try to hex me every five minutes, so I'll take my chances.”

Alden chuckled, leaning on the table with that easy grin. “Careful. Books can be just as dangerous as duels, you know. Trust me, Ethan here almost got taken out by one last year.”

Ethan groaned, dragging a hand down his face. “Alden...”

Luna laughed softly, and for the first time in what felt like hours, the tension in the room loosened. Alden had that effect: he could walk into the most uncomfortable situation and somehow make it feel lighter.



As Alden and Luna continued talking easily, Ethan watched them in silence. Alden's ability to connect with people so effortlessly, to put them at ease without trying, was something Ethan both admired and envied. But right now, gratitude outweighed jealousy. Alden's presence had transformed the atmosphere from suffocating to manageable.

Still, a small part of Ethan wondered if Alden might be a better partner for Luna. She seemed to relax around him - laughing at his jokes, even showing him the artifact she'd been working on. It made sense, didn't it? Someone like Luna - bright, confident, admired - deserved someone who matched her energy. Not... someone like him.

Ethan clenched his jaw and forced his eyes back to the tome in front of him. Luna had everything handed to her - status, talent, confidence - and even though he knew it wasn't her fault, he couldn't help the bitterness that crept in. She'd probably never had to fight for anything the way he had. Every step he'd taken at the Academy felt like a battle just to prove he deserved to be there.

Alden's voice yanked him out of his spiral. "Hey, Ethan, didn't you, like, read this stuff before you even got here?" he said, tossing a look over his shoulder. "You're the resident book

expert, right?”

Ethan glanced down at the page, where a faded graphic sprawled across the parchment. “No, I wish,” he said. His father had taught him a lot - things most kids never learned before coming to the Academy - but nothing like this.

“At home?” Luna asked, curiosity slipping through her composed tone.

Ethan froze, forcing a casual shrug. “It’s nothing,” he said quickly, hoping to move on. But he could feel her eyes on him - searching, as if she already sensed there was more beneath the surface.

She clearly wasn’t about to let it go. “Wait, were you homeschooled?” Luna asked, leaning back in her chair, curiosity lighting her features. “How did you even end up here then? Getting into the Academy isn’t exactly easy.”

Ethan hesitated, a flicker of memory slipping through his mind - an envelope sliding under his door in the dead of night, sealed with a crest he didn’t recognize. That letter had changed everything. But he couldn’t tell her that. And something about the way she’d asked - the casual curiosity, maybe the hint of disbelief - rubbed him the wrong way.

“I worked for it,” he said, a little more sharply than he meant to. “Just like everyone else.”

Luna blinked, one eyebrow lifting as she caught the change in his tone. “I didn’t mean-” she started, but the damage

was already done; his walls were back up.

“I know what you meant,” Ethan snapped before she could finish. He knew he was overreacting, but the words were out before he could stop them. “You think I don’t belong here. That I don’t deserve to be at this Academy.”

Luna blinked, clearly surprised by his sudden outburst. “I wasn’t saying that at all,” she replied, her voice calm even as her expression tightened. “I was just curious.”

“Well, don’t be,” Ethan muttered, his voice low but final. His eyes fell back to the scroll, though he wasn’t truly reading. The familiar weight of his defenses settled in around him - cold, solid, impenetrable.

The air in the room fractured again, tension flooding back like a tide. Alden’s uninhibited laughter faltered, unable to bridge the rift this time. Between Ethan and Luna stretched a silence thick with pride and misunderstanding, a fragile truce turned brittle once more.

And as Ethan shut the world out, part of him knew - some walls, once rebuilt, were harder to tear down again.

For a long while, no one spoke. The only sound was the faint rustle of parchment as Ethan pretended to focus, though his thoughts were a tangled mess of irritation and defeat. They weren’t getting anywhere, and the frustration sat heavy in his chest.

Luna finally broke the silence with a soft sigh. “Maybe we

should call it a day.”

Ethan didn't bother arguing. He shoved his notes and books into his bag, the sharp rustle of paper matching his mood. “Fine,” he said shortly, pushing back his chair. “I'll see you later, Alden.”

“Hey, man, wait-” Alden started, but Ethan was already halfway to the door.

Then Ethan was gone, his steps echoing down the marble corridor, hurried and heavy. His head hung low, the fire that had driven him this morning dimmed to embers. He'd come here determined to make this partnership work, to prove that knowledge and intuition could co-exist in harmony.



Yet now, the distance between them felt insurmountable, stretching wider with every step he took away from her. How could he bridge a divide born not just of realms, but of pride, fear, and the quiet ache of being unseen?

Outside, the sun sank over Aetherion, its light fractured by the tall windows - gold meeting shadow, never quite blending.