

Shepherds of the Lost: Yesterday's Shadow

Charlotte sat quietly as baby Aurelia fussed in her friend's arms. She was too filled with dread to notice anything besides her own thoughts, much less the crying.

She needed to end this. It had gone on too long.

How else could she keep her baby safe? Her friend's baby? Everyone? How was it that this all sat on her shoulders now?

The room was dimly lit by the closet light that crept through the gaps of the closed door. Annabelle swayed back and forth, soothing her baby girl back to sleep. She whispered to her friend. "Charlotte, you shouldn't follow Felix into the In Between again like last night. He's on the wrong path, and he's pulling you along with him."

"Oh, please," Charlotte replied dismissively. She leaned over the crib to soothe her own daughter. Baby Vidia had started to stir from Aurelia's fussing, so Charlotte patted her back and shushed her back to a peaceful slumber. "Felix is right. If we embrace it, we can control it. And if we can control it, we can do what Shepherds are supposed to do. We can save the Lost, bring them home, and close the portals to the In Between forever. We can end it."

"Have you not listened to a word my Mama and Papa have taught us?" Annabelle sighed, shaking her head. She then placed Aurelia, who was now sleeping, down in the crib next to Vidia.

"Your parents have it all wrong. Your uncle Felix is right. We will never be able to defeat the darkness or close the portals unless we first understand what the darkness is and what it really wants. And in order to understand it, we need to embrace it." Charlotte's eyes hardened.

"You know that's not true. Embracing the darkness will only make it stronger," Annabelle said.

Charlotte snapped back at her friend. "Well, we weren't all born with the gift of sight, like you and your mother. Some of us have to try harder. Shepherding is awful, and we need to defeat the darkness. And we need to do it now more than ever. We have to protect our little ones." Charlotte looked down at her sleeping daughter, and worry crept across her face.

"We will. We will always protect them. That's our job," Annabelle said.

"Easy for you to say, when you always get a preview of what's going to happen next," Charlotte said, envy plain in her eyes.

"It's not that. We have our family, and there's strength in numbers. There's Victor, Mama, Papa, Elvis, and you. We're all in this together, and that's our advantage. We are a team," Annabelle said.

"No, *you* have your whole family helping, and I'm sure you're going to bring little Aurelia into this when she gets older, too. I'm alone in this," Charlotte responded.

“You are not alone. You have all of us, and then of course there’s Frank.” Annabelle paused, watching the expression on Charlotte’s face when she brought up her friend’s husband. “You still haven’t told him yet, have you?” she asked.

“No, and I won’t tell him. We all need to get out of this and move on with our lives. Can’t we just be normal families again?” Charlotte said.

“You need to tell him. He’s your husband. If we can’t confide in our loved ones, who can we trust? This life is hard, the burden is heavy, and we need to lean on our loved ones and each other,” Annabelle said.

Charlotte could feel her friend’s judgment. Who was Annabelle to tell her what she had to share with her husband? This was Charlotte’s family, and there was no way she was going to bring them into this nightmare.

“You act as if this will go on forever,” Charlotte finally responded. “It won’t. We’re close to ending it. Felix is sure of it. He can see it, he’s told me. Can’t you?” Charlotte asked bitterly. “Why can’t you and your mother see it? It’s as plain as day.”

Annabelle placed her hand on the crib railing. “All I see lately is darkness.” She bent over the crib railing and kissed her sleeping daughter. “We need to find the light. For our baby girls. For all of us.” Annabelle looked at her friend for a moment, fear in her eyes, and then walked out of the room.

After Annabelle left, Charlotte bent down and pulled a wrapped gift from underneath the crib. She’d been thinking about it all day, ever since Felix had first handed it to her in the morning. She would have opened it immediately if Mrs. Santiago hadn’t interrupted and shooed Felix away. Now, though, she was finally alone and safe to open the present without any of the Santiagos’ judging eyes. Atop the wrapping paper was an envelope taped down against the gift. She opened it and saw a handwritten note.

Do not cover from the shadows, instead embrace and use them to your advantage. There is great power to be found in all that is feared. Keep this Shadow Box our little secret.

Your friend, F

Charlotte’s eyes widened with both excitement and fear, “This is it. This is what he’s been telling me about, and he finally thinks I’m ready.”

She looked up at the two baby girls sleeping in the crib, and something resolute settled behind her eyes.

