

Where Shadows Feed

CHAPTER 4



Luna moved quickly down the corridor, her composure perfectly in place as she exited the Realm of Light. She greeted passing students with polite nods and small smiles, performing every gesture exactly as it was expected of her. But the moment she was alone, her expression sobered. Sunlight streamed through the archways, stretching long shadows across the cobblestones - a stark contrast to the quiet unrest stirring within her.

Her fists tightened as her thoughts spiraled. Why was it so hard to talk to him? Every time she tried to apologize, Ethan either shut down or slipped away. It wasn't like she'd done anything that bad - she'd only asked a simple question about his life before the Academy. Maybe she'd pushed a little, sure, but everyone was curious about him. Still, the way he reacted, as if she'd hit something raw, left her unsettled.

Maybe I shouldn't have pushed him, Luna admitted, guilt creeping in at the edges of her thoughts. But her curiosity burned stronger. There was something about Ethan - a secret he

carried just beneath the surface. She couldn't ignore it. What if her instincts were right? What if that secret was the key to understanding him?

Two weeks had passed since their last argument, and they'd barely made any progress on the assignment. One riddle had been stuck in Luna's head ever since; she was almost certain she'd cracked part of it. But, of course, that stubborn knucklehead wouldn't even listen.

Luna's stride lengthened, purpose rising with every step. I need to fix this, she told herself, the thought pounding in sync with her heartbeat. They couldn't keep orbiting each other like this - close, but never quite connecting. Avoidance would only let the distance grow, and she was tired of waiting for him to make the first move.

Luna spotted the courtyard up ahead - the same place Ethan always went during his breaks. This time, I won't let him slip away, she thought, drawing a deep breath. He'd been avoiding her long enough. It was time to face this once and for all.

Luna stepped into the courtyard, her eyes scanning the space. The warm air and the faint scent of flowers helped settle her nerves. A few students lingered nearby, whispering, but she barely noticed them. Her focus locked onto a lone figure by a stone bench - Ethan. He hunched over his notes, writing so intently that nothing else seemed to exist.

She paused at the edge of the courtyard, her breath catching in her throat. For a split second, doubt crept in - maybe

this isn't a good idea. He'd made it pretty clear he didn't want to talk, and last time... she'd only pushed him further away.

Then the frustration hit, sharp and all too familiar. Weeks of silence. No progress. Every passing day had tightened that invisible pressure of expectation around her chest. Her mother's voice echoed in her mind - sharp, cold, demanding, impossible to ignore.

Her jaw clenched. She couldn't fail this project. She wouldn't.

If Ethan Grey wanted to keep hiding, then she'd drag him - kicking and glaring if she had to - back into the light.

Luna took a deep breath and started toward him, her steps quickening as she crossed the courtyard. "Ethan," she called, trying to sound casual, like it didn't matter - even though her pulse said otherwise.

Ethan flinched, nearly dropping his quill. His head snapped up, eyes wide the moment he saw her. Instinctively, he scrambled to gather his notes, clutching them like a shield. Luna caught the nervous flicker of his gaze as it darted around the courtyard - either looking for a quick exit or just worried about who might be watching.

Whispers rippled quickly through the courtyard, students trading curious glances and hushed remarks. Luna ignored them, keeping her composure steady. Ethan looked visibly unsettled. His shoulders tensed, and his eyes kept shifting, his discomfort obvious.



“Hey,” Luna said softly as she stepped closer. “Can we talk?”

Ethan’s fingers tightened around his notes. “I’m busy,” he muttered, staring anywhere but at her. “Maybe later.”

“No,” Luna said, a little sharper than she intended. The word slipped out, edged with something stronger than she’d planned - determination. She wasn’t letting him walk away this time.

“We need to talk,” she added, softening her tone. “I... I wanted to apologize for earlier. I didn’t mean to pry.”

Ethan shifted, finally looking up at her. “It’s fine,” he blurted, but the way his voice wavered told her it wasn’t.

Luna crossed her arms, steadying herself through the awkward pause. “Look, I think I might have figured something out about the Sphere,” she said. “But we don’t have to talk about it here. Let’s find somewhere quieter.”

Ethan blinked, clearly thrown. “A clue? What do you mean?”

“Just... trust me,” Luna said, taking a step back before

turning toward the gardens behind the courtyard. “Come on. We can talk somewhere without an audience.”

She didn’t wait for an answer. Without looking back, she started walking, her pace steady. He’ll follow, she told herself. He has to.

A few seconds passed before she heard the rustle of papers and hurried footsteps behind her. She exhaled, a small smile breaking through her tension. He was following - not exactly enthusiastic, even so, it was something. And for the first time in weeks, it felt like hope.

They left the courtyard behind, its noise and whispers fading away. The gardens embraced them in stillness - the air cooler; the light softened beneath the wide canopy of an ancient oak, its roots steeped in centuries of secrets.

Luna stopped beneath its vast shadow, her pulse loud in her ears. When she turned, Ethan stood a few steps behind, his posture uncertain, guarded. The tension between them hung suspended in the hush of the trees.

Her heart picked up - not from fear, but resolve. This was her chance to fix things, to bridge the distance that had fractured their partnership. One wrong word could shatter it again, but one right one might finally heal it.

“What’s this about, Luna?” Ethan asked, his voice quieter now, no longer edged with irritation.

Luna met his eyes. “I’ve been thinking about the riddle in

Professor Eldrin's letter. I think I know the place he meant."

Ethan's eyebrows lifted, curiosity slipping past his guarded expression. "Where?"

"The lake," Luna said after a breath. "The one in the forest. It fits, if you think about it."



For the first time in weeks, Ethan actually looked like he was considering what she'd said. Not wanting to lose the moment, Luna pulled out Professor Eldrin's note, her fingers brushing over its worn edges. "I couldn't stop thinking about it," she said, keeping her voice steady despite the nervous energy buzzing inside her. "The line about the Sphere being where 'the stars danced with the earth' - it has to mean a place where the stars reflect on water. And it would make sense if it's somewhere near the Academy."

Ethan gave her a skeptical look, crossing his arms. "Why do you think that?"

"Well," Luna began, taking a steadying breath, "Professor Eldrin gave us that riddle for a reason. And we can't exactly wander off wherever we want. We're supposed to stay near the Academy. So, it has to be somewhere close, somewhere we can

actually reach. And I keep thinking... what if it's the lake? The one in Shadowgrove Forest?"

Ethan's brow furrowed, his gray eyes shadowed with unease. "The lake?" he echoed, doubt weighing down his voice. "That forest is supposed to be dangerous. Are we even allowed to go in there?"

Luna lifted her chin, her confidence cutting clean through his hesitation. "I'll get permission from Professor Eldrin," she said. "He gave us the riddle. He wants us to solve it. And if that means venturing into Shadowgrove, then that's where we're going."

The certainty in her tone left little room for argument, but beneath it, the air seemed to shift - something unseen. Even Ethan felt it: the first stirrings of fate responding to the path they had chosen.

Ethan still looked unsure, his eyes distant as if he were turning the idea over from every angle. Luna could almost see the thoughts racing through his mind. He hadn't been convinced yet. So she leaned in slightly, her voice earnest, a trace of frustration slipping through. "Ethan, it's the best lead we've got. We've been stuck for weeks - this could finally be our breakthrough."

Ethan pressed his lips together, clearly weighing it all. Luna braced herself for another lecture about research and caution, but after a long, tense pause, he gave a small nod. "Alright," he hissed. "It's worth a try."

Relief flooded through her, and a smile broke across her face before she could stop it. “Great! We’ll go after classes tomorrow. I’ll talk to Professor Eldrin today.”

Ethan lingered, uncertainty still written all over his face, but he’d agreed. And for now, that was enough. Right now, that was all she needed.

Luna and Ethan walked side by side as the path toward Shadowgrove Forest narrowed, pulling them farther from the Academy grounds. The sinking sun stretched long shadows across the trail.

Attempting to ease the tension, Luna started light conversation: comments about the weather, small updates about the Academy. However, Ethan’s replies stayed short, his focus locked on the mission. After several more failed attempts, Luna relented, allowing silence to envelop them once more.

As they approached the perimeter of Shadowgrove Forest, Luna’s steps slowed. This place felt different from anywhere else within the Academy’s bounds - darker, heavier, wrong somehow. Massive trees arched overhead, their tangled branches blocking out what little daylight remained. A thin mist curled around their feet as they stepped inside, carrying an energy so strong it raised the hairs on Luna’s arms. Even her light magic felt weaker here, like it was struggling to push back against something ancient and powerful.

“We’re here,” Luna whispered, mostly to herself.

The forest felt alive. Leaves rustled softly, an owl called somewhere in the distance, and beneath it all... something else. A low, steady hum that made her uneasy. She glanced at Ethan, who was already studying the shadows with that analytical look of his, jaw set tight. He felt it too. She could tell.

They pressed onward, pushing through thick branches until the trees finally opened up to reveal the lake. The water lay still, mirroring the deep colors of the setting sun. Luna paused, studying the surface. Everything looked completely normal. No glowing symbols, no hidden relics, nothing but calm water. But something in her gut told her this calm was only temporary.

Luna pressed her lips together, disappointment flickering across her face. “Maybe it’s not time yet,” she murmured, lifting her gaze to the darkening sky where the last streaks of sunlight bled into dusk. “If the stars are part of the riddle, maybe we have to wait for them to show us the answer.”

Ethan shifted beside her, restless, his eyes darting through the gathering gloom. “This place feels wrong,” he said, voice low. “The air’s too still. We should head back. Before whatever’s watching us decides to move.”

Luna shook her head, determination burning stronger than her fear. “We’ve come this far,” she said, her voice steady despite the tension crawling under her skin. “We’ll wait until nightfall. If nothing happens by then, we’ll leave. But we have to try.”

Ethan’s gaze lingered on the still water before shifting

back toward the shadowed path they'd taken. The fading light caught in his eyes as he considered her words. Finally, he exhaled, the sound quiet but resigned. "Fine," he said. "But if anything goes wrong-"



"Nothing will," Luna interrupted, her tone firm, braver than she actually felt.

The forest seemed to stir around them, the mist curling tighter at their feet as the last of the sun slipped below the horizon. Her words hung in the air, fragile but defiant, swallowed by the growing darkness.

Luna edged closer to the water, determination keeping her focused as the sky darkened. They waited in tense silence, watching every shadow, searching for a sign - anything to prove they were right, anything that might justify their effort.

Just as the last light disappeared, Luna caught a flicker near the water's edge. Her heart skipped. "Ethan," she whispered, pointing toward the faint shimmer. "There's something there! I'm sure of it."

Ethan turned, squinting toward the glow. "What is it?"

"I don't know... maybe something buried? Or

enchanted?” Luna said, stepping closer to the edge, her pulse quickening with each step. Then a sudden rustle behind them froze her in place.

“Did you hear that?” Ethan whispered, his voice tight. He stepped closer, eyes sweeping the dark treeline.

Luna’s heart thudded in her chest. “Yeah,” she breathed. The forest suddenly felt different - too quiet, too aware. Every rustle of leaves made her skin prickle. Something was out there. Watching them.

Ethan’s body turned slowly, every movement careful, his gaze cutting through the encroaching darkness. “It feels like...” he muttered, tension roughening his voice, “like we’re being watched.”

Luna’s pulse spiked. She lifted her hand, summoning her light. A sphere bloomed to life, bright and pure, its glow rippling across the mist. But the forest answered. The fog thickened, rising in curling tendrils that reached for the light. Within seconds, it swallowed it whole, leaving only suffocating black.

Luna’s breath caught. The darkness pressed closer, heavy and suffocating. Panic clawed at her chest, but beneath it something else stirred. An instinct. This was no ordinary shadow. Something ancient had awakened.

“I think there’s something-” Ethan started, but his voice broke off. His eyes went wide, and his hand clamped around Luna’s arm, cold and shaking.

Luna's heart jolted. "What is it?" she whispered, even as dread crawled down her spine.

Then it emerged from the darkness - slowly, deliberately - something that didn't belong to the world of the living.

From the heart of the mist, it appeared - a creature born of shadow and silence. Its form shifted like smoke, never fully solid, yet unmistakably alive. The darkness bent around it, responding to its presence. Two pale, hollow eyes burned through the gloom, locking onto them with a hungry, predatory focus.

It moved without a sound, gliding forward with an unnatural smoothness, each motion sending a ripple of dread through the air. The mist pulled back from it, recoiling as if it feared what it had birthed.

Luna's breath hitched. Terror surged through her chest, heavy and cold, yet she couldn't tear her eyes away.

This wasn't just another creature. It was something older. Ancient. Something aware. Watching. Waiting. Until now. And it had found them.

Ethan's tone faltered, trembling with disbelief and barely holding together. "There's no way..."

Luna swallowed, drawing in a shaky breath. "What is it?"

He didn't even look at her, his focus locked on the

creature. “It shouldn’t exist,” he murmured. “Things like that were wiped out decades ago. No one has reported a sighting in years - how could this one have survived?”

Ethan’s stare didn’t waver. “It’s impossible...”

“Ethan,” Luna hissed, fear tightening her voice as the shadow crept closer. “There’s no time for a lecture. What is it?”



His gray eyes flicked to hers, the creature’s glow reflecting in them like shattered glass. “A monster born from cursed arcane power,” he said quietly. “They feed on magic, draining it until there’s nothing left.”

The realization hit her hard. Her light.

Ethan turned fully to her then, fear and resolve warring in his expression. “Luna... these are Umbra Wraiths.”

The name itself seemed to thicken the air, the darkness pulsing in response - as if the creature had heard and answered.