

Where Trust Begins

CHAPTER 6

Luna sank onto the grass, her chest rising and falling in uneven bursts as she struggled to steady her breathing. Beside her, Ethan lay flat on his back, just as breathless. Above them, the night sky stretched on forever, the Academy's towers etched against a field of stars. Warm light spilled from the windows, washing the grounds in soft gold, a comforting reminder they had made it back alive.



She shivered, though it had nothing to do with the cold. The memory of the Wraiths still clung to her, those glowing, unblinking eyes. She had buried her fear in the middle of the fight, but now it came rushing back, hammering through her

chest.

“I’m sorry,” Luna said suddenly, her voice breaking the stillness. She shut her eyes, guilt churning in her chest. “If I hadn’t been so stubborn, we never would’ve been in danger.”

Ethan let out a slow exhale beside her, and when he finally spoke, his tone was steady. “Those things never should’ve been

there.”

Luna turned her head, studying him. His words were meant to comfort her, but something about them felt wrong. He’d fought with too much certainty, too much knowledge. For someone who claimed he couldn’t fight, Ethan had known exactly what to do.

“How did you know so much about them?” Luna asked, her voice soft with curiosity. She tried to sound casual, even though the question had been pressing against her thoughts ever since the fight.

Ethan didn’t look at her. His eyes remained fixed on the stars. “It’s a long story.”

His jaw tightened, and she recognized that familiar distance at once, the walls sliding back into place. For a moment, she thought he was retreating into silence again, locking away the part of himself he never let anyone see.

But then Ethan surprised her. He turned his head, and for once, the usual wall of indifference was gone. His gray eyes - normally sharp and distant, seemed softer now, open in a way she had never seen before. Vulnerable.

“Thank you,” he said quietly. “You saved us.”

Luna blinked, caught completely off guard. Gratitude was not something she associated with Ethan. He was always the composed one, the one who acted as though he needed no one. Hearing those words from him felt... different.

“Besides, if you hadn’t insisted we go there,” Ethan added, the faintest smile tugging at his lips, “we wouldn’t have found the clue.”

Luna frowned, the tightness in her chest giving way to confusion. She propped herself up on her elbows, eyes narrowing. “The what?”

Ethan sat up, reaching into his pocket. “I saw it glowing in the lake,” he said. “I thought it might be what we were looking for.”

He pulled out a small object, and Luna’s breath caught. Resting in his palm was a medallion, ancient and etched with spiraling symbols that seemed to whisper of forgotten power. Its glow had faded, but she could still feel its pulse - the same eerie light she’d glimpsed in the depths before the Wraiths descended.

Luna leaned closer, her voice dropping to a hush. “It’s covered in drawings.”

Ethan’s expression hardened. He turned it under the moonlight, the runes catching a faint silver glint. “Not drawings,” he said. “Runes. Old ones.”

Luna’s mind spun with possibilities, though none of them made much sense. She couldn’t tell the difference between runes and random scribbles - both just looked like fancy lines to her. But Ethan’s tone held a weight that made her pause. She looked at him, still lost, and to her surprise, he smiled. A real smile. Not the smug or irritated kind she was used to, but

something warm and genuine.

“I think these represent stars,” he said warmly. “Or constellations.”

“What?” Luna asked, blinking again, more thrown by the smile than by the theory.



“I can try to read them, but if you don’t mind...” Ethan gestured to his soaked clothes, his teeth clicking together as he attempted another smile. “...I’d like to get changed first.”

Only then did Luna truly notice how drenched he was. His hair clung to his forehead, and water dripped steadily from his sleeves. She winced. “Right. Sorry. You must be freezing.”

Ethan gave a half-shrug, trying to play it off, but the shiver that ran through him betrayed him completely.

“Maybe we should meet tomorrow,” Luna said, standing and brushing the grass from her pants. “You need to warm up.”

Ethan nodded, pushing himself to his feet with a tired breath. He slipped the medallion back into his pocket, his fingers lingering on it for a moment before letting go. “Yeah,”

he said quietly. “We’ll figure this out in the morning.”

Just as Ethan turned to leave, Luna hesitated. The memory of the Umbra Wraiths flashed behind her eyes, a cold weight settling deep in her stomach. “Wait,” she called, stopping him mid-step.

“Shouldn’t we tell the teachers? Those things were close, too close. It could be dangerous.”

Ethan turned back, his expression darkening. “And tell them what?” he asked. “We don’t have proof. No one’s ever going to believe us, not unless they see it for themselves.”

“But-” Luna started, only for Ethan’s voice to cut through hers.

“The Academy’s protected,” he said, firm and steady. “The Umbra Wraiths can’t get in. And I...” He glanced over his shoulder, his fingers twisting together. “I think something’s brewing here. Something dark.”

Luna crossed her arms, a chill creeping down her spine. “Like what?”

Ethan shook his head slowly. “I don’t know yet. But if we sound the alarm now, and they actually listen, all we’ll do is cause panic. We might lose our only chance to figure out what’s really happening.”

Luna’s frown deepened, worry seeping into her voice. “But what if something happens? What if those things get

closer?”

“They won’t,” Ethan said confidently. Then his tone softened, turning thoughtful. “Besides, think about it. If this connects to the Celestial Sphere, it could be bigger than we imagined. Our project could actually matter. We could make a name for ourselves.”

That struck a chord. For all their differences, the project mattered to both of them. If they could uncover not just the Sphere’s secret, but the truth behind the Umbra Wraiths... Luna couldn’t help but imagine her mother’s face - proud, stunned, maybe even a little speechless.

After a long pause, Luna finally nodded. “Okay,” she said softly. “We’ll keep quiet. For now.”

Ethan’s shoulders eased a little as he gave her a small, grateful smile before heading back toward the Academy. Luna watched him go, the cool night air brushing against her skin. Something felt different now, subtle but real. A thread of trust had begun to form between them, fragile but strong enough to hold. And for once, it had nothing to do with her family name. That, she thought, was a delightful change.

Morning light streamed through the Academy’s tall windows, painting the study room in soft gold. The worn wooden tables glowed beneath it, and Luna felt a flicker of comfort, though it did little to loosen the knot in her stomach. The memory of the Umbra Wraiths still clung to her, cold and

unwelcome, her hands tingling as though the shadows had left their mark behind.

Ethan was already there when she walked in, seated at one of the tables with the medallion laid out before him. He looked exhausted, dark circles shadowing his eyes, but calm. His posture was relaxed, his expression open. When he glanced up, he gave her a small nod, polite but warm, the usual distance between them nowhere to be found.

Luna smiled as she crossed to him. “Morning.”

“Morning.” Ethan didn’t look up right away, but his tone was easy, not clipped. He turned a page in his book, calm and unhurried, more open than she was used to seeing him.

They sat in companionable silence for a while, the medallion resting between them, its faint shimmer catching the morning light. Luna felt a flicker of excitement beneath the lingering unease. For the first time, they had a real lead, and maybe, just maybe, a real chance at working together. It was unfamiliar ground, uncertain, but not unpleasant.

“So... the runes,” Luna said at last, motioning toward the medallion. “You said they’re old?”

Ethan nodded, leaning closer to examine it again. “Yeah. These runes were used by the ancient Arcanes to chart the stars,” he said, his voice slipping into its usual, thoughtful cadence. “They believed the stars were the source of the world’s strongest magic, and that belief led to the creation of the Sphere. If I’m right, this map could hold some of their lost knowledge.”



Luna's eyes brightened as she absorbed every word. "So you think it's... a clue? Something that could lead us to the Celestial Sphere?"

Ethan met her gaze, his expression thoughtful but intent. "Could be. But we're missing too much information. I can read some of these runes, but others... they're not like anything I've seen before."

Luna sank back into her chair, frustration tugging at her shoulders. "So... what do we do now?"

"We need to learn more about it," Ethan said, tapping the medallion lightly. "There's bound to be something in the archives - old records, research notes, anything that can help us make sense of these symbols."

Luna almost pushed back, that familiar instinct to take charge flaring in her again, but she stopped herself. They'd done things her way already. Maybe it was time to let him take the lead. "Then let's search," she said, settling back into her voice.

They spent the rest of the morning buried in books and scrolls, cross-referencing symbols and hunting for anything that might shed light on the medallion's runes. Hours slipped by, and the room grew steadily warmer as sunlight spilled through

the high windows. Still, no real breakthrough came. Even so, Luna felt something shifting - a quiet sense of teamwork taking root between them. For once, the uncertainty did not feel so heavy. They were in this together.

By the time the sun had begun its slow tilt toward afternoon, Luna's eyes ached from reading. The letters blurred, lines melting together as exhaustion crept in. She blinked hard and swallowed a yawn. She had never spent this long reading before. Her life had always revolved around endless drills and training, not pages packed with ancient texts.

Luna stared at the chaos of books spread in front of her and thought, Yeah, time for a break. Then she glanced over at Ethan's side of the table and nearly fell out of her chair. His pile looked like a miniature tower, easily three times higher than hers, and he was still reading like he had not the slightest intention of stopping.

He was bent over the medallion, eyes flying across the pages with frightening focus, fingertips brushing over the runes with almost reverent care. The only sounds in the room were the whisper of turning paper and Luna's steadily growing disbelief.

What, do his glasses have a built-in speed spell or something?

Break officially canceled. She grabbed the next book and glared at it had personally insulted her.

Luna flipped through the thick book, her eyes darting across lines of faded text. She was halfway through when



something made her stop. “Wait,” she said, her voice rising with excitement. Sitting up straighter, she traced the passage with her finger. “There’s something here about ancient star maps.”

Ethan looked up, surprise flashing across his face. He pushed back his chair and came around to her side of the table. “Where did you find this?” he asked, already scanning the spine. “I checked the catalogs for anything on star maps – this one didn’t appear in the listings.”

Luna blinked and pointed toward the far end of the table. “It was just sitting there. On that pile. Look.”

Luna turned the book so he could see, and they both leaned over the pages. The faded text described celestial maps, which charted stars, the flow of magic within them, and even theories on how the power could be harnessed.

Ethan’s eyes traced the lines with care, and when he finally spoke, his voice was quieter than usual. “That’s impressive,” he said. “If I can figure out how these maps work, I might be able to link them to the medallion. Good job, Luna.”

Luna blinked, caught off guard by the compliment. Coming from Ethan, it felt different. Genuine. Maybe it was

because he never seemed to expect anything from her, or maybe it was because seeing him falter the night before had changed something between them.

“I’ve been meaning to ask,” she said after a moment, hesitating. “What spell were you trying to cast by the lake?”

Ethan froze mid-motion, his shoulders tensing. When he looked at her, his expression had shifted, more guarded now. “Why do you want to know?” he asked, his voice quieter, edged with something defensive.

Luna lifted her hands quickly. “I’m not making fun of you, I promise. I’m just curious,” she said, her voice sincere. The last thing she wanted was to push him back into that wall again, not after all the progress they had made.

Ethan hesitated, the tension hanging between them for a few seconds before he finally let out a sigh. “It was a spell meant to alter the consistency of elements,” he said quietly. “To make water solid, or earth flow like liquid. The theory sounded simple enough when I read about it.”

Luna’s curiosity sparked again. “How does it work?” She asked while leaning in and tilting her head slightly.

“Think of it like this.” Ethan leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table as his hands moved animatedly through the air. “Everything around us is made up of molecules. If you apply enough energy, you can alter the way those molecules behave.”

Luna’s brow furrowed as she followed his movements.

“Like how heat turns water into steam?” She asked inquisitively, testing the idea out loud.

“Yes, exactly,” Ethan said with a nod. “But with magic, we’re skipping the normal process. Instead of using heat or pressure, we directly manipulate the bonds between molecules. If you do it properly, you can turn something solid into liquid, or make something soft as hard as stone.”

He paused, frowning a little. “The real challenge is balance. Too much energy, and you break the bonds completely. The material just falls apart. Too little, and nothing happens at all. That’s where I messed up. The theory is sound, but actually controlling that energy...” He sighed. “It’s harder than it sounds.”

Luna studied him in silence, genuinely impressed. The way he explained things - the precision, the thought - made her realize how sharp his mind really was. If he could ever channel that same focus into his magic, she knew he would go far. “Regardless of how that spell turned out,” she said softly, “you were amazing back there, Ethan. I wouldn’t have had a chance without what you knew about those creatures.”

Ethan glanced at her, uncertainty flickering in his eyes, as if he were trying to decide whether she really meant it. “Thanks,” he said at last, his voice low as he looked away. “But you were the one who saved us. Your magic... it was impressive.”

Luna felt her cheeks warm at his words. Maybe the teachers had known exactly what they were doing when they paired them together. With her magic and Ethan’s knowledge,

it was hard not to imagine how far they might go. They balanced each other in ways she never would have expected.

The thought sparked something, and she leaned forward suddenly. “Hey,” she said, her voice bright with the idea. “What if we help each other?”

Ethan blinked, eyebrows drawing together. “What do you mean?”

“I’m not exactly great with ancient texts,” Luna admitted with a small laugh, “but I could probably put a hole through that bookshelf without breaking a sweat. And you’re brilliant with all this theory stuff. If you could teach me about runes and the technical side of magic...”

Ethan’s eyes lit up, the tension that had clouded him moments ago slipping away. “You’d help me with my spells?”

Luna grinned. “Exactly.” She could already imagine how much stronger her magic could become with Ethan’s knowledge guiding it. “So, what do you say?”

Ethan paused, considering the offer before giving a reluctant but genuine nod. “Alright,” he said. “But please don’t put holes in any of the books.”



A sly smirk curved across her lips, mischief lighting her face as she looked far too pleased with herself. “No promises.”