

THE WINX
CHRONICLES



1

FATE

J. L. MARTONE

Disclaimer

I do not own Winx Club or any of the related characters. The Winx Club franchise was created by Iginio Straffi and owned by Rainbow SpA. This fanfiction is intended for entertainment only. I am not making any profit from this story. All rights of the original Winx Club story, locations and characters belong to Rainbow SpA, Iginio Straffi, RAI & Viacom. The original characters, locations and plot are the property of the author, who is, in no way associated with any of the owners, creators or producers of the original show or any protected material. No copyright infringement is intended. This is a fan tribute to the story that made me believe in magic. The show that inspired thousands all across the globe. It is a love letter to the creators who fostered my belief in charm, enchantment and wonder.

Foreword

To say writing a book is difficult is an understatement. It's something you know before you begin writing, aware that it would be many, many months before completion. However, I underestimated just how difficult writing a book is. Especially a book based on a show people care about... a lot.

This project began in 2021 after the release of Fate: The Winx Saga. It was during this year that I truly believed I could write a better, more interesting and more adult version of the Winx Club story. A task that Netflix wasn't able to complete to a high enough standard. It started with me planning the world, writing the magic system and the lore. Before long, I had created so much about this world but had no plot to fill it. This is when the Winx Chronicles was truly born. I set out to write six books, each of them adult high fantasy sci-fi epics. Not only to reimagine the world of the Winx Club and the characters that I know and love, but also to improve my writing.

Writing the first book has definitely changed me for the better. I have learned so much about what it means to write a book, to plan one, to commit to a project and not give up in the process. These are lessons I will take forward with me as I continue to write the Winx

Chronicles and whatever else I write in the future.

I have always loved to write, and have loved to tell stories. It is one of the few things, out of all of the uncertainties I have in my life, that I know I want to do. I have so much to learn about the craft of writing, but I am truly proud of the first book I have ever written, and the fact that it is this one.

Many people will know that the release of this book has been marked with so much uncertainty and broken promises. All of which are my fault. Every time I thought I had a version of the book I was happy with, I went back and decided I wasn't. The versions that have existed before this version you will read have all been so different. It's always hard, choosing what to include and what not to include in a project like this. I have always said, The Winx Chronicles isn't a direct retelling or novelisation of the Winx Club story. It is very much a re-imagining. Once I let go of having to be so similar to the cartoon, this book really found its stride. One of the very early problems I was encountering was the amount of characters in this book. Which, in the end, I only cut one really big character that appears in Season One that doesn't appear here. I've managed to keep the others intact. Who is this character? Well, I'll tell you now to avoid any disappointment. The character I removed was Riven.

Why? Because Riven actually has a lot to do in season one of the Winx Club cartoon, however, I think a lot of what we know of Musa's story is subsequently filtered through him. This is something I didn't want. I felt Musa needed this season to stand by herself, Riven will come later I promise.

As a result of cutting Riven, it meant I could add in the sixth winx fairy earlier which is something I always wanted to do. It always feels wrong going back to watch season one without Layla / Aisha there. In the Winx Chronicles, I have changed that. Now, she's here

from the start, or, at least Layla is.

There is truly so much to come and so many characters to introduce in the books going forward. I can't wait to explore the characters more and go on adventures you've never experienced with them. This project is a massive undertaking that I've committed to and I'm one sixth of the way finished.

I promise book two will be out sooner than five years time! Anyways! Without further ado, I hope that you enjoy my fan created Winx Club rewrite: The Winx Chronicles, Book 1: Fate.

- Joshua L Martone

Special Thanks

I have been so fortunate to have received so much support from so many people during the making of this project.

I would like to thank the following people:

Lucy Cole for designing and creating the beautiful cover artwork for the book. She has done an absolutely phenomenal job. She is also one of my best friends, and has always been my person to soundboard ideas off of. I want to thank her for hyping me up through the process of writing the book, reading through unedited pages of, frankly, really terrible writing. For keeping me grounded and for being one of my best friends. I could not have done it without her.

Lola Valentine for being one of the first people to see potential in this project and for going out of her way to consistently show me kindness, help me throughout the project and platforming me in the process. I went on her podcast a couple of years ago and it was such an amazing experience. She, also, lent her voice to professor Valentine in one of my mini-series

in 2023. She has consistently stayed one of my good friends in this community and I could not be anymore grateful.

Stellaswinxclub, QBA016, Thomas Vaccaro & Lisa Fernald for lending their voices to the professors of the “Welcome to Alfea” mini-series. They spent their time recording the lines and have given something to this world that I could not have given just by myself. Thank you to all of you, truly, for your help with that project again and for remaining supporting forces in the years that have followed.

Cassidy Bowen for being my library buddy where much of this book was written. Spending hours upon hours in the library isn’t nice to do by yourself, thank you for sitting next to me as I work on my fairy fan-fiction project, even though you know almost nothing about it.

I would like to thank Fae from Shiroyukichan for reading the book and giving me some amazing notes, It was such a kind thing to do and this sort of thing is so handy.

To all of my followers on instagram and subscribers who comment and have been following along for the past few years. Thank you, thank you, thank you. I, truly, could not have done this without the support of the Winx community. Reading your comments and watching you get invested in this story all over again has made all of this worth doing. Thank you for inviting it into your minds and hearts and for giving this project a chance and your time.

Finally, to Iginio Straffi and all of the original artists and creatives at Rainbow. Thank you for creating a world that I have used as my sandbox. None of this would exist without you, and I

would not be who I am today without the characters you created. I hope I have done them justice.

Dedication

To Molly,

My best friend, my sister. I am so grateful to have you in my life. Thank you for teaching me the true meaning of magic, of friendship and of chosen family. Thank you for standing beside me for 22 years, and counting.

Opening Statement

Some say,

The greatest stories ever told are never told only once.

Spectacle cradles them, whispers betray them.

Touched by the hands of dreamers

Shaped by the certainties of pragmatists.

Through the victors and through the defeated.

Harnessed for the light or for the wicked.

By those pure and those nefarious.

They morph, they flow like water.

They become what we need them to be.

A spark of hope for some.

A bitter reminder for others.

So let me tell you a story, one which you very well may have heard before.

A story of power, wonder, hope and friendship.

A story of despair, destruction, loss and betrayal.

It is a cautionary tale, to be wary of those whom you trust.

To whom who you cast judgement upon.

For every creature from human to god is foiled.

And those who intend the most good are capable of the greatest evil

Allow me to tell you a familiar tale.

This is for those who believed in magic as a child.

And despite all of the horrors of the world.

Still believe in it, to this day.

In charm. In enchantment. In wonder.



* Prologue *

Piercing screams drowned against roaring flames. The sound of thousands fleeing their homes to their peril. Three cloaked figures emerged from the fire's smoke; malevolence etched into their smiles that bore no semblance of morality. They said not a word, only gazed into the destruction and the suffering. The three figures moved slowly, revelling in the chaos. The street they stood on was long and at the end of the road, atop a small hill, was a grand palace. The buildings were stacked in a Grecian style and painted in different pastel shades, muddled by the black, overcast sky. Although the street was wide, the miscellany of houses made it feel narrow. A boy emerged from one of the homes in flames, weak and covered in several burns. He stood opposite the three figures and hesitated for only a moment before he took a deep breath. A bright, fiery light began to consume him. Each one of his already cindered clothes burned up as they transformed into a new, shimmering attire. As his hair was magically pinned back, he now wore a sparkling blue shirt and trousers, and finally sprouted a large pair of intricate, glittering wings as the fire evanesced. The burns present on his skin were no longer visible.

“Fairies.” snarled one of the hags. “You don’t know when to give up.”

She paused and looked at her two accomplices. The boy let out a breath and leapt into the air, his wings beginning to flutter. A fiery bolt shot from his fingers at the three figures, exploding in a huge display of heat and embers. He remained in the air as the smoke from his magic cleared, revealing that the three figures had vanished. For a moment, only the fluttering of the fairy's wings and the desolate howling of the wind remained: the screams had faded into silence. Flying higher, he could see the vast expanse of destruction. Everywhere he looked, he could see the memory of his home, now gone. He collapsed to the ground in tears, as the three hags re-materialised before him. One walked towards him and kneeled, her hand caressing his face.

“Valiant effort from an Enchantix fairy.”, she said, as her claws wrapped around the fairy's neck. “Unfortunately, not valiant enough.”

Then, an icy glow radiated from her palms, his skin began to freeze, progressing up his neck and over his face. The fairy croaked as he tried to breathe, his skin sizzling and crackling as it turned to solid ice. In a matter of moments, the fairy was frozen solid, his knees already melting into water under the heat of the flames. The hag cackled. The three villains stared in silence as he boiled into nothing, before reeling their heads to face the palace atop the hill.

In the palace, a woman, cloaked and masked in sunset orange, raced through the golden halls. Fighting tears, she dragged behind her a young child, dressed in white, panting and stumbling as she tried to keep up. The woman's platinum blonde hair leaked from her hood as she repeatedly cleared it away from her face. The palace was already engulfed in fire and most of

the staff along with it. Meanwhile, the three hags made their way into the courtyard of the palace, setting aflame each topiary along the path leading to the doors. Before even entering the castle, they spotted the cloaked woman and her young companion. The two of them ran through the grand doors, locking eyes with the three hags for what was barely a moment. The woman then removed her cloak, revealing a glittering costume and large, ornate wings underneath. She swept up the young girl and turned to fly across the courtyard. The wicked trio pursued the fairy, their faces betraying a semblance of fear, the arrogance now wiped from their smiles. The hags knew exactly who this woman was, and she frightened them.

The fairy flew down the hill, upon which the palace stood, still carrying the young girl. Behind the castle, the hill turned into a cliff face, with a strip of sandy beach separating it from the ocean. Ingrained into the side of the cliff was a small cave. Carried by her wings this time, the fairy headed inside.

The cave opened up into a large dome-like area within. Crystals of bright warm colours littered the cave, and a strange monolith stone circle structure stood proudly in the middle. The woman rushed inside, setting down the young girl, and began to cast spells over the stone circle. As she did, each of the rocks began to glow.

“Daphne.” the small girl stuttered. “What’s going on?”

Daphne turned to face her; she could see through her mask that she was trying to fight back tears.

“You’re going to be okay.” spoke Daphne in an attempt to calm her. A great roar of energy then resonated from the monolith, as a veil of magic appeared between two of the centre rocks that seemed to form a doorway. “Listen to me, I need you to go through that portal now-”

“Will you come with me?”

“Of course I’ll come with you,” Daphne affirmed, although her voice trembled.

“Sisters always stick together. Let’s go, quickly.” Her voice dwindled to a whisper.

They both walked towards the veil together, hand in hand. Suddenly, there was a crash of energy from within the cave. Daphne knew in an instant that the hags had managed to find their way into the cavern.

“I’m sorry.” she spoke quickly. Her eyes lit up with grief as she pushed the small girl into the portal. The girl let out a scream as she passed through the veil, but it faded from the cave along with her. Daphne placed her hand on the portal and dissolved it, her head lowered in heartbreak.

“You’re foolish - you know he will live on for all eternity. What makes you think you can hide her forever?” croaked one of the hags. Her voice sounded macabre, yet clearly frustrated.

“Quiet Liliss. No need for us to waste our breath on words she already knows to be true.”

“I’m not scared.” jabbed the fairy. “One day you will find her, but, when that day comes, she will be strong enough to finally snuff out the darkness and usher in the light. I hope that scares you. I hope it scares you for a thousand years.”

“You remind me of your parents, Daphne,” the third and final hag remarked. “I have seen dynasties rise and fall, but never have I encountered such arrogance as I have with your family.” She paused for a moment and glared. “You will fall. Liliss, Tharma, your hands.” As the beings linked their hands, every ounce of warmth in the cave turned cold.

“May the forces of light live on. Forevermore.”

A bright light encompassed Daphne. Then she was gone. The hags were left unsettled; they had failed. The leader of the three let out an ear-shattering scream in frustration and

cindered pride. They looked upon the ashes.

This was the night that the almighty realm of Domino fell.

* Chapter One *

Never labeled as a prodigious child, Bloom existed in the realm of painful averageness. She blended seamlessly into the plain backdrop of her small town, where nothing of note ever happened, and no one expected otherwise. School was a series of decent grades and unnoticed efforts, a place where her presence was as easily overlooked as the tick of the classroom clock. Her one brush with visibility was understudying Annie in sixth grade. Chosen not for her talents, of course, but because of her unruly and vibrant red hair.

It was the final week of March and Bloom's senior year, classes were beginning to draw to an end. History was the last of the day, Mr. Olsen, their teacher, stood at the front of the room, twirling his glasses between his fingers. He was somewhat of an eccentric man and was in the middle of a lesson about greek philosophy.

"In a single day and night of misfortune, Atlantis disappeared into the depths of the sea," Mr. Olsen recited, his voice carrying the weight of the ancient tale. "And perhaps, it is there, where it has become one of the most influential cities of our time. Even more so than if it never sank at all."

Bloom sat tense, confidence on her face, an orchestrated façade. She ran her fingers

through her hair anticipating a question.

“Now, can anyone tell me which philosopher mentioned Atlantis and what was the significance of his account?” Mr. Olsen’s eyes scanned the room, landing on each student before settling on Bloom.

Bloom took a deep breath, her mind racing through the material she had poured over. “Plato,” she began, steadily. “He wrote about Atlantis in his dialogues ‘Timaeus’ and ‘Critias.’ The story served as an allegory for the hubris of nations and the moral lessons about power and corruption.” A little precocious on her part, she thought, but she was desperate to prove that she knew the material.

Mr. Olsen nodded, a small smile playing at the corners of his lips. “Exactly. Plato’s work isn’t only historical; it’s philosophical. It’s about the ideas and warnings embedded within the narrative. And what about Aristotle? What was his take on Atlantis?”

Bloom’s hand tightened around her hair. “Aristotle was more skeptical. He considered the tale of Atlantis a fictional story, used by Plato to illustrate his philosophy.”

“Correct again,” Mr. Olsen said, his smile broadening. “Aristotle’s skepticism highlights the debate about the balance between myth and reality in philosophical teachings. Do raise your hand next time won’t you?”

“Mr. Olsen...” spoke a shrill voice from the other side of the room. “How is any of this relevant to history? Atlantis wasn’t real and Plato was a philosopher, not a historian.” The girl who spoke up had a name. Mitzi. “And how comes Bloom gets to interrupt during class?” She sat with both legs crossed to the side of her desk, a feigned shrug of cordiality on her shoulders. “Not to be rude or anything, I’m just wondering.”

Mr. Olsen turned to Mitzi, still smiling. “Well, Mitzi, I do apologise. I must confess that I thought it would be a fun change of pace and no harm done with a spontaneous answer.

Since we are on the topic though, What do you think about the influence of Socrates on Plato and Aristotle?”

Mitzi blinked, clearly caught off guard. “Um, Socrates? He was like, their teacher or something, right? He asked a lot of questions or whatever.”

“Indeed,” Mr. Olsen said. “Socrates laid the groundwork for both Plato’s idealism and Aristotle’s empiricism. His method of inquiry, the Socratic method, is foundational to Western philosophy. Important history, wouldn’t you say so Miss Jennings.”

Mitzi huffed as Mr. Olsen continued. Bloom sighed in relief, thankful she remembered the material. History was one of Bloom’s favourite classes but that made it all the more important she did well. Although, it’s true she was often more interested in the gaps of the narrative rather than the history itself. Mr Olsen was a kind man, generous and well read. With curly black hair, dark skin and large round glasses. He frequented a suit and was always dressed in colour, never black or grey. Today he sported mauve, almost like a glass of light wine. With a smart white shirt and a perfectly knotted forest green tie. It certainly topped Bloom’s bell-bottom jeans and comfortable burgundy hoodie that she hadn’t washed in weeks.

As another student was about to launch into one of his verbose critiques of Aristotle’s philosophy, the final bell of the day chimed.

“Alright, we resume next week, have a great weekend everyone!” The students grabbed their things and left. Well, everyone besides Bloom. Unaware of the time, she had half of her backpack littered over her desk. Three highlighted printouts of Plato’s writing, an Ancient Greek textbook, several pages of scribbles, even she had a hard time making out, and a half-drawn picture of a salamander.

“You did well today” said Mr. Olsen, casting his eye over her desk.

“I’ve been trying to catch up on reading and fortune favours the prepared, as they say.”

“Fortune favours the brave, Bloom. Or was the original translated to ‘fortune favours the bold’? And you’re definitely bold. Anyway. Your improvement has been impressive this year. You should know your efforts haven’t gone unnoticed.” He said through a smile. Bloom began packing away her things, ensuring her drawing didn’t crease. The rest she scrunched behind a notebook.

“Your essays are getting better, but they could be even stronger. I’d be happy to go through things with you next week?”

“That would be great, thanks!”

“Great, you have a good evening. And rest, you deserve it!”

Bloom smiled and left the classroom. In the hallway, A buzz was about the school as everyone had begun to receive their college acceptance offers. She knew one girl in her history class was accepted to Stanford, and news was circling that Penelope Rhode had managed to get into NYU. Over the past year, Bloom had poured herself into her studies, driven by a desperate need to escape her life of fervent mediocrity. Had her efforts paid off? Well, yes and no. Her grades were much better and she had already received several college offers. However, they were from modest regional universities, not prestigious institutions. These were what she applied for after all.

Bloom was waiting on one last decision, from UCLA, the university at the top of her list. She tried to temper her expectations, but as the days passed, her longing intensified. She yearned for one moment to prove to herself that she could achieve something extraordinary when she put her mind to it. The answer would arrive any day now.

Bloom reorganised her locker and headed into the warm afternoon sun. Her school

was quite lovely, quintessential Americana one could say. The chatter of excited students faded as she walked away from the school grounds. Her thoughts consumed by the impending arrival of the decision to her inbox. Bloom couldn't be labelled a misfit by any means; in fact, she fit in quite nicely, too well, even. She didn't have many friends, but this made her days relatively stress-free. It made for an easy schooling experience as nobody gave her grief, well, nobody apart from-

"Hey, Bloom, shouldn't you be taking that crusty old relic to the junk pile?" A shrill voice spoke.

"Mitzi. There's nothing wrong with this bike. My dad got it for me."

"Oh, you poor girl," Mitzi said, twirling her onyx hair around her finger. Mitzi was an old acquaintance of Bloom's, although 'acquaintance' would be a very strong word. She had porcelain pale skin and always wore the same pair of triangular false glasses. They had lived in the same neighbourhood for as long as Bloom could remember, and in all that time, Mitzi had done everything in her power to make Bloom's life miserable. Like when she decided to glaze Bloom's eighth birthday cake with ketchup. "Mr Olsen should really stop teaching us such nonsense and start going over some real history, don't you agree?"

"I'm enjoying what we're doing right now..."

"Oh, yes, sorry I forgot, you live in your own fantasy world, greek mythology must be right up your street...So, what will you be doing next year? I'll be studying fashion in New York. I'm gonna be the next big thing, I can feel it!" Mitzi seemed to grip the air, a self-confident grin stretching to both ears. The sooner she left, the better.

"That's great news." Bloom uttered behind her teeth, ignoring most of what she had said. "I'm not quite sure what I'm doing yet, I'm still waiting on UC-"

"UCLA. I see, well it is a public school, so you might have a chance you know."

“Thank you? I think. If I don’t get in I might take a year out to work in the shop.”

“I see, well I guess we can’t all have a natural gift.”

“I guess not...” Bloom trailed off, feeling a familiar knot of insecurity tightening in her stomach. Mitzi leaned in closer.

“You know, Bloom, I heard UCLA is quite competitive these days. Maybe you should have a backup plan. I don’t know of anywhere looking for an Ancient Greek enthusiast but if I see anywhere I’ll let you know!”

Bloom forced a smile. “I appreciate your concern, Mitzi, but I’ll be fine.”

“Sure, if you say so.” Mitzi leered “Anyway, I’ve got to run. Busy schedule and all that. Keep me updated won’t you?” She flipped her hair and sauntered off, leaving Bloom aggravated, but it was nothing she hadn’t dealt with before.

“Oh, and, by the way, Bloom,” Mitzi called back, halting mid-stride, “I heard your mum’s business hasn’t been doing too great lately. Such a shame.”

Bloom stiffened. “Gardenia’s doing fine, great even, thanks for asking.” She jabbed.

“Oh, I’m sure it is,” Mitzi replied with a mocking sweetness. “It must be hard, though. Financial strain and all that.”

Bloom clenched her fists. “We manage.”

Mitzi shrugged, a fake pout on her lips. “I’m just concerned for you, Bloom. Hey, if UCLA doesn’t work out, you could consider a career in the floral industry. It’s not like you have many other options, right?”

Bloom’s heart pounded in her chest. She knew Mitzi was trying to get under her skin. “I have plenty of options. More than you know.”

“Oh, really?” Mitzi’s words dripped with sarcasm. “Like what?”

Bloom steadied her nerves “Like focusing on my art. I’ve been working on a

portfolio.”

Mitzi raised an eyebrow. “Art? How um, cute.... sad, but cute. Let’s be real for a second though Bloom, it’s a tough field. Not everyone can make it. Look at me for instance, you have to be top of your game to make it where I’m going.”

“Just because it’s tough doesn’t mean it’s impossible.”

Mitzi smirked. “Well, good luck with that. I’m sure your paintings of flowers and socrates, was it, will hit it big.”

With that, Mitzi finally climbed into her car and drove away, Bloom sighed and glanced down at her bike. Despite Mitzi’s taunts, she couldn’t help but be a little jealous of her car, but the bike had been a loving present that she cherished. It’s true that her family wasn’t able to afford a car like Mitzi’s, but she’d take the ‘crusty old relic’ over the hollow car any day. As for UCLA, well, Bloom was more hungry for it than ever now. Knowing that she’ll never have to see Mitzi’s face again when she walks onto campus that first day, crusty bike and all.

Bloom set off and peddled through the familiar streets of Mill Valley, the warm spring breeze tousling her hair like flames. Mill Valley sat amidst the rolling hills of Northern California, the scent of eucalyptus mingled with the salty breeze of the Pacific. It was a charming town with eclectic shops adorned with colourful facades. The people were kind and pleasant, for the most part, and there was a good sense of community.

Bloom turned onto fifth avenue, she spotted the familiar sign of her mother’s flower shop, Colourful petals and leaves peeked through the windows. Vanessa had chosen the

location strategically, between an up and coming bookstore and a coffee shop that perfumed the area with fresh coffee.

Adopted very young by Mike and Vanessa, Bloom found herself in the care of two of the kindest, wisest people one could call their parents. Mike, a local fireman in Mill Valley, was the quintessential high school football captain: well-liked, well-mannered, and still sporting a great head of hair. His charisma and steady presence made him a beloved husband and father. Bloom and Mike had a boisterous relationship, sharing their love for boardgames and disdain for modern art. Monopoly was always a rather serious affair in the Peters household.

“You can’t build a hotel on Boardwalk without four houses first!” Mike would say, a teasing glint in his eye, as Bloom fumed over another lost game.

Vanessa, like Mike, was a kindly lady, self-assured and business savvy. She met Mike in high-school and the pair never looked another way after that. She owned a florist in town called ‘Gardenia’ into which she poured her heart and soul. Vanessa loved nothing more than to make someone smile with a large bouquet of flowers. Bloom would often join her mother in the shop, the scent of fresh flowers was comforting like nothing else to her. Vanessa would hum softly as she arranged the petals, her fingers weaving together colours and textures.

Bloom trusted her mother’s judgments no matter what. She was always there with a warm blanket and a cup of hot cocoa to talk about anything, her presence a soothing balm to Bloom’s frayed nerves. They’d sit together on the couch, the rain tapping gently against the windows, as Bloom poured over her frustrations and fears.

The bond between Bloom and her parents was unshakable, forged through countless shared moments of laughter, love, and understanding. Despite her feelings of mediocrity, in the eyes of Mike and Vanessa, who could not have a child on their own, Bloom was the

epitome of extraordinary. Their unwavering belief in her gave Bloom the strength to chase her dreams, even when the odds seemed insurmountable.

Parking her bike beside the shop's entrance, Bloom pushed open the door, chiming the familiar melody of the small bell above her. The interior smelled delicately of flowers, sweet and pleasant.

"Hey, honey!" Vanessa's warm voice floated from behind the bouquets. She appeared from the back room, with hands covered in soil and petals. Vanessa was a tall lady with soft features. She had tanned olive skin and medium length dark hair, she always wore a plumeria flower behind her left ear and her signature blue dungarees covered in all sorts of colourful stains. Her brown eyes lit up at the sight of Bloom. "How was school?" She asked.

Bloom managed a half-hearted smile, tossing her bag by the counter. "Oh, you know, the standard. Mitzi being her usual self."

Vanessa frowned slightly, sensing that Bloom had taken her comments today particularly to heart. "Ignore her, sweetheart. You know she's just... well, Mitzi."

She rolled her eyes. "I don't know why she does it, she loves to torment me, but it's always veiled underneath this idea that she secretly cares. Does she think we're friends or something and this is how she treats everyone? Sometimes I'd rather she was pure evil. It'd make her easier to deal with."

"Well, nobody is pure evil Bloom, I think Mitzi believes everything to be a competition, you know that."

"Yeah, I know..." She trailed off "Anyway, how's your day been?"

"All fine here! You know we've got the town fair coming up, Mr Genero has asked if we could do some floral arrangements. Maybe you'd like to help?"

Bloom giggled "Yes, I'll help, for payment in ice cream of course and to help me win

against Dad at our next game night!”

“Deal!” Vanessa quipped, they shook on it. “Not that I don’t love your company, but, I didn’t think you’d be stopping by, I thought you were heading up to Muir today after class?”

“I’m still going to cycle up to do some sketching, I thought I’d stop by incase the email came through on my way. That and, I don’t know I guess I needed to see someone to get Mitzi out of my head... I also forgot my coat.” She looked over to a black rain coat hung up on the door. Bloom took a deep breath and began carefully arranging lilies and roses.

Vanessa began alongside her, expertly crafting a bouquet from the flowers.

“You know, honey,” she began, “life is full of people like Mitzi. They’ll always find something to criticise, but it doesn’t define who you are or what you’re capable of. You have your own path, your own dreams. UCLA or not, you’ll find your way. You know what I always say, people are like flowers, they’re all unique, bloom at different times, yet they are all worthy of love.”

Bloom smiled and nodded, but winced a little at the idea of rejection from UCLA. She had been checking her inbox every half hour. “Thanks mum” She smiled. “Imma’ take off, I need to get there well before daylight’s out.”

“Yes, remember to not stay out too late after dark and to call when you’re on your way back! See you later sweetie!”

Bloom took her coat from the door, left the shop, hopped on her bike and set on her way to the woods. Despite her parents being the most wonderful, and her teachers being the most supportive. Everyone else, including herself, knew it and believed it to be true; there was simply nothing extraordinary about Bloom.

* Chapter Two *

Bloom cycled up the familiar, winding road leading to Muir Woods, the rhythmic click of her bike chain was almost soothing. It was still warm out and the air became fresher as she left the town. There was so much beauty around her, the towering redwoods beckoning in the distance. She had made this journey so many times; but it never grew old. She muttered to herself, pushing harder on the pedals as the terrain inclined.

The entrance plaza to Muir Woods stood as a gateway to the forest. It was a rather quaint entrance with a rustic wooden arch over the main path. The sign, weathered by years of sun and rain, exuded a sense of timelessness. Redwood trees bordered the plaza, their forms casting dappled shadows on the ground. A series of wooden benches provided a place for visitors to rest and take in the scenery. Carved into each bench was images of local wildlife: deer, foxes, and birds.

As she neared the entrance to the park, she spotted Ranger Kelly Jones standing by the gate, checking passes. Kelly was a short girl in her late twenties, with a friendly demeanour and bright blue eyes. She waved as Bloom approached.

“Hey, Bloom! Back for more inspiration?” She called out.

“Hey, Kel! You know it,” she replied, catching her breath as she locked her bike up on the railings.

Kelly checked her pass, a gift from her parents for her birthday last year, and nodded approvingly. “Annual pass still good. You know, you’re probably our most frequent visitor. What’s the sketchbook looking like these days?”

Bloom grinned and pulled her sketchbook from her bag. “Wanna take a look?”

“Always,” Kelly said, her interest genuine.

She flipped through the pages, showing her latest work. There were detailed drawings of muir woods, delicate sketches of wildflowers, and some more imaginative pieces. One drawing caught Kelly’s eye. It depicted a place unlike anything she’d seen, yet so vividly real. Grecian style buildings leading to a fantastical castle on a hill. She turned the pages to reveal whimsical interiors and golden halls.

“Where are these from?” Kelly gawked.

“I’m not sure actually, I made them up, kinda European wouldn’t you say?” They tilted their heads. “I guess they are pretty extravagant” She giggled. The truth was Bloom had drawn it from a dream, or something, but she’d never admit to that. She liked Kelly, but not that much.

“This one is incredible,” She said, pointing to a drawing of a beautiful woman. “Who is she?”

Bloom shrugged, a bit embarrassed. “I’m not really sure. She just... came to me.”

Kelly nodded thoughtfully. “You have a real talent, Bloom. Ever thought about doing this professionally?”

“I’d love to,” she admitted, “but it’s tough. That’s why I’m hoping to get into UCLA. They have a great art program that I could transfer onto after my first year! Only if something

more academic doesn't peak my interest first that is"

"I'm sure you'll make it," Kelly said with conviction. "Your work speaks for itself!"

Bloom smiled, appreciating her encouragement. She turned the page, revealing a sketch of a haggard face with sharp features and a malevolent glare. It was a stark contrast to her other, more magical drawings.

"Whoa, who's that? This one's creepy enough to give me nightmares!" Kelly said, raising an eyebrow.

"I couldn't tell you either, characters I make up in my head I guess." Bloom said, frowning slightly. "Sometimes I just feel this urge to draw something and that's where my best work comes from."

She studied the drawing for a moment before nodding. "Well, it's powerful. Shows you have range. I'm no expert or anything but you've got a special gift."

"Really? You think that?" Bloom beamed. "Thanks, Kel. That means a lot. Anyways, I'm heading in. I'll see you later."

"Remember, the park shuts at eight. I don't want a repeat of last month!"

"That was one time! Besides, I won't end up staying long tonight, there's no signal in the woods."

"Ah, of course. Have fun!"

She tucked the sketchbook back into her bag and said goodbye. The conversation had been a nice distraction, and a welcome boost to her self esteem.

Bloom began her walk to find a calm place to sketch. The forest had always been a place of solace for her, a place where she could lose herself in her art and dreams. The conversation with Kelly had her considering if she really was good enough to do art professionally. Even though she bolstered to Mitzi, Bloom always saw art as an escape rather

than a career, but maybe she could have both? Her plan was to study something lucrative at UCLA, something where she could make a difference. All the schools she had applied to had decent history programs. She wasn't overly fussed about what she studied. She sometimes wondered, did she want this life for herself at all? Or was she chasing the idea, rather than the reality, of what it is to feel fulfilled.

A couple of hours went by and Bloom found herself in a quaint part of the woods, quiet and alone. The air was saturated with the earthy perfume of damp soil and sweet scent of sequoia. She found herself observing a Douglas Squirrel. Capturing its form with several skates of the pencil as it gathered food for the night. Her sketchbook often featured the majestic stature of the trees and the diverse flora and fauna of the woods. Yesterday, she had spotted a proud Cooper Hawk, and the day before, a bathing Salamander. Each rendered in different mediums on the pages of her worn sketchbook. At this hour, the sunlight filtered through the leaves and created a magical interplay of shadows on the forest floor. They danced with each gentle sway of the canopy overhead. She would never tire of the enchanting woodland scenes that the forest revealed to her during each visit.

Bloom continued her portrait of the squirrel, propped up against one of the trees in a quiet corner of the woods. The tranquility was only interrupted by the rustling leaves and the occasional chirping of birds high in the canopy. Home wasn't a stressful environment for Bloom. Her parents were always happy to help her take her mind off things, but she knew they were as worried as she was. Sometimes it was easier to be alone with her own thoughts.

Bloom extended her sketchbook at arm's length, carefully examining her handiwork.

Her eyes darted between the squirrel, still scurrying about on the woodland floor, and her drawing. The creature's form was perfect, resembling the outline of a photograph. But, something was missing. She paused, then rummaged through her bag, retrieving a battered and stained box of pastels. Inside, the pastels were broken into several pieces and stored randomly. Bloom didn't see much point being precious with her supplies, they worked just as well like this. She began to render the fur on the creature, using layers of grey and brown. Studying the colours of the rodent, she noticed it stood on its hind legs and locked eyes with her for a moment. Bloom glanced down then fixed her gaze back upon the squirrel. What was once a calm creature now seemed panicked. It retreated up a sequoia tree, blending into the reddish-brown camouflage of the wood. Bloom sat irritated with herself. She would usually take a picture on her phone, but today it had slipped her mind, leaving her without a reference and an unfinished drawing.

"You're kidding," she muttered under her breath, before redirecting her attention to her sketchbook. Going back and forth in her mind whether she should continue from memory or pull up a reference at home. Either way it had soured her mood.

The atmosphere beneath the canopy had grown markedly dim as dusk settled in, casting a shadow over the wood. She assumed there weren't many people left in the park, which, admittedly, was how Bloom liked it. The kiss of the sun had gone and a gentle chill permeated the air. The once melodic chirping of birds that punctuated the soundscape had vanished, leaving only the eerie howling of the wind.

Bloom stood up, brushed the eraser shavings from her jeans and retrieved the coat she was sat on. Shaking it to dislodge any dirt, before tying it around her waist. It would soon be time for the park to close anyway, and she could have twenty unseen texts from her Mum and an important email in her inbox that won't reach her until she leaves the cover of the forest.

Closing her sketchbook, she stashed it into her bag alongside her pastels. She couldn't shake the feeling that she was being observed. The fine hairs on the nape of her neck stood on end. If she focused she could almost hear another creature's breath in tandem with hers. It was a deep, unsettling feeling. There aren't any bears in Muir, but she wasn't about to try her luck against a mountain lion or a coyote either. Her bike wasn't parked far, so she began wandering back to the entrance.

As she took her first step, from behind her, there was a sudden snap of a branch. It cracked like a whip. She spun to face the sound, narrowing her eyes to scan the surrounding trees and bushes. The dimness had deepened, with the last rays of dusk filtering through the leaves of the canopy. The chilling sensation intensified, as if she was staring right back at something or someone.

"Hello!" Bloom called out, moreover to hear the comforting sound of her own voice than expecting a reply. Feeling her own heavy breathing, she took a moment to compose herself, closing her eyes and inhaling deeply. The stress of the day had gotten to her head, she mused. How wrong she was. As she managed to regain her composure, a creature emerged from the shadows, unlike anything she had ever seen. It ascended from the ground, growing taller with each passing moment, casting a looming shadow over her. As its features began to materialise, it revealed an eyeless face, marked by a wide, uncanny, and sharp smile with two slits for a nose. The head, almost human but bald, pale grey and veiny, led to a body even more alien. Pointed limbs resembling spears, a dried blood-coloured exterior, and organs encased in what looked like a roach's shell. The creature emitted the putrid odour of rotting flesh, and its growl had an infected and mucosal sound. Bloom stood paralysed with fear and sheer shock. The creature purred, sniffing the air, inching closer to where she stood.

"My god." She said under her breath. It continued to sniff the air until it finally caught

sent of her, the creature shrieked. In a flash Bloom was running faster than ever before, the foliage rustling beneath her feet. Panting, stumbling. The same air that once brought her comfort now became an obstacle to wade through. The creature followed suit, it was faster than she was but far more clumsy. It crashed into the trees as it stabbed its limbs into the ground. She couldn't look back now, she couldn't. She needed to make it to the entrance and out of the woods. Would it follow her back to the town? To her house? What about her parents? The creature bellowed in frustration behind her. She spotted a clearing ahead and ran into the open glade. The canopy above opening up to the evening sky, but she didn't recognise this part of the woods. She tried to look around for the best way out, but was completely disoriented. She went to run again but tripped on something at her feet and fell brutally to the ground. She could hear the creature behind her. This wasn't real. Surely this must be a dream? She sobbed and looked again at the creature then back to the ground. This was it, she was going to die.

"You know, the evening light does wonders for the complexion darling, I'm so glad you decided to join me out here." A voice spoke from behind Bloom, still staring at the ground blankly. She pushed back her hair and rolled over. The creature was at the centre of the glade, but between them was a girl with long golden blonde hair. Tendrils of warm holographic light seemed to orbit her body. She stood tall, statuesque and confident.

"Are you okay?" she asked Bloom, turning to face her. Bloom nodded, captivated by one of the most beautiful girls she had ever seen. With slightly wide-set amber brown eyes, light gold-tanned skin, and a cheeky smile. The girl wore an orange and yellow robe over a scaled, shimmering jumpsuit. As she turned to face the creature again, Bloom noticed a small pair of translucent, holographic wings attached to her back. Impossible.

The girl shot spectral spears from the orbiting tendrils around her. Each spear hit the

creature, dissolving into its body. It roared and charged back at the girl. She weaved behind it and blasted it back with light. Who was this girl? Then, with a leap into the sky, she fired a concentrated beam of heat at the creature's path. It winced but swatted the girl like a fly. She fell to the ground and rolled into a cloud of dust. Bloom watched as the creature began to sniff again. Bloom panicked as she tried to get up, her leg twisted beneath her. She couldn't move from her helpless position on the glade floor.

Desperate, she tried to claw her way to the tree-line in a bid to hide from the monster but it was tens of meters away. At first it began to stalk toward the girl, but it sniffed again and set its sights back onto Bloom. It drooled from the mouth, the eyeless face of the grotesque creature fixated on her. Suddenly, a strong breeze came from her left, it was the blonde girl. The wind picked up, and the creature sniffed again, following the direction of the wind into the trees. It squealed and ran into the forest. Paralysed in shock, Bloom couldn't move as the blonde girl ran towards her.

"Are you hurt?" She cried as she ran. "You're fortunate I arrived when I did," she extended a hand to lift Bloom from the ground. "The creature is still out there; we need to put as much distance between us and it as possible." She looked to where the creature ran to, her wings vanishing into nothing.

"Who are you?" Bloom gasped, her eyes wide in a state of shock.

"My name is Stella. Listen I can answer your questions later, but that creature can smell magic, so if you intend to stay here, be my guest. What's your name?"

"Bloom," she responded, grasping the severity of the situation. "I'm pretty sure the exit is that way."

"Okay great, let me help you" Stella put Bloom's arm around her shoulder. They both hurried in the direction of the exit.

They walked quickly, Bloom's injured leg improved with each step. Whether due to adrenaline or not remained uncertain. Both girls remained silent, left to process the events that transpired. Each checking their surroundings in case the creature had decided to follow them. They weren't far from the park gate, managing to get out within minutes. The place was deserted. Upon reaching the main plaza, Bloom went to unlock her bike. Stella looked around before noticing what Bloom was doing.

"How are you going to cycle home with your leg?" Stella asked, breaking the silence. Bloom continued to unlock her bike before finally meeting Stella's gaze.

"Can I call anyone for you? If not, I'm going to go."

"Alone?!" Stella yelled. "Do you have any idea what you've gotten yourself into?"

"No, and I don't want to know. Whatever is happening here, I don't want anything to do with it." Bloom began putting on her helmet and swung her leg over her bike. "Monsters in the woods, I must be losing my mind!"

Stella's face was riddled with confusion. "Listen, Belinda..."

"It's Bloom."

"Whatever. Perhaps you didn't hear me earlier: that creature can sense magic."

"Magic?" Bloom said under her breath.

"Yes, MAGIC!" Stella theatrically waved her hands "Did you not see what I did? It was after you and I saved your life!"

"So?"

"So? How come it was more interested in you than it was in me?" Stella's eyes locked with Bloom's. Her tone cold but serious. Despite witnessing these extraordinary events, every sense in Bloom's head screamed that this girl was crazy.

"Oh I get it, this is some sort of joke? Real funny Mitzi!" Bloom screamed into the

trees.

“Keep your voice down! This isn’t a joke, You know what you saw Billie...”

“It’s Bloom!”

“Belinda, Billie, Bella, whatever, it doesn’t matter. You’re in danger and I can help you.” Stella extended her hand, shifting her demeanour “And I kinda need a friend as-well.”

In that moment, Bloom allowed herself to believe in something. Something extraordinary. But she had spent too long living in a world of normalcy to believe it.

“Listen, Stella. I can’t deal with this right now. I choose the blue pill. Even if there is something... real, about this. You should go to the police, or the rangers, they can help you get home. But, please, stay away from me.” Bloom pushed her bike down the hill, beginning her journey home.

“Bloom, please wait, don’t leave! You’re in danger!”

* Chapter Three *

Bloom peddled home in a panic. Her mind had never been so haunted. The creature's eyeless face and its sharp, evil grin plagued her. It was almost violating. The evening was unusually quiet. All she could hear was the click of her bike chain as she navigated the dim roads of Mill Valley. She looked behind her, each time fearing she might see that monstrous figure from the woods, lurking just beyond the streetlights.

Bloom turned onto her road; the familiar sight of home had never been more welcome. Although it did little to quell her anxiousness. There was a faint warm glow coming from the windows and muffled chatter from inside. She dismounted her bike and fumbled with the lock on the porch railing; her hands were still shaking. The front door cracked open.

"Bloom? Is that you?" came her mother's voice, its usual warmth tarnished with worry. Vanessa stepped into the doorway, her hand resting on the frame. She looked tired, yet relieved. "Where on earth have you been? We've worried ourselves sick!"

Bloom froze, her breath caught in her throat. How could she even begin to explain what had happened in Muir? That a nightmarish monster had chased her, and a blonde girl with wings had saved her. A girl who might not even be real? It would all seem absurd,

ridiculous, and unbelievable to her. Yet, she had seen those events play out moments ago; her mother had not. Bloom let out a long breath and slipped through the door past Vanessa. The scent of lavender from the candles her mum always lit in the evenings filled the space.

“I, uh, I lost track of time in the woods,” Bloom stammered, trying to make herself sound casual. About as successfully as a drunk man trying to act sober. “You know how it is, Mum. Once I start, time slips away.” She hung her bag on the staircase banister as she always did.

Vanessa’s eyes narrowed as she studied her daughter. She didn’t believe her, and Bloom knew it. “You know the park closes at eight. You could’ve got into trouble, again, I might add! Or worse, something could’ve happened to you.” She softened but was still edged with concern. “You weren’t answering your phone. No text? What were you thinking? This was reckless, even for you, Bloom.”

“I’m fine, really,” Bloom insisted as she brushed past her mother into the kitchen to search the fridge for food. “I needed some air, and I forgot to check my phone. It won’t happen again.”

Before Vanessa could respond, Mike appeared at the end of the hallway. He was leaning against the kitchen doorframe. His presence was solid, reassuring. Mike Peters was the kind of dad who always had a joke ready. He always knew how to diffuse tension with a smile, but tonight his expression mirrored Vanessa’s. They were curious; that was certain.

“As long as everything’s okay?” he asked, crossing his arms as he observed Bloom. He was calmer than Vanessa, but even he knew she was hiding something.

“Yeah, everything’s fine, Dad,” Bloom answered quickly as she took a handful of grapes from the fridge. She realised how flustered she sounded. She could feel both her parents’ eyes on her, waiting for some explanation that would make sense of why she was

acting distant. She couldn't offer them that. At least not yet. Who was she kidding, not ever.

"You look pale, Bloom. Are you sure nothing happened tonight?" Vanessa said as she caressed Bloom's cheek. She moved closer, trying to make eye contact with Bloom, her expression softening into something more concerned than suspicious now. "You're acting strange. Did you get hurt? Did you see someone? Did someone say something to you or threaten you?"

Bloom winced, feeling her pulse quicken. "No, nothing happened. Seriously, Mum, it was just me, the trees and this stupid squirrel that ran away from me. I was drawing, and I stayed out too late. End of story."

The lie was a bitter taste on her tongue, but what else could she say? The truth sounded insane, and she wasn't even sure she believed it herself. Every part of her body was tense, and her parents could see it. She knew she wasn't fooling anyone, especially her mum, who knew Bloom a little too well for even her best tricks to work.

Mike exchanged a glance with Vanessa. "You know you can talk to us, right? If something's bothering you?"

Bloom nodded. "Yeah, I know, Dad. I'm tired, that's all. It's been a long day, and I've got a ton of school stuff to worry about too."

The mention of school seemed to shift the conversation, if only a little. Vanessa's face softened further, and Mike tilted his head, a silent agreement to back off for now.

"Alright," Vanessa said, though her tone was far from convinced. "But we're here if you want to talk."

"Thanks," Bloom mumbled, already inching towards the stairs and grabbing her bag. "I'm gonna head up to bed."

"Don't forget to eat more before you go to sleep. I can cook something if you fancy

it..." Vanessa called after her as Bloom hurried up the stairs. The conversation was heavy in the air behind her. "And we need to talk about this tomorrow."

Bloom didn't respond, but she could feel the lingering concern, could practically hear the unspoken questions buzzing between her parents as she retreated to her room.

Once inside, Bloom shut the door behind her, pressing her back against the cool wood and letting out a long groan. Her room was a cozy blend of plum and ebony; it offered a strong sense of refuge. Various pieces of art she had created over the years adorned the otherwise grey walls. Each one held a memory. Fairy lights hung around the perimeter of the room, casting a soft, comforting glow. Her bed looked inviting, but how could she sleep? The memories of the woods, the creature's eyeless face, and the girl with golden hair who had saved her, Stella, overcame any sense of tiredness.

Her parents' conversation drifted faintly from downstairs. She couldn't make out the words, and it didn't matter. They were worried, and she knew her lies weren't helping. But what choice did she have? If she told them the truth, her mother would think she was having a mental breakdown. Bloom wasn't entirely sure that wasn't the case herself.

She moved to her desk, dumping her sketchbook onto the surface. Flipping it open, she found the unfinished drawing of the squirrel she'd worked on earlier. She picked up a pencil, hovering it over the paper, attempting to add the missing details. Usually, drawing soothed her, helped her find clarity in the chaos. But tonight, her thoughts refused to settle.

Maybe it was stress. Maybe everything had manifested as some bizarre hallucination. That had to be it, right? There were no such things as monsters. There were no such things as fairies.

With a sigh, she dropped the pencil, letting her head fall into her hands. Her fingers threaded through her bright auburn hair, gripping tightly.

There are no such things as fairies.

But if that were true, then the events of the day simply wouldn't have happened.

Bloom writhed in her bed. The fairy lights above offered little comfort, barely pushing back the darkness. Memories of the woods, of the creature, and of Stella, none of it would fade. They clung to her, despite her efforts to bury them.

The nocturnal sounds she usually found comforting set her teeth on edge. Every howl of the wind, each rustle and creak made her flinch. How was she ever going to explain what had happened to her parents? She couldn't keep lying to them. What made it worse was that they knew, knew she was hiding something. Maybe it wasn't true, maybe it was a trick, a delusion, an invention of her mind. Despite the possibility, those twisted, gnarled limbs reaching for her remained burned into her memory. They refused to be dismissed as imaginary.

She wanted to convince herself that it had all been the product of an overactive imagination, nothing more. But then there was Stella. Stella had been real, or at least she had felt real. Not a delusion Bloom could dismiss. She remembered the way Stella's blonde hair seemed to glow in the light, how she sounded so strong. Stella had to be real. The creature was soulless, something so alien and malevolent that it almost seemed fictional. Stella felt different; there was something undeniably human about her presence. Something vivid and tangible. How could she not exist?

Bloom rolled onto her back, her eyes tracing the cracks in the ceiling, her heart thundering. Exhaustion managed to pull her under, but sleep offered little comfort.

The first dream came to her in broken fragments. She found herself back in Muir Woods, surrounded by tall redwood trees, their branches twisting above. The dense canopy blotted out the midday sun. A stillness settled around her. She ran, bolting through the twigs and soil of the forest floor, but then realised she wasn't running at all. She was frozen.

Stella appeared nearby, her robe catching the filtered sunlight as she fought off something beyond Bloom's view. Stella's movements were fluid and confident, her strength radiating in every dodge and burst of light. Bloom could only watch. She wanted to help, to scream, but her body refused. Her feet were rooted in the dirt, her words trapped in her throat, she was powerless.

In the distance, something else caught Bloom's eye, something oddly familiar. A long city road, lined with buildings worn and abandoned. An uncanny light bathed the landscape. It was her home, or what was left of it. The windows of the buildings were shattered, the ground and foliage singed. This didn't make any sense, she had never been to such a place in her life, yet the sight filled her with a deep, aching sadness. A longing. It felt as though she could still hear the echoes from years past, of people she had once known. How could it be?

She blinked, and the image shifted. She was in the palace gardens, the hedges and flowers vibrant and meticulously maintained. A woman Bloom hadn't thought about in many years sat on a bench on the other side of the garden. Bloom tried to call out, her throat straining, but no sound escaped her lips. The woman turned, her eyes wide with fear, her mouth moving as if trying to say something, warn her of something. A sudden wind whipped through the garden, tearing up the greenery, the force of it knocking Bloom off her feet. And then, she heard it, a voice.

"I'm sorry."

A creeping sense of dread seized Bloom. The ground beneath her feet cracked open, like the earth itself was shattering. From the widening fissure, something dark emerged, something primal and terrifying.

The Creature.

Its long, spindly arms reached toward her, its eyeless face grinning, wide and unnatural, stretching across its face like a parody of a smile. Her legs remained rooted to the ground. The Creature crept closer, its hot, rancid breath washing over her. Its claws stretched out, fingers ending in wickedly sharp tips. Her skin crawled, and as the Creature was about to strike-

She woke up.

Bloom jolted upright in bed, her breath coming in gasps, her heart hammering. Sweat clung to her skin, and twisted sheets tangled around her legs. She shook her head, disoriented, the room spinning as if the dream still held her.

It was a dream. Just a dream.

Her entire body trembled, the fear lingering like a toxin. The Creature's face was truly seared into her mind. She could still feel its breath and hear its purr. She shivered at the memory. A memory.

The clock on her nightstand read 3:23 a.m. The house was silent, save for the occasional groan of the floorboards. There was no way she could close her eyes without seeing it again.

She swung her legs over the side of the bed, the cool floor grounding her, pulling her back to reality. She needed something, anything, to help her make sense of it all. She was still trembling, her breath shallow. Her eyes settled on her desk, her sketchbook still lay open. She

needed to see it again to decide if was true. If it was on the page, perhaps giving it form could somehow strip it of its power.

Without a second thought, she moved to her desk, flipping her sketchbook to a blank page. Picking up a pencil, her fingers still unsteady, she began to draw. The image of the creature was vivid, every detail etched in her mind, uncanny and precise. The long, sinewy arms, the twisted limbs, the grotesque, eyeless face with its gaping mouth full of crooked, needle-like teeth.

Her hand moved faster than her thoughts, the lines sharp and jagged, each stroke an outlet of her fear. It all flowed out of her and onto the page. The more she drew, the more real it felt, the Creature took shape before her, its presence almost palpable. The image alone made her want to vomit. When she finally stopped, she stared at the drawing, breathless, her hand trembling.

It was exactly as she remembered. Horrifyingly accurate.

In that moment, she realised, beyond any measure of doubt, the Creature was real. There was no denying it. It had attacked her, and worse, she had left Stella to face it alone. She had fled.

Guilt and unfettered fear washed over her, tightening her chest, making it hard to breathe. Stella had saved her life, and in return, Bloom had run. She had abandoned her. What kind of person does that? If something had happened to Stella, it was Bloom's fault. All of it. The thought was unbearable.

She had to find Stella. She had to make it right.

The morning sun filtered into Bloom's room, casting a golden hue through the blinds. She lifted her head from the desk, her neck stiff from the awkward position she had slept in. She was groggy, but awake. She blinked at her sketchbook lying open in front of her. The jagged, erratic lines stared back.

In daylight, the sketches seemed almost absurd, like remnants of a bad dream. But Bloom knew better, this wasn't a nightmare. A knock on the bedroom door startled her, she snapped the sketchbook shut.

"Bloom?" Vanessa's voice came through the door, gentle but insistent. "Are you awake?"

Panic flared in Bloom. She shoved the book beneath a pile of papers and darted across the room, grabbing her sweater to make herself look more presentable. "Yeah," she croaked, still thick with sleep. "Come in."

Vanessa opened the door, her eyes settling on Bloom. Though she was half dressed, it was clear she hadn't slept well, her auburn hair tangled, her face tired. Bloom tried to stand up straighter, rubbing her eyes.

"You didn't come down for breakfast," Vanessa said, stepping inside, her face softening with concern. "Everything alright?"

Bloom glanced at the clock, 10:02 a.m. She must have dozed off at her desk sometime during the night. She offered a weak smile.

"Yeah, just... studying," Bloom muttered "Got a lot on my mind."

Vanessa stepped closer, lifting her brow. "You still seem off. You're not yourself, honey. What's going on?"

Bloom felt her mother's concern and, for a moment, considered telling her everything. But how could she explain what had happened when she barely understood it herself?

“Homework, Mum. It’s just stress,” she said.

Vanessa’s eyes swept the room, pausing on the disarray of papers on her desk. Bloom tensed, hoping she wouldn’t pry further.

“Are you sure?” Vanessa asked gently. “You know you can talk to me if something’s bothering you, right?”

Bloom nodded. “I’m fine, really,” she insisted, standing abruptly, as if moving could end the conversation. “I’ve just got a lot on my plate.”

Vanessa gave her a long look then sighed. “Alright,” though she was still suspicious. “Just remember to take care of yourself, okay? You sound exhausted.”

Bloom forced another smile. “I will.”

As Vanessa turned to leave, she looked back to the stack of papers for a moment longer. She was suspicious of something, but she chose not to say anything. She gave Bloom a small nod before closing the door behind her.

The moment Vanessa was gone, Bloom exhaled. She wandered to her window, opening it as far as it would go, leaning out to feel the fresh air against her face. She looked to the sky for a moment, then down to the street below, casting her eye over the familiar sight. She froze, and jerked her head in disbelief.

Stella.

The girl from the woods stood across the street, arms folded, eyes locked on Bloom’s window. It was as if she had been waiting for hours. Her hair shimmered in the low morning sunlight, but her unnerving stillness and focus made Bloom’s stomach twist.

Bloom yanked the curtains shut and paced her room, one hand on her head, the other covering her mouth, trying to calm down. What was Stella doing here? How did she even find her? Was Stella following her? Why hadn’t she left after last night?

Bloom snatched her jacket, shoving her arms into the sleeves before bursting through her bedroom door. She hurried down the stairs, taking them two at a time, her mind racing with questions. Vanessa called from the kitchen, but Bloom barely heard her.

“I’m heading out!” She shouted over her shoulder, already halfway to the door.

Vanessa rushed to the hallway. “Where are you going?”

“I’ll be back later,” Bloom replied quickly, not giving her mother a chance to stop her as she rushed out.

Bloom ran down the patio stairs, her breaths in shallow bursts as she hurried across the street. The morning air was chilly, but her mind was too fixated to notice. What was she even doing? She hardly knew Stella, yet she knew she had to speak with her again. How had Stella even found where she lived? And if Stella could, so could that creature.

Bloom wandered down the road, locking onto Stella, who leaned against a lamppost, her arms folded. Despite her relaxed posture, there was a sharpness in Stella’s eyes. She was wearing the same sunset orange robe as she was the night prior. Guilt ate at Bloom as they stood in silence for a moment. After what felt like an eternity, Bloom spoke.

“I’m sorry,” she blurted, surprising them both. “I shouldn’t have left you last night. I freaked out, and I didn’t know what to think. I know it wasn’t fair. You saved me, and I just... left.”

Stella, who had been about to speak, closed her mouth slowly, surprise across her face. Bloom didn’t know what reaction she was expecting, but that certainly wasn’t it.

“I feel terrible,” Bloom added, trying to fill the silence, her fingers tugging at the strings of her burgundy hoodie. “I really do.”

Stella stood, still with her arms crossed, observing Bloom as she shifted her weight from one foot to the other. She pursed her lips as Bloom looked around aimlessly. Stella

straightened up, flashing a small smile. “That drab garment you’re wearing is an awful colour on you,” she said, gesturing to Bloom’s hoodie.

“My... my sweatshirt?” Bloom replied, surprised.

“Yes, red is not your colour. It washes you out, daw-ling. Try blue,” Stella nodded, seemingly impressed by her own advice. “Oh, and you don’t need to apologise. I was going to say sorry for following you home. I know it was totally weird and everything, but needs must I’m afraid.”

Bloom paused. “Well... thanks for the advice. But why did you follow me? How did you even do it without me noticing?”

Stella’s smile faded, her expression turning serious. She leaned in closer, her tone lowering. “I followed you because I needed to make sure you were safe. That thing we fought last night; it’s still out there, Bloom. And I think it’s after you now.”

Bloom’s heart skipped a beat. “So it really was real... but after me? Why? You’re the one who fought it, why would it want me?”

Stella shook her head. “I’m not sure. I thought it was hunting me, true, Princess of Solaria and all that, but something’s changed. Last night, it fixated on you.” A chill ran down Bloom’s spine. The idea that the creature was still out there, hunting her, made her feel faint. She glanced around, half-expecting it to appear from behind a parked car.

“Who are you, Stella?” Bloom asked, quieter now, almost defeated. “And... what are you?”

Stella hesitated. “Oh, this is so against protocol!” she muttered, dragging her hands down her face. “I can’t explain it here,” she said, looking around, as if suddenly aware of how exposed they were. “Not out in the open. We need to go somewhere more private, but still public enough to be safe.”

Bloom frowned, but she couldn't argue. She studied Stella, trying to understand her, but the girl was a puzzle, confident, sharp, yet endearing. There was definitely something human about her, but also something unworldly.

"Alright," Bloom said after thinking it through. "I know a place."

Stella nodded, her face softening as she sensed Bloom's reluctant acceptance. They started walking side by side, cautious distance still separating them. Bloom shoved her hands into her jacket pockets, as they made their way towards the café near her mum's flower shop. Her mind kept drifting back to the woods, the Creature, and Stella's strange abilities. None of it made sense, but nothing about her life had made sense since the previous evening.

Bloom broke the silence again. "Why do you care, Stella? About me, I mean. You don't even know me."

Stella glanced at her, "I don't know," she admitted. "I can't let you get hurt, that's for sure. But part of me wonders if I was meant to find you. Maybe it's... fate."

Bloom let out a small, sceptical laugh. "Fate? You believe in that?"

Stella shrugged, a playful look on her face. "Stranger things have been true, have they not?"

Despite herself, Bloom smiled. She still didn't trust Stella completely, not yet. But she realised that whatever was happening, she couldn't do this alone.

✱ Chapter Four ✱

The bell above the door chimed as they stepped into the café. The warm, inviting atmosphere welcomed them, along with the comforting scent of fresh coffee. The café had a modern aesthetic, with grey and orange accents, and modern art hanging on the walls. Art that Bloom often found herself critiquing whenever she came in. She led Stella to a secluded booth in the back corner. It was close to midday, the café was quiet, occupied by only three couples sipping their coffee and two baristas behind the counter.

They settled into their seats, Bloom noticed how Stella's eyes moved around, as if she were trying to absorb every detail. Dressed in her long, sparkling garment, Stella looked comically out of place.

"So," Bloom began, leaning forward, trying to sound composed. "You said you weren't from around here. Where are you from? You mentioned you were a princess from Salaria?"

Stella didn't respond immediately. The barista approached their table, and Bloom ordered a latte out of habit. Stella hesitated, studying the menu before pointing to an item. "What is... that?" she asked, her finger lingering on the words 'iced caramel macchiato.'

“It’s a shot of espresso with a dash of milk over ice, and caramel syrup,” the barista responded. Stella looked even more confused and turned her head to Bloom.

“Uh, it’s a coffee drink,” Bloom explained. “It’s sweet. You’ll probably like it.”

Stella nodded, brushing her fringe away from her eyes, which narrowed as she tried to understand. “I’ve never had... coffee before.”

The barista glanced between the two of them but remained silent, nodding and walking away to prepare their drinks.

Bloom leant forward. “I can’t say I’m surprised.” She smiled, attempting to appear relaxed. “So, I’m guessing Salaria is a long way from here?”

“Salaria,” Stella corrected, turning her head to the window. She considered her words, deciding how much she could reveal to Bloom. She finally spoke, almost a whisper.

“I’m not from Earth,” she said. Bloom froze, struggling to comprehend the statement. Though part of her had suspected something like this, hearing it aloud was still shocking.

Bloom blinked, trying to open her mind to the possibilities. “Okay... so, where are you from?” she asked again.

Stella offered a grin. “I’m from a planet called Magix. Part of the Magic Dimension.”

The names sounded strange, almost absurd. Bloom leaned back, trying to process what Stella had said. “Salaria... Magix... and this isn’t a joke?” but even she knew it wasn’t. “You’re actually telling me you’re from another planet?”

Stella’s lips pursed “It’s not a joke,” she said, her tone firm. “I’m a princess. A guardian, in a way.”

The barista returned with their drinks, placing the tray on the table. He looked like he was about to ask if they needed anything else. He could tell by the look on Bloom’s face that he was interrupting something. Bloom believed every word, despite how unbelievable it

sounded. She had tried to pretend otherwise the night before, but denial hadn't gotten her very far.

"So you're some kind of alien royalty? No country I know of would send their royalty alone on a dangerous mission, where some shadow monster could attack them."

"That might be true here, but in Solaria, the oldest heir to the throne has responsibilities. One of them is guarding the gateway ring, known as the Ring of Solaria. It's the only connection left between my world and yours. Every six years, the eldest heir crosses over to learn about Earth. This is my first time; I just came of age. Everything was going according to plan until that creature attacked me and stole the ring!"

Bloom found herself understanding this, even though it sounded completely surreal.

"Wait, so, the creature... was it after the ring or after you?"

Stella's eyes darkened. "At first, I thought it was trying to kill me to take the ring. You see, the ring is also a powerful magical weapon. It turns into a sceptre. It managed to knock it out of my hand and steal it. I thought it would use the ring's power to return to Magix, but instead, it stayed here, hunting me. It showed no interest in attacking humans... until it found you last night."

Bloom sipped her coffee, a chill creeping up her spine. "So it really is after me now?"

"I think so," Stella said. "It seems to have shifted its focus to you. I don't know why, but I had to make sure you were safe." They both paused. "Bloom, are you sure there's nothing unusual about you? Have you ever experienced anything odd? Done something you can't explain?"

Bloom thought about it. Nothing in her life had been as bizarre as this. "Not really... except for my adoption. That's the strangest thing about me."

"You're adopted?"

“Yeah... My mum was visiting her family in Hawaii when a freak forest fire broke out, something unheard of in that area. I was in the middle of the flames, a delirious two-year-old who could only remember her name. It was a miracle I was alive, completely unharmed by the fire. My dad found me whilst helping put it out, and when nobody claimed me, they adopted me. The rest is history.” She recounted the story as she had done so many times before. This time felt different.

“Don’t you find that a little odd?” Stella asked, as if she had a hunch she wasn’t sharing.

“Of course. I used to stay up at night, wondering what could have happened to me. I’ve tried to remember, but I don’t think I ever will. I’ve made peace with it, but there’s always a part of me that’s curious.” Bloom’s tone grew somber, as if the topic was more difficult for her than she let on. They sat in silence for a moment as Stella took the first sip of her drink. She nodded approvingly. “So you’re telling me some creature from another world is hunting us because of... a ring?”

Stella tilted her head, leaning closer. “I know it sounds unbelievable, but it’s the truth. I’ve never seen anything like that creature in my studies, but I know it’s incredibly dangerous and needs to be stopped. Also, if I don’t recover the ring, I can’t get home.” Her face, which had been stern and determined, softened, showing vulnerability. It was a plea.

“Are my family safe?” Bloom asked, though she feared she already knew the answer.

“I don’t know,” Stella admitted. “It’s more than the ring now. Maybe it sees you as an obstacle, or perhaps there’s... something else. I wish I had all the answers. I’ve told you everything I know.”

Bloom stared at Stella, feeling an unexpected connection forming between them. Reading between the lines, she understood what Stella was asking. If Stella was right, Bloom

had no real choice.

“You want me to help you, don’t you?” Bloom asked. “You want me to help you track this thing down and... stop it?”

Stella looked at Bloom, her entire demeanour pleading. “I know it’s a lot to ask. But I can’t do it alone. And I can’t let anyone else get hurt. Please. If we don’t stop it, it could come after you, and I’ll be stuck on Earth.”

“I don’t know if I can do this,” Bloom said “I can’t fight it like you can.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure. My mother used to tell me ‘sometimes you need a monster to attack you to know what you’re truly made of’. We are the two things it wants. I need to find it, then I can try to take it down!”

“What if you can’t? What if it hurts you?”

“I don’t have another choice, Bloom... All I need is your help to get me to that point, please.”

“I’ll think about it, how’s that?” Stella nodded in a silent response. “In the meantime, come back to mine to rest and eat. It’s the least I can do.”

“Thank you, Bloom.” Relief perfumed Stella’s words. Bloom realised that, despite her confident facade, she must have been terrified. All alone on a strange world with nothing to turn to. Even if Bloom couldn’t help in any other way, at least now she had a friend.

Bloom and Stella left the coffee shop. They were now walking back to Bloom’s parents’ house. She wasn’t sure what she was going to tell her mother when Stella walked through the front door. Especially after acting out as Bloom had been. The truth was an option now since

Stella could prove it with her magic. Was it worth involving her parents in this, she supposed that they could already be whether she liked it or not.

“I haven’t... told my parents yet. About anything that happened last night.”

“I guess that makes sense, what are you meant to say? This whole scenario is crazy, even for me.”

“So when you meet them, act natural. You’re new to the area and wanted to make some new friends’

“Don’t you worry Bloom, subtlety is my middle name” Stella flourished.

They walked in an estranged silence for a moment. Bloom was still trying to process everything. It was a lot. Too much, maybe. Her whole life had been... ordinary. Average. Now, she was being told there was something more, something bigger, that she didn’t understand. She pushed the thought away.

“So, what’s Solaria like?” Bloom asked, hoping to reignite the conversation. “I mean, aside from all the fairy magic and important rings and stuff.”

Stella’s face glistened at the question, the awkwardness melting away. “Well...Solaria is unlike anything here. In Cittaluce, The buildings stretch taller than you can imagine, they’re all different colours and shapes. Nowhere you look is the same and the food, oh! If only you could try it Bloom. It’s the best in the entire magical dimension. Although I’d get some push back from the Melodians.” she giggled then sighed. Her face turned wistful “I miss it. Earth is so... grey. Everything’s so cold here. I can’t describe it.”

“It’s not all bad. There are some wonderful places to see here too! You’d be surprised. I know Earth hasn’t given you the warmest of welcome but you could spend a lifetime trying to see everything in the states, let alone the whole world!”

Stella smiled slightly. “You sound like you like it here”

“Well I’m definitely very lucky to have grown up here... but there are so many places far more wonderful I’m sure.”

“You’re right this place isn’t all that bad” Stella admitted, glancing at Bloom with a smile. “I’ve met you, after all, that has to count for something! I’ve also now discovered coffee... remind me to take some back to Solaria!”

Bloom flushed at the compliment. “How are you so calm?”

Stella shook her head “I’m not. The truth is I’m terrified. I’m great at hiding it.” She looked around at the quaint buildings and foreign sky. Her expression faltered for a moment. Bloom glanced over, feeling a sense of kinship. She hardly knew Stella, but she understood how it felt to be completely lost. She too carried her fears and doubts silently. Whatever differences lay between them, in that moment, they weren’t so far apart.

Bloom didn’t respond right away. They walked in silence for a few minutes, the sounds of birds chirping and distant traffic filling the quiet.

“I’ve been feeling lost lately too,” Bloom said softly “Everything feels so... aimless. Like I’m not going anywhere. I thought college would help me figure things out, but now...”

Stella listened intently, her eyes softening as Bloom continued.

“I don’t know,” Bloom said with a shrug. “Maybe I’m just scared of making the wrong choice. To be trapped here if I fail.”

Stella smiled, a knowing look in her eyes. “You’re the only person who can free yourself from expectations Bloom. The ones that shackle us the hardest are the ones we put on ourselves.” Stella gave a small nod as Bloom returned a smile. Her tone was thoughtful. “It’s tough, feeling like you don’t belong. But sometimes, the path you’re meant to walk isn’t the one you expected to take. You have to trust yourself.”

Bloom met Stella’s gaze, feeling the weight of her words. “I don’t know if I can.”

Stella grinned, “Well, you’ll have to see what paths life decides to roll out for you!”

Bloom laughed, the mood easing.

As they turned the corner onto her road, Bloom slowed for a moment. Something about the front door felt wrong the moment it came into view. Stella noticed it too, immediately hastening to get a closer look. The door was ajar, there were no signs of forcing it, but inside the house told a completely different story.

As Bloom and Stella stepped inside the house, they froze. The air was heavy, her heart sank at the sight before her. The living room was a disaster, furniture overturned, picture frames shattered on the floor, and carpets torn up. The cozy warmth of her home was gone. Even the walls, once lined with family photos seemed lifeless, as if mourning the chaos.

“Oh no,” Bloom whispered. She stepped forward, her breath trembling. “Mum? Dad?” She called through the house, but only silence followed. Bloom ran up the stairs and checked every room. The second floor wasn’t ruined, yet there were no signs of Mike or Vanessa anywhere.

Stella strode into the living room and began to look at the damage around the room. Her movements quick and deliberate. “Bloom, stay close to me,” she said. “We don’t know what’s happened here.”

Bloom’s mind raced as she moved deeper into the house. “We don’t know what’s happened? Of course we know what’s happened. It... it came! It found me!” She bellowed. Stella could see the horrified look behind Bloom’s eyes. In the kitchen, the table was overturned, one of its legs snapped clean off. A chair lay splintered against the wall, and the scent of spilled coffee marked the air.

“Mum?! Dad?!” she screamed again. Her hands shook as she pulled out her phone, dialling her mother’s number. The familiar ringtone came from behind a sofa pillow. She

followed the sound and dug the phone out and declined her own call.

Panic surged through her. She turned to Stella, “They’re gone,” she choked out. “They were here, and now they’re gone. It’s... it’s taken them!”

Stella nodded grimly, stepping toward a broken picture frame on the floor. She examined it, her fingers tightening around the edges. The glass was cracked but intact. Inside was a smiling photo of Bloom with her parents. “This doesn’t make any sense Bloom” Stella said. “Why come after your parents?”

Tears streamed down Bloom’s face as she shrugged in defeat. A million theories bounced around Stella’s head. Each one as absurd as the last, but one of them had to be true. She placed a hand on Bloom’s shoulder. “We will get them back, I promise” she said firmly. “But first, we need to figure out where it went. It wouldn’t take them without a reason. This is to get to you Bloom, but why?”

Bloom’s eyes darted around the room, searching for any sign or clue. She landed on the hung up map of the mill valley area, the only thing still left hanging on the wall. Bloom fixated on it and noticed something peculiar. “Look Stella, you don’t think that’s a coincidence do you?” She asked as she pointed to the map.

“It can’t be...” The two girls looked at a mark on the map on the outskirts of town. Seemingly clawed in the shape of a cross. “This creature is far more intelligent than I thought... It’s marked where it’s taken them. It’s keeping them as leverage... trying to draw you out!”

Bloom’s hands curled into fists. “Then we go after it,” she said. “I can’t stand here and do nothing. My parents... they’re everything to me.”

Stella nodded “Bloom think for a moment, that creature had all night and all day to attack you. Why didn’t it?”

“Maybe it only found me whilst we were out.”

“No, Bloom, remember it smells magic. I discovered that days ago. Why not wait for you to come back? Or follow us to the cafe?” Stella paused for a moment, deep in thought.

“Unless... unless it’s scared of you.”

“Scared... of me? Stella, that doesn’t make any sense.”

“No, it doesn’t. There’s quite a lot about you that doesn’t make any sense Bloom.”

Stella said. Bloom took a step back at the words. They sounded conclusive, like she had been thinking about it for longer than she had been letting on. Perhaps Stella wasn’t sharing all that she knew after all. “I’m a powerful fairy. I’ve been training since I was old enough to walk, yet that creature showed no fear of me. Not since I first encountered it. Yet it wants to face you on its own terms. It wants you, but it’s not taking any chances.”

Bloom paused, it sounded as farfetched as anything to her. “What if this is a ploy to get to you Stella?”

“No, why would it be? Why would it take your parents? Why would it focus on you last night? Bloom. Is it possible you’re in possession of a rare artefact, something like my ring, something it wants?”

Bloom tried to think through the haze clouding her thoughts. Her parents had lived in Mill Valley for years. She didn’t own anything abnormal. There were no family heirlooms or old trinkets lying about the house. If the creature was searching for an object, it would have turned the entire house upside down; yet upstairs remained untouched. So what could it be? Stella breathed in and strode towards the door.

“We’ve got to hurry, Do you know where that is Bloom?” she tilted her head to the map.

Bloom pulled out her phone, “Yes, It’s an old warehouse. I pass it everyday on my

way to Muir. We can take the bikes. You can use mum's."

"Great, I've never ridden a bike like these before but how hard can it be?"

Before they could step outside, Bloom hesitated, glancing back at the wreckage. The sight of it all. Guilt ate away at her as she thought of how scared they would be. "Stella," she said quietly. "What if we... what if we're too late?"

Stella turned. She stepped closer. "We won't be," she said. "You have my word. We're not going to let this creature win."

"It will be my fault, I should have told them the truth."

"It's not your fault Bloom, you can't blame yourself at every turn. But you can try and save them."

Bloom nodded. The creature had taken her parents, but she wasn't going to let it keep them. Not if she could help it.

As they cycled into the evening air, the streetlights flickered on, casting shadows across the road. Each moment Bloom felt her resolve hardening. She exchanged a determined glance with Stella, their unspoken agreement clear. They would face this together, whatever it took.

* Chapter Five *

Mill Valley, now cloaked in darkness, seemed to hold its breath. Bloom pedalled beside Stella, the two of them moving toward the edge of town. They didn't talk; there wasn't much to say. The only thoughts Bloom had on her mind were those of her parents. What could have happened to them, if they were hurt. She wasn't frightened, not like she thought she'd be. not of the Creature, at least. Its play had somehow humanised it in her mind. It was no longer a creature of unpredictability and animosity. It was calculated, machiavellian, which should scare her more. But she wasn't scared of things she could analyse. Stella focused on the path ahead, her determination unwavering. Her thoughts, too, were pre-occupied: but by none other than the mystery of Bloom herself. They crossed the town's boundary, leaving behind the slight protection of streetlights for the outskirts of Mill Valley.

The warehouse district was nothing like the wonders of the town or Muir. Most of the warehouses were falling apart. One stood intact, yet still old and dilapidated. There was a looming mist in the air. Broken fences lined the streets, and graffiti marked the walls. It was silent. No chirping. No car engines. No sign of the Creature, or Bloom's parents. A slight light flickered from within the most intact warehouse. Whether they were functioning lights

or the reflection of the moon was hard to tell.

“We’re here,” Stella murmured,. She pulled her bike to a stop a few meters away from the entrance, gesturing for Bloom to do the same. Bloom’s palms were wet with sweat as she dismounted. The night air stinging her hands. Stella glanced over. “We have to be careful. We don’t know if it’s still here, but we can’t take any chances.”

Bloom nodded. Together, they approached the side of the building, slipping through the long grass that surrounded the structure. Blocking the entrance was a large, rusted door that looked to have been chained shut long ago. Stella cupped her hands over the lock. A glow came from between her fingers as she channeled her magic, Bloom hadn’t seen it since the night before in Muir. When she removed her hands the lock had melted and freed the chain. She pulled it from the bars, the rust chipping off in pieces as it clang against itself.

“This way,” Stella whispered, pushing as the gate creaked open. The sound was loud, echoing into the night, Bloom winced as she entered.

Inside, the warehouse was even more foreboding. Dust thickened the air, the ground littered with debris. Broken crates, rusted machinery, and pieces of what looked like old furniture. Everything had a layer of grime or rust. Time had forgotten this place. Cool moonlight streamed through the cracked walls in long beams of light. Bloom’s eyes looked around, searching for any sign of her parents or the monster from the woods.

“It’s too quiet, what if we’re in the wrong place? Or if it sent us here to throw us off?” Bloom whispered. She had expected... something. A sign of life, or of struggle. But there was nothing.

Stella nodded, her brows low. “Let’s look around. There has to be something here.”

Together they moved through the large, open space, their footsteps muffled by the layers of dust and debris. Bloom’s eyes leaked tears as she checked every corner. The

warehouse was a labyrinth, each section blending into the next. The corridors formed by towering piles of old boxes and metal trusses. Every now and then, the building rumbled because of the wind outside howling through the cracks.

Stella, moved with a quiet confidence, her eyes and mind sharp. She held a ball of light in her hand that illuminated the area with a strong warm glow. “I’m sorry, by the way Bloom. I’m sorry this is happening to you.” Stella whispered, almost like she had been thinking about saying it for a while.

“It’s okay, it’s not your fault.” Bloom replied. “Let’s find my parents.”

“If... when we find your parents. I want you to take them and get out. I’ll handle anything that comes after you.” Stella said. She looked back at Bloom with an apologetic cast to her eyes. The fear for her parents twisted in her at the thought that she could have prevented all this. Bloom had been so awful to them before she left, and now, because of Bloom’s involvement, they were in the middle of something horrible.

As Bloom went to reply, she heard something faint. They hurried over to where the sound was coming from. Stella crouched beside an old, rusted pillar. Bloom knelt beside her, squinting as Stella pointed to a series of dark smudges on the ground, lit by her magic.

“What is that?” Bloom asked in a whisper.

“Blood,” Stella replied grimly “It’s faint, but it’s fresh.”

Bloom’s stomach churned. “My parents?”

“Possibly,” Stella muttered, her eyes scanning the ground. “It looks like there was a struggle.”

Bloom’s heart raced. If they were hurt, they had to find them and fast. She looked around. “I heard something, they must be around here somewhere.”

Stella stood. “They must be... somewhere. Which means the Creature must be around

here too.”

The words sent a chill down Bloom’s spine. She wanted to believe they were alive, that they weren’t hurt. She followed Stella deeper into the warehouse, overthinking every step and every breath. The faint blood trail led them toward the back of the building, where the walls seemed to close in. The shadows grew darker. Bloom knew they were walking into a trap, but she didn’t care.

Then, as they turned a corner, they heard it again. A soft, muffled sound. A voice.

“Mum!” Bloom croaked, her heart leaping. She bolted toward the sound, ignoring Stella’s warning to stay quiet. In the far corner of the warehouse, half-hidden behind a stack of old crates, Bloom saw them. Her parents were slumped against the wall, faces pale and bruised, eyes wide with shock. They were bound by a black substance, their clothes were torn. But they were alive.

Bloom dropped to her knees quickly untying them as she whispered, “I’m so sorry. I’m so so sorry Mum!”

Vanessa was weak, but she managed a small smile. “Bloom... you came.”

“Of course I came! Are you hurt? Is Dad okay?”

Bloom knelt by their side, her hands shook with a mixture of relief and fear, relief that they were alive, but fear at the state she found them in. Mike’s face was pale, and a large bruise was on his cheek. They didn’t look badly hurt. Mike had a cut on his leg, nothing serious looking. But they were drowsy.

“We’re fine Bloom. We were sleeping.”

“Sleeping, what do you mean sleeping? Stella what does she mean?”

“I’m not sure Bloom, it’s possible whatever attacked them is able to create a toxin that makes them drowsy. It explains how it got them here with nobody noticing. I don’t know

much about this creature Bloom... my magic might be able to help them feel awake enough to walk.” Stella moved over to Mike and Vanessa and lit the area with a glow of warm sunlight.

“What is light going to do Stella?”

“Sunlight wakes us up... Doesn’t everyone know that?” She said, and, to Bloom’s surprise, it worked. Not brilliantly, but Mike opened his eyes and Vanessa began to move her legs.

“Okay. I’m going to get you out of here, I promise. Can you walk Mum?” Bloom asked.

“Yes I think so, but your father, he’s bleeding.”

“We can help him stand. We just need to get to the edge of the road and call emergency services “

Mike winced as Bloom untied the last of the ropes, his body slumping against Bloom for support. He was hoarse, “We, we didn’t know what it was, Bloom. That thing... it came out of nowhere. We tried to run, but...” He trailed off, as if the memory was too horrifying to relive. “Why is this happening?”

“It’s my fault,” Bloom admitted. She couldn’t hold back the truth any longer, not now that they were looking at her with those terrified eyes. “I got involved in something I shouldn’t have, and it led that... thing to you. But I’m going to fix this, okay? I’m going to get you out of here, and then we’ll deal with the Creature.”

Vanessa, now on her feet turned at the remark “What?! Bloom you must leave here with us!”

Bloom turned to Stella, still casting light from her hands. Something her parents were pretending wasn’t happening before their very eyes. “I have to help them Stella. Are you going to be okay?” She spoke.

Stella stopped casting the light and looked at Bloom “It’s as I said, get your parents to safely. I’ll be okay.” As she said it, they offered each other a look of mutual understanding. Bloom breathed in deeply as if to thank her. She helped Vanessa bring Mike to his feet as they began to walk out of the warehouse. Stella followed them, as if to keep guard. Her brown eyes narrowing as she scanned the area for anything out of the ordinary. “Something’s wrong,” she murmured “It’s too quiet.”

Bloom froze, her heart skipped a beat. “What do you mean?”

Stella didn’t answer right away. Instead, she stepped away from the group and looked again into the darkness of the warehouse. The air was holding its breath, waiting for something to happen.

And then, it did.

Without warning, the ground beneath them shifted, a low, rumbling sound vibrated through the floor. Bloom’s arm around her father tightened as she stumbled, trying to keep her balance. The dust on the ground shook with the movement, and the temperature in the room dropped to an icy chill.

“What’s happening?” Vanessa whispered.

Before Bloom could answer, a dark, slithering shadow began to emerge from the cracks in the floor. It moved like smoke, twisting and curling as it rose, growing larger each second. The shadow took shape, becoming something monstrous, something Bloom recognised immediately. It was the Creature, its grotesque, eyeless face leering at them with that same wide, twisted grin as the night before. Its body, a mass of sharp, insect-like limbs, scraped against the concrete as it materialised. It was the same creature she had drawn. The same creature that had haunted her every sleeping and waking moment.

The beast reared up, its movements slow but deliberate. Bloom had imagined this

moment in a million different terrifying ways. This was real this time, but she had her parents. The air grew thick with the stench of rotting flesh, its putrid breath filling the space as it let out a low, guttural purr.

Mike gasped, Bloom could feel him tense.

Stella, without hesitation, stepped in front of Bloom and her parents, her stance protective and ready for battle. “Bloom take your parents and get out of here,” she said through gritted teeth. “It’s got my ring, I’m getting it back. I’ll cover you whilst you run!”

The Creature let out a series of clicks and hisses, its movements erratic as it shifted from side to side. It didn’t speak in any language that Stella could understand, but the sound of it was unsettling, alien, as if it were trying to communicate something. Each click echoed in the hollow warehouse, reverberating through the metal and concrete like some kind of twisted melody.

“What’s it doing?” Bloom asked as she struggled to keep Mike steady.

“I don’t know,” Stella replied, her eyes never leaving the monster. “But it smells magic. You need to get out of here, now! I’ll hold it back if it goes after you. Run now!”

Bloom nodded weakly. Her body trembled as she took a step back. Vanessa was so terrified she was speechless and Mike was still struggling to stand. Bloom shot Vanessa a look and began to walk to the doorway.

“So you’re back for more? I believe you have something that belongs to me” Stella taunted. The Creature clicked and hissed. “Oh them? Don’t you worry about them.”

It bellowed and shifted again, its head tilting as it let out another series of clicks, this time louder and more aggressive. The sound grated against Bloom’s nerves, but they were almost out of the door. Was this thing mocking them? Its alien dialect was impossible to understand yet it still conveyed malice all the same.

“We don’t have time for this,” Stella muttered under her breath, her hands beginning to glow with a soft, golden light. She turned to Bloom, with that signature glint in her eyes. And then, with a flash of light, Stella transformed.

It happened so quickly that Bloom barely had time to process it. One moment, Stella stood opposed to the Creature. The next, a brilliant burst of golden light enveloped her, and when it faded, Stella was... different. Her clothes had a glow to them, the shimmering, scaled outfit now shone with an ethereal light. Stella now had wings, small, translucent, and shimmering with iridescent colours that caught the moonlight. By the time Stella looked back, Bloom had gone. She was alone again.

Stella shot the monster back a confident smirk. “Now, let’s take care of this.”

With a powerful flap of her wings, Stella launched herself into the air, her body radiating light and heat as she summoned her magic. The warehouse filled with the glow of her power, and the temperature rose. Stella wasted no time, hurling bursts of intense light toward her foe, the energy slamming into its chest with a crackling sound.

The monster screeched, recoiling from the attack, but it didn’t back down. It lunged at Stella, its sharp limbs slicing through the air as it tried to strike her. But Stella was too fast. She dodged and weaved around its tendrils. Her wings carrying her through the air as she danced around it unleashing blasts of light. Stella wasn’t losing this time, she was beating this creature, but bolts of light would only do so much. Her eyes landed on a pile of old metal pipes lying nearby. Without thinking, she grabbed one and hurled it toward the Creature, the metal clanging as it hit the ground near its feet, missing it narrowly. It fell back. Its eyeless face twitching as it clicked in anger. Stella blasted it again with a searing beam of light that sent it stumbling back.

But the fight was far from over.

The warehouse rattled with the intensity of the battle as Stella and the Creature exchanged blows. Stella whipped up a strong wind that threw it off her scent, allowing her to hit it with spectral daggers. Each blast saw it rear in pain, but it didn't seem to be getting any weaker. It kept coming, its movements relentless and terrifying. Stella went to blast it again but the creature grabbed her arms and flung her into a nearby pole with a clatter. It stalked over to her as she tried to orient herself. Then there was a clang, the Creature snapped its head back. It was Bloom. She was trying to help, throwing debris, metal pipes, and anything she could find in its path. Each clang and crash seemed to confuse the beast.

"Bloom! What are you doing here? Run!" Stella roared as she got to her feet. Bloom's chest heaved as she stumbled across the dusty floor. She wasn't sure how long she could keep this up, but she had no choice. They had to keep the Creature distracted, had to keep it from gaining the upper hand.

"Keep moving!" Bloom called out, straining with effort. "Don't let it get close!"

It let out another ear-piercing screech, slashing its limbs through the air toward Bloom. Its body seemed to shift in colour in the low light. Its eyeless face twitched, and the constant clicking sound it made grew more and more aggravated.

Bloom grabbed another piece of debris, a broken wooden plank this time, and threw it toward the monster's legs. It clattered against its shins as Stella fired another blinding beam of light. The attack struck it square in the chest, sending it stumbling into a pile of boxes. Stella ran over to Bloom.

"You shouldn't be here it's dangerous." Stella said

"This is as much my fight as it is yours now. I'm here to help where I can. Tell me what to do." For a brief moment, it seemed like they were gaining the upper hand. The Creature staggered up from the boxes. Its movements less coordinated, its growls more

pained than before. It hissed, the dialect clicking faster now, as if it were becoming more frantic, more desperate.

Stella leapt up, her wings beating as she hovered out of reach. She extended her hand, summoning another sphere of glowing light. Her face was slick with sweat, her brows arched in concentration as she prepared to unleash another powerful attack.

“We’ve got it!” Bloom shouted, racing with the possibility that this nightmare could be coming to an end. As Stella released the sphere of light, the monster twisted with a burst of speed, its arms slashing toward her. Stella barely had time to react, flipping backwards into the air. The sphere of light missed, exploding against the far wall in a burst of heat that sent chunks of debris raining down around them.

Bloom gasped as she dodged flying pieces of metal and concrete.

“The Creature is tougher than I thought, and uglier too.” Stella quipped. It wasn’t going to go down easy, and they couldn’t afford to make any mistakes. She circled back, her face set in determination as she prepared to strike again. It moved quicker, darting from shadow to shadow as it tried to avoid Stella’s blasts. Each time she got close, the Creature would shift, its body melting into the darkness like smoke, only to reappear close by, lunging at her. Stella stood between it and Bloom whilst she searched for a way to help. She spotted a pile of old, rusted machinery near the edge of the room. Without hesitation, she sprinted toward it, grabbing hold of a large metal rod and jamming it into the gears of one of the machines. With a loud creak and a snap, an arm of one of them shifted. Sending a heavy metal claw swinging down toward the Creature.

The claw crashed into the beast with a deafening noise. It hissed and screeched. Stunned by the blow, Stella seized the opportunity. She charged a larger attack and hurled another blast of light toward the beast.

This time, the attack hit its mark.

The Creature let out a hiss in pain as the light seared through its chest, its body convulsing violently. Dark, smoky tendrils erupted from the wound, twisting and writhing as if the evil thing was unraveling. It looked like its body was cannibalising itself. It staggered backward, collapsing onto the ground in a heap, twitching as it struggled to hold itself together. Bloom stared at the fallen creature, her body frozen with a mixture of shock and disbelief. Could it be over? Had Stella actually beaten it? The Creature reached into the air and began to melt away back into the shadows. The clicks and the hisses turning into wails of pain.

Stella landed beside her, gasping for air. Sweat trickled down her forehead. Her wings folded neatly behind her as she surveyed the scene with cautious optimism. She held her hand to her chest, trying to regain her composure. She only had one eye open but she had a triumphant look behind it. “We did it,” she said breathlessly but filled with satisfaction.

Bloom felt a surge of relief wash over her, the weight of the past day lifting from her shoulders. Her parents were safe, on their way to the hospital, and the nightmare was gone. She stumbled toward Stella, her legs shaking as the adrenaline began to fade. “Is it... is it over?” she asked.

Stella nodded, offering her a reassuring smile. “Yeah, I believe so. It’s not getting up after that.”

They both stood in silence for a moment, staring at the Creature’s melting body. The warehouse was quiet once again. The only sound the soft creaking as before. The heavy feeling that had lingered in the air was starting to lift, and for the first time all day, Bloom allowed herself to breathe.

She looked at Stella trembling but smiling. “You were amazing,” she said in awe.

Stella grinned, though she was exhausted. “You weren’t so bad yourself. That thinking with the claw was pretty clever.”

Bloom giggled, the sound more of relief over than anything else. “I didn’t think it would actually work.”

“Well it did. You were great Bloom!”

“Your ring... Is it there?” Bloom asked. Stella walked over to where the Creature had melted away and ran her hand through the blood on the floor.

“It’s not here... That creature could have put that ring anywhere, it’s lost.”

“Stella, I’m so sorry.”

Stella sighed and wiped a tear from her eye with her wrist. She had half expected this. If they destroyed the Creature there would be no way to find where it put the ring. Stella was trapped. There was a moment of silence between the two girls.

But then there was a click. Both of the girls twitched their heads in reflex. Bloom’s heart stopped. Stella froze, her eyes widening in horror as a twisted form began to rise in front of her. The smoky tendrils that had unraveled from its body reassembling, pulling it back together. Its limbs jerked like a puppet being forced to move, and within seconds, it was rising from the ground once more. Its twisted face turning toward them with renewed vigour.

Stella’s expression shifted from triumph to shock in an instant. “How is that possible?”

Before either of them could react, the Creature lunged forward at lightning speed. It flung Stella backwards, knocking her unconscious. It turned to Bloom. Purring, stalking towards her. It savoured the distance between them getting smaller. As Bloom turned to run, its black tendrils wrapped around her body and lifted her into the air.

The Creature’s icy grip tightened around her, its spindly, sharp fingers digging into

her arms as it held her off the ground. A surge of panic shot through her as she struggled against its hold. It was too strong, its limbs like iron, and no matter how hard she kicked and twisted, she couldn't break free. Stella was down and the Creature had survived her best attempt to destroy it. It was hopeless. The Creature clicked, its twisted mouth curling into something that resembled a smile. The smell of decay and rot made her gag, suffocating her senses. It was hard to think. Hard to breathe. She felt defeated.

"Bloom!" Stella rang out, sharp and urgent. She soared into the air frantically as she shot toward the Creature, another burst of light forming in her hands. But as quick as Bloom felt hope, it was snuffed out. Before Stella could attack, the monster spun, dragging Bloom with it, using her as a shield. Stella faltered, her glowing hands dropping; she couldn't risk hitting her. It knocked Stella out of the air as a result of her hesitation. This time, she stayed down.

Bloom panicked more with every passing second. She could feel the Creature's breath, warm and wet, against her skin, its language growing more menacing. She had never felt so helpless, so completely at the mercy of something so alien, so evil. For a moment, she thought this was it. This was how it would end. Her confusion, her fear, her guilt, it would all end here, in the clutches of this nightmare.

But then, something deep inside her stirred.

At first, it was a flicker, a small, barely noticeable warmth in the pit of her stomach. A feeling she had felt before. But as the Creature's grip tightened, that warmth began to grow. She let it spread through her body like a slow-burning flame. It wasn't like the fear fuelled adrenaline she had felt earlier; this was different, something far more powerful, far more primal. The flame grew stronger, hotter, until it was no longer a spark, but a raging fire, blazing through her veins. It set her skin alight with a sensation she had never felt before. It

felt unnatural. It felt wrong. It felt powerful.

It was as though something she always had within her had activated. Something she now could feel was a part of her that she'd never met before. Something that had always been there, buried deep within her, waiting for the right moment. For this moment. The more the Creature pressed down on her, the more the fire inside her grew, until it was all she could feel. It was her last line of defence. An overwhelming, burning heat that threatened to consume her. It felt wrong and right all at the same time.

"Let... go!" Bloom screamed, she strained as she struggled to control the surge of power building within her. Power. Yes, it was power.

But it didn't let go. It hissed again, its grip tightening almost daring her to break free, as if it were trying to tempt it out of her. Then, with a sudden, explosive force, the fire inside Bloom erupted.

It started in her core, a blinding, searing flame that shot outward in all directions. The power that had been building inside her burst free. Engulfing her entire body in a cosmic flame so intense that it lit the entire warehouse like the midday sun. The Creature recoiled in an instant, screeching in pain as the fire spread over its body, scorching its dark, shadowy form. Bloom could feel the power coursing through her, wild and untamed, but she wasn't afraid of it. For the first time, she felt strong, stronger than she had ever felt before. This was her fire, her power, and it was magnificent.

She didn't just break free of the Creature's grip, she obliterated it. The moment the fire touched the Creature, it disintegrated, its smoky tendrils burning away like dry leaves in a wildfire. It screeched again, but this time it was a sound of pure, agonising defeat. Its alien clicks turning into garbled, dying noises. The force of the explosion sent waves rippling through the warehouse. It melted the metal beams and flattened the debris around them.

Bloom's body radiated with a cosmic light, a corona of flames dancing around her. Her hair floated like wildfire. Glowing with the intensity of the power that now surged through the warehouse. Her arms, once bound by fear, were now glowing with burning light. The monster stood no chance. Its body was completely incinerated, leaving nothing but ash and smoke.

The warehouse itself began to tremble under the force of Bloom's power. The walls groaned and buckled, the metal beams twisting and warping under the intense heat. The ceiling began to crack, pieces of debris falling all around them as the structure gave way. But Bloom didn't notice any of it. She was lost in the fire, in the raw, untamed energy. She could feel it pulsing in every inch of her body, begging for release, for control. She felt invincible, unstoppable, like a force of nature that couldn't, and shouldn't be contained.

"Bloom!" Stella broke through the chaos. Bloom blinked, the fire inside her shrinking as she turned toward Stella. She was hovering in the air, a shield of energy around her as she tried to tolerate the energy. Her face was a mixture of awe and concern, her eyes wide as she took in the sight before her. "Bloom, you have to stop!" Stella called out over the roar of the flames. "The whole place is going to come down! It could kill you!"

The fire still raged inside her. She wanted to stop, but the power was so overwhelming, so all-consuming, that she didn't know how. It felt like trying to hold back a wave with nothing but her bare hands.

"I can't..." Bloom gasped "I don't know how!"

But Stella wasn't deterred. She got closer to Bloom "You can do this," she said, steady and reassuring. "You're stronger than this power. It's yours to control, not the other way around. You're in control Bloom."

Bloom struggled to calm herself, to focus on Stella's words. Slowly, painfully, she tried to reign in the fire, to pull it back to herself. The flames flickered and dimmed, the

cosmic light around her body fading. Her muscles ached with the effort, but spark by spark, the fire began to subside. The warehouse groaned but the tremors were less violent. Bloom could feel the power retreating, though it still burned within her. It was like she let something out of a cage. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the flames around her died down completely, leaving only faint cinders in their wake.

Bloom's legs gave out beneath her, and she collapsed to the ground, her body trembling with exhaustion. Her vision blurred, the edges of the world fading into darkness as the last remnants of her power slipped away. She could hear Stella calling her name, but it sounded distant, muffled, like it was coming from underwater. Her eyelids grew heavy, her body too tired to keep fighting.

As the darkness swallowed her, Bloom's last thought was a simple one, one she barely had the energy to comprehend.

I'm a fairy.

And then, everything went black.

* Chapter Six *

The first thing Bloom noticed as she stirred was the sound of her parents voices from downstairs. For a moment, she felt a sense of peace, a fleeting calm. It was as if the events had been nothing more than a dream. That was, until the memories of the previous night rushed back in, overwhelming her. The creature, the warehouse, the fire burning inside her. It all came flooding back in vivid flashes, as Bloom's eyes jumped open.

She bolted upright in her bed, looking around in frantic sweeps. She was in her room, her familiar walls lined with posters of her sketches tacked up around her desk. Everything looked normal. But the memories still burned behind her eyes, a reminder that nothing in her life was normal anymore.

She eventually looked at Stella, who was sitting calmly in a chair near the window, wrapped in a blanket. She looked different than she had during the fight the night before. Less fierce. She was wearing different clothes. The sweater she recognised was Bloom's. Her golden hair was tied back loosely, and she gave off an air of ease that Bloom hadn't seen before. The outburst of powerful magic, the battle with the creature, seemed almost like a distant memory.

“You’re awake,” Stella said, relieved.

Bloom blinked, still trying to shake off the lingering fog of sleep. “What... what time is it?” she asked hoarsely.

“Late afternoon” Stella replied, stretching her arms above her head. “I didn’t want to wake you after everything that happened last night.”

The mention of it made Bloom tense. She pulled the covers tighter around herself, her mind still reeling from the memory. “What happened? How did I get back here? My parents?”

Stella leaned forward. “You fainted after... well, after everything. I managed to get you back here. Your parents got back in this morning from the hospital. They’re both fine.”

Bloom felt a rush of relief. “My parents... what do they know? Do they remember anything?”

Stella shook her head. “Not a lot. They remember enough to know why their living room is trashed, but not the full story. Whatever that creature gave them knocked them out big time.”

“Did you tell them... about me?”

“No, I left that part for you. I figured it’s a conversation you’d want to have on your own terms. But don’t worry, they think you’re resting up. I told them you were still processing everything. I filled them in on the blanks about the Creature and what happened to them but I imagine the details are still pretty blotchy.”

Bloom sighed “Thanks for... for everything,” she said, “I’m not sure how I’m supposed to do with all this.”

Stella gave her a sympathetic look. “It’s a lot, I know. But you did it. You were amazing, Bloom. You saved them and you destroyed that creature. You also found out

something incredible about yourself in the process.”

Bloom thought as the words sank in. She had saved them. She had stopped the creature. And more than that, she was a fairy. A real, actual fairy, with powers she had never even dreamed were possible. But instead of feeling triumphant, Bloom felt overwhelmed. Her whole life had changed in the span of a day, and she wasn't sure how to handle it.

“I don't know what it means,” Bloom admitted “Being a fairy. I mean, how could I be something like that? I didn't even know magic existed until... yesterday.”

Stella smiled gently, her eyes warm. “It's still up to you Bloom. You're a Mystic, that's for sure, and a powerful Arcanist. You have to choose if being a fairy is what you want to be. It's a lot to take in, I know. But you don't have to figure it all out right now. You have time to come to terms with it.”

“A Mystic?” Bloom stared down at her hands, still half-expecting to see flames dancing across her skin. But there was nothing but the normal, human hands she had always known. “What is a Mystic? An Arcanist?” How was she supposed to believe she was anything other than what she had been her whole life?

“A Mystic is the name of our species, Bloom. You can't escape what you are. Nor can you escape that you're able to harness a great deal of magic. That makes you an Arcanist. Being a fairy is a choice. A choice you need to make yourself.” Stella seemed to sense her confusion. She stood up, walking over to the bed and sitting beside Bloom. “I do have some good news, though,” she said, her tone brightening. “Do you want to know how I got us back here last night? I got my ring back.”

Bloom blinked, her eyes widening. “You did?!”

Stella grinned, holding out her hand showing off a small, glowing ring for Bloom to see. It shimmered with a golden light, the same light that Bloom had seen so many times

when Stella used her magic. “It was left in the ashes of the creature,” she explained, twirling the ring between her fingers. “I guess it wasn’t as careful as it thought. Once you took care of it, the ring was sitting there, waiting for me. I owe it to you that I can go home.”

Bloom couldn’t help but smile. “That’s great. I’m so happy for you Stella.”

Stella nodded, slipping the ring back onto her finger with a satisfied sigh. “Solaria’s waiting for me.” There was a moment of silence as the weight of those words settled in the air. Bloom hadn’t thought about what would happen after the battle. She had been so focused on the immediate danger, on saving her parents and stopping the creature, that she hadn’t considered what Stella would do once it was all over. The idea of her leaving, of going back to her home planet, felt strange. Like something was ending before it had begun. “But,” Stella continued, “before I go, I wanted to ask you something.”

Bloom looked intently at Stella, unsure of what to expect.

“I owe you so much, Bloom,” Stella said, her face turning serious. “You saved my life. You helped me get my ring back, and you stopped that creature. I can’t thank you enough for all of it. You could have left me alone to fight it, but you didn’t, you came back for me. There’s more to this than gratitude.”

Bloom looked confused. “What do you mean?”

Stella hesitated for a moment, as if choosing her words carefully. Stella stood from the bed and walked over to the window. “I think... that creature was sent to assassinate me.” Stella spoke. Bloom leant in, interested. “There’s a lot going on in Solaria, political things, power struggles, A lot going on across Magix to be honest. I think someone wanted me out of the way. But you... you were a wrinkle in the plan. Whoever sent that thing didn’t expect you. You were the wild card. That’s why it was so fixated on you. One powerful fairy it could deal with, but two. It didn’t expect that.”

Bloom's stomach twisted. "Assassinate you? You think someone tried to kill you? I thought you said Solaria was all sunshine and rainbows."

Stella nodded, her expression darkening. "Yes, it is, but it's real. When things are real this is what happens." She paused again, mincing her words "I hate to ask it of you Bloom.. but I need you to testify to that. I need you to come with me to Solaria, to tell the court what happened. To prove that what happened here was real."

Bloom stared at her blankly, her mind racing. Go to Solaria. On another planet she had only just heard of. A world she couldn't even imagine. And Stella was asking her to go there? To leave everything behind and testify in some alien court?

"I know it's a lot to ask," Stella continued. "It's a huge decision, and I won't pressure you. But, there would be something in it for you too. If you want to find out more about who you really are, about being an arcanist, then this is your chance. You can come with me to Solaria. I'll take you to Alfea, the fairy school there. You can learn about your powers, about your heritage, and in the process, you can help me prove what happened here and unmask whoever was behind it."

Bloom immediately felt the weight of Stella's offer settling on her. Solaria. Alfea. It was like something out of a dream, a fairy tale come to life. But this wasn't a fairy tale. It was real. And the decision Stella was asking her to make was real, too.

"I... I don't know," Bloom admitted. "I need to think about it. It's... a lot."

Stella nodded, she understood. "Of course. Take your time. I'm not leaving right away. I wanted to give you the option now so you had the longest to think about it."

"You're not?"

"No. I am staying here for a couple of weeks. Alfea's term doesn't start for a month or so yet and I wanted to see more. Your parents have offered me the guest room, if that's

okay?”

Bloom grinned at the idea “Oh that’s wonderful news!” Bloom felt a surge of gratitude toward Stella, but also a sense of uncertainty. What was she supposed to do? Go to Solaria, a world she knew nothing about, and help her friend? Or stay here, in the life she had always known, and try to figure things out on her own?

“I need to tell my parents,” Bloom said after a long moment. “They need to know what happened.”

Stella nodded. “I understand. I’ll be here if you need me.”

Bloom took a deep breath, her mind spinning with everything that had happened, everything that was still to come. She had a lot of decisions to make, decisions that would change her life forever. But for now, there was only one thing she could focus on.

Telling her parents the truth.

Bloom’s footsteps were soft on the wooden floor. The stairwell long and daunting. Her mind was racing, trying to piece together how she would even begin to explain everything. How do you tell the people who raised you that you’re not human, but also something far more extraordinary, and terrifying?

Behind her, Stella followed in silence, her presence a quiet but reassuring support. She had to tell them. After everything that had happened, she couldn’t keep this a secret any longer. They deserved to know what happened to them, and what happened to her.

When Bloom stepped into view of the living room, she found her parents exactly where she expected,. Mike sitting in his favourite armchair, reading a book, and Vanessa on

the couch, flipping through a gardening magazine. The mess was gone, for the most part, and the house looked back to normal. Her parents both looked up as Bloom stepped off the stairs. Immediately running to embrace her. They didn't speak a word.

Vanessa looked up first, her face lit with relief at the sight of Bloom. "Sweetheart. I can't begin to tell you how worried I was."

"Your friend filled us in on everything. I'd say I didn't believe it if we didn't live it." Mike said. He had a bandage on his leg and was limping. The bruise on his face looked less severe than the night prior. Bloom managed a smile, but the dread in her chest grew worse.

"I'm so glad you're both okay." Bloom said. She felt relief, true relief in seeing both of her parents there, healthy and relatively unharmed. She glanced over at Stella, who gave her a slight nod, silently encouraging her to go ahead. "What Stella told you is true. Everything about the Creature. It's why I was acting up last night. I didn't tell you because... well who would believe it? I feel terrible that it landed you guys in danger. I'm so sorry." Bloom began to cry. Mike and Vanessa said nothing as they brought Bloom into their arms again.

Taking a deep breath, Bloom pulled them over to sit down on the couch. "There's more I need to tell you though, and it's going to sound crazy but, it's the truth."

Vanessa sensed the seriousness in Bloom's tone. "What's wrong, honey? You look pale."

Mike leaned forward and tried to loosen his expression. "Honestly, after everything we saw last night dare I say nothing could sound crazy to us anymore!"

Bloom's hands twisted in her lap. "Well, I wouldn't be so sure to be honest..." Bloom said, Mike and Vanessa exchanged glances. "I don't know how to say this, but... something happened last night. Something big. Something extraordinary."

Her parents paused. “What do you mean? Did... did that creature do something to you?” Vanessa spoke softly, trying not to pry.

“I don’t know where to start,” Bloom admitted. “But I need you to listen. And I need you to believe me, do you promise?”

Mike looked at Vanessa “Of course, Bloom. We’re listening. What happened?”

Bloom took another deep breath, scrambling for the right words. Stalling for time. “That creature that attacked us, that attacked you. It isn’t from earth. It’s from somewhere else. Another world. The same world Stella is from... the same world I think...I’m from.”

Her parents stared at her, their expressions frozen in shock.

“It almost killed the both of us last night, but when it tried to hurt me I discovered that I have powers. Like Stella.”

“You have what?” Vanessa asked, barely above a whisper, as if she wasn’t sure she had heard correctly.

“Powers,” Bloom repeated, “I don’t know how to explain it, but I have magic. I’m not... I’m not normal. I’m not Human. I’m something called a Mystic.”

The silence that followed her confession was suffocating. Vanessa and Mike’s faces were a picture, their faces a mixture of disbelief and confusion.

“Bloom...” Mike started slowly, leaning forward in his chair, “I don’t understand. Are you saying this creature gave you powers?”

“No,” Bloom said. “It didn’t give me anything. I’ve had these powers all along. I just didn’t know. I... I don’t know where they come from, but when I was fighting the creature, something inside me woke up. I used my powers to stop it. I know this sounds insane, but I’m telling the truth.”

Vanessa looked pale, she reached out toward Bloom. “Sweetheart, I don’t, how can

this be? You're our daughter. You're human."

"She's telling the truth" Stella interjected quietly. "Do you remember what I did last night?" She walked forward and sat beside Bloom and reached her hand out. Light danced in her palm. Mike and Vanessa both took a moment to watch the light, then they looked up at Stella. Mike looked more surprised than anything, his hand slowly pushing his hair back in disbelief. Vanessa, on the other hand, looked less surprised, moreover lost in thought.

"I'm not human. I'm like Stella. I didn't believe it either, but it's true."

Mike's words faltered, leaving him shaking his head. "When Stella said that she was a fairy, I didn't think. It's impossible. Fairies aren't real."

Stella didn't stop the display of her magic. It filled the room with tendrils of light. This wasn't a trick. This wasn't a dream. They were seeing magic, real magic, with their own eyes. Vanessa took Mike's hands into hers to reassure him.

"I'm from Magix," Stella explained, lowering her hand and letting the light fade. "Another planet. Last night, Bloom saved my life. She discovered her powers, powers that have been lying dormant for who knows how long."

Mike was visibly struggling to make sense of it all. He lowered his head with a sigh. "You're our daughter. That will never change Bloom. But magical powers. I always knew you were special. I shouldn't be so surprised. "

"I don't understand it either. You should know that nothing has changed. I'm not like other people. I don't know where I come from, or why I have these powers, but I need to find out."

Vanessa's eyes glistened with tears as she reached out to touch Bloom's hand. "Sweetheart... all we've ever known is that we found you. You were so small... so alone. You haven't spoken this way since you were a child."

Bloom's heart skipped a beat. "I've spoken this way before?"

Vanessa turned to Mike and then back to Bloom "Well you know when we adopted you, it wasn't through the usual means. We didn't find you through an agency. We found you. You were left to fend for yourself, all alone. The only thing you could remember was your name, Bloom. But you didn't have any memory of where you came from. The only thing you spoke about was fire. Which we assumed was from the forest fire we found you in. You spent the first couple of years with us talking about magic, and fairies and you always pretended you knew magic. It's normal for a child that age."

Bloom began to connect the dots like never before. It was starting to make sense.

"There was fire," Bloom murmured "That's all I could remember? I knew I had magic, I just forgot."

Vanessa nodded, tears slipping down her cheeks. "Yes I suppose so. We never asked too many questions because... well, you were our daughter. You were ours, and we loved you. We still do."

Mike cleared his throat, "We raised you as our own, Bloom. That hasn't changed. But if there's more to your story... if there's something you need to find out, we'll support you. No matter how little or how much we understand." Bloom felt a rush of love and gratitude toward her parents. She didn't have answers yet, but she knew she wanted them.

Stella, who had been watching the exchange, spoke once more. "I can help her find out more," she said. "I've spoken to Bloom already, but you should know. I've offered her the choice to come back with me to Solaria. If she chooses to come with me, I can take her to Alfea. I'll look after her. She can learn about her powers, about where she comes from. But it's Bloom's decision." Bloom turned away at the mention of the choice. She wasn't ready to make that decision. Not yet.

She looked at her parents, and then at Stella. She offered her a path forward. Bloom wasn't ready to go. Not now. But the possibility lingered, waiting for the moment when she was.

"I need more time, to make a choice" Bloom said finally "I need to figure things out here first."

"If the offer still stands Mr and Mrs Peters, I'd like to stay."

Vanessa, who had been staring blankly at the floor snapped out of it "Of course Stella, it's the least we could do." She saw Mike was about to argue but shot him a look that told him not to say anything.

Stella smiled, "thank you."

Bloom exhaled slowly, There was so much to process, so much she didn't know. For both her parents and her.

The following morning arrived with a quiet stillness. The tension from the previous day still lingered, but there was calm in the Peters household, as if a storm had settled for now. Bloom sat at the breakfast table, her hands wrapped around a warm cup of coffee. It was a welcome return back to the routine. Across from her, her parents were chatting, about something mundane no doubt. They had accepted the truth, though how much they understood was another matter, but they were doing their best. And for that, Bloom was grateful.

Stella, now seated beside her, looked far more relaxed than the previous day. She had helped herself to toast and was flicking through a magazine she'd found on the table. It was strange to see her here, in this quiet, domestic moment, after everything they had been

through. Bloom stared down at her coffee. There was still so much she didn't know, so many questions left unanswered. Where had she come from? Why did she have these powers? What did it all mean? And the most pressing of all: what was she supposed to do now?

The scent of coffee and pancakes filled the kitchen. The smell of chocolate spread was nostalgic and a welcome comfort. Vanessa brought a plate of pancakes over and set it down beside the stack of toast. It was all so normal, but, somehow, that normalcy felt distant and alien.

The sound of her phone interrupted her thoughts.

She glanced down at the screen as if it was nothing of great importance. It was an Email. An Email from UCLA. There it was.

'There has been a change regarding your application'

She paused at the notification. The bold letters of the UCLA logo at the top of the message. This was it. Her future. The moment she had spent so many sleepless nights hoping for, working for, dreaming of. For a split second, everything else, the magic, the creature, the fire inside her, faded into the background. This was the moment she had always thought would define her life. And yet now, she felt a strange sense of detachment.

"Is that what I think it is?" Stella asked, cutting through Bloom's thoughts. Vanessa overheard and gasped, tapping Mike hard on the shoulder. Vanessa grinned and covered her mouth with her hands. They all stared at her. Waiting.

Bloom looked up, realising that everyone was now watching her. Stella, her mum, her dad. Vanessa wiped her hands on a dish towel and walked over to Bloom, her eyes wide with excitement. "It's from UCLA, isn't it?" Vanessa asked.

Bloom nodded, her fingers losing her grip on her phone. “Yeah. It is.”

Mike stood up from his chair, crossing the kitchen to join them. “Well, what are you waiting for? Open it!”

Bloom hesitated. She wasn’t sure if it was fear or uncertainty, but this wasn’t the emotion she had expected to feel in this moment. Taking a deep breath, Bloom logged into her account and read the decision. Her eyes scanned the words, her heart racing as she read the first few lines.

‘Dear Miss Peters, we are pleased to inform you...’

Bloom gasped, She had been accepted. After all the hard work, the late nights, the endless studying, she had finally made it.

“You got in, didn’t you?” Vanessa asked.

Bloom nodded, and began to cry. “Yeah. I did! I got in!” The room erupted in celebration. Vanessa wrapped her arms around Bloom, pulling her into a tight hug, whilst Mike clapped her on the back, laughing. Even Stella smiled, raising her third cup of coffee in toast to her success.

“Congratulations, Bloom,” Stella said warmly. “That’s a big deal. I can’t think of anyone more deserving.”

Bloom allowed herself to feel the joy of the moment, to revel in the fact that she had achieved something everyone thought was impossible. Beneath the surface, the questions lingered. Was this still what she wanted, could she still? Did she ever?

As her parents got carried away talking about the future, about her classes, her new life in Los Angeles, Bloom found herself retreating into her thoughts. The life they were

painting looked wonderful. She could be part of the world she always envisioned herself in. The one she had worked so hard to be a part of. She didn't have to let the discovery of her powers change anything. This was a path open to her. That made it all the more difficult.

Stella, ever observant, seemed to notice Bloom's apathy, despite the smile wide across her face. As Vanessa and Mike continued to talk, Stella asked quietly so that only Bloom could hear. "Are you okay?"

Bloom blinked. "Yeah. I mean, I got in. This is what I've always wanted."

Stella nodded, "You can still want this Bloom, you know that, don't you.?" It wasn't a question, and Bloom didn't deny what it insinuated. Instead, she sighed, her shoulders slumping. She got up and hugged her parents, trying to enjoy the moment for what it was. Stella understood that it wasn't the right time to pry at this moment. It was still Bloom's achievement after all. One that should be celebrated.

They all sat and spoke about her plans in the living room. What she could study, all the things to do in Los Angeles. How Mitzi was going to react was her Mother's favourite.

The rest of the morning passed in a blur of celebration. She was always going to take the day off school. Her parents took her to her favourite dessert place to celebrate. They could talk of nothing more than making plans for her college orientation, talking about campus life and what she would need to pack. Bloom smiled and nodded along, she enjoyed it. The idea of it at least. Her mind kept drifting back to the events of the last few days, to the fire that had ignited inside her, and to the invitation Stella had extended to leave this world for another.

Two days past and Bloom sat out in the back garden. The sun had almost set and Stella was

helping Mike cook dinner in the kitchen. Watching a princess learn to dice an onion was funnier than she had imagined. Especially when she had no idea what an onion was. The familiar sound of the back door creaking open pulled her from her thoughts. She looked up to see her mother stepping out into the yard. She carried two cups of tea, her face soft and thoughtful, as if she already knew what was weighing on Bloom's mind. Without a word, she handed one of the cups to Bloom and sat down beside her on the steps, the smell of the tea comforting her. Jasmine was her favourite.

For a few moments, they sat in comfortable silence. Bloom appreciated the quiet, the presence of her mother beside her. It was grounding, in a way, even though everything else in her life felt like it was spiralling out of control. She leant her head on her mother's shoulder. "You've been awfully quiet today. You can't blame school work anymore."

Bloom stared down at her tea, her fingers tracing the rim of the cup. "Yeah... I have a lot on my mind."

Vanessa nodded and laughed. "I figured as much. You've been through a lot the past few days. It's no wonder you're feeling a little lost. I don't know if there's been another teenage girl go through what you are right now."

Bloom let out a soft sigh "It's more than that. I thought getting into UCLA would be the most important thing in my life, that it would be everything I ever wanted. But now I'm not so sure. The discovery about myself has ruined everything."

Vanessa was quiet for a moment, then turned to Bloom. "What have you lost? Nothing. What have you learned? Everything."

Bloom hesitated, trying to find the right words to express everything swirling inside her. "After everything that's happened I don't know if I want the same things anymore. I don't know if it's because this is so fresh I'm feeling this way. I don't want to make the

wrong decision.”

Vanessa’s eyes softened, there was a hint of sadness there too. “I can’t imagine what you must be feeling right now. Discovering that you have powers... it’s not exactly the kind of thing we prepared for as parents. I do know that, no matter what you choose, you can always change your mind. Don’t let the fear of choosing stop you from following your gut.” Vanessa reached over, placing a gentle hand on Bloom’s arm. “But you don’t have to have all the answers right now, Bloom. It’s okay to be confused, to not know what you want. You’re allowed to be human, even though you aren’t one.”

Bloom looked down at her hands “I don’t want to disappoint you and Dad. I know how proud you both are of me for getting into UCLA. It’s everything we’ve talked about for years. You guys never put it on me, you let me choose my own path and you supported me through it. I feel like I’m betraying you in not being excited.”

Vanessa shook her head. “Bloom, your father and I are proud of you no matter what you choose. We’ve always wanted what’s best for you, but that doesn’t mean you can’t change your mind. That’s life. What’s most important to us is that you’re happy, that’s always what we have cared about. And that you’re being true to yourself.”

Bloom shed a tear, the sincerity in her mother’s words bringing a lump to her throat. “But what if I don’t know what that is anymore? What if I’m not sure who I am?”

Vanessa’s hand tightened “Then you take the time to figure it out. You don’t have to have it all figured out today, or tomorrow. You may never figure it out. Life is about becoming okay with that. The best thing you can do is learn to listen to your heart, and trust that it will lead you in the right direction.”

Bloom’s eyes shone with unshed tears. She had always felt a strong connection to her parents, their love and support unwavering through every stage of her life. But this, this was

something different. This was a moment of true understanding, of her mother seeing her not only as the daughter she had raised, but as the person Bloom was becoming. And that meant more to her than anything else.

“Thank you, Mum,” Bloom whispered “I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

Vanessa moved to brush a lock of hair from Bloom’s face. “It’s okay to be lost. Sometimes, you have to be lost to find somewhere you want to be.” They sat in silence for a few more moments, the breeze rustling through the trees as Bloom let her mother’s words sink in. She didn’t have to have all the answers right now. She didn’t have to choose between one path or another. All she did know was that something inside her was shifting, that her future wasn’t going to be what she had always imagined, and maybe, just maybe, that was okay. Vanessa placed a kiss on Bloom’s forehead “UCLA is a wonderful opportunity, Bloom. But if it’s not what you want anymore... if you feel like there’s something else calling to you, then that’s okay too.”

It had always felt like a dream, this moment, the moment where she would finally get to leave Mill Valley, go to college, and start a new life. But now, that dream felt incomplete. There was something missing. “I don’t know what I’m going to do yet” Bloom admitted quietly, “It’s going to make it easier knowing that the only person who I need to worry about disappointing is me. Thank you.”

Vanessa smiled, “Whatever you decide, your father and I will support you. I’m sure Stella will as-well. She’s a good friend Bloom.”

Bloom nodded, The future was uncertain, yes, but it was hers to decide. And in that uncertainty, there was possibility. Bloom felt a small flicker of hope. She didn’t know exactly where she was headed, but she wasn’t alone. She had her parents, she had Stella, and most importantly, she had herself.

After three weeks, the day had finally arrived for Stella to leave. Bloom stood in the doorway, watching her adjust the straps of her bag. It was filled with several bags of coffee, onions and two Taylor Swift CDs. Stella was going home. After everything they had been through together. After the battle with the creature and the revelations that had followed, the time had come. Her mission was complete, she had her ring back, and the threat was gone.

As Bloom watched her, a strange ache settled in her chest. Nobody would be around to scorn her for wearing red anymore. She'd become a part of her life in a strange way, and it felt as though they had known each other for a lifetime. They had truly become friends. She had spent the past couple of weeks reflecting on everything that had happened. She felt at peace in her decision. UCLA, her parents, the life she had planned for herself, it all still mattered, and she owed it to herself to see where that took her. She was a product of her experiences and ultimately most of her experiences were on Earth. She was staying.

Stella turned to face Bloom "Well, I guess this is it," she said, "I've got everything I need. Wait until the world gets their hands on coffee, Bloom. They'll worship me!"

Bloom giggled as she embraced her friend one final time. Despite their rocky start Stella had become an important bookmark in her life. The idea of her leaving felt like the end of something important.

"I'm really glad I met you, Bloom," Stella continued warmly. "I know things got... crazy. But you were incredible. I owe all of this to you. I promise I'll visit, when I'm next here."

"Six years can't go fast enough." Bloom said uneasily.

“Don’t wish the time away Bloom, enjoy everything you have worked for. Enjoy your success. Remember that you are so deserving. Promise me that?”

Bloom nodded “I promise.” They hugged again. “I don’t know what I would’ve done if you hadn’t been there. I mean, you literally saved my life first.”

Stella grinned, that familiar spark of mischief dancing in her eyes. “Well, I guess we’re even now. You will always be welcome on the trip back with me next time!” She winked. The words hung in the space between them, heavy with possibility. Stella had extended an offer to take her to Solaria, to a world filled with magic and wonder, but she turned it down. To follow her heart where it lead her before she discovered all this. Now, as she stood on the precipice of the consequence of that decision, it felt real.

Bloom bit her lip, her mind racing. She had spent her entire life trying to fit into a world that felt safe, predictable. She had worked so hard to build a future that seemed solid and reliable. She couldn’t turn her back on that, or say goodbye to her parents. That was her decision but it didn’t make it any easier to let go.

Stella’s robe shimmered in the fading light as she adjusted her bag again. “I’ll be leaving now, take care Mr and Mrs Peters, thanks for everything!”

“It was our pleasure Stella, get back safe won’t you! I’d say drop us a message but... well just get back safe!” Mike said as he shook her hand. Vanessa came over to give her one final hug goodbye.

“Make sure you give whoever sent that creature a piece of my mind, won’t you!” She said, cupping her face.

“Will do!” Stella giggled. “Well... that’s my tour de earth complete. Goodbye Bloom. Thank you. For everything.”

Stella shed a tear and began to walk to find a quiet area to open the portal. Bloom

stood and waited at the door until she couldn't see Stella any longer. She was gone. She had told herself all day that she was ready, that she had made her decision, but as she watched Stella leave, something inside her shifted. The thought of letting Stella go, of watching her walk out of her life and return to a world Bloom was only beginning to understand, felt wrong. She would wonder about what Magix was like for years, at least, if not forever!

She turned to face her parents closing the door to the house.

"Bloom, are you alright?"

"I think I want to go with her?"

"What?" Vanessa said. Mike snapped back.

"Stella's already gone, It's so quick Bloom!"

"I know, and I'm sorry. I'm so so sorry. I can't pass this up. I'll spend the rest of my life wondering!" Bloom said frantically as she ran around the house grabbing bits and pieces that she wanted to take with her, cramming it into her art bag. "I searched for every reason to pass it by, but I can't do it!"

"Bloom! Stop!" Mike said sternly. Bloom slowed down and stared at her parents. She began to cry. As did Vanessa. As did Mike.

"If there's one thing I know about you Bloom, it's that there's no stopping you is there?" Vanessa said, wiping a tear from her eye. "We half knew you might change your mind today Bloom. We could just feel that your spirit isn't here anymore, it's somewhere else. You need to go and find it!"

"You're going to go, and you aren't going to worry about us. This is for you. We will be waiting when you come back. You will come back right?" Mike said. They were both handling this far better than Bloom thought.

Bloom laughed and hugged them both once more "Yes, I'll visit as soon as I can I

promise! I love you both so much.” As they pulled away, Bloom turned toward the door.”I guess this is it then, just like that”

“Just like that” Vanessa replied. “Make us proud, Bloom”

“Thanks Mum” Bloom stared into her mother’s eyes for one final time.

“Now run! Bloom, you must run! Go!” Vanessa yelled. Bloom bolted out of the door. She didn’t look back, for she might just lose her nerve at the last hurdle. She knew her parents would be waiting for her when she gets back. This was it. She was ready. All she needed to do now was find Stella.

She didn’t stop running. Her legs burned. Her heart pounded. Every part of her body was screaming at her to stop, but she couldn’t. It was too important. She ran to the end of the street and into a small clearing behind some trees. Stella was there, sceptre at the ready.

“Wait!” Bloom called out, frantic and urgent.

Stella paused mid-action, facing her with wide eyes. “What is it? What’s wrong?!”

Bloom’s ragged gasps fought to steady herself. Her entire body was buzzing with adrenaline, her pulse racing as she realised what she was about to say. “Take me with you!” she said, resolute. “I don’t know what’s going to happen, and I don’t have all the answers yet. But I can’t stay here. Not anymore. I need to know who I am. Please.”

Stella paused for a moment, looking Bloom up and down. Slowly, her eyes lit up, a wide grin spreading across her face. “Are you serious?”

Bloom nodded, the weight of her decision finally settling into place. It wasn’t easy, and she knew there would be challenges ahead, things she couldn’t even begin to imagine. But something inside told her, this was the right choice.

“I’m serious,” Bloom said “I’m ready.”

Without hesitation, Stella rushed forward, pulling Bloom into a tight hug, her energy

shimmering. “I knew you couldn’t resist” she said filled with joy. “You have no idea how amazing this is going to be!”

Bloom smiled, pure excitement bubbling up inside her. “Do I need to bring anything with me?”

“No... nothing!” Stella said with resolve.

“Nothing? What about money?”

“Well you won’t be wearing any of those drab things you call clothes in Solaria, we will get you a whole new wardrobe, everything you need is on me! None of your earth money will work. Oh, You’ll love it Bloom. Fairy school is like human school but we all have magic powers and better outfits!” Stella clapped in triumphant glee. “Now, you should know, my sceptre isn’t an infinite well. Jumps between dimensions is powerful business, you won’t be able to come back whenever you want... you know that right.”

“I know Stella.”

“Well, on that note...are you ready?” Stella asked with a flourish. Bloom took one final look around at the quaint town of Mill Valley. At the sky she had always known. Of everything that had filled her life for the past 18 years.

“I’m ready, to Solaria!”

Stella began to spin her staff, tendrils of holographic light began to form as they looped around them. Stella twisted the sceptre in various patterns and spins, each time the wind around them picking up more and more. The tendrils of light began to collide into the girls’ bodies. Stella finally slamming her staff to the ground. The orbiting tendrils enveloping them as they disappeared into the unknown.

* Interlude One *

The night sky over Cloudtower was clear, the two moons casting their silver light over the vascular purple shapes of the castle. The waves tossed gently at the base of the small island. There were several spires to the castle, each connected by bridges of iron and purple crystal. It was a seemingly peaceful night for the newest member of the Cloudtower faculty.

In one of the tallest towers, a figure stood alone in front of an ornate window, staring out at the vast expanse of Roccaluce sea. Her long, silver hair shimmered in the moonlight, cascading down her back like a frozen river. Her sharp features complemented her striking blue eyes. She wore a long, flowing robe of midnight blue, adorned with intricate patterns that seemed to shift and swirl with every movement. Around her neck, hanging from a delicate chain, was a crystal. A deep, translucent gem, the colour of dusk, nestled against her chest.

For centuries upon centuries, that crystal had been in her family, dormant. It was an artefact of the past, an heirloom of her late mother's. She kept it as a reminder of her and all of the witches that came before.

The woman unpacked a couple of books from her suitcase, her room was modest in

size and decorated in various shades of purple. It had been a long few days of travel from the far moon of Wisperia. An early night would do her good, she thought. Pulling back the sheets she set her crystal down on the desk, opening her book on advanced Arcanistry for Witches and Wizards.

Out of the corner of her eye, a faint glow permeated. Glancing to her side, it was the crystal. How could it be? The woman reached for the necklace, her fingers tightened around the delicate chain, lifting the crystal closer to her eyes. She stared at it intently, her sharp gaze narrowing as the light within the crystal grew brighter this time. It was undeniable now. Something had changed. Something had awakened.

The crystal cast a warm glow across the woman's pale skin. A trick of the light, surely, she thought. This could only mean one thing, but how could it? The woman's mind raced, broken by a melodic ringer coming from the corner of the room.

Composing herself, she hurried over, attaching a watch-like device to her wrist. Her eyes flitting between eyeing the crystal and navigating the holographic display. She answered. Two other women appeared on the screen. One with long dark hair, olive skin and deep eyes. The other with coiled indigo hair, deep skin and aquamarine eyes. They all had the same angular face as the third woman.

"The crystal... is yours...?"

"Active? Yes, and just as we thought this year wouldn't get anymore opportune." The dark haired lady spoke.

"How is this possible, the crystals haven't glowed in centuries!"

"Well, here they are, all three bright as a flame." The white haired witch said. "Darcy, do you think this has anything to do with your work? Coincidental timing, don't you think?"

"It's hard to say... we haven't heard anything back yet." Darcy uttered, her voice

silken and sly.

“Stormy, how quickly can you get to Magix?”

“I’ll leave on the first ship tomorrow.”

“Excellent. It seems fate has bestowed upon us the task of our ancestors.” The silver-haired woman’s eyes darkened as she looked back at the crystal. “I want all of our informants from every corner of this wretched planet to stay vigilant, especially in Solaria. If they hear so much as a whisper, a peep of anything out of the ordinary, I want to hear about it.”

“What about Griffin?” Darcy injected.

“What about her?”

“She might be a witch but we all know where her loyalties lie.” Stormy said.

“Griffin won’t be a problem, at least not yet, actually access to the Cloudtower library is going to be invaluable.” The silver-haired woman held up her crystal once more, the light within it pulsing consistently. “Meet me at the Black Mud Swamp in three days time, I will stay in touch.”

The hologram faded, and the room fell silent once more, other than the shimmer of the crystal. The woman placed the crystal around her neck watching the way it seemed to shimmer, still in disbelief. She had heard the legends since she was a child, stories her mother had told her of the Wisperian crystals.

What had stirred it from its dormancy?

She looked out the window to the glittering expanse of the water stretching to the horizon, feeling the weight of a destiny she hadn’t quite anticipated. This was what her entire bloodline had been waiting for.

✱ Chapter Seven ✱

Fantastical colours danced in Bloom's periphery. Wisps of starlight consumed her entire field of vision, swirling and sparkling around her. A sensation of falling possessed her body. Gentle, to begin with, slowly becoming so forceful she dipped in and out of consciousness. She looked around for any glimpse of Stella, she was nowhere. So she closed her eyes as tight as she could until the feeling finally stopped...

"Bloom, are you okay?" A voice echoed. Curled up on the ground completely passed out was Bloom. Fluttering her eyes as Stella's face came into focus. Her expression shifting from worry to relief. "Thank the stars!" Stella exhaled. "Listen, if you're going to vomit please do it on the hard floors, the rugs are all ancient."

Bloom went to respond but could only sit up and nod towards Stella. She took a moment, and looked up. Painted on the ceiling was a beautiful mural of the sun, moon and stars. Against a backdrop of midnight blue, twinkling lights formed constellations she had never seen before. At the centre, the sun's beams stretched across the ceiling and walls. The mural seemed to shift and glow, infusing the chamber with a warm light.

Bloom brought her head downwards; following the mural. The walls looked like golden sandstone, each as embellished as the ceiling. Four pillars made of the same material stood in the middle of the space. The artwork seemed to tell a story of some sort.

"Where.. where are we?" Bloom finally said in awe, her voice was hoarse and still in a slight state of shock from the jump.

"We're currently underneath the Temple Of Light. The only people allowed down here are the royal family and important delegates from the other realms. I thought this would

be one of the only places in the city we could go where we wouldn't draw attention." Bloom took a moment to take it all in, the sheer beauty of the chamber still almost too much to process. Stella smiled before lifting her wrist to look at, what seemed to Bloom, a small bejewelled bracelet. A hologram then appeared above her wrist, crystal clear, like a screen.

"What is that?" Bloom said in enchantment, rising from the floor so she could get a closer look.

"It's called an Omni, kind of like the slabs of glass you carry around on Earth, only so much more functional. It allows us to communicate and control a myriad of other things, like... fashion!" Stella's eyes lit up as she spoke. Then, the wristband released a white glowing wave of light that formed around Stella into a plain sienna outfit. Stella smiled at Bloom, who stood weak in the knees and bewildered at the sight of it.

"It's incredible..."

"This? It's drab, Bloom, it's meant to be understated... Speaking of understated, I need to get you out of that abomination you have on..."

"I wasn't talking about the clothes, Stella. I was talking about that thing! How does it work? Why did you not use it on Earth?"

"Bloom..." Stella wandered off through one of the many doorways in the temple. "Do I look like the girl who knows the answer to that? Something to do with little nano robots or something..." Her voice echoed away as she spoke. A minute or two passed, and she returned with a dark navy cloak. It was soft velvet and had golden trimmings around the hood and hems. "As for why I didn't use my Omni on Earth, it simply doesn't work. Even if it did, I'm strictly prohibited from using non-essential magic on my missions." Stella flung the cloak around Bloom. "Listen, wear this until we can get you into something a little more... modern."

Bloom wandered around the chamber, trying to work out the story of the mural. A dragon appeared to breathe life to eight planets. There was another creature depicted too, it almost looked like-

“Listen, Bloom.” Stella said, demanding her attention, her face and voice more serious. “Whatever that creature was on Earth, it didn’t come from here. Monsters like that only exist in legend. It didn’t get there by accident. It was after something... whether it was looking for you or for me doesn’t matter. All we know is that we cannot trust anyone. Not my father, not the Magix Council. Only us and a couple of friends. One of them I have contacted, and that’s where we’re going first. You’re powerful, Bloom. The magic you used is no ordinary feat... Not only that, you’re the only other person who saw that creature. Something is happening, Bloom, and we’re going to find out what it is. I don’t know how you ended up on Earth, but we’re going to get all the answers together... okay?”

“Okay,” Bloom stated, her voice sounding assured for the first time in a while.

“Then let’s go. I can’t wait to show you outside.”

Bloom and Stella left the temple through the back onto a small street. For the first time, Bloom saw the sky of a new world. Stella put on some oversized sunglasses to try and mask her identity. She led without saying a word, and Bloom tried to follow closely behind her, every second a new question coming to mind. Both about Solaria and what Stella had told her in the temple moments ago. So far, wherever they were, looked almost like Rome in its architecture. Tall, stately buildings of weathered stone flanked either side. Their facades covered with details and carvings. Vines clung to walls, weaving a tapestry that softened the harshness of stone. The street twisted and turned, revealing glimpses of hidden courtyards of everyday people. That was the most magical of it all to Bloom: how ordinary it seemed to everyone else. The sheer beauty of the rest of the city began to come into focus. The pair

stepped out onto the main balcony in front of the temple. Only then did Bloom realise that she stood on top of a mountain with a panoramic view of the entire city.

“Bloom, welcome to my home, Cittaluce.” Stella gestured to the spectacle. Bloom had never seen or imagined anything like it before. It was a city both of magic and technology. A kaleidoscope of colours mesmerised the eye everywhere she looked. The skyline crafted from gleaming spires. Buildings of glass and metal soared, all different shapes and all covered in greenery. The city stretched from beyond the horizon all the way to the ocean. The sky was a different colour than it was on Earth, more a periwinkle than a blue. Bloom stood looking at the panorama of the city, shaking her head in disbelief.

“This is Solaria?” Bloom whispered, crossing her arms over the balcony.

“Yes, well, this is the capital of the Realm. Look, you can see my house from here!” Stella took Bloom’s head and turned it left to face a large palace in the distance. It curved like a crescent moon and was built with materials like the Temple of Light behind them. “I can’t wait to show you the city! We have somewhere to be though, but you’ll get to see more on the way! Come on!” Stella exclaimed as she dashed to a building in the distance. Bloom watched the other people at the top of the mountain. They were sparse, one couple looked out over the city as Bloom did. Another took pictures of the temple using the Omni Stella had shown her earlier. Almost nothing worked the same as it did on earth, yet everything was vaguely familiar. Looking at the clothing of everyone else, she understood why she couldn’t walk around in the outfit she was in under the cloak. Bloom ran to catch up with Stella, taking in as much as she could.

“Stella, wait, you never told me where we’re going or who we’re going to meet!”

Stella looked at Bloom for a moment, as if deciding whether to reveal more information than she needed.

“We’re going to the Lupus District on the far side of the city. Before I left for Earth, an old friend of mine contacted me to ask for help. I’m hoping she’ll return the favour... and right now, we need all the help we can get. She’s so way smarter than me, so she’ll be amazing at figuring this whole thing out.”

“Great. What’s her name?”

Again, Stella paused to think. “Layla. Her name is Layla.”

Stella gestured to a building on the very edge of the mountain. It bore aspects of a temple but sparkling and new. In the distance, Bloom saw what looked like floating trains, pearlescent in colour, pulling in and out of the structure.

She continued to follow behind Stella as they made their way through the bustling streets of Cittaluce. Every corner they turned revealed another spectacle, a city that brimmed with life in a way that Bloom had never experienced before. It was breathtaking and overwhelming all at once. Stella powered through the streets but Bloom couldn’t help but slow down to take it all in. Even the mundane cobblestone flooring was something to be admired. From small floating market stalls where objects danced in midair to the performers juggling droplets of water. Solaria was nothing like Earth.

Everyone wore, what looked like to Bloom, eclectic and strange clothing. It all had a glistening quality whilst still looking otherworldly. It wasn’t fantastical as she had imagined it, nobody was wearing capes or tunics or gowns. The clothes were asymmetrical. She could see skirts, crop tops, tall boots, off-shoulder collars and ultra-fitted bodices all in one glance. All colourful and jewel-toned.

“Bloom!” Stella cut through. “You can see more from the Levée!”

Stella grabbed Bloom’s hand and guided her through the street. They finally approached the station, and it was as spectacular up close. Before her stood a grand structure that looked like a piece of art in and of itself. The station consisted of glass-like material that shimmered with shifting colours, as if it was infused with magical energy. Symbols lined the exterior and glowed, giving the entire building an ethereal quality. The entrance, a series of arches, rippled like water as people passed through, their forms distorting, before returning to normal.

“Is that...?” Bloom trailed off, her eyes fixed on the station.

Stella glanced back at her and smiled. “The train station? Yep, pretty cool, right? Here we call it a Levée station. The architecture here is a blend of function and beauty, something we’re quite proud of in Solaria. This district is quite renowned for it and a tourist hot-spot so you’ll have to excuse the grandeur.”

Bloom nodded, still in awe as they approached the entrance. They stepped through the entrance archways. It felt like passing through water but without getting wet, as odd as that sounds. The interior of the station was vast, with tall columns made of translucent crystal that refracted the light, casting rainbows across the walls. Bloom noticed faint runes etched into the polished floor. Above them, the ceiling opened to the periwinkle sky. In the centre of the main hall, a large holographic map displayed midair. It seemed to show the train routes across Cittaluce. The paths lit up with flowing lines of light, each representing a different line that connected the various districts of the city.

“This place is incredible,” Bloom whispered, her eyes darting around, trying to absorb every detail.

Stella smiled, a glint of pride in her eyes. “I’ve always taken it for granted, but yeah,

it is pretty amazing. Wait until you see the views from on board!”

They walked over to the platform, where a sleek, hovering vehicle waited. Its exterior was smooth, a metallic surface that rippled in colour as it hovered above the track. The closest thing it resembled was a bullet train Bloom had only seen photos of on Earth.

The doors slid open. Bloom peered down underneath the carriage. “It’s floating... How?”

Stella shrugged. “This actually isn’t magic, believe it or not. It’s some pretty advanced tech straight from Zenith. They travel through those rings, you see...” Stella pointed to shimmering golden rings on either end of the station and in the sky. “I have no idea how it works though. You’d need to find someone from Zenith to explain that to you.”

“Zenith?” Bloom said as she stepped inside. The seats were plush and comfortable, each one responded to the presence of passengers, adjusting to their comfort. The windows were large and curved, offering a panoramic view of the city outside as the levée prepared to depart.

“Zenith is one of the six realms of Magix. Solaria, that’s us, we’re the best, obviously, but Zenith is where they make a lot of the technology you see around. They came up with the Omni, the levitation trains, Arcstream, bio-domes, the list goes on! I can’t pretend to understand any of it though.” Stella monologued casually as they took their seats. Bloom looked around at the other passengers. They all appeared completely at ease, their Omni screens floating above their wrists as they went about their business. One woman, sitting a few rows ahead was trying on several different outfits. Each materialising and dematerialising in quick succession.

Across the aisle, a group of students, young teenagers by the look of them, chatted excitedly. Their voices alive with the teachings of whatever they had learned that day. One of

them conjured small rainclouds in the air with a flick of her wrist, causing her friends to giggle as they watched them dance.

“So, is magic just... everywhere here?” Bloom asked, turning to Stella, who was watching people board the train through the window.

“Pretty much,” Stella replied with a nod. “It will take some getting used to but, everything is built around magic here. Some people can use it without tools, like us, but there are also ways to use magic even if you don’t have innate powers. We’ve found ways to fuse magic and technology, but we also use magic to advance our science and vice versa. That is why everything here looks so advanced.”

“It’s amazing,” Bloom said, looking around.

As the levée began to move, Bloom felt a soft rumble beneath her feet. The train glided through the city, and Bloom watched in amazement as they soared past towering spires, glowing bridges, and floating platforms. Below, the streets of Cittaluce buzzed with life, Solarians moving about their day as if it was the most mundane thing in the world.

The train picked up speed, and the cityscape blurred as they left the central district and headed toward the outskirts. As they moved, Stella leaned closer to Bloom, her voice lowering.

“Listen, we’re going to meet someone I trust completely,” she said, her tone serious. “Her name’s Layla. She’s from southern Solaria, and she’s fierce, one of the strongest fairies I know. More than that, she’s smart, resourceful. If anyone can help us figure out what’s going on, it’s her.”

Bloom stared at Stella, noting the shift in her voice. “You keep saying we can’t trust anyone else. How do we know we can trust her. Have you told me everything you think is really going on?”

Stella's face darkened as she turned her head back to the window. "I have a gut feeling something bigger is at play, Bloom. That creature we faced on Earth, I can't get it out of my head that it wasn't some random attack. It's like I told you on Earth, Someone wanted me out of the way. Which means someone sent it. I don't know who yet, but I have my suspicions. They would need to be high ranking members of the Solarian government. They were the only ones who knew about my mission on Earth. Right now, we can't risk letting anyone else know what we've seen or what we're planning."

"Not even your father?" Bloom asked softly. "He's the King, surely you don't suspect him, Stella?"

Stella's jaw clenched. "Of course I don't. But we especially cannot tell my father. The politics in Solaria are complicated. The Magix Council is supposed to keep everything in balance, but there are people who will do anything to seize more power. I have a feeling that this creature was part of something more than what we can see."

Bloom's stomach twisted as she listened. The thought of being hunted by forces she couldn't even comprehend terrified her. Stella had said it all before, but why did she feel as though she was still hiding something from her?

"We'll be safe with Layla," Stella added reassuringly. "She has connections in the Lupus district, hopefully she can help us figure out our next move. We can't do this completely alone after all."

As they spoke, the train began to slow, the regal city centre of Cittaluce giving way to a different kind of landscape. The buildings here remained grand but they had a rougher, more industrial feel. Factories and warehouses were what the Lupus district was known for.

The train slid into the station, and Bloom couldn't help but marvel again at the design. The platform hovered in midair. Above them, silver lanterns lit the station.

Bloom smiled, though her mind raced. Whoever this Layla was, Bloom knew one thing for certain, she was about to dive even deeper into a world she was only just beginning to understand.

* Chapter Eight *

The shift in atmosphere felt immediate as Bloom and Stella stepped out of the station and into the Lupus District. The air carried a heavier, cooler quality with a faint metallic scent. It contrasted with the luminescent, ethereal beauty of the Cittaluce centre. Here, everything seemed a shade darker in mood. The Lupus District gave off a different energy, more grounded, more industrial, with an edge of excitement. It prickled at the back of Bloom's neck. Shops and workshops lined the streets, many of them bustling with activity as artisans and engineers courted their patrons.

"This place is great," Bloom murmured, her eyes wide as she took it all in. She followed Stella off the platform and scanned the streets ahead. The buildings in Lupus stood tall and modern, much like those in the city centre, but constructed from darker materials. Steel and polished stone, with fewer of the glowing and shimmering. Instead, neon lights flickered in cool blues and purples, casting long, eerie shadows as they moved along the narrow streets. A rough elegance defined the district, like a city built on hard work and resilience rather than pure beauty.

Stella smirked. "Well, it's not as glamorous as Central Cittaluce, but it's got its own

charm.”

Bloom eyed a group of workers across the street, their dark uniforms practical, their hands glowing with magic as they levitated beams of metal. “I don’t know if I’ll ever get used to this.”

Stella shook her head as she led the way down the sidewalk. “Trust me, plain ol’ ferrokinesis gets old fast. A lot of Solaria’s technology gets produced here; everything from magical tools to hover tech and kinesis-powered vehicles. It’s grittier than the centre, but it’s still safe. For the most part.”

“For the most part?” Bloom echoed, raising an eyebrow.

Stella shrugged and adjusted her oversized sunglasses whilst glancing around the street. “You just have to know where to go and who to trust. Layla grew up here, so she knows the ins and outs. She’ll keep us safe once we find her.”

“I thought you said Layla was from southern Solaria...”

“I... did I?” Stella paused. “She’s from southern Solaria yes, Regulus to be specific. Lovely place, by the midnight sea, the crown has a beach house there. We must have you when this whole thing is over. Anyway, shall we proceed?” Stella chuckled.

Bloom sensed she may have flustered Stella, but decided not to press on it. They both crossed the street and wandered down the main plaza. The streets around them bustled. People moved quickly, their faces shadowed by the hoods of dark cloaks or sleek jackets, their eyes sharp as they went about their business. They fit right in with their cloaks. Fewer magical displays appeared here, no floating markets or verdant fountains. The quiet of the machinery blended with the soft clattering of metal.

“So, how are we going to get to Layla?” Bloom asked, eyeing a large map on a nearby wall, its glowing lines outlining the districts of Cittaluce. “Is she far from here?”

Stella tilted her head and paused. “Not too far, but we need to be quick. The longer we stay out in the open, the higher the chance of someone recognising me. Pains of being royal and beautiful.”

“We could get a car,” Bloom suggested, uncertain about how transportation worked in Solaria.

Stella made a face. “Cars are inefficient, especially in Lupus. We’ll get stuck in traffic, and the streets here can be a nightmare for something that big.” She paused, glancing down a side street where a line of sleek, hovering bikes waited. “No, we’ll take the hover bikes. They’re faster and free to use.”

“Hover bikes?” Bloom repeated.

Stella smirked and led Bloom toward the row of bikes. She clapped and kicked her feet giddy. “Yeah. They can run on the magic of the user. They’re perfect for getting around the city, especially in a place like Lupus.”

As they approached the bikes, Bloom examined them closely. The bikes hovered a few inches off the ground, their frames sleek and streamlined, with glowing lines etched along the sides. They were a deep red colour. Each bike had handlebars that looked different to the rest of the vehicle. A faint drone filled the air around them.

“Okay, I’m impressed,” Bloom admitted, eyeing the bikes with a mix of excitement and apprehension. “So how does it work? Do we just... hop on and hope for the best?”

“Not quite,” Stella said with a grin. She walked up to one of the bikes and placed her hand on the handlebars. A glow surrounded her fingers, and the bike responded instantly, lighting up with the colour of Stella’s magic along its frame. “You have to attune the bike to your magic. They can run on electricity, but since we can, we can power it ourselves. We don’t have time to play around, so hop on.”

Bloom watched Stella's fingers move over the vehicle, her light magic coursing through the bike as it adjusted to her power. The glow along its frame strengthened as it continued to attune to Stella's energy.

"Is it safe?" Bloom asked, her stomach flipping.

"Completely," Stella replied with a wink. "Just follow my lead."

With a deep breath, Bloom swung her leg over the bike and settled into the seat behind Stella. The bike steadied beneath her, strange but not uncomfortable. It felt almost natural, like the bike had become an extension of her body. Stella tapped a button on the bike, and with that, a light grey suit and helmet materialised over the girls. Bloom looked at both of her hands and felt her helmet in bewilderment.

"Ready?" Stella asked.

"As I'll ever be," Bloom replied, gripping Stella tighter.

"Good, Let's ride!"

With a flick of her wrist, They shot forward, the bike zooming ahead with a burst of speed. Bloom gasped and closed her eyes as the bike surged forward. Wind whipped through their hair as they both soared through the streets of Lupus. It was thrilling, far faster than any bike or car she had ridden on Earth. The city blurred around them as they weaved through the narrow streets, dodging other vehicles and moving into special lanes for the bikes.

The streets of the Lupus District stretched ahead, darker and more shadowed the further they ventured in. Stella leant backwards and the bike went up at an angle giving Bloom a view from high of the district and the rest of Cittaluce in the distance.

"It's cool right?" Yelled Stella over the rushing wind and bike. Bloom remained speechless and just laughed at the absurdity of it all. They drove above the buildings for a while before Stella brought the bike back down to street level and began to slow down.

“There’s so much going on here,” Bloom called out.

“Well, that’s Lupus!” Stella replied over the noise.

They rounded a corner. Bloom’s heart skipped a beat as they narrowly avoided a floating delivery cart. The driver glaring at them as they passed. The streets here were more crowded and chaotic, and Bloom tightened her grip as they weaved through traffic. Despite the chaos, the rhythm steadied her. She trusted in Stella’s lead.

The city blurred past in flashes of dark stone, glowing lights, and bursts of magic.

“Almost there!” Stella called as they neared a looming structure at the district’s edge.

Bloom squinted at the building ahead. Taller than the rest, its dark stone exterior glowed with flickering blue. The building looked much older than many of the ones she had seen on the way. It was much more quaint than grand, but had the allure of an english tavern.

“Is that it?” Bloom asked, breathless from the ride.

“That’s it,” Stella confirmed, slowing as they neared the entrance. “We’ll meet Layla here. She’s expecting us.”

They dismounted the bike, the grey body suit and helmet disappearing. Bloom scanned the area. The Lupus District carried a strange beauty, but no less magical. It felt like a place of secrets, that’s for sure.

Stella adjusted her sunglasses and gave Bloom a reassuring smile. “Ready to meet Layla?”

Bloom took a deep breath, her heart still racing. “Let’s do it.”

Stella led the way and pushed open the heavy wooden door. Warmth and the scent of food and drink wrapped around them the moment they stepped inside. The tavern’s interior was cozy, with low ceilings and dark wooden beams overhead. Framed magical artefacts lined the

walls. Glowing orbs, enchanted mirrors, and other trinkets that glimmered with magic. The space bustled with conversation, though it wasn't overcrowded. Groups of people chatted and laughed around small wooden tables. In the corner, a floating instrument played a soft melody, adding to the atmosphere. It was the most Earthly place she had seen so far, but it wasn't without a quaint charm.

"There she is," Stella said, gesturing toward a table near the back.

Bloom followed her and spotted Layla immediately. She was impossible to miss. Sitting with her back to the wall, Layla radiated an effortless confidence. Her dark, coiled hair pulled back into two buns. She wore sleek, dark green clothes that looked both practical and stylish. Muscles defined her form, even from a distance, giving her the appearance of someone strong and athletic.

At the moment, Layla focused on something in front of her. As they got closer, a strange magenta magic rippled between her fingers. A sphere of a bright pink substance hovered between her hands, rippling in the low light, whilst another person across the table tried to control a similar sphere. It looked like a game, a test of control. Layla's face remained calm, whilst her opponent struggled.

With a flick of her wrist, Layla made her sphere spin faster, the substance changing form and swirling into a tight vortex. Several smaller orbs came out of the first. Her opponent's sphere wobbled, turned into water, then splashed to the floor, soaking them. Layla smiled, not smugly, but with quiet amusement, like the game hadn't offered much challenge.

"Nice try," she said, her voice low and steady. "But you're gonna need more control to get good enough to beat me."

Her opponent, a young man with sandy hair, laughed and wiped his face. "I'll get you next time, Layla. You wait. Thanks for teaching me!"

Layla chuckled and leaned back, letting the sphere turn into water and evaporate from her hands.

“Layla!” Stella called out as they approached. “You’re still giving these poor guys a hard time?”

Layla’s face lit up as she turned. “Stella!” She jumped to her feet and rushed over, wrapping Stella in a tight hug. “By the shore! I was worried sick about you! What happened? You were supposed to be back weeks ago!”

Stella winced and patted her back. “Yeah, about that... like I said, it’s a long story.”

Layla pulled back and looked her over, checking for injuries. “You’re okay, right? No broken bones? No missing limbs?”

“I’m fine,” Stella said with a laugh. “One piece. Mostly thanks to Bloom.” She gestured to Bloom, who stood awkwardly nearby.

Layla turned to Bloom and extended a hand. “So, you must be Bloom. I’m Layla. It’s great to meet you.”

Bloom shook her hand, trying not to be shy. “Nice to meet you too,” she said, her voice quieter than she meant. Layla had deep blue eyes, flawless ebony skin and smelled faintly of sea salt and amber. What was most striking of all was the way she moved, graceful, like a dancer, fluid and precise.

“Come on, sit down,” Layla said, gesturing to the table. “We’ve got a lot to talk about.”

Bloom sat across from Layla. A candle flickered in the centre of the table, casting soft shadows. Layla leaned forward curiously. Stella returned with three purple drinks in peculiar glasses. She took a swig, the taste was sweet, like some sort of fruit juice.

“So, what happened?” Layla asked, looking between them as Stella sat down. “Why

didn't you come back when you were supposed to?"

Stella sighed and rested her elbows on the table. "It's complicated. I went to Earth for my mission as planned, but things didn't go smoothly. The Solarian Ring was stolen by some kind of creature. Something I've never seen before. It ambushed me, and I got stuck there trying to track it down."

Layla's eyes widened. "A creature? What kind? Was it from Earth?"

Stella shook her head. "We don't know. It was definitely a magical creature of some kind. It wasn't only after the ring, it hunted us. It attacked Bloom. It developed this obsession with her."

Layla looked at Bloom, her eyebrow raising. "Hunted you? How did it find Bloom?"

"That's what we're trying to figure out," Stella said grimly. "It was intelligent, it knew how to lure us out. It wasn't animalistic, it was strategic. We don't know if it was after me, Bloom, or both. It definitely wasn't from Earth but it can't be from Magix either. It was powerful, and it nearly killed us."

Bloom shuddered at the memory. Even now, the thought of it twisted her stomach. "It... it was like nothing I've ever seen," she muttered. "It had this horrible presence. Like it was made of shadow. Like it was made of decay, of death itself."

Layla sat back, her expression grim. "That's troubling. Very troubling indeed. Peculiar though, especially since you both survived."

"Barely," Stella muttered, rubbing her neck. "Thanks to Bloom that is. But we did. And I got the ring back which is why I'm back."

Layla nodded slowly. "That's good. But you're right, something feels off. A creature attacks you and somehow managed to find a Mystic on Earth. It doesn't make any sense Stella, what are the chances?"

“I’ve been wondering the same thing” Stella said.

“There have been rumours for weeks. Attacks, disappearances, anomalies. You know everything I’ve told you Stella...” Layla looked to Stella as if to convey something she didn’t wish to share with Bloom. “It’s like everything is shifting. Something’s happening, and it’s bigger than any of us.”

“Do you think it’s connected?” Bloom asked, her heart pounding.

Layla shrugged, squinting her eyes. “It’s possible. I don’t believe in coincidences. If something went after you, Stella, and then found Bloom, there’s more going on than we know.”

Stella leaned forward, narrowing her eyes. “That’s what I’ve been thinking. Which is why we need to stick together. If something is happening, we’ll need all the help we can get. I can’t trust anyone else. It’s like I said to Bloom, the only people who knew about my mission were high up in the Solarian government. I can’t trust my father, not the council. Just you and Bloom right now.”

Layla nodded. “Agreed. We need to be careful. If the council hears about this, they’ll bury it, let alone giving information to whoever is behind this. As for your father...” She paused. “We have to think about his safety as well as yours and Bloom’s.”

Stella’s jaw tightened. “Yeah. I know. I can’t say I haven’t considered they could go for him. Whoever did this needed me out of the way though, on Earth. So my thinking is that they don’t have the power to hurt my father as it stands.”

Bloom tilted her head to each of them, wide eyed. She had only just discovered she was a fairy. Now she faced political schemes and magical conspiracies. “So... what do we do now?” Bloom asked.

Stella and Layla exchanged a glance before Layla answered. “We go to Alfea.”

“Alfea?” Bloom repeated.

“It’s the school I told you about, remember” Stella explained. “The best place to learn magic, train, figure out who you are. I wondered if we should hold off going for now but Layla is right. It’s safe, or safer than anywhere else. If something’s happening in the magical dimension, we’ll figure it out at Alfea. And we’ll be together. We’ll be under the protection of headmistress Faragonda.”

Layla nodded. “We’ll have time to gather information and find out what’s going on. Nobody would dare come for us in Alfea.”

Bloom swallowed hard. It wasn’t only about answers anymore, it was about survival. That creature hadn’t been the end. Something bigger loomed.

“Okay,” Bloom said after a moment. “When do we leave?”

Stella smiled and reached across the table, squeezing Bloom and Layla’s hand. “I’m so glad I have you both. I couldn’t do this alone.”

A couple of hours went by as Stella recounted the entire story to Layla. The tavern had settled into a comfortable evening atmosphere. The conversations blending into a background melody of laughter and low voices. Bloom listened to the story Stella recounted almost as if she didn’t live through it. She was still processing everything Layla and Stella had said about Alfea and the dangers stirring across Solaria. She didn’t know what to expect from this new school, but she trusted them both, more than she had trusted anyone.

As they talked, Stella’s voice dropped to a whisper, her expression shifting from relaxed to sharp. Her amber eyes narrowed, fixed on something across the room. “Don’t look now, but someone’s watching us.”

Bloom instinctively turned her head, but Stella nudged her arm. “I said don’t look.”

“Who is it?” Bloom whispered, her stomach dropping.

Layla’s eyes flicked to where Stella gestured. At a table a few meters away, a cloaked figure sat alone, their hood pulled low over their face. They appeared to nurse a drink, but their posture was too stiff for someone enjoying an evening out alone. Most telling of all, though, their head occasionally fixed toward their table, as if trying to listen in without being obvious.

Layla leaned back, keeping her voice low. “Shady characters aren’t uncommon here, but something about them feels off. You think they’re eavesdropping?”

“I’m sure of it,” Stella said, steady and suspicious. “They’ve been trying to listen to us for a while. I don’t like it.”

Layla’s words sharpened. “It could be nothing. This district has spies and informants, but most are harmless. Probably someone looking to sell information. Once you get to Alfea it will spread that you’ve returned to Magix anyway.”

“What if they’re working for someone,” Stella added, “We can’t take any chances.”

Panic surged in Bloom. “Do you think they know about the creature? About... us?”

“Maybe,” Stella muttered, her eyes staring at the centre of the table. “If they do, we need to know who they’re working for.”

As if on cue, the figure stood and pushed their chair back with a loud scrape. The movement was swift, almost too deliberate, as though they had heard enough and wanted to leave.

“I’m going to talk to them,” Stella said, rising.

Layla shot her a warning look. “That might be overkill. They could be a harmless local!”

Stella shook her head. “No. I have a feeling.”

Layla sighed, unconvinced, but before she could protest again, the figure turned to the door, now unmistakably in a hurry. Stella took a step, and the figure bolted.

“I knew it!” Stella hissed loudly.

In an instant, Stella and Layla jumped to their feet, with Bloom scrambling after them. The eavesdropper pushed through the wooden door, knocking over a group of patrons. Stella didn’t hesitate, she ran, her long legs carrying her through the pub, weaving between tables and chairs. Layla followed, her eyes locked on the fleeing figure.

Outside, the streets of the Lupus District glowed dimly. The air felt sharp with the scent of metal and stone. The sun had set on the city. The sky now without its periwinkle hue. The figure throttled through the crowd, knocking into pedestrians, barreling toward a narrow alley.

“After them!” Stella shouted.

Bloom hesitated, unsure. But Stella and Layla didn’t wait; they acted on instinct. In a fluid motion, Stella raised her arms and summoned her magic in a burst of glowing light. In an instant, her body transformed, the sunset-orange robe she had worn reappearing, her wings unfurling in a dazzling surge of energy. Beside her, Layla transformed. Her sleek green outfit didn’t change as Stella’s did. Her water magic pulsed around her.

The transformation took seconds, but the shift in energy was undeniable. Both girls radiated power, their wings slicing through the night as they launched into action, their speed increasing as their feet left the ground.

Bloom watched in awe, her heart pounding. On Earth, Stella had been out of her depth and alone. Here she was comfortable and confident. She had seen her transform before, but Layla moved with such ease and control, Bloom realised how powerful she was. These girls were warriors.

As Stella and Layla soared after the figure, Bloom pushed herself to keep up, her feet pounding the pavement. The alley closed in, narrow and filled with shadows. The cloaked runaway had already vanished into it, but Stella and Layla weren't about to let them escape.

"Layla, cut em' off!" Stella shouted.

Layla veered left, her wings slicing the air as she moved to intercept. Stella dove straight into the alley, her light magic illuminating the narrow space.

The figure raced, but they weren't faster than magic. Stella closed in, her wings glowing as she raised a hand and hurled a burst of light magic at their legs. The blast hit, and they stumbled to the floor, nearly crashing into the wall. But the figure was not as powerless as they seemed. They got to their feet and pulled their hands out from their cloak. They began to conduct a bright fuchsia lightning.

"Watch out!" Layla shouted.

The figure hurled a bolt at Stella. For a moment, time slowed. The bolt exploded into plasmatic tendrils that snaked toward her. Stella twisted in midair, dodging the dark magic, but the tendrils chased her through the alley like a living storm.

Layla moved fast. With a flick of her wrist, she manipulated a vortex of water and sent it crashing into the figure. The water hissed as it met the lightning between the assailant's fingers. The tendrils dissolved before they reached Stella.

"Thanks!" Stella called, her wings beating hard as she regained balance.

The figure snarled, frustrated. They reached out for another attack but Layla closed the distance. She dove at them, a pink magic forming a whip in her hand. With a crack, she lashed the figure, knocking them off balance.

The figure cursed and turned to run again, but Stella didn't let them. She fired a beam of light at their feet, knocking them down.

“We’ve got you now,” Stella said, her voice cold as she landed.

But, with a grunt, the figure pulled an artefact from their cloak. It pulsed with deep crimson light. It activated instantly, and the air around them rippled with dark magic.

“Stella, look out!” Layla shouted. But it was too late.

The artefact exploded in a flash of dark pink light, sending shockwaves through the alley. Stella and Layla folded their wings around themselves as they hit the ground. Bloom, still behind, felt the shockwave slam into her, knocking her back.

When the light faded, the figure was gone.

Stella groaned and pushed herself up, her wings flickering with residual light magic.

“Damn it. I knew they were hiding something.”

Layla stood beside her, brushing off her clothes “They were powerful, not fairy magic for sure, and not your average thug. A rogue witch or wizard? Whoever they are, they’re serious.”

Stella clenched her fists. “This confirms it. Someone is after us. We can’t wait.”

“We need to get to Alfea,” Layla said. “If anyone can help, it’s Faragonda.”

Bloom caught up, her chest heaving. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Stella said, still tense. “But we’re running out of time. Whoever is behind this is going to know we’re back very soon. We need to stick together, and we need to get to Alfea now.”

✱ Chapter Nine ✱

The streets of Lupus were quiet at night. Any remaining bustle faded into the distance as the girls made their way out of the heart of the district. After the encounter with the mysterious lightning arcanist, and the intensity of the battle, a charged silence lingered between them. They headed for Alfea now, but first, Layla needed to return home to pack. They decided they'd spend the night there before making the journey the following morning. Bloom and Stella followed her, walking side by side through the dim streets.

Layla's home wasn't far, a modest but sleek apartment tucked away in a quieter part of the district. The building was simple, a blend of the industrial design of the Lupus District and the magic-infused architecture that characterised Solaria. As they approached, Layla keyed in her entry code and held her hand to the handle. The door to her apartment slid open with a buzz.

"Make yourself comfortable," Layla said, her voice losing an edge she'd displayed all evening. "We should be safe here for the night, I'm pretty out of the way."

Stella nodded, leaning against the doorframe. "That arcanist would be mad to show up again."

Bloom lingered behind, caught in a strange mix of anticipation and uncertainty. She had witnessed another real battle and now she was about to head to a magical school on a different planet. It was exhilarating, but also terrifying. Everything had happened so fast. There was no time to contemplate regretting her decision to come in the first place.

As Layla disappeared into her apartment to pack, Bloom wandered to an open window. The air felt cooler now, the night settling in, and for the first time in a while, she allowed herself to breathe. She thought she had finished processing everything in the weeks that followed the attack on Earth. It all came flooding back to her.

A few minutes later, Stella left to take a shower and Layla returned, a large duffle bag slung over her shoulder. She walked over to where Bloom stood, her footsteps light and sure.

“You alright?” Layla asked, quieter now they were away from the noise and chaos of the Lupus District.

Bloom looked up at her, unsure how to put her feelings into words. “Yeah. I just... it’s a lot.”

Layla gave a knowing nod, her face softening. “I get it. Believe me. I’ve been there.”

“You have?” Bloom asked, surprised.

Layla leaned against the wall beside her, folding her arms. “Oh yeah. When I first started out, I felt the same way. Like I was always out of my depth, always one step behind. Being thrown into something so much bigger than yourself is hard. It’s something you didn’t ask for.”

Bloom sighed, her eyes dropping to the ground. “Everything’s changed so fast. A few days ago, I was trying to figure out my future, what school to go to, whether I’d go to UCLA, whether I even wanted a normal life. Now, I’m in a different world, I have magic, and I’m supposed to go to a school for fairies. It’s overwhelming.”

“I know,” Layla said. “But you’re not alone.”

There was a sincerity in her voice that caught Bloom off guard. She looked up at Layla, surprised by the vulnerability in her expression. Layla, who seemed so strong and sure of herself, admitted she understood exactly what Bloom was going through. Bloom believed her, there was no mistaking the look they exchanged.

“I don’t know what I’m doing if I’m honest,” Bloom said, her voice breaking. “Everyone else knows what they’re supposed to be, but I don’t. Now I don’t know who I am or where I come from.”

Layla tilted her head, studying Bloom before responding. “You think I know what I’m supposed to be?”

“Well, yeah,” Bloom said. “You seem like you’ve got more together than I do...”

Layla chuckled, a sound that was both warm and bittersweet. “Trust me, I don’t. I’ve had my share of doubts, my share of mistakes. My entire life was up-ended a couple of months ago. If it wasn’t for Stella dragons know where I’d be. No one has it all figured out, Bloom. We’re all trying to make the best of what we’ve got.”

Bloom frowned, comfort washing over her. Layla seemed so confident, so powerful. It was hard to imagine her feeling anything less than sure of herself.

“But you’re... You’re strong, you’re a fighter, you’ve got everything under control,” Bloom said, her voice wavering. “You know who you are.”

Layla’s smile faded, replaced by a thoughtful look. “Does anyone know who they are Bloom? At least at our age? Can one be expected to?..”

Bloom looked at her, waiting for her to continue.

Layla hesitated, as if weighing her words. “There’s a lot about me you don’t know, Bloom. A lot I haven’t shared with anyone. But the truth is, I’ve spent most of my life trying

to live up to expectations, other people's expectations. I didn't choose the path I was on, just like you didn't. And sometimes, it feels like... I'm not the person everyone thinks I am."

Bloom felt a pang of empathy, recognising the feeling of being out of place, of not knowing who she was supposed to be. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to pry..."

Layla shrugged, her face softening again. "It's not something I talk about much. But I know what it's like to feel like you're always out of your depth. To feel like no matter how hard you try, you're always a step behind. That you'll never live up to the expectations of the people around you. Or your own of yourself. But you'll get through it. You're stronger than you think, Bloom."

The sincerity was palpable, and Bloom felt less lost in hearing her story. Something about Layla's presence grounded her, an honesty that reminded her she wasn't alone. It reminded her of a conversation her and Stella had when they first met. No doubt that was why Stella had bonded with Layla as she did with her.

"Thanks," Bloom said. "That means a lot."

Layla smiled, warmth returning to her eyes. "Anytime. And so you know, Whilst I'm a great fighter. There's more to me than that. You'll see."

Bloom raised an eyebrow, intrigued by the mystery in her words. "What do you mean?"

Layla gave her a mischievous grin, her confidence returning. "Let's just say, there's a lot more to me than meets the eye."

Before Bloom could press her for details, Stella came back into the living room. "Hey, are you two done bonding over there? Early night, we've got a school to get to in the morning!"

Layla laughed and pushed herself off the wall. "Before we get to bed, I was thinking

we should call Faragonda to let her know she should be expecting us tomorrow.”

Bloom had heard the name several times before, back when Stella explained her plan to go to Alfea. Faragonda was the headmistress of the school, a figure who carried both respect and mystery. From what Stella said, she was one of the few people they could trust. There was a deep bond between them, built on loyalty, and trust.

Stella began to control her Omni. The display pulsed with light, it flickered, and for a moment, the connection faltered. Stella frowned, her fingers dancing across the holographic interface as she adjusted the settings.

“I can’t get a good signal!” she muttered. “Stupid thing.”

Layla glanced around, her eyes scanning the streets. “Makes sense. We’re at the edge of the city. It’s not usually this bad though.”

After a few more adjustments, the Omni stabilised, and the green light of the connection filled the air. A second later, a holographic image of a woman appeared. Headmistress Faragonda. She was tall and graceful, her presence commanding despite the casual nature of the call. Her long, silvery-white hair was pulled back into a loose braid, and her sharp eyes gleamed with intelligence. Though she appeared calm, a strength radiated from her, a fierceness that commanded respect.

“Stella,” Faragonda said, her voice a mixture of warmth, caution and relief. “I was beginning to wonder when you’d call.”

“Sorry, Headmistress,” Stella replied, her tone respectful but familiar. “We’ve had... complications.”

Faragonda’s eyes darted to Layla and Bloom, her look lingering on Bloom longer than expected. “I see. Complications, indeed. And who might this be?”

“This is Bloom,” Stella said, stepping aside. “She’s... well, it’s complicated. She’s the

one I told you about, the one who fought with me on Earth.”

Faragonda’s expression shifted slightly, her eyes narrowing with curiosity. “Ah, I see. The one who discovered her magic in rather... dramatic circumstances.”

Bloom felt a surge of nervousness under Faragonda’s sharp examination, but the headmistress offered a reassuring smile. “Welcome, Bloom. It seems you’ve found yourself in quite the situation.”

“You could say that,” Bloom replied, unsure how to address someone like Faragonda. “It’s nice to meet you.”

Faragonda’s smile widened, a hint of amusement in her eyes. “I’d say ‘don’t worry. I’ve seen it all before.’ but I’m afraid that’s not true in this case.” She laughed.

Stella cleared her throat. “We need to talk, Headmistress. About what’s happening here, on Solaria. The situation is... delicate, and I don’t think it’s safe to discuss over the Omni.”

Faragonda’s expression turned serious, her eyes narrowing. “You’re right. There are ears everywhere, and we don’t know who might be listening. I especially want you to keep Bloom’s nature under wraps, do you understand?”

“I understand, we’ll get her to Alfea in one piece.” Stella said smiling at Bloom.

Layla stepped forward, her voice steady. “Faragonda, you should know, this evening someone using a powerful magical artefact attacked us. It wasn’t a random fight. Whoever they were, they were trying to get information, probably about the creature we fought on Earth.”

Faragonda’s face shifted. “That’s troubling. Artefacts like that aren’t easy to find. Whoever they are must have serious resources and connections. And if they’re after information about the creature...”

“I know,” Stella said. “Which is why we’re coming to Alfea tomorrow. I... We need your help.”

Faragonda’s concern for Stella was clear. “You’ll always have my help. But be careful. The situation at Alfea isn’t as stable as you might think. We’re facing pressures from the Magix council to drop certain academic exceptions. The very protections that will allow me to keep you safe here.”

Bloom glanced at Stella. “You mean the Magix Council could be in on this as well?”

Faragonda’s expression darkened. “Let’s not jump to conclusions but err on the side of caution; the Council is not to be trusted right now. They have their own agenda, and it doesn’t always align with what’s best for Magix and its citizens. Some among them seek power above all else.”

“So, we’re on our own,” Layla said.

“Not entirely,” Faragonda corrected. “You have allies, myself included. We have the princess of Solaria! But we must be cautious. Whatever is happening has been in motion for a long time. And now, with the creature you encountered, things are escalating. We must be prepared.”

Stella sighed. “I knew things were bad...”

Faragonda tried to reassure her. “You’ve always had good instincts, Stella. Trust them. And trust your friends. Together, you’re stronger. Bonds between loved ones is far more powerful than anything darkness can throw our way. I shouldn’t say more here. I will fill you in on all I can when you arrive tomorrow.”

A moment of silence settled over them. Bloom felt uncertainty rise inside. She was still new to this world, still trying to understand her magic, let alone the politics of it. But something in Faragonda’s words did reassure her.

“We’ll be there soon,” Stella said.

“Good,” Faragonda replied. “And when you arrive, head straight to me. I’ll need to speak with Bloom personally. There’s much to discuss and prepare for. Be safe, all of you.”

The connection flickered, and Faragonda’s image faded, leaving only the soft light of the Omni as it powered down.

Stella exhaled, her shoulders sagging. “Well, that was reassuring... sort of.”

Layla crossed her arms. “Faragonda knows more than she’s saying. I don’t think she wanted to share too much over the Omni, but she’ll end up keeping things from us tomorrow.”

“Yeah,” Stella agreed. “but at least she knows. Miss F has connections everywhere.”

The girls looked toward one another for a moment before Layla finally broke the silence. “Right, I’m off to bed, we’ll get the first astrail to Roccaluce tomorrow.”

The morning sun spilled into Layla’s flat. Even the daylight was slightly different in colour there. The city stirred outside. Bloom rose to her first morning on Magix with a strange calm and a readiness for what lay ahead.

They dressed and ate swiftly with light conversation. Each girl focused. Stella adjusted the straps of a bright green halter top. She coupled it with an orange mini skirt with a golden medallion belt and matching sandal shoes. She threw the cloak on over top and placed the shades atop her head. Layla moved through the flat with efficiency. She grabbed a datapad from the kitchen counter before slinging her bag over her shoulder. Layla sported a soft pink, sleeveless hoodie and denim capris with a khaki cuff. Bloom borrowed some

simple clothes from Layla: A light blue top and trousers.

The streets of the Lupus District felt different this morning. Workers bustled past with purpose, and the metallic scent that clung to the district seemed less sharp in the morning air. Bloom stayed close as they moved, following Layla's confident stride and Stella's more casual but alert pace.

They didn't speak much as they walked, but the silence felt companionable. There was a shared understanding, an invisible thread between them. They approached the hoverbikes, Layla drove her own whilst Bloom decided to ride with Stella, despite her insisting it wasn't hard to drive. When Layla touched the handlebars a different sound rattled through the machine, still mechanical, but distinct. The vehicle lit up in a teal blue rather than the warm orange that Stella's had.

After cutting through a network of narrow streets, they emerged into a broader avenue where the morning traffic thickened. The girls zipped overhead, as glass-panelled cabs staggered below in quiet streams. Stella was right.

Once they reached the levée station it was clear that the city had come alive once again. They boarded the carriage, no less impressive on Bloom's second ride, and headed to Cittaluce centre.

The girls found a quiet section near the rear of the carriage, where wide windows framed the passing skyline. Bloom pressed her forehead to the glass, watching buildings blur into coloured streaks of light.

"You know," Stella said, crossing one leg over the other, "I got to study at Alfea last year. There aren't many luxokinesis teachers around, so Father sent me there. You're going to love it Bloom. Just don't make some of the mistakes I made, okay."

Layla smirked. "If the rumours I've heard are true, that's solid advice."

“Excuse me,” Stella said, mock-offended, “It was in the name of fashion, I don’t regret it. I cast half my spells with confidence alone.”

Bloom smiled, went to ask what happened but decided to change the subject. She kept her eyes on the city scrolling by through the window. “Do you think I’ll fit in there?”

Layla shifted. “You already fought off something most of us only have nightmares about. You’re more prepared than you think.”

Stella nodded. “You’ve got the instinct, Bloom. The rest will come.”

A moment passed in silence before Bloom asked, “What if I don’t have powers anymore? I haven’t felt anything since that day. What if I used them all up?”

Layla and Stella exchanged a knowing look, half amused, half sincere. “Trust me Bloom, someone like you doesn’t lose their powers.” Stella said. “It’s not possible, they’re probably just rusty for sitting unused for so long...”

Their carriage passed through a brief tunnel, shadows cutting across their faces. When they emerged, a building had a projection on one of its faces, displaying the Council crest. Sleek silver lines wrapped around a pink orb.

Bloom caught the emblem and pointed. “That’s the Magix Council, right?”

Stella’s eyes narrowed. “Unfortunately.”

Layla spoke carefully. “They’re powerful. But lately, they’ve been making decisions that serve themselves more than the realms.”

“Sounds all too familiar to me” quipped Bloom.

“Historically the Magix Council has done great things. It’s recently that things have gone awry. This is why we have to be careful who we see before we get to Alfea.” Stella added. “Faragonda will know what to do.”

The train began to slow as the centre approached, buildings rising taller, cleaner, more

pristine. Cittaluce centre gleamed ahead, crystalline and gold.

By the time they reached the Astrail terminal, the morning hue of the sky had faded to its classic periwinkle. It looked like they were right in the middle of the city now. There were no cobbled floors, just a sleek marble. There were no cars on the street here, it was completely walkable and stretched beyond the eye. The Levée station was right across from the Astral terminal which stood like a spire of light, the platforms stretching out in all directions. A long, silver train idled at the track, suspended above its rails, light off its polished surface.

“We’re right on time,” Layla said as they approached the gates.

Bloom nodded, her eyes locked on the train ahead. “So, why can’t we take the levée to Alfea?”

“Because,” Stella began, “The levée only connects Cittaluce.”

“Most people opt to use the astrail for realm-wide travel. We’re currently in western Solaria, but the astrail can get you to the other side of the continent fast. Cittaluce has connections to most of Solaria, and some to Andros too.”

Bloom stood on the platform, completely awed. Despite only being there a day, Bloom could tell, the station felt distinctly Solarian. Unlike the bustling, futuristic and open platforms she had seen prior, this station held a more serene quality. Magical lanterns illuminated the thin trails of mist curling at the edges of the tracks. The astrail terminal was far more grand than the Levée stations.

Stella led the way, her usual confidence exuding in her strides. Layla followed, more serious than before, though more at ease than she was in Lupus.

“Alfea isn’t far from here,” Stella said, glancing at the holographic display above her wrist. “We’ll be there in half an hour or so, and we’ll pass through some of Solaria’s more

remote landscapes. It's one of my favourite parts of the journey."

Bloom nodded and looked at the sleek, magical train waiting at the platform. It hovered as the levée did, but above track. Its entire body shimmered with a silver light. This felt more akin to a train Bloom had seen before.

As they stepped inside, pleasant cool air hit them. The interior matched the exterior of the train. Wide, velvet seats and large windows were arranged in groups of four. They found seats at the end of a carriage. Bloom settled into hers with a sigh of relief. Stella sat across from her, still in her oversized sunglasses and hood. Layla sat beside Bloom. It was clear many other students were on the train as well. Dozens of prospective fairies lined the platform, chatting in clusters, bright with anticipation. They all wore sleek, travel clothes, in the distinct Solarian style. A few still outside, their parents offering last-minute advice, quick embraces, and encouragements.

Bloom watched them board, each group carrying its own excitement. Some practically bounced with energy, whilst others looked pale and determined, as if trying not to show how scared they felt.

A soft chime echoed through the station, and the carriage doors slid closed. The Astrail gave a gentle lurch, then began to glide forward, pulling smoothly out of the terminal. The platform drifted past, taking with it the crowds of waving hands and familiar faces.

Bloom turned to watch Cittaluce fade into the distance. The train was fast, very fast. The enchanting buildings of the city quickly gave way to wide green fields, glittering rivers, and distant mountains.

"Wow..." she breathed.

"Just wait," Stella said, smiling. "The best part's coming."

Layla leant in to take a better look at the landscape. "Solaria is beautiful. Not as

beautiful as Andros though..." Her tone held a teasing lilt, directed at Stella.

Stella gave her an amused, sarcastic smile. "Of course not," she muttered.

"What's Andros like?" Bloom asked, turning to face Layla.

Layla looked up, as if sifting through memories for the right words. "It's south of Solaria. Very different. The food's amazing, the oceans are clear as crystal, and the people are some of the best you'll meet."

Bloom frowned slightly. "Have you spent a lot of time there?"

Stella had told her Layla was from Cittaluce. Then she'd said she came from southern Solaria. Now Layla spoke like she wasn't Solarian at all. There was a brief pause.

"Layla spent a lot of time in Andros. Being from Regulus," Stella cut in, glancing at her, "right, Layla?"

"Yes," Layla said quickly. "I've spent a lot of time there." She turned to Bloom. "What about you? What's Earth like?"

"Nothing like this," Bloom replied. "But... it has its own charms, I suppose."

The train continued its journey. Outside, the terrain shifted. Fields of fantastical flowers stretched to the horizon. Rivers sparkled as they wound through deep, green forests. The sky above was clear, streaked with gold-threaded clouds.

Stella pointed toward the mountains in the distance. "Those are the Castleton Mountains. One of the highest ranges in the realm. They stretch all the way down to Callisto."

As the train sped on, the landscape grew wilder. Fields gave way to towering trees with leaves that glowed from the sunshine. Every so often, Bloom caught glimpses of strange creatures darting between the trunks, creatures unlike anything she recognised.

Soon, they reached the edge of the forest, the train emerged into a vast clearing. A

great lake upon the horizon.

“We’re almost there,” Stella said, “That is Lake Roccaluce, Alfea is on the edge!”

Lake Roccaluce stretched for miles, its waters a lavender blue reflecting the sky. Droplets sparkled across its surface, and Bloom felt its energy even from the train.

“Wow...” she murmured.

“It’s said to be one of Solaria’s most ancient places. They say if you look deep enough, you’ll see the surface of other planets reflected in it.”

Bloom stared out. The train continued, passing over bridges that crossed the lake, the view shifting with every turn. She saw the town of Roccaluce in the distance. A quaint settlement nestled on the lake’s shore, its stone and wooden buildings wore moss-covered roofs, but still had a fantastical, other-worldly feel.

The train slowed as it neared the station and Bloom couldn’t look away. As they disembarked at Roccaluce, the air filled her lungs. It was completely different to the city, and, in the distance, was Alfea castle. Half veiled by trees and early morning mist, Alfea didn’t sit on the land, it rose from it. Most visible were the spires of stone and glass, their shapes delicate and tall. Each one crowned with glowing blue domes.

“Welcome to Lake Roccaluce,” Stella said, her voice laced with nostalgia and excitement. “From here, we head to Alfea. It’s beautiful right? Wait till you see it up close!”

Bloom looked to Stella and grinned in sheer glee. She had come so far from the life she’d known, and she’d almost made it to the doors of Alfea. It somehow defied her expectations.

The girls arranged their final transport. Though the station held old-world charm, the cab waiting area buzzed with technology. Floating cabs, sleek and streamlined, hovered a few feet off the ground. Stella flagged one down quickly. The driver, a woman with short brown

hair and warm eyes, nodded and prepared the cab.

“This one’s ours,” Stella said, opening the door. “Alfea, here we come.” They climbed inside and the cab lifted off the ground. Bloom watched as Roccaluce was left behind them.

The landscape inclined as they moved toward the castle. The forest passed by them, the ride smooth and quiet. As the cab rounded a bend in the mountain, Bloom’s breath caught. Nestled among the trees and jagged peaks stood Alfea. The castle was breathtaking, its silhouette reflecting off the waterfall flowing from the mountains.

The architecture blended old and new. Tall towers rose into the air, their spires crowned with domes and intricate Elven-like designs. Smooth, pink stone walls curved into bridges connecting the wings of the structure. Large windows, some round and others shaped like leaves, reflected the sun’s afternoon rays across the castle.

But it wasn’t just the ancient beauty that captured Bloom. Glass bridges suspended high in the air and crystal nodes embedded into the stone blinked softly. The contrast gave the castle a feeling, as if it existed outside of time.

“This... this is Alfea?” Bloom whispered.

“Yep,” Stella replied, smiling at her reaction. “Welcome to your new home.”

Bloom noticed a wide stone courtyard lined with glowing trees. Steps led to the entrance, where tall, blue doors shaped like wings stood. They stepped out of the cab and gathered in front of the gate.

Stella turned to her, gleaming. “This is it, Bloom. Alfea. What do you think?”

Bloom just stood with her mouth ajar, shaking her head in disbelief.

“We’ll get in find Miss Faragonda, then hopefully we can get a good night sleep! We can try and start working this whole mess out...”

Bloom looked up at the castle, fearful yet exhilarated. This was her new home, a place

to learn about her powers and Magix. It overwhelmed her, but she also knew that this was where she was meant to be.

As they approached the entrance, Stella looked at her with a smile. A thankful smile, as if she was truly glad Bloom was there with her.

✱ Chapter Ten ✱

Alfea castle stretched toward the sky. The school's silhouette exuded grandeur, but the grounds were still warm and inviting. Floral arrangements lined the stone walkways and the air smelled of jasmine and honey. Birds with iridescent wings flitted through the trees, trailing sparks behind them. The castle was made of three main buildings as well as several other smaller structures. The left and right wings were similar to each other, they were made of pink stone and marble and rose several stories high. Each one like a castle by itself with turrets, spires and domes arranged across the structure.

A current of tension crept inside Bloom as they made their way through the courtyard. Many students bounded around, some welcoming old friends, arriving around the same time as they were. Small groups of young fairies sat on the grass. It was evident who was new to the school and who were returning for another year of study. Bloom, Stella and Layla walked to the main central building on campus. It had a rather round shape and a massive blue glowing dome sat as its crown. It was the most impressive and tallest part of the castle. Bloom's shoulders straightened at the sight of an imposing woman positioned at the base of the steps. With a posture like steel and arms crossed over her chest, she radiated authority.

Mousey brown hair, scraped into a severe bun, drew attention to her angular face. Her cheekbones were sharp enough to cut stone. She caught eye of them walking her way, scrutinising them as they came towards the entrance.

“Who is that...?” Bloom began, trailing off.

“Miss Griselda,” Stella muttered with clear exasperation. “Head of discipline. She looks scary, is scary and is in desperate need of a makeover.”

Bloom let out a short, nervous laugh. The woman standing before them was the embodiment of institutional control. Unflinching, unrelenting, and undefeated - presumably at least.

Griselda’s focus zeroed in on Stella as they approached. Her mouth flattened.

“Princess Stella,” she said glacially. “I’ve been expecting you, dare I say i’m surprised to see your return to Alfea this year.”

Stella mustered a smile, poised but thin. “Miss Griselda. Always a privilege.”

Griselda arched an eyebrow. “Given your... incident in the arcanistry lab last semester, I am dumbfounded why the school let you back in this year. It’s beyond me...”

Stella held for a moment. “A miscalculation. Lesson learnt. Completely.”

Griselda didn’t blink. “I very much doubt that.”

Bloom looked to Stella. “What happened in the lab?”

Stella sighed. “Small, minor explosion. A little singeing. I may have been banned from the lab for the rest of the year. It wasn’t a big deal, really!”

Griselda’s eyes narrowed to slits. “Minor? Singed? You almost burned down the entire laboratory. And yet, here you are. Readmitted. Some might call that a miracle.”

Stella gave a dramatic eye-roll. “That’s overstating it.”

Griselda turned to Layla, she appeared to soften, barely. “Layla. Good to see you. I

trust you'll show better judgement."

Layla inclined her head politely. "Of course, Miss Griselda. I always follow protocol."

Griselda's attention returned to Stella. "Ensure that you do. There will be no repeats."

Stella sighed with restraint. "I'm here to study, nothing else."

Completely unreadable, beyond an obvious aggravation, Griselda turned to Bloom. "And you must be Bloom. The earth girl..."

Bloom's throat tightened. "Yes. That's me."

Something seemed to shift in Griselda, interest perhaps, or suspicion. "Your arrival has sparked considerable attention amongst the faculty. Don't expect any special treatment from me though. I don't care if you're from Earth or otherwise. Got that?"

Bloom managed a small nod. This was not the welcome she'd hoped for, but it matched the sharp-edged atmosphere she supposed.

Stella spoke again. "No drama this year Miss G. Promise."

Griselda studied her for several long seconds. Then, finally, she nodded. "Let this be your final warning. Any further incidents, and you will not be granted a third chance. Am I clear, your majesty?"

Stella saluted half-heartedly. "Crystal."

Griselda turned on her heel. "Follow me. The headmistress has requested to see you immediately."

They climbed the wide, sunlit steps. Bloom was relieved the confrontation had ended. The entrance hall opened before them in full grandeur. Towering columns etched with constellations and strange symbols supported the tall room. Suspended orbs of golden light floated overhead. The marble floors were flecked with gold, silver and pink. Staircases

spiralled in every direction, their railings shimmered gold. Tapestries floated displaying scenes of Alfea's past and important figures.

"This way," Griselda said, her voice cutting through the silence. She led them through a corridor and up the main staircase in the hall. The dome opened up to the sky above letting the natural daylight cast across the entire hall.

As they walked, Stella leaned toward Bloom and whispered, "Don't worry about her. She's all bark."

Layla snorted. "Oh she bites too."

Bloom chuckled but even Stella's bravado couldn't erase the weight of Griselda's scrutiny and meeting the headmistress for the first time.

A glass walkway floated above the hall, leading to a doorway. Behind the door was a woman who could give Bloom the answers she had been waiting for since she got there.

Stella had always spoken of Headmistress Faragonda with a degree of reverence Bloom had not heard her apply to anyone else. Yet, within that respect, there had always been an undertone of caution. Faragonda, according to Stella, was not only wise but also exceptionally strategic. She was someone who possessed an uncanny ability to see what others missed and rarely disclosed the full extent of her knowledge. Even to those she trusted, she revealed only what was necessary. This selectivity and authority had made her a figure of both admiration and mystery.

"Headmistress Faragonda is expecting you," Griselda announced in a clipped drone. The grand double door leading to Faragonda's office was unlike anything else in Alfea.

Carved from dark, polished wood, it had intricate panels carved with symbols and pictures. It looked to belong to some of the older aspects of the school. Though aged, the door seemed vibrant with energy.

Griselda halted them before they went to knock. "I trust you will conduct yourselves with decorum," she said, particularly to Stella.

Stella gave a theatrical eye-roll but refrained from speaking, accustomed to these reprimands. Bloom, in contrast, just felt more anxious. Her hands felt clammy. This meeting was pivotal. It was her first impression, her opportunity to prove she deserved a place at Alfea, despite the mystery surrounding her powers. It hadn't struck her until now, but Faragonda could turn Bloom away from Alfea. A possibility that she didn't want to consider, but was forced to confront in that moment.

Griselda tapped once on the door. A moment later, the doors opened soundlessly, revealing the headmistress's private office. The room blended the simple with the scholarly. High walls with expansive shelves overflowed with tomes, parchment scrolls, and mystical artefacts. There was a scent of aged paper and something herbaceous, perhaps lavender or dried starleaf.

A large window behind the central desk allowed the afternoon light to pour in, gilding the office in warm, golden tones that touched every surface. The light gave the space an atmosphere of invitation, yet it did not diminish its elegance.

At the desk sat Faragonda herself, composed as anything. Her silver hair, worn in a braid, contrasted with her youthful, perceptive eyes that seemed incredibly adept at observation. She wore a suit jacket and trousers in soft blue and gold, understated yet refined. Every part of her demeanour suggested that she saw everything and judged nothing.

"Ah, Stella, Layla, and... Bloom, I presume," Faragonda greeted, her words even,

controlled, and thoughtful. A subtle inflection emerged as she said Bloom's name, a faint trace of curiosity, "Please, come in."

The trio entered. Griselda offered a curt nod before stepping out and closing the door. Bloom's heartbeat quickened as she trailed behind her companions. Before the desk were three chairs. Stella took her seat with characteristic ease. Layla, always composed, sat with upright posture and folded hands.

Bloom lingered a moment, unsure whether to wait for direction or follow suit. When Faragonda gestured with a small nod, Bloom slipped into the final chair. Her hands found her lap, fingers interlaced. The chair felt much larger than expected.

Faragonda regarded them for a few moments. She drifted across Stella and Layla with familiarity, but when she landed on Bloom, she lingered. The weight of her stare was not hostile, but penetrating. Bloom had the distinct sensation of being read, her history, her fears, her potential, all exposed under her judgement.

"So," Faragonda said finally, "You've experienced quite the journey."

Stella nodded. "You could say that. I encountered unexpected obstacles on Earth. A creature. Not like anything I've ever seen."

Faragonda didn't shift at all. "A creature?"

Bloom swallowed and spoke up. "It attacked me. In Muir Woods, near where I live. I didn't know what to do, that's when Stella saved me."

"Miss, the creature became obsessed with Bloom after encountering her the first time. It was calculated, it knew how to get to her." Stella said. "If it wasn't for Bloom, I wouldn't be back here."

"It took my parents, I stopped it."

Faragonda folded her hands. "Stopped it how?"

“With magic,” Bloom answered uncertainly. “I think. I don’t know how. It was instinctive. The creature disintegrated. I barely remember and I haven’t been able to access that power again.”

Faragonda tilted her head, thoughtful. “Magic, particularly in latent users, often manifests in crises. It reacts to need, not will. The fact that Stella was unable to destroy the creature and you could produce enough energy to do so, untrained, is, well, I’m not sure if I believe it. Such a feat would be exceptional, unheard of. Yet, so is finding a Mystic on Earth.”

Bloom looked to the floor. “So what does that mean for me?”

“It means,” Faragonda said gently, “if what you say is true, you possess deep potential. Your magic is not gone, Bloom. It is latent. Waiting to be understood. Magic is not conjured through effort alone. It is revealed through self-awareness and intention.”

The quiet that followed wrapped around Bloom. She was doubtful yet some part of her felt soothed by the explanation. There was still fear, but there was a little certainty now.

Stella interjected. “Miss F, I don’t think that creature just stumbled into Earth. It was sent. I’m convinced of it.”

Faragonda finally let a serious look onto her face. “I agree. Creatures of that calibre don’t exist here, let alone on Earth. It’s plausible it was dispatched with a purpose. Whether its intended target was you, Stella, remains to be seen. Whatever that purpose was led it directly to you, Bloom.”

Bloom’s breath caught. The implication unsettled her.

“But you are safe now,” Faragonda continued. “Alfea is protected by ancient, powerful magic. No entity enters uninvited. This place is more than a school. It is a sanctuary. You see, Alfea operates as its own entity,” Faragonda explained. “This institution has stood for millennia, through traditions and history. We have specific legal protections you see.

Whoever is behind this won't be able to access any of you, as long as you're here. Nobody has power in these walls. Except for me of course."

Despite the warmth of her words, Bloom noticed something unspoken in Faragonda. a guardedness, a depth of knowledge the headmistress was choosing, for now, not to share.

Stella leaned back, her arms crossed. "And the Magix Council? They really don't have a say in any of this?"

Faragonda remained composed, sharp as ever. "The Council has its jurisdiction, but Alfea functions autonomously. We preserve certain liberties that allow us to make decisions free from political pressures. These decisions prioritise the safety and growth of our students. There are times when Council oversight can prove... limiting."

There was no mistaking the implication buried in her words, and Stella understood. Faragonda turned back to Bloom.

"As for your path forward," Faragonda said, shifting toward decisiveness, "we will approach this carefully. You are not like other students. Your journey will require a different pace. But this institution was created for students like you. Those still discovering the truth of who they are."

Still absorbing the weight of everything, Bloom shifted in her seat. "But I don't even know if I can still use magic. What if I don't belong here?"

Faragonda softened as her eyes met Bloom's. "That is why we take things slowly. You've already demonstrated extraordinary ability, Bloom, power that most fairies don't ever access. But magic defies linear progress. It is unique to each individual. What matters most is your willingness to understand yourself and commit to the journey ahead. You're not behind, you're beginning."

Bloom frowned, doubtful. "But what if I can't do it again? What if that moment was

just... a fluke?"

Faragonda smiled, "No one here is ordinary, Bloom. Not at Alfea. You don't need to have all the answers now. Magic is not a skill you perfect overnight. It's a process. Let us help you."

Bloom took in the words. Although the doubt still lingered, It now coexisted with something else: possibility. Something inside her, long dormant, clicked with the idea that she wasn't broken. Just undiscovered.

"That being said, i'm placing you on probation," Faragonda continued. "You'll study privately with me for a period. I need to observe you, understand the nature of your magic, and guide you through it. It will require focus, trust, and effort, but I believe you're more than capable."

"Probation?" Bloom echoed, caught between relief and apprehension. "Does that mean you could kick me out?"

"It's a safeguard," Faragonda explained. "You are unlike the others. Your power is distinct and as yet undefined. For now, you won't join most general classes, but we will work together to awaken what lies within you. The goal is not exclusion, it's precision. We'll ensure your training suits your needs. If you don't work, if you don't try, I can't allow you to continue at Alfea. Something tells me, this won't be a problem though. You also have my unwavering protection, no matter what."

Stella turned toward Bloom, "Don't worry. Faragonda's the best teacher here. She's helped generations of fairies master their power. If anyone can help you figure this out, it's her. You have the best of the best teaching you. Most of us would jump at the opportunity."

Bloom wasn't being cast aside. She was being offered something rare: a real chance.

Faragonda looked to Stella, "and you, Stella, I understand why you didn't return to

the palace. Under the circumstances, your judgement was sound. There's wisdom in caution."

Stella eased, and smiled at the complement. "Better safe than sorry. Whoever sent that thing to Earth, whether it was targeting me or Bloom, it wasn't random. We couldn't afford to give more information to whoever is behind this."

"You trusted your instincts," Faragonda said. "That decision may have saved both of you. There are forces in motion none of us fully comprehend yet. Within these walls, you have protection, and, most importantly, time. It would be best, Stella, to alert the king of your return. Now you're here news will get back to him eventually. Can I trust you to contact him?"

"I expected that, and yes, I will contact the palace tonight."

"Headmistress," Layla said, speaking up for the first time. "Do you believe this is tied to the wider disturbances across Magix? Everything that happened? The sightings?"

Faragonda turned to Layla. "It's possible. But speculation without evidence serves no one. We must observe, collect information, and remain vigilant. For now, your focus must be on learning. The protections around Alfea remain intact, but caution is never wasted. Please promise me you'll try to enjoy yourselves. Make friends. Leave all of this with me for now."

Bloom shuddered. She knew about the creature and the attack. But what are these disruptions in Magix?

"Now," Faragonda continued. "you should settle into your dormitories. Bloom, I will meet with you soon to begin our private sessions. Stella, Layla, you are both free to begin your courses and connect with your instructors. There's much to prepare."

Stella and Layla both nodded, rising from their seats. Though the conversation had formally ended, a weight still hung between them and the headmistress. Faragonda's composed demeanour never cracked, but something suggested she remained on alert.

Watchful, even as she offered reassurance.

“Thank you, Headmistress,” Stella said. “We’ll help Bloom settle in.”

Faragonda gave her a single nod, her eyes locking with Stella’s. “I trust you will.

Support one another. Remain cautious. And remember, you are not alone in this.”

With that, the meeting concluded. The three girls began to leave. Faragonda went to return to the parchment on her desk before asking one final question. “Bloom?”

Bloom turned to face Faragonda.

“On Earth, your magic, what was it? What element?” She asked calmly.

“Fire.” Bloom replied. “All I remember is feeling like I couldn’t control it, but I was somehow also it... Is that weird?”

“No, it’s quite normal for someone not to be able to control their magic.” Faragonda paused. In that moment, she let her facade drop. In that moment Faragonda showed, just for a second, how she felt. She was shaken. Faragonda looked scared.

“Goodnight Miss, thank you for everything.” Bloom followed Stella and Layla toward the door, her thoughts still swirling. She looked back at Faragonda one last time, and, to her surprise, Faragonda was staring right back. Deep in thought.

✱ Chapter Eleven ✱

The corridors of Alfea were much more homey than its exterior. Inside, the walls were made from polished beige stone and white marble. Some of the corridors were clearly older than others, some had stone flooring and others had marble and red carpet, all it did was add to the charm. Orb chandeliers dangled above illuminating the already bright corridors and the windows were large and arch shaped. Looking out you could see the school gardens. The rest of the castle looking even larger from within. The scent of lavender and aged parchment drifted throughout. Bloom meandered, absorbing her surroundings. The place somehow retained a humble energy despite being an elite institution.

Ahead, Stella and Layla walked together, deep in conversation. Their laughter mingled with the ambience of footsteps from other students. Bloom lagged behind, pausing at intervals to admire the view from each window. Beyond the glass, Alfea's grounds stretched out, meadows rolled into forests and over mountains. In the other direction, Lake Roccaluce shimmered beneath the lilac sky in the distance.

“What do you think?” Layla asked, slowing to match Bloom's pace

“I don't think I'll ever get used to this,” Bloom admitted.

“Well, give yourself a couple of weeks.” Stella cut in, “Honestly, this place is nothing compared to the royal palace of Solaria, they could do with a bit of colour! So much beige... I’ll forward my interior designer’s number to Miss Faragonda once this is all over as a thank you for helping us out.” Stella gestured to the arches, thinking about the several alterations she’d make to the space if she could.

Layla smiled. “You’ll adjust. Hopefully, the roommate situation won’t be a disaster.”

Navigating the school felt like exploring a living maze. Corridors bent around towers, stairwells led to gardens and doorways would lead to outside walkways. Even Stella, despite her familiarity with the campus, admitted to taking wrong turns. Bloom didn’t mind. Each misstep revealed somewhere new. Each classroom was unique, some cozy, others open, some historical, others modern,

Eventually, they reached the west wing. It was a lot easier to navigate than the central castle. they wandered the corridors’ red carpet until finally finding their room. The door was large, ornate and inlaid with delicate gold patterns. Stella pressed her hand to the wood, which seemed to recognise her palm, then the door swung inward.

“Welcome to our new home, ladies,” Stella said, stepping aside to let Bloom and Layla enter first.

The room was nothing short of awe-inspiring. The main living area was spacious and whimsical. Unlike much of the castle which was historical, the room was modern and sleek. A blush sofa rested in the centre, surrounded by complementary armchairs. A holographic display hovered above a marble table, shifting between school announcements and forecasts. To the side, a kitchenette and dining nook overlooked a terrace where late afternoon sunlight leaked into the room. The top of the room had a blue tinted skylight which matched the other windows around the room each with seating below.

Six bedroom doors, in sets of two, curved along the walls, each marked with a unique sigil. Bloom found hers, marked with a dragon. She placed her hand onto the lock and stepped inside. Shelves lined the walls, partially stocked with beginner books. A modest sized bed placed in the middle as-well as a desk for studying. Tall windows opened onto the glade, which let in the breeze and birdsong. Bloom walked over, drew back the curtains, and stood in the sunlight. It felt as though she was back in Muir... almost.

She noticed that there was a sliding door connecting her to another room that the door was ajar. She lingered for a moment before catching the scent of wildflowers and earth that poured into her side of the room. It was a familiar smell, it smelled of Gardenia.

She peered inside where greenery dominated the space. Ferns spilled from hanging baskets, orchids bloomed along trellises, and fresh herbs lined the windowsill. On the bed, a girl sat cross-legged, carefully trimming a vine. She did a double take before beginning to beam in joy.

“You must be them!” she said brightly, standing in one smooth movement. Her outfit: a khaki top and a rose skirt, complemented the room’s palette. Long dark hair flowed down her back, and two lighter strands framed her face.

“I’m Flora,” she said, extending her hands. “You’re Bloom, right? Griselda said you’ were coming shortly.” Flora took Bloom by both of her hands. Her skin was soft and warm against Bloom’s which was clammy and cold.

“Your room’s beautiful,” Bloom said. “It reminds me of home.”

“Linphea?” Flora asked.

“Pardon?”

“Linphea? Is that where you’re from? It’s where I’m from you see, would be wonderful to bunk with another Linphean!”

“Ah, no, unfortunately not” Bloom began flustered “I’m from, um...”

“Bloom, would you like to introduce me to your roomie?” Stella chimed in to the rescue.

“Oh, yes, sorry! Stella, this is Flora.”

“Flora, it’s lovely to meet you,” Stella said “I’m princess Stella, but don’t worry you don’t have to call me princess. It’s all so formal. I see you’ve met my friend Bloom, she’s from Callisto, super private family, she barely knows anything about the rest of Magix!”

“Oh, I see, well, Bloom, I’m sure we’ll make fine friends!” Flora said with a smile, “and it’s lovely to meet you Stella! You’ll both fit right in. Come meet the others.”

Flora drifted off toward the other dorms, her skirt rustling against the stone floor. Stella pushed down her sunglasses and peered into the bedrooms, first Bloom’s, then Flora’s.

“This dorm has potential,” she declared. “I’m seeing a makeover in its future. Maybe pink... no, too basic. Blue! That’s your colour now, Bloom. Signature-worthy. Red is officially banned in my presence.”

Bloom laughed, rolling her eyes. She crossed to the sofa, where Layla had already settled, flipping through the Omni display.

Flora circled back, tapping Layla lightly on the shoulder. “Layla, right? I’m Flora. Come meet the others, we’re finally all here!”

She tapped on the next door. It creaked open, and out stepped a girl whose hair was a tangle of black and indigo pigtails. She wore a slouchy red T-shirt that slipped off one shoulder and a pair of distressed jeans. A well-worn set of headphones rested around her neck.

“I see the rest of you made it in one piece,” she said through half a smile. “I’m Musa.” Without waiting for a reply, she turned back into her room, waving them in. “Welcome to the

madhouse. Excuse the disaster; still unpacking.”

She wasn’t exaggerating. Clothes trailed across the floor, and instruments, some of which Bloom couldn’t name, cluttered the walls and shelves. The bookshelves had been repurposed into makeshift storage for mixing decks, keyboards and various woodwind instruments.

“What brought you to the headmistress on day one?” Musa called over her shoulder.

“Late admission,” Stella replied flatly, eyes scanning the chaos. “We had to speak with Faragonda.”

Musa smirked. “Ah, so you’re Stella. If you plan on blowing up the arcanistry lab again, give us a heads-up so we can bounce.”

Stella groaned. “It was one spell. People really don’t let things go.”

“What happened?” Bloom asked, genuinely curious now.

“I tried to create a new shade of pink,” Stella replied. “The lab didn’t survive.”

“Did it work?” Musa raised a brow.

“Not yet,” Stella said with a smirk. “But when it does, it’ll be the official colour of Solaria.”

Musa burst into laughter. “I always hoped that story was true.”

She turned to Layla, who had stepped away from the sofa and joined the group. “And you must be Layla. Good to meet ya’.”

Layla nodded. “Nice to meet everyone. I’m going to put my things away.”

From the other side of the room, A tall girl with sleek magenta hair and sharp turquoise eyes stepped into view. She wore a form-fitting plum jumpsuit which contrasted with everyone else’s clothes. Her side of the dorm stood in stark contrast to Musa’s, completely organised and immaculate.

“Apologies. I was finishing my setup,” she said. “I’m Tecna. If your devices malfunction, I’m your girl!”

“She’s a local celebrity in Zenith,” Flora explained “Designed half the upgrades to the Omni system last year!”

Bloom chuckled. “I’ve been meaning to get one. Maybe you can teach me how to use it?”

Tecna looked surprised. “You don’t have one already? That’s... unusual. How do you function day to day?”

Bloom glanced at Stella, then shrugged. “Overprotective parents.”

Tecna gave a thoughtful nod. “I’ll walk you through it later. Right now, I need something to eat.”

Flora clapped her hands. “Perfect! The welcome party’s started. We’ll miss all the good food if we wait any longer.”

“I’m in,” Musa said, stretching her arms overhead.

“Same here,” Bloom added. “Stella? Layla?”

She turned to find the two seated on the sofa, their heads close together in quiet conversation. Layla’s shoulders were tense. Stella had a hand on hers, a concern over her face.

“We’ll catch up,” Stella said with an insincere smile. Concern lingered behind her words, and Bloom understood this wasn’t the moment to pry.

With that, Bloom and the others headed toward the door, chatter slowly fading as they disappeared down the hall.

Once they were gone, Stella turned back to Layla. “What did you see? Something in the headlines?” she whispered.

Layla shook her head. “No. That’s what worries me. There’s been nothing. I haven’t heard from anyone in weeks.”

“You think it connects to what happened on Earth? With me and Bloom?”

“Definitely. There’s no way it’s a coincidence. And then there was the assailant in Lupus... Something’s going on. I’m worried about my home Stella. We’re only seeing bits and pieces of all this.”

Stella leaned back, absorbing Layla’s words. “Well, you’re safe here. And I trust Bloom. I wouldn’t have brought her into this if I didn’t.”

“I know,” Layla agreed. “But the fewer people who know the truth, the better. For her safety, and ours.”

The Alfean Hall was like a mythic vision. A grand glass dome stretched overhead, letting in the last golden rays of dusk. Towering pillars of rose quartz and cream-hued marble supported the room. Paintings and carvings lined the walls. Long round tables followed the curve of the room, new students sat gathered welcoming in the school year. The entire castle had a dream-like quality, but the central hall was nothing short of magnificent.

Bloom, Flora, Musa and Tecna took a seat at one of the tables. Bloom eyed the floating lights that, to her, looked like sparkly jellyfish. Trays of food scented the air, delivered by an overhead system she couldn’t quite understand. The atmosphere was alive with a blend of excitement and magic. Students tucked into strange looking stews, vegetables and glistening pastries dusted with sugar. Like everything Bloom had seen, nothing compared to it.

“This place is incredible,” she declared. She looked around in a slow circle, taking in different pieces of minutia around the hall. Little ornaments made from oak, blossoming live vines with a peculiar flower, and cast obsidian statues. There were seven of them, most of which looked like powerful fairies.

Bloom noticed a holographic display appear in front of her, like a menu, and began scrolling through the strange offerings. Stella and Layla entered the hall, Tecna caught their eye and beckoned them over. They strode to the table, Layla looking better than how she was in the room.

“It’s something, isn’t it?” Stella said as she sat down next to Bloom. “I still remember seeing it for the first time. Its better than dining in the royal ballroom!”

“I can’t wait until the night falls, we’ll be able to see the stars through the dome.” Flora added in a half dazed sound. “Those plants up there are from Syderia, they produce oxygen without the need of sunlight! They’re found in the caves on the moon, pretty right?”

“They come from somewhere with no sunlight... not for me” Stella smirked.

Tecna analysed one of the hovering servers that ran overhead. “These must be bespoke constructs. I wonder what they’re powered by? Quite elegant indeed.”

“Does it matter?” Stella waved her off. With a flick of her fingers, the holographic menu appeared before her. “If the food’s good, I don’t care if it’s delivered by Gollums.”

Bloom turned her head back to look at the menu. She struggled with the interface as it rotated with animated depictions of dishes. They looked like crystal dumplings, glowing soups and golden pies trailing steam. Some names she recognised. Most she didn’t.

“Pick anything,” Layla said, sliding into the seat opposite her. “Just steer clear of the Lurandian fruit salad unless you like spicy food. It’s all good though.”

“Good to know,” Bloom said, scanning the selection with a nervous amusement. Her

finger hovered over a dish labelled luminasta. It shimmered, coiled in pearlescent sauce. She tapped it clumsily and the menu dissolved away.

“I still can’t believe we’re here,” Musa declared loudly, “It’s something we’ve worked at for so long, now it’s happening!” She was clearly excited, it occurred to Bloom in that moment that, not unlike earth, college admission must be a stressful ordeal. At the thought a twinge of guilt came over her, after all, she hadn’t earned her place like the others. At least, not yet.

“Alfea makes you feel like that,” Stella said warmly “No matter what, it can make you feel at home.”

“Doesn’t it get overwhelming?” Bloom asked. “Living in a place like this, doesn’t it ever feel too much?”

“Too much?” Tecna laughed. “How can it? This is what every fairy in the system dreams of! With the enrolment ceremony tomorrow, and the Roccaluce gala after that, you should enjoy it Bloom!”

“What are they like?” Bloom leaned forward curiously “The ceremony? The gala?”

“They’re steeped in tradition,” Flora said, “The ceremony welcomes us formally. You get to wear the Alfean robes for the first time. That’s when you become a student here officially.”

“And the gala?” Bloom asked.

“Held by Lake Roccaluce, you know where we got off the astrail?” Stella chimed in. “It’s the first big social gathering. Alfea, Redfountain, and Cloudtower all attend. It’s part diplomacy, part celebration. And let’s be honest, part fashion show.”

“All three schools?” Bloom asked again.

Musa put a spoonful of her food into her mouth and held it there, confused at Bloom’s

lack of knowledge. She turned to Flora who gave her a ‘don’t be rude’ nod politely. Stella looked around and continued. “Redfountain trains wielders. They’re magical warriors with artefacts and armour. They can’t use magic without tools like we can. As for Cloudtower? That’s for witches. We’re both Arcanists, start off the same really” Stella explained. “But our methods differ. Fairies use transformation and ancient techniques. Witches wield raw magic through force of will. They’re more modern. It’s an ideological difference more than anything, but we infamously don’t get along well.”

“Redfountain’s students use channelling tools,” Tecna added. “Staves, blades, gauntlets, anything to stabilise and concentrate their Winx.”

Layla leaned across the table “You’ll learn,” She said kindly. “We all do. Don’t get overwhelmed.”

The rest of their meals arrived quickly. The server device placed Bloom’s luminasta before her. It glowed with a pearlescent shift.. She twirled a forkful and took a bite. Her eyes widened.

“This is delicious.” She said turning to Stella.

“Told you,” Stella said, already halfway through her own dish. She was shovelling massive spoonfuls of strange purple beans between large bites of a sandwich. It wasn’t particularly graceful, but there was something amusing about watching Stella eat. “The chefs here could enchant a brick and make it taste divine.” She said with her mouth full.

The six girls fell into conversation, any tension from earlier dissolving. They swapped stories of spell mishaps, bizarre encounters, and eccentric teachers from their previous schools. Bloom laughed along, she pretended to understand for now. She’d ask the rest of her questions later to Stella or Layla in private.

Despite her undeniably warm welcome, part of her remained guarded. No one here

knew her true origin. Earth remained her secret, for now. But in that moment she felt like she'd made new friends. She let herself believe she belonged.

Overhead, the lights shifted to a deeper blush. Flora's plate glimmered as she took the last bite of her salad, each forkful blossoming with tiny flowers that vanished on her tongue. She turned to Bloom with a gentle tilt of her head. "So, Bloom," she asked, "have you thought about which classes you'll take? There's so much variety, it can be overwhelming at first."

Bloom hesitated, her eyes darting across the table. "I'm... not sure yet," she said. "Everything's still so new for me."

"That's completely normal," she replied, calm and grounding. "The first few weeks are meant for you to explore. You'll find your path and your passions. What's your affinity?"

Stella tossed a strand of hair over her shoulder, catching the question before Bloom could process what it meant. "She's an ignimancer, cool right!" Stella said quickly.

"Ignikinesis is rare, I've never met someone with that affinity before" Flora said pleasantly surprised. "I'm a phytomancer. Plants" She giggled. "I felt like that was obvious though. I can't wait to see your magic in action Bloom!"

Bloom nodded slowly, but began panicking a little. The theory of magic fascinated her, but the thought of wielding it again. Casting spells, invoking transformations, channeling raw energy felt distant. Especially after last time. What if her power had vanished as suddenly as it had appeared? What if she didn't have fire magic? Or worse, what if she hurt someone?

She took another bite of her luminasta, its warm nutty flavour calming her. She was determined to learn to survive in this world, so she might also learn to belong to it.

Stella's voice pulled her back. "Tomorrow's the big day. What is everyone wearing?"

It's our chance to make an impression!"

"Show off, you mean?" Bloom teased.

"Obviously," Stella said, tossing her hair. "Why perfect your wardrobe if no one gets to admire it? We're going shopping for you tomorrow Bloom, I can see the vision now!"

Layla laughed. "Just try not to torch your dress if you want to change the colour."

"No promises," Stella replied.

"I've got mine new, it's the very latest in fabric technology" Tecna interjected, an excited smile on her face.

"Where'd you get it... on Merlin?" Musa teased.

"I designed the fabric myself thank you."

Their shared laughter bubbled up with ease, and Bloom found herself relaxing again.

After a moment, Musa turned to Bloom, curious. "You're still a bit of a mystery, though. Where exactly are you from?"

Bloom's hand paused halfway to her plate. She smiled carefully. "A small town. Very quiet."

"In Solaria?" Tecna asked, watching her with interest.

"Something like that," Bloom said, measured. "It's quiet. Ordinary."

"Well, don't worry. Alfea tends to turn the ordinary into extraordinary." Musa declared. "I can tell you're kinda shy, but no need, we're your peeps now!"

Bloom gave a quick nod, grateful the conversation moved on. She would share the truth, about Earth, about the creature, but not yet. Not before she understood the full extent of what was going on.

Flora stretched with a quiet sigh. "We should rest. Tomorrow's going to be a long day!"

Layla stood, smoothing down her top. “Agreed. Let’s head back.”

The group rose together, the table clearing itself in their wake. As they moved toward the exit, Bloom paused briefly beneath the dome. Above, the magical sky revealed its canopy of stars.

She stood still, letting that quiet beauty settle in her for the night. There was so much she didn’t know. So much she didn’t yet understand.

But that was okay if she had friends to support her as she figured it out.

* Interlude Two *

A noxious mist clung to the air of Black Mud Swamp. It carried the stench of decaying vegetation and stagnant water. Nothing seemed to disturb the mire, it was broken only by the occasional sign of a submerged creature. Above, a heavy grey sky loomed, swallowing the last of the sun's light. The surrounding trees stood skeletal, their twisted roots clawing out of the swamp like fingers grasping for escape.

Stormy waded through the marsh with a characteristic impatience. Her boots stomping through the sludge, splashing brackish water as she avoided clumps of sodden moss. Stray burns were across her shoulders, remnants of a recent fight. Her clothing also bore the evidence, scorched edges and ash-stains. None of it seemed to slow her. Her focus remained sharp.

"Icy," she called across the clearing.

A bitter wind curled through the trees as Icy emerged. She stepped from behind a gnarled willow. She was composed and wasn't covered in mud like her sister was. Her silver hair flowed behind her like smoke, and her crystal shimmered at her chest. Though she wore the Cloudtower faculty robes, hers had been tailored to be sleek and sharp. Power emanated

from the woman.

“You’re late,” Icy said coldly.

Stormy scoffed. “I’m the first one here. You were just skulking in the dark like an old bat.”

Before the tension could escalate, Darcy appeared. She glided through the mist as though the swamp parted for her. Her cloak hovered above the mud, untouched by the filth below. The dim pulse of her Wisperian crystal glowed through the folds of her layered garments. She said nothing at first, brushing a damp leaf from her shoulder.

“Enough,” Darcy said “We’re not here for posturing.”

Stormy crossed her arms. “I saw something. In a tavern in Lupus. Stella is alive.”

That name cleaved the silence. Icy froze and Darcy recoiled in shock.

“Alive?” Icy stepped forward. “Are you sure you weren’t mistaken? It could have been a look alike.”

“I’m sure. I watched her walk in, with that familiar Solarian arrogance. She’s alive alright, and smug as ever. She walks around acting like she’d not been marked for execution.”

“She was meant to be intercepted before returning to Magix,” Darcy muttered. “My contact at the Council authorised the trap. It was in motion. I don’t see how she avoided it.”

“Then someone either intervened or lied,” Stormy replied. “Because she’s walking around just fine, and she wasn’t alone.”

Darcy refocused her attention. “Who else?”

“Two girls,” Stormy said. “One could be Solarian. She can’t have been royal but she was disciplined. She kept herself between Stella and the door. The other...” she paused, her features straining to remember, “was strange.”

“Strange how?” Icy asked.

“Red hair and odd clothing. She looked like a lost sprite, her name is Bloom. She and Stella met the other girl in the Tavern.”

Darcy folded her arms. “There was no mention of either of these girls. If the Council knew they existed, surely they’d be on our radar?”

“That’s not all,” Stormy replied. “I was trying to listen in to the conversation, but Stella, the brat, caught on. They chased me out of Lupus. ”

Icy frowned. “They didn’t catch your face did they?”

“No... but when they fought me, at some point, the Wisperian crystal activated. It allowed me get away.”

“You’re saying it was in your presence?” Darcy leered.

Stormy nodded grinning, “It must have been and we know it’s not in the ring of Solaria. They mentioned Alfea, that’s where they’re headed.”

Icy paused for a moment and turned in thought. “Darcy, you managed communications for Stella’s mission. Are you saying our informants might’ve changed plans without us?”

Darcy tightened. “I received confirmation. Stella was not meant to return from Earth. She wasn’t expected to survive the first two days. So either someone sabotaged the plan, or, Stella had help from something or someone else.”

“How about this red-headed girl, what was it? Bloom? You’re telling me Stella returns from a death sentence with no scratches on her. She does, however, return with a girl who none of us have ever seen before.”

“Are you saying she could have gone with her to Earth in the first place? Two fairies is something we didn’t account for?” Darcy said.

“It’s possible... or... Stella went in alone but travelled back with her.”

“Impossible” Darcy said, “Why would Stella bring back a human?”

Icy paused again, thinking on Darcy’s words. “And the Solarian? Did you get a name?”

Stormy nodded her head. “She said her name was Layla. I didn’t see a crest or anything like that. But she fought like someone descended from the founding families. She was skilled enough, she must have been trained.”

Icy nodded. “Now we investigate. Quietly. We keep an eye on the girls at Alfea. We determine who they are and how Stella escaped from earth. It’s going to be difficult with Faragonda in the way and Griffin on my tail...”

Darcy’s voice dropped. “Or the Council’s fragmenting. Someone on the inside might’ve found out and warned her?”

“Then we gather intelligence,” Icy said. “No confrontation until we understand what’s at stake. But we need to know who this girl is, why she matters, and why the Wisperian crystals have woken up for the first time since the fall of Domino.”

Stormy’s grin turned feral.

Icy offered a rare smile in return. “I have a theory. But I need time and information to confirm it.”

The swamp itself seemed to fear the intent of the witches. Shadows crept in closer and the air grew thick. Without another word, the witches turned and vanished into the fog. The clearing fell still once more, only the black waters holding on to their secrets.

* Chapter Twelve *

A golden stream of light stirred Bloom awake. She blinked, taking a moment to remember where she was: Alfea. Her first day had come and gone. For a moment she felt like she was waking up at home in her bed. Likely because of the scent Flora's side of the room gave off. It smelled of her Mother's flower shop: like carnations and roses.

She rubbed the sleep from her eyes and noticed the other girls were already awake, bustling around the room, getting ready for the enrolment ceremony. Flora sang to herself as she arranged her hair, and one of Tecna's gadgets was ironing her gown. Stella, of course, was already dressed, looking flawless in an elegant sunset gold gown with white accents. She had her robe laid out on the bed and was just finishing lightly curling her hair with a strange device that Bloom supposed wasn't much different to a curling iron.

Stella shared a room with Layla, which was almost as comical as Musa and Tecna's divide. On Stella's side were heaps of clothes and trunks waiting to be unpacked. Her bedding was a lush velvet with the rest of the room decorated in the beginnings of Stella's vision. Layla's side was plainer and more organised. She had only brought the clothes in the bag she had packed before they left Cittaluce. She had her books lined on her desk and

assorted trinkets from home she'd set out.

"Morning, sleepyhead!" Stella called with a teasing smile. "Better get moving if you want to be ready for the ceremony. It's a big day."

Bloom ran a hand through her tousled hair as her mind cleared. "Right, the ceremony," she murmured. She hadn't forgotten about it, but the importance of the occasion was only now beginning to sink in. This was her chance to make a good impression on her peers and her teachers. Although, she half wondered if she was even allowed to partake since she was on probation.

"How did you manage to get all that stuff here Stel?" Bloom said changing the topic, but genuinely curious.

"Oh, I had it all packed before I left for you know where, so I asked the staff to send it when I rang the palace last night. 'thank the stars, Stella you're alive!' Yes, yes, just send me my shoes, thanks." Stella was weighing up two types of shoes as she spoke.

"I thought you had all your clothes in your Omni?"

"Oh, you can't put more than, like, three things in there! And it only works with certain materials." She got up and studied her reflection "You would have thought they'd have fixed that by now."

"Do you know if I'm allowed to go to the ceremony today? Did Miss Faragonda mention anything to you?"

Stella placed a comforting hand on Bloom's shoulder. "Don't worry Bloom! You're still allowed to take part in the ceremony and the gala. Faragonda wants to see if you can harness your magic before making it official, that's all!"

Bloom looked at the simple nightwear she still wore. "Speaking of... I don't exactly have anything formal to wear for the ceremony. I wasn't prepared."

Stella lit up as she remembered something. “Oh, that’s right! Faragonda sent something up for you. It’s on the table.”

Bloom turned and saw a package resting on the dorm table, she hadn’t noticed it before, but it was addressed to her. She untied the ribbon and unwrapped the delicate paper. Inside was a shimmering pink robe adorned with golden embroidery along the edges that matched everyone else’s. A white stole folded inside to complete the ensemble. Behind that was a blue formal gown she could wear underneath.

“Wow,” Bloom breathed, fingers brushing over the fabric. “It’s beautiful.”

Stella walked over and nodded approvingly. “See? You’ll look perfect. It’s one of the traditional robes used for the ceremony. Faragonda wouldn’t have sent it if she didn’t believe you deserved to wear it. It was me who requested the blue, of course. I’m sure someone will have shoes you can wear.”

Bloom felt overwhelmed with gratitude and relief. Even though she was on probation, it was clear Faragonda believed in her. The thought squashed any doubts she was having about the ordeal.

“Thanks, Stella,” she said, looking at her friend with genuine appreciation. “For everything. I don’t think I could do this without you.”

Stella waved a hand. “Oh, please. I’m only here to make sure you don’t get lost on your way to the ceremony. And we must go shopping later!”

Bloom laughed, shaking her head as she picked up the robe and stepped away to get ready. She showered, fixed her hair and slipped into the blue gown and a pair of Flora’s shoes. Finally she put on the sparkling pink robe and stepped back into the main dormitory.

The rest of the girls waited for Bloom, they all wore the same pink robe. Tecna had a suit on underneath. Musa wore a short, red cheongsam with purple patterns along the side.

Flora had on a flowing pink and green dress and Layla wore a dark green traditional gown.

When Bloom finally stepped out, Stella's eyes widened. "You look fantastic Bloom! I told you blue was your colour!" She said with glee, patting herself on the back.

"Thanks," Bloom said, still with a hint of hesitation. "I hope I don't mess anything up. Anything I should know?"

"It's super easy sweetie, you go up shake the main faculty's hands and then perform a display of magic. Easy!" Flora said.

Bloom immediately went from relative calm to panic. She had to use magic, how? She looked to Stella knowing she couldn't say anything out loud right now. "You're right. Easy! I guess... I'm ready."

"Woo hoo! Let's go" Musa yelled. They all filed out of the dorm room, Bloom hung back so she could walk with Stella and Layla.

"What am I meant to do guys, I've only ever used magic once." She half yelled, half whispered. She looked at her hands as they began to shake.

"Bloom, don't worry. You can do this. You have magic. You can do whatever they ask of you. You just have to believe that you can do it." Layla said sternly, she was correct of course. Bloom did indeed have powers, but whether she could control them was another question entirely.

They walked down the corridors of Alfea. Other students already gathering outside, their robes sparkling in the morning light. Bloom took a breath and tried to search for the fire within her.

Alfea Castle's courtyard was at the heart of the school. Surrounded by the architecture of the castle's towers and arches, the courtyard was a large, circular space paved with smooth white marble. Delicate pink and cream statues of historic fairies and magical creatures lined the green areas. It was the same space Bloom, Stella and Layla entered through the previous day. Today, a large banner with Alfea's sigil, a pair of wings attached to a capital 'A', hung from the main building with a raised stage in front.

The entire school was abuzz with anticipation, waiting for the ceremony to begin. Students found their seats in rows in front of the stage. Several faculty members were already seated behind the main podium. Professor Cornares greeted some students and Professor Valentine helped people find their seats.

Bloom stood between Stella and Flora. They were sat near the front of the crowd. Bloom still had to pinch herself that she was witnessing such a scene. Everything from the courtyard setting to the elegance of the decorations made her feel like this was plucked from a dream. The other students were all dressed in robes like hers, underneath wearing garments from their home realms. It was an honour, but also intimidating.

At the far end of the courtyard, Headmistress Faragonda appeared, her graceful figure draped in shimmering robes of deep blue and silver. She stepped onto the central platform and the murmurs of the crowd fell away. Her presence commanded respect and the way she held herself carried both wisdom and strength. Bloom felt reassured seeing her again.

The headmistress raised her arms and the banners above stilled, their colours settling into a soft gold. "Welcome, students, faculty and guests," she began, her words carrying throughout the courtyard. "Today, we gather to mark the beginning of a new chapter in the lives of our students. Alfea has stood for centuries as a beacon of magical education, a place where young Arcanists come to discover their true potential." Her eyes swept across the

gathered students, catching on Bloom for a moment longer than the rest. “This school was founded on the principles of courage, knowledge and transformation. It is a place where magic and academia come together. It is where you’ll learn not only to wield your power but also to understand the responsibility that comes with it. You are the next generation of the Magic dimensions’ fairies. Your magic is a gift, but you being here is a choice. That is the most important of all.”

Bloom listened with a mix of excitement and anxiety. Faragonda’s words made her feel even more aware that she was still on academic probation. Her fingers fidgeted with the hem of her robe, trying to calm herself. She would have to produce magic any moment.

“Today’s ceremony,” Faragonda continued, “is a symbolic act. It is a reminder that each of you stands on the threshold of a great journey. One that will change you forever. You will face challenges, make discoveries and grow in ways you cannot yet imagine. But you will not walk this path alone. You will have the support of your peers, the guidance of your instructors and, most importantly, the strength within yourself.”

She gestured to the raised platform and several small, floating lights appeared above it. “Each of you will step forward and demonstrate your magic,” she explained. “There is no need to worry. This isn’t meant to test you, but it is an acknowledgment of the path you are about to undertake. Show us who you are and let the magic within you speak.”

The crowd bustled with excitement as the first students were called to the stage. Bloom’s heart pounded as she watched each one step forward and perform a brief display of magic: flashes of light, bursts of colour and shimmering waves of energy filled the air. Each demonstration was unique. They reflected the students’ personal affinities and earned cheers and applause from the crowd.

Soon enough, it was Stella’s turn. She strutted onto the stage, brandishing a self-

confident smile as she faced the audience. Raising her hand, she called upon her light magic and brilliant ribbons of golden light appeared from her palm. They casted warm rays across the courtyard. With a graceful motion, she sent the light swirling into the air, creating a mesmerising pattern of sparks that twinkled like stars. The audience burst into applause and Stella bowed elegantly before stepping down from the platform.

Next came Layla. Her expression focused, as she raised her arms, conjuring a series of water spheres that floated around her like dancing droplets. She twirled guiding the spheres to follow her motion, then fused them into a single rippling wave that arched over her head before splashing onto the stage. The crowd cheered as Layla nodded.

Flora stepped up. Her magic was gentle, yet vibrant, coaxing a blooming flower vine to spiral up from the platform. The vine unfurled in a cascade of petals, each one having a subtle bioluminescent light. She guided the vine to twist and weave into the emblem of Alfea, drawing a round of applause as she stepped down with a smile.

Tecna was next. A crackling bolt of electricity formed between her hands. Its bright indigo light casting sharp, contrasting shadows across the crowd. With a swift flick, the electricity arced into the air, forming geometric patterns that mimicked a digital display.

Musa swaggered onto the stage, riling the crowd up before she even began to display her magic. A quiet sound filled the courtyard, low and resonant like the first note of a song. The sound swelled, waves of pink energy in the air as the pitch climbed higher. With a sweep of her arm, the song broke into a symphony of tones, weaving together around the audience. The vibrations caused the air itself to shimmer, scattering the light in rhythm with the music. As the final note faded away, The crowd cheered. Musa opened her eyes and sat down once more.

Finally, it was Bloom's turn. She took a deep breath and stepped onto the platform,

she could hear her heart in her ears. The stage felt larger with each step, the hundreds of eyes locked on her. Faragonda sat at the back of the stage, she straightened and focused intently on Bloom. Her palms grew clammy as she searched her memory for everything Stella and Layla had taught her about accessing magic.

Bloom extended her hands, trying to summon a spark of magic, as she had seen the others do. All she needed was a flame, a small fire. She focused on the sensation of warmth, of energy flowing through her, but nothing happened. She tried again, straining to feel any flicker of power, but all she mustered was a faint tingling in her fingertips. Nothing. Her cheeks burned with embarrassment as the silence of the crowd became the only thing she noticed.

“Come on, Bloom,” she whispered to herself under her breath, willing something, anything, to happen. She reached again for that elusive spark, but it was as if her magic was locked away, beyond her reach. Panic began to set in as she looked over at the others, who watched her with a mix of concern and encouragement. She turned back to the teachers, and looked Faragonda in the eye. She met her stare dead on.

Bloom’s heart sank as she realised that she still stood there, hands outstretched with nothing to show for it. The silence pressed in from all sides. Her pulse quickened, and she felt her vision blurring. Her breath coming faster, shallower. Panic clawed at her inside, threatening to take over completely.

Stella, who stood with Layla and Flora near the edge of the platform, gave her an encouraging nod. She mouthed something that looked like ‘You can do this’. Layla clasped her hands together. Flora seemed to lean forward, willing Bloom’s magic to appear. But their support only made her failure worse.

Bloom closed her eyes and tried to steady herself. She took a deep breath, focusing on

the warmth within, trying to draw it out. She imagined the fire she had felt in that desperate moment back on Earth, when her magic had flared to life without warning. She pictured the creature, her parents. She held it in her mind: a burning flame, hot and bright. She reached for that feeling, willing it to manifest.

But when she opened her eyes, nothing had changed. Everything was still, the air around her devoid of any magical spark. There was no fire, only the reality of her inability to summon her power.

The whispers from the crowd were now audible, the eyes of the students and instructors all on her. Some in confusion, others exchanged judgemental looks. Bloom's struggle made an impression, and not the kind she wanted. Her throat tightened, and her eyes clouded as tears began to spill over.

"I can't..." she croaked to herself. Her cheeks flushed, and she took a hesitant step back. The shame of standing there, completely powerless whilst others watched, was too much. Without another thought, Bloom turned and ran off the stage, leaving the crowd in stunned silence.

She rushed down the steps and away from the platform, Stella and Layla called after her, but she didn't stop. She kept moving. Her feet carried her through the courtyard, under the shaded archways that ran along the castle. Her vision was still blurred. But she didn't want to see anything at that moment.

The cool air of the shade soothed her flushed skin. She came to a stop at a quiet alcove, collapsing onto a stone bench and burying her face in her hands. She let out a wheezing breath. Never had she felt so exposed, so vulnerable. It wasn't supposed to be like this. She had come here to discover something about herself, to learn who she was and what she was capable of. But instead, she faced nothing but disappointment. Disappointment in

herself. It was as if every hope she had of finding her place at Alfea had shattered in that single moment. She was too different for Earth, not special enough for Magix.

The sound of footsteps on stone approached slowly. She didn't look up, but she knew it was Stella by the familiar rhythm of her stride.

"Bloom," Stella said gently as she stepped into the alcove. She sat down beside her, not saying anything at first. There was no judgment in Stella's words, only empathy. "It's okay," she said. "You don't have to explain."

Bloom shook her head. Her voice trembled "I...I couldn't do it," she choked out, her hands dropping to her lap as she stared at the stone floor. "Everyone else could, and I... I couldn't even conjure a spark."

Stella reached out and placed a hand on Bloom's shoulder. "You're not alone, you know," she said. "You're not the first person who's had trouble finding their magic, and you won't be the last. Besides, it doesn't change who you are or why you're here."

"But it does, doesn't it?" Bloom said edged with bitterness. "How am I supposed to be a fairy if I can't even show that I have magic?"

Stella sighed, giving Bloom's shoulder a gentle squeeze. "Magic isn't about making a spectacle. It's about understanding yourself, finding the strength and the power already inside you. You've already shown that you have it, even if you don't know how to call on it yet. I've seen it Bloom. I've seen how powerful you are. What happened on Earth... that wasn't an accident. It wasn't a fluke. You're special."

"But that was different," Bloom jabbed. "I was desperate. It's like I can't reach that part of me unless my life is in danger. I'm not special Stella. I couldn't even light a match."

"That's something you'll have to work on," Stella said matter-of-factly. "Faragonda didn't expect you to have everything figured out today. Nobody expects you to be at the same

level as everyone else here. They've had their whole lives to learn about themselves, you've had a few weeks. That's why she gave you time, remember? The ceremony isn't important, it's doesn't mean anything."

Bloom took a shaky breath, finally raising her head to look at Stella. There was so much doubt behind her eyes, still a lingering fear that she didn't belong at Alfea. "Thanks, Stella," she murmured, managing a small smile. "I... I don't know what to do"

Stella shone. "Well, we'll work it out together, and I'm not going anywhere. We're in this together, okay?"

Back in the dorm room, Bloom had barely spoken since returning. She stared at the floor as she sat on the edge of her bed. The elegant pink robe she was wearing shimmered on the other end in the dim light. Failure still stung. The girls all sat awkwardly around the suite, trying to create smalltalk about anything else.

Stella sat beside Bloom. She kept glancing over, her brows knitting in worry. "Bloom..." she said moving closer beside her. Flora wandered through the division between their rooms and sat a pink flower down on her windowsill. Flora waited for an acknowledgement from Bloom but she kept her eyes on the floor, her hands locked in her lap.

"I don't know what I was expecting, but it wasn't this." She murmured.

Stella placed a hand on her shoulder. "One bad moment doesn't define you Bloom, trust me. I've had plenty and I'm still here."

"You blew up the arcanistry lab..." Musa said from the living room.

"One... time..." Stella turned to her.

Bloom exhaled and looked up at her, doubtful. “I don’t know, Stella. Maybe I’m not cut out for this. I don’t think I belong here.”

Stella shook her head and took Bloom’s hand, squeezing it tight. “Don’t say that. You belong here as much as anyone else.”

Bloom bit her lip as the memory rushed back. Fire: raw, untamed fire, had burst from within her, she was unstoppable. It had felt real then, but now it seemed so far away, out of reach no matter how hard she tried.

Stella squeezed her hand again, pulling her back. “How about this Bloom, give it a few months. Trust Faragonda, take it one day at a time. If you still feel this way, I will personally take you home.”

“Really?” Bloom said.

“I promise.” Stella assured her.

“Sweetie, why don’t you call your parents now on my omni?” Flora offered, of course completely unaware they were in a different dimension entirely.

“Thank you Flora, but I’m afraid I can’t do that”

Stella caught a look of suspicion on Flora’s face, and jumped in. “Listen, tonight, we’re going to the gala by Lake Roccaluce. You have to experience it Bloom. It’ll be a good distraction, and who knows? You might even have a little fun.”

Bloom hesitated. “I don’t know, Stella... I’m not in the mood to celebrate. I think I’ll just stay here, you guys have fun though.”

Stella scoffed. “Nonsense, no friend of mine will miss a party like this! You don’t have to celebrate. Just be with your friends. We’ll dance, eat far too much good food, and flirt with some of the Redfountain boys. You’ve had a rough day. You deserve a break.”

Silence stretched as Bloom turned the words over. She didn’t feel like going, but

Stella's certainty made her want to try, if only to escape for a while. At last, she nodded.

"Okay, fine," she said, "I'll go."

"Great!" Stella's tone brightened. The rest of the flat seemed to hear and burst back to life. "Trust me, you'll love it. The gala is one of the best parts of the year, and we'll make sure you enjoy it. Everyone will be there from all three schools! And Bloom, you're still in dire need of some new clothes..."

Bloom watched as Stella gathered everyone in the living area. "Ladies, the gala is not about socialising and dancing," she said, almost crazed. "It is about making an impression. And nothing makes an impression better than a flawless outfit. Oh, there's so much to do!"

Layla leaned against the back of the sofa, folding her arms whilst giving Stella a skeptical look. "Don't you think you're getting ahead of yourself?" she teased.

Stella waved a hand. "Details. There's plenty of time for a shopping trip. We'll head to downtown Cittaluce and..."

"Stella, maybe not," Layla interrupted, shaking her head. "You said it yourself. Downtown may not be the best idea." She tried to say subtly. "It's always too crowded."

Stella's confidence faltered as she sighed. "Yes. You're right. Crowds aren't the best idea."

Bloom looked between them. "So where else could we go? Somewhere closer?"

"How about Navi?" Tecna suggested.

Stella's smile returned at once. She clicked her fingers. "Navi! Of course. It's stylish, less crowded, it's perfect! And I know a boutique there that's to die for! Trust me, it'll be

worth it.”

“Navi? Is that another city? How far away is it?” Bloom whispered to Stella.

“You’re thinking with Earth logic, Bloom,” Stella muttered to her with a wink, laying a hand on her shoulder. “The express bus will get us there in no time.”

Before Bloom could raise another question, the others were already gathering their things and preparing to head to the city. Stella appeared to already have command of her troops.

“We best get a move on if we’re going to make it back in time” Flora said, skipping out from her room in a flowing pink and green sun dress.

Layla wandered over to Stella in their room as Stella changed out of her gown into a stylish turquoise and pink dress.

“Are you sure this is a good idea, Stella?” Layla questioned.

“Oh, don’t be so serious! Think about it, we took on someone when it was only me and you. Nobody would dare come for all six of us!”

“We keep a low profile, okay. There and back.” She insisted.

“Fine.” Stella huffed. “ You’re no fun! But never let it be said I’m not a princess of compromise.”

Layla rolled her eyes and smiled. Within 15 minutes, the girls all bustled out of the room.

They ran down the marbled steps, and straight toward the bus terminal. Outside the gates of the castle was a host of different bus lanes. Each connected Alfea to the surrounding areas. Many students appeared to have a similar idea to the girls, but they all lined up for the bus that would take them to the Cittaluce astrail. Bloom, Stella, Musa, Flora, Tecna and Layla were the only ones in the line for Navi. The vehicle appeared right on time, it was sleek

and glowing.

Inside, the rows of seats were almost empty. They managed to sit together toward the back of the bus. Looking around, Bloom was wide-eyed. The idea of visiting another city excited her beyond any feeling of embarrassment she had earlier. She could hardly wait to see Navi.

The bus surged onto Solaria's roads, hovering above the ground. It ran over waterways, through forests. It was quick. Only stopping at a handful of smaller towns along the way. Their journey passed in a blur of landscapes until, in a timely fashion, they were travelling through the streets of Navi.

The bus stopped in the middle of the city and the girls disembarked, Bloom immediately sensed its difference from Cittaluce. Navi was colourful and luscious. The architecture shone in the sun, facades of buildings inlaid with mosaics. The skyline was less grand. Navi felt more quaint than the grand streets of Cittaluce. An old-world feeling wove throughout the city in a way that gave it character.

"Wow," Bloom gasped, staring down the main avenue. "It's beautiful."

"You've never been, Bloom?" Tecna asked "Is it what you expected?"

Bloom dropped any pretence she had of being a girl from Magix. Navi astonished her the same way Cittaluce did. It was impossible to hide. "Before I came here, I thought there'd be dragons, unicorns, flying brooms... but this is better."

"Whatever could have made you think that?" Tecna said pointedly. Flora jabbed her with an elbow as if to remind her not to be rude. Stella and Layla looked awkwardly at one another.

"It's my imagination getting away with me." Bloom said, trying to cover up quickly.

"I forgot how much I love Navi. You know Bloom, a unicorn or two wouldn't go

amiss in my book.” Flora smiled at Bloom, taking her hands again and leading her on.

“You’re welcome in Linphea anytime, we can visit Graynor.” she said, trying to make her feel less embarrassed. “This was a great shout Tecna!”

Tecna adjusted her shirt, her eyes scanning the area. “I was here recently, so it came to mind. I much prefer Navi to Cittaluce. It reminds me less of home.”

“Do you not vibe with Zenith?” Musa asked, walking back over to the group, sipping some sort of drink. “I’ve never visited before. You’re a pretty big deal I thought.”

Tecna allowed a faint smile. “Zenith has its charms, but the other realms of Magix offer so much more. It’s a lot warmer as well. A bio-dome can only do so much to keep the cold out!”

“What’s Zenith like?” Bloom interjected.

“Well, there isn’t a whole lot there if I’m honest, but Tulevik is the largest city in the magic dimension. It’s not got much personality beyond the technology though. The other cities in Zenith are better, but I don’t often get to leave Tulevik,” Tecna confessed. “Which reminds me, we need to get you an Omni. I’d say it’s about time!”

“That’s right!” Stella swept in. “There should be a store around here somewhere where we can get one... there!” Stella exclaimed, pointing toward a shop in the distance. The main avenue of Navi had trees planted in varying shades of saturated green all down the middle. The floor was some form of polished stone. The facades of the buildings and shops all matched. The store Stella pointed to was white and blue. A simple ring shape as its logo outside. The six girls wandered past several shops, most selling souvenirs, clothes or food.

Simply titled ‘Bridge inc’, the store was sleek and modern. Several gadgets completely foreign to Bloom were on display. At the end of the store was a large sign pointing to the Omni devices. They walked over and, inside the transparent casing, rows of

slim metallic bands rested on velvet trays. Each one shiny and new. They caught the light like fine jewellery. There were sets that looked like they were made from a polished metal as well, these were like the one Tecna wore.

A clerk in a long teal robe stepped forward, bowing. "Princess Stella, it's an honour! And, let me guess, Alfea students? What can I help you all with?"

"A first Omni for our friend here, please!" Tecna said.

"First Om- How peculiar! This is a special occasion indeed. Do you have a colour preference dear?" She gestured to Bloom and then to the devices in the cabinet.

Tecna stood on one side and Stella at the other. Bloom looked between them and then over the devices behind the glass. If she was honest with herself, they all looked remarkably alike to her. She supposed the one with a pinkish hue was nice.

"Personally, I think you should go for the newest generation model. It's the fastest and has the most up to date features that will last you the longest."

"Yes, but the colours are all hideous, go for this one Bloom, The silver blue." Stella mused. Tecna looked back at her shaking her head. "What, you want her to walk around with a band that clashes with her skin tone. I simply won't have it."

"Stella, you can change the band colour, they're inter-generational..."

"Oh right, well the one my good friend Tecna said, but with that gorgeous band right here."

Bloom nodded in agreement as the clerk pulled the device from the cabinet and placed it around her wrist. As much as she liked the pink. The cool silver colour Stella picked out looked great on her. The device shone and spawned a display above Bloom's wrist welcoming her to her new Omni system.

"Is it to your liking?" The woman asked.

“It’s perfect thank you!”

“My pleasure, anything for her majesty and her friends. Please tap here for payment.”

The clerk pulled up a screen above the counter and Stella took a card from her bag and swiped it over the display.

“Thank you Stella, I’ll pay you back once I earn some money” Bloom whispered to her.

“Nonsense” Stella said “I said everything you need for your new life here is on me. I live for it Bloom, really!”

Stella strode ahead and out of the store with a renewed energy. Bloom held up her wrist and swiped the screen as if it was already second nature. Outside of the store, Layla, Musa and Flora waited for them.

“The new bling suits you Bloom” Musa said, noticing her bracelet.

“I’m going to go out on a limb and guess you didn’t get to choose, did you?” Layla teased.

“Apparently, this generation’s colours are hideous.” Bloom recited.

“Well you can rest assured you’ve got a great model, Tecna knows everything about them.”

Stella clapped her hands. “Onward ladies, no time to dilly dally.” She beckoned them all as she marched down the avenue, five paces ahead of everyone else. Layla looked to Bloom and smiled as they followed her.

Stella lead them all down the street. Signs above labelled the eateries and stalls. Wherever she was taking them must be special as a myriad stores had beautiful dresses in the windows. A short walk later, the girls stood at a boutique with vast glass windows displaying gowns that sparkled like nothing else. Above the door, the name ‘La Luminosa’ glowed in

elegant letters. The store was at the corner and overlooked the boulevard looking out to the Mabon ocean.

“Here we are, ladies,” Stella announced, sweeping her arm towards the entrance. “Are we only shopping for Bloom or does anyone else require my expertise picking something out?”

“Bloom is your only victim of the day, your majesty,” Musa said. “Maybe let Bloom choose the dress Stella, she’s the one wearing it after all.”

“My dear Musa, that may be true, but, like I always say, beauty enhances beauty. Which is why Bloom’s dress must be show stopping. Right Bloom?” Stella pointed at Bloom to beckon an answer.

Bloom turned to the girls and then to Stella. They all waited on an answer, but all she could do was smile awkwardly. Stella huffed and opened the door shaking her head.

Beyond the bravado and theatrics of Stella, it could never be said she didn’t know what she was talking about. Inside, the boutique was beyond luxurious. Dresses glittered on the racks, each one unique. They were tasteful, interesting and, simply put, beautiful. Mannequins posed in the centre, cloaked in gowns of every cut and shade. Even the air carried a faint scent of opulence.

Stella’s eyes lit up. She began to search the racks like a child in a sweet shop. The other girls, including Bloom, had to take a second longer to take it all in.

“Princess Stella!” A voice called out from the back of the boutique.

“Signora Alessandra, we are in dire need of your help!” Stella rushed over to the woman, and kissed her on both cheeks. Signora Alessandra was much older than the girls, but had a youthful energy. She had glossy brown hair, tanned skin and wore a chic red outfit with a large hat. The lady reminded Bloom immediately of Stella. They both spoke with their

hands and carried themselves with a confidence that she'd only seen in her.

"My friend Bloom here, she needs a dress for the gala tonight. We need to make a statement."

"I understand" Signora Alessandra replied, as serious as Stella. She turned to Bloom and looked her up and down. She paused for a second and pondered. Her stare met Bloom's. "I wonder... I have a dress to show you. Wait here." She ran to the back of the boutique and behind a curtain, flailing her arms in the air.

In the meantime, Stella reached for a midnight-blue top and held it against Bloom. "Darling, we're starting fresh. You can't borrow my clothes forever. You need your own wardrobe. What do you think of this?"

"One dress will do for now" Bloom said edged with nerves. She couldn't deny her excitement though. "I've never worn anything like these."

Flora smiled warmly. "We'll find the one that feels as if you've always worn it. It's traditional to wear something from your home realm. Do you see anything like that Bloom?"

Bloom looked at Flora blankly for a second, before shaking her head.

Stella flicked through more hangers, dismissing each in turn. "Too sparkly," she muttered at a sequinned silver dress. Another she dismissed with a shake of her head. "Predictable." She carried on searching.

Across the room, Tecna studied a display of jewellery. Rings, necklaces, and tiaras glimmered with shifting light as she brushed her fingers over them. One necklace in particular caught her attention, glowing pink before deepening into violet. "This would suit you, Bloom," she said.

Bloom stepped closer, staring at the subtle colour shift. "It's beautiful," she admitted.

Musa wandered over, running a hand across a row of sparkling bracelets.

“Accessories are as important as the dress. You’ll want something that makes the whole look sing.”

Stella nodded enthusiastically. “Exactly. The gown, the jewels, the hair, all of it matters. First impressions are everything.”

Layla chuckled under her breath. “It’s got to be something Bloom loves, not us.” She reminded them. They all turned to look at her.

Bloom paused. “I think let’s just worry about the dress for now.” Bloom looked to Stella with a hint of guilt.

Stella shot her a playful glare but didn’t try to argue. Today wasn’t the day. Instead, she set down the necklace and pulled another gown from the rack, a soft cobalt fabric embroidered with golden details. She held it up to Bloom, tilting her head as if picturing the final effect. “This might be the one.”

Bloom’s hand brushed the dress. The material shimmered, light rippling across it like water. For a moment she allowed herself to imagine wearing it, stepping into the gala with confidence instead of doubt.

“It’s lovely,” she whispered.

“Then we’ll make it yours,” Stella said with satisfaction.

Flora clapped her hands. “Perfect!”

“I don’t know if it’s for me though. It’s too much.” Bloom said, letting go of the dress. Stella placed the garment back on the rack and smiled at Bloom. Stella went to speak, but before she could, Signora Alessandra reappeared with a raggedy black dress bag. Stella was immediately taken back at the sight, but it peaked Bloom’s curiosity.

The girls fanned out behind Bloom as Signora Alessandra walked forward, holding the garment bag like it was delicate or treasured.

“I crafted this dress many years ago. Designs that have since gone out of style inspired me. This garment will definitely turn some heads. The styling hasn’t been popular in centuries now. There’s something about you, mi amore. I’ve been waiting for someone who may wear it with pride. For a friend of principessa Stella. I can think of nobody better. If you like it that is.” The designer was being timid in her words, she looked to Bloom and then began to unzip the bag.

Inside was a true light blue dress. Ruffled on the top. It looked unlike anything the girls had seen. But to Bloom, there was a vague sense of familiarity.

“Would you like to try it on?”

“Yes, please.” Bloom said slowly, touching the fabric. It was a soft satin. She disappeared into the changing room. The girls all waited in a relative quiet. Then Bloom stepped out. Everyones eyes widened.

“Wow” Stella said.

The gown clung to her shoulders in delicate ruffles that resembled blue flames, each fold like the edge of a corona. Ribbons flowed from behind the sleeves. The bodice shimmered with an iridescent sheen, shifting between silvery blue and hints of yellow. The skirt flowed outward in cascading layers of satin. Each layer catching the light in different shades of blue, purple and yellow. The hem of the dress looked like curling flames.

It was not beautiful in the way of sequins or jewels. Nor was it a large dress. It wasn’t grand or modern. Instead, its beauty felt timeless. The only garment in that room that didn’t feel alien to Bloom. It complemented her fiery hair perfectly.

“Well,” Tecna said with a small smile, “I think we’ve found the dress.”

“Oh my goody goodness, Bloom!” Flora clapped her hands. “You look incredible.”

“You clean up nicely,” Musa added with an approving nod.

Bloom flushed, her fingers fidgeting with the fabric. “It’s the most beautiful dress I’ve ever seen.”

Layla inclined her head at Stella. She was unreadable, which was an odd expression on Stella’s Face.

“Bloom...” She began. “It’s magnificent. You’ll turn heads tonight.”

Bloom grinned ear to ear and let the moment wash over her. The gown embraced her like a second skin, and her friends’ approval made her feel woven into something bigger than herself. In that moment, the dress made her feel like she belonged on Magix.

Bloom turned to Signora Alessandra. “Are you sure you want me to have this dress?”

She took Bloom’s hands “I can’t think of anyone looking better in it. Your features. your hair. It’s as though this dress was made for you. A Dominian shape never looked so good on anyone.”

“Dominian?” Bloom replied.

“Yes, this dress, the cut, the style. It’s similar to a design they would have worn in Domino many centuries ago.”

Bloom looked down at the dress. Then back to the designer. “Well, thank you. I will wear it with pride tonight.”

Stella paid for the dress and the girls began to head from the store to the bus. The sun was getting lower in the city of Navi, Bloom looked to the sky and let out a laugh. Stella came up from behind her. “Are you feeling better? I’m sorry everything hasn’t gone one hundred percent smoothly so far...”

“It’s not your fault Stella, and yes, I’m feeling better. I don’t know how I’ll ever repay you for the dress and the bracelet I-“

“Don’t,” Stella said with a dismissive wave. “It’s like I said. I want to do this. Besides

you've saved me more than once. Call this even."

"You don't think it will be too much do you?"

"Oh, please," Stella said with a shrug. "Blending in is boring. Tonight we all make a statement."

Bloom felt a warmth rising that had little to do with magic. For the first time since arriving at Alfea, she felt anchored by friendship. These girls believed in her. They wanted her to succeed. Each in their own way, they were helping her find her place.

With a small spark of hope restored, she stepped onto the bus. Ready for the gala.

✱ Chapter Thirteen ✱

Roccaluce Lake was set for the gala to begin. The evening breeze carried the scent of jasmine as the girls arrived. The sun had almost set, it cast its gold rays across the water. The lanterns swayed from the branches of the surrounding trees which began to provide more and more light as the sun dipped below the horizon.

The lakeside had been transformed. Golden arches framed the path from the entrance, each school had their own. Alfea's was a pink carpet decorated with various flowers and gemstones. The second archway was bronze. The carpet was blue and various trees lined up along it. The final archway was silver, with purple carpet. Floating balls of liquid lined the entrance with an atmospheric fog. Students from Alfea and Redfountain were already mingling. The students from Cloudtower clustered together in small groups.

Music drifted from the stage by the water's edge, strings and flutes weaving Solarian melodies that were both lively and magical. Private cars took the girls from Alfea campus to the lakefront. They arrived late as Stella couldn't find a ring to go with the dress. Nevertheless, they made it: stepping out of the car each girl was a vision in their ensemble.

Stella emerged first, radiant in a gown of molten gold and light orange. The fabric

shimmered like the sun, reflecting different colours of holographic light as she moved. A fitted bodice gave way to a skirt that shone at the edges. Jewelled accents dotted the neckline. Her long blonde hair cascaded, crowned with a regal circlet.

Musa followed, striking in a red and deep pink hanfu. The bodice was trimmed with silver filigree that resembled sound waves, whilst the skirt was simple and layered. Dark ribbons crossed over her shoulders, and a faint shimmer dusted her hemline. Her indigo and black hair tied high in twin knots.

Flora wore a gown of rose pink and green, in the style of petals of a blooming flower. The embroidered corset-style bodice featured tiny blossoms. The dress spread into a layered skirt with sheer fabric that swirled. Her long hair had pieces spiralled around itself in intricate ties, braids and twists. Vines of pale green and small pink flowers, that matched the ones at her waist, wove around her arms.

Tecna had on a structured cool silver and violet suit, cut into a sleek and geometric pattern. It was simple but suited her frame well. The tie she wore had an opalescent look to it. Her cropped hair framed her face, and a large, narrow earring of chrome completed the look.

Layla stepped out in a dress of deep emerald, bold and fluid. The dress cinched at the waist before flaring into a skirt edged with golden embroidery that looked like patterns of waves. The fabric changed with her movements, it had a blue shift depending on where it caught the light. Her hair was pinned high, threaded with strands of gold. A couple of her braids hung loose on either side of her face.

Finally, Bloom wore the gown she had picked out earlier that day. She was a vision of light blue satin, the bodice, the skirt, the layered waves of fabric suited her perfectly. Layla and Stella had done her hair. Two braids ran around the crown of her head, pinned to the back. The rest of her hair flowed behind her.

Bloom's eyes darted from group to group, dazzled by all of the people in gowns and formal suits. Many of the faces she recognised from that morning, which now seemed so far away.

Stella was already mingling with a couple of students from Redfountain. She caught Bloom's attention and swept over next to her. "The Roccaluce gala is one of the most magical nights of the year. And tonight, we're going to make it unforgettable. You deserve to be here Bloom. Enjoy it."

Flora drew in a breath "Let's get some food! I'm intrigued to know what they've put on the buffet!" She took Bloom's arm as if to invite her along. They both went to the buffet table that seemed to be stocked with a whole host of foods that only seemed half familiar to her.

Musa let out a quick whistle as she lingered by the orchestra. "Now this is a party. A little mellow for me, but still. Maybe I can convince them to let me play something more interesting later."

Stella was, naturally, drawing a lot of attention. The princess of Solaria was a celebrity after all. But, It was Bloom who drew the longest stares. Whether this was because of the dress or because of her embarrassing performance earlier she didn't know. However, she carried herself with a newfound poise.

The main path led into the central space, where students were dancing to the music. The Cloudtower witches stood in tight circles, their clothes noticeably darker than the Alfeans. The Redfountain wielders were all wearing their uniforms, the crest stitched into the fabric.

"I am such a fan of traditions and everything, but uniforms at a party? Not for me"

Stella spoke, mainly to herself, sweeping the crowd.

“It’s tradition they wear uniforms to the event?” Bloom asked.

“Yes. No idea why though. It’s boring, and it gives them an excuse not to make an effort. Ridiculous really. When I’m queen, that’s the first rule that’s going.”

“You know, the queen of Solaria can’t do that, Stella.” Layla reminded her.

Stella sighed as Bloom looked towards a group of Cloudtower students. “Do Cloudtower stick to themselves or something?”

“Alfea and Cloudtower have always had a rivalry. Redfountain and Alfea are friendly. To think, they say we’re the arrogant ones! Because they’d rather do things the ‘new way’.”

“Rivalry’s not quite it,” Layla said, looking at the nearby Cloudtower students. “It’s more philosophy. Witches don’t transform like fairies, but we’re much the same. We approach magic in a different way, that’s all. But, historically, fairies and witches don’t like each other very much.”

“And the wielders?” Bloom asked.

“They’re fine” Stella answered. “They don’t have enough winx to use magic the way we do. They use special weapons to channel it. Wielders and Arcanists make great teams. It’s a shame that Witches and Wizards prefer to work alone.”

Bloom looked at the group of Witches with nothing other than curiosity. She waved. They didn’t wave back.

The orchestra changes tempo and the rhythm lifted into something faster and brighter. Stella’s eyes gleamed; she looked over to see Musa conducting the orchestra. “Come on, let’s dance.” She seized Bloom’s hand and spun her onto the dance floor. Layla, Flora and Tecna followed, and in a matter of moments, the whole gala began to dance.

Bloom laughed as Stella twirled her, brimming with happiness even as she stumbled. Bloom wasn’t the greatest dancer, but that didn’t matter. The joy in the air was contagious,

and she felt herself carried by it.

Still, the prickle of stares never left her. Between turns she caught sideways glances of other Alfea students. Perhaps she was imagining it, but they seemed to be whispering about her.

“Is it me or is everyone staring?”

“Don’t mind them,” Musa dipped in, slipping a hand onto her shoulder mid-step.

“You’re here. That’s what matters.”

“They’re staring because you’re a vision Bloom!” Stella bolstered.

Bloom softened with gratitude, though the unease remained. She forced herself to sink into the music, to let it drive her steps, to breathe.

As the evening marched on, Bloom found herself getting swept up in the enchantment of the gala more and more. Music boomed over the lakeside, rainbow lights lit the trees, and she had eaten more food than she cared to remember. She found herself going back for more and more of a cookie like treat that tasted like vanilla and almond. Stella was with her but she was staring at the far side of the crowd.

“Is something wrong?” Bloom asked, following her line of sight.

A coy excitement painted Stella’s face. “Look over there,” she murmured, nodding toward a tall boy with brown hair who stood out even amongst the Redfountain students. He was speaking to a couple of Alfea girls and three other Redfountain wielders.

“That’s Prince Sky,” Stella whispered, her lips morphing into a puckered smile.

“Crown prince of Eraklyon.”

Bloom grew curious. “A prince? And he’s at Redfountain?”

“It was quite the scandal,” Stella said, enjoying the retelling. “His father wanted him at the Gladius Institute, you know, it looks good to have your royal family go to the flagship school. But Sky chose Redfountain! Of course, I’ve never met him before. He’s been in hiding since he was a kid. Eraklyon’s got problems Bloom, you’ll come to learn that. Too much to explain right now though.”

Bloom tried to keep note of everything Stella had rattled off. She turned back to him, watching the way he spoke to everyone. Popular, for sure. “He doesn’t seem like a prince,” she admitted. “Not how I’d imagine one.”

“Exactly,” Stella said, lowering her voice. “His family keeps to themselves. No one knows much about them. But Sky... I’ve heard he’s different. Bold move to choose Redfountain over Gladius that’s for sure. ”

With a faint air of mischief, Stella straightened. “I’m going to introduce myself.”

Bloom watched as she strutted towards Sky, Stella had a way of making introductions look effortless. Sky turned at her approach, Stella may never have seen him before, but she was as well known as it gets on Magix. Bloom followed her, a vanilla almond like cookie in her hand.

“Hi,” Stella said. “You’re Prince Sky, aren’t you?”

“That’s right,” Sky replied. “And you’re Princess Stella of Solaria.” His voice carried curiosity as he extended a hand. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.” He took her hand, and kissed it as he bowed.

Stella accepted with a smile and curtsied. “Likewise. I’ve heard plenty about you. Redfountain though? Not the school I’d expect for a prince.”

Bloom rolled her eyes at the accent Stella had adopted. She was a princess, and she

was going to make sure he'd remember it.

Sky chuckled "I like to keep people guessing. Besides, I wanted a challenge. Redfountain seemed right. Gladius is all too familiar for me, and everyone knows Solaria has the best schools in the magical dimension."

"We try our best. Having you study in the kingdom is our pleasure." Stella flirted. She and Sky continued their conversation. Bloom stood behind Stella and began to look around to avoid idling by. She shoved the whole of the cookie into her mouth and turned to go back to the buffet table. Then she felt a tap on her shoulder. She turned to her left to see another Redfountain student, tall, like Sky. He had longer blonde hair and the bluest eyes Bloom had ever seen.

"I'm guessing you're friends with Stella?" He asked.

"I, um, yes!" Bloom said with her mouth still full, she covered it and almost choked as she tried to speak.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to catch you off guard. I'm Brandon, Sky's squire."

Tears streamed down Bloom's eyes as she coaxed down a half chewed lump of food, but she managed a smile. It was nice to have someone introduce themselves to her. "I'm Bloom. It's nice to meet you."

"Bloom," he repeated, as if testing the sound. "New to Solaria?"

"Kind of," she said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "It's a long story. But yes, you could say that."

"Ahh well, that makes both of us" he remarked and leaned in. "How are you finding it?"

"It's been fun, although I have a feeling it's going to take a while to get used to all this."

“Me too. I’ve not been a squire for all that long you know. But Sky’s a good guy, I’m lucky I suppose.” He looked toward Sky and Stella, still deep in animated conversation.

“Looks like Stella’s making her mark.”

Bloom followed. “She always does. They look good together. Do Prince’s often couple with Princesses’ here?”

“Sometimes, Sky’s father would prefer it.”

“Right. The king... of Eraklyon. What’s he like.”

“Stoic. No fun at parties. Not like his son and his incredibly charming squire.”

Bloom turned to see him grinning. “Something tells me you’re not as humble as you sound. A simple squire hey?”

“Just a simple squire,” he replied with mock solemnity. “For now at least. And you Bloom, you’re mighty mysterious.”

“It’s a long story, I’ll spare you the details”

“Perhaps you’ll tell me the story some other time then?”

Bloom’s cheeks blushed as she matched his stare. He had a way of speaking. There was something about this Brandon guy.

Before she could answer, Stella called across the floor, waving her hand. “Bloom, let’s go and find the others!” she urged, still in that strange, heightened accent.

Brandon stepped back, giving her space. “I’ll catch you later,” he said warmly. “Enjoy the gala Bloom.”

“Thanks,” Bloom replied smiling. She walked off and turned back to look at Brandon.

Stella took Bloom’s arm as she walked across the gala. Stella fixed on Bloom, almost waiting for her to speak.

“So... that squire is dreamy.” Stella winked.

“We spoke for five minutes. How can you possibly figure out if you like someone in that amount of time?”

“Oh, Bloom, five minutes is all it takes for me to make my mind up. I’m a great judge of character. Then you always leave them wanting more. The night is still young you know.”

“How was the prince?”

“Bloom, he’s perfect. We’re made for each other. King and Queen of Eraklyon and Solaria, no, Solaria and Eraklyon. Our empire will be vast. The press will love us. I can see it now.” She stretched her arm to the air, painting a picture that only she could see.

By the refreshment tables, Tecna, Musa and Layla grazed on some of the final bits of food. Flora looked to a cluster of Cloudtower witches. They stood near the edge of the dance floor, their dark gowns and sharp accessories stark, almost warding them away.

“Musa,” she said, nudging her friend’s shoulder, “should we introduce ourselves to some of the witches? It might help to build some rapport between our schools.”

Musa glanced at the group as they whispered and cast sly looks towards the fairies. “Really?” she replied in a dry tone. “I’m pretty sure the only rapport they’re after is watching us trip over our gowns.”

Tecna shrugged “All of them can’t be hostile. There must be a few who don’t care about the rivalry. They might be thinking the same thing we are?”

“Maybe,” Musa said through a twisted mouth. “I’ve had bad experiences with Witches.”

Flora smiled faintly at the remark. “Fair point. Still, it feels a shame to miss the

chance to make some friends.”

Musa frowned. “Tell you what. You go ahead and break the ice, and I’ll be right behind you. For moral support.”

Flora gracefully backed down and walked to the far end of the table. She filled her plate with a couple of pastries. They looked to be dusted in glitter. She took a bowl of fruit too.

As Flora took a deep breath, and psyched herself up to introduce herself, she noticed a girl nearby. Pale skin, bright red hair pulled back, and a dark purple dress marked her as Cloudtower. She lingered, biting her nails. Eyes flitting between the ground and the crowd.

“Hi there.” Flora said softly. “Are you enjoying the gala?”

The girl looked up, startled. “Oh, hello,” she said, her voice was hoarse and fried. “Yes, I suppose so.”

Flora stepped closer “My name is Flora. I’ve just started at Alfea. You’re from Cloudtower, aren’t you?”

The girl nodded and flushed red. “Yes. I’m Mirta,” As though apologising for speaking. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you too, Mirta.” Flora picked up a pastry and set it on her plate. “I’ve never been to Cloudtower. Is it anything like Alfea?”

Mirta did a double take between her plate and Flora. “I’ve never been to Alfea. I don’t imagine they’re alike though.” She lifted the pastry and squinted at it.

Flora could tell she wasn’t enjoying the conversation, but Mirta wasn’t trying to be rude or standoffish. “And do you enjoy it?”

Mirta looked to a fellow gaggle of Witches and then back to Flora. “I’m not sure. I didn’t exactly choose Cloudtower. My mother wanted me to be a witch. It’s kind of a family

tradition.”

Flora donned a sadder expression. “I see... So you’re here because your mother wants it. I’m sure you’ll be a brilliant witch Mirta.”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “I’m not all that great at magic.”

Flora paused to think of the right response. “It’s not easy finding your path is it? I find that friends can help you.”

Mirta shrugged. “Thank you. I don’t have many friends at Cloudtower though.”

“Well, you’ve got a friend at Alfea.” Flora assured her, outstretching the bowl of fruit.

Mirta smiled and reached for a piece. “I thought that fairies were meant to hate witches.”

“I don’t see why I would,” Flora replied simply. “We’re all here because we want to learn about our magic.”

“Right.” Mirta agreed. They both looked to the crowd of witches and shared the food Flora had brought over.

As Flora and Mirta continued to talk, Tecna was called over to help fix an issue with the lights on the main stage. Layla was in the middle of the dance floor. Lost in the music.

Bloom and Stella rejoined Musa at the buffet table. The music at the gala slowing, Bloom began to sway to the sound.

“Where is everyone?” Stella asked.

Musa nodded her head to the other end of the table. “Well, Flora is over there speaking to a girl from Cloudtower. Don’t ask me why. Tecna is with the faculty, trying to fix

the main stage and Layla has been dancing the whole night, but I'm not sure where she is now. I'm kinda worried about her, is she okay?"

"Yeah, she's going through some personal stuff right now. She'll be fine." Stella replied, clearly being cagey. Bloom had noticed the same. Layla had been on edge about something since they first met. The only person who seemed to know anything about it was Stella.

"I'm going to get a drink, does anyone want-" Bloom cut herself off as she felt a tap on her shoulder. She turned to see Brandon. "Hey!"

"Hello Bloom, I hope I'm not interrupting." He said quickly.

"No, you're not interrupting anything, Brandon, me and Musa were just about to go and find our friend Layla. See you later" Stella said with a wink, grabbing Musa by the hand. Bloom turned back to Brandon with a blushed smile.

"I was wondering, would you like to dance?" Brandon asked.

"I won't be stealing you away from your prince will I?" Bloom teased.

"I'm sure he can handle himself for a song or two." He reached out his hand. Bloom placed hers gently in his, as he guided her to the middle of the dance floor. His hand rested on her waist, she placed hers around his shoulders.

"You should probably know I'm not the best dancer."

"Another thing we have in common." He jested. The two of them moved in harmony across the floor. The lanterns above blurring to spheres of warm light. For a moment, Bloom let everything fade into the background. The ceremony. The ambush in Cittaluce. The attack on her and her parents. In that moment, Bloom was just dancing with a simple squire.

Something about Brandon disarmed Bloom. She didn't realise how guarded she had been. For how long had she been that way, she wondered. He leaned closer so she could hear

him above the orchestra. “You’re a natural,” he said, “You’re too modest Bloom.”

Bloom laughed, shaking her head. “I’m still finding my footing.”

“Well, you’re doing it well,” Brandon replied with a nod. “You’re only ever new at something once.”

“I’ve never thought about it that way before.” Bloom replied. It seemed that Brandon was not new to dancing at all. He moved like he’d rehearsed a thousand times.

“There’s something strange about you Bloom”

“In a bad way?”

“In a weird way. But a good way. You look at everything like you’re seeing it for the first time.”

Bloom couldn’t help but laugh at the remark. If only he knew.

“Promise me I’ll see you again after tonight,” he said, his voice softer now. “If you’d like that.”

“I think if Sky and Stella keep dragging us into their schemes, I doubt we’ll have much choice.”

Brandon chuckled. “Fair point. Sounds like you’re stuck with me, Bloom.”

She looked into his aqua blue eyes. His playful smile dropped into something mellow. “I guess I am.”

They turned in time with the strings, the crowd folding around them. Bloom’s chest eased, her shoulders relaxing. As they passed the edge of the dance floor, she caught eye of a small group of Alfean students standing nearby.

She remembered their faces as they watched her falter during the enrolment ceremony. As soon as she saw them, they began to exchange whispers. In that moment, everything came flooding back. The air grew thin. Bloom’s chest pinched, and she stumbled.

Brandon caught her “Hey,” he said concerned. “You alright?”

Bloom tried to force a smile but it wasn’t convincing. “I’m fine. I’m sorry... I need a break.”

She slipped from his hold before he could say more. “I’ll be back in a moment,” she added quickly.

Brandon gave her an understanding nod. “Take your time. I’ll wait.”

Bloom shot him a grateful look before turning away. She walked briskly across the lawn, where the lantern light thinned and the laughter of the crowd began to dissolve into the rustle of leaves. The air cooled as she reached the tree-line, the faint scent of jasmine now fresh and grassy. Some of the tension in her shoulders loosened. She placed both of her hands on her head and wiped away a bead of sweat.

She wandered along the edge of the trees, gown brushing against the grass. As much as she’d tried to not let it ruin her evening, the memory of the ceremony ate away at her. The silence when her magic failed, the pity in the eyes around her. She wanted to believe it was just one mistake, but how could she be sure of it? No matter how hard she tried, would she always be one step behind? A guest in a world that might never accept her.

She sat on the many layers of her dress. Out at the lakeside of Roccaluce. It was peaceful, until she felt an unsettling feeling. A feeling that she was not alone.

A voice came from the trees behind her. “You shouldn’t let those girls trouble you,” it said. “The ones who point and laugh usually have the least to say themselves.”

Bloom turned sharply. A girl stood a few paces away, half-veiled by the trees. Her hair fell in sheets of icy white, catching the faint light of the gala. She wore a gown of deep blue that shimmered like snow in moonlight. She was calm, almost detached, but there was something sharp about her, something Bloom couldn’t read.

“Thanks,” Bloom said, startled. Her voice wavered. “I needed a moment.”

The girl stepped closer. “It isn’t unusual to feel out of place,” she said. Detached on the surface, but under it lay a note of understanding.

Bloom studied her. There was something older in the girl than her face suggested, a way she carried herself that made her seem both enigmatic, yet assured. “I’m Bloom,” she said at last. “Are you from Alfea?”

One corner of the girl’s lips curved upwards. “No,” she replied. “But I know the school well enough.”

Bloom frowned, intrigued. Her words were like a riddle. Unsettling, but. Bloom was curious. “So you’ve been to a lot of these events?” she searched for a clue.

“Let’s say I’ve met enough people who thrive on appearances. And I’ve learnt that the ones who stand apart, who don’t quite fit, often prove the most interesting. I only talk with interesting people. My time is much too valuable to waste on the mundane.”

Something about this girl knew more about Bloom, somehow, than she should. A great judge of character, maybe? Or something else.

“It isn’t easy,” she admitted “I’m still figuring out where I belong.”

The girl’s expression deepened by a fraction. “People fear what they don’t understand Bloom. They fear power, too, even when it’s hidden.”

The words lingered as Bloom looked up at the woman, suspicious now. She tried to swallow any signet of understanding. “Who are you?”

The girl looked back at her, Bloom knew she hadn’t been successful in hiding her expression. “Isabella,” she said. “You can call me Isabella.” She outstretched her hand.

Bloom stood up and shook her hand firmly once. She opened her mouth to respond, but Isabella had already begun to step back, shadows swallowing the edges of her form. “It

was a pleasure to meet you, Bloom,” she muttered. “I hope you find what you’re searching for.”

Before Bloom could answer, Isabella turned and slipped deeper into the trees. Within moments she was gone, her gown melting into the dark as though she had never been there.

Bloom stood frozen, staring at the space she had left. The encounter raising one hundred questions. Was she overthinking it? She couldn’t deny that it was a strangely comforting exchange. Isabella’s words had touched something within Bloom that she hadn’t even dared to name. It was as though she saw right through her, like a sheet of ice.

She got up and walked back towards the lake. The orchestra immersing her into the gala once more.

She saw Brandon waiting near where she’d left him. He waved at her, she wandered back. As she did, she couldn’t shake the feeling that all of the people she’d met that night kept something from her. Perhaps it was that she had a secret of her own, that allowed her to see through it in others.

✱ Chapter Fourteen ✱

The first day of classes began on the following Monday. Although the days of the week went by different names on Magix. The first day of the week is Hestiadies. The days followed Leonardies, Jingdies, Ahnahdies, Aureliadies, Ekondies and Dimitridies. Bloom had spent the whole weekend getting down the basics for her studies. Stella had ordered her a whole wardrobe of casual clothes and Faragonda had kindly provided her textbooks. Tecna insisted she digitised them, but a paper and pen worked best for Bloom; they were still used on Magix so they must be useful in ways technology can't replace. Alfea came alive in the morning light. Students hurried to their lectures, chatter was loud with excitement.

Bloom walked with Stella, Musa, Flora, Layla, and Tecna down one of the castle's elegant corridors, caught between eager and nervous. Their first lesson, Fundamental Kinesis with Professor Wizgiz, waited ahead. Doubts about her place at Alfea still plagued the back of her mind. It didn't stop the thought of beginning real magical study sending a current of anticipation through her. Perhaps here, finally, she would find a way to access her magic.

The classroom surpassed anything Bloom had imagined. Tiered benches curved around a wide central platform, leaving space for demonstrations. Symbols of the four

classical elements lined the walls: fire, air, water and earth. Each one parented other symbols.

The girls settled into seats near the front as Professor Wiggiz bustled in. He was a short and skinny man, quite the peculiar figure. He had wild red hair jutting in every direction, a pointed beard, and spectacles perched precariously on his long nose. He wore green overalls and a pointy tartan hat. He definitely wasn't a young man, but there was youthfulness about him and a restlessness that hinted at knowledge deeper than his unusual appearance suggested.

"Good morning, students!" he cried, clapping his hands together as he strode into the centre of the room. "Welcome to your first Kinesis lesson. This is the bedrock of your magical education. This course serves as a refresher to what you may have learned at previous institutions. We want to get you all on the same page. A sturdy foundation is important for everything else you do at Alfea. In this class you'll learn the proper ways to channel your Winx. We want to make sure you make safe and effective use of your power."

Bloom wondered about the word. 'Winx'. She had heard it before in passing. She nudged at Layla, who seemed to be only half there.

"Layla, what is Winx?" Bloom whispered.

Wiggiz's enthusiasm seemed to cut her off before she went to answer.

"Now," he continued, "before we begin, let's clarify something important. Each of you carries a natural attunement. It could be one of the core elements, or, something more specialised." He leapt across the benches, making eye contact with a few faces. "Today we start with general kinesis, but as you progress you will branch into classes for your specific affinity. You could leave Alfea, with up to four or even five under your belt, depending on your potential."

Wiggiz looked over the room and caught eye of Stella. Who was brushing her hair.

“Miss Deluce, I’m sure you’re aware that Luxokinesis, the manipulation of light, is rare indeed. It requires a rigid understanding of the subtleties of light. I’m sure you’ll be happy to hear, Princess Stella, you will join the higher-year class in Luxokinesis after this lesson. But do try and pay attention for this.”

Stella smiled “Sorry, professor.”

The professor shook his head slightly. “Any student with different circumstances that I’m not yet aware of, please do let me know at the end of class. Especially if you’ve already began to learn multiple attunements.”

Multiple elements? Bloom wondered to herself. She wasn’t sure how she’d master one. She tucked the thought away, meaning to ask Faragonda later.

“Now,” Wizgiz said, raising his voice. “I imagine you’re all eager to begin. But magic is not a matter of power alone. It begins with understanding.”

He lifted a hand. Rocks seemed to lift from his desk to his palm. They hovered above, scrunching in shape and form. The stones clustered into a solid before beginning to glow red hot and form into a ball of lava.

“Magic doesn’t require domination over what you wish to control, It requires knowledge. You must study your element, and distinguish it from the others around it. You must see that which soothes and nourishes, and set it apart from what destroys. To wield anything you must first understand it.”

The lava formed into a crystallised orb.

Bloom leaned forward. She had to blink twice at the sight. Every time she saw a new display of magic, it was like the first all over again.

“Magic is born from intention,” Wizgiz went on at a rather excitable speed. “Raw energy is meaningless without purpose. A spell is not what you want to do, but why you want

to do it. If you learn to align your will and understanding with the nature of the element, then your magic will answer you.” Wizgiz scanned the faces of everyone in the room. Most students twiddled their thumbs or were only half listening. Bloom sat differently. She hunched over the desk, eyes wide and wore a stunned expression.

Wizgiz clapped his hands. “Now,” he said, “let’s see what you can all do.”

A shiver ran down Bloom’s spine. The whole room sprung back to life as Bloom seemed to shrivel up. She looked to her friends.

“You’ll be fine” Stella whispered.

Wizgiz gestured to the demonstration space at the centre of the room. “All right” he said, “We’ll start by seeing where you are. Would anyone like to demonstrate? We aren’t trying to get something perfect. This is a no judgement zone.”

The students glanced at one another. Not so much of nervousness, more so at lethargy towards the idea. Stella raised her hand after waiting for a moment.

“I’ll go professor.” She called as she strode to the centre with her usual flair. Golden light curled at her fingertips, weaving into tendrils that ebbed around her. She spun them into an orb, before stretching them into ribbons that coiled around her like living sunlight. Murmurs of admiration circled the benches, and even Wizgiz looked impressed.

“Well done, Stella,” he said with a nod. “Your affinity for light is strong. And you understand that Luxokinesis thrives on creativity as much as control. It will be interesting to see how we can push your powers further!”

Stella returned to her seat with a self-satisfied smile.

“Now, we are going to continue with the first task of the day. Come to the front of the class and pick up a part of your element if you need. We are going to test control.” Wizgiz announced over an increasingly loud class. “Bloom, where is Bloom? Would you mind

coming to see me at the front?"

Bloom's heartbeat started to climb. She flexed her hands, trying to steady them, was he going to ask her to use magic? As the rest of the class got out of their seats and began to work on their control. Bloom walked to the professor's desk. Wizgiz met her with a kind but expectant expression.

"How are you finding Alfea, Bloom?" Wizgiz leapt up onto his desk. "I do apologise if I put you on edge at all. I didn't mean to put you on the spot. I wanted to talk to you without singling you out!"

Bloom blinked. "Of course," she said, masking her surprise. "Thank you...and yes, Alfea has been wonderful."

Wizgiz nodded gently. "Headmistress Faragonda would like to see you. If you could head up there now! Do you remember the way?"

"Yes, I think I'll find it. Thank you, professor." Bloom replied quickly. Her first lesson, most likely. Or had her failure been too much? Was she to be sent home for having no magic to show?

Her friends all looked over to her as she left the room.

The journey to Faragonda's office seemed to stretch time. This was the first time she had been in the castle by herself, alone with the centuries of history. It truly was a beautiful place. Professor Wizgiz' classroom was in a different wing to what she had been in before. It was a lot older than where the dormitories were. Cobbled pink and tan stone made up the walls. A rolled out and worn red carpet lined the floors.

Finally, she reached the main hall and walked up to the tall double doors of the headmistress's office. She paused before knocking.

"Come in," came Faragonda's voice from the room. It was calm.

Bloom pushed the doors open. The office was as she had remembered. Spacious and warm, lined wall to wall with shelves of tomes, scrolls, and artefacts. The air smelled of parchment and pear. Faragonda's desk was at the head of the room, a large window behind her. She peered over the rims of her glasses, her eyes just as piercing, just as compassionate as before. She looked similar, in a blue and gold suit with her hair styled into a bun.

"Sit down, Bloom," she said, motioning to a chair.

Bloom obeyed, perching on the seat. She clutched at the hems of her denim skirt.

Faragonda removed her glasses and placed them down beside her papers. "I imagine you are feeling unsettled. That is natural. But you must understand that you are not a normal student Bloom. That is the very first thing I wish to impress upon you. For better or worse, You are different. Your circumstances are extraordinary."

Bloom attempted to swallow but her throat felt like sandpaper. "I thought as much... I couldn't even summon a spark at the ceremony," she admitted. She was frustrated beyond what she cared to hide. "It was humiliating. I..." She stopped and pressed her lips. "What if I don't belong here?"

Faragonda had no time for sympathy. Bloom could see it on her face. It was comforting in a strange way. "The absence of display is not proof of absence itself. One doesn't need to see a bird in the air to know it can fly. Magic is the living essence of who you are. In some, it lies close to the surface. In others, it awaits for the right call."

Bloom looked down at her hands. "So... what happens now?" she asked.

Faragonda leaned back, interlacing her fingers. "Now, I will take responsibility for

you myself. I will tutor you personally. You should know Bloom, I will do my very best to help you, but you have to want it! You have to believe in yourself and your abilities. For you are one of the only people who knows what you can do. Show me. Show this school.”

Bloom paused and nodded her head. “I will do everything I can, I promise.”

“For the time being, no one else must know the truth of your origins other than you and the faculty. Not even your closest friends. Your story is delicate, and secrecy is necessary on this occasion. You, Bloom, have had no preparation for this school. You must master both fundamentals and higher studies side by side. It will not be easy.”

The task sounded impossible. Bloom slumped. “And if I can’t?”

Faragonda sharpened, her face irritated. “You can. And you will. I can’t deal with a negative attitude though Bloom. You leave it at the door. It’s true that this path will demand more of you than of anyone else in this school. You must work harder than you have ever worked. I believe in you Bloom. Do you believe in yourself?”

Bloom almost got irked by Faragonda. How could she be so cold? But, maybe, she was right. “I’ll do whatever it takes. But...” She hesitated, then forced herself to ask the question that had burned at her since the beginning. “There’s something I still don’t understand.”

Faragonda inclined her head. “Go on...”

“How did I end up on Earth?” Bloom asked, “I grew up there, I lived like any other girl. I thought I was human. So how is it possible that I have magic?”

Faragonda went silent for a while, she sat back in her chair and seemed to look around the room. “I cannot give you an answer Bloom. I don’t know. What I can say is that it is not unheard of for children of magical heritage to be raised in the human world. There are stories of dormant bloodlines. Families descended from mystics whose gifts lay buried for centuries

until, in one child, the spark reappears.”

“Dormant bloodlines?” Bloom repeated.

Faragonda nodded. “Long ago, mystics: us, Arcanists, wielders: magic users, lived openly amongst humans. Magic was a part of Earth just as it is here. But then came a conflict so great it scarred history. Out of that upheaval Magix was born, and for many centuries, gateways linked our realms. We passed freely between worlds. Earth was not so separate then.”

Bloom beckoned her on. “What happened?”

“The Seventh Realm of Magix: Domino, was destroyed,” Faragonda said coldly. “Its fall shook the balance of all realms. A calamity so vast that the gateways were sealed forever. To preserve what remained. From that day, Earth stood apart, cut off from magic.”

The name Domino sounded familiar. It was the realm that created the style of her gala dress. She understood, but nothing connected this to her. “But then... how was I on Earth? And the creature that attacked me and my parents... how did it find its way if the gateways are sealed?”

Faragonda turned to Bloom. “That is what troubles me most. The gateways remain closed, and have been for a long time. The only relic known to bridge the realms is the Solarian Ring. Beyond that, I cannot explain the presence of such a creature on Earth. I cannot explain you; a child of a dormant Bloodline wouldn’t have the raw power that Stella described.”

Bloom sat back in her chair “So you don’t think I carry magic because of some ancient lineage?”

Faragonda folded her hands once more “No I do not. To be transparent with you Bloom your circumstances are far too coincidental. It’s entirely possible your presence here is

no accident. Perhaps, you were meant to be found that day. Whether you were meant to return alive is another question entirely. You are part of something bigger, something yet to be revealed.”

Faragonda seemed to speak in code. Every answer opened into more questions, and every question drew her into a different conclusion.

Bloom thought of Mike and Vanessa, her parents in every way that mattered. They were the ones who had held her through nightmares and cheered on her every triumph. They had no idea, how was it possible?

“My parents... my Earth parents. They told me about my adoption before I left. They said they found me in a forest fire. All I could remember was my name. They said I told them stories about fairies and Magic when I was little... Could there still be fairies on earth? I could have gotten lost?”

“It certainly would be strange. Not impossible though. It’s unlikely there are fairies on Earth left after all of these years, but we cannot rule it out.”

“And the creature...” Her words faltered. The memory of it returning “Why did it go after me?”

Faragonda was unreadable. “That, I cannot answer. If the creature was indeed something Stella had never seen, its appearance on Earth signals something troubling. It saw more magic in you than it did in Stella. That is, if Stella’s assumption that it tracked magic is true.”

“Even when I didn’t know I had magic... it did.” She murmured.

“Exactly. The creature’s nature and purpose are unclear.”

Bloom gripped the chair. “And what if there are others like it that could find me?”

“Then you must be ready. Alfea will keep you safe, rest assured, but your training

here will not only teach you to master your magic but also to defend yourself. You were able to defeat it once. Imagine what you'll be able to do with training. And, you will not face this alone. You have friends. The most important power of them all. People to stand by your side."

"I want the truth," Bloom said suddenly, her voice sharper than she intended. "About my magic, about why I grew up on Earth, and about that creature. I need to know."

Faragonda seemed to be pleased with the fire in her voice. "Then we will search for those answers together. But for now, your focus must be here. Your studies come first. You will need to master the basics of your Winx at pace if you wish to remain."

"What exactly does that mean?" Bloom asked "Winx?"

"'Winx' is your magical potential. How much of the full spectrum of magic you can control. It is also your magical identity. Your 'Winx' is your power. It is the core of who you are as a magical being. You will begin with fundamentals and I will guide you through magical theory. Then I will help you discover your Winx. Your essence, the unique shape of your magic. You will practise science and kinesis. The magic within you is strong. You must learn how to reach it."

Bloom swallowed hard. To give up now would mean never knowing who she was or where she belonged. Where she came from. "Thank you. I won't let you down."

Faragonda looked onto her and gave her an approving nod. "Then we begin at once. There is much to do, and little time to waste."

✱ Chapter Fifteen ✱

The weeks seemed to slip by at Alfea. The rhythm of classes soon became familiar. Bloom had been continuing with her work with Faragonda. Everyone else had broken off into their own classes to master their affinities. She remained in standard classes to learn about Arcanistry: the science of Magic, Astronomy, Mystipology and Geography. History was Bloom's elective subject, and her personal favourite. Flora, of course, chose Botany with Professor Palladium. Stella and Layla joined Griselda's advanced combat classes and, finally, Musa and Tecna chose to do Philosophy with Professor DuFour.

Through it all, Bloom spent almost every evening in the library, learning all she could about the magical world. She practically lived between there and Faragonda's office, learning in secrecy. The headmistress guided her through every question. Every mental block, every perfect technique to controlling magic. She was still unable to conjure a single flame. Not a spark, not even a tiny bit of heat. Nothing in the several weeks since she had started.

Where she had failed at the practical, she had excelled at the academic. In classes with Professor Echion, she had learned that Magix was comprised of six realms, each with its own culture. Solaria, Andros, Linphea, Zenith, Eraklyon and Melody. Then there was Domino, the

seventh destroyed realm.

Astronomy with Professor Cornares charted the Solar System. He spoke of the ways each of the planets could be explored one day. The moons of those planets and the prison planet of Omega: which seemed a little barbaric to Bloom.

History with Professor Penumbra told the tale of the Great Dragon, the ancient being that gave life to this dimension. From it had come the Elves who mated with humans to create the Mystic race. Penumbra described how Mystics had once walked on Earth, until the destruction of Domino and the closing of the gateways severed that bond.

Mystipology with Professor Mistral taught her that every Mystic carried their Winx, a unique signature of power. Finally, In Arcanistry, she studied magic as science. Professor Valentine laid out its laws. How the elemental law all connected and the beginnings of the process of transformation. To Bloom, it all made sense on the page. She knew the basic theory well. She could explain how some magic cancelled or reinforced one another. Yet when called to conjure a spark, she still produced nothing.

Night after night she returned to Faragonda, who guided her through exercises and meditations, urging her to have patience. Yet each session ended in failure and each weighed heavier than the last. Bloom's friends didn't ask many questions, yet they all knew Bloom was struggling. For all she had learned, she had nothing to show for it but piles of notes and a growing sense of hopelessness.

It was the end of Bloom's sixth week at Alfea. She walked with her roommates back to her dorm. Her wrist buzzed and a message appeared on the display: a message from Brandon.

"Hey, girls?" she slowed as she read the message.

They all turned at once. "What is it?" Flora asked brightening when she saw a happy

look on Bloom's face. One that had been slowly fading over the past few weeks.

"Brandon invited me to Redfountain for a date!"

Stella's eyes widened. She broke into a laugh and threw her hands in the air.

"Brandon, huh? Well, well, look at you," she teased. "It's about time, you've been talking for weeks!"

Tecna folded her arms "Redfountain, you say? Do you know how to get there?"

Bloom nodded, though her voice harboured doubt. "I think it's just a bus right?"

"Exactly, you'll be there in 15 minutes. Don't let it put you off Bloom, this is great!"

Bloom looked up in relief. She was excited to see Brandon, of course, but she was also excited to see another magic school. "Well, I suppose I'll get to see Redfountain! I'll just have to hope I don't get lost."

"You'll be fine," Stella said squeezing her shoulder. "If you get lost, call us. We will stay on standby all night!"

"Or," Tecna cut in, "use your Omni. Its got everything on it! You remember everything I showed you right?"

"Yes, good idea" Bloom said quickly. "but if you could keep an ear out for me, that would be great too. I'll call you if I have any trouble."

"So, what's the plan for this date? Is he just showing you around? He should be pushing the boat out more for you Bloom!" Musa teased.

Bloom shook her head. "I mentioned to Brandon that I'd love to see the school so he offered to show me around the grounds. He thought I'd enjoy seeing it."

"Ah, romance at its finest," Layla said dryly. "Nothing says affection like 'school tour'." She teased. "Still, it'll be interesting. Redfountain's very different to Alfea."

"I think it will be casual, I'll try not to overdress. Then again, maybe I'm overthinking

it, and he just wants to show me the school!”

“Nonsense,” Stella said at once, tossing her hair. “It’s a perfect idea. If he’s already inviting you into his world, he’s serious. Just don’t let him show off too much. You may need to remind him that he has to work for you Bloom. Oh, this has made my week! Bloom, we are going to get you ready for this together!”

The group broke into laughter. Bloom pictured Brandon leading her across the vast grounds. The thought fluttered in her stomach. “I can’t,” Bloom said “I’ve got to go to see Ms Faragonda. I’ll head straight to Redfountain after!”

“You’re always running off Bloom, when are you going to tell us what you get up to?” Musa pried.

“One day you’ll find out, I promise!” Bloom said, starting to skirt away.

“And remember, you’re representing Alfea.” Tecna called to her seriously. To which Stella just rolled her eyes.

“And when you’re back, we’ll want details. Every single one.” Flora added with a wink.

The girls headed back to the dorm, Bloom ran to her lesson with Faragonda. Carried by the excitement that tonight she would be going to see another part of Magix. She’d also be lying if she said the thought of seeing Brandon again didn’t add to the feeling.

The door to Faragonda’s office closed with the same familiar sound as Bloom entered. The sun cast threads of colour across the floor. Faragonda had her hands resting on a stack of books. She looked up as Bloom approached.

“Ah, Bloom.” she said. She didn’t bother to gesture her to the chair now, Bloom took her seat, as she always did. “How were your lessons today?”

Bloom settled in, lowering her bag beside her. “They were interesting,” she said. “Professor Mistral taught us Mystipology. We went over the different types of Mystics and the levels of magic they can harness. I had no idea there was so much variety.”

Faragonda swayed her head. “Yes, Mystipology is an interesting subject. It gets far more complicated if you decide to take it in your later years. Is there anything that stood out to you in your classes? Or anything you didn’t quite understand?”

“Well, Professor Mistral explained that depending on the level of magic a Mystic can harness, they go by different names. Mundanes can’t use magic at all. Scholars have heightened ability in a single skill. Then there are Wielders, who can use magic only through tools or weaponry. And finally, Arcanists, who can cast magic directly.”

“All of that is correct,” Faragonda replied approvingly. “Most mystics have some innate magical ability. Mundanes are very rare.”

Bloom thought back to Mistral’s lecture. “Professor Mistral also said Fairies and Witches are the same, except one group chooses to transform and the other rejects transformation. What does that mean exactly?”

Faragonda nodded slowly. “A Fairy and a Witch share the same magical potential, for the most part.” she explained. “Both possess the potential for transformation. Transformation is a deeper attunement to their magic, a state in which your power reaches its fullest form. Fairies embrace that process. Witches reject it. They believe their magic is stronger left unrefined, raw, and unshaped. They seek mastery in its base form and sever their link to transformation when presented with the option.”

“So transformation is a choice?”

“In many ways, yes,” Faragonda replied. “The choice is between unfiltered power and broad command of more attunements. That being said, transformation doesn’t guarantee command over several elements. Neither does the eternox process, rejecting transformation, guarantee superior power. It also depends on knowledge, discipline, and the courage of the individual. To transform, or not, is only one factor as to what sort of Arcanist you will become. There are Fairies whose command of raw magic rivals any Witch in her highest state and vice versa.”

Bloom wondered for a moment. “If not transforming gives you more power and better control, broadly, Then why do Fairies choose to transform?”

Faragonda warmed. “Well, you have to make that choice for yourself Bloom. For me, power isn’t everything. I think limits to power are more important. Knowing many elements has come in handy for far more than you would believe. Transformation also develops your power in different ways, things you wouldn’t be able to do without it.” She let the thought settle in the room before she continued. “At Alfea, students strive towards transformation into a fairy. It is a milestone that marks growth in the magical arts. But it cannot be forced. It arrives when a Fairy’s understanding of herself and her magic is complete enough to invite it.”

Bloom thought back to Stella and Layla. She had watched them burst into their transformed states, she had only seen it a couple of times. “Stella and Layla can already transform, is that normal?”

“Stella and Layla are gifted fairies,” Faragonda said with a smile that held a little bit of caution. “It is rare for students to reach transformation before their studies begin. Those who do are prodigies. Your entire dorm room actually are all able to transform, Bloom. Did you know that?”

Bloom shook her head. She had no idea.

“You see, it’s not a race. Nobody treats it as such. We try and put those students together though, every year we tend to have a dorm or two. Ordinarily, I wouldn’t have put you with the girls in your suite, but given your circumstances, I didn’t want to separate you and Stella.”

Bloom exhaled in a sigh. She was frustrated and she wasn’t able to mask it very well. She had struggled for weeks without even a flicker of flame, meanwhile all of her friends were apparent prodigies of their craft. “How can I even think about transforming when I can’t bend a lick of fire?” she asked.

Faragonda’s calm expression did not waver. “You must not lose faith. Magic is a lifetime’s pursuit. I won’t lie to you, I was hoping that we would have made further progress than we have. I know you’re trying Bloom. I see it everyday. It’s another layer of mystery to your story. You might have to get used to that I’m afraid. Just know, every lesson you take to heart, every theory you grasp, builds the foundation. You will grow, Bloom. That I can promise you.” The headmistress reached over and took Bloom’s hand. “It’s going to be a long path for you. To sprout wings is to understand your magic. How can you begin to do that yet when you’ve only known this about yourself for two months?”

Bloom nodded. She wanted to believe her, wanted to hold onto the certainty in Faragonda. “Thank you, I won’t give up. I’ll keep trying.”

“That is all I ask. Now, perhaps we can try something new today?”

Faragonda rose from her chair and moved to one of the tall shelves, her robes trailing behind. She drew out a crystal vial filled with liquid that shimmered between gold and red. She set it on the desk and turned to Bloom.

“We have worked on intention and focus, today, I want to try something a little

different. I want to see if I can help you quiet the noise inside and find your power.”

Bloom straightened in her seat curiously. “All right. What do I need to do?”

Faragonda gestured for her to stand. She guided Bloom to the open space near the window, where the sun spilled into the room.

“Close your eyes,” Faragonda instructed. “Breathe slowly. Focus on the warm air around you. Focus on every sensation your body is experiencing. My voice in your ears. The clothes on your body. The air running through your lungs. The sun on your face.”

Bloom rose her chest and let it fall gradually. Her posture loosened, and her mind began to steady.

Faragonda raised her hand above Bloom’s head and held the crystal tight in the other.

“Now, your magic, just like any of your senses, can be felt. If you can separate out each of the sensations from one another, you can hone in on your Winx. You cannot see it, but you know it runs deep within you. Reach for it as though you are trying to speak, or smell or touch or taste.”

Bloom clenched her fists. She imagined fire pluming from the ground. She felt her heart beat, she felt her breath enter and leave her lungs, she became hyperaware of herself in the physical world.

Faragonda closed her eyes and hovered her hand above Bloom’s head. They both stood in silence, breathing deeply. Faragonda shook and began to channel something to the crystal. The crystal grew hotter and hotter until Faragonda could no longer hold it. She broke from her stance and dropped the searing rock to the floor. She fell onto her desk. Bloom, too, felt the break and fell to the floor. They both took a moment to compose themselves. Bloom wiped a bead of sweat from her head.

“What happened?” Bloom said breathlessly.

“I’m not quite sure... I... I’ve never...” Faragonda was speechless.

“I felt something,” Bloom said turning to her. “It was there, for a second. Then it was gone. It was the same feeling I felt on Earth.”

“That...is progress,” she said. “You know what it feels like to access your magic. Even if it was fleeting, this is good. You just have to coax it out.”

Bloom pressed a hand to her chest, “It felt... I don’t think I held it back. It’s like something else was holding it back.”

Faragonda tried to keep her expression even. “Magic often resists when you first learn to summon it. It can be similar to meeting a wild creature. We will try something else next week. I need to confirm what has just happened. I can hopefully get you some answers, Bloom.”

Bloom nodded. This was exactly what she needed. Confirmation that magic still resided within her. Still, she was a little frustrated.

“That will be enough for tonight. You’ve worked hard.” Faragonda said, sitting back down at her desk.

Bloom picked up her bag and headed to the door. “Thank you, I’ll keep practising. I won’t give up.”

“Enjoy your evening, Bloom.”

Bloom went to speak again but chose not to. She left the room and closed the door quietly. Outside, the corridor stretched long and empty. Her wrist buzzed faintly, the Omni flashing with a message from Brandon. She paused mid-step, her lips turned to an involuntary smile as she read his words.

‘I’ll meet you where you get off the Bus’ it read.

Faragonda’s lesson clung to her, she’d have to tell Stella and Layla later. But she

couldn't dwell on it too much for now. The evening ahead promised something different.

Bloom quickened and went to board the bus to see Brandon.

Redfountain was an imposing sight. The school was built over a lake at the base of a mountain. The main towers looked old, buildings seemed to be carved into stone columns that stretched upwards. On top of the columns was the main campus, modern and sleek. With waterfalls cascading down each of its sides. Bloom stepped off the bus and paused at the edge of the gate. The air was a lot colder, she still hadn't quite adjusted to how far someone can travel so quickly here. Redfountain was comparatively further north than Alfea.

She adjusted the strap of her bag and steadied her breath. Nerves gnawed in her stomach, but there was excitement too. This was her first time seeing the academy for wielders and she was about to see Brandon again.

"Bloom!" Brandon called, jogging towards her. At his side bounded a sleek caramel dog whose tail whipped back and forth.

"Hi, Brandon," Bloom called with a smile as he reached her. She turned her attention to the animal at his heels. "And who's this?"

"This is Lady," he said proudly as he rubbed the dog's ears. "She's spoiled, but she grows on you."

Lady sniffed at Bloom's shoes before giving a bark. Bloom bent to stroke her, laughing as the dog licked her hand. "She's beautiful."

"She's a good judge of character," Brandon said. "Looks like you've passed her test."

"Where are we headed?"

“I thought I could show you around? There’s a path around the training grounds that loops past the lake. Thought we could start there. You can get an amazing view of the school.”

“Perfect,” Bloom said.

They set off together, Lady trotting ahead on her lead. Brandon pointed towards a trail that curved away from the courtyard. Brandon spoke easily, telling stories of his lessons at Redfountain: sparring sessions that ended in bruises and lessons that sounded similar to the ones Bloom had at Alfea. Only Brandon learned everything with his sword.

“It sounds a lot lighter over there,” Brandon remarked. “Here it’s a little more militant.”

“It’s intense in its own way,” Bloom replied. “Alfea might not be as physically training but mentally, it’s a lot. Although Stella and Layla both take advanced combat and their recounts of the class sound like what you guys do here!”

Brandon chuckled. “We’re all chasing the same thing in the end I guess.” He turned to her. “Do you know what you want to do after? Or is it too soon to ask?”

It’s not something she had even considered to think about before. Bloom looked ahead, watching Lady bound along the path. She could not keep avoiding the truth forever. “I’m not sure. I had quite a sheltered upbringing. What about you? Do you want to be a squire?”

“I don’t know either. My parents, they... they can be tough. They definitely have ideas for me. I’m not sure if I want to be that person though.”

“It’s hard. Not knowing who you want to be.” Bloom said sincerely. “I kind of know that feeling, I don’t know if I belong at Alfea. Everyone else seems so far ahead of me.”

Brandon looked at her. “You do belong. You got in the same as everyone else! You

deserve that place as much as anyone.”

“Right...” Bloom drifted off.

They fell into a thoughtful silence as they circled the lake. The air was colder now. It carried the scent of pine from the nearby woods. It wasn't an awkward or imposing silence. It was comfortable. Across the lake the academy lights had begun to turn on.

They veered from the main path towards a quieter stretch by the lake. The water caught the moonlight, Lady ran ahead and nosed through the reeds at the shoreline.

“What's Eraklyon like?” Bloom asked.

“It's different, for sure. There's a lot going on there right now. I'm sure you've heard a lot of it...”

“I haven't, I really don't know much about Magix.”

Brandon seemed to look confused for a moment, before deciding that she was being innocently curious. Strange as it may be.

“Well. Eraklyon has been divided for centuries now. Magic users are at odds with non magic users. There are many who want to see Magic outlawed.”

“Oh, I didn't know. That won't happen though right. Magic is a part of this world. You can't make people hide a part of themselves, what makes them special.”

“I don't know. Many Arcanists have already fled to Melody or Linphea. It's been getting worse in the past 10 years. There's this nasty piece of work named Yorgin. He's causing a lot of trouble in the realm right now.”

“I'm sorry Brandon, I didn't know...”

“It's alright! Everywhere has it's problems I suppose. What about you? I heard from Stella you're from Callisto right?”

“I say Callisto but I really didn't get out much as a kid. I had an unconventional

upbringing if you could say that.”

“I see... and how do you know Stella?”

“Oh, she kinda took me under her wing. She was a big reason why I was allowed to enrol at Alfea.”

“Well. I’m sure you’re doing great,” Brandon said certainly. “You wouldn’t be here if you didn’t have something special in you.”

His words struck deeper than he knew. He didn’t see her as ordinary, didn’t treat her like an outsider. With Brandon, she could almost believe she might become something extraordinary one day. Powers or not.

Before either Brandon or Bloom had realised, hours had passed. They found themselves sat on a bench looking out over the water. Lady sat curled up by Brandon’s legs. They were close. Looking out into the distance.

“You know,” Brandon said breaking the quiet, “I never thought I’d enjoy sitting still this much. Usually I can’t go five minutes without needing to move. But this...” he gestured towards the lake, “this feels different.”

“Peaceful?” Bloom suggested.

“Yeah,” he said with a smile. “Peaceful. And not boring, which is a miracle for me.”

Bloom chuckled. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

He slid his eyes sideways at her grinning. “You should. You’ve managed what even my instructors can’t do: keep me quiet for longer than five minutes.”

She shook her head in amusement. “I don’t believe that. You’re a good listener Brandon.”

“Maybe,” he admitted. “But not for just anyone.”

Bloom looked down at her hands, not trusting in a response right away.

Brandon leaned in. "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"What's the one thing from home you miss the most? Something you'd bring with you if you could."

She thought of Mill Valley, of her mother's flower shop filled with flowers, the scent of which she loved so much. The sound of the bell above the door when customers came in. She thought of the summer evenings riding her bike down the streets, the taste of her mum's homemade pizza cooling on the counter. She missed it more than she allowed herself to everyday. Who knows when she'd see them next.

"Home," she said faintly. "I miss the feeling of it. Safety. You might feel trapped at times but, when you leave, you realise that its a comfortable feeling." She glanced at him.

"Do you know what I mean?"

Brandon nodded slowly. "I think so." He paused to think. "For me, it's much the opposite. Home was so overwhelming. I sometimes feel like I've come here to escape my responsibilities. My family isn't exactly simple. Sometimes I wish I could strip it all back to when I was a kid, when the world felt small enough to understand."

Bloom studied him as he spoke. The honesty creating something between them. "I can understand that. Our situations are so different yet, so similar." she murmured.

He smiled. "I'm not very good at this deep stuff?"

She laughed, and nudged his shoulder with hers. "Deep stuff? You're not too bad, Brandon."

"High praise," he teased.

Lady began to fidget, lifting her head at the sound of their laughter before curling back into sleep. The moment stretched out.

“Thanks for coming tonight,” Brandon said. “I had a great time.”

“Me too,” Bloom replied, “I’m glad I came.”

Bloom thought for a moment that he might lean closer, or perhaps even try for a kiss, but Lady barked at their feet. Brandon laughed, crouching to pat the dog.

“Guess that’s her way of saying goodnight.” He straightened. “Come on, I’ll walk you to the bus stop. Will you be okay getting back?”

Bloom didn’t argue. “Yeah, it takes me directly back to Alfea.”

Together they crossed the courtyard and stopped outside the gates where the hover buses pulled in. When the next one arrived, she turned to him once more. “Thank you, Brandon.”

“Goodnight, Bloom,” he said warmly. He kissed her cheek gently before she stepped aboard, choosing a seat by the window. As the bus pulled away, she caught one last glimpse of him waving, Lady at his side, before Redfountain and its lights vanished into the dark.

The bus sped along the road, its engines giving a steady noise. There wasn’t anyone else on board. Bloom leaned her forehead against the cool glass, replaying the evening in her mind. Brandon’s smile. She hoped he felt the same way about her as she did about him. What if when he found out about who she really was it would change things? How she hated lying to him.

Her train of thought shattered when the cabin lights flickered once, then again. The engines gave a stuttering cough before the bus crashed to the floor with a heavy jolt. The bus screeched across the road. There was no driver, or anyone else. Just her.

“What’s going on?” she muttered to herself before going to text Stella on her omni.

The headlights dimmed to a feeble amount, barely piercing the darkness. Outside, the trees surrounded her. It was silent. Too Silent.

All of a sudden, a figure stepped from the tree-line. Cloaked in black, it moved unsettlingly toward the bus, closing the distance between them. Bloom knew in the back of her mind it wasn't help. As it neared the the bus, their eyes caught in the weak light.

The figure raised a hand, and two more people came from the trees.

The windows shattered. Glass rained across the seats. Bloom screamed. Whoever this was had come for her.

* Chapter Sixteen *

Cloaks of midnight blue, amethyst, and magenta trailed behind the three figures, the fabric whispering on the ground. Their faces were hidden behind masks that reflected the surroundings. One grinned with pure delight, the others showed nothing at all. They glided forward. A strange and uncanny grace.

“Well, look at this,” mocked the witch in blue. “A little lost fairy, alone in the big, bad world.”

Bloom forced herself upright, scanning for any escape, for any sign of help. Her fingers swiped to her Omni. With a quick command, she sent a message to Stella:

Bus attacked. 3 vs 1. Need help.

The witch in purple leered, her voice could chill the marrow. “Nobody will be able to find you all the way out here. We’ve made sure this bus won’t be reaching anywhere tonight.”

Fear paralysed Bloom, but she put on a brave face, stood up and clenched her jaw. “What do you want?”

The witch in blue let out a laugh. “It isn’t what we want, girl. It’s what you have.”

She stepped back in confusion.. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t have anything.”

“Oh, but you do,” the magenta witch hissed. Frost crawled along the floor, snaking towards Bloom’s feet. “A trinket, perhaps? An heirloom? Something old and powerful.”

The blue witch finally moved. She drew a crystal from her cloak. It pulsed with a light: a light she recognised. It was the same crystal that their assailant had used in Cittaluce. The other two followed, each drawing out a similar shard. Together, the three crystals glowed feverishly, filling the darkness with their light.

“Our crystals never lie,” the purple witch said with a triumph laced tone. “And they tell us you carry exactly what we’re looking for.”

“I don’t know what you think I’ve got,” Bloom said firmly. “But you’re wrong.”

The blue witch stepped closer, fashioning a sneer. “This will be easier if you don’t waste our time. The crystals react to you. Whatever it is, it’s on you now. Hand it over.” She outstretched her hand. There was something about that voice. Something familiar, as if she had heard it before.

Frustration burned through any fear Bloom was feeling. For a moment, she felt something stir inside her, a faint spark maybe, she needed it now more than ever and the feeling was fresh in her mind from her lesson with Faragonda. She doubled down. “I told you. I don’t have anything!”

The blue witch sighed as if bored. “So be it.” She snapped her wrist, and the frost came to life. Ice curled around Bloom’s legs, climbing to encompass her body.

Desperation drove Bloom to reach deep. There was something there. She could feel the warmth inside her. Suddenly, the frost shattered, shards exploding across the road. The

witches staggered back, their masks flashing from Bloom's fire.

"Well, well," the blue witch cackled. "The little fairy does have power in her. Looks like we'll take what we want by force."

Power swelled. Bloom tried to reach for the spark again. The magenta witch summoned a vortex of wind that whirled around her. Bloom reached out her hands to protect her eyes as she was knocked to the floor. When she looked up, she was surrounded by darkness. Her environment had completely changed somehow. Her heart thundered. She stretched out her palm, she searched for that flicker within her again, willing it to take shape. A faint flame wavered in her hand, barely enough to light a candle. But it was something.

"Pathetic," she heard a witch sneer, "Is that all you've got, little fairy?"

This is mind magic, Bloom thought. Surely it had to be.

Before Bloom could think any further, Shards of ice shot between her limbs in succession. Another shard whistled as it cut by her ear. She steadied herself and tried to focus on the source of her illusions. The purple witch. She tried to fight off the control in her mind, which only half worked, it brought the trees and the witches in and out of darkness.

"Don't resist," a voice cooed, "Give in. We can end this without pain."

Bloom clenched her teeth. She was trying to fight in whatever way she could.

The witches exchanged a look. Then, in unison, they struck. Wind and Ice converging into a single precise bolt of energy.

Bloom barely had time to react. Magic flared, hotter than before, breaking through the illusion. A wave of fiery energy burst from her chest, shielding her just enough to soften the blow. The clash lit the bus in a storm of sparks and frost. Still, the force sent her across the road. She rolled across the dirt and hit the floor with a grunt, pain jolting through her body.

She clawed herself to sit up. Gasping. Her arms trembled. She tried to control her

powers, to unleash the same energy that wiped out that creature on Earth. It was no use. It seemed to do anything but obey her. The witches advanced.

“We warned you,” said the purple witch. “You could have handed over the Flame, and we would have let you run along.”

Bloom paused “The... Flame?” she echoed. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

The blue witch scoffed and lifted her crystal. Its light pulsed in time with Bloom’s own heartbeat. “You may not know you carry it but, you have it on you right now. It will be in the form of a relic, a jewel, a gift from your bloodline. Don’t lie. The Wisperian Crystals never lie. You must know exactly the thing we are talking about but you refuse to give it to us.”

The three shards burned. The glow from them made the area lighter than any street lantern could.

“I swear, I don’t have anything!” Bloom cried “I really have no idea what it could be!”

“Lies won’t save you, fairy. You will give us the Flame, one way or another.” The magenta witch said. The three witches raised their hands and focused one last ball of energy.

“This is your last chance, hand over the flame now or we-“

Suddenly, a bolt of sunlight struck at the three witches. It knocked them to the floor.

“Bloom!”

Five figures landed in the road, wings ablaze and alight with the magic of transformation. It was all five of her friends. Stella’s light swirled around her in golden rays. Layla, Flora, Musa, and Tecna stood at her side, each one wielding their magic. They all wore their standard issue Alfean combat suit which was a plain padded black one piece. Bloom

hadn't seen them all transformed before. They looked so powerful. Invincible like this.

Bloom sprung to her feet in relief and ran into their arms. She cried, her knees almost gave way, but she forced herself upright. "You have no idea how happy I am to see you," she whispered through a broken voice. "How did you find me?"

"I told you, latest model, latest features." Tecna winked lifting her wrist.

The witches took a moment to process what was happening. The blue witch sneered. "More fairies," she spat. "Fine. Three witches vs five fairies should be easy."

The Alfeans answered. Their wings beating with power. Stella's body blazed with light as she threw balls of heat at the witches. Layla's waters surged around her. She cast it to the ground in a circle around the trio. Flora then grew plants out of the watered soil. Each one of the vines animating as if having a life of their own. Tecna electrified the water, creating a deadly ring around the witches. Finally, Musa held them inside with a paralysing screeching sound.

The witches held their ears as the sound forced them to their knees. The vines wrapped around them, binding them together.

"Are you okay Bloom, what on Magix happened?" Stella said finally.

"Sweetie, we were so worried! Faragonda knows. More help is on the way!"

"In the meantime, we need to make sure these witches don't go anywhere, I think we can do that. Don't you girls?" Layla declared.

Then, Musa was thrown back. The vines began to freeze and Tecna fell to the floor.

"She's in my head!" Screamed Tecna.

Layla bent a slice of water at the purple witch that knocked her back, releasing Tecna.

Stella and the blue witch began to duel. Stella twisting her staff around, forming fields of light that distorted the witch's vision. Stella stunned the woman with a burst of air before

the witch fought back with spires of ice. She hurled them directly at the fairy. Stella shunted out of the way of one and managed to melt another before it hit her.

Across the road Flora and Musa took on the magenta witch. Vines wrapped around her legs as Musa tried to knock her out with walls of sound. The witch summoned lightning from the sky, it tried to strike at the girls. A current managed to catch one of Musa's sound waves. The electricity travelled along the waves and hit Musa. She was blasted backwards.

"Are you okay?!" Flora called.

"I'm good!" Musa answered, sticking a thumb up as she lay sprawled on the floor.

The battle continued on. Despite their numbers, the Alfeans were faltering. The witches' unity and their heightened powers of wind, frost and mind, pressed the fairies. But all they had to do was hold off the witches until help arrived.

Bloom shook as she watched her friends struggle. She knew her own magic lurked beneath her skin. It just refused to come forth.

The witches didn't lose interest in Bloom.

"You can end this now," the blue witch screamed out as Stella recovered herself.

"Surrender the Flame, and we'll let your friends live."

At that comment, a key turned in Bloom. Anger or fear, resolve maybe? A heat flared in her chest, not timid like before but fierce and rising.

"I told you... I don't... have it!" she yelled. The remnants of the bus shuddered under the surge of power. The witches all reconvened as the fairies helped each-other to their feet. All five of the girls ran over to Bloom. She stood still and tall. An unmistakable mirage of heat forming around her, distorting the air. The Wisperian Crystals in the witches hands now flared white-hot.

For the first time, hesitation broke the witches confidence. Something clicked in the

mind of the blue witch, something she never could have anticipated. “She doesn’t have it... she is it.”

The words rang in verdict. It was strangely quiet. Bloom faced off the three witches who just looked on to her. The faces that were once so full of confidence now fearful at whatever power Bloom wielded. The crystals pulsed erratically, almost desperate.

Stella’s face tightened. “She is it?” she repeated as she looked to Bloom. Her voice cracked on the last word. Around her, the other girls exchanged confused looks. Stella stood up and placed her hand on Bloom’s shoulder. She turned to look at her friend. The buzz in the air immediately fading, and the crystals returning to their glow with a coloured hue.

“Are you okay Bloom?”

“Yeah, let’s just get out of here.” Bloom said as she turned around. The other girls were all on their feet now, looking worse for wear, but none of them had sustained any serious injuries.

“Try anything and you’ll regret it,” Stella snapped and stepped forward. She planted herself between Bloom and the other girls and the witches. They just had to wait for Faragonda to arrive.

Layla stepped forward and mirrored Stella’s stance. “You’re not going to hurt anyone anymore.”

The witches seemed to be lifeless before the blue witch stepped toward them once again.

“Bloom. It is Bloom isn’t it.” The witch said in an icy cadence.

Bloom walked to face her, all six of the girls stood side by side. Fairies across from witches.

“You can’t even begin to comprehend how long we’ve waited for you. Give us the

flame, I will not ask again.”

“I’m not giving you anything.” Bloom said firmly.

“Have it your way.” The witch stated. Then, the crystals linked above her head and exploded in a burst of pure energy. It was so powerful it knocked the fairies over like rag dolls. They were knocked out of their transformed state, their wings dissolving. They were almost completely out of magic.

Flora gasped in pain and lurched, seeming to clutch a wound on her arm.

“Flora!” Bloom screamed. She was the only one left somewhat standing after the blast. Everyone else laid strewn out on the floor. Her friends were helpless.

“Now, give us what we want.”

“You don’t have a choice Bloom.” The purple witch added.

Bloom turned to her friends one last time who lay in weakness behind her. Rage seared through her panic. Every nerve sparked, every beat of her heart pumped fire into her veins. She couldn’t let them keep hurting her friends. Her magic surged again, stronger than before, the fire returning. The air around her heated, her skin glowed without burning

“Bloom, we all know you don’t know how to control your magic. Make it easy and cease this spectacle.”

“I don’t know what you want from me or why you have attacked me tonight.” she roared. “But, you will not hurt my friends and I will never give you anything. Ever!”

Flames erupted. A storm of fire swirled around her. It poured from her in a blaze so fierce the trees around them all burst into flames. The witches recoiled, shielding their faces.

“Retreat!” The magenta witch screamed at the others.

They didn’t stay around any longer. They turned to fly back to wherever they came from.

Bloom continued to display her power. Flames began to whip around her. The wreckage of the bus began to melt. Through this, her friends remained unharmed. Whether consciously or subconsciously, Bloom's power wouldn't hurt them. Instead, the heat and flame sank into them and healed their bodies. Flora's wound closed up as if it never existed. Every cut, scrape and bruise washed away in the light of Bloom's power. They got to their feet. It was as if Bloom's energy had recharged their magic and healed them from the inside out.

Bloom's body began to tremble with the strain, heat slipping away as quickly as it had risen. Her knees buckled. Stella darted forward and caught her, holding her weight against her shoulder.

"Easy," Stella murmured. "You've done more than enough." Her expression was just as shocked as it was the first time she had seen Bloom's power.

Layla pulled Flora upright, supporting her. Musa and Tecna stood completely awestruck at Bloom's strength.

"I'm fine," Flora insisted to Layla. "But Bloom... what is... I've never seen anything like it."

Faragona, Griselda and several other members of the faculty came flying in as the last flames of Bloom's magic dissipated. They landed next to the girls and were in the same state of shock as the others.

Bloom could barely hold her eyes open. She swayed, vision swimming. Her body gave out, too drained to stand. Darkness crept at the edges of her sight. The last thing she felt was Stella's arms tightening around her and her voice the final thing she could perceive.

"Hold on, Bloom. We've got you."

Then everything slipped into black.

Faragonda and the others brought Bloom straight to her office. The school nurse joined them, to monitor her condition. The corridors felt narrower than usual, their footsteps clipped and urgent. No one spoke on the way, not even Stella. It was strange to see the office so empty as they opened the door. They laid Bloom on the couch as Faragonda began to flick through pages of a book she coincidentally already had open on her desk.

A crushing tension filled the office. The moonlight flowing in through the window framed Faragonda. Her face was that of pure shock. It was always a known fact that she cared for her students, but never had it been so clear to see it written over her.

“Tell me what happened,” she said in an attempt at remaining calm.

Stella spoke first, her words quick but clear as she described the ambush. “I got this message from Bloom.” Stella showed the headmistress the message on her omni. “I apologise for leaving after dark but, there was no time to lose. That’s when I called you. When we arrived, Bloom was being beaten down by three witches. We tried to fend them off but they were so strong.

“Bloom was using magic?”

“Yes!” Stella said. “But it was weak. It was enough to protect her a little though. With Bloom’s help. We almost had them, until they used those crystals on us!”

“Crystals?” Faragonda replied.

“Yes, I think they were the same ones we encountered in Cittaluce when we were ambushed.”

“Wait you’ve seen these before?” Tecna cut in.

“You never told us anything about that, Stella.” Musa added, looking suspicious.

Stella turned to Layla, to Faragonda and then to Bloom. She laid motionless, breathing slowly on the couch.

Faragonda looked to Stella. “You need to tell them. Your friends are involved in this too now. They need to know everything, Stella.”

Stella hesitated, then exhaled and faced the others. She turned to Layla who gave her a nod in agreement. “There’s quite a lot we haven’t been honest with you all about.” She said interlacing her fingers.

“Go one...” Musa said. Flora and Tecna leant forward intently.

“Bloom isn’t from Magix... She’s not from the magical dimension at all.”

“What?” Flora said. Musa and Tecna looked stunned.

“She grew up on Earth, knowing nothing about magic. That’s why she’s been going away to private lessons. It’s why she couldn’t summon her magic at the ceremony. It’s why she doesn’t know anything about this planet.”

“I’ll admit, whilst it sounds improbable, it does connect all of the dots.” Tecna said.

“Why did you lie to us, did you not trust us?” Flora asked.

“No no, it’s nothing like that” Layla jumped in. “Listen to Stella.”

“My ring has the power to jump between the new and old world. From here, to Earth. I was on a secret mission on Earth when a creature attacked me. It stole my ring and then went after Bloom for some reason. It was unlike anything I’ve ever seen before. It went after Bloom’s parents and that’s when we discovered Bloom had powers. She was able to destroy the creature almost instantly with her magic. I needed Bloom to testify at the Magix council, and she wanted to learn more about why she was on Earth, her powers and who she is. That’s why I brought her here.”

The words dropped like stones. Musa's mouth fell open.

"So you're saying," Musa said, her tone incredulous, "Bloom lived on Earth with no idea she had magic?"

"Yes," Stella said. Relief and dread as she spoke. "She was just like any other human."

Tecna's mind leapt ahead. "And what happened in Cittaluce?"

"Stella and Bloom met me in Cittaluce. Understandably, Stella didn't want to go back to the palace after her mission was compromised. We noticed someone eavesdropping on our conversation, so we chased them. They had the same crystal that was used on us tonight. At least, it looked the same and had the same effect, same everything!" Layla explained. She looked to Stella and to the girls, asking for sympathy.

"We didn't want to lie to you. But there was so much at stake. We couldn't risk involving anyone else. But, I know we can trust you. You have no idea how good it feels to tell you. I know Bloom will feel, the same."

The three girls paused before looking at each other. "You did what you had to do, I understand." Flora finally said, breaking the silence, as forgiving as ever.

Musa folded her arms and then rolled her eyes. "I just wish I'd have known. I said so many things... I didn't know..."

"How could you have. It's our fault. We should have trusted you sooner..."

"I'm afraid I cannot let Stella, Bloom and Layla take the heat entirely for this."

Faragonda interjected. The girls had almost forgotten she was there. Stella and Layla followed her as she stepped down from her desk and stood next to the girls. "It was me who asked them to keep it from you. They were only doing as I instructed. I think it was the right call, given the circumstances. Please don't allow this to create any ideas in your heads. You

have been the most wonderful friends to Bloom. It has been one of the few things she's found solace in her time here."

Flora, Tecna and Musa smiled softly.

"Now. What happened to Bloom?" Faragonda said bringing the conversation back on track.

"Oh... Right" Stella continued. "After the crystals wiped us out. None of us stood a chance! It looked like we had truly lost! But Bloom... she... the same thing happened again as it did on earth. But it was more controlled than before. She exploded with the same fire. It knocked back the witches and made them flee. It also healed all of us and restored our magic."

"Fascinating..." Faragonda whispered under her breath. She walked over to Bloom who was being tended by Nurse Ofelia.

"Is she going to be okay?" Flora asked.

"Bloom will be fine. She used up too much magic in one go. I know something that may help though." Faragonda said. She walked back to the book she had opened earlier and read the words on the pages. Then, she walked over to Bloom and placed a hand on her shoulder. A soft light emanated from her body. It spread to Bloom's. Faragonda allowed the light to envelop Bloom's body completely before withdrawing her hand. The light vanished.

Faragonda sat down immediately onto a chair beside Bloom and drew in deep breaths.

"What did you just do?"

"I gave some of my magic to Bloom. I'm hoping it will jumpstart her re-generation. One must be careful not to overdo it though."

The girls all huddled around Bloom as she seemed to stir from her sleep. "It was me. They knew my name. I am the Flame." she mumbled.

“What’s she saying?” Faragonda said.

“The witches kept saying that Bloom had something they wanted. They said she had the flame? What could that mean Faragonda?” Layla said.

“I don’t know... I don’t know.” The headmistress’ eyes lingered on Bloom, with a depth that unsettled her. Faragonda already knew the truth, it was plain to see. Faragonda was never one to share that sort of information. So there was no use asking, she was as guarded as she was wise. There would also be good reason for her not sharing the knowledge. It could be dangerous to know. Everyone in the room watched with held breath as Bloom began to open her eyes. She looked dazed for a moment, before finally realising she was safe.

Bloom swallowed hard. “Where am I?” she asked softly. “What happened to the Witches?”

“You’re safe now Bloom. You’re back at Alfea. As for the Witches I’m afraid I don’t know what happened to them...”

Bloom looked around at the girls and started to well up. “You’re all okay...”

“Thanks to you Bloom.” Flora added, sitting at Bloom’s feet.

“I thought those Witches were going to... I didn’t think I was strong enough to protect you all. I’m so sorry I pulled you all into it.” Tears streamed down Bloom’s face.

“That’s what friends do! You saved us!” Musa added. “We really need to find out who those witches were though!”

“That is the question,” Faragonda replied. Her eyes narrowed, not unkindly, but with thoughts she did not share. “I will speak with Headmistress Griffin at once. We must confirm whether those witches match the description of anyone she knows... I wonder.”

Stella, Layla, Musa, Tecna and Flora all huddled around Bloom.

“I think you guys should know. I’m not from Magix...” Bloom began awkwardly. The

girls all looked at each other in amusement.

“Oh, we know Bloom. Earth huh? You’ll have to tell me about what the music’s like there.” Musa joked. “Earth girl or not, we’re still your peeps!”

“And we’re not letting them touch you again, you hear that?” Stella declared.

“Agreed,” Layla said. Flora and Musa nodded.. Even Tecna clenched her fists.

Bloom sighed in relief. They finally all knew her, the real her.

Faragonda mellowed as she looked over the group. “Now, whatever comes, you will face it together. That is the strength of your bond, and it may be what saves you. You are bound together by this knowledge. Your Winx is connected...”

“Winx...” Bloom said, thinking.

“Now, nurse Ofelia, please can you take Bloom down to the hospital wing tonight. Stella, please can you accompany her. The rest of you, head to bed. I have to pay someone a visit.... I’m afraid it cannot wait.”

Nurse Ofelia nodded, she and Stella helped Bloom up and out of the room. The other girls followed and waved their goodbyes. Griselda escorted them to their dorm. Faragonda remained in her office. She turned to the window and looked to the two moons of Magix.

“Bloom... It cannot be.... could it?”

* Interlude Three *

Zenith and Syderia lit the breaking waves on the shores of Cloudtower. The pale light painted the sinewy spires in purple, silver and shadow. The school's walls rose jagged from the water. Faragonda's steps and the crashing waves broke the silence. Her cloak brushing the stone and sand. She approached the beginning of the bridge that lead to the entrance of the school.

The iron gates flung open. A figure walked to meet Faragonda on the shore. Whoever this woman was, her presence was just as imposing as Faragonda's. She was tall and unflinching, her black gown moved like smoke. The moonlight drained colour from her skin, leaving it pale as bone. Dark hair was tied back. She had sharp features that caught the light at harsh angles.

"Griffin." Faragonda spoke.

"Faragonda," she said. Her voice fraying at the ends. "It's been too long. I was beginning to think you'd forgotten the way."

Faragonda stayed serious. "Forget? Not likely. You know I haven't forgotten a thing in a century Griffy."

They stood in silence, neither in haste to begin.

“You’re not here for pleasantries,” Griffin said at last. “What trouble has brought Alfea’s headmistress to my door?”

Faragonda drew a slow breath. She dropped her facade, she spoke, as if talking to her friend. Her equal. “Three witches attacked one of my students tonight. It was planned and malicious. They were masked. Coordinated. They wielded power beyond the usual witch, and they wanted something from her.”

Griffin sharpened, though her posture stayed calm. “You suspect a Cloudtower witch?”

“Not exactly Griffy, You know I would never accuse without cause,” Faragonda answered. “But their strength reminded me of witches I once knew. A coven from a couple of years back.”

Griffin studied Faragonda. “Which witches?”

“The Trix,” Faragonda said. “Talented and ambitious. Reckless. They pushed boundaries even here. The magic my girls described to me was... unsettlingly similar.”

Griffin let out a low sound, something that wasn’t quite a sigh. “Those three. They were infamous during their years here and gifted beyond their peers, yet powerful enough some of my staff started to fear them. As far as I know, they’ve moved past their reckless youth. Darcy works in Zenith. Stephanie hasn’t been seen on Magix since she left.”

“And Isabella?”

Griffin pursed. “She teaches here now. I’ll question her, only for you Faragonda.”

Faragonda bowed her head. “I would be grateful. Too much has happened in too short a time for me to dismiss it as chance. A fairy found on Earth. A place where she should not exist. Then a creature of ancient times attacking her and the princess of Solaria?”

“We live in troubling times, Faragonda. Although, people like me and you know,

times have always been troubling. Have they not?"

"You don't have any ideas do you Griffy. Anything. I know I've asked you before but..."

Griffin began to pace toward the shore. "I gave it some thought" Her words were intriguing. "In terms of the Earth girl, my best guess is that someone hid her there. Someone from this world. Someone with access to the old world."

"You believe that 18 years ago a member from the Solarian royal family hid Bloom there for her protection? I suppose it's not impossible..."

"As for the creature and the girls powers, I'm afraid I have absolutely no idea. Perhaps it was her power that whoever hid her was eager to protect..."

"That is what troubles me," Faragonda said. "Her power is unlike anything I've seen. Capable of great damage and healing."

"You seem to have taken a liking to this girl Farah. Do not let it cloud your judgement."

"The witches tonight told Bloom that she was the flame, Griffy." Faragonda added gravely.

Griffin turned to the side and almost snarled at the remark. What an outlandish suggestion. "It's impossible Faragonda. There are a million things that girl could be before that."

"Are there?" Faragonda said slowly.

This made Griffin think. Really think, yet her face remained motionless. Faragonda knew her friend well enough to know that she was entertaining the thought as well.

"If your suspicion is true Faragonda, and what you are thinking has indeed returned to Magix... I'm afraid none of us can predict what happens next."

Faragonda's face darkened. She stared at Griffin, a woman she knew better than anyone. They both shared the knowledge that they knew more than they'd care to say aloud.

"If witches are behind this, I assure you I will find out Farah. You have my word." She turned to walk back up the bridge. "Take care, won't you." Griffin said finally. Her voice dropped to a fond whisper, almost intimate. "Darkness creeps in where we least expect it."

Faragonda's nod was slight. "And you, Griffy. If we are on the precipice of a new era for Magix, let us hope we can outpace our foes."

Griffin gave Faragonda one last small smile before returning to Cloudtower. Faragonda stood alone on the beach. Although she had tried to deny it. She knew it to be true now, as there were no other explanations left.

The Dragon's flame had returned.

* Chapter Seventeen *

It was almost halfway through the first semester at Alfea. The academic year was split into two halves, each lasting for 22 weeks. Week 11 was treated as a small break. Classes ended, but most students stayed at the school. Bloom spent most of the week in Alfea's library. Rows upon rows of shelves climbed toward a painted ceiling. The Library took up a large space, spanning several floors. Each of them converging in on a central point. Miss Barbatea sat in the centre overlooking the whole room. There was no sunlight allowed in the hall, as it could damage the books. Artificial orange lights spilled over wood and stone. The physical books weren't even a majority of Alfea's collection. Most were now digital, and were accessible online. Bloom had come to treasure this place even more as the weeks went on. There was something about reading on paper that reminded her of home. It was almost nostalgic, and here, she could sit unseen, surrounded by voices from the past, and search for answers that eluded her in the present.

A month had passed since the attack on the bus. Bloom was able to fill Brandon in on the details, some, at least. She wanted to tell him the whole truth: about earth, about who she really was, but she didn't know how, but she trusted him more and more by the day. He often

came to see Bloom and they explored Alfea together. He had a way of talking that put her at ease, always earnestly interested in what was going on in her world, and Bloom found herself laughing more than she had in a while with him. She was able to visit Redfountain again. One evening he lead her to Redfountain's training yard, where students learned to use their weapons. He handed her his sword, guiding her hands with his. Bloom's attempt at a stance earned her nothing but a topple into the grass, but she wasn't so terrible after a little practice.

Stella and her romance with Sky moved at pace alongside theirs, which worked for her since she no longer had to travel alone. They had, all four of them, dined on a terrace restaurant in Navi. Stella quizzed Sky about his royal duties with the same intensity she used to interrogate Brandon about his intentions with Bloom. Stella was slowly dropping the royal pretence she applied when talking to Sky. She was being more and more herself around him, which Bloom and Brandon could both tell he preferred. Bloom thought they suited each other; they were both rather flamboyant in their own way. They were so perfect for each other, it was almost cliché.

Back in the dorm, Bloom felt her friendships with the other girls growing. With the truth of her origins now out in the open, any walls she had up were gone. Musa dragged her to band every so often, letting Bloom shake a tambourine hopelessly off-beat. Flora and her bonded over their love of flowers. She taught Bloom how to coax seedlings of native plants to sprout. All she could think about was the bouquet of extraterrestrial flowers she could bring her mother next time she saw her. Tecna, now aware of how little Bloom knew about Magix, taught her about many pieces of technology. Her Omni was far more capable than she had realised. It could interface with most things. They got around to setting her up online, which was strangely similar to how it was on earth.

Layla was the only one who had grown more distant. Not just with Bloom, but with

everyone. She'd often skip group trips and had begun to skip classes. Everyone had tried to talk to her but it was no use. Stella refused to disclose any information on it, even though she clearly knew more than she let on. Everyone had decided it was best left alone, for now.

Her power, too, began to respond, if only a little. Bloom had finally been able to connect with her magic. Faragonda's private lessons pushed her harder than any class, each session ending with Bloom drained but exhilarated. They finally made progress. Once, she had managed to conjure a true flame that hovered in her palm before sputtering out. It wasn't much, but the pride on Faragonda's face spurred Bloom on. She had not yet started standard kinesis classes, but she was well on her way. They were only small victories, but for her they were proof she could control her power.

Bloom sat at a wide oak table and had stacked several books to her side. She bent over a heavy volume bound in cracked leather, its title etched in fading gold: *The Lost Realm: A History of Domino and Its Fall*. The cover bore a flame. A relic of a kingdom once the brightest in Magix. Bloom had been looking for anything she could find about the creature and what the Witches had spoken about when she was attacked. She had read all about creatures of the realms, about the history of many of the kingdoms. She now read about Domino.

The Fall of Domino. The heading sprawled across the parchment in bold script. She let her finger rest on the words.

The seventh realm of Domino ceased to exist in the year 1828 MC. Almost one thousand years ago. Historians have long argued about the events that lead up to the destruction of the realm. The most commonly accepted theory is that Princess Daphne, the crown princess of Domino, turned on her own people. She was able to orchestrate the overturn of her realm. It

is believed that she lusted after the great power her mother possessed and refused to pass down to her. Left by the great dragon itself, This great power is said to have been passed down through the generations of the Dominion royal bloodline.

Daphne may not have acted according to her own free will, argue some historians. They say that a corrupting influence came over her as she sought the power to free a powerful mythical entity. Many other historians believe the existence of such a power, and such an entity to corrupt Daphne to be folklore. They argue that the Great Dragon, as Mystics worshipped at the time, was not a conscious entity, but rather a universal force that Mystics and Elves once knew how to control. Furthermore, the destruction of Domino could have come out of political unrest just as easily.

Whatever happened all those years ago was able to eliminate any who would have been able to tell the tale, thus leaving the truth about what happened an eternal mystery.

Bloom read the words nearing the end of the book. It couldn't be all there was to the story, surely? She did linger on one picture. It was a picture of Princess Daphne and her parents: King Oritel and Queen Miriam of Domino. They looked so strong, they looked like a family. How could Daphne have betrayed her kingdom, and how was she able to succeed in razing it to the ground? Not only that, Bloom knew that name. She hadn't heard it in a lesson or lecture, no, that name somehow existed in the corners of her mind. She knew, beyond a doubt, that Daphne was good. She didn't know how she knew it. But she did. She turned the page, and her breath stopped.

Another illustration showed Daphne at a ball, her arms were around an un-named man. Her gown was very similar to the one that Bloom wore at the gala, but it was not the gown or the man that unsettled Bloom. On Daphne's hand, half hidden by the light, rested a

ring. Amber and gold glinted from its surface. Bloom knew it at once: the ring of Solaria. She had seen the ring so many times now it was un-mistakable. But what was it doing here, on the finger of the last princess of Domino?

Her mind chased connections. Every text painted Daphne as the betrayer of her realm, accusing her of summoning a power that had consumed Domino. But the ring? How was Daphne wearing it? She knew that the ring of Solaria was a relatively well kept secret from what Stella had told her, but someone must have made the connection at some point... surely?

Bloom shut the book, the clap of it echoing in the library. Was Daphne to blame for the fall of Domino? And if she had the ring of Solaria, does that not mean she would have been able to open gateways too? She pressed her hands flat against the table, steadying herself. Curiosity cut at her. She needed more. About Domino. About Daphne. About the ring.

Leaving the library, Bloom strode down the marble corridors, their surfaces reflected her footsteps back at her. She reached a wooden door marked with a plaque written on in elegant script: Professor Penumbra. Her history teacher. She knocked.

“Enter,” came the voice from inside.

Bloom entered. Towers of books and rolled scrolls seemed to decorate the classroom. Behind the oversized desk sat Professor Penumbra. Her purple-streaked hair falling at her shoulders. She was a younger lady compared to the other members of the faculty. She looked up, her dark eyes setting on Bloom. She smiled, genuinely happy to see her.

“Bloom,” she said motioning her forward. “What brings you here?”

Bloom clasped her hands together. “I wanted to ask you about something I read... it’s

about Domino. Do you have a moment?"

At the name, Penumbra stopped what she was doing, setting down her quill.

"Domino," she repeated. "Absolutely I can do my best. What is it you wish to know?"

Bloom hesitated. She sat down across from her professor. She pulled up an image of the book that she had been reading in the library. "It's about Daphne. I was reading a book in the library, it said she likely caused Domino's fall... How did she do it?"

Penumbra thought about the question before answering. "We don't know unfortunately. Some say she raised a great fire that tore into the ground. Others say she lead an army against her own people. I can't explain it exactly, as nobody knows." She said shrugging her shoulders. "Why does this interest you?"

"It's just that, The records say she was a guardian of her people, loyal to her family. If that's true, why would she destroy everything she was sworn to protect?" She lowered her head and folded her hands. "It feels wrong, like there's a part of the story missing."

Penumbra leaned forward. "You're not the first to think so. Academics have debated Domino's fall for centuries. The official account places blame on Daphne, yes, but gaps in the evidence remain. The destruction was so swift, and most of what we know comes from second-hand accounts written long after the realm was gone."

"Where did the idea that Daphne was guilty come from?" Bloom asked.

"Why, you see that man there?" Professor Penumbra pointed at the picture Bloom had pulled up. "He was Prince Thoren, of Solaria. He was betrothed to Daphne. He claimed that he knew Daphne betrayed her people. Accounts from the time claim that he thought a dark force had come over her. She was then able to wield this dark force against the realm."

"A dark force? What sort of dark Force?" Bloom questioned.

Penumbra turned distant. She went to speak, then re-thought her words. "I don't

know. It's likely her sudden switch up caused him to believe that, when indeed, she just became power hungry. You see Bloom, some people believe in an opposite force to the great dragon, a dark force of destruction in the universe. Many have attributed this force to the fall of mankind and then to the fall of Domino. I, personally, have never found it easy to picture her turning against her realm. She was revered as Domino's defender, a true prodigy of her time. To accept she would burn her kingdom without cause..." She shook her head. "It has never sat comfortably with me. Yet the records, flawed as they are, still point in that direction. The truth is tangled, perhaps lost."

Bloom winced uneasily. "It just feels... wrong." She said it louder than she intended, almost defiantly.

Penumbra regarded her closely. "You sound as if Daphne is more than a name in a book to you."

The comment caught Bloom off guard. "I... It's only a feeling," she said. "I can't explain."

The professor's expression turned thoughtful. "Feelings often lead us towards truths that facts cannot yet prove. Trust yours, Bloom. They may show you what history has hidden. Perhaps we will make a historian of you."

Bloom nodded "Thank you, Professor."

"Remember: history is never whole. What survives is only what someone wanted preserved."

Bloom stood and pondered that for a minute. They had a similar saying on Earth. She stood up and lingered in the doorway. "Professor, one more thing."

Professor Penumbra looked up again and leaned in.

"Do the words 'The flame' mean anything to you?" Bloom asked. Penumbra, upon

hearing this, seemed to flinch back. She opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

“Unfortunately not, my dear.” She said, but she was lying.

“Alright,” Bloom said, “Thank you professor.”

Bloom left the office. Penumbra was hiding something, just as Faragonda was. What could they possibly not be telling her? The professor’s words also cycled in her mind: ‘You speak as if you know her.’

By the time she reached her dorm, the thought was eating away at her. She slipped inside, sat at her desk, and pulled out her sketchbook. The battered cover was familiar beneath her hands, its pages filled with drawings she’d carried from Earth to Alfea. She flipped through until one image stopped her cold.

A woman, her hair cascading like gold, her expression solemn, almost mournful. Bloom traced the lines of the face she herself had drawn months before. It was impossible. Daphne.

She gasped to herself. She had sketched this long before she knew Magix existed, before she had ever heard the name Domino. Yet here she was, staring at the same figure she’d seen in the history book. Bloom sat back. The connection she felt, a thread running from her memory to reality. Who was Daphne, really?

The girls all gathered around Bloom in the dormitory later that day. She pulled up pictures of the book that she was looking over onto the big screen in the common area of their room. She pulled up the image of Princess Daphne the she had found.

“This,” Bloom said “is Daphne, crown princess of Domino. Do you all know the story

of the destruction of the realm?”

“Yes, everyone here knows the story Bloom. She’s the great betrayer of the realm.”

Musa said.

She tapped the screen, guiding their attention to a detail on the illustration. “Look at her hand.”

Stella leaned forward. Her eyes widened as they settled on the ring on Daphne’s finger, the same band Stella wore at that very moment. “That’s...” she faltered “That’s my ring. Or it looks exactly like it.” She glanced between the picture and Bloom. “I knew the ring of Solaria was ancient, but I never thought it stretched back to Domino. Do you think it once belonged to her?”

“It could have,” Bloom said. “The book doesn’t explain anything about the ring’s history, only that Daphne was always shown wearing it.” She pulled up other images of Daphne. Each one showed her wearing the ring. “You knew nothing about this Stella?”

Stella leaned back. “I’ve never been taught anything like this. I was told the ring passed through Solarian queens for generations, but nothing about it belonging to a princess from another realm: let alone Domino. If it is the same ring, it must have been either found or given to the Solarians.”

Layla folded her arms. “Or it was stolen? Sounds like something buried on purpose. If Daphne carried it, and if she orchestrated Domino’s end, then hiding that connection would check out.”

“But, that doesn’t make sense.” Stella said. “You see, Hestia Domino and Leonardo Solaria were best friends. Solaria and Domino were the closest allies. I don’t want to believe my ancestors stole the ring!”

Flora nodded. “That’s true. And if it was given to the Solarians, maybe Daphne really

did know what was going to happen before it did.”

Everyone in the dorm went silent in thought. Bloom studied the picture again.

“There’s more.” Bloom said, pulling her sketchbook from under her arm. She flicked the pages open and turned the book around to face the girls. “I drew this.”

Stella looked at the picture for a moment, then to the girls in confusion. “It’s a lovely picture Bloom, it’s not your best work, I’ve seen better from you...”

“I’m guessing you didn’t draw that today, did you Bloom?” Layla said slowly.

“No. I drew this months ago, before I met you Stella, before I knew about any of this.”

“What...” Musa said. The girls’ expressions all changed from curiosity to something more serious. They all began to think about the same questions Bloom had been wondering about.

“How can that be possible though? Bloom, you must have seen Daphne somewhere before, right?”

“I don’t know Flora; I want to ask Faragonda and the faculty but i’ve noticed that every time I ask about any of this, they always act like they’re hiding something from me. I know it.”

“Faragonda always know more than she lets on Bloom,” Stella said.

“I know... but what does she know about me that I don’t know about myself?”

Bloom flicked to another image from another book she had been reading.

“I have been trying to find out as much as I can for myself... I found it odd that the creature we encountered was after the ring at first Stella. I’ve tried finding information about it somewhere.” she said quietly. “There’s nothing. No pictures or any descriptions. This is the closest creature I’ve found but it was nothing like what we encountered.” Bloom let the girls

look over the creature she had photographed from the bestiary. It was a rather disturbing beast. It wasn't the one they had encountered on Earth however.

Stella shook her head. "I'll confess I've searched too. I think Faragonda has as well. Every archive I've checked, not one mention. Either I'm missing something or it has never been written about."

Tecna, who had been listening, spoke at last. "Or, perhaps it's not contained in any of the pages in Alfea's Library. The only library that's more vast than Alfea's would be one of the royal Libraries or archives. Solaria has one of the biggest in the world. I bet there will be some information in the restricted section. If the creature has been written about, it should be there."

Stella connected the dots in her head. "The Royal Library..." She paused, then nodded. "I bet we could find more about the history of the ring and about 'the flame' those witches mentioned Bloom. And, more about Daphne! But the Solarian archives aren't easy to access. Only royals and politicians are allowed."

Layla arched an eyebrow. "You're royalty. Doesn't that count?"

Stella rolled her eyes. "It's not that I'm not allowed. But I don't trust the court or anyone close to it right now. They were the only ones who knew about my mission to Earth. I can't ignore the possibility that someone there was probably involved."

"I thought you wanted to call a hearing at the Magix council?" Bloom asked.

"I did, but the Magix council isn't easy to get a hold of, even for me. I don't want to tell my father about it to escalate it as it may alert the wrong people." Stella said, and she was right of course. The truth about what had happened on Earth needed to be kept secret until the last possible minute. If Solaria's court played a role, they could try and sabotage the hearing.

Bloom leaned forward. "We can't face the council without evidence. Maybe we could

hurry things along if we had a more complete picture, if we knew what that creature was.”

Stella nodded slowly. “You’re right. We need something concrete. The royal archives are our best lead.” Stella thought for a moment, “There may be a chance soon. Solaria is hosting Eraklyon for a diplomatic event. Sky told me about it. With the court distracted, it might be the opening we need to get inside.”

“Nobody invited you?” Layla chimed in, confused.

“Nobody! In fact, Prince Sky seemed to be double checking that I wouldn’t be attending. What are they going to do if I show up though, they wouldn’t deny the princess of Solaria!” Stella’s eyes lit with a spark of resolve. “This could work you know. If all eyes are on the event, the west wing will be quieter. Risky, yes, but it’s the best chance we’ll get.”

Flora’s hand rested in her lap, clearly worried the entire time. “Are you sure this is a good idea Stella. Especially if someone at the palace went out of their way to try to assassinate you!”

Nobody spoke for a moment. Layla leaned against the back of a sofa with her arms folded. “If we’re serious about this, we can’t go in blind. We need a way in, a way out, and backup in case everything goes wrong.”

“I can build a layout of the archives and the restricted wing. The official blueprints won’t show everything, but I can combine data from public schematics with what Stella can remember. We can be prepared for as much as we can.” Tecna said.

Bloom chimed back in “Why keep a restricted wing in the already restricted archives?”

Layla and Stella looked to each-other. “Because some knowledge is too dangerous to leave lying around. Even for royals. The archive will hold records the council doesn’t want circulating, information that could destabilise entire realms if mishandled. If anything about

Daphne or Domino survived the fall, anything about that creature, or about the ring, that's where it would be." Layla said bluntly.

"If the ring connects Solaria to Domino, and the ring was what the creature initially wanted then it ties into everything. We need to know why." Stella affirmed.

"It'll be tricky, but worth it. If there's even a chance that the truth is buried in Solaria, then we can't turn it down!" Musa said pumping her fists into the air.

Bloom's mind returned to the image of Daphne in her golden gown, the Solarian ring sparkling on her finger. If this wasn't common knowledge, what else was yet to be discovered and what had they erased from the history books?

"We'll need traditional gowns and masks" Tecna said.

"Leave the wardrobe to me. You'll all look the part." Stella winked.

Layla's mouth quirked. "If nothing else, we'll be the best-dressed thieves Solaria has ever seen."

That coaxed a ripple of laughter from them all, but Bloom could feel in the way Stella's hand lingered on her lap that she was scared.

✱ Chapter Eighteen ✱

The following evening, the girls all gathered in their dorm once again. Stella stood at the head of the table, her Omni projecting a map of Cittaluce from above. The city's grand central avenues that lead to the royal palace rotated. Lines of light outlining every wing and courtyard. Bloom, Layla, Musa, Tecna, and Flora sat around in a loose semicircle, all eyes on the hologram. The room's lamps were dimmed for the projection.

"Alright," Stella said, adopting a commanding stance, "The Eraklyon Solaria event is this Ekondies. I've managed to coax as much information as I can about the event from Sky, but I haven't told him we're going. This is how we're going to do it." She swiped her hand, and the map zoomed in on the express line linking Roccaluce to the capital. "We leave at dawn. Let's get there early, We'll arrive in Cittaluce as the palace opens its gates for the event. Most people won't have arrived other than the people setting up the Grand Hall. Which means the west wing should be quieter and anyone who could give us trouble won't be there."

The Omni display changed to show the palace's grounds in detail, the Grand Hall glowed gold, the west wing marked in blue with the library circled. Stella pointed at the

passageways, her bracelets rattled as she moved. “The Solarian palace is my home, so we aren’t breaking any rules by being there. We will be able to get in and head to my room where we can regroup. As soon as it’s know I’m there, I will be expected at the event, but, if it comes to it, we should all be ready to attend. Timing will matter. The presence of Eraklyon means more guards. If we’re going to make it into the archives, we’ll likely need to split up. I will get you all into the library just before the start of the event. Then, myself and Flora will go to the main hall and let you know when things begin. When everyone is there, and the library is empty, Tecna can hack into the security system to get into the restricted vault. The Grand Hall connects to the west wing: where the main festivities will take place. So once you’re done we can get out of there quickly.”

“I’ll take the creature records,” Bloom said without hesitation. “It started with that thing on Earth. I’m the only one who knows what it looks like other than Stella. If the library holds anything about it, I’ll find it.”

Tecna nodded once. “Me and Musa will search for anything to do with ‘The Flame’ the witches mentioned.”

“I guess I’ll look up the ring and see if I can find anything about its history.... And if everything falls apart?” Layla said flatly.

“Then we leave, we won’t have a second chance. We take what we can and get out without arousing any suspicion as to what we’re doing. That’s the most important thing.” Stella declared. Bloom knew she was right. One mistake and the court wouldn’t hesitate to imprison them. Or worse, uncover Bloom’s secret before she understood it herself or help whoever is out to hurt Stella.

Bloom studied the library’s schematics, following the route with her finger. “What if someone notices that six girls have become two girls?” she asked quietly. “They’ll know

something is up.”

Layla folded her arms. “We can get back quickly if someone catches on. Just keep us updated the entire time.”

“Listen, the library is one thing, but, we need to be in agreement that nobody can catch you in the restricted section. You guys could be branded traitors, I could face disgrace and we’d all be expelled from Alfea. Worst of all, it could risk exposing Bloom and her identity. Who knows what sort of people would love to have that information. We need to know the risks. And still agree.” Stella said gravely.

The weight of her words sat in the room, but everyone nodded. Stella let the map collapse, replacing it with the golden crest of Solaria. “It should go off without a hitch. I can always cause a scene if I need to, and as long as you don’t get caught in the restricted section, I can cover you with an excuse.”

“Won’t there be security in the castle? Won’t someone see us on the cameras?” Bloom asked.

“Leave that to me,” Tecna said. “I know these security systems like the back of my hand. I can loop the feed.”

“Perfect. Now,” Stella said, regaining her poise, “Since we are going to an official Solarian event, you’ll need traditional gowns and masks. I have taken the liberty of shopping for each of us.” Stella was giddy as she practically skipped into her room and emerged again with six long dress bags. Stella handed them to each of the girls.

Musa looked at hers. A crimson and black dress. She whistled. “Not bad.”

Flora’s was soft green, embroidered with floral designs that seemed to move when she touched them. Tecna’s glimmered with geometric patterns in silver and violet. Layla’s was dark green, close-fitting but edged with intricate stitching. Bloom’s shimmered blue,

embroidered with fire details. Stella's was a soft orange, clearly fit for a princess.

"The masks all work with your Omnis," Stella instructed. "They'll appear when you need them."

Bloom ran her fingers across the embroidery. They had a plan. The idea that she could finally find out something about her identity. Finally learn whatever she could about her origins filled her with a hope she hadn't felt in a long time.

The common room was quiet that evening, most of the girls had gone to bed. Layla sat alone, watching the news, as she did every night. A low murmur from the wall display. Headlines slid past, she paid only half a mind. Trade in Zenith. A dispute to protect the forests of Linphea. An unconfirmed report of raiders sighted in the mountains of Eraklyon. She flicked through channels with a quick, practised swipe.

Musa padded in from the kitchenette with a mug that steamed in the lamplight. She paused and clocked the holoscreen. The girls hadn't asked questions for the most part. Musa stopped to consider if she should and then noticed a half-packed rucksack tucked behind the sofa leg, hidden by a folded throw. The zip sat open, a neat coil of climbing cord, a water-skin and a sealed med-kit in plain sight. Musa said nothing about the bag. She came round the sofa and dropped onto the opposite cushion.

"You and the news," she said, light as she could make it. "I'm more informed than I ever was before with you here Layla." She chuckled awkwardly.

Layla turned slightly. "It's more enjoyable when you play the flute at night, it gives me something to listen to in the background." she said. She kept her eyes on the ribbon of

headlines. “Besides, someone ought to know what is going on.”

“All of it? Everywhere?” Musa nudged. “Or are you waiting for something in particular to pop up?”

Layla let the silence hold. The feed shifted to a coastal shot of Andros. She leant in. The caption mentioned increased patrols after ‘unusual activity’ in open waters. She turned up the volume.

“I don’t like surprises,” she said at last. “I like to know what’s happening.”

Musa blew on her tea and studied her friend. Layla’s fun was still there if you knew where to look for it. Lately, though, she always seemed to be holding her breath. She skipped breakfast. She trained alone at the pool at dawn. She left class early and came back late. She kept a change of clothes rolled tight at the bottom of her bed. Almost like she was ready to leave at a moment’s notice.

“Being prepared is smart,” Musa said.

Layla lifted a shoulder. “I am.” She flicked to a Solarian society segment, then away from it at once. “Everyone relies on someone else to notice things. I have learned not to.”

Musa set her mug on the table and let her hand rest there. “Who did you stop relying on?”

A small line appeared on Layla’s forehead. “It is not that,” she said. “I have lost people, that is all. Your world can go from steady to broken in a breath, but if you listen, there are always cracks to hear... Listen, Musa, I understand you’re trying to be nice, but I don’t want to talk.”

Musa saddened and looked down to the steam curling from her tea. “I get that,” she said, quiet now. “My mum died last year.” The words came randomly. “She was the one who always said yes to the worst missions. This one was on Wisperia. I thought she wouldn’t get

caught out. She was the most powerful fairy I knew.” Her mouth scrunched and relaxed again. “Turns out everyone can.”

Layla turned from the screen. “Musa, I am sorry. I did not know.”

“It is not something I lead with,” Musa said. A wry smile came over her and faded. “They said it was an ambush. Some shoddy intelligence. I read the report of her death, it was the sort of report that tells you nothing. I guess she died with secrets I couldn’t know about...”

Layla let the holoscreen darken. There was silence between them both, but it wasn’t uncomfortable. “I had these friends,” she said, and stopped. She looked past Musa, not at her. “We were supposed to meet but they... they never showed. I tried to look for them, but they went missing. I don’t know where they are.”

Musa glanced at the rucksack again. “Are you expecting them to show up on the news?”

“Not exactly. I expect to be ready to help the rest of my friends if I must.” Layla said. She leaned forward, elbows on knees. “I worry that whoever wanted to take my friends will want to take me as well, or the people that I love. I can’t let that happen. It’s probably nothing.”

“Probably,” Musa echoed. “But you have a bag tucked behind the sofa with everything you need to leave quickly.”

Layla laughed. “You noticed.”

“I notice everything, I’m just not as vocal about it as everyone else is.” Musa said. She picked up her mug and cradled it with both hands. “Look, you do not have to tell me anything you do not want to. I am nosy, but I won’t overstep a line. But you have been quieter. You skip out on plans. Even Stella has stopped guessing where you are when you vanish. I know things have been about Bloom a lot, and you’ve always shown up for her.

You're also taking a big risk for Stella and her when you go to this event. You're a good friend Layla, but, we are your friends too... We are here to help you and fight your battles with you. If you need us, we will be there. You know that don't you?"

Layla thought about it. She thought about her old friends and her new ones. She thought about the way the sea could pull a person shoreward with one hand and drag them under with the other. "If I ask for help, I make it your problem, I don't want to add to the list," she said. "I am not ready to do that."

"Then don't," Musa said. "Let me sit here and drink this terrible tea whilst you watch thirty channels and we both pretend you are only interested in Zenith's economic reforms. Your friends will show up for you Layla. I promise."

Layla smiled.

Silence settled again. Musa tracked the little tells she had come to read since they moved in together. The way Layla rolled her shoulders, the way her eyes flicked to doorways and windows, the way she checked her Omni twice without unlocking it.

"You know," Musa said, shifting the mood deliberately, "there is a jam by the lake next week. It's for whoever turns up with an instrument and an idea. I usually invite Bloom but between us, she's got the rhythm of a toddler. You should come."

"I do not play," Layla said.

"Good," Musa replied. "Half the people who come do not. They clap on the wrong beat and eat all the biscuits." She nudged Layla's knee with her own. "Please. You need something that is not the news. I bet you will be better than you think, and I can teach you to play!"

Layla considered the offer. Down by the water, which she loved. No one would ask questions there. Not the kind that mattered.

“All right,” she said. “On one condition.”

“Name it.”

“You play something that I can dance to,” Layla said. “I’m far better at that.”

Musa huffed a laugh. “Deal. I will leave the tragic ballads in the case. I can do cheerful. I have a whole playlist titled ‘Songs To Distract Your Friends From Their Mysterious Problems.’”

“Practical,” Layla said. She stood and reached for the remote, then tucked it beside her.

Musa took her tea and walked to her room. “Let me know, won’t you?” She said.

“I’ll be there”

“We’re here for you Layla, remember that, goodnight”. Musa walked into her room and shut the door softly. Layla immediately flicked back the tv to a video of the king and queen of Andros. They were two regal looking rulers. King Teredor was a tall and strong looking man, with dark skin and long black hair. Queen Niobe had a maroon tone to her hair, that was tightly coiled. They both looked youthful but still portrayed the image of royalty. They’d been avoiding public appearances for months. Videos showed them avoiding certain questions and political tensions were beginning to rise. The president of Andros was assuring the people that it was nothing, but, people were starting to speculate. They were beginning to speculate that the princess of Andros had gone missing.

* Chapter Nineteen *

It wasn't against the rules to slip away from Alfea, nor was it against the rules to attend a party uninvited. Perhaps, it was the intention of sneaking into a classified archive that made all the actions of the day seem rather nefarious. One by one, Bloom, Stella, Layla, Flora, Musa, and Tecna moved through the corridors. Alfea was particularly beautiful in the morning light. They looked comically overdressed pattering against the stones as they crossed the dew-damp lawns.

The morning bus pulled up and they perched down on the seats, each taking up at least two. It's not like it mattered as they were the only ones awake that early.

"Anyone want to turn back?" Layla said as they pulled away from Alfea.

Overhead, the sky blushed with streaks of orange and rose and by the time they reached the station, the platform was virtually empty. A few early commuters from Roccaluce town waited, with tired faces fixed on their Omnis. The girls huddled at the far end of the platform. The Astrail pulled up right on time. The train left the station quietly. As Alfea's spires receded into the forest and hills, Bloom couldn't help but to be taken back by the beauty of Solaria all over again lit by the early morning sky.

“Let’s be realistic,” Musa said, breaking a long silence. She leaned her elbows on the table. “What are the chances something goes wrong before we even reach Cittaluce?”

“As long as Stella isn’t noticed by someone.” Tecna replied.

“We are travelling with a celebrity” Flora added.

Stella tossed her hair back. “If anyone recognises us, I’ll say I’m paying Father a surprise visit. But who’s going to with my mask?” Her voice was breezy, though her nerves betrayed her as a masquerade looking type of mask appeared on her face.

Layla rolled her eyes. “We hardly look like servants, everyone will know where we’re going. It’s going to be difficult not to draw attention.”

“As far as anyone knows we’re six girls heading to the palace” Stella said, smirking. “Perfectly reasonable.”

“Will Sky or Brandon not recognise us?” Bloom muttered, watching the countryside blur past. “They don’t know we’re coming, maybe we should have told them?”

“As much as I’d love to launch my royal romance in front of the court with a dance, today is not the day. It’ll be a pleasant surprise when he sees me, but I’m keeping it cordial for today.”

“Why didn’t you tell him, he doesn’t know about any of this does he?” Musa replied.

“No, of course not. I am sure I can trust Sky and Bloom can trust Brandon but we can’t be certain who they’d tell or who they think they can trust. It’s too risky. It’s best for now they know nothing. They’ll understand why we kept this from them when they do find out.”

Bloom felt that like a bullet in her chest. It’s true, she hated lying to Brandon, but Stella was right. Too much was at stake.

The train carved its way across Solaria, and Stella began to draw on her omni’s

holoscreen. She sketched adjustments to the plan as the map glowed above her wrist.

The others nodded, each committing the steps to memory. Their faces carried the mix of excitement and apprehension that always came before something daring. They knew everything was riding on what they discovered today.

As the train eased to a stop beneath the glass arches of Cittaluce's station, it was safe to say the city wasn't as quiet as they had hoped. Diplomats wrapped in fine cloaks and dresses, vendors with cakes and pastries. They walked with their produce hovering behind them. The girls stepped down onto the platform, their masks concealing their identities. The golden crest of Solaria was draped from every angle, intertwined with the silver shield of Eraklyon.

"This is a bigger event than I thought..." Stella murmured as they weaved through the crowd. "And they didn't invite me to the party..."

"We can worry about that later!" Layla said, swerving between two frantic dressmakers.

"No... we worry about it now. Trying to have me assassinated on a mission is one thing, but excluding me from a party like this? Now it's personal. I smell a rat, and I'm going to find out who it is." Stella huffed and began to stomp off with her head held high, bracelets clanging against one another, every inch the princess she fell so easily into being. The others fell into step behind her.

The palace wasn't far from the Astrail station. So many people were flooding to the front gates. The spires of the crescent shaped palace caught the sunlight, the vast walls sparkling with gemstones. Guards in polished armour flanked the gates and patrolled the

streets. The sunburst crest shining on their breastplates. Stella marched, her arms propelling her onwards with her hands tightly in fists. She barged past several people, Flora apologising to each of them along the way, as everyone else tried to keep pace.

Broad boulevards cut through neat rows of townhouses all in different colours. A pale marble paved the streets here which was different to other areas of the city that Bloom had seen. The paths were lined with wrought-iron lamps that curved like vines. Hover cars ran down the streets with tinted windows, which Bloom assumed carried important delegates.

As they moved closer to the palace square, the buildings grew more sparse. Domes and spires loomed overhead. Statues of Solaria's hero: Leonardo Solaria, looked down from a plinth. Spaced out around the square were the other six heroes. The air smelled of sweet pastries from the hall and fresh herbs from the palace gardens.

The palace itself rose above everything, a sweep of marble set around a vast courtyard. Its scale was reminiscent of the great palaces Bloom had seen on Earth, but where those were grey, this one dazzled in brilliant white, gold and blue. Every column polished until it shone. The flags of both realms flew on its roof.

"Alright," Stella said quickly, "Let me do the talking."

"Are we going to walk straight through the front door?" Musa said.

"Well, I don't think we have another option."

They all wondered to the castle gate and one of the guards stepped forward. He was broad-shouldered, his expression wary until Stella removed her mask. Recognition dawned on him immediately. "Princess Stella!" He bowed sharply "We were not informed you'd be coming."

Stella waved her hand with a casual elegance that indicated she'd done it a thousand times. "That's because it's a surprise. My father loves surprises. These are my guests."

The guard's eyes looked over the group, lingering a fraction too long on Bloom's auburn hair. "Of course, Your Highness." He signalled to his companion, and the heavy gates groaned open. "Shall I inform your father of your arrival?" He asked.

"That won't be necessary... What's your name?" Stella replied.

"Elio, your majesty."

"Right, well, as I said I'd like to surprise my father as I've been away studying. You understand, don't you Elio?"

"Of course, we welcome your return Princess."

"Alright. I'll bring you some cake later Elio. Thanks!" She smiled and strutted into the castle grounds. The girls all offered the guard a mixed reaction. Bloom curtsied and then ran after Stella. Tecna adopted the same march as Stella did. Musa and Flora smiled awkwardly past him and Layla gave both guards stern looks.

"You've done that before?" Bloom said smiling.

"Oh, of course, I lost count of how many times I snuck out of the castle in my youth."

They all stepped into the grand courtyard, Stella allowed herself a sigh of relief. They paused for a second to regroup. The gardens spread around them in manicured perfection. Fountains spraying arcs of water and hedges clipped into neat topiaries. The front door to the palace was wide open, inside people were hustling about.

"See?" Stella declared. "Too easy." She adopted a confident grin. The words had barely left her lips when another voice rang across the courtyard.

"Well. What an unexpected surprise!"

The girls froze. A woman approached from the colonnade. A tall figure draped in a wine and violet gown that sparkled as she moved. Her pale blonde hair tied behind her in a large bun. Her expression controlled as anything.

Stella stiffened. She whispered without moving her lips, “Don’t say a word.”

“Countess Cassandra...” Stella greeted, forcing a friendly tone. “I thought you’d be in the Grand Hall.”

Cassandra’s heels clicked against the stone as she drew closer. “And I thought you would not be here at all,” she replied smoothly, casting her eyes over the others. “What a... charming entourage you’ve brought along.”

Stella gave a graceful shrug. “They’re my friends from Alfea I wanted to show them the palace on such an auspicious day! My invite must have gotten lost I’m afraid.”

“How...thoughtful of you,” Cassandra said. Her face tightened as she swept over them again, lingering on Bloom with a hint of interest. She tried to hide it, but Bloom had spent too much time with Faragonda and was much too familiar with the look of someone trying to conceal something. “The Grand Hall is where you ought to be.”

“We’ll be there soon,” Stella assured her steadily. “But the gardens are beautiful this time of year. I thought we’d start here.”

Cassandra tilted her head, her facade didn’t falter. “Of course. But don’t keep His Majesty waiting. He values punctuality above all. I’ll let him know you and your friends are here.” She turned and began to walk into the hall.

Behind her, Stella gave a small curtsy. “We’ll see you at the event, Countess.”

“Do enjoy the gardens,” Cassandra replied over her shoulder. She let them move on.

Stella’s fake smile morphed into a frustrated wry. “This event has started way earlier than I thought... Okay. Bloom and Tecna, you need to go to the library alone. The rest of us will go to the hall. I’ll say you’ve got gas or something.”

“Gas?” Bloom said.

“Yes, yes. She won’t ask questions. Tecna needs to be with you to stop the cameras

and unlock the restricted section. Be as fast as you possibly can. That, or we leave now.”

The girls all looked to each other. Bloom looked to Tecna.

“I’m in if you are Bloom.” Tecna said.

Bloom took a moment to decide, “Okay. Let’s do it.”

“Okay.” Stella said. “You remember the way, right? Go!”

Bloom and Tecna nodded and split off from the group as they entered the castle.

Tecna patched the security feed. The plan was broken, but officially in motion.

Bloom and Tecna hurried down the halls of the Solarian palace’s west wing. There was nobody else there, as expected, everyone else was at the event. Tecna began tapping at several screens coming from her Omni, interrupting the security camera feed.

“How much further” Bloom asked.

“It should be around this corner” Tecna said. As she did, she pulled Bloom behind a pillar. Walking toward them was an armed guard. She held a glowing orange weapon and wore shining solarian armour.

“What now? She’s going to see us!” Bloom said.

“Okay...” Tecna began. “I’m going to distract her. I’ll say that I lost my way from the ball. Stay here and, with any luck she won’t see you!”

“But what about getting into the restricted section and then back out again?” Bloom questioned. Tecna looked stunted for a moment. She was thinking, which was an interesting expression on Tecna since, usually, she knew answers to questions instantly. Bloom peaked behind the pillar, the guard was nearing.

“How about I distract her and you go in?” Bloom suggested

“No, because I don’t know what the creature looks like. If anyone is going to find it, it will be you Bloom. I am sending you this now... It’s the code that will get you into the restricted vault. All you should have to do is hold your omni up to the interface and it should work like this.”

Bloom watched as lines of code came running across her holoscreen. When she looked up, Tecna was already walking toward the guard. She had to hand it to her, Tecna was really selling the part. She had a look of bewilderment on her face and her fingers resting on her lips.

“Excuse me?” She said to the guard as she saw her. “Can you help me?”

“Ma’am what are you doing here?”

“I know I’m so sorry, I’m afraid I got lost looking for the lavatories. Can you help me?”

“Of course, right this way.” The guard said courteously. Tecna and the guard walked right past Bloom. Tecna holding her attention to the other side of the corridor. When they were gone, Bloom was left alone. What was meant to be a four person mission had turned into a one person task. She ran across to the other side of the corridor and approached the library.

The heading above read: *Bibliotheca Solaris*. The doors creaked as Bloom pushed them open. Their weight alone spoke of centuries. She slipped inside and pressed them shut behind her, careful to keep the sound to a minimum.

The room she found herself in was breathtaking. She thought that Alfea’s library was beautiful, but never had she imagined what Solaria’s royal library looked like. An endless looking nave stretched before her, with impossibly high shelves that went to the vaulted

ceiling painted with murals of the magical dimension. Shadows leapt from the arches above. They left the upper reaches of the space half-concealed, even the light didn't dare to trespass there. Chandeliers shone with a soft amber, lighting the thousands of books in front of Bloom.

The smell of the place was so familiar: a mix of old leather and a faint tang of incense. The silence was so complete that Bloom could hear her own heartbeat. Her steps echoed out as she made her way inside. The heels of her shoes tapped on the stone. The sheer scale of the place unnerved her; how on Magix was she to find anything in this place? At Alfea, the library had order, clean lines and catalogues. The Omni-linked system helped her find what she needed. Here, it was different. Ancient and chaotic. The shelves overflowed with tomes squeezed together so tightly the wood strained. Parchment scrolls leaned at precarious angles. Books scattered on tables in half-finished stacks, pages still marked by ribbons of coloured silk.

Bloom forced herself to focus. Somewhere in this labyrinth of history might be the answer she needed. She moved between the rows, looking for the entrance to the restricted section. On the way she scanned titles engraved in the books, many in languages she couldn't parse. Thankfully, much of it was in Latin. One section drew her eye. A carved plaque marked *Bestiaria Antiqua*.

She hurried forward and tugged at a tome big enough to cover half of her body. The cracked spine read *Creaturae Vetustissima*. Dust puffed into the air as it thudded down on a desk. She pulled it open. Illustrations of creatures stared up at her from the parchment: creatures Bloom had only ever read about in fairytales. Griffins, dragons, wyverns, unicorns. They were rendered in great detail, yet none matched the eyeless monster she remembered from Muir Woods. She flipped through page after page, scanning columns of script. It was

similar to books she had in Alfea's library. She closed it with more force than intended, the clap echoing too loudly in the quiet hall. Bloom winced before looking around. The silence returned.

She rubbed her palms against her skirt, then resumed wandering the chamber. She walked to the end of the hall and then saw a gate in the far corner leading to a staircase going down. It was half-buried in shadow. Above it, an iron sign declared: '*Librum Privatus*': The Restricted Section. There was a faint shift of light over the gate, which indicated some form of protection. She half ran over and tapped her Omni to the terminal. Immediately the code that Tecna gave her began to run. Bloom held her breath before the system seemed to shut down. The wall of protection dissolved in front of her. She could reach for the latch of the gate.

If the answers existed anywhere, they would be there.

Bloom creaked the gate open, she took a lantern from the side of the stairs and began to walk down. Beyond this point, everything looked even older than in the main archive. It screamed medieval, a sight Bloom hadn't seen up until now in Magix. She made her way down the stairs with her dress brushing upon the stone behind her. It was colder and almost pitch black beyond the lantern she held.

At the bottom, yet another lock was ahead of her.

"Shit." She said under her breath. This lock was old, it wasn't protected by technology but instead with a form of magic. She lifted the lock to inspect it, it emitted a pink opalescent light. She turn it to the side, which read: '*Oculis regalibus tantum*'.

Before she had time to think about what it meant, and without her doing anything, the lock shivered once, and clicked open. The gate gave way, the hinges groaning as they woke from their long slumber. Lights inside the walls burst to life.

The dust had settled inside. It looked like this place hadn't been touched in decades, perhaps centuries. There weren't nearly as many books as there were above. It was reminiscent of a castle crypt. The shelves holding the books were rotting, causing an old, damp wooden smell. The books themselves, however, looked remarkably well preserved. Gold gilded the edges of the spines. Her finger hovered across a row of books, each more ominous than the last. Some were in a language Bloom couldn't recognise at all. She had learned some Solarian, which was essentially Latin to Bloom. But there were two other languages. One was written downward rather than horizontal using strange swirling symbols that connected in glyphs. Some were written in Both Solarian and this strange language. Her omni wasn't able to translate it. She paused at one tome bound in blackened leather, its spine stamped with faded bronze: '*Daemones mali et umbrae*'

The title alone set her pulse racing. Translated, the title read: Demons of Evil and Shadow. She took the book and set it on the central table, which almost broke under the weight of the tome.

She turned to the first page. These creatures were unlike anything she had seen, or something she had only seen once. The book looked to be written by hand, in ink, which meant this was likely the only copy. Every entry came with an illustration of varying fidelity and slanted, frantic walls of text. Bloom flipped through one after another. It must be here somewhere, she thought to herself. She kept going through creature after creature until...

There it was, alive on the page.

The creature illustrated on the parchment was exactly as it was in Muir Woods: long, sinewed limbs, chest ridged with bony plates, a maw split wide, and a smooth head where eyes should have been. The heading read: *Ceacusbellator*

Her throat tightened. Her hands trembled. She began to read. The name meant:

Sightless Warrior.

‘The sightless warriors are members of the creatures of decay. They hunt, not by sight or smell but by sensing the very potential within a magical being: pulled inexorably to the strongest of magic. They are harbingers of evil, of chaos and of death. They are omens of darkness’

An illustration of fairies with huge wings fighting against the creatures was on the following page. Lines of text recorded the way the Sightless Warriors overwhelmed their prey and were nearly impossible to kill.

“The creatures are of a realm long forgotten, The domain of Darkness. No map has ever recorded its place, but they once served a master, a master who has been stripped from history. The great shadow. As of the writing of this book, these creatures, along with every other member of the creatures of decay are extinct. They will never pose a threat to mystic-kind again.”

That couldn't be right. As Bloom and Stella had faced this very creature months ago.

What was worse, it was a thing with purpose, created by something far older and more terrible than she could yet imagine.

She kept her fingers on the pages re-reading the same passages over and over again. The information wasn't a lot at all. She turned the page. The subsequent passages recounted other creatures of decay. Members of the same family. There were scrapers, fighters, divers and flyers. They all had things in common to the sightless warrior. They all had the same

dried blood colour. They all were highly dangerous. Together they formed an army that was meant to wipe mystic kind from existence.

“The Creatures of Decay formed an army, an army of darkness. One that legend says stood against the forces of light millennia ago. The only known powers that could destroy these creatures are those of the Enchantix fairies and the Great Dragon itself.”

“Enchantix?” Bloom said under her breath. It’s true, she had noticed that the fairies depicted fighting these creatures looked nothing like modern day fairies. Even so, how was Bloom able to destroy the creature on Earth?

She took pictures of the book to show the girls. She then closed the book gently and held it for a moment, her palms cold against its cover. Then, with care, she slid it back into the shelf, its spine blending into the row of other dark tomes.

She let out a sigh of relief and stepped back. She had found what she came for. But the knowledge left her with more questions than answers. She’d grown accustomed to the feeling.

She turned to leave the restricted section when a small volume with a dark blue spine jutted slightly forward from the shelf. She slowed despite herself, The title gilded in silver read *“Origo Solaria.”*

She reached for it, and opened the book to its contents. The ink had faded in places, but the words were legible, written in the crisp script of ancient Solarian scholars. Luckily her Omni projected translations of this language. The only language it didn’t seem to translate was the strange runic language. The book spoke of the realm’s origins, of relics and guardians, of the Solarian line’s unbroken claim to the throne. She turned the pages,

searching for one relic in particular.

“The Ring of Solaria, a sacred relic passed through the hands of Solarian royalty. It is the last remaining power known to bridge the worlds. Its origins predate even the foundation of the realm itself, once belonging to Hestia Domino. Known, then, as the ring of light, the ring passed down through the matriarchal line of the Dominican royals. This remained until it was left in the hands of Prince Thoren of Solaria when Domino and its people were destroyed. Its last known Dominican owner was Princess Daphne. It was long assumed that the power of the great dragon lived inside of the ring, but time has revealed this not to be the case.”

Bloom froze, the words burning into her mind. Domino. She whispered the name. Daphne. Stella’s ring was indeed a royal heirloom, but one far older, and somehow bound to Domino’s fate. Her mind leapt to the image of Daphne, her hand adorned with a ring that looked exactly like Stella’s. Her arms around Prince Thoren. The man who said she was responsible for the fall of Domino. The man who took the ring.

If the ring had been Daphne’s, it explained the why someone would want it. The creature’s pursuit, perhaps even the assassination attempt on Stella. She, again, took pictures of the book.

She slid it back into place, every second felt like borrowed time. She could hear Stella’s warning replaying in her mind. ‘Don’t get caught in the restricted section.’ The only thing she had left to try and find was a mention of the flame. She didn’t have the time though, she was pushing it as it was.

She hurried back up the spiralling stairs and crossed the rows of shelves, the massive wooden doors of the library in sight. All she had to do was make it out unseen. She peaked

outside of the door: the coast was clear.

She stepped out of the library and closed the door as quietly as she could. Before she could turn back around, she heard a gentle cough from behind her.

A girl stood in the centre of the aisle as though she had been waiting. Champagne blonde hair flowed in perfect waves over her shoulders. A dark ruby gown clung to her form. Impressive embroidery decorated a structured bodice. Her posture was regal, her chin tilted, her eyes a reptilian orange. They fixed on Bloom as though she could see straight through her.

Bloom froze.

The girl seemed to grin when she saw her. She had a voice that was silken but edged with steel. “And what exactly are you doing?”

Bloom glanced to the side of the corridor. There was no choice but to stand her ground. She swallowed, forcing a steady delivery. “I was reading, I’m one of princess Stella’s friends and she always spoke about the library” she said. “I don’t want any trouble.”

The girl’s smile changed. “One of Stella’s friends, are you?” she said. Her eyes swept across Bloom. “Strange, though, how you seem to have wandered so far. I’m pretty sure the library is off limits to guests.”

Bloom’s grip on her bag strap tightened until her knuckles blanched. There was too much to risk here. She had to get back to Stella and the others. Stella had said she could talk them out of trouble. “Who are you, sorry, I don’t believe we’ve met?”

The girl tilted her head, amused. “My name is Diaspro,” she said, her curtsy more mocking than polite. “Lady Diaspro of Eraklyon... and, you are?”

“My name is Bloom, it’s good to meet you Diaspro.”

“Lady Diaspro... to you.”

“My apologies, Lady Diaspro. I do need to get back to my friends. Perhaps we could walk together?”

Diaspro’s eyes gleamed almost in humour. She motioned her hand casually. Two guards stepped from the corner behind Diaspro, clad in Solarian armour. They moved to block Bloom inside the corridor.

* Chapter Twenty *

Bloom could barely draw a breath. Diaspro seemed to twinkle at the theatrics of it all. Her gown trailed in a sweep as she moved forward, the sound of silk brushing marble. Behind her, the two guards stepped closer.

“You must be very brave,” Diaspro said. “or very foolish. Sneaking through a palace. Meddling with things far above your station.” She donned a face of disdain.

Bloom swallowed, “I’m not sneaking around,” she said. “I’m here with Princess Stella. I wanted to see the library, that’s all.”

Diaspro let out a short, cold laugh. “Oh, please. Princess Stella might be careless, but not that careless. You think she’d trust some... provincial little girl to wander these halls unescorted?” She took a step closer and fiddled with the jewels at her throat. “No, my dear. You’ve been caught doing something you shouldn’t. I can spot the look on anyone.”

The guards inched forward. She had to think fast. Running would only confirm her suspicion.

“If you take me to Princess Stella, she can vouch for me.”

Diaspro held her necklace in her hand for a moment. She pursed her lips and looked

Bloom up and down. “Fine. Any funny business and I promise you, I’ll make your life far more difficult than you can imagine.” She turned on her heels as the guards came up behind Bloom.

As they began to walk, Diaspro lifted her wrist. She swiped across several floating profiles before landing on a very familiar face.

Brandon.

She began to call the number. He didn’t pick up.

“You know Brandon?” she said quickly, clutching at another thread. “He’ll vouch for me too.”

The effect was immediate. Diaspro paused, then twisted around. “Brandon?” she repeated, curdled with an air of supremacy. “You poor, deluded thing. You clearly know nothing about him. This is Prince Sky of Eraklyon: my betrothed.”

Bloom blinked, the words didn’t sink in at first. Then the ground seemed to tilt beneath her. “Prince... Sky?” she managed. Her stomach churned “No, that’s Brandon, Prince Sky’s squire.”

Diaspro glittered with satisfaction. “I’m afraid you’re mistaken my dear girl. I think I’d know my own fiancé. You clearly don’t know him very well, to not know his name.” She took a step closer, lowering her voice. “I don’t blame you though, He’s been in hiding since birth.”

Bloom paused. “You’re lying. You’re the one who’s not where they belong!”

Diaspro’s smirk deepened. “Oh, I wish I was. But no, sweet girl, the royal engagement was sealed years ago.” Her words were venomous. “Now, I know you aren’t who you say you are and I’ve officially run out of patience.” She turned to the guards. “Take her away!”

The two men moved at once, hands outstretched. Something inside Bloom snapped. Magic surged through her veins before she could control it. Heat rushed into her palms, and a pulse of fire erupted outward, a shockwave threw the guards across the floor. Their armour clanged against the stone as they hit the far wall and slumped, groaning.

The smell of scorched air filled the corridor.

“I know who you are. You’re the woman from the bus that night!

Diaspro straightened. The mocking smile vanished. “Well,” she said softly, “that’s new.” She raised one elegant hand, her fingers trailing faint sparks of pale light. “It seems you’re not as harmless as you look.”

Bloom braced herself.

Diaspro hardened. “I must confess I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about. You’re far more deluded than I thought. Let’s see what you’re capable of. I like a challenge.”

A sphere of metal formed in her hand. Pieces coming together from around her skirt. She thrust it forward, the bolt slicing through the air like lightning. Bloom dove sideways, the ball striking a column behind her and splintering it into shards of stone. She landed hard, the impact jolting through her ribs, but she rolled to her feet, summoning a flame that burst alive in her hands.

“Big mistake,” Bloom said.

She hurled the fireball. It seared through the air, exploding against a barrier of metal that formed around Diaspro.

“You’re untrained,” Diaspro said, advancing slowly. “No finesse at all. Do you even know what you’re doing?”

“I know enough,” Bloom shot back. Another fire-blast followed, hotter this time..

Diaspro waved her hand, and the flame dissipated into sparks.

“Predictable.”

Bloom bit back her frustration. The energy inside roared. Diaspro’s movements were fluid and clearly practised. She levitated metal disks in precise arcs that forced Bloom to retreat between a column as she lashed them at her.

Diaspro’s laughter echoed through the chaos. “You’re out of your depth! We can do this the easy way or the hard way!”

That did it. Bloom steadied her breath and forced the power inside to focus. She thought of Stella, of Brandon, of every question that she had. The anger sharpened her focus. Her hands blazed bright gold, the fire swirling and tightening until she managed to control it.

When Diaspro sent another disc toward her, Bloom met it head-on. The two forces collided in a burst that lit the hall like a sunrise. The metal melting in the flame. The shockwave rippled outward, scattering ash and dust. The carpet on the floor caught fire.

Diaspro staggered back a step, surprised. “How?”

Bloom seized the opening, driving forward. A jet of fire shot from her palms, striking Diaspro’s barrier. Melting holes in the metal. She bent fire from the carpet up and at her. Diaspro hissed, throwing her arm up to reinforce the shield, but Bloom didn’t stop. She pushed harder, the flame surging brighter, until the shield melted away.

The backlash hurled Diaspro backwards. She hit a column, the breath leaving her in a sharp gasp. For a moment she looked less like a noble and more like a cornered predator, her composure fracturing.

“You’ll regret that,” she spat, rising to her feet. Her magic flared again “Let’s fight fire with fire.” She conjured a ball of flame and hurled it back at Bloom.

“Whoever you are, leave me alone!” Bloom said heaving.

She threw one final burst of energy, enough to send a blinding flash across the hall. Diaspro shielded her eyes, cursing. When she looked again, Bloom was gone: vanished between the rows of columns.

The hallway was silent except for the crackle of the burning carpet. Diaspro lowered her hand, still clenching her jaw. A faint scorch mark was left on the marble floor where Bloom had stood.

She exhaled, fury simmering beneath her outward appearance. “So,” she murmured to herself, a thin smile crept up her face. “Someone knows how to bite.”

Bloom leapt out from behind a pillar and fired a bolt of fire directly at Diaspro.

The sound of string music filled the Grand Hall of Cittaluce Palace. It was an elegant room, with regal decor in gold and white everywhere you looked. The marble floor complimented the diffused golden light from the chandeliers above. Stella, Musa, Flora, Layla and Tecna stood at the base of the staircase with their heads held high. Looking around for any sign of Bloom. The sight of Stella’s childhood home had her conflicted; She hadn’t been back since she left for Earth.

Flora and Musa were trying desperately not to draw attention. Tecna was preoccupied with her Omni, trying to make sure any security measures were intercepted. Layla, quieter than usual, kept her eyes focused on the grand doors leading to the west wing.

“Stella!”

Stella turned, her smile freezing the moment she saw him: King Radius. His crown glimmered in the light, his expression between pride and surprise. He looked older than she

remembered, much older.

“Father,” She said as a tear fell down her cheek, running towards him with her arms open. “I didn’t mean to miss the official introductions. I wanted to surprise you.”

“It’s been so long, but this is a surprise indeed,” he replied. “You’ve not visited the court in months, and suddenly you appear at a diplomatic summit without notice. I can’t decide if I should be proud or suspicious.”

Stella laughed faintly. “A little of both suits you.”

“I was under the impression you didn’t want to come back to the palace!” The King said almost pre-emptively defending himself as to why Stella did not receive an official invite.

It was true, of course, Stella did not want to come back to the palace. So how could she argue? Neither of them said anything.

“And these are your friends from Alfea?” He asked curiously.

“Yes, Father, this is Musa, Flora, Layla and Tecna.” Stella pointed to each of the girls, each curtsying before the king.

“It’s wonderful to have you all here, Any friend of my starlight is a friend of mine.” He bowed to the four girls and lingered on Layla. “I don’t suppose we have met before Layla? I daresay I recognise the eyes behind that mask.”

Layla looked to Stella quickly and back at King Radius.

“I don’t believe so, your majesty, maybe I just have one of those faces?”

“Ahh well, perhaps I-“

“Your Majesty!” A voice trailed from behind the king. Countess Cassandra walked over to Stella and the others. “Isn’t it truly marvellous to see the Princess again. She’s grown so... independent.” The countess’ gown shimmered, her expression polite but engaging in

some form of power play. Stella's face warped at the sight of her. Cassandra's hand rested lightly on her father's arm.

"Countess," Stella greeted "Hello again"

Cassandra smiled faintly. "The King must be off to greet the other guests. Today is about ensuring good relationships with Eraklyon."

"You're right Cassandra... Stella. You simply must meet the King and Queen of Eraklyon. Could I steal you for one moment?"

Stella looked back to the girls and then to her Father. She nodded graciously and took her father's arm as they walked toward the King and Queen.

Countess Cassandra lingered for a moment after they left, trying to decide if something was suspicious or not. She didn't say a word before walking away.

The girls all exhaled as they watched Stella make her way to greet the rulers of Eraklyon. Musa gestured discreetly toward the delegation. "Isn't that Sky?" she whispered to Flora. "He looks different. He's not wearing royal attire, he's wearing a guard uniform?"

Instead, another young man stood beside the King and Queen, dressed in formal royal attire, flanked by guards bearing the crest of Eraklyon. His posture was regal, but it was unmistakable. It was Brandon.

"Brandon?" Flora said surprised. "I don't understand?"

"Something is very wrong" Tecna said.

The group exchanged puzzled glances. As Stella walked over with the King, Brandon spotted them and gasped, he looked to Sky and turned back with panic across his face. He dipped his head toward Stella.

Stella immediately understood and as did Layla.

"They switched." Layla said abruptly to the other girls. "Of course they did."

“What do you mean?” Flora said.

“Prince Sky IS Brandon and Brandon IS Prince Sky. They must have been made to swap places when attending Redfountain for his own protection.”

The four girls held their mouths open in shock, and looked back at Princess Stella and the King as they approached the Eraklyad royals.

“Princess,” Brandon, or Prince Sky, greeted, his voice far more formal than she has ever heard it. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

Stella folded her arms. “Neither did I, Prince Sky.”

His composure faltered. “This is my squire. Brandon.”

Stella crossed her arms, practically steaming from the ears.

“Do you know each other?” King Erendor said.

“It’s complicated...” Sky said awkwardly.

“Clearly,” Stella said. “Complicated enough that you couldn’t tell me and Bloom the truth!”

At the mention of Bloom’s name, Sky’s head snapped up. “Bloom? She’s here?”

Before anyone could answer, the thunder of magic cracked through the ballroom doors.

The double doors exploded open, shards of charred wood scattering across the marble. Gasps rippled through the crowd as a rush of heat flooded the hall. Bloom stumbled forward from the smoke, her gown singed at the edges, her hands blazing with fire.

Behind her, wings fluttering, floated Diaspro, her hair wild, her expression a mask of fury.

Diaspro landed gracefully, magic sparking around her. “You’ll regret crossing me,” she hissed, voice ringing through the Grand Hall. Everyone stood back.

Bloom steadied herself, breath ragged. “You’re not the first person to tell me that,” she said, summoning another wave of fire and hurling it forward. “I don’t know who you are, or what you want from me, but leave me ALONE!”

Diaspro threw up a barrier of metal. The impact forcing her back several paces. The blast struck one of the chandeliers, sending shards of crystal raining down. Nobles screamed and scattered toward the edges of the room.

“Enough!” Diaspro snapped, her voice cracking. “You’re nothing but a meddling child!”

“You’re the one who’s been meddling with me!” Bloom shot back.

Her magic flared again, illuminating her hair in hot strands. The sight drew cries from the guests. Everyone could feel Bloom’s raw and untrained power.

Diaspro retaliated, sending a stream of blinding blue fire toward Bloom. She countered, conjuring a shield of flame that dissolved the attack midair. The marble beneath them blackened and cracked.

From the top of the stairs, Stella shouted over the battle. “Bloom!”

Bloom turned at the sound of her name, long enough for Diaspro to strike again. A bolt of energy grazed her shoulder, spinning her sideways.

“That’s enough!” The king cried, stepping forward. His voice carried, filled with authority he rarely used. “Both of you, stand down!”

Diaspro’s expression of fury scrunched up as she began to cry and run towards Prince Sky.

“She broke into your palace, destroyed royal property, and attacked me. I was just defending myself!” Diaspro wept into Sky’s arms.

“Brandon?” Bloom said, stepping forward. As she did, the palace guard all

surrounded her like a wild animal. Bloom stared right into Brandon, Sky's, eyes. Bloom put all of the pieces together immediately as Diaspro wept into Sky's neck.

Stella ran into the middle of the room and put her arms around Bloom. As did the other girls, they all ran into the centre.

Cassandra swept forward, her heels clicking sharply against the marble. "Princess Stella," she said in a high pitched, authoritative tone, "I advise you all to step aside. This intruder has attacked a royal guest and endangered the court. She must be detained."

King Erendor stood immediately. "This is an outrage, this girl could have been making an attempt on the Prince's life! I want her reprimanded and turned over to the court of Eraklyon!"

Stella looked to her father across the room. Then Radius gave the smallest of nods to the guards. They ran in to seize Bloom. For a moment there was nothing but pure pandemonium as they tried to take Bloom away.

"Stop!" Cried Prince Sky. "Father, she wasn't trying to hurt me. I know Bloom."

"He's telling the truth Daddy" Stella exclaimed. "Bloom isn't the threat here."

"Then what is she?" Diaspro snapped, pointing at Bloom, who stood trembling but unbroken.

"Everyone who is not part of the Solarian or Eraklyad court get out NOW!" King Radius screamed. The room began to clear, guards ushering out groups of high ranking and noble guests. "Someone had best explain to me this instance what in name of the Great Dragon is going on here!" King Radius yelled.

Stella and Bloom looked at each other. Prince Sky turned to Bloom, his eyes already pleading for forgiveness.

Stella stepped forward, looking at Brandon. He was mouthing the words 'I'm sorry'.

Stella in that moment became a Princess. “Many in this room will be aware of this, many will not. But this Summer I went on a mission to Earth.” Stella declared.

The entire room erupted in murmurs. King Radius’ face grew furious.

“On Earth, I was attacked by a creature. A creature that I can only assume is from the dark times of Magix. It tried to kill me and my friend, Bloom. This creature was not on Earth by accident, it was sent, by someone in this very room to assassinate me.”

The hall erupted in screams and gasps.

“Fortunately, it turns out that I was not the only Mystic on planet Earth. Bloom vanquished that creature and saved my life. Ever since, we have been trying to find out more about it in order to bring it before the Magix council.”

The silence that followed was heavy. Every pair of eyes in the hall fixed on Bloom: the unknown girl wreathed in fire from Earth.

“That’s impossible.” King Erendor declared.

“It is true, your majesty. I can assure you every word I’ve said is the truth.”

“So you brought this mysterious girl back with you, from Earth?” King Radius yelled.

“I did Father. It was my idea. Please do not blame Bloom.”

“She doesn’t belong here!” Diaspro jabbed.

Stella flared “Neither do you, if you think you can threaten my guests in my palace.”

Diaspro froze, then she began to snarl. “You dare—”

“Yes,” Stella said, stepping closer until their faces were inches apart. “I do.”

For a long, dangerous second, the two locked eyes. Diaspro turned, furious, she groaned bearing her teeth.

“This is an outrage, a scandal!” King Erendor boomed. “If word was to get out that a gateway between worlds still existed and that someone from Earth is here... on Magix...

There'd be chaos!" He looked to Bloom and then to Prince Sky. "How are you mixed up in this, I want the truth. Now."

Prince Sky walked over to Bloom, he approached cautiously. "Bloom," he said softly. "Are you okay?" He reached out a hand.

Bloom looked at him, the ache of betrayal still fresh. "I could ask you the same, Sky." she said quietly. "Or should I say... Your Highness?"

His face paled. "Bloom, I had no choice."

"Save it," Stella interrupted, stepping between them. "This isn't the time or place."

"Father, Bloom is a close friend of mine. She would never try to harm me."

Cassandra's voice echoed behind them. "How can we be sure? Such untrained power. An outsider of the Magical Dimension. We have never experienced anything like this in modern times."

Guards were already encircling Bloom and the girls, spears glowing with magic. Stella squared her shoulders, her friends forming a tight circle around Bloom.

"Diaspro, I want to know what happened with this girl." King Erendor said sternly.

His question hung in the air like smoke. "Lady Diaspro," he said evenly, "what happened here?"

Diaspro wasted no time. "Your Majesty, this girl" she extended a manicured finger toward Bloom, "was caught leaving the Royal Library. She's been sneaking through the palace, damaging property, and when I attempted to stop her, she attacked me."

Gasps moved through the crowd. Every head in the Grand Hall turned towards Bloom, who stood in her singed and torn dress. Streaked with soot. For a moment, she couldn't speak.

Then Stella stepped forward. "It's true," she said, cutting through the murmurs

“Bloom was in the library. But she wasn’t acting alone. She was following my orders.”

A new wave swept the hall.

“Stella!” King Radius’s voice sliced through the noise. He strode toward Stella, his golden cloak catching the light. “Are you admitting you instructed this girl to break into the royal archives? To steal knowledge from the crown?”

Stella looked directly at her father, lifting her chin a fraction. “Yes, Father. I ordered it. And I’d do it again.”

The room fell silent. Cassandra, standing at the king’s right, exchanged a quick look with Diaspro. Her expression was perfectly neutral, but Bloom caught the faintest hint of irritation, perhaps even fear.

Radius descended the dais slowly. “You’d better explain yourself.”

“We were looking for information on that creature” Stella said. “On Earth. Father. If Bloom wasn’t there, you must believe me, I’d be dead.”

“If I may...” Bloom stood and spoke for the first time. The King looked around and gave her a small nod. “I was able to find out about the creature. I only wanted to warn you, warn you all, of what attacked Stella and I. It’s a member of the creatures of decay. Specifically, a sightless warrior.”

Murmurs erupted again, louder this time.

Radius’s composure faltered. “A creature of decay?” he repeated, incredulous.

Cassandra stepped forward. “Your Majesty, that’s impossible,” she said. “Those creatures were destroyed during the dark age of Magix. The last record of them is over a thousand years old. The fact that she even has this knowledge means she was in the restricted section. They are clearly lying”

“I am not lying” Stella countered. Panic beginning to spread in the room. “I know

what I saw. I would stake it on Solaria. On my life. Father, I am telling the truth!”

“ENOUGH!” The room fell silent. King Radius recomposed himself. “Stella, what you are saying is frankly unbelievable. Even if I am to believe this girl is from Earth, that is not even half as preposterous a claim compared to suggesting the creatures of decay have returned.”

Bloom saw Stella’s confidence falter for the first time.

“Cassandra, what do you suggest?”

Cassandra clasped her hands together, and adopted a pious persona. “I am suggesting, Your Majesty, that this girl” she turned her head slightly toward Bloom “poses a risk to Solaria’s security. She wields uncontrolled magic, she’s trespassed in royal property, and now we have unverified claims of assassination attempts and mythical beasts. She has endangered our friends in Eraklyon. We cannot be sure where her allegiances lie. She cannot stay on Magix after this.”

The crowd seemed to jeer in support. Bloom’s stomach dropped.

“I’m not working for anyone,” Bloom said quickly, her voice trembling despite her efforts. “I came here to help Stella. That’s all. I didn’t mean to-”

Cassandra cut across her. “To trespass? To cause panic at a diplomatic event? To attack the crown prince of Eraklyon’s Fiancé? You’re lucky no one was hurt.”

Diaspro folded her arms, looking satisfied.

Bloom clenched her fists.

“This has gone too far.” King Radius said quietly. “Stella, you will stay here at the castle. We will get to the bottom of these stories you have told me. As for the girl...”

Cassandra launched into a persuasive rant. “Your Majesty, we can’t ignore this. You know what the council will say when they hear that an unidentified Arcanist infiltrated your

palace. We must act now.”

“She will be sent back to Earth. If that is where you are truly from.”

“No,” Stella said breaking, stepping between Cassandra and Bloom. “She’s not our enemy Father. She’s a friend and she saved my life.”

“I don’t care if you think she’s your friend,” Cassandra replied, silky and cold. “This is about the security of the entire magical dimension”

“If you cared about Magix you’d let her stay, she’s the only one with the power to stop those creatures!”

Cassandra’s face lit up at the comment, her lips thinned, but she said nothing.

Radius pinched the bridge of his nose, exhaling slowly.

He turned to Bloom. He was no longer angry, but he held the weight of a king balancing his daughter’s word against his duty. “Bloom,” he began, “I believe you didn’t intend harm. But your presence here has caused chaos. My court is in uproar, and the integrity of our security has been questioned. You must return home.”

Bloom’s throat tightened. “Your Majesty, please. I didn’t mean to-”

“I know,” Radius said gently, cutting her off. “But intent doesn’t undo consequence. You cannot remain on Magix.”

Stella’s face went pale. “You can’t be serious.” Stella turned to her friends in Panic who all stood huddled together around Bloom.

“I am.” Radius turned to her. “You will send her back to Earth immediately. Your sceptre will be confiscated for the time being. If what you say is true, then she’ll be safer there than she is here. And so will Solaria.”

“Safer?” Stella’s voice cracked with disbelief. “You’re sending her away without any protection!”

Radius hardened. “Stella.” The single word carried the full weight of his authority.

“Do not forget yourself. I have made my decision.”

Silence descended. Bloom’s heart hammered. Around them, the nobles whispered like rustling leaves. She wanted to run, to speak, no, to shout the truth.

Stella swallowed and tried to gather her words. “Father, please. She’s done nothing wrong.”

“She’s ignited a diplomatic scandal,” Radius replied. He lowered his head. “I’m sorry, my daughter, but these are the consequences of your actions. I am giving you the option to fix your mistake yourself. Or will I have to?”

The finality in his words left no space for protest.

Bloom felt hollow, her thoughts a blur. Just as she had uncovered more, she was to be cast out like a trespasser.

Stella turned and walked slowly toward Bloom, placing a hand on her arm. “Say the word now, and we fight. We can go on the run...” Stella said through tears.

Bloom couldn’t answer. Cassandra turned to Radius, murmuring something too low for Bloom to hear. “Stella. It’s time for me to go. Do it. I’ll be okay.”

Stella ran in to hug Bloom, and so did the rest of the girls. Sky went to try and say goodbye, but was blocked by King Erendor.

Diaspro stood near the edge of the crowd, satisfied with the outcome. She looked at Bloom and shot her a cold and victorious stare.

Bloom forced herself to look away.

Stella took out her sceptre and touched it gently on Bloom’s shoulder. “Goodbye Bloom.”

“I love you guys.” Bloom said through tears as she disappeared from the room.

King Radius raised his hand for silence one last time. “This matter is closed,” he said. “Lady Diaspro, you will submit a full report of the incident to the royal archives. Countess Cassandra, you will assure my daughter is confined until we can get to the bottom of this. Send a letter to Headmistress Faragonda informing her of what has transpired. The rest of you girls will be escorted back to Alfea.”

Cassandra bowed her head. “Of course, Your Majesty.”

As the guards began clearing the wreckage from the doorway, Stella was escorted by members of the royal guard away from Musa, Tecna, Flora, and Layla.

“I can’t believe it’s over” whispered Flora.

The girls were ushered into a private car and driven off. Stella handed over her sceptre to countess Cassandra.

They had lost. What’s worse, their secret was out.

Faragonda’s silhouette paced against the window overlooking lake Roccaluce. The moonlight made the room cold. A brass astrolabe ticked on one of the shelves. It was the only thing that could be heard. Musa, Tecna, Flora and Layla stood in a row on the carpet. They all held their heads down. Faragonda eventually sat at her desk and folded her hands.

“So,” she said, “which of you would like to explain why my students appeared at a Solarian state reception and prompted escorting back by three diplomatic couriers in the middle of the night?”

No one spoke. Musa and Tecna stared blankly at the floor. Flora’s fingers fiddled with a frayed thread on her sleeve. Layla stared straight ahead.

“We thought we had everything under control, we really did.” Layla said at last. “No one could give Bloom any answers. The truth about her. Bloom somehow knew the face of the last princess of Domino.”

“What did you say?” Faragonda replied.

“Bloom. She had been drawing pictures of Daphne before she had even arrived in Magix. Before she knew she was a fairy. She also discovered that Daphne owned Stella’s ring. We wanted to look in the Royal Archive to find the answers to everything. The creature who attacked Bloom and Stella, the connection between Domino and Solaria and any mention of ‘the flame’ those witches spoke about the night Bloom was ambushed.”

The Headmistress stared almost crazed at Layla. Quickly jerking her head between her and the others. “And...” She said. “What did she find?”

“We didn’t get to talk to her but we know she found the creature that attacked her and Stella. It was called a sightless warrior. A member of the creatures of Decay or something?”

Faragonda wasn’t surprised, nor was she angry. What a peculiar look on her face. It was rare that a fairy as great and as wise as her ever looked how she did at this very moment. It was the expression of finally, everything clicking into place. How could she have been so blind? Faragonda remained silent and still for longer than she could play off as normal.

“Headmistress...” Flora said gently.

Faragonda looked up and met each of the girls in the eye, one by one. “Where is Bloom now?” She asked.

“Gone. She’s been sent back to Earth. She got into a fight with some noblewoman from Eraklyon. It all happened so quickly.” Musa said. She looked to her friends to illicit nods of confirmation. Faragonda slammed her hand on the table and turned at her heel. The four girls jumped and glanced over at each other in confusion; they weren’t in trouble? Or

were they? If so, Faragonda clearly had bigger things to worry about.

They all remained in silence as Faragonda looked out into the night sky. She was muttering to herself, something indiscernible. If the girls didn't know better, they'd have assumed she was going mad.

"You know who she is, don't you?" Tecna said. "You've known for a long time who Bloom is."

Musa, Layla and Flora looked shocked at the accusation. How could Faragonda possibly know more about Bloom than they did? It seemed implausible to the ordinary, but Headmistress Faragonda was far from ordinary. On that, everyone knew, and in each second that passed since Tecna spoke, the idea only felt more and more likely.

Faragonda eventually moved her head to the side and let out a heavy and defeated breath. "I had my suspicions, yes. To tell you the truth there wasn't much else she could have been. But it seems your little outing has finally solved the last piece of the puzzle I couldn't quite work out."

"Headmistress, who is Bloom?" Layla asked.

"She is something very important, and right now, she is in grave danger."

* Chapter Twenty-One *

The world seemed to snap back in pieces. Bloom's eyes rolled to the back of her head as the world shifted around her. The warmth of the Solarian Ballroom dropped to a slight chill and rain. A brick wall came into view, the sound of a distant bus, the familiar smell of petrol and the characteristic blue hue to the clouded and darkened sky. She was back in Mill Valley.

Back on Earth. She stood in a narrow alleyway behind the public library, her palms were still tingling with magic. Her dress singed all over.

She sat upright and, out of what had now become habit, she held up her wrist to check her Omni. The gemstone that usually produced the screen flickered and did nothing. Omnis didn't work on Earth. She placed her palms to her eyes to try and block the tears. She had to get home.

She knew where she was and she wasn't all that far from her house. It can't have been too late as there was still daylight behind the rainclouds. She peaked out from behind the alleyway and was almost surprised that absolutely nothing had changed. The coffee shops were still open. The same familiar faces still went about their business on the street. The same groups of friends from surrounding schools still frequented same haunts. How could all of

this, which had been so normal, now feel so alien.

Bloom pressed her finger to the inside of her eye to try and stop the ache in her head. She couldn't believe that finally, after all this time. After finding out more information than she had since she came to Magix, she was sent home. She could still see the pages of the books she'd read. About the creature of decay. About the ring of Solaria tied to the lost realm of Domino. The ring carried once by Daphne who had supposedly been responsible for the fall of her realm. The woman Bloom knew. Somehow.

Bloom walked kicking rocks into the small puddles in the road. The streetlights were beginning to turn on and wash the pavement with pale gold. She continued past the shuttered bakery. Past the bus stop timetable, past a billboard no one had updated in months, as it was still the same since she'd left.

A rustle came from one of the streets. Bloom instinctively flinched back only to see it was a fox nosing at a bin. She let out a breath she hadn't realised she held and laughed once under it. Again, she couldn't cry. Not yet.

She continued towards home. The rain falling heavier as she walked, soaking her dress through and making it twice as heavy. She couldn't wait to wash the ash from her hair. To tell her parents she missed them. To take off that stupid gown. She would fall asleep and wake up thinking she was back in her bed at Alfea.

Bloom shuddered in the cold and walked on, down past the streets she knew like the back of her hand. She had no idea how long she walked for, only that, by the time she rounded the final corner, she was completely soaked through. She didn't even need that shower now, she supposed.

Bloom smiled and stepped up to the doorway. Immediately, the familiar scent of home wrapped around her. For a moment, she just stood there, her hand rested on the doorframe,

unsure whether she'd really come back. If Magix had only been a dream. A fantastic and wonderful dream.

Her limbs were numb from the cold. She knocked once. From behind the door she could hear Mike and Vanessa's muffles. The door opened.

"Hello-" Vanessa said and then stoped. Before her was her daughter. As wet as anything. Mascara smeared down her cheeks. Hair completely flat. Her dress seared and muddy from the walk. She stood there and finally cried, falling into her mother's arms.

The sight of Vanessa undid her. Broken words rushed out in sobs that came faster than she could control. "I ruined everything," Bloom choked. "I messed it all up. I got sent back...it's all my fault."

Vanessa pulled Bloom into the house and cried out for Mike. She stroked the back of Bloom's head as they both kneeled on the floor in the hall.

"I missed you, so much." Bloom said between whimpers.

Vanessa was still shocked at the sight of her daughter. She held her as tightly as she had when Bloom was small. "Oh, honey..." she whispered "You're home. You're safe. That's what matters."

Bloom shook her head against her shoulder. "No, it doesn't. You don't understand." She pulled back enough to look directly at her mother. "I got Stella in trouble. I got everyone in trouble. I made it worse. She's trapped there, and I'm here, and I don't know if I can ever go back."

Vanessa tried to follow her daughter's story, but there was something cautious about her too. She didn't understand. She guided Bloom into the living room, easing her down onto the couch. The light from her mother's favourite lamp fell across Bloom's face. It caught the tear tracks on her cheeks.

“Bloom, honey, calm down.” Vanessa said gently.

Mike finally made his way downstairs, none the wiser that Bloom had walked through the front door. He came down the stairs and caught a glimpse of his daughter.

“Oh my god, Bloom? What are you doing here” He ran and embraced her before kneeling in front of her on the floor.

Bloom looked to her mother sat beside her and her father in front. She tried to hold back her tears again. Where could she begin?

“They think I’m dangerous.” She said quietly.

Vanessa frowned. “Dangerous?”

Bloom let out a small, broken laugh. “They’re not wrong. I couldn’t control it, Mum. I tried, but my magic.” she stopped herself, the words felt strange in this house where magic didn’t belong. “It’s like fire that doesn’t listen to me.”

“Bloom. We need to get you cleaned up. You’re completely frantic honey.”

“What if I don’t belong anywhere Mum?”

Vanessa looked to Mike and then back at Bloom.

Vanessa’s hand tightened around her daughter’s. “You belong here. You always have. You always will.”

Bloom wanted to believe it, but she couldn’t. The living room looked exactly as it had before the creature attacked. She stood abruptly and went upstairs.

Vanessa sat for a moment to process what had happened. Mike went to follow Bloom before Vanessa put a hand on his shoulder to stop him. “Don’t follow her, she needs a minute.”

“A minute? Vanessa, the poor thing is traumatised! I knew we shouldn’t have let her go to that school. What were we thinking?”

“She had to make her own choice Mike. She had to find out who she is. Who are we to stop her?” She responded gently as she lowered to the carpet to sit next to Mike. She cupped his face with her hands. “We have to help her get back to her feet. We have to help her move on.”

Bloom peeled away the dress she was wearing and threw it on the floor. She pulled her omni from her wrist and threw it at the dress. She placed her hands over her eyes again before wandering over to the mirror. She screamed at her reflection. Her eyes were bloodshot and red, half irritated by the tears and half by the makeup smearing down her face.

Bloom showered and put on a fresh pair of pyjamas. Everything was where she left it, which drove her even more crazy. She set her phone to charge at her desk. She couldn't bare to look at the artwork pinned on her wall. She just fell face first on her bed and stayed there.

An hour or so later, she emerged from her room and wandered downstairs to find her parents sat sipping tea waiting for her.

Bloom looked less disheveled now, but one doesn't only look disheveled. It's worn on the face too, and unfortunately, Bloom couldn't shake that. She sat beside her Mother and drew in a deep breath. She told them everything down to the most minuscule detail. About all of the things that had happened since she left all those months ago. She told them about the friends she had made, about Alfea. The creatures of decay, the ring and the Solarian ball. Her parents never once interrupted her. They didn't make a sound throughout the whole story. They listened as intently as they could.

“You're not angry with me, are you?” Bloom said as she finished. Mike and Vanessa were still processing everything Bloom had said.

“Mad at you, Bloom why would we be mad at you?” Vanessa said finally.

“Because, I ruined everything! I rejected my place at UCLA. I got expelled from an

entire realm! All I wanted was answers. About where I came from. Who I am. But all I found were more questions. Domino, Daphne, the creature, the Ring of Solaria. It's all connected somehow. As soon as I got information I got sent back!"

Vanessa brushed a strand of hair from her face. "You've been through something extraordinary, Bloom. And you're exhausted. That's all this is right now: exhaustion. You'll think clearer after you rest."

Bloom wanted to argue, but she couldn't. Her body felt heavy, her mind even heavier. The adrenaline of everything had drained out of her, leaving only loss behind. She nodded, though it felt more like surrender than agreement.

"I'll make you something to eat" Vanessa said quietly. "Then go upstairs. Try to sleep."

Bloom looked between her parents once again. She tried to think of what she could say. She didn't know what she was trying to argue against or who she was trying to argue with. Her body was in defensive mode, she supposed. Nothing she could say would make her parents fully understand. They were trying, but how can you without seeing it? Just as she didn't comprehend Magix when Stella told her all about it all those months ago, how can she expect them to?

Her Mother made her a bowl of Saimin soup, which was one of her favourite comfort foods. Her parents caught her up on everything that had been happening back on Earth. Bloom was only half listening.

Almost immediately upon finishing she went up to her room. Closed her door and fell onto her bed. She tried to forget everything. Forget her powers, forget Alfea, forget Magix.

The days drifted by painfully slowly. No intention carried Bloom through them. Each one merged into the next until she lost track of how long she had been home. Her room, once her haven, felt like a museum to a life she no longer belonged to. She spent most of her time in bed. Dust had accumulated since she had left. Posters curled at the edges. Sketches she had once poured her heart into stared back at her. All her hopes and dreams that fuelled them now meant nothing to her anymore.

She spent hours staring up at the ceiling as the light of the morning then the afternoon and then the evening shifted across the plaster. Nothing stirred her. Only eating one meal a day, her mind slipped back to Magix. She thought of nothing but her friends and the life she had begun to craft there.

Her parents gave her the space whilst trying to keep the house warm with their usual routines. Vanessa brought food to her room everyday. Plates gathered on Bloom's desk. Bowls of soup cooled untouched. Vanessa never pushed her to talk, but she worried more and more with each visit.

She wondered what her Omni would say if it worked. Had they already moved on without her?

Bloom couldn't bring herself to entertain the thought. Her mind looped back to the moment Stella's face had crumpled before she raised her sceptre and sent her away. She knew Stella didn't want to do it. She wondered where she was now. Was she okay? She considered herself lucky in a way. Stella was now at the mercy of the court.

The days turned into weeks. A knock sounded at the door.

She didn't answer. The handle turned anyway, and Vanessa stepped inside carrying a mug on a small tray. Steam curled from the cup, carrying the scent of peppermint. She set the

tray on the bedside table, like she had done every day prior.

“Bloom.” Vanessa spoke. It was the first time she had spoken directly to her since the night she got home.

Bloom laid her head back, her eyes stared blankly at the ceiling. Vanessa hesitated before perching on the bed beside her. She folded her hands on her lap.

“You’ve not come downstairs,” Vanessa said after a moment. “I know you’ve been through something enormous. I know you’re grieving something we don’t understand. But you’re shutting us out. You’re shutting yourself out. You won’t get past it like this.”

Bloom swallowed, but it caught in her throat. “I don’t know how to do anything else,” she whispered. Her voice cracked. “Stella’s stuck there because of me. Magix is in danger because of me. And I’m here... like a coward. I’m helpless.”

Vanessa didn’t interrupt her.

Bloom sat up as her hair fell around her face. “I thought I was getting closer,” she continued. “I thought I was finally going to find answers. Who I am. Why I have this magic. But all I did was put everyone in danger. I don’t know how to fix my mistake!”

“You cannot carry an entire world on your shoulders. It’s all right to move on. To remember that you’re only one person.”

Bloom shook her head.

“You faced monsters,” Vanessa replied. “You helped your friends. You protected someone who needed you. That doesn’t sound like failing to me. You were so brave Bloom. You went to Magix to help!”

Bloom let out a hollow laugh. “I went to Magix to help myself. I went because I thought I could be something special, but I’m not. I’m not special.”

There was silence.

“It doesn’t matter. None of it matters now. I’m here. They’re there. And everyone thinks I’m some kind of monster.” She clenched her fists. “And they’re right. I can’t control my powers enough. I don’t deserve them.”

Vanessa watched her, searching her daughter’s face. Vanessa changed her tone. It wasn’t the soft tone she had taken with Bloom up until now. This was tinged with frustration. “Bloom,” she said, “when you were little, you used to lose your mind if your drawings didn’t turn out right. You’d tear them up and start again. And every time, your next drawing was better than the last. You never allowed yourself any space for the failure that got you there. You always wanted to be the best. You allowed nothing less for yourself. You’re doing the same thing now. You think because one attempt didn’t go how you hoped, that’s the whole picture, ruined. But it’s not true Bloom. You cannot be someone who mopes around because everything didn’t go your way!”

Bloom looked at her Mother. She had never talked that sternly to her before. Bloom’s immediate instinct was to argue back like a petulant child who was told ‘no’ for the first time. But, Vanessa was right, and Bloom knew it.

Vanessa leaned closer. “You don’t see it. You’re so special Bloom. You don’t see that you’re still learning. You think the worst of yourself. You rushed into something dangerous and new, yes because you were curious but also because you care. You are extraordinary. Why is it that you cannot see it about yourself?”

Bloom’s eyes filled with hot tears. She tried to speak, but the words stuck. Only a single breath escaped.

Vanessa took Bloom’s hand. “You’re not done,” she said. “Not by a long shot. You will find a way back if that is what is meant for you.”

A tear fell, sliding down Bloom’s cheek. Another followed. She fell into her mother’s

arms. Vanessa held her tightly, the same way she had the night Bloom arrived home.

When Bloom finally pulled back, her breathing steadied, though her eyes were still red. Vanessa gave her hand a squeeze and stood.

“There’s food downstairs if you’re hungry,” she said, moving toward the door. She took the food she had brought in on the tray and carried it out. “And the kettle’s on.”

Bloom nodded. Vanessa slipped out, closing the door.

It had almost been three weeks since Bloom came back. Mill Valley settled into Winter. Bloom felt as though she was watching life from behind glass. Vanessa had coaxed her back into the world, though it took effort for Bloom to move beyond the house. She could now breathe without shaking. Magix had begun to feel like a fantastical dream. One so unbelievable when existing somewhere as simple as Mill Valley.

She had decided that she preferred the blue tone to the sky on Earth over the periwinkle of the sky on Magix. It meant that it deepened into a rusty red as the sun dropped behind the hills. The light stretched across the roads and houses. Despite the fact that the colours were less saturated, Earth felt bolder. Bloom pedalled her bike down the streets. Cool air rushed past her cheeks and stung her nose. The comfort of cycling down the familiar roads allowed her mind to steady. Though everything was a distraction from her reality. Magix hovered in the periphery of her mind at every waking moment. Bloom replayed it each night when she closed her eyes. The look on Stella’s face. Brandon, or, Prince Sky offering her his hand. Her friends’ fear.

During the day, she could forget it. She could allow herself to focus on the smell of

sequoia wafting from the forest, or, the sweetness from the bakery. She had belonged once, she could belong here again.

She had just left Gardenia's (her mother's flower shop) after helping her out during the day. She slowed as she rounded the corner near the park. It had been where Stella and her left for Magix to begin with. It seemed like a far off memory now.

She locked up her bike using the park's bike rack and rested her helmet on the seat. The sun was beginning to set already, ever earlier as winter progressed. She walked through the park gate and sat on a bench looking out. She took a moment. This was her life now. There was no way back to Magix. Unless... she thought, no.

That creature must have gotten here somehow, which means there must be another way. That hadn't occurred to her in a while. Although, it must be true. Whatever connection there is other than the ring could be anywhere. It could be closed now. She'd never find it even if there was another opening.

She ran through the possibilities in her mind, carefully considering each one at a time. A figure stepped out from behind the corner walking a small, yapping Pomeranian. She picked up the dog and strutted over to Bloom.

Mitzi.

Bloom threw her head back and cursed. Why was she here? Anyone but her. She'd take the creature of decay over Mitzi.

"Well, well well. If it isn't Bloom Peters," Mitzi called, her voice carried cleanly through the quiet park. She tapped one glossy nail against her folded arms. "I heard you came crawling back. I didn't believe it myself at first. After you missed graduation and everything, people started to assume you were dead, then word spread that you went to some weird school abroad."

Bloom exhaled, gripping her jeans. “Good to see you too.”

Mitzi sauntered forward, the streetlights caught her overly highlighted cheekbone.

“So it’s true then. You got kicked out of that new school whatever it was. Back in record time.” Her smile curled. “Impressive.”

“I wasn’t kicked out,” Bloom said. “I left for personal reasons.”

Mitzi’s chortle slipped out. Her laugh was highly irritating. It sounded like her dog, coming to think of it. Let’s not call it a laugh, let’s call it a yap. “Personal reasons. Cute, Bloom, cute. We all know you got rejected from UCLA. Then this new school... let me guess. Too much pressure? Didn’t fit in? Or did you finally realise you’re a small-town girl pretending to be something you’re not?”

She yapped again, there was a snort somewhere in there too.

Bloom wasn’t even angry, she stared blankly at Mitzi. “I deferred UCLA actually. I got in fine. Nice to see you’re keeping track. Not that it’s your business.”

“Oh, trust me, everyone’s been talking. I’ll be sure to set the record straight though.”

“Why are you here Mitzi? Aren’t you meant to be at NYU? Last we spoke you were going to be ‘the next big thing?’ So... why are you here?”

Mitzi tilted her head and flitted her eyes a second. “Bloom, please. You can’t lie and expect me not to see through it. You didn’t get into UCLA did you?” She looked over Bloom’s clothes, her messy hair, the tired shadows beneath her eyes. “Honestly, I’m surprised you even came outside.”

Bloom grinned. “Mitzi, stop. Don’t change the subject now. NYU not ‘Mitzi’ enough for you? Or are you the one who didn’t get into college?.”

“No,” Mitzi replied. She began to strut back to the carpark. Bloom followed behind her.

“Well, unlike you, I don’t care. But, for your information, Mitzi. I was accepted to study at UCLA.”

“Why didn’t you go then Bloom? It was your dream school. There’s nothing on the planet you would have turned it down for.”

“You’re right. Nothing on the planet.”

Mitzi yapped again. “Whatever you say. Let’s face it, Bloom. Some people rise. Some people fall. You? You fell. You’re a loser Bloom. There have to be losers in this world, so that Winners can win.”

Bloom’s power stirred within her. It was a familiar feeling around Mitzi. This time, she recognised it. She had power now, not that Mitzi knew it. She had always been unpleasant, but tonight she was taking it too far. Bloom wasn’t sure if it was because she was raw from Magix or because she had nothing left to lose.

Mitzi took out her keys and unlocked her car. She slid into the driver’s seat and pulled the door shut. She rolled the window down. “Good luck with all that... deferring,” she said, through the open window. “You’re going to need it.”

The air around Bloom prickled. Fire licked across her palms. The rubber on Mitzi’s tires hissed. The bonnet began to smoke. Mitzi was too busy cackling to notice before she put her foot on the pedal. As she did, the car made a loud BANG.

Mitzi’s head turned to see the front of her car in flames. Her smile fell immediately and turned to a shriek. She leapt out of the seat. The car engine stuttered and then stopped. Bloom couldn’t help but chuckle to herself.

“See you later, Mitzi!”

“What is wrong with you?” she shouted, eyes wide as she tossed her head between the car and Bloom. “Bloom!”

Mitzi scanned the pavement. She began to stomp her feet like a toddler and weep.

Bloom could have looked back at the whimpering girl, but to look back would only give her more of the attention she craved. She calmly walked away, back to her bike.

She unlocked it, climbed back on and pushed off the kerb and headed home.

It was almost dark by the time Bloom got to the turnings of her neighbourhood. The streetlights were beginning to turn on and the temperature had dropped to uncomfortably cold. She stopped on the path for a moment and dialled her Mother on her phone. It was odd how much she missed having a phone on Magix, even if the omni could do everything a phone could. Vanessa didn't answer.

She tried her father as well. He also did not pick up.

Strange.

Bloom continued along down to her road. Her parents were likely making dinner. Something felt wrong though. The same unsettling feeling she had gotten all those months ago when the creature took her parents.

She slowed as she approached the house and swung her leg off the bike, and let it fall against the fence. The metal clattered. The lights were all off. The door was closed. Bloom climbed the steps two at a time and unlocked the door. She paused, hovering over the handle, and pushed it open.

Inside was pitch black. All except for a faint light coming from the living room.

"Mum... Dad?" Bloom called out. "Are you home?"

She closed the door gently. She couldn't smell food. Nor could she smell any of

Vanessa's flowers. All she could smell was the faint general scent of burning. She supposed it could be coming from her clothes.

She walked into the living room. Long shadows stretched across the floor, bending around furniture she knew by heart. For a moment, everything looked untouched.

Too untouched.

Then she saw them.

Pinned up against the back wall, shoulder to shoulder, their bodies locked in place were Mike and Vanessa. Dark tendrils of magic wrapped around their arms and torsos, pulsing slowly. Vanessa's face had gone pale. Mike's hands strained against the bindings.

Three figures came from the kitchen.

"Bloom, Bloom, Bloom. I think it's time we finally meet each other." A cold voice said.

Bloom choked as recognition struck. The witches from the bus attack. The same three. They were here.

The lights turned on showcasing the cloaked and masked figures. The one dressed in blue stepped forward first. She looked Bloom up and down. A slow smile came over her. The other two figures stepped forward and removed their masks. For the first time, she could lay her eyes on her tormenters.

They were, well, beautiful.

The First lady dressed in dark purple had long dark hair and olive toned skin. The second lady, dressed in pink, had curled indigo hair and dark skin.

Finally, their leader stepped forward. She wore dark blue. As she removed her mask, the lady looked familiar. They had met once before... at the gala.

"It's time we spoke, Bloom. Face to face. After all, I only talk to interesting people."

The woman had long icy hair, and was as beautiful as the other two.

“Isabella.” Bloom said.

“That’s right, Bloom. Although, I tend to go by Icy. Meet my coven sisters: Darcy and Stormy.”

Bloom’s fists clenched hard. “Let my parents go. Whatever you want, take it from me. Just let them go!”

Isabella cackled. She wasn’t being threatening. She didn’t need to be. The sound rang cold and sharp through the room. “I promise you Bloom, we aren’t here to hurt you or your parents. They’re only our little insurance policy so you don’t pull a stunt like you did on Magix again. Even a spark of fire from you and your parents are as good as pixie dust.”

“What have you done to them?”

“Don’t worry, they’re fine, for now. They can’t see or hear anything at the moment.”

Bloom began to shake. She darted her eyes from her parents and back to the witches.

“How about you sit down.” Isabella said gesturing with her hand.

Darcy and Stormy sat down and put up their feet. Icy walked over and perched on the armrest of the couch. Bloom turned to her parents another time, almost to try to assure them they’d be okay, but they couldn’t see or hear her. She remained standing.

“We’ve been searching for you for a very long time,” the dark-haired witch, Darcy, said. “And at last, we found you. Right here. In little old Mill Valley.”

Bloom’s eyes moved from one to the next. “I don’t know what you think I have,” she said, forcing the words out. “You’ve got the wrong person. I don’t have anything.”

The trio looked to each other. Stormy began to laugh manically. She flung herself back against the couch. Darcy stared at Bloom. Isabella stood up, and put her arms behind her back.

“What do you know about Domino?”

“Domino?” Bloom quipped back.

“This is a very long story, Bloom, and I’m afraid we don’t have much time. However, I think you deserve to learn the truth.” Icy said. She walked over to the other side of the lounge. “Many thousands of years ago there was once an entity known as the Great Dragon. This dragon was the most powerful force in the universe. It was the one who created the magical dimension. Afterwards it disappeared, never to be seen again. But, it entrusted a spark of its flame to Hestia Domino. This flame travelled down the royal bloodline for two thousand years. The last known owner of the power was Miriam Deragona. The final queen of the realm.”

Bloom couldn’t help but listen intently. Icy had no reason to lie to her. But why was she telling her this? “The power that Daphne craved, it was the spark from the Great Dragon?”

“Exactly. That spark is known as the Dragon’s Flame. It is the most powerful source of magic in the universe.”

“So, Daphne really did destroy Domino?” Bloom said under her breath.

Isabella smirked and looked between her two sisters. “No, Bloom. Daphne was not the one who destroyed Domino.” she laughed. Bloom looked between the three witches in confusion.

“Miriam offered Daphne the power of the dragon’s flame, but she refused it. Nobody knows why, but Daphne had power so potent, she didn’t need it. During the final days of Domino, Oritel and Miriam vanished. Daphne was all that remained of the royal bloodline. The ones who wanted the flame razed Domino to the ground. They were looking for the one who carried it. Despite destroying the entire realm, the power was never recovered.”

“Who? Who destroyed Domino?”

“The ancestral witches. Our ancestors Bloom. Witch covens are stronger than your usual familial bonds. The descendants of the three ancestral witches have been in a coven for the past one thousand years. Waiting for the moment the flame finally revealed itself again. And here it is... here you are.”

Bloom’s eyes widened at the sudden connection. “Me? You think I have the Dragon’s Flame?”

“It turns out King Oritel and Queen Miriam had a second child, in secret. When the time came, Daphne insisted the flame not to be given to her, but instead to the last princess of Domino. To you.”

Bloom froze. The world seemed to stand still.

“It took us a while to piece things together, our ancestors did such an amazing job altering the historical narrative. But, In her last moments Daphne used all her power to send you here. How she did it, we don’t know, but she was brilliant. Our ancestors underestimated her. A mistake we made with you Bloom. She sacrificed herself for you that night. She was playing the long game, so the ancestors decided to do the same. They created the Wisperian crystals. Artefacts that respond to the presence of the Dragon’s Flame.” Darcy said, as she pulled out her crystal. It was glowing a searing white light.

“When your powers woke up. So did our crystals.”

The temperature in the room dropped. Bloom’s head began to cloud. She drew in a breath and reached inward, searching, scouring for the truth. This couldn’t be it. This couldn’t be true.

But it was true. She knew it to be.

Daphne was her sister. She was a princess. She was the keeper of the Dragon’s Flame.

It was the first time something made sense. Something that answered more than it asked. As much as it all connected together, she still couldn't bring herself to quite believe it.

Bloom staggered backwards. The witches didn't seem to take pleasure in it.

"Now, we've given you what you want. How about you give us what we want?"

Stormy finally spoke up, impatiently.

"No!"

"Oh, Bloom," Icy said condescendingly. "You have no idea what's happening here, do you?" Icy glanced sideways. Darcy lifted her hand. The magic tightened around Mike and Vanessa. Vanessa cried out, her body trying to fight off the force of the shadow.

Bloom screamed and thrust her hands forward. Fire burst from her palms in reflex.

The flames struck at the tendrils and collapsed into sparks. A small hole in the tendrils quickly healed itself.

Icy shook her head and tutted under her breath as she paced towards Mike and Vanessa. Pity touched her face. "I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt and assume that was a mistake. You're nowhere near ready," she said. "But that isn't your fault."

Stormy stepped forward. She pulled out her Wisperian Crystal. Icy and Darcy did the same. All three of the crystals were different in shape, they floated above the trio and formed a triangle.

"One last thing about the crystals Bloom: they're designed to strip magic from its source," Icy said. "Completely."

Bloom flinched back in horror. Her mind ran through a thousand options to try and escape. But none of them were any use; it was her power or her parents.

"It's almost amusing," Darcy said. "That the lost princess of Domino ended up here of all places."

Bloom stumbled back a step. "I'm not... a princess."

"And yet," the witch replied calmly, "You are. Deny the truth to yourself all you want Bloom. You know it to be true. It's why you have never fit in. It's why that creature hunted you over Stella. It's why your powers didn't respond for such a long time. You are the lost princess of Domino Bloom. You are the keeper of the Dragon's Flame. Well... not for much longer."

Images crashed through Bloom's mind. Fire surging from her hands. Daphne's voice calling her name. The golden halls she had seen so many times in her dreams. The not belonging.

The witches closed in. Bloom pulled in her fire but allowed it to diffuse. She couldn't risk harming her parents.

Isabella grinned at the look of defeat that swept over Bloom. "The dragon's flame is finally ours." She declared.

She lifted her hand. The room plunged into biting cold. The light of the Wisperian crystals shone brighter than ever, a searing white. The space itself seemed to distort around them.

Bloom gasped and pulled a hand up to shield her eyes.. Something inside her pulled hard. It was sharp. It felt like a thousand needles were pressing from beneath her skin. Fire began to surge toward the crystals against her will. Pain lanced through her chest as the Flame resisted being taken. Bloom screamed and keeled over. Her body and eyes began to shine, wisps of flame coming out from all over her body, being drawn into the crystals. It was as if her very soul was being split apart. Wisp after wisp of bright orange fire left from her body searing her skin and clothes.

The witches smiled as Bloom fell silent. She had lost consciousness. Her head fell

back as the fire inside Bloom stuttered, flaring and fading in uneven bursts. The final licks of fire were absorbed into the crystals. Her knees struck the floor, she then collapsed onto the ground.

The Trix each took their crystals from the triangle. They brightened in their hands. There was a look of near astonishment on the three of them. They almost couldn't believe it, they had finally stolen the Dragon's Flame.

Bloom tried to pull herself up from the floor. Her colour was completely drained. Her body was almost corpse like.

"This power was never meant for you," Darcy said as she ran her nails along the side of her crystal.

Bloom's breathing was heavy and ragged. Her throat was completely dry. Her head boomed in pain. The room blurred at the edges. Her limbs were cold and numb. She slipped in and out of consciousness. She laid where she had fallen, gasping and trembling. Her body was unresponsive. There was a space in her now.

Her fire was gone.

Footsteps rushed toward her.

Mike dropped to his knees at her side, his hands shook as he reached for her. Vanessa pulled Bloom into her arms.

"Bloom!" Vanessa screamed.

Bloom could barely comprehend what was happening. She blacked out and came to several times. She caught glimpses of her parents.

"She'll recover... eventually." She heard one of the witches say.

She blacked out again. She could not move her body and heard faint calls from Mike and Vanessa.

She tried to look around, to hold on, to fight back. But she couldn't. She blacked out again.

Then, a memory came to the surface. A memory Bloom had never recalled before.

She was running through a burning castle. Next to her was a woman cloaked in sunset orange.

"Faster Bloom!" The woman said, pulling Bloom by the hand forward. But she couldn't run any faster, even as she exerted. She panted and stumbled over her own legs.

They burst through tall golden doors into open air. Heat slammed into Bloom's face, the night sky lit dark red by fire. She nearly fell, but the woman scooped her up without breaking stride.

That was when she saw them.

Three figures across the courtyard, moving through the flames. Every step they took set something alight.

For one moment, Bloom locked eyes with them.

Fear surged through her, an instinctual, primal fear.

The woman tore her cloak away. Wings unfurled from her back, catching the firelight as she leapt from the palace steps. The air rushed past them, roaring in Bloom's ears as the woman flew down the slope beyond the castle.

The palace shrank as they left, its towers collapsing inward. Below, the land dropped into a cliff, waves crashing against the shore far beneath. The woman flew toward a dark opening cut into the stone.

The sound of the fire vanished, replaced by echoing drips of water. Bloom clutched at the woman's shoulders as they descended, she could trust her.

She landed in a wide chamber with crystals dappling the walls, emitting faint light. In the centre stood a ring of stones, etched with symbols she did not understand.

The woman set her down.

“What’s happening?” Bloom asked.

The woman knelt in front of her, she brushed Bloom’s hair back. She wore a mask, it was glowing orange and fanned out past her eyes. Through it, her eyes betrayed her sadness.

“You’re going to be okay, okay?” she said. She removed the covering. Bloom could finally see her face.

It was Daphne.

She stood and moved to the stones, placing her palms against them... The symbols ignited one by one, light threaded between the stones like veins.

The ground began to rumble.

A roar filled the cave as a veil of shifting light appeared, rippling like water between two stones. Bloom took a step back.

“Listen to me,” Daphne said, turning to her. “I need you to go through that portal now.”

Bloom’s throat tightened. “Will you come with me?”

Daphne crossed the space between them in two strides and took Bloom’s hands. “Of course,” she said. “Sisters always stick together.”

Daphne gave Bloom a smile and a wink. They walked toward the light, hand in hand. Sisters. Together.

Then, a blast of energy tore through the chamber, almost knocking Bloom over. Daphne looked back and then directly at Bloom.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

She pushed.

Bloom screamed as she fell backward into the veil. The air tore out of her chest.

The world twisted. Light and cold and heat collided. Bloom felt herself stretch. The sound of rushing wind deafened her. Flashing lights and stars swirled around. She could not tell where her arms were. Or her legs. Or if she still had them at all. The air roared and, almost at once, was replaced by silence.

Her chest burned. She couldn't breathe.

Everything stopped. She was frozen. Afloat somewhere in space.

As quickly as she thought it, she slammed onto something hard and wet.

Air pushed into her lungs as she gasped, coughing violently. The world snapped back into shape with a jolt that left her dizzy.

It was dark.

Cold mud pressed against her cheek. The smell was damp and earthy, not like the crystal cave. She rolled onto her back, sobbing, her body aching as though she had fallen from a great height.

Above her, the sky was black and endless, dotted with unfamiliar stars.

"Daphne?" Bloom wheezed.

No answer.

She sat up, panic coming over her as she looked around. Trees climbed in all directions.

She was alone.

She began to cry. Around her erupted a powerful flame that set the forest ablaze.

The last thing she remembered before the dream fractured was arms lifting her up.

The memory dissolved.

* Interlude Four *

Indigo clouds churned around the spires of Cloudtower. Wind howled and tore through every arch and open window. Something wicked was coming.

Inside, students crossed corridors and stairwells, vocalising complaints about the weather. It was a relatively normal day, adverse weather was common in the north of Solaria.

Then, the temperature dropped without warning and the sky grew darker. Students began to gather in the courtyard. In the distance, they noticed three figures headed straight towards the castle.

“Someone get headmistress Griffin!” a student exclaimed.

Frost skated across the stone on the floor. Sparks of lightning cracked through the clouds overhead. Shadows pooled around the spires as the three figures drew closer.

Icy landed first, boots clicking on the rock. The cold followed her, crawling across the courtyard. Darcy touched down beside her, the shadows at her back shifting as though alive. Stormy dropped last, laughing as lightning began to crackle above.

The Trix had returned.

The students froze in fear. A few gasped. Whispered chatter swept over the crowd as it

parted for the three witches.

Icy lifted her hand.

The Wisperian Crystal glowed around her neck, its surface clouded with veins of light. Within it, something burned. The Dragon's flame. Frost grew over her fingers.

"Well," she said, surveying the courtyard, "it's lovely to see so many students. Allow me to introduce my sisters. Darcy and Stormy. We are your new headmistresses."

Stormy rolled her shoulders back.

Darcy's smile widened as panic rippled through the gathered students. "They look terrified. I love that."

The students exchanged looks with each other, half in fear, half in confusion.

Icy rolled her eyes and flicked her wrist.

The crystal pulsed once and the ground began to freeze.

A wave of dark magic tore through the courtyard, The students lifted from the ground. They began to scream as shadowy bindings snapped around their wrists and ankles, tethering them to the floor. The magic pinned them where they stood, forcing them to their knees, they bowed in front of the witches.

"So Faragonda was right" Called a booming voice. "It was you three." It was headmistress Griffin. Her dark hair flowed freely and she flew down into the courtyard between her students and the witches. Other members of staff followed suit. "I expected more from you Isabella. I trusted you."

Icy smiled. "Unfortunately, Griffin, the fates have aligned for me and my sisters. We have the power of the Dragon's Flame." Her eyes widened as she spoke. Griffin attempted to mask her fear, but her and the rest of the faculty flinched at its mention. "I am going to ask you to kindly get out of our way. Cloudtower is ours."

Griffin quickly looked to the crystals. "If it is true, and you really possess the dragon's flame. You have stolen something you do not understand. Stop now, or it will be your doom. More dangerous creatures seek that power than you know."

Stormy cracked her neck. "We understand perfectly."

"What could be more powerful than us?" Darcy hissed.

For a moment, the three witches and Griffin were locked onto each other. Then, Griffin outstretched her hands and turned the floor into molten lava. Icy, Darcy and Stormy's power surged from their Wisperian Crystals. Shadows lashed outward in defence, the force tore straight through two members of faculty as they went to defend Griffin. Dark energy wrapped around her.

Ediltrude sent a column of air straight at Stormy. It knocked her back momentarily before Stormy sent a current of electricity through the wind, striking her down. The students broke into chaos, as a full blown battle between the Trix and the Cloudtower faculty commenced.

Stormy laughed as sparks jumped from her hands to the spires above. She threw both arms skyward. Lightning tore from the clouds in forks, slamming into the courtyard. Stone and lava exploded. Members of the faculty bent pieces of rock to shield students from the debris.

Darcy stood still amongst the chaos. She closed her eyes as shadows peeled away from walls and pillars, stretching into grasping forms that wrapped around witches and instructors. Then, other faculty members began to cry out that monsters were attacking the castle. Yet there were no monsters truly there. They began to fight each other. Darcy was in control of their minds.

Griffin got to her feet and a ring of black fire burst outward, forcing the shadows

back. She grew angry as she lifted herself into the air, robes snapping around her in the wind.

“Cloudtower stands,” she declared. “You will not take it!” She bent a plume of magma that began to chase Icy.

Icy flew up to meet the headmistress head on. She answered by lifting her hand and the Wisperian Crystal pulsed.

The Lava hardened back into stone, halting Griffin’s control over it. Then, it began to snow. Slowly to begin with, turning quickly into a blizzard of sleet and hail. Ice swirled around Griffin’s legs, cracking as she tore free and hurled a blade of fire straight at Icy.

Darcy intercepted and the blade dissolved into smoke.

“Predictable,” she said as she flew up to join her sister in the sky.

Ediltrude and Zarathustra flew up and flanked Griffin. Ediltrude summoned a cyclone, driving Stormy back to the ground. Zarathustra threw boulders of stone at the Darcy and Icy.

Darcy laughed as they both swerved effortlessly around the rocks.

The hail and sleet began to spiral around Griffin, Ediltrude and Zarathustra. Griffin created a dome of fire, evaporating the bullets of ice into harmless steam.

Stormy roared and unleashed a storm directly above the trio of faculty. Thunder detonated again and again, lightning whizzing past Griffin and her allies, each time almost striking them down. The bolts struck the same point over and over until the courtyard split open. The students that weren’t trapped or injured ran out of Cloudtower and into the surrounding area.

Ediltrude yelled and sent another blast of air toward Stormy, but Icy stepped in front of her sister.

Ice glowed in midair, forming a wall that blocked the attack.

“Enough,” Icy said calmly and she lifted the crystal higher.

Griffin, Ediltrude and Zarathustra were the last members standing. The two covens of witches hovered high above cloudtower.

Frost began to climb the walls, sealing windows, locking doors. Ancient carvings from centuries ago cracked and splintered.

Griffin flew forward and shot a beam of bright fire at the Trix.

Icy retaliated with a beam of ice. For one brief moment, their powers were matched.

Icy tapped on her wisperian crystal, which glowed with the power of the Dragon’s Flame. In that moment, the beam of ice overcame the fire and made contact with Griffin, Zarathustra and Ediltrude. They slammed against one of the walls of Cloudtower and fell to the ground.

Icy, Darcy and Stormy descended slowly, and touched down on the broken cobblestones of the courtyard.

“You taught us everything we know,” Icy said. “Well, almost everything.”

She raised her hand and clenched her fist.

“No,” she breathed. “At least let the students go!”

Icy advanced in front of her two sisters. She extended her hand. “We don’t want to harm anyone Griffin. The students don’t matter to us.” Icy said. She looked at Darcy and nodded.

Darcy reluctantly drew back her shadows. Stormy calmed the sky.

“Before you go.” Icy cooed to the students. “Allow me to properly introduce myself. My name is Isabella Caligo, these are my sisters. Darcy and Stephanie Caligo. We are the descendants of the ancestral witches and have the power of the Dragon’s Flame. Join me and my sisters as we usher in a new era of Magix. One ruled not by Fairies, but by Witches! The

time of transformation is over!”

Silence fell, broken only by the wind. Then, several students began to applaud the witches.

Others began to get up and run over the bridge and into the forest to get off Cloudtower island.

Icy turned back to Griffin and knelt beside her.

“Happy?”

Griffin spat blood onto the ice. “You will destroy everything.”

Icy smiled. “We intend to.”

She stood and faced the courtyard. Many of the students still were cheering where they were. They looked to each other and then to the Trix.

“Isabella, Darcy and Stephanie?” One of the boys said. “My parents told me stories of the descendants of the ancestral witches. How can I be of service?”

One by one, each of the students, perhaps two dozen or so, pledged allegiance to the Trix.

Stormy looked around and began to cackle.

Icy smiled in disbelief. “From this moment on,” she said, voice carrying across the grounds, “Cloudtower answers to us.”

The crystal flared once, sealing the gates shut.

“We are the descendants of the Ancestral Witches,” Icy continued. “And this school will serve its true purpose at last.”

Griffin and the rest of the faculty struggled.

Darcy leant down, staring at Griffin. “Class dismissed, Headmistress.”

* Chapter Twenty-Two *

Stella's room was in the eastern wing of the Cittaluce palace. The windows faced out into the ocean on one side and the city fell away on the other. She had once loved that view. Now it felt like a painting hung to distract her from her prison. The rest of the room was a golden cream colour, with pillars supporting the domed ceilings.

She paced the length of the soft pink carpet. The hem of her silken nightdress brushed her ankles. The room smelled of citrus from tea on the table, untouched since yesterday.

Any connection to the outside world had been taken from her. She could do nothing else but people watch. So, she crossed to the window once more. She could see the Levée station in the distance, its arches catching the sunlight. She thought back to the day many months ago when Bloom saw the city for the first time. The city moved on, busy as usual, unaware that the princess sat boxed up like a jewel in a case.

A knock sounded at the door. It was cold, a single firm strike. Stella didn't move. She remained at the far end of the room looking out of the window.

The latch clicked. The door opened and stopped. A guard's shoulder came into the opening. Solarian armour, polished so much it may as well be a mirror. The sigil on his chest

showed he wasn't palace staff. Military.

"Breakfast," he said.

Stella looked behind her to look at the tray in his hands. Pastries, a fresh cup of tea, slices of fruit laid out with care. It was a tempting breakfast.

"I'm not hungry." She said calmly. Although, she was hungry. Very hungry. Stella hadn't had a bite to eat in days.

He walked into the room and left the tray on the table by the door, swapping it with the meal she had been left the previous night.

Stella rolled her eyes and turned to face the guard. He was young, with auburn hair. She walked over to him. "Did Cassandra give you a list of instructions, or was it my father?"

His mouth tightened. He looked past her shoulder, anywhere but her face. "I was instructed not to speak with you beyond necessity."

"Right." Stella smiled, "Because conversation is dangerous."

The guard didn't move. He said nothing, but Stella couldn't take that. "Tell me something," she said. "When you joined the Solarian military, did you picture yourself as a babysitter?"

He flattened his mouth and remained silent.

Stella let the moment stretch out for longer than anyone could be comfortable.

"Fine," she said, walking over to the tray of food. She picked up one of the pastries and bit into it reluctantly. She patted the guard on the shoulder in a deliberately condescending manner. The guard moved back toward the door.

Stella picked up the tray and set it down by the window.

She turned again to look into the mirror by her wardrobe. She was pale and gaunt, her hair greasy and slicked back. She had a bruise on her upper arm where a guard had grabbed

her two days prior. She lifted the strap of her nightdress to examine it, then dropped it again.

The guard remained in the middle of the room.

She turned away from the mirror, and crossed casually toward the door. As she did, the guard stepped between her and the exit, drawing his sword.

“Open it,” she commanded.

No response.

Stella let out a cry in frustration. The guard backed away and closed the door once more. Her mind ran in circles. Diaspro. Cassandra. The ring. Guards she had never seen in the palace before. Her father absent since the ball. It had been days.

Something had happened. Perhaps it was her reveal of what truly happened on Earth, and what attacked her and Bloom. But she didn’t understand, not yet. Stella hated the not knowing.

Time crawled on. Weeks passed. The room changed from early morning gold to daylight to evening crimson.

She was going stir crazy in her room. Each time she was asked she recounted the same story and refused to say anymore to anyone but the king. She sat on the edge of her bed and forced herself to breathe slowly. Panic did not suit her. She was eating very little as, in her head, the chances of someone poisoning the food was high. She was picking the pieces of food that would be hardest to lace to live off of. Luckily she had running water in her room but, at this point, she might have to take the risk or die of starvation.

She thought of Bloom and the rest of her friends back at Alfea. She had dragged all of them into this mess. If it wasn’t for her, none of them would be in the trouble they were now.

The lock turned once again and Stella snapped upright.

The door opened. Two guards entered first, this time wearing the sigil of the palace guard. They did not look at her. Then King Radius stepped in.

He didn't wear his crown. He did not need one. To Stella, King Radius was always just her father. It had been the most painful thing in the world having to distrust him. His clothes were simple by palace standards, dark and fitted, with a subtle shimmer. He had long strawberry blonde hair that looked golden when it came into the light. In that moment Stella saw her father and the king at once. He turned to his guards and gave them a nod, which seemed to dismiss them, as they retreated back into the hall and closed the door.

Radius looked over the room. The tray on the table, with uneaten food. The marks on the carpet where she had been pacing. The fact that Stella couldn't bare to look at him.

"I knew something was wrong when they told me you weren't eating," he said.

She waited. If she spoke first, she would start with fury, and that fury would waste time. So she stayed sat on her bed, looking out of the window.

"You should not be locked in here," he said.

Stella gave a short laugh that cut off quickly. "And yet, I am." She turned to him. "I've been locked in this room for weeks!"

Radius's expression did not change. This time he looked to the window, and out over the city, then turned back. He did not sit. He remained standing, as if he intended the visit to be brief.

"I can't do anything Stella if you don't tell me the truth. Explain," he said. "From the beginning."

Stella's mouth went dry. She had rehearsed this in her head a thousand times. But, now, she was tired. Guarded. Angry in a way she controlled so well it scared her. She supposed he was angry too, they had always been rather alike.

She stood up, because if she stayed sat on the bed she would feel like a child. She lifted her chin. "Will you believe me?" She asked. "Even if what I say sounds unbelievable. Will you trust me to tell you the truth?"

Radius seemed to mellow at the comment. "I'll believe you Stella."

Stella pressed her hands over her hair and inhaled so deeply tears began to form in the ducts of her eyes. She wiped them away with the same motion. Radius waited patiently for her to begin.

"It all started the night I left on my mission for Earth. Shortly after arriving a strange and terrible creature attacked me and stole my ring. Naturally, I had to hunt the creature to try and get it back. This creature showed no interest in humans. That is, until it saw Bloom. The girl from the ball. She was completely ordinary, at least to me. She had lived her entire life on Earth, and yet, that creature was more interested in her than me. After it attacked her I couldn't leave her alone. I didn't want to, either. I was so scared..." Stella began to cry, for a moment only. "The night after, the creature took Bloom's parents. It was then we realised that it was clever. This creature wasn't animalistic, it was calculated. We managed to save Bloom's parents and my ring, but not because of me. Because of Bloom... Father. She has the most incredible power I've ever seen. I knew after that she had to come back with me to Magix. Mystics on Earth and creatures like that at the same time and place... I still wonder what it means. She wanted to find out more about her power and I wanted her to be a witness when I presented my findings to the Magix council. The findings we would get in the Solarian Archive."

King Radius looked as unreadable as he did when the story began.

"Bloom saved me, Father" Stella said. "But there are forces here that want to hurt her. There's something special about her, dangerous yes, but special. I owe it to Bloom to look

after her.”

Radius’s voice was low. “And Faragonda knows about all this I assume?”

“Yes.” She said laced with guilt.

“And, why couldn’t you tell me?” He asked. This time, he looked hurt.

She looked at her father with a sadness she had been holding for months. “It’s not that I couldn’t trust you. But, someone you’re close to. Someone here, in the palace. Wants me dead. How else could the creature have ended up on Earth?”

“Did you ever consider that creature was already on Earth?”

“I did, although it seemed unlikely considering it knew to go for my ring to stop me coming home. My suspicions that I was in danger were confirmed when I returned home and was attacked in Lupus.”

Radius’s mouth tightened. “Lupus!?” He exclaimed “You went to the Lupus district alone?”

“Yes,” Stella said, and did not attempt to hide her pride. “And Bloom came with me.”

Radius dropped to Stella’s hand. The ring noticeably missing from her finger. “That’s why you haven’t touched your food. You think something will harm you?”

Stella nodded. “There’s more” She said. “Bloom is somehow connected to Domino.”

Radius’ face dropped. “Domino?”

Stella nodded once. “Bloom has seen Daphne somehow, before she came to Magix. There were these three witches that attacked us a while back. They mentioned a flame. We wanted to find out about the creature, the ring and the flame in the archive. That’s why Bloom was there when Diaspro found her.”

There was a deathly quiet, even the city outside seemed to hush.

Radius looked at Stella as if he searched for the trick in her words. “Oh my stars...

What have I done?" he said.

Stella felt a surge of dread. "What? What is it?" She shouted. "This is about Bloom isn't it?"

"You should know, last night, three witches attacked Cloudtower wielding formidable power."

"The flame..." Stella whispered.

"The Dragon's flame." King radius stated. "The most powerful force in the universe. That is likely what those witches were referring to. Your ring once belonged to Princess Daphne of Domino. So is it a surprise that the creature, the creature of decay, wanted your ring? Is it a coincidence that these creatures were thought extinct after the fall of Domino. Your friend, Bloom, is sent back to Earth and now, three witches appear with power the magical dimension hasn't seen in a thousand years. I'd wager, the same three witches that attacked you."

Stella's fingers curled. "The ring belonged to Daphne..."

"I think your friend is far more important than we realised." Radius said.

Stella looked at him, and for the first time, everything clicked together. "If those witches attacked cloudtower last night, that means Bloom... Father, you have to let me go to Earth!"

Radius shook his head "Out of the question, you are to stay here, where it's safe. The Magix Council will handle this."

"But we don't have time! I don't know who to trust; You don't know who to trust!" Stella exclaimed.

"It's too dangerous Stella. I cannot have you involved in this."

"I'm already involved. And it's my choice. You can't protect me forever, and I'm not

a little girl anymore.” Stella swallowed. “I am asking you to trust me. To help me.”

Radius looked at her. She did not look away.

At last, Radius reached into his pocket and pulled out the ring of Solaria. He took Stella’s hand and placed the ring on her finger.

“Go and help your friend” he said.

Stella’s breath caught. She teared up and flung her arms over her father.

“Please be careful. I’m not sure how many trips the ring has left in it.”

“Let’s hope its enough to get Bloom and I back.”

Stella stared at him. She didn’t really know what she expected to come from a conversation. This, however, wasn’t it.

Radius’s voice stayed steady. “If what you say is true and Bloom truly was the keeper of the Dragon’s Flame. It may be up to you to save us all.”

“Do not return here until I send for you.”

Stella nodded.

“And Stella. Look after yourself.”

Radius turned and walked toward the door, taking one more thing out of his pocket before he left and set it on the table. He opened the door and a guard closed it behind him.

The lock clicked. She was alone. But she had her ring, and, on the table, was her Omni.

Stella’s pulse beat loud in her ears. She moved to her wardrobe, yanked it open, and pulled out the first clothes her hands found. Black trousers. Boots and a long jacket with hidden pockets. She dragged her hair into a knot and pinned it up and slid her Omni onto her wrist and checked the screen. Messages from everyone at Alfea.

She immediately messaged Layla everything that had happened and all that her father

had told her. She said that she was going to get Bloom and to go to Faragonda with everything they've got.

The ring turned into her sceptre once more, she felt the strength of adrenaline course through her body. The blue skies of Earth were waiting. Bloom was waiting for her.

It had been two days since the attack of the Witches and Bloom still drifted in and out of sleep. A blanket was pulled up to her shoulders on the sofa. Her periods between sleep were growing longer but she showed no sign of regaining her full strength anytime soon. Would she ever feel the same way again?

Vanessa sat nearby with a book she had not turned a page of. She watched Bloom's chest rise and fall. Her and Mike had not left her side. Mike was in the kitchen, making dinner.

"Maybe she'll eat something today" Vanessa said quietly.

"We'll see. She can't go on much longer like this Vanessa. She needs a hospital." Mike replied.

"And what are we going to tell them Mike? Our daughter had her magical powers stolen by three witches from another dimension? Please." She jabbed. Immediately upon saying it she regretted how it came across. Mike put his hand on her shoulder. She took his hand in hers and looked up to him. "What are we going to do?" She reached out and brushed Bloom's hair back from her face. Bloom stirred but did not wake.

The clock on the wall ticked far too loudly. Mike had no reply for Vanessa. The longer they waited the worse it could get.

A knock came at the front door.

Vanessa jumped at the sound. "Are you expecting someone?"

“It’s probably just the neighbours, I’ll get it.” He said

Another knock followed, firmer this time.

“I’m coming!” Mike called.

He crossed into the hallway and opened the door. Looking up at him, travel-worn and frantic, was Princess Stella.

“Stella?” Mike said, completely dumbfounded. Vanessa sprang to her feet and ran over to the door and pulled her into a tight embrace.

“Is Bloom okay?”

Vanessa looked to Mike and back to Stella. “She’s been in and out of sleep since.”

Stella let out a sound somewhere between a sigh and a gasp upon seeing Bloom.

“Bloom, what did they do to you?”

“Is she okay?” Vanessa asked.

Stella took Bloom’s hand. Her skin had almost no warmth or colour to it. “I don’t know Mrs Peters. I’ve never seen anything like this before. If this is what I think it is... stealing powers from another Mystic I... I didn’t think that was possible.” She crouched beside the sofa and rested her hand against Bloom’s.

“It’s worse than last time” Mike said.

“Power drainage knocked her out for twelve hours. Power removal....” She shook her head. “I don’t know what its effects are.”

Vanessa clasped her hands together. “Can you help her.”

Stella looked up. “I can take her to someone who can. Ms Faragonda, the headmistress of Alfea will know what to do.”

“You want to take her back? Back to Magix?” Vanessa said surprised.

“It’s the only place she’ll get better and the only place she can fight for her powers

back. She can't run from her destiny Mrs Peters."

Bloom stirred, her eyes fluttering open. "Stella?"

Stella straightened at once. "Bloom!"

Bloom tried to sit up. Stella caught her shoulder before she could fall forward. "Easy."

Bloom's mouth twisted. "How much do you... know?" She said weakly.

"I know that the Witches stole the Dragon's Flame from you. They've taken over cloudtower Bloom."

Bloom pushed herself upright. "They did what."

"Griffin, the faculty and some students didn't escape"

Anger sliced through Bloom's exhaustion "It's all my fault."

"No Bloom. It's not your fault. How could you have known?"

"Stella... There's more." Bloom said as she swung her legs off the sofa. The room tilted. Stella caught her again.

"Stay seated Bloom. What is it?" Stella said.

"Daphne. The reason I knew her. She's my sister Stella. I am the last remaining princess of Domino. That's why I knew Daphne's face. That's why I have the Dragon's Flame... That's why I'm here. She sent me here, I think, to protect me."

Stella recoiled back slowly. Her eyes flitted in confusion. "Bloom. I don't know what the witches told you but that can't be true. Domino was destroyed over a thousand years ago. You can't be Daphne's sister. Oritel and Miriam only had one child. There must be another explanation."

"No, Stella. It is true. I saw it. When they took my powers I remembered the night I was sent here. I don't know how it's true, but it is. It's the only thing that makes sense."

"But how?"

"I don't know. The Witches didn't know either." Bloom shook her head. "I have to go back... to Magix." She exerted.

Mike stepped forward. "She can barely stand, how on earth is she going to get back to Magix?"

"She won't get better here," Stella said. "Faragonda needs to see her. Whatever those witches did, we need to find out more about it. And fast."

Bloom pressed her palm to her chest and drifted back into sleep.

Stella looked over Bloom. Mike was right, moving Bloom like this was risky. But what choice did she have? Stella bowed her head and then stood to face Mike and Vanessa.

"Listen. Power doesn't just vanish," Stella declared to them. "This is some strange form of magical science. The only person I know that I can trust and can help her is on Magix. I have to take Bloom to her. It's the only way."

Mike and Vanessa looked to each other, almost to weight their options. Before either of them could speak, Bloom woke up again.

"Take me to Faragonda, Stella." She croaked. "I'm no safer here than on Magix."

She tried to talk again, to keep herself from falling back into sleep. Bloom swallowed. "I've... been thinking. How was the creature here? How were the witches here?"

Stella exhaled slowly. "That's the part I still don't understand."

Bloom frowned. "I don't think the creature was just after the ring. Is it possible it knew I was here?"

Stella considered it for a moment. "It's possible, but how?"

"What if the creature needed the ring, and it needed me? What if it needed the ring to take me back to Magix?"

"You're saying the witches knew you were here?"

“No.” Bloom said sternly. “The witches said themselves they didn’t know until I used my powers for the first time.”

“So... You’re saying someone else knew you were here.” Stella said slowly.

“It would be a massive coincidence otherwise, wouldn’t it? Something doesn’t line up?”

Stella’s mouth tightened. “It’s possible.”

Bloom leaned back against the arm of the sofa, adrenaline kept her awake. “Staying here won’t fix anything.”

Stella shook her head. “If your theory is true, we need you back on Magix.”

Bloom met her eyes. “Then take me back.”

Stella did not hesitate. She nodded.

Mike looked between them. “Now?”

“Yes,” Bloom said.

Vanessa reached for Bloom’s hand. “Honey, if everything you’re saying is true, you are going to put yourself in the way of very powerful people.”

Bloom squeezed her fingers. “I know Mum.”

Vanessa took a deep breath in and put her hands to her mouth. She knew her daughter. She also knew that this was the best chance for her. “When can you come back?” she said quietly.

Bloom looked up to Stella for an answer. “I- I’m not sure” Stella said. “My ring only has a limited amount of energy. It’s made so many jumps recently. It needs to rest after this. But we will come back as soon as we can.”

Vanessa teared up and then looked back to Bloom. “How will I know if you’re safe?” She said.

“You’ll know it, Mum. I promise.” Bloom groaned.

Stella took Bloom’s hand on the sofa. Bloom was still very weak, despite the excitement of the moment. Bloom braced herself. “What if the ring is already out of power?”

“Well, we will cross that bridge if it comes to it” Stella said. “Faragonda will know what to do.”

Then, the light folded inward around them.

The gates of Alfea rose up as they landed back on Magix. The familiar periwinkle sky was a deep shade of red as the sun began to set. Bloom lay on the grass, passed out from the jump. Stella took Bloom in her arms and carried Bloom into the courtyard.

Stella steadied “Help!” she cried. “Someone help!”

Immediately students began to notice what was happening. They came to Stella’s aid and helped her carry Bloom into the castle. Griselda came running into the main foyer, a look of genuine concern across her face that Stella had never seen before.

Bloom was taking shallow breaths. The halls of Alfea loomed around her.

“Take her to the infirmary and quickly! I’ll fetch the headmistress.” Soon enough, the entire school knew that Bloom had come back. They parted way for Stella and the other students carrying her in the hall. Naturally, everyone wondered what happened to her and rumours began to spread. Musa, Flora, Layla and Tecna came running to help Stella.

“What happened to you both?!” Layla exclaimed.

“It’s a really long story, right now, Bloom needs help.”

“She’s as pale as a ghost!” Flora said flustered.

“Those Witches got her, didn’t they?” Musa said.

Tecna came at them with a hovering stretcher. “Put Bloom on this.”

They lowered Bloom onto the platform and began running with it to the infirmary.

They did not need to announce themselves. Faragonda was already there, waiting by the door. Nurse Ofelia waited next to her. A rather stout older lady with glasses and strawberry blonde hair.

Bloom lifted her head and reached for Flora.

“Bloom,” Flora breathed.

“You look awful.” Layla chimed.

Bloom managed a smile.

Faragonda’s eyes swept over Bloom with swift precision as they entered the infirmary. “Inside,” she said. “At once.” Faragonda led them into a circular chamber lined with tall windows. The girls clustered to one side.

“Tell me, calmly, what has happened?” Faragonda said.

Stella recounted the whole story to Faragonda. Everything Bloom said, all their theories about the creature and the witches. The headmistress listened closely, almost completely unfazed by anything she was hearing. She turned back to Nurse Ofelia who was monitoring Bloom. She walked over to her, almost to beckon an explanation.

“I think she’s suffering from an extreme form of hypo-magic depletion syndrome. I’ve never seen anything like it.” Nurse Ofelia said, looking over her equipment.

“Stand back everyone.” Faragonda said sternly. She raised her hands and began to channel her magic into Bloom. Green rays of light curved around Faragonda and then into Bloom’s body. She whirled her hands around again and then stretched out, what looked like, clear slime between her fingers. Faragonda cast her hand just above Bloom’s body. She wiped a bead of sweat from her forehead.

The girls were stunned.

Faragonda finished the spell and had to kneel on the floor for a second. She then stood up straight. She summoned another nurse into the room. “Would you please fetch a pack of *lignum vitae*.”

“Headmistress, you understand that the pollen from the tree of life is exceedingly rare.” Nurse Ofelia said.

Faragonda almost couldn’t believe she was being questioned. “I am well aware, but we have them for emergencies. Now is an appropriate time for their use.” She declared. Nurse Ofelia gave the other Nurse a polite nod. Faragonda took Bloom’s hand and felt the warmth return to her body.

“The Lost Princess of Domino.” Faragonda said under her breath.

Bloom opened her eyes and looked up at her. “You knew... didn’t you?”

Faragonda inclined her head slightly. “I suspected, yes.”

Stella and the other girls emerged shocked, and began to gather around Bloom. Faragonda, too, sat by her side and dropped her guise of unfeeling. Faragonda, truly, looked happy to see Bloom alive. Everyone did.

“Why didn’t you say something,” Bloom croaked. “Why let me walk around not knowing I carried the power I did.”

“Because I did not know you were Daphne’s sister, a princess of Domino. I suspected a connection, yes, and I was almost certain you were carrying the dragon’s flame. But, suspicion is not truth. And what I suspected defied every other logical explanation I could think of. But there was some part of me that knew it to be the only explanation. Especially after the Trix attacked you that night on the Bus.”

Bloom clenched her fists. “The Trix?”

Faragonda sighed. “Those three Witches, Isabella, Darcy and Stephanie, otherwise

known as Icy, Darcy and Stormy are part of an infamous coven on Wisperia. The Trix. Griffin said they had a disdain for the rules during their Cloudtower days, much like you girls actually. She insisted that they were harmless, just powerful. How wrong she was. They have somehow found a way to strip the Dragon's Flame from its host. I don't know how."

Flora's hand flew to her mouth and Layla swore under her breath.

Bloom pushed her eyelids fully open, anger cutting through her. "They took it from me completely, didn't they?"

"They did not take it cleanly," Faragonda said. "But yes. It seems that the Dragon's flame is no longer yours. The power they used to overtake Cloudtower was indeed the Dragon's flame. They will use it to take over Magix unless they're stopped. I also imagine there are others after the flame. The announcement that it truly exists and location is known will mark the beginning of a new era of history."

"Do you think there really are other players in the ring, like Bloom suspects?"

"It's impossible to know. Just how Bloom got to Earth in the first place is impossible to know, let alone that someone on Magix knew where.. and when... she was." Faragonda replied, resuming her usual sharing of half-knowledge.

Stella stepped forward. "Then we have to go and steal it back. Now! Griffin and the other students will need our help!"

Faragonda shook her head. "No."

Stella stiffened. "With respect, Headmistress--"

"I said no. The Solarian military has already been deployed," Faragonda said. "They will sort this out. You girls will stay here."

"And do what," Stella shot back. "Wait?"

Faragonda's voice sharpened. "Prevent further damage. May I remind you, if you

didn't take this little trip to Solaria none of this would have happened!"

Bloom pressed her palm to her head. "But we also wouldn't have the knowledge, the truth we have now. Surely that means something."

Faragonda turned to her. "That is true. And you now believe the witches did not act alone?"

Bloom nodded.

Stella turned to the others. "There are too many things to be a coincidence."

"Has it not occurred to you that the Witches were the one who sent that creature to earth to get to Bloom?"

"But they said it themselves, they didn't know how or why I was there. They also didn't know until the Wisperian crystals reacted to my magic the night I destroyed the creature of decay."

"They could be lying" Tecna said.

"Why would they?" Bloom replied gravely.

"I don't think we know what the Trix originally wanted. But we know someone wanted the Dragon's Flame before the Trix did."

Faragonda's fingers tightened around each other. "All of this is why you should remain safely here. The illusion of knowledge is far more dangerous than the lack of it at all."

Musa stared at her. "You cannot expect us to sit here and do nothing."

"I expect you to recover," Faragonda said, turning to Bloom. "And to think."

Bloom laughed once "I've done enough thinking."

"And you nearly lost yourself when you didn't." Faragonda replied.

Bloom wavered. Nurse Ofelia then brought her a steaming cup of dark green tea. It smelled of honey and sandalwood. Bloom drank it and immediately upon the tea touching her

lips, she felt her strength come back.

Faragonda sighed in relief when she saw Bloom begin to fully heal. “We cannot undo what has been done to you Bloom, at least for now. That tea is taken from the leaves of the tree of life. It is a substance known for its properties to recover ones magic. For you, this will just recover your strength. Now, rest, all of you.” Faragonda said. “You will let me examine the damage done. And you will stay here. Where it’s safe.”

“And the witches,” Bloom said. “They won’t wait.”

“No,” Faragonda agreed. “Nor will whoever stands behind them.”

Faragonda straightened and walked out of the room gesturing to the other girls. They all left one by one.

Back at their dorm room. Stella stood by the window, arms folded, watching the sky darken over Magix. The red haze from earlier had faded, replaced by an indigo dusk. Her Omni vibrated against her wrist.

She looked down. Brandon, or now she had discovered, the true Prince Sky of Eraklyon. She answered the call but didn’t say anything.

After a moment of silence, Sky spoke. “Stella. I know you don’t owe me anything but there are rumours Bloom’s back. Is she alright?” He said frantically.

Stella answered without lifting the device fully. “Hello Brandon, Sky or, whoever you are.” She looked to her nails and adopted the most splenetic tone she could muster. “Bloom is fine but she is not receiving fan mail at the moment.”

“Can you just tell her that I’m sor-“

“Well, gotta go now, your highness.... Toodleoo”

Stella hung up the omni with a huff. “Who does he think he is?” She barked as she

walked into the common area of the dormitory.

Layla looked up first. “Was that Prince Sky?”

“Yes,” Stella said. “That was him.”

Musa snorted quietly. “Bold of him to call. I guess he must really care about Bloom though. Have you heard from Brandon?”

Stella turned from the window again “He’s tried to call, but I am furious. With both of them.”

Tecna was sat messaging on her Omni. “For the deception?”

“For the audacity,” Stella replied. “And for lying to our faces! I thought I was dating the Prince Sky of Eraklyon, not some squire boy!”

Layla looked up at Stella. Almost a polite nudge to reconsider her comment.

“I don’t think it was personal Stella” Layla said. “It was strategic. Eraklyad royalty are not popular. Not like in Solaria. Would you have dated Brandon if you had known he wasn’t the prince?”

Stella paused. “Well. Yes. I’m not that shallow.”

Flora moved under her blanket. “Then what’s the problem? Surely Bloom has more to be angry about considering Sky is engaged!”

“Flo has a point Stella. Just give it some time, you’ll stop buggin’ about it eventually.”

Stella paced the room, her heels clicking against the marble. “ ‘Give it some time’. I am sick of hearing that. Faragonda thinks waiting will somehow save us from being taken over by the witches.”

Layla folded her arms. “You don’t trust the Solarian army to handle it?”

“No,” Stella said. “Of course I don’t. There’s a rat amongst them we still haven’t coaxed out. Until then, I don’t trusts the army to do anything.”

Tecna looked up from her screen. "You have a point..."

Stella turned around to face her. "You agree?" she said in shock, chiefly because, after Flora. Tecna was a stickler for the rules.

Tecna inclined her head and addressed the other girls. "Stella is correct, There is currently a flaw in Faragonda's plan. The Solarian military response assumes a clean chain of command. We know that, Faragonda knows that. So what is she not telling us."

"You think she's hiding things from us again?" Layla said.

"Of course she is! It's Faragonda, she's brilliant but she's not going to tell a bunch of students her secrets." Stella replied. "One thing is for sure, there is someone inside the system feeding information back to whoever is behind this. They surely won't allow the army to fully combat the Trix?"

Musa rolled her lips. "What else can we do Stella, You heard Faragonda!"

Flora shook her head. "Griffin is still there. What happens to them if Solaria can't take back cloudtower?"

"And the students," Layla added.

"Not to mention Bloom's Dragon Flame. We are currently the only ones other than Faragonda and Bloom who know the truth. Who is better for this than us?" Stella jumped. "I say, we go to Cloudtower!"

Flora, Musa and Layla looked at each other in disbelief.

"No way Stella, It's too dangerous. We need to trust Faragonda. We have already broken the rules and gotten ourselves into more trouble than we should have. Not all of us are princesses you know!" Flora said.

"I don't know Stella, to save some witches? Is it worth it?" Musa added.

"Is it worth it? Musa, wouldn't you want them to help us?"

“I would, but they wouldn’t”

“Something could happen to us Stella that could be worse than what happens if we do nothing.” Layla chimed in.

“You guys! This is a do or die moment. If we wait and something happens to Griffin, what then?”

Musa exchanged a look with Flora.

Tecna tapped her screen once, then again. “There is the matter of transport.”

Stella turned. “I- Tecna?”

“I know someone from Redfountain, a pilot.” Tecna said blankly.

Silence.

Musa blinked. “A guy?”

Musa, Layla, Flora and Stella crowded around Tecna in excitement and surprise.

Stella stared at her. “Tecna, why didn’t you tell us?”

Tecna giggled. “It’s not a big deal! Besides, he owes me a favour.”

“And he would be willing to take us to cloudtower?” Musa laughed.

Tecna shrugged. “It’s what he says.” Tecna showed their Omni message exchange.

Flora looked between them. “Is he a safe driver?”

“Yes,” Tecna said. “But Cloudtower is not. So we need to make a decision to do this or not.”

Stella exhaled slowly. “Listen, it has to be unanimous if we go. But we could save Bloom’s power. If we steal the Wisperian crystals, maybe we can give it back to Bloom. Or, at least, find out how to reverse it. And we can save Griffin, the faculty and the witches.”

“Steal a Wisperian crystal?” Flora said nervously “It could work.”

Layla smiled briefly. “Faragonda is going to lose her mind when she finds out.”

Stella's lips curved. "Not if we come back successful, What is she going to do? Griffin is her best friend. If we save her, she'll be grateful I know it!"

"Listen, I'm down as long as, if we get caught, we tell Faragonda it was Stella's idea."
Musa said.

Stella rolled her eyes.

Tecna closed her device. "I will let Timmy know to come and pick us up!"

* Chapter Twenty-Three *

Scurrying through the moonlit halls of Alfea, Stella, Layla, Musa, Tecna and Flora made their way out of the gates of the school and to a nearby clearing. Cloaked in black, underneath, each of the girls wore their Alfean issued combat suit. It was made of a black elastic material that acted as armour. Alfea was situated relatively deep into the forests surrounding lake Roccaluce. They walked for a while in silence before arriving at the pickup location. Tecna checked her Omni and nodded once.

“He’s on approach.” Tecna confirmed.

Soon enough, a steady mechanical sound grew louder from beyond the tree-line. It got closer, until lights beamed through the dark leaves. A compact red aircraft powered by blue jets of light from its exhaust landed with ease.

The hatch opened and a redfountain student dressed in the usual blue and grey attire leaned out, squinting into the low light. He was tall and thin from all angles, with a mop of copper hair flattened by a headset. Glasses slid down his nose as he pushed them back with one finger.

“Tecna,” he said, almost in relief. “You made it.”

Tecna stepped forward. “Timmy.” and hugged him.

He grinned quickly before gesturing to the aircraft. “This will be your ride tonight, A redfountain owl. It should get us there and back fast!”

Stella eyed the ship, then Timmy. “You’re the pilot?”

Timmy straightened, suddenly aware of the scrutiny from the other four girls. “Yes. At Redfountain I study to be an engineer. I also fly.”

Musa smiled. “You also fly?”

“Well,” Timmy said, flushing slightly. “I passed the advanced course.”

Tecna nodded. “Top of his class.”

Timmy’s ears went red.

Tecna turned to the others. “This is Timmy.”

“Hi,” he said, offering a small wave.

Layla crossed her arms. “Thank you, Timmy, for offering to take us. I know it’s a risk but we’re hoping we can save Griffin and the others still trapped there. Do you know where we’re going?”

Timmy nodded. “I know the way. Alfea, Cloudtower and Redfountain form somewhat of a triangle.”

Flora stepped forward before anyone else could continue. “We’re not alone.” She gestured back toward the trees.

A small figure was hiding in the shadows with her hood drawn low. Everyone stared at them before the figure stepped out into the clearing, pushing the hood back. Bright Claret hair framed a pale and innocent face. She looked around quickly in nervousness.

“Mirta?” Flora said in surprise. “What are you doing here?”

Mirta inclined her head. “I saw you leave and heard you talking about Cloudtower in

the courtyard, so I followed you. I escaped cloudtower with the other witches. My best friend, Lucy, is still there. I think she's trapped. I want to go with you!"

Flora and the rest of the girls paused in shock. Witches and fairies notoriously did not mix well.

Stella studied her. "You're a witch."

"Yes. Well a Witch in training!"

Musa stiffened. "And we're meant to trust you?"

"Please. My friend is still there. I- I'm so worried about her."

Flora stepped closer to her and then turned back around to her friends. "Girls, I think we can trust Mirta. Witches and fairies aren't all that different. She wants to help her friend, just like us!"

Silence followed. Musa particularly had a scrunched up look on her face like she'd swallowed something sour.

"You'll guide us?" Layla said, breaking the silence.

"Yes," Mirta said. "I know the school inside and out! I can help."

Tecna considered this, then looked to Timmy. "If you're okay with it Timmy, Mirta could be useful."

Timmy nodded to Tecna and then to Mirta "Welcome aboard!"

Stella and Flora smiled before Musa rolled her eyes and huffed. Stella went to touch her shoulder, but she shrugged her off. She tried to ignore it and then turned back to the group with a firm voice. "We all know the plan, Mirta. We're getting in. We find the captives. We get them out. Then...we go for a crystal. Mirta you'll guide us through the castle. We should be quicker with you around."

Timmy cleared his throat. "I will try and stay at the meeting point for as long as

possible, but I can't risk getting detected."

Stella nodded.

Flora reached for Mirta's hand. "We'll find Lucy Mirta."

Mirta swallowed and nodded once.

Tecna climbed the ramp first onto the ship. Timmy moved aside to let her pass, eyes flitting between her and the controls with equal focus. She settled into the co-pilot seat.

"You upgraded the stabilisers," she said, scanning the panel.

Timmy smiled. "You noticed."

"They were inefficient."

"Agreed."

Musa leaned toward Layla as they boarded. "I like him."

Layla smirked. "Me too."

Pausing at the foot of the ramp, Stella looked back. Alfea stood just beyond the trees.

The hatch sealed. The craft lifted smoothly. Below them, the lights of Roccaluce fell away and they set off to Cloudtower.

The journey across Solaria was quick. Each of the girls sat in a contemplative silence. Was this the right choice? Although, they supposed, if they didn't stop the Witches, being expelled from Alfea would be the least of their problems. Suddenly, Cloudtower rose from the blackened rock. The castle was vascular and purple. It twisted in and around itself like plumes of smoke in wind. The spires were uneven, iron ribs wound through stone as if the building was grown rather than built. Pipes ran along the outer walls. Blackened glass caught the low light. Cloudtower felt almost alive, eerily so.

Timmy brought the craft down behind a jagged ridge onto the shores of the island.

Neither Syderia or Zenith's light reached them, for Cloudtower's shadow swallowed them whole. The engines cut. The only sound remaining the slight howl of the wind and crashing of the waves on the shore.

"This is as near as I can take you," he said. "I'll keep the ship ready for when you return. Be as fast as you can."

Stella nodded. "Give us an hour?"

"O-okay." he stuttered, trying to sound confident. "If nothing goes wrong."

Mirta adjusted the strap of her bag and stepped out onto the sand. "We don't have any time to lose. This way."

Musa and Flora exchanged a glance. Layla was the first out, followed by Stella.

They all followed Mirta along a narrow path carved into the rocks. Their boots scraping against stone slick with condensation. The air smelled metallic and damp. As they reached the other side of the shore, the iron gates to Cloudtower stood before them.

Mirta stopped before stepping out before the gates. "Stella, do you think you can make us less noticeable? The bridge is the one place where we are most likely to get noticed"

"Maybe... We'll have to stay close."

"Only until we get through the main doors"

"You've got it." Stella nodded. Then, she glowed and sprouted her wings. Extending her sceptre outwards she bent the light in an arc around the six girls. From the outside, the girls looked as though they only reflected blue and purple colours allowing them to blend in with the environment. From far away, they were practically invisible.

They stepped through the gates and began their ascent up the winding purple bridge that lead them to the main door. They all huddled together underneath Stella's concealment.

"This place is so creepy Mirta, how on Magix do you go to school here everyday?"

Flora asked.

“You get used to it after a while...” She replied, but she didn’t sound very convincing.

“For all the stereotypes Fairies have about Witches, this place certainly plays into them.”

“You don’t say” Musa added.

The girls stepped into the main courtyard. It was almost completely wrecked with blackened and hardened stone jutting out from the cobbles. Pieces of the tower laid broken on the cracked floor alongside scorch marks and rubble. There was no sign of any other students or the Witches.

“What happened here?” Layla said through gasps.

“It looks like Griffin put up quite a fight against the Trix.” Tecna said as she ran her hand against some rubble.

“She sure did. The Trix were just too strong. I managed to escape pretty early on, I hope everyone is okay” Mirta lamented.

Stella turned back to face her, determined. “I promise we’ll find Lucy and the others, we’ll get them all out!”

The door creaked open as each of the girls stepped into the main hall one by one. Again, nobody was there. Stella dropped her concealment and de-transformed. The main hall was nothing like Alfea’s. It was tall, as tall as the main tower itself, stretching almost beyond sight. Stairways reached across in different directions in a tangled web of pathways. The walls all seemed to be a deathly green colour lit by several flaming pyres. The floor was old and damp with moss growing between the cracks of the stone.

“This way” Mirta said running up the main staircase. She gestured to follow her over the banisters as she ran through the left archway. They all ran after her and up the staircase, made of a blackened marble, padded with a crimson carpet.

The girls caught up to Mirta, she stood in the middle of a short corridor beyond the foyer, on the other side looked to be a canteen of sorts. Tucked away in a corner was an inconspicuous wooden doorway. She stood by it trying to force it open.

“Does this lead to the dungeons?” Layla said.

“Yes, but It’s locked.”

Flora, Stella, Musa and Tecna exchanged looks.

“Let me try and melt it off” Stella whispered.

“That won’t be possible.” Tecna declared “That lock is made from tungsten. You’d have to heat it to the temperature of the sun to break it.”

Stella face dropped. “Well, have you got a better idea?”

Layla frowned “I do, stand aside.” She said, stepping forward. Layla twisted her hands together and extracted water from the air and stones around them. She bent a small globule of liquid into a light magenta ball of slime. She pressed it into the lock and it opened. The fluid turned back into water as soon as Layla relinquished her control.

“That’s the coolest thing I’ve ever seen!” Musa gasped.

“I call it morphix, I’ve been able to do it since I was little, if I rearrange the water molecules I can turn the water into that substance.”

“Incredible” Tecna said smiling.

Layla didn’t acknowledge the compliments. “Let’s just get down there” She stepped through the doorway and began the descent of a narrow spiral staircase.

Flora and Stella looked to each-other before following Layla and Mirta down the stairs. They stepped down quickly in a single file and came out into a strange looking corridor. The walls curved unnaturally, bowing inward, then widening again at the top. Exposed sinew ran along the corners. There was a mechanical sound coming from behind the

walls and the floor vibrated underfoot.

“Stay close,” Mirta said.

“Don’t you worry, I wasn’t planning on galavanting around this place unsupervised” Stella quipped.

They moved deeper down the corridor. Until empty cells started appearing in the walls.

The first sign of life came in the form of voices. Echoing from down the hallway.

“I think I hear something” Flora whispered.

They picked up their pace and searched each of the cells for any sign of the faculty. It didn’t take them long until they reached a set of cells all protected with barriers of energy.

Behind the bars to one of the cells, Griffin sat inside, back straight despite the chains at her wrists. Her robes hung torn, darkened with grime. Her eyes snapped up at the sound of footsteps. In the cells that followed each member of the faculty and a couple of stray students were in the same state.

Griffin glared at Mirta and then to the five fairies. “Well,” she said dryly. “Either I’ve died, or, you’ve all completely lost your minds.”

Flora rushed forward. “Griffin.”

Stella reached the cell first and tried to get through the magical barrier. She snatched her hand back immediately upon contact with the energy. “Ouch! What did they put on here?”

“I have absolutely no idea, we’ve all tried to break out but nothing we do works. It’s useless girls, you coming here was a mistake.” Griffin said.

“We aren’t leaving without you!” Layla said, each of the girls nodded in unison.

Tecna began scanning the energy with her omni. “There must be a way Griffin,

think.”

Griffin rose unsteadily. “Whatever it is, it’s magic created by the dragon’s flame.

Nothing we do can break it.”

Well... if it’s a flame surely it can be snuffed out like any other fire can?”

“That’s brilliant Mirta!” Flora exclaimed.

Tecna nodded. “Yes, but the Dragon’s Fire isn’t a typical flame. The witches are, however, maintaining it remotely. This barrier requires them to keep feeding it energy.”

“So if we disrupt the connection,” Layla said, “the barrier collapses.”

“For a short window,” Tecna replied. “Long enough for everyone to get out.”

Griffin pursed her lips. “And what happens if they realise? None of us stand a chance against them,”

Musa stepped closer to the cell “Well we kinda came here to try and steal back the dragon’s flame too.”

Griffin looked up “You girls are absolutely insane... but... insane is all we’ve got right now.”

Tecna’s fingers flew across her omni. “If arcanons carry the Dragon’s Flame the same way they carry usual magic, then some interference should break the connection.” Tecna turned to Musa. “Together we can disrupt the physical and electromagnetic fields.”

Musa nodded to Tecna. “It’s worth a shot!”

Tecna nodded once.

Griffin stared at them. “You intend to disrupt the connection of a spell powered by the most volatile magic in existence?”

Stella smiled thinly. “I think they intend on opening the door, Griffy.”

Musa and Tecna transformed quickly and focused hard and extended out a sphere of

sonic and electrical energy around the cells. At first nothing happened, but then the force fields began to flicker on and off.

“It’s working!” Mirta exclaimed.

Tecna and Musa exerted more and the barriers on the cells disappeared. The remaining girls quickly got to work severing the chains and allowing each member of the faculty and students free from their prisons.

Tecna and Musa stopped casting and the barriers immediately reappeared. Any of the remaining chains tethering them to the cells were sliced in half.

Layla went to each person and unlocked the chains around their wrists.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I’m impressed.” Griffin remarked.

“Who are you?” Another witch called from down the hall.

“We’re here to get you all out, we’re going to take you back to Alfea where you’ll be safe!”

“Well... safer.” The witch quipped again. It was Zarathustra, she helped the students to their feet.

“We’re getting you out, Now.” Stella said. “Mirta, I thought you said there were more students. Where’s Lucy?”

Griffin turned to Mirta. “You don’t know? Most of the students who stayed behind joined the Trix! ”

Mirta met her stare. “What? No, Headmistress Griffin, Lucy wouldn’t do that, I know her!”

“I’m afraid it’s true. The Trix are claiming to be descendants of the ancestral witches. Many Wisperians will recognise a common enemy in Magix.”

“Well then, we have to leave now. If the trix are as powerful as Griffin claims and the

other students don't want to be saved. We have done all we can." Layla said. Everyone seemed to agree in unison and they all began striding up the spiral staircase.

Mirta froze for a moment before trailing along behind the group. She ran up to Stella and Griffin. "No, no, you promised we'd help Lucy. She wouldn't do anything like that I need to find her!"

"Mirta, I promise you, she is beyond help right now!" Griffin declared. Everyone began streaming out of the wooden doorway, down the steps and into the main hall.

"No!" Mirta exclaimed, she ran up another set of stairs, deeper into Cloudtower.

"Mirta!" Flora yelled, she began to run after her.

"You have got to be-" Griffin bellowed in frustration. "Alright. Stella, Layla with me. Musa and Tecna get everyone to the ship. We will meet you there. If we don't come back, leave without us." Griffin looked to Stella and Layla and began to run after Flora.

Layla followed suit gesturing toward Stella who stood bewildered. "How did I get dragged into the crazy people team again?" She muttered to herself.

"C'mon Stella!" Layla called. Stella grunted and reluctantly went along, muttering to herself.

They followed Griffin up another set of stairs, these far more grand. They led to a floor where student dormitories were. They found themselves in long dark green hallway. Far more homey than the rest of the castle, which wasn't saying much. The doors were uncanny and looked like hollow screaming faces carved in dark wood.

They eventually caught up with Flora who was trying to talk some sense into Mirta. She wasn't listening to her, despite her pleas to return to the ship.

"We never should have brought her with us!" Stella said behind Flora. She turned in shock which quickly changed to relief upon seeing Stella, Griffin and Layla.

“We never would have found Griffin without her!” Flora said softly. “Please, can you try and convince her headmistress?”

“No, she needs to see this for herself...”

Layla and Stella looked to each other, confused.

They continued walking through the Cloudtower hallways, until Mirta opened one of the doors. It presumably was Mirta and Lucy’s room. The dorms were sleek and modern, dissimilar to the rest of the castle. Although there was something cold about the space. The room was very tall with a balcony overlooking the main living space running around the top. A long green tinted window was the main feature of the room that let the moonlight in.

“Lucy? Are you here?”

Lucy stepped out from behind a column in the dorm room. Her green hair lay loose around her shoulders, her expression something close to relief. She was a tall, gaunt and pale girl.

“You came back,” Lucy said bringing Mirta into an embrace.

Mirta took a step toward her. “Lucy. I knew you wouldn’t be with the Trix. Quickly, come with us! We have a ship waiting.”

Lucy immediately scowled at them all. She looked to Stella, Layla and then to Griffin. She laughed, short and incredulous. “You came to save me?”

Stella moved subtly between them. “Mirta, we don’t have time, can’t you see she doesn’t want to be saved?.”

Lucy’s attention snapped to her. “You fairies need to mind your own business. The world would be better if you did.”

Mirta shook her head. “They’re not what you think Lucy, They’re using you, come with us. Fairies and Witches don’t have to hate each other, we can work togeth-”

“Using me?! Mirta, don’t you see. They’re the ones using you. No doubt they only allowed you to come so you could show them the way.”

“They came to save us!”

She gestured to the tower around them and then to Stella and Layla. “Look at this place. Look at who you’re stood by. Magix is a bastion of all this technology and power, whilst we rot in Wisperia.”

Stella bristled. “That’s not fair.”

Lucy turned on her. “Isn’t it? Wisperia gets scraps. We only ever get suspicion whilst Fairies get statues built in their honour!”

Flora spoke softly. “That doesn’t make what the Trix are doing right! They destroyed Cloudtower first and imprisoned some of the most respected and powerful witches and wizards on Magix!”

“No, it might not be right” Lucy agreed. “But it is overdue. You think Griffin would be anything without being close with a powerful fairy like Faragonda? Do you think they’d allow real witches and wizards. Wisperian witches and wizards to run this school? Of course not. My allegiance isn’t to Magix. It’s to Wisperia. It’s to the ancestral witches; To the Trix.”

Mirta stepped closer urgently. “Lucy, please. Come with us. We can work something out but please don’t do this.”

Lucy turned to Griffin, then back to Mirta. Something wavered, then hardened.

“You don’t understand because they scare you.” Lucy jabbed. “But tell me this. Who runs Magix? Fairies. Who decides what power looks like and how we can use it? Fairies. Who calls witches dangerous because we are stronger than they are?”

Stella held her ground. “This isn’t about power.”

Lucy scoffed. “It’s always about power.”

Layla clenched her fists. "If you want to make a change you can do it in better ways Lucy. You don't have to choose this path."

Lucy scoffed and folded her arms. "I didn't choose it. I was placed on it, by people like you."

Mirta's voice broke. "Lucy."

Lucy inhaled, steadying herself. "Fairies are fading. You cling to traditions whilst the rest of us adapt to the way things are. Witches are the future of arcanists. We will see a day where there is no choice of who you become. To choose to be a fairy is pointless now, we don't apologise for it. We are the future."

Stella felt some truth underneath the rhetoric. It unsettled her.

Lucy turned and ran.

"Stop her," Stella snapped.

Lucy disappeared into the upper corridors, Mirta stood still in shock.

Stella swore. "We're out of time."

Griffin straightened. "We have to get out of here. She will get the Trix and we don't want an encounter with them at the moment."

Flora touched Mirta's arm and pulled her into an embrace. "We tried," she said.

"Can you all fly?" Griffin asked.

They all nodded. All of them, but Mirta.

"It's okay. Leave without me. I put us in this mess." She sniffled.

"We aren't leaving you Mirta. Lucy was right about one thing, us fairies and witches need to treat each-other better. I am getting you out of here." She met Mirta with a determined stare, forcing the fight to come out in her too.

Layla, Stella and Flora all sprouted their wings and Griffin levitated into the air. Flora

mustered her magic, and pressed her hands to the window. Suddenly, a massive winding vine broke through the glass grabbing Mirta and lifting her to the base of the castle. Everyone else flew down. The night sky overhead grew stormy.

“Griffin, can you help me carry her?” Flora cried. Griffin and Flora linked underneath Mirta’s shoulders and lifted her slightly off the ground. They flew quickly over the island and to the ship where everyone was already waiting.

“You made it!” Musa called.

“What happened, where’s Lucy?” Tecna asked from one of the seats at the front of the craft.

Mirta welled up at the question, likely a mixture of guilt and sadness “She’s not coming.” She said lowly.

Tecna gave Timmy a nod before he powered on the ship’s thrusters and took off from the ground, to fly back to Alfea.

Intense thought marked Griffin. She was an imposing woman and stood at least half a foot taller than anyone else. The forests of Roccaluce began to appear under the ship as the spires of Alfea rose to meet them in the distance.

The ship touched down beyond the lower terraces, engines cutting as soon as the landing struts found the ground. It was now the early hours of the morning, but the winter night had not yet ended. Everyone aboard was tired and cramped from the journey. The rescued student witches and wizards disembarked first, some leaning on one another, then the faculty followed. Griffin stepped down last, ever imposing despite the fatigue carved into her. Mirta and Flora left the ship together, followed by Stella, Layla and Musa.

“Timmy. Thank you.” Tecna said quickly. “For driving us.”

“I, uh, it was my pleasure!” Timmy responded, fixing his glasses with a grin. “I don’t often get to break any rules. It’s kinda fun.”

“It is, isn’t it.” She chuckled. Timmy laughed with her awkwardly. It wasn’t a painful or uncomfortable awkwardness. But awkward, nevertheless.

Tecna disembarked and waved to Timmy. Blushing. Stella was waiting with her like a cat ready to pounce on its prey.

“So... Tecna. Timmy is dreamy.”

“Don’t be ridiculous Stella, we’re just friends.” Tecna said, readjusting her suit.

“Oh yes, and I’m just a blonde with a common sense of style, puh-lease!” She squealed. Tecna tried to maintain her nonchalant attitude, but failed to keep the smile from her face. Layla and Musa grinned with her as they all walked back to Alfea.

“Now we have to deal with Faragonda” Layla reminded them all.

“What’s she going to say? ‘You saved the Cloudtower faculty how dare you?!’” Musa quipped. As she did, they noticed Faragonda stood at the gateway to Alfea. The witches all gathered in a huddle outside of the gates, almost fearful at the expression she wore. Flora and Mirta stood at the front. Griffin and the other girls joined them.

Faragonda’s face was like searing fire. As stern of an expression as they’d ever seen on her. Griffin approached. Faragonda did not move until she brought her in to an embrace.

“You’re alive,” Faragonda said, wrapping her arms around Griffin.

Griffin huffed. “Disappointing, isn’t it.” She said in a long drone.

A breath escaped Faragonda that might have been a laugh, a sob, or both. She held Griffin by the forearm and steadied her as she pulled away. The contact lingered for a second before Faragonda turned to the girls.

Her expression hardened again.

“Inside. All of you. Now!” She demanded.

The refugees from Cloudfort all were welcomed inside and able to rest for the night. Flora, Stella, Musa, Tecna and Layla all followed Headmistress Faragonda to the infirmary alongside Griffin and some of the other members of staff. The nurses moved quickly, looking over the wounds of Griffin and the others. Everyone settled around Bloom’s bed. She was sat upright, colour stronger in her face than before, which was a good sign.

“Bloom!” Stella exclaimed. All the girls ran over and celebrated that Bloom looked to be nearly recovered. Faragonda waited at the head of the bed for them to finish.

“What did you guys do?!” Bloom asked.

Faragonda was completely mortified. “What did you do? Why don’t you tell Bloom.”

“We may have kinda sorta went to Cloudfort to save the witches and try to get your power back...”

“You went to Cloudfort?” Bloom repeated in shock.

“Against my direct orders!” Faragonda yelled. “Do you have any idea what could have happened? What you could have done? If the Trix got their hands on you Stella, the princess of Solaria? The bargaining power they’d have? Or you Layla?”

Layla looked up from the ground and was almost fearful that Faragonda brought her up. Musa, Tecna and Flora looked to each other a little confused, why would the trix want Layla in particular?

“You left school grounds without permission. You endangered yourselves beyond comprehension. You put yourself in direct conflict with the greatest power in the magical dimension. You interfered with the Solarian military, and destabilised an already volatile situation.”

“Yes,” Stella said.

Musa, Layla, Flora and Tecna stood very still.

Faragonda paced the floor almost dumbfounded by how they could have been so stupid. Her voice rose again. “You intended to force a confrontation inside Cloudtower? To steal from the Trix? To put yourselves further into their line of fire when they’re the most dangerous creatures on the planet?” She paused, exasperated. “What good did you think could come from this?”

Griffin walked in from behind the divider, “Well... they did save us.”

The room fell quiet. Faragonda turned to her. “They should not have been there. The Solarian military were on their way!”

“And yet,” Griffin replied, “The girls were there and the military was not.”

Griffin’s expression was just as blank and apathetic as ever. Her words sounded grateful, though. Faragonda closed her eyes and turned around. When she opened them, the fury had dulled, worn thin by relief.

“You had no right,” she said to the girls. “No authority.”

“But, don’t you think we did the right thing?” Flora spoke softly. “We didn’t do the smart thing, or the tactful thing, but we did what was right.”

Faragonda looked at her then, really looked. She stared at each of the girls individually. She saw something in them in that moment.

“You did,” she said. “And that is exactly the problem.”

She paced several times, heels tapping against the stone. “At every turn,” Faragonda continued, “I tell you to wait. To trust the process. To trust me. To protect yourselves.”

Musa lifted her chin. “I get we messed up Ms F, but this time we did something right, didn’t we?”

Faragonda stopped before Bloom. “Need I remind you all that it is because of your

theatrics we are in this position to begin with?”

Bloom spoke again. “But I’m still here.”

“Yes,” Faragonda replied. “You are.”

She studied Bloom.

“You are not heroes girls. Is this truly the life you want for yourselves?” Faragonda said at last. “I’m not going to be able to stop you am I?”

None of the girls answered, but that, in and of itself, was all she needed to hear.

“None of this matters if we don’t get the Dragon’s Flame back. You girls were correct about that... It’s possible that something exists that can relight the flame within you Bloom.”

Stella stepped closer. “Like an object?”

“No,” Faragonda said. “Like a memory.”

Bloom’s hands curled in the blanket. “You don’t think I have lost my powers completely?”

Faragonda turned away, thinking. “It’s possible that the Wisperian Crystals did, truly take the very source of your power. But what is more likely is that they depleted it like snuffing a candle completely. But they didn’t remove the wick or the wax. There’s only one place you can connect with your past Bloom.”

Bloom’s heart thudded. “Domino?”

“Yes.”

Stella’s head snapped up. “You were just scolding us for inserting ourselves where we shouldn’t be, now you want us to go to Domino? It’s Illegal to step foot on Domino, it’s Magix law.”

“Do you think I am not aware of that law, Stella.” Faragonda replied. “The law cannot stop the princess of Domino from returning to her homeland. As far as Magix is concerned,

she makes the law of that land now.” She turned to Bloom and gave her a look, almost as though she was handing her diplomatic power. She spun and faced the room. “As far as your meddling is concerned, it is clear you will not stop with this conflict. You are far too stubborn and far too bound to what is unfolding. However, you are capable, this little excursion to Cloudfort has proven that.”

Musa smiled faintly.

Faragonda shot her a stare. “Do not look pleased.”

Musa sobered.

Faragonda exhaled. “If this is what you want, so be it. If you insist on involvement, you will do so with guidance.”

Tecna brightened. “You’re helping us.”

“I am helping Magix,” Faragonda corrected. “If that is what you all want.”

Layla crossed her arms. “We’ll take it.”

Faragonda nodded once. “Bloom you will travel to Domino with your friends with one mission, and one mission only... To remember who you are.”

Bloom swallowed.

“We don’t stand a chance without the Dragon’s Flame on our side.” Faragonda declared. She turned back to the girls. “You will rest. All of you.”

Stella opened her mouth to speak.

“Do not argue tonight.” Faragonda said. “You can all discuss this yourselves if you choose to accept this mission or reject it.”

The girls all exchanged differing glances.

Nurses moved in again. “Bloom, you’re free to go if you want to spend the rest of the night with your friends.” Nurse Ofelia said. Bloom didn’t say anything, she gave the nurse a

thankful nod and left alongside her friends. Faragonda watched on as all six of them left the infirmary. Griffin lowered herself into a chair beside Faragonda.

“You should have trusted them sooner,” Griffin said quietly.

Faragonda did not deny it. “They remind me of us when we were their age. Griffy... I can’t protect them forever.”

“No.” Griffin said in a drone. “You cannot. But they can protect each other. And, if we let them, they can help protect all of us.”

For what must have been the first time in years, Griffin smiled. Faragonda turned to her and placed her hands in Griffin’s.

* Chapter Twenty-Four *

The morning came quickly. Despite being awake for the majority of the night the girls all woke relatively early. It was strange for Bloom sleeping in her bed at Alfea again.

The soft light of the winter morning lit the dormitory in a blush pink. Bloom sat cross legged on her bed, wrapped in a cardigan Stella had gifted to her. She felt stronger with each passing hour, however, there was still an emptiness within her, where the flame once coursed through her body.

Everyone began to congregate in the living area. Musa perched on the arm of a chair, attempting to braid a loose strand of her hair. Layla leaned against the wall. Tecna stood by the window, already awake for far too long. Flora got them all tea and set down the mugs, she walked through to Bloom's room.

“Do you want to come and sit with us sweetie?” She asked. Did she have a choice? She knew what needed to be discussed.

Stella walked through at last. Whilst everyone else remained in their pyjamas, Stella was already dressed and ready. She strutted into the centre of the living room and looked around.

“Before anyone says anything,” she said, picking up her tea, “I would like to formally announce that we are terrible at resting.”

“Agreed.” Musa said.

“Listen” Stella resumed, trying to energise the room. “We did a good thing yesterday. We actually saved Griffin! We should be excited about it!”

“Stella, the Trix still have the Dragon’s Flame and that’s another very large problem to add on top of the ever growing list of other problems. For instance, you know, the one where there’s a mole in the Solarian palace trying to kill you?” Layla said sarcastically.

Stella rolled her eyes. “Before we get to the heavy stuff, and all that, we need to discuss something. We need a name.”

The girls all stared at her.

Musa tilted her head. “A name? What on Magix for?”

“A name!” Stella said, as if it should have been obvious. She gestured to the air with her hands. “We’re not simple classmates anymore sneaking around places we shouldn’t be. We’re a team. We’re all working toward a common goal now. To find out what happened on Earth, to reveal who tried to assassinate me, to get Bloom’s dragon flame back and...” She threw her hands onto the table. “To save the world!”

Tecna raised her eyebrows. “I doubt a name will influence our success rate.” she said plainly.

Stella smacked her hand to her forehead and dragged it down past her eyes.

“Stella, don’t you think it’s a little silly?” Flora said smiling, but trying not to dismiss the idea entirely.

Stella looked to Bloom for a little bit of support, she only offered a nod of agreement with Flora. “You guys aren’t seeing the vision. Think about it: ‘The Stella Six.’ Strong, bold:

unforgettable. Or, better yet: The Stellaries.”

Layla laughed. “Unforgettable for sure.”

“Fine,” Stella said, undeterred. “Does anyone else have any ideas, I’m not sure you’ll be able to top mine, but it’s worth hearing you all out I suppose...”

Flora shook her head, hiding her smile. Musa groaned. Bloom’s mind switched to another direction entirely. The words came almost instinctively.

“What about...Winx Club?”

All five pairs of eyes darted to Bloom.

“The Winx Club?” Musa repeated. “It’s catchy, I’ll give you that.”

Layla considered it. “It’s better than Stella Six,” she said with a smile.

“Barely,” Stella huffed, though she betrayed her amusement.

Flora leaned forward. “I like it.” she said brightly.

Tecna gave a small nod. “I guess having a defined group identity could make us perform better as a team.”

Stella sighed, then raised her chin. “Fine. Winx Club it is. But for the record, I came up with the idea first.”

Laughter circled the room.

Stella reached into the bag she had been carrying and placed six folded bundles on the table. One for each of the girls. “Which brings me to this.” She said gently.

She unfolded hers first. Bright orange fabric shimmered against a sleek and stylish black jumpsuit.

“The standard battle uniforms they give out are truly dreadful, ugly beyond belief” Stella said. She ran her fingers through the top of her hair, almost distressed at the thought. “I refuse to fight evil looking like a raggedy training dummy.”

Musa picked one up. "You made these."

"Designed," Stella corrected. "I had help making them in truth. The suit underneath is better than the standard issue, and much more stylish."

Stella ran her hand along the left arm of the garment. The suit was a shimmering black in a dragon-scale pattern. Each of the second-skin suits underneath ran from the top of their necks and covered all the way to their wrists and ankles, similar to the standard issue suits. However, the one Stella designed had a proper garment over top. Stella's being an asymmetrical crop top and shorts with thigh high orange boots and long silver bracelets.

Flora traced the stitching on the front of her outfit. "They're beautiful Stella."

"They're stylish and practical," Stella said. "And they're yours."

Bloom hesitated. "Stella, how did you do this?"

"Well I started with my own if I'm being honest" Stella replied. "But then, of course Bloom I had to make one for you, then Layla's. I just got carried away... do you like them?" Stella asked. For once, this seemed like a genuine question, she was looking for someone else's approval.

"I love it Stella, thank you." Bloom beamed.

Each of the girls agreed in unison and thanked Stella.

Stella watched them, satisfied as they placed their outfits against their frames. Then she fiddled with the ring on her finger. "There's something else," she said.

Bloom turned to her. Stella had an almost saddened look on her face.

"This ring belonged to Daphne," Stella continued. "Which means it belonged to your sister. Which means, it should belong to you now. Solaria and Domino were the greatest of friends. I suppose we kept the ring safe until you returned."

Stella took the silver and gold ring off her finger and held it out to Bloom.

Bloom was taken back. “Stella...”

“Take it,” Stella said. “Please.”

Bloom slid it onto her finger. It fit. She extended her hand and studied the ring, the very same ring that once belonged to Daphne. She looked at it again. Then slowly, she removed it. She took Stella’s hand gently and placed it back onto her finger, where it belonged. Bloom held Stella’s hand for a moment, looked at the ring and smiled.

“This ring... never belong to me Stella. It belonged to my sister,” Bloom said. “If the true owner of the ring is my sister, and it cannot be Daphne, then the ring, rightfully, belongs to you.”

Stella’s eyes burned with the first drops of tears. “Really?”

Bloom nodded. “Really. You’re the closest thing I have to a sister.”

Stella sighed, for she was truly touched. She pulled her hand into view. For a moment, she could not speak.

“Fine,” she said eventually. “I guess I’ll keep the ring. If you insist.”

Bloom lifted her chin. “You keep it for the Winx Club.”

By the time the following day came around, things had only gotten worse in Magix. The Solarian military showed up to cloudtower but were unable to make any headway against the Trix. All public transportation had halted and the Magix council had been called for an emergency meeting in Graynor.

Meanwhile, for the Winx, their decision was already made. They unanimously agreed to go to Domino to try and find a way to spark back Bloom’s power. Although, nobody knew if she could relight the flame or if the Trix had taken it for good. Faragonda had made

arrangements with a squadron of wielders from Redfountain to fly them there and back and act as backup for the fairies.

Despite the nervousness amongst them, there was now an air of excitement, like they were truly helping the effort against the witches. Usual classes had completely halted in the meantime as most of the witches and wizards from cloudtower chose to seek refuge at Alfea.

By midmorning, the ship from redfountain had arrived. It was a much larger ship than the one used to get them to Cloudtower two days prior. It descended slowly, its angular hull bore the sigil of Redfountain. Word had already spread across the school that Bloom and her team of roommates were going on a mission, not that anyone knew where. Fairies and witches gathered along the terraces and walkways of Alfea. The craft settled onto the landing platform with a low electronic sound.

Bloom was waiting in the main hall with her friends alongside Headmistress Faragonda, Griffin and Griselda. Bloom felt stronger today. Not completely restored yet but well enough to go on the mission: there was no time to waste. The hollow space within her remained where her flame once lived. Domino awaited her return. She felt sick with apprehension as to what she'd remember there. Most of mystic-kind had not been allowed to visit Domino for almost a thousand years.

In the distance, The hatch to the Redfountain ship opened.

A large bearded man walked out with wide steps. He had a grizzly look to him and was wearing a padded blue vest despite it being relatively cold in Roccaluce.

Following behind him was none other than Brandon and Sky, or, as they now knew, Sky and Brandon. They were dressed in their official specialist squadron uniform which was a blue and white jumpsuit, very similar to the Alfean standard issue. Apart from theirs was padded and looked to be made of a denim like nylon.

Timmy followed behind them, looking even paler than last time. His hands gripped the rail as he leaned out to survey the landing. He swallowed hard and adjusted his glasses.

“I still think this is wildly inappropriate,” he muttered.

A laugh followed him down the ramp from Codatorta, which was more of a bark than a laugh.

“You wanted to play the hero,” he said flatly. “You can play the hero one more time. You will make yourself useful.”

Timmy swallowed his nerves. “Sir. Domino is restricted airspace.”

“You have clearance from Myself, Saladin, Griffin and Faragonda... not to mention the princess of Domino herself.” Codatorta went on. “You fly them to Domino. You help them on their mission. You bring them back. And as for you two.” He turned to Brandon and Sky. “You asked to be here. Do not think I’m above docking your grades if this mission goes sideways. You stick your neck out on the line, don’t come crying if it gets cut!” He belted at the two guys. He lifted himself onto his tip toes as he spoke to give himself even more height than he already had.

Brandon and Timmy were staring at something in the distance. Sky tried to pull Brandon into a conversation but caught eye of the same thing. The Winx girls were walking toward the ship.

They did not wear their usual combat uniforms of black and grey. They did not wear cloaks or travel gear. They walked out in the garments Stella made for them, catching the mid day light in a way that drew every eye in the courtyard. Sparkling sky blue fabric wrapped Bloom’s torso in a cropped halter turtleneck, an oval gold jewel at her chest. A matching miniskirt layered over light blue shorts moved with her, paired with high heeled ankle boots the same shade. She wore detached sleeves on her forearms, tapering to points over the backs

of her hands. A small golden tiara rested at her crown.

Stella followed beside her. Dressed in her signature shade of golden orange. She wore a one shoulder crop top that shimmered against matching shorts. Her boots rose to her knees. Her hair tied into two long pigtails tied with orange tubes, light blue cuff bracelets at her wrists, and a matching headband. The ring of Solaria rested on her left hand.

Flora's corset dress was fuchsia and orchid, the skirt unfurled like a rose. The top of the dress had a sweetheart neckline, it concealed matching shorts beneath. Ankle high boots matched the garment with a green choker adorned with a pink four petal flower resting at her throat. She wore pale pink fingerless gloves on her arms from elbow to wrist.

Musa wore a one strap top cut diagonally across her frame, translucent red fabric layered at the centre connected it to a red miniskirt. Crimson shorts visible beneath and matching knee high wedge boots. A purple headband sat on her indigo and black hair and purple ribbons wrapped her forearms.

Layla's outfit was green. One shoulder top paired with a sparkly mini skirt, darker green shorts beneath. Calf high boots with cream heels. A green sash connected her outfit, silver rings sparkling at her waist, arm, and neck.

Finally Tecna wore a full body suit in bright lavender purple. It covered the same as the usual suit did. Powder blue boots rose to her knees, matching sleeves covering her hands. A lavender helmet framed her face, a lime green tear shaped brooch sat at her chest and mirrored on the helm.

The glittering black protective layer beneath all of their garments looked like a second skin of dragon-scale.

For the first time, they stepped out into the world as the Winx Club.

As they all walked forward in a line, Codatorta turned to the girls, and glared.

Timmy stared at Tecna. She gave him an apologetic wave that she had gotten him wrapped up in this mess.

Brandon's eyebrows lifted before he caught himself.

Sky did not react at all, he kept his face blank but fixed on Bloom.

Bloom rolled her eyes in disbelief that Sky had managed to weasel his way onto the mission. She did not look at him.

Stella did not look at Brandon either.

Layla spoke up in the absence of Bloom and Stella. "Thank you for agreeing to help us get to Domino Codatorta, I don't recall us asking for two extra wielders however."

"They insisted on coming. Two of the finest specialists we have." Codatorta said confidently.

"Right... well. Let's agree to keep this professional. We are on a mission to help Bloom reconnect with her Dragon Flame. Only then will we have a chance to stop Icy, Darcy and Stormy." The delivery left a lot to be desired. Layla nodded and rubbed her hands together awkwardly.

They all boarded the ship attempting to maintain a level of professionalism despite Bloom wanting to scream at Sky for all of the lies he told her. Although, she did suppose he defended her in front of the king.

Inside the ship, Timmy took his seat at the controls, his hands trembled despite his effort to steady them. Tecna settled into the co pilot position to help him out.

"Do you know how to fly this thing?" Timmy asked.

Tecna turned to him with a lofty smile. "I was part of the team that designed this 'thing'".

Timmy nodded and turned back to face the front with a nerdy grin. "Awesome..."

Brandon and Sky took seats on either side of the entrance.

The girls all strapped in.

“Don’t worry you’re in great hands!” Timmy called back.

“Trust me, your hands aren’t the one’s I’m worried about.” Stella scoffed.

“Stella I said I’m sorry!” Brandon said.

“I don’t want to hear it.”

Musa and Flora planted their faces in their hands. The mission could be disastrous now Brandon and Sky have gotten involved.

Layla stomped her foot on the floor. “You all have to pack it in. I don’t have the faintest idea why the two of you thought it’d be a good idea to get onto this mission but I swear to the Great Dragon. if you cause any problems I will personally hand you over to the Trix myself. Got it?”

“Yes ma’am.” Sky said. He turned to lock eyes with Bloom. She turned her head away to the window.

As the ship lifted from Alfea, Bloom watched the domes of the castle fall away.

She pressed her palm to her chest. The ship moved over the continent of Solaria at blazing speed.

The ship broke through the cloud cover and descended upon the lost kingdom. The hatch of the ship opened generating a cloud of brown dust.

Before them stretched a city frozen in time, almost completely razed to the ground. There was such little life on the land, the elements had barely claimed it back. The once proud capital city of Sparks perpetually existing on the day it was destroyed. The streets carved in pale stone. The miscellany of what were presumably houses lay in pieces on the

floor. Weathered statues lined the avenues, worn smooth by wind and rain. There was no sound, there wasn't any movement at all.

Nobody spoke as each of them stepped off the ship for the first time. They had all seen photos in books, but nothing could have prepared them for seeing, feeling, the lost realm.

Bloom remained in the doorway a moment longer than the others, fingers gripping the edge of the ship. Her chest tightened as if the air resisted her breath. She didn't know what she expected to see or feel, this wasn't it.

Some of the areas were more decrepit than others. Some segments of the city still stood tall, despite parts of the buildings rotting away. Other parts of the city were completely flattened, the only indication of anything having ever been there the rubble on the ground.

The wind moved through the streets with a hollow sound, lifting dust into thin spirals before letting it fall again. There were no plants. Even moss refused to grow here. Whatever had happened had not only ended life. It had erased the idea and any hope of it ever returning to this region.

Stella's boots clicked against the plaza floor. "This was a capital city?" she said, quieter than usual, heartbroken. She cupped her hands over her mouth.

Layla crouched, pressing her palm to the ground. "There's no water in the soil. Nothing cycling back. It's completely dead."

Musa walked around expressionless.

Flora looked from building to building. "I've never been anywhere that feels like this before."

Tecna scanned the area, projecting from the brooch at her chest. "Omni communication won't work here." She said. "There's nothing that could have caused this

level of destruction. At least, nothing we know of. Perhaps other than the Dragon's Flame."

Bloom walked without realising she had started moving. "The witches said that Daphne wasn't the one who destroyed Domino, rather it was the three ancestral witches."

"The Ancestral Witches were powerful, but not this powerful Bloom. There's got to be more to it than that."

Bloom's feet carried her down the central avenue, past shattered fountains and empty market stalls, past homes whose doors hung open as if the occupants had stepped out and never returned. The others followed instinctively, forming a loose party behind her.

"I've been here before," Bloom said.

Stella turned. "Right here?"

Bloom nodded. "Not like this. But the layout. The streets. I, I think I remember it."

She stopped at the foot of a broken obelisk, hand lifting to hover over unreadable symbols worn nearly flat. "I dreamed about this place," she said. "Before I ever knew about Magix."

Sky watched her from a few steps back, "I mean it makes sense." Bloom turned to him, with a slight hint of fury. "Bloom, if you remember this place, surely you'll remember the castle? It would have been your home." He gestured to the ruined castle that sat atop the hill overlooking the city.

They walked on a little further, drawn upwards by the gentle slope of the city. As they climbed, they could see the palace more clearly. It rose from the summit, blackened stone streaked with scars, towers fractured and fallen. Even damaged, it was still beautiful. A place built to be seen from across the city of Sparks.

Bloom stopped again.

"I have to get inside the palace," she said. "Maybe there's something there? A clue?"

She took a step forward. Then another. “Is the gateway close to here? The one they would have used to travel to Earth?” she asked suddenly.

Tecna looked up from her scan. “Yes, the old gateway is close. Why?”

Bloom slowed. “And when were the connections shut down?”

“They were sealed hundreds of years ago,” Layla replied. “Some of them were even dismantled. If they weren’t most of them are guarded.”

Bloom stopped entirely. “Most,” she repeated.

Tecna frowned. “Well yes.”

Bloom turned in a slow circle. She imagined the catastrophe, no, she remembered it. “Faragonda said nobody has been allowed here since its destruction outside of isolated, controlled incidents. Nobody lives here. Nobody visits.”

Understanding spread across Layla’s face. “You don’t think...”

Bloom nodded. “It’s been left alone on purpose.”

Musa’s breath caught. “The final gateway, one nobody bothers to watch.”

Bloom nodded.

Stella exhaled as it all clicked together. “And the perfect place to breed and hide creatures of decay.”

“I bet it was sent from here!” Bloom continued. “It only needed the ring to get back because they couldn’t keep it open long enough.”

Brandon spoke for the first time since landing. “Which means someone on Magix really did send it.”

“Well yes, duh, we established that months ago genius!” Stella mocked. She turned back to Bloom “So whoever did this has the power to control who comes in and out of Domino. They know it’s empty and that nobody would notice activity here.”

Bloom fixed on the castle. "Do you think it's possible they knew about me?"

The wind howled again.

"There's only one way to find out if your theory is correct, Bloom, and that's to head down to the gateway ourselves." Timmy declared.

"But we were meant to come here to trigger Bloom's memory, not to uncover more of the conspiracy as to why Bloom got here to begin with." Tecna said.

"Why not do both?" Sky suggested. "Timmy, Brandon and the girls go down to the gateway and see if you can spot anything. Me and Bloom will head up to the palace!"

Flora touched Bloom's arm. "Maybe it would be better if one of us went with Bloom."

Bloom shook her head. "I think I need to be alone. Besides, if there is anything dangerous the boys will need all of the fairy power they can get to protect them." She winked.

Sky hesitated, then stepped forward. "Bloom, let me go with you. You don't have your powers. It's dangerous."

Bloom stiffened. "I can look after myself you know."

Stella glanced between them but said nothing.

Bloom took a moment and thought about it, then nodded once. "Alright."

The two groups parted ways. One group heading to the shore, Bloom and Sky toward the castle.

The main group made their way back to the ship to land it closest to the cliff face. Waves struck the cliffs below, their sound echoing through fissures in the jagged rocks. It was impossible to know how far the city once extended; the clifftop edge was completely barren of

any ruins or rubble.

They all exited the ship once again and made their way to the edge of the cliff face. Below them was a sheer drop of at least a three hundred feet. The rocks were a dirty shade of grey and they lead to a beach below with crystalline white sand.

Tecna scanned the area below as she tried to locate the cave opening. Brandon and Timmy stayed stood by the ship.

“Don’t you girls want to land this thing down by the cave opening?” Brandon said casually.

“Brandon. Use that pretty little head of yours.” Stella began. “If there are really people down there, we don’t want them to see us, do we?”

Brandon scratched his head. “I suppose not...”

“Look, down there!” Layla said pointing to a small opening in the rocks. Everyone looked to where Layla was pointing, and indeed, there was something there. And there was movement.

“We’ve got to get down there without being seen.” Musa said.

“Well we could fly down?” Flora suggested. “But the boys...”

“We’ve got this Flora, there are grappling hooks on the ship. We’ll abseil down!” Brandon looked delighted at the words that left his mouth.

Timmy, on the other hand, turned a rather pale shade of green. “I’m not sure about this Brandon...”

“Sure you are!” Brandon replied, giving Timmy a rather strong pat on the back that looked like it almost made him throw up.

Brandon walked back from the ship with two long wheels of glowing blue rope and two harnesses.

The girls all sprouted their wings and flew down the cliff face. Brandon and Timmy followed suit, Brandon bouncing quite happily off the rocks. Timmy held on for dear life as the mechanical rope slowly lowered him to the ground.

The fairies all landed on the sand gently. In contrast, Brandon came bounding down with such bravado he almost forgot he needed to slow down before touching the floor. Timmy remained halfway up in the air. Everyone waited as he slowly, but surely, managed to plant his feet on the beach.

“That wasn’t so bad, was it Timmy?” Brandon said. “Now all we have to do is climb back to the top!”

At that comment Timmy turned to Tecna with a look of horror that almost made her laugh. “Don’t worry Timmy, we’ll find another way back up. Thank you for following us down!” Tecna said. At her words, the look of fear on his face seemed to melt away.

“What are we waiting for?” Musa said. “Let’s do this!”

“Try and stay hidden.” Layla reminded them.

They edged forward along the beach, the cave was quite a way down the shoreline. As they got closer, they hid behind a line of large boulders that concealed them. They neared the cave. From there, they could see the opening widened into a vast chamber carved deep into the rock. The entrance supported by metal struts bolted into stone.

Masked people carried mysterious boxes deep into the cave.

“Can we get inside?” Flora asked.

“I’m not sure...” Tecna said as she scanned the cave. “There are more people within”

“Let me handle this.” Stella activated her ring and bent the light around them. An orb of light distortions surrounded the group that camouflaged them against the rock. They made their way inside of the cave, careful not to get too close to anyone. As they ran inside, the

space opened up into a massive cavern. Glowing crystals lit the walls, but large artificial lights drowned out the colour. In the centre of the cavern was a massive stone circle structure. It was hooked up to rows of equipment. Consoles, screens and cables. Large generators were placed at the back of the cavern. Several personnel moved between stations and out from inside what looked to be a laboratory built in a shipping container.

They didn't look like soldiers or thieves or smugglers. These were technicians. Researchers. People in fitted coats and boots.

"What's going on here..." Brandon said through a gasp.

The group ran over to a corner of the cavern and hid behind several crates and boxes.

They all peered out into the cave. That's when they heard it. A snarl. A gargling clicking screech.

Stella's breath hitched. "That's... that's not possible."

Layla crouched behind a rock. "What is it?"

"I know that sound..." Stella took her mind back. Back to Earth. All of her senses intensified. The smell of the air, the sound of the breaths, the feeling of something so dark, so sinister sharing the same air as you.

Sure enough a group of guards came running from behind a far wall. Then another set followed carrying cages.

Three of them.

The creatures inside were unmistakable.

Creatures of decay. Two of which were sightless warriors, the same creature that attacked Bloom and Stella on Earth. The other was different. It was smaller and skinnier, but just a vile. It had the same colour of dried blood. The same eyeless face. Its form writhed within containment field. The limbs of the creature elongated and warped. Dark vapour bled

from its body and stained the bars. All of their movements were sluggish and restrained but violent enough to make the cages shudder.

Musa swallowed. "Those are creatures of decay?"

Stella's fingers curled at her side. "There are... so many of them."

They all watched in horror as several armed guards carried the creatures to the centre of the stone circle. "Are they planning on sending more to Earth?" Tecna said.

"They could be for anything... what more would they want from Earth?" Timmy asked.

They all waited behind the boxes, questioning what to do. Suddenly, a low mechanical whine echoed through the chamber.

At the entrance of the cave, a small craft rolled through the tunnel. It stopped beside the metal container where there looked to be some form of laboratories inside.

The door to the cart opened.

Three women stepped out. The Trix.

They all wore dark suits tailored sharply at the waist.

Then another woman came out to meet them. Stepping out from the metal container, Stella felt the air leave her lungs.

With long blonde hair that fell neatly over one shoulder. A rigid posture, and an self-assured expression. Countess Cassandra shook hands with the three witches.

"Cassandra," Stella whispered.

Layla stared. "That's... that's King Radius' advisor? "

"I saw her at the Solarian Ball." Brandon said quietly.

"This all makes sense." Layla added. "Stella, The Trix have been working with Cassandra the whole time. It was her who wanted you assassinated!"

Cassandra walked the length of the platform without hurry. A technician hurried to her side, tablet in hand. Cassandra did not slow for him.

Stella's mind raced, pieces snapping together quicker than she could articulate.

"The ring," she murmured. "She had access to it when I was locked in my room! She gave it to the Trix so they could get to Earth to steal the flame!"

Tecna's projection emitted again. "They are routing energy through the gateway. It's just as Bloom theorised. They must have sent that creature to Earth after you Stella and instructed it to get the ring to bring it back."

"They couldn't use the gateway to bring it back?," Brandon said.

"It's too much energy to keep it open indefinitely" Stella continued. "But, in killing me. They could take out the heir to the throne of Solaria and obtain the last remaining connection between worlds."

Cassandra and the witches began conversing. The witches looking over the cave, their profiles catching the light as they examined the space.

"Everything is coming along here well, Cassandra." Icy said focusing in on the beasts in the cages.

"We should be ready to transport the creatures to the other gateways in a matter of days!" Cassandra said gleefully

"Days? You said this would be ready weeks ago!" Stormy growled.

"A lot has happened in the past couple of weeks, wouldn't you agree Miss Caligo?" Cassandra jabbed back. Stormy crossed her arms and turned to the side as Darcy placed her head in her hands.

Behind the crates, the Winx could hear everything they were saying. They waited for an opening before they spoke.

“What do they mean the other gateways?” Flora whispered to the others.

“Could it be the other gateways of Magix?” Stella said in horror. Looks of a deep, unsettling understanding washed over the girls.

“They want to unleash the creatures on the other realms of Magix!”

Cassandra brought the Witches into her laboratory. One creature lashed out at one of the guards, knocking him to the ground. Its claws scraped against the containment field within the bars.

“So what does this mean?” Timmy said slowly as everyone huddled into a circle.

“I don’t know... One thing is for sure. We have to kill those creatures before they’re unleashed on Magix!” Layla said quickly.

“How? We don’t have the Dragon’s Flame. The only people who could destroy them now are the Trix!” Flora said.

Musa shook her head in disbelief. “Dammit. They thought everything through! They wanted to Dragon’s Flame so nobody would be powerful enough to stop them!”

“We have to warn the Magix Council.” Stella said. “We have to find Bloom and get out of here fast!”

Cassandra and the witches re-emerged from the laboratory and stood overlooking the cavern.

“Once we have finished work on the gateway” Cassandra said. “We can use the Dragon’s Flame as power and send the creatures wherever we wish.”

“This has all worked out much better than we anticipated sisters.” Icy said slyly.

Layla’s breath caught. “How are we going to get out? Surely someone will see through your spell Stella?”

Stella closed her eyes for a fraction of a second. Bloom was alone in the castle.

“Not if we get out fast enough,” Stella said under her breath. “We need to move.” She outstretched her staff and camouflaged them once more.

They ran out from behind the crates and toward the exit. But then, the creatures of decay began to go berserk. They writhed against the bars. The screeches from the creatures almost deafening. They reached directly for the girls.

“What on magix do we have here...” Darcy said slowly seeing the outline of the group. She walked down from the metal podium and toward where the creature was pointing. “You see, these creatures are very used to me and my sisters. So, they know when someone else is here. Show yourselves!” She belted into the cave.

Timmy shook his head.

Brandon looked between them. “How did she see us?”

“She didn’t at first, but the creature can smell us!”

“Come out, come out...” She turned back to her sisters slowly and then leapt into the air. She brought down a dark pulse of energy that knocked Stella and the others off their feet and into the light.

Cassandra turned to see them all knocked onto the floor. Her eyes settled eerily onto them.

“Well, well, well...” She said as she stalked over to them. Her shadow crept over Stella’s body.

Darcy’s eyes narrowed. “Fairies.”

Cassandra grinned. “And friends.” She looked to the two wielders who were with them.

Stella got to her feet. “How could you?”

Cassandra tilted her head and cackled.

“You sent that creature to Earth, You tried to have me killed! You gave the witches my ring!” Stella snapped.

“I did, yes.” Cassandra replied calmly. “You survived though. Originally that was quite unfortunate, but that ended up being a rather good outcome for us in the long term.”

Layla grunted. “You’re going to kill so many people!”

Cassandra shrugged. “The cost of progress is great. When the world realises that it is only the Trix who can stop the creatures of decay, witches and wizards will finally ascend to their rightful role. To rule Magix!”

Darcy laughed. “You know, we really should be thanking you. If you had died as we intended, it never would have panned out this easy for us. We would have had to play a much longer game... But with the Dragon’s Flame. We can accelerate our plans quite considerably.”

Stella’s fury burned. “This ends now, Cassandra. I’ll tell my Father everything!” she said.

Cassandra laughed. “You think your Father will believe you? Besides, none of you will be leaving this cave alive. Unfortunate you won’t get to see the new era of Magix roll in.”

Stella lifted her chin. “You’ll never win Cassandra.”

Behind her, several guards came up behind her friends and placed cuffs around the fairies.

“My dear Stella... my bella.... We’ve already won.”

* Chapter Twenty-Five *

The palace doors were open. Rusted and broken from the centuries of weathering.

Bloom looked up at the castle. Its colour faded and turrets collapsed on the floor. She could hardly imagine how beautiful it would have been before it was destroyed. Although, she supposed, she didn't have to imagine. She just had to remember.

They both set foot into the courtyard. The structure opened up around them, archways framing the many different entrances to the palace. Sky followed a step behind her, equally as in awe as Bloom. They left footprints in the dust that laid undisturbed across the tiles. A lot of it had hardened into chunks of stone over the years. Much of it thick enough to show how long it had been since anyone passed through.

Bloom looked around slowly. She tried to remember. She thought she did, or was she kidding herself? She, somewhat instinctually, walked towards one of the entrances to the castle. Her body turned before her mind caught up.

"You remember it," Sky said quietly.

"I don't know..." She ran her fingers along the wall as she walked. The stone felt cold, worn smooth. The halls were completely desolate and barren of any signs of life. But they

were as grand as the halls of the Solarian palace, perhaps even more so.

“There were tapestries here,” she murmured. “Tapestries of the dragon. I remember drawing them a few years ago. I didn’t know it at the time of course...”

Sky watched her profile, he said nothing. Bloom continued to look over the halls.

They reached a wide staircase split into two sweeping curves. One side had collapsed. The other still stood, barely. Bloom looked across at the fallen half.

She took her mind back. She remembered this place. “I used to run down these stairs, I was so small back then I could slide down the railing. Daphne would always be waiting at the bottom to catch me, even though she told me not to do it.” Bloom giggled as she reminisced.

It’s true these memories weren’t as clear as she wanted them to be. But they were indeed memories. Memories of a life she didn’t know she had. How could she have forgotten?

Sky put his hand gently on Bloom’s shoulder. “You remember all of this?”

She nodded, beginning to tear up.

“Not everything. But more than I ever have before.” She said before continuing to move. They climbed the staircase slowly, her’s hand gliding along the banister.

As they reached the landing the corridor ahead sent more memories flashing into Bloom’s mind. Light fell through tall windows. Servants hurried past. A woman she barely remembered knelt before her, straightening a ribbon at her collar. It wasn’t Daphne, but someone else.

The corridor returned to ruin when she blinked. Bloom pressed her hand to her temple. She tried to hold onto the memory, to the face of the woman. She couldn’t remember. It was almost as if she’d dreamt it.

Sky stood behind her, he didn't say anything, but he could see the melancholy on Bloom. She turned to him and gave him a quick smile before she continued down the hallway. They reached a corner where the windows were all blown out, leaving only the arched framing.

"I remember the night," she said looking out onto the city. "When they came."

Sky stepped closer.

"The sky was red," she continued. "Not like a sunset red. but like it was burning from the inside. I remember running with Daphne. Down this corridor. She must have been so scared."

She closed her eyes. She took herself back to the memory. This was the clearest of them. She recalled more of it than she had been able to up until now. She remembered the smell of smoke filling the air. The castle crumbling around her. "She kept saying it would be alright," Bloom whispered. "She wasn't lying though. It was as if... Daphne knew what was going to happen somehow."

Sky said nothing.

"She took me through a secret passage behind the throne room. We came out around here."

The memory came into focus. Bloom looked around and tried to remember where the passage could be.

"I didn't understand any of it." She wandered around and looked to a gap between two pillars. Walking over slowly, she pressed one of the bricks. And, sure enough, a loud mechanical sound thudded and the panel of stone ground to the left, revealing a dark passageway.

Sky gasped. "This was where you ran?"

“Yes.” Bloom said. “When the witches took my power, that was the moment I remembered something. But being here. I can feel it all again.”

“Everyone thought Daphne was the one who destroyed Domino. But... she saved it. She saved you.”

“And she gave up everything to do it.” Bloom broke out into tears. “And what did I do with her sacrifice? I let the Dragon’s Flame fall into the hands of the descendants of the same witches that killed her.” Bloom turned to Sky. “She gave up everything to get me to safety.”

“Bloom, it’s not your fault. How was anyone to know any of this? You’re remembering more than anyone thought possible, You’re doing more than Daphne ever would have expected.” he said.

Bloom looked down into the passageway. “Sky, why did you come with me? Why are you here?”

Sky looked at her. “Bloom...” he said.

“Have things changed now you know who I am?” she asked.

The question caught him off guard. He exhaled.

“Bloom. I want to help you, I also wanted to apologise to you.”

Bloom said nothing.

Sky sighed and shook his head. “My father’s council decided my engagement to Diaspro when I was twelve,” he continued. “The royal family of Eraklyon aren’t as popular as they are in Solaria. Diaspro is the daughter of a beloved Eraklyad scholar. My union with her would make the crown more popular. To be honest, I don’t think Diaspro wants to marry me.”

“And you, what do you want?” Bloom said.

“I don’t know Bloom. I go between following through on my duty to my kingdom and throwing it away and running off somewhere else.” He looked away briefly, then back. “I knew I was never going to be able to figure anything out at the Gladius institute. That’s why I wanted to go to Redfountain, it was my first chance to be anything else. My father made Brandon and I switch identities for my safety. I would be lying if I said I wasn’t glad about the arrangement.”

“I don’t understand how nobody knew your face.” Bloom said.

Sky laughed, something that was so obvious to him was, of course, perplexing to Bloom. “Most royal children don’t make public appearances until they’re fully trained. Stella is an exception to the rule because the Solarian royals are very popular.”

“You could have told me,” Bloom said.

“I should have.” He paused. “I lied because when I was with you, I didn’t have to be Prince Sky. I didn’t have to think about the kingdom. Or the marriage. Or the future already mapped out for me. You were in it only for me.”

Bloom crossed her arms. “And you thought that would change when I found out who you were?”

Sky laughed again. “Well, you know the feeling now. You asked me if things have changed now I know you’re a princess. I felt the same. We aren’t so different Bloom.”

“And what about Diaspro.”

“She deserves honesty. And I failed her too.” He admitted. “When this is all over Bloom, I’ll put it right I promise.”

Bloom studied him carefully. “You let me think you were someone else for your safety. I did the same thing.”

He frowned. “You were protecting yourself.”

“So were you.” Bloom stepped closer. “I don’t care if you’re a prince or not.” she said. “Finding out the guy I’m dating is an engaged prince though, is quite different.”

Sky looked at Bloom again. “I’m sorry Bloom.”

Bloom stared into his eyes for a while.

“I’m glad I know who you are,” she said at last.

“Even now.”

“Especially now.” She smiled. She pulled Sky into her arms. They held there for a long time. Stood in the ruins of the lost kingdom.

“Don’t you think we should keep going?” Sky said. “We don’t want to keep the others waiting.”

Bloom pulled away and nodded her head. She turned and walked into the passageway, to the royal throne room.

At the gateway cave. The girls were placed into magic blocking cuffs, and caged, much like the creatures of decay

Stella gripped the bars and pulled. The field flared white against her palms. Heat shot up her arms and forced her back a step.

“Don’t,” Tecna said from another cage. Her brooch projected a grid across the barrier. “It’s useless. We can only break these bars from the outside.”

“This is wack! What about Bloom and Sky?” Musa muttered. She threw herself to the floor of the cage.

Layla paced the small length of floor they had, Flora knelt beside Timmy, who was still pale from the cliff descent and now paler still.

Brandon tried to pick at the cuffs at his wrists. “These aren’t standard restraints.” he

concluded.

Stella rolled her eyes again at his, obvious, remark. She dragged her hands from her forehead down to her eyes.

“Correct Brandon” Tecna replied. “They’re stopping our Winx taking affect.”

Stella turned away from the wall and faced the centre of the chamber. Beyond the bars, the researchers continued to work at the gateway. People frantically moved between consoles. Screens displaying unknown data readings.

At the far end of the platform, Cassandra stood with the Trix, discussing something they couldn’t hear. Stella grew frustrated.

“How could she do this?” she said steadily, only with effort. “She stood beside my father. She advised him. She sat at our table. I always knew she was a cow, but this.”

Layla stopped pacing. “She wants the throne Stella.”

“That’s too simple,” Tecna said. “All of this for the throne when the long game was to destabilise the realms anyway? What’s the point?”

Flora looked up. “She’s coming.”

Footsteps sounded from the stone floor. Cassandra approached the holding cells alone. The Trix remained on the platform. Cassandra stopped beyond the bars. Up close, she was immaculate. Not a strand of hair out of place or tremor in her hands.

Stella stepped forward until the energy buzzed inches from her face.

“Why?” she demanded.

Cassandra studied her as one might examine a portrait. “Because opportunity arrived, and I chose to take it.”

“Opportunity to murder me?” Stella jabbed.

Something close to irritation passed through Cassandra. “You were not meant to

suffer. It was meant to be a swift death.”

Stella laughed in disbelief. “That’s your defence?”

Cassandra scowled. “I was promised a Solaria without you. A Solaria me and my daughter could rule. With you gone, the king would have been forced to select a new heir. Without your Mother in the picture, naturally, he would have married me.”

Stella scoffed at such a remark. “Marry you?” She said through a sarcastic smile. “My father would never marry you, Cassandra!”

“Oh, I assure you he would have done.”

“And in exchange?” Stella pressed, rolling her eyes.

Cassandra smiled, a thin and malicious smile. “The ring.”

Stella’s hand dropped to her side. “You could have stolen the ring anytime.”

“That is true, but I wasn’t the one who needed it.” Cassandra corrected.

Layla stepped closer to Stella’s shoulder. “Who? Who was the one who promised you the throne in exchange for the ring? Why did they want it?”

Layla demanded the answer from Cassandra in a tone the girls seldom heard from her.

Cassandra paused before answering. She ignored the question.

“Was it for them?” Stella gestured towards the Trix. “You handed them the ring so they could steal the Dragon’s Flame, didn’t you?”

Cassandra laughed. “Do not flatter them. Darcy was only brought on to make the gateway work. I provided everything else. It turned out eliminating Stella was opportune for both parties. The Trix wanted a world ruled by witches and I wanted to rule Solaria.”

Behind her, Darcy’s laughter drifted across the platform.

“You were never part of our design either, Countess,” Darcy called. She walked towards them, boots clanging on the metal grating. “You were as useful to us as we were to

you.”

Cassandra bore her teeth. “Careful.”

Darcy ignored her. She stopped beside the barrier and regarded the girls with amusement. “It is true none of this would have been possible without the eggs. The creatures were not our idea.”

Musa perked up. “Then whose were they?”

“Cassandra acquired the eggs.”

Stella’s breath stalled. “You’re lying.”

“Oh, I rarely bother,” Darcy replied dryly.

Cassandra turned. “That is enough.”

Darcy smiled without any warmth. “What’s the harm? The world will soon know new rulers anyway. These meddling pixies won’t see the light of day again.”

Stella stared at her. “You’re going to let Solaria burn, Cassandra!”

“I am going to let Solaria evolve.”

Brandon lunged at the barrier. The field snapped him back with a crack of energy. Stella rolled her eyes again.

Darcy examined the confusion painted on the expression of the Winx. She seemed to enjoy toying with their knowledge. She liked working out how much they had been able to piece together on their own. It was a sick game, but useful, if they were able to escape, that is.

Icy, who had been listening across the cave placed her hands behind her back and walked over with Stormy. She tilted her head to the side. Her long crystal white ponytail dragging behind her. “I am quite impressed you all got as far as you did, what, with Faragonda keeping you in the dark. She was never any fun. But that’s enough of this Q and

A.” She shot Cassandra and Darcy a look of disgust.

They all walked away from the cages and back to the centre of the cave where the stone circle was nearing completion. Two more creatures were being carried in, caged like the others. These two had wings, they repeatedly tried to leave the ground before being knocked back by the cage’s forcefield.

“Bloom was right.” Stella whispered. “Cassandra’s benefactor wanted something on Earth. That’s why they wanted the ring. I’d bet my money that thing was Bloom and they just got lucky me bringing her back with me!”

“They would have given Cassandra the Creature of Decay eggs.” Flora said.

“Whoever this person is... do you think...” Layla looked to Stella. Asking her something she couldn’t say aloud to the other girls. Layla put the pieces together as fast as Stella. They didn’t say anything more. “I have to warn them...” Layla said under her breath.

“I don’t think the Trix or Cassandra know Bloom is with us, let’s hope she can find a way to get us out of here!”

Bloom and Sky stepped through the secret passageway to the other side. This side, the door had long ago been torn from its mechanism. The throne room lay at the heart of the palace. The corridor opened up to a vast and beautifully lit hall. The pillars that held up the hall rose like the trunks of petrified trees. They were cracked but all still standing. The sunlight poured through the broken window above. It silvered the dust that drifted in the air.

At the far end of the room, upon a dais of golden marble, was the throne. Veins of gold still embellished the armrests, though soot dulled them. The dragon carved into the back was still preserved.

Bloom walked towards it without speaking. Her hands trembled at her sides as she

drew closer to the throne. Sky remained near the entrance. He did not intrude; this chamber did not belong to him.

Bloom mounted the steps slowly. When she reached the throne, she did not sit. She stood before it and lifted her hand to the carved dragon and brushed her fingers over its scales. She brought her hand down past the carving and onto the armrest. Her palm picked up the soot and dust.

She closed her eyes.

"I'm not sure if I remember this room," she said. Her voice carried further than she expected for how quiet she spoke. "This place... it doesn't feel like mine. I wouldn't deserve it, even if it was."

Banners of crimson and gold that were once draped from the ceiling lay rotting away on the floor. She opened her eyes. She couldn't remember how this place had looked, but she would wager it was beautiful.

"I let them take it," she whispered. "I let them take everything. I'm never going to get it back Sky."

Sky took a step forward. "Bloom..."

"Please." She did not look at him. "It's the truth Sky."

He stopped.

Bloom turned around and faced the throne once more. She cried again. For all she lost, for all she could have been. Climbing the final step, she lowered herself onto the throne. She rested her arms on the rests, brushing away the soot and burying her head into her hands.

She wept. There was no searching for the flame. Nothing would answer her. It didn't belong to her anymore.

"I don't know... what I'm supposed to do. I don't know what Daphne wanted me to

do. Whatever it was, it wasn't this. I've failed her."

The wind seemed to howl through the window.

The dust at her feet lifted in a slow spiral.

Sky focused his eyes on a small sparkle of light that looked, at first, like the sun catching on dust.

"Bloom..." He said standing back. "Get away from there!"

Bloom lifted her head from her hands to see a torrent of golden light swirling in front of the throne. She leapt up and tried to run toward sky but the vortex kept her back. Light warped and gathered at the centre of the chamber.

Ribbons of a golden orange folded into existence. A faint shimmer that grew brighter, then brighter still until it formed a column that reached from the broken dome to the floor.

Bloom rose to her feet.

Within the light stood a silhouetted figure.

A young woman. Tall. Hair cascading in waves of gold that didn't seem to interact with the light around her. She wore a sunset orange dress. Bloom remembered her from her dreams. She couldn't see the woman's face but she would know the energy of the woman anywhere. Her breath escaped her.

"Daphne."

The glowing figure moved her head.

"Bloom."

It was her. It was Daphne. But... how was it possible. That voice was only one Bloom had heard in dreams and memories. But it was her. There was no question about it.

Bloom descended the steps toward the light. Sky struggled against the force of the energy behind.

“I have so many questions,” she said at once. “Why? What does any of this mean? Why didn’t anyone tell me? They took it from me. They took the Dragon’s Flame and I couldn’t stop them. I wasn’t strong enough. Someone tried to kill the Princess of Solaria. How did they find me? Can I get my powers back?”

Daphne lifted her hand. “I do not have much time,” she said.

Bloom could have continued on for hours. She had a million questions for her. But only one was the most important in that moment.

“Are you alive?” Bloom asked. “How are you here?”

“Do not worry about me Bloom... I cannot be described as alive or dead. At least, right now. ”

Bloom faltered. “What do you mean?”

“Bloom.” She said calmly. The glowing figure reached out to her and took Bloom’s hand. “You must know. The Dragon’s Flame cannot be taken,” Daphne said. “You have to remember how to access it Bloom.”

Bloom shook her head. “They used the Wisperian crystals. I felt it leave. You don’t understand.”

“No, Bloom. You felt them take a spark. Not the flame” Daphne replied. “You also felt every part of you that feared your own power block you from accessing it ever again.”

Bloom took a step back.

“It’s a good thing Bloom. Such great power should never be in the hands of someone who doesn’t fear it. But you cannot fear yourself. The Dragon’s Flame is not an object,” Daphne continued. “It is not something to be stolen. It is not power to be seized. You are the flame Bloom. The only person who can sever that connection to that part of yourself is you.”

Bloom pressed her hand to her chest. “I don’t know what to do Daphne! I don’t feel it,

anymore.” she said.

“You do know,” Daphne answered. “You feel its absence because you are afraid of what it means. But Bloom, you don’t have to be just one thing. You know who you are!”

“But who am I? Was I meant to be the Earth girl or the Princess of Domino? I’m not good at being either of them.”

Daphne floated closer. The light around her brightened as she shook her head.

“Bloom. You are not the Earth girl or the Princess of Domino. You are both. You are all of your experiences. And nobody, not a witch, or a boy, or even your sister, can tell you what you’re meant to be. You have to let go of the belief that someone else can dictate to you or steal something away from you. Your victories, your mistakes, your friends, your memories and your power are yours to keep and control. Nobody in the universe can steal your past, your dreams or your magic.”

Tears slid down Bloom’s face.

“I could not save our kingdom,” Daphne said. “But I could save you.”

Bloom trembled. “And I wasted it.”

“No.” Daphne corrected. “You grew up. You found friendship. You loved. You chose to stand by those who would love you. You are living your life the way you want to live it. You aren’t bound by your fate Bloom, you control your fate, and that is everything I ever wanted for you.”

Bloom shook. She wiped her face with the back of her hand. “I barely know who I am or what I want...”

Daphne regarded her steadily. “Magic is, really, quite simple. All you have to do is want something and then let yourself have it.” she said.

The light intensified as Daphne drew back into the column.

“You fear your power,” Daphne said. “You fear what it will cost you?”

Bloom nodded.

“But you cannot protect those you love by shrinking yourself” Daphne said. “You cannot save them by pretending to be less than you are.”

“Don’t leave me...” Bloom pleaded. “I can’t do this alone.”

“You will not do this alone. You have friends and people who love you. And you can always find me as long as you wish to be found. But now, your friends need your help. And they need you to be all of you, Bloom.”

The light around Daphne sparked.

“Wait,” Bloom yelled as the chamber trembled.

The column of light began to thin.

“Daphne!”

The light shattered into sparks. Bloom was left kneeling on the floor.

Bloom sobbed. Sky ran over to her...

“Bloom! Bloom! Bloom...” His voice drifted away.

All she could do was hunch over herself. She thought about what Daphne, her sister, said. She didn’t just have the flame, she was the Dragon’s Flame.

She felt heat perforate through her body. The ground below her began to warm and the parts of herself that felt hollow, filled with magic once again. Blazes of fire burst from her body and swirled around her, lifting Bloom into the air.

Fire once again roared through her veins. Whatever held her back met the flame and didn’t survive.

Sky stepped back and shielded his eyes as the chamber filled with a plasma so bright it could outshine the sun.

Finally, wings burst from Bloom's back, unfurling in a sweep of light. Azure and gold streamed outward, sparks of fire twirled in the air. The shape of a dragon emerged from the fires around her. Her wings stretched behind, a translucent blue.

Bloom hovered above the dais, eyes open and clear.

The Dragon's Flame coursed through her, and it never left.

Sky stood up and looked to Bloom in awe.

She looked at her hands. For the first time she felt as though she could control her power.

Lifting her chin, Bloom knew what she had to do. "Let's go and find the others."

* Chapter Twenty-Six *

Back at the gateway cave, the girls remained locked up as the stone circle grew closer and closer to completion. The creatures of decay strained against their cages, whoever was on the receiving end when they got out was done for. Cassandra stood at the centre of it all as if she had already claimed the throne she wanted. Stella supposed she was correct, Magix was as good as lost now. She looked through the bars and stared at the entrance of the cavern, hoping, praying for a miracle.

“Come on, Bloom,” she muttered under her breath.

Suddenly the creatures began to writhe. In a way more disturbing and frenzied than before. All five of them broke out into chaos in their cages, forcing everyone in the cave to cover their ears.

“What’s happening?!” Icy blared over the sound.

“I don’t know!” Cassandra called back.

Darcy turned at the sound of a distant crashing that came from outside the cave. Icy’s eyes narrowed. Stormy clenched her teeth.

Then the cavern roof cracked.

A ball of fire tore through the opening of the cave and slammed into the sand at the centre of the chamber. Rock exploded outward and the generators exploded in balls of fire, setting the equipment alight.

Flames spiralled upward, bright enough to bleach the cave walls white.

From within it, a figure descended. Bloom hovered above the fractured stone circle, wings outstretched, light emitting from her skin in flecks of gold. Her hair floated above her like wildfire. The dragon-scale under-suit shimmered beneath her sky blue attire. Fire coiled around in the dance of a dragon.

The creatures of decay shrieked.

Cassandra staggered back a step. “No... it’s not possible.”

Bloom lowered her hands, her eyes glowed with the power of the Dragon’s Flame.

The cages around the creatures shattered.

The two sightless warriors lunged at her first. Their limbs elongated mid-air, claws slicing toward her. Bloom did not move. She extended one hand and a torrent of blazing fire surged forward and the creature disintegrated mid-air. Its body unravelled into ash before it reached her.

The second creature sprang from the platform and leapt at her from above. She bent a current of plasma in front of her. The creature fell through and disintegrated overhead.

The flying creatures ascended into the sky. Bloom turned in the air and drew the fire into a narrow arc and around her. The vortex drew them in like a vacuum. They tried to escape it but the both were pulled into the flames. They convulsed once and collapsed into cinders.

The final creature tried to flee, dissolving into shadows along the cavern floor. Bloom clenched her fist. The Dragon’s Flame followed it into the ground, a ball of white hot light

following the dark shadow. It chased it out of the ground like a whale breaking onto the surface. The air around it compressed. Fire wrapped its form in a sphere and imploded inward. When the blaze faded, nothing remained.

Silence fell in the cavern for half a breath. The creatures of decay were no more. Bloom dropped to the ground and drove her palm into the stone. Wildfire raced through the carved circle, tracing the ancient runes that glowed back to life. The modifications to the stone circle disintegrated away, turning to ash drifting across the cavern floor.

The Winx and Specialists all cheered at the back of the cave. Bloom flew over and unlocked the cages. They all piled onto Bloom in indiscernible chatter and questions. Timmy and Brandon ran over to Sky to do the very same.

“Well, that took you long enough.” Stella jested.

“We were so worried Bloom!” Flora cried.

Musa rolled her eyes. “Oh yeah, worried about Bloom, when we were in here with creepy witch one through four.”

“You transformed, that’s brilliant!” Tecna declared.

Layla gestured to all of them quickly to turn around. “Guys...”

At the other side of the cave. The Witches and Cassandra regained their composure.

Icy began to clap several times. She strutted forward as the Winx came into the clearing to meet her head on. The girls all unfurled their wings. Sky, Brandon and Timmy drew their swords.

“I have to say I am impressed.” Icy giggled. “It’s good to see you with your powers back Bloom. That means there’s more for us to take.”

“You won’t be taking anything. This ends here Isabella.”

“Oh... but that’s no fun. I had planned our reunion a little differently than this. I really

did want to leave you alive. To live a worthless human life on Earth. Now, I'm afraid, we're going to have to silence you for good."

"Good luck." Stella quipped.

"You'll need it." Bloom said as she rose from the ground, her fire bending into the shape of the great dragon behind her. Icy's wisperian crystal glowed in response around her neck. Icy led Bloom away as they flew out of the cave.

Stormy screamed. Lightning forked from her hands, crackling through the air, striking down the cavern roof. Rock rained down on the Winx.

Musa sprang forward, darting between the rubble. She clapped her hands together and a shockwave thundered through the chamber. The falling debris broke into smaller pieces mid-air and vibrated afloat before landing away from the group.

Darcy turned up her heel and dark tendrils crept across the floor, coiling toward Flora's ankles. She flew into the air and lured the tendrils from the sand. She conjured a vine, it erupted from the fractured stone, thick and green despite the dead land below. The vines wrapped around the shadows and crushed them into nothing. She bent the vines at Cassandra, they wrapped around her and hoisted her into the air.

Layla vaulted onto the metal platform and hurled a sphere of morphix at Stormy. The substance spread across her body stopping her from moving.

"You know what happens when electricity meets water?" Stormy growled. She emitted bolts of lightning from her body that sank into the morphix. She bent the lightning in the fluid and Stormy hurled the electrified ball back at Layla. Layla dodged out of the way and collapsed the morphix back to water again.

Brandon and Sky took down three of the armed guards and slammed them to the ground. Timmy and Tecna took control of the console, Timmy's fingers flying over its

interface.

“Tecna, can you wipe the drives?” Timmy asked. Tecna nodded in response before placing a hand on the console. the screens flickered and went black as the laboratory was completely shut down.

Stella rose into the air, brandishing her staff. She swung it in a wide arc and bent the light around toward Cassandra. She broke free from Flora’s vines and the beam ricocheted toward a cluster of crystals.

Cassandra lifted both hands and summoned a surge of energy that rippled outward, slamming into the Winx. Layla and Stella hit the wall. Musa skidded across the stone.

Outside, Bloom descended on Icy. They flew over the water off the coast of Sparks.

Fire met Ice.

“You should have stayed on Earth” Icy hissed.

“And you should have stayed out of my way!” Bloom bit back, she concentrated a ball of fire and launched several at Icy, who was knocked out of the sky and into the ocean.

Bloom hovered over the area for a moment before Icy grabbed her ankle. She flew upward in reflex and Icy conjured a stream of freezing water from the ocean and bent it around Bloom. It encircled her in a ball of ice. She remained frozen for a moment before exploding free. Chunks of water crashing into the ocean below.

Icy screamed in frustration and Bloom winked before firing another bolt of fire toward her. Icy immediately condensed it to steam.

“You think you’ve won,” Icy said, frost crawling across the ocean beneath her. “You are a child playing with embers.”

Bloom flew higher into the air dodging icicles being launched from below.

“Don’t run away now, Bloom!” she bellowed, launching upward, a spear of ice forming in her grasp. Bloom conjured the same, a flaming javelin of plasma. They both threw them at one another, the two colliding in a burst of steam and light that sent a shockwave outward knocking both Bloom and Icy out of the sky and collapsing part of the cliff face. Rocks fell from the ceiling in the cave, letting the sunlight pour in.

Inside. Stella fought with Cassandra, darting in from the side and striking hers flank with a beam of concentrated light. Cassandra twisted and dodged it narrowly sending an explosive burst at Stella, just missing.

Storm clouds churned inside the cavern. Lightning striking at Layla repeatedly. She summersaulted out of the way, practically dancing around each bolt of lighting. Eventually she fixed her eyes on Stormy who was calling down the torrent. Layla bent a wave of water from the ocean outside and pulled the surge over Stormy knocking her out of the air and into electrified waters.

Musa swept in behind Stormy and unleashed a piercing note that pushed her into the rocks. Stormy lost her composure. Layla seized the moment and drove a ribbon of morphix around her wrists, binding her hands together. Musa ran to get the cuffs used on them earlier to try and fix them around Stormy but she launched herself backwards with a current of air.

Darcy closed her eyes and took control of Flora’s mind. She gripped her head as she lost all of her vision. Tecna flew in and broke Darcy’s concentration allowing Flora to regain her bearings.

Brandon slammed his sword into the ground and opened up a ravine of Earth. Sky ran in and slashed his sword through the air. It created a gust of wind that knocked Darcy into the gorge.

Cassandra and Stella locked eyes with each other in fury.

“You were meant to die,” she spat as narrow threads of combustion launched from her.

Stella’s staff expanded into its full form, she twisted it to generate a shield.

“Well you know what they say.” Stella replied gliding into the air. “If you want something done, you’ve got to do it yourself.” She thrust the staff forward. A beam of concentrated solar energy slammed into Cassandra’s back and drove her into the middle of the gateway circle. The ancient stone cracked. Stella marched over, Brandon joining her side.

Outside. Bloom and Icy spiralled around one another in the open air.

Icy hurled shards of ice toward Bloom. Each time, she melted them out of existence mid-flight. Steam clouded the sky between them.

“You are nothing without the flame,” Icy snarled.

Bloom burned bright. “It’s funny, I could say the same about you!”

They exchanged more torrents of Ice and Fire.

She drove forward. Fire streamed from her hands, wrapping around Icy’s head. Icy countered with a blast of freezing wind from her mouth that cut through the heat and sent Bloom crashing into the ocean.

Icy saw her opportunity and took it. She concentrated all of her power and froze over the ocean, creating an iceberg rising from the depths. Bloom became trapped under meters of Ice. Drawing the stolen spark of the Dragon’s Flame into her palm, Icy’s Wisperian crystal began to lose its glow.

“You feel that?” Icy laughed. “The Dragon’s Flame is mine to command!” She bellowed as the iceberg grew larger and larger by the second.

Then, the spark of the flame in Icy's hand shrank. The stolen spark sputtered away and the Wisperian crystal hanging around her neck shattered into dust.

Below, in the cave, Stormy and Darcy's crystals seemed to be connected as they also disintegrated. Their attacks immediately losing all power.

The girls paused for a split second before realising what had happened. Layla grinned. "Their flame... It's gone!"

Darcy tried to tap into her regular magic but it seemingly lost all potency. Stormy's lightning thinned to pale streaks in the air.

Outside, Icy's laughter died in her throat as the spark in her hand guttered like a dead candle. "What? This can't be happening?" She hollered. She repeatedly tried to influence the ice around her but nothing was happening. No matter how hard she tried, her power was useless. She landed on the iceberg she had created.

In that moment. Bright orange and red cracks began to form in the ice. Icy looked down at her feat and tried to avoid them, but she could do nothing as Bloom broke free. Just as powerful as before.

She rose up from the crashing waves surrounded by fire. "You cannot hold what is not yours, Isabella." She said.

Icy tried to fly but she could barely gain any height. Bloom spread her wings wide and fire erupted around her and surged forward. The full force of the Dragon's Flame dove into Isabella. The impact sent shockwaves across the sky as she was knocked out of the air. She fell into the crashing waves below.

Inside the cavern the trix were defenceless. Flora bound Stormy in thick coils of vine.

Layla pinned Darcy against the wall with her morphix. The only remaining witch left was Cassandra. She staggered as Stella's beam drove her to the edge of the cave..

She spent a second laying there, stunned. Then she pushed herself up on one elbow, with her sleeve torn and hair loosened from its perfect arrangement. Even now she still tried to maintain her meticulous image.

Stella walked over to her, every bit a vision that Cassandra was not.

Forcing herself upright, Cassandra leant back despite the cracked stone behind her. "I built Solaria whilst your father smiled for cameras. I negotiated treaties, I strengthened the council, and what did I receive?" Her eyes burned now with the fury of a woman who knew she'd lost. "Nothing!"

"You had everything Cassandra! You were the advisor of the king!" Stella jabbed.

"But that wasn't enough for you?" Layla called from behind, still holding Darcy pinned. "You had to want the throne as well."

"I wanted competence at the helm of Solaria," Cassandra corrected. "Power shouldn't go to you just because you descend from one of the great heroes."

"And you think it should go to you?" Flora's voice cut in. "Think about all of those people, innocent people, who's lives would have been lost!"

"Every new era demands sacrifice."

Stella stepped closer until the tip of her staff hovered at Cassandra's throat.

"You never wanted to build something better for everyone," she said. "You wanted to build a world better for yourself. You don't deserve the power."

Cassandra laughed once. "And you think you deserve it? Born into it. Dressed for it. You have no idea what it takes to hold a realm together."

"Then you never understood me." Stella answered. "I'm not just a pretty face

Cassandra, I bested you at your own game.”

Cassandra gathered the last of her power and hurled it forward. A violent force struck Stella full in the chest. Stella hunched over and fought back to her feet.

“You mistake ruthlessness for strength,” Stella said. “You mistake fear for loyalty. You mistake control for leadership.” Her staff flared brighter. “And you mistook me for weak. It will be the first and only time you do so.”

Cassandra screamed as she realised what was happening.

“It’s over,” Stella said. “Looks like you lost after all.” Cassandra looked up at her. For the first time, there was no calculation in her eyes. Only disbelief.

In the cavern, Stella forced Cassandra to her knees. Without the protection of the Trix, she was nothing.

Tecna tore the final generator from its housing and hurled it into the sea beyond the cliff.

Bloom flew back into the cave holding Isabella between her arms, unconscious. She landed between her friends and the fallen witches.

Her wings dissolved away.

Cassandra tried to rise. Stella placed the staff against her shoulder and pressed her back to the ground.

Darcy struggled against Layla’s morphix. Stormy thrashed within Flora’s vines. Icy lay motionless, frost turning to water in her hair.

The last traces of stolen flame were gone from the witches, their crystals and any means they had to take it again, were gone.

The battle was over.

* Chapter Twenty-Seven *

The sun set on Domino. Solarian vessels began to land on the beach. Armoured soldiers disembarked the crafts. They secured the shoreline and the cave and began to take out all of the equipment that had been inside, most of it burned and destroyed.

Eventually a white and gold craft arrived and landed outside the entrance to the cave. When the ramp lowered, King Radius stepped down onto the sand. He was wearing his golden crown and armour to match. Behind him were members of the royal Solarian guard. Then three figures descended behind the king: Faragonda, Griffin, and Saladin. The three head teachers of the schools of Solaria.

The Trix knelt in restraints at the edge of the shore. Without the dragon's flame they appeared to have lost access to their standard magic. Cassandra stood apart from them, wrists bound in silver binding. Even with torn sleeves and wind-tangled hair she held herself properly.

Stella stood before her father. She looked at him and for a moment, neither of them spoke.

Then Radius crossed the distance and pulled her into an embrace that cracked the

seriousness he had carried from the ship. Stella threw her arms around her father.

“You were nearly taken from me,” he said, voice rougher than Stella had ever heard it.

“I wasn’t,” she replied. “I told you to trust me.”

He held her at arm’s length and looked at her properly. In her he saw every good part of himself and none of the flaws. “I failed you,” he said. “Cassandra stood beside me for years. I trusted her counsel. I trusted her loyalty. I did not see what stood in front of me. What’s worse, I didn’t believe you when I should have.”

Stella held her father’s hand in hers.. “But you did believe me, when it mattered, how could you have known?”

“I should have. It took you and your friends risking your lives to fix my mistake. For that, I am forever grateful. To all of you.”

Behind them, Bloom and the others stepped forward.

Radius turned to each of them, regarding them all with gratitude. When he reached Bloom, his face was overcome with an uncomfortable emotion. Both respect and regret.

“Bloom, I can only apologise for the misunderstanding we had in Solaria. You also have my thanks,” he said. “For saving my daughter. And for ending what began here.”

Bloom tilted her head. The wind lifted strands of her hair across her face.

Faragonda stepped forward “There is something the realm must hear,” she said to the king. She then turned to Griffin who gave a single nod. And then to Bloom, who did the same.

Faragonda turned toward the assembled military and the faculty who had arrived behind them. “Before you, stands the final heir of Domino and the true keeper of the Dragon’s Flame.”

Gasps perforated through the crowd. “Impossible!” Someone called out.

“How can this be.” Followed another.

“She is Princess Bloom Deragona of Domino,” Faragonda continued. “I assure you it is no more a mystery to you than it is to either me or Bloom, especially. But I can also promise you that it is true. A new age of Magix has arrived. The Dragon’s Flame has returned.”

Silence followed Faragonda’s words before King Radius began to clap. Everyone gathered around joined in. Saladin lowered his head in acknowledgement. Griffin folded her arms but gave Bloom the faintest hint of approval.

“I couldn’t have done any of this without my friends here.” Bloom gestured to the rest of the Winx girls and to Brandon, Sky and Timmy.

Radius stepped toward Bloom once more and then turned to the crowd of skeptical politicians. “Domino has been left without a sovereign for a thousand years. Today that changes.”

He turned to Bloom and bowed. Around him, the Solarian guard followed suit and slowly everyone on the beach bowed to Princess Bloom of Domino.

Bloom inhaled slowly. The ruined skyline of Sparks stood atop the cliff in front of her.

“Um, thank you?” Bloom stuttered.

Stella came right beside her and whispered in her ear. “Oh, it’s so dreadfully formal isn’t it.”

“Princess Bloom may I have the honour of your company?” Musa teased, fluttering her eyelids.

“Stand up straight Bloom, princesses do not slouch!” Layla followed in a snooty tone.

“Lay off her guys, Bloom’s probably exhausted!” Flora said to them all. Bloom turned

to her friends and smiled.

Radius nodded once and the crowd dispersed. Behind them, soldiers moved to escort the prisoners away. The Winx went to see Isabella, Stephanie and Darcy walked to one of the ships. Isabella bore her teeth at Bloom as she was pulled to her feet. "You think this is finished," she said. "I'll get you if it's the last thing I do!"

Bloom did not rise to the bait. "I'll be waiting, but it looks like I might be waiting a while!"

"Yeah! Have fun in the loony bin!" Musa jeered.

Griffin stepped beside the girls. "The Trix will be transferred to Lightrock Monastery," She announced. "Their magic will be contained and redirected. They will serve the realm they tried to fracture for the rest of their lives."

Stormy was flailing her feet around like a child as she was loaded onto the ship. Quickly enough, the ship closed its doors and set off to Lightrock, taking the witches with them. Never to be seen or heard from again.

"It's kinda sad when you think about it..." Flora said quietly.

"Flo, you're not about to tell me you feel sorry for the Trix?" Musa replied.

"Think back to what Lucy told us at Cloudtower. Fairies don't treat witches right, especially Wisperians. They weren't right about much but they were right about that. They were only angry." Flora pleaded to the group. Stella groaned a little and Musa rolled her eyes.

"Witches do it to themselves Flo." Musa said as she walked away.

Flora bowed her head and twiddled her thumbs.

"Is that true Flora?" Bloom asked sincerely. Flora nodded back. "Well, we'll have to be the change we want to see in the world. Maybe Fairies and Witches will get along one day." Bloom put an arm around her.

“I sure hope so Bloom.” Flora whispered back with a smile.

Across the beach, Tecna and Timmy were helping load different pieces of equipment onto the Solarian ships.

“You know you can go and hang out with your friends Tec, I’ve got this.”

Tecna smiled at the offer. “It’s alright, Stella said, and I quote ‘if you don’t go and talk to your bespectacled specialist I will personally install a virus on your computer.’” She tried to capture Stella’s cadence without much success. Timmy and Tecna looked over at Stella who was watching with Layla. Stella was giving her a rather large, cartoonish wink and two thumbs up.

Tecna and Timmy laughed. “So you’re here to stop her from installing a virus? Smart.” Timmy said blushing.

“Timmy, don’t be ridiculous.” Tecna said, cocking her hip. “Stella couldn’t install a virus if she tried. It’s an empty threat.”

“So why are you here then?” Timmy asked.

“I just like spending time with you Timmy.”

“I like spending time with you too Tecna.”

They both smiled at each other before continuing to move the equipment onto the ships.

King Radius approached Cassandra, who remained silent until soldiers moved to bind her more tightly.

“Cassandra Draghetti, You betrayed the crown, conspired against Solaria and allied with forces that endangered the whole of Magix. You will be tried for your crimes in the court of Solaria. I imagine you will be sent to Omega for this...”

“Your majesty. I strengthened your kingdom!” Cassandra began frantically. “I have

served Solaria for thirty years! You cannot send me to Omega!”

“You attempted regicide, and threatened the whole planet with creatures brought back from the dark times.”

Her mouth quivered. “I’m sorry. It was all him. I didn’t want to do this, I was forced!” She exclaimed grasping at straws. Bloom, Stella and Layla heard Cassandra’s pleas and ran over to Radius.

“Who Cassandra? Who put you up to this? Who gave you the eggs?” Stella demanded.

Cassandra’s face shook, her eyes watering. Stella had never seen the woman so broken. She pressed her face between the bars of the cage. “He’ll kill me if I tell you.”

Radius stepped closer. “Don’t worry girls. We will find out what we need to know from her soon enough. You will stand trial for treason and conspiracy against the crown. And you will answer for every life endangered by your decisions.”

Cassandra slumped in her cage as she was carried up a ramp and away into one of the Solarian crafts by soldiers. Bloom, Stella and Layla all exchanged grave looks between one another. Who was Cassandra working for?

Griffin watched as the ships began to depart from the shore. Faragonda, The Winx and the three specialists gathered together with the king.

“Cloudtower will reopen,” Griffin said. “Every student will be invited back. Even those who sided with the Trix.”

Musa raised an eyebrow. “Even Lucy?”

“Especially Lucy,” Griffin replied. “Young witches often misplace their anger. I will not lose another generation to resentment. Not like I lost the Trix. You will all help me in convincing them that the path of hate is not the way forward.”

Flora allowed herself a small smile. “Absolutely.”

Faragonda stepped toward the girls. “When I sent you on a mission to Domino, I didn’t expect you to solve all of our problems in one fail swoop!” she said.

Stella tossed her hair. “See Faragonda, you said we had potential and you were correct.”

Faragonda’s eyes rested on each of them in turn. “I’m so proud of you all.” She smiled at all of them before turning to Bloom. “I am proud that you chose yourself.”

“Thank you Faragonda.”

“I take it you won’t be needing your private lessons anymore?” She laughed. Bloom and Faragonda continued walking and the group made their way back to the specialist ship. Luckily for Timmy, Tecna flew up and landed it on the beach for everyone.

Brandon ran up behind Stella and cleared his throat as he approached to get her attention.

“So,” he began, staring at the horizon rather than at her, “does it bother you?”

“Does what bother me?”

“That I’m only a squire.”

Stella blinked. “I’m still deciding...”

He scratched the back of his neck. “Okay... listen Stella.” He took her by both of her shoulders so they faced each other. “I’m not a prince, but I promise everything else was real. I know you wanted a prince, but if you give me a chance I-“

“Brandon,” she said laughing. “Please. I was being dramatic.”

He glanced sideways. “You? Dramatic?”

“Yes. I enjoy making a scene. You’ve got to learn this if we are going to get married one day.”

He laughed despite himself. "Get, get married?"

She laughed at him again. "I'm kidding Brandon, I'm kidding."

She smiled at Brandon like she wasn't kidding.

"Listen, I wasn't furious because you're a squire," she continued. "I was furious because you lied. And because it's entertaining to be furious and have a man to be mad at. It's all part of the fun."

"That's comforting."

She stepped closer. "I don't care about titles. I care about who stands beside me when things fall apart. And who wants the real me. Not just princess Stella."

Brandon mellowed at her comment.

"You have a lot to prove, snookums."

Brandon exhaled. "Good."

"Don't let it go to your head now." She said sauntering off in front of him.

"I won't, princess." He said following behind her.

They walked back toward the others together.

Bloom and Faragonda walked along the beach. "How does it feel? To know where you come from." Faragonda asked. "Is it everything you imagined?"

"I thought it would feel... different."

"I assumed as much."

"Daphne spoke to me Ms Faragonda, I don't know how. But she was able to speak to me in the throne room. She said she didn't have much time..."

Faragonda looked to think deeply at the comment. "Daphne's power is a mystery to me Bloom. If she was able to send you to Earth, hundreds of years into the future, who knows what else she was capable of."

Bloom thought on it. “My parents... King Oritel and Queen Miriam. They weren’t there that night. It’s why Daphne had to be the one to save me.”

“The King and Queen went missing just before the fall of Domino. Nobody heard from them again. They likely tried to prevent the ancestral witches attacking Domino and died trying. I’m sorry to tell you Bloom.”

“It’s, it’s okay.” Bloom said looking at the sand. “But what if, what if they’re still out there. My parents? If Daphne is, why can’t they be?”

Faragonda’s eyes widened. She took Bloom by the hand. “Listen, Bloom, do not get caught up in the past. All you can do is live for the now. The world will know the truth about Daphne, I promise you, but do not try and uncover exactly what happened all those years ago. It is a road you will lose yourself travelling down, that I can promise you.”

Bloom nodded at Faragonda as she decided to join Griffin and Saladin. Sky ran over to Bloom as she stared out at the ocean.

“Are you okay Bloom? You should be happy, you did it, you saved Magix!”

She turned to Sky. “I am happy!” She said forcefully. “I am. It’s just a lot to think about you know.”

Sky didn’t say anything as he knew anything he could say wouldn’t make it better. He just held out his hand for her and they walked hand in hand along the shore. She cast one final look back at the cave where her sister had brought her all those years ago. The question remained, how did she do it, and what happened to her birth parents?

They climbed aboard the ship leaving the lost realm of Domino behind.

* Chapter Twenty-Eight *

It had been several months since the events in Domino. The whole world now knew what had occurred, or at least, knew what they needed to. Summer had arrived in Solaria.

Ivy climbed the outer walls of Alfea's towers. The lake beyond the grounds shimmered beneath the sunny sky. Students filled the courtyard with chatter getting ready to leave for the holiday. They all were taking their seats for the farewell ceremony.

In the courtyard, banners of pink and silver hung from the castle. Rows of chairs were laid out in front of a raised podium where Headmistress Faragonda stood, hands folded before her. The whole faculty of Alfea gathered behind her. Griffin had returned to Cloudtower months ago, Saladin to Redfountain, yet both had come for the closing ceremony. The three schools stood united and, for once, not out of necessity.

The Winx sat together near the front. Bloom rested back in her seat, sunlight catching in her hair. Stella sat beside her, poised, as usual. Though, her heel tapped against the marble. She impatiently awaited the end of the ceremony so she could see Brandon. Flora clasped her hands in her lap. Musa and Tecna chatted quietly. Layla sat straight up, unreadable as ever.

Faragonda gestured for everyone to rise to sing the Alfea school anthem.

Ah, Alfea,
Ah, Alfea,
Our school makes us proud
When you cheer for all our glory, always cheer out loud
The best and brightest gather here. From all our many realms.
Learning potions, transformations, and empowering spells.
Alfea teach us well.

Silence fell as they finished and Faragonda gestured for everyone to be seated.

“This year,” she began, “has tested this school, and many of you in it, in ways none of us could have anticipated. You have seen and felt the affects of fear. You have seen and felt betrayal. You have seen what happens when power is pursued without conscience.” Her eyes moved across the assembly. They lingered, briefly, on the winx girls seated together.

“You have also seen courage. Not the kind born of arrogance or of impulse, but, the kind born from conviction. The drive to act when waiting would be safer. The courage to choose who you are, even when the world attempts to decide it for you.”

Bloom held her breath without meaning to.

“Adversity is not the only thing that defines you, It does, however, expose the fractures in our thinking and the strength in our foundations. It asks us a question: have you built your life on fear or bravery? This year, many of you were asked to confront truths about yourselves. About your past. Some of you discovered that your power was greater than you could have ever imagined. Others discovered that restraint is its own strength. You will leave here today, not as you arrived,” Faragonda said. “You will leave with scars, perhaps. With

questions still unanswered. With futures you're frightened of. That is as it should be. Growth is not clean or comfortable or predictable. But experiencing that discomfort shows you one thing for certain: You are growing."

A few students smiled.

"Stay true to yourselves," she finished. "Not to anyones expectations or to your reputation. If you stay true to yourself and follow your heart, the rest will follow."

Applause rose, filling the courtyard. The Winx joined in, glancing at one another with small, knowing smiles.

"For those graduating this year, I wish you luck, and for those who will be returning, have a wonderful summer!" Faragonda waved at the crowd and then directly to the Winx. Applause continued on as students began to leave their seats.

After the ceremony ended, Students hugged their new found friends and made promises they would either keep or forget.

The six Winx girls slipped away outside the gates of Alfea. Bloom remembered arriving at Alfea unsure of everything that was going to happen. Now she stood rooted in it. Rooted in the soil of a new world.

"So," Musa said, breaking Bloom's train of thought. "What are we doing with ourselves for the next three months?"

Stella stretched her arms above her head. "Well, I plan on not saving the world for at least a fortnight."

Musa laughed. "That wasn't what I meant." She pushed off from the stone column and faced them properly. "I've got invitations from three venues back home. Nothing massive. I want to test some new songs I've been working on. See how they fare outside my bedroom!"

“You’re going on tour?” Stella said with bravado.

“Mini tour,” Musa corrected.

Bloom grinned. “You’ll be incredible. Me and Stella will have to come and see you!”

Musa jumped up with two fists in the air. “Yes, that would be wicked! I can show you Melody Bloom. It’s way better than Solaria!”

“Lies, lies, more lies. Musa darling won’t you stop corrupting the innocent.” Stella said.

Tecna adjusted the cuff at her wrist. “I am returning to Zenith,” she said. “We have secured funding for a new prototype omni. I am going to work on getting it ready before autumn.”

Stella blinked. “Translation?”

“You’ll be able to put more clothes on your wrist.” Tecna replied.

“Finally! Took you all long enough!”

Timmy, who was standing with Brandon and Sky by the edge of the tree-line gave her a look of admiration. She smiled at him back.

Flora smoothed her skirt over. “I’m going home,” she said. “I’ve missed Linphea and my sister, and I’ve missed the gardens. I imagine it will be a quiet summer for me! You’re all welcome to visit Aspen!”

“You miss the plants?” Musa asked sarcastically.

Flora smiled. “Especially the plants.”

Stella nudged Bloom with her elbow. “We are travelling.”

Bloom came back to reality. “We are?”

“Yes. Solaria first,” Stella declared. “You haven’t seen the southern coast. It is criminal. Then perhaps Andros. I know all the best places to eat! Imagine the paparazzi

Bloom. They won't be able to get enough of us. And nobody will mess with the fairy of the Dragon Flame."

Bloom laughed. "You want me as royal back-up?"

"I absolutely do," Stella said without shame. "You owe me for the drama."

Bloom tilted her head. "I thought it was you who brought the drama to me remember?"

"Details, details. You'll love it Bloom. We can definitely visit Musa and Flora on our travels. I'd say let's visit Tecna but... Zenith is freezing and I want sunshine. Layla what about you? Can I entice you on our trip?"

They all turned to Layla. She had been quiet for most of the day.

Layla folded her arms. She was staring blankly at the sky. "Im going home," she said at last.

"For... family things?" Musa ventured.

Layla tucked her hands in her skirt pockets. "Something like that."

"You'll tell us if you need us," Stella said assuringly.

"I will. I promise." She took Stella's hands and then Musa's next to her. The six of them stood in a circle for a moment.

Nine months earlier, they had stood in this same space fractured by secrets and half-truths. Now they stood bound by something bigger than any of them could have imagined.

"We really did it," Bloom said looking at all of them.

Stella placed her hands on her hips. "Obviously."

"Winx Club?" Musa said.

"Winx Club forever!" Stella confirmed, crossing her hands over with two fingers extended on each.

One by one, each of the girls split off. Timmy, Brandon and Sky joined them.

Musa left first, wheeling her suitcase out alongside Tecna followed by Timmy beside her. Layla offered a nod to each of them and headed to catch an arcstream to Regulus on the boarder of Solaria and Andros. Flora, Stella and Bloom were remaining at Alfea for one more day.

“You realise,” Stella said, “this is only the beginning.”

Bloom looked toward the horizon, where the sky met the lake in a band of gold.

“I know,” she said. She did not fear it anymore.

The wind moved through the trees. The towers of Alfea stood tall ahead of them. Ahead lay one thousand unanswered questions, and the subsequent one thousand answers.

They stepped toward it together. As the Winx Club.

* Epilogue *

Carved into stone that predates Solaria itself was Cittaluce's top security prison. Nobody could get in or out without someone knowing. Chiefly because, not many even knew of its existence.

The corridors smelt of iron and mildew. Royal guards stood at several places in the complex, switching around at random intervals. No one spoke unless required.

Cassandra sat alone in a circular cell at the end of the lowest corridor. Silver cuffs coiled around her wrists and throat. Her powers had been totally nullified. Her hair lay down without any style or structure. Her elegant dress had been replaced with coarse grey fabric. She ate from a small bowl of oats the guards had given her.

They had made it comfortable for her inside, but she had not asked for the mirror.

Light could only get through the small slits in stone that acted as windows. It cast a pale bar across the floor that shifted inch by inch as the day turned to night.

Her trial would begin at dawn and soon everyone would know Cassandra's secrets. The crown had granted her a scholar, but even he couldn't help Cassandra out of this. She had rehearsed her defence until the words meant nothing. Loyalty and service. Loyalty and

service. She would act in any way she could to avoid the sentence to Omega.

Nothing could change the fact that she had lost. She had lost everything she had worked so hard to build. All for nothing.

Cassandra wiped away her tears. Indistinct chatter could be heard outside, which was unusual, why would they need to speak. Then she heard both guards thud to the ground.

A shadow stretched slowly underneath the doorway to the corridor. The flowing form of a person appeared on the wall. Stepping out from the darkness came a man. He wore nothing but a dark cloth that drank what little illumination reached him. His hair fell past his shoulders in pale dirty blonde strands that caught at the edges of shadow. His face remained obscured, as though the light refused to get so close to him.

The guards at the corridor entrance looked like they were still standing outside.

Cassandra was shaking as she looked up at the intruder.

“Cassandra.” His voice did not echo. It seemed to travel directly from his mouth to her ears. Almost as if he was right next to her, whispering softly. “You’ve done well.”

She laughed once, brittle. “Stop toying with me. Are you here to kill me?” She yelled.

The man tutted as he slid across the room. “I mean it, truly. Things have worked out better for me than I could have imagined.” He stepped closer to the bars.

Cassandra rose slowly to her feet.

“You wanted the Dragon’s Flame the whole time.”

“Yes.”

“How is it possible?”

He moved his head. “I’m capable of much that many would find quite inconvenient. Like getting into this prison.”

“You used me.” Cassandra sputtered.

“Yes. Absolutely I did.”

She was almost shocked by his honesty, but then, she supposed, what did he have to lose. “I risked everything,” she hissed. “My position. My daughter. My life.”

“You didn’t have to accept my deal. I simply provided you with opportunity. As far as I’m concerned we both upheld our end of the bargain.”

“You promised me Solaria.”

“I promised you a future in which you would rule.”

“I don’t have either!” She snapped

His hand lifted slightly. The air in the cell disappeared. Cassandra couldn’t breathe.

“Don’t get greedy Cassandra” he said restoring the air in the cage.

She dropped to the ground and gasped for air. She regained her bearing. “Why are you here?” she asked.

“I came to cut a new deal.”

“What do you want?”

He remained silent for a moment. “I believe you already know the answer to that.”

“Bloom,” Cassandra breathed.

“The true heir returns. The Flame reignites. The realms look to Domino once more.”

His voice lowered. “The pieces move where they were always meant to move.”

Cassandra gripped the bars.

“You wanted this from the beginning.”

“I can’t say I had planned it going exactly like this, but, in many ways, yes.”

Her mouth thinned, she glared at him.

“What do you gain from a restored heir to the throne of Domino?”

He leaned just enough for a sliver of moonlight from the window to catch his jaw.

“Spoilers.” He hissed, coy.

Cassandra drew herself up. “Well you can forget it. I won’t help you again. At my trial I will speak,” she said. “I will tell them you exist. I will tell them who provided the eggs. Who orchestrated the ring.”

“And you think a nameless whisper of “the shadow that made you do it” will be enough to save you from the Omega Dimension?”

The air in her cage grew thin.

“That being said, if you dare even utter anything to do with me” he said, “your daughter will not live to see the verdict., I can assure you of that.”

“Leave her alone.” Cassandra’s breath shortened. She coughed. “You promised she would be safe.”

“She will be. If you remain silent.”

Her jaw trembled.

He turned slightly, “When the time is right,” he said, “I will step into the light once more.”

Cassandra turned in frustration and threw herself against a wall. Her hands were tied.

“You know, I can give you what you want. I can reunite you with your daughter. I can give you Solaria. I can save you from Omega and I can eliminate anyone who would stand in your way. You only have to join me.”

“How do I know you aren’t lying?

“I never go back on a deal.”

She searched him for deceit, but what choice did she have?

“You were never meant to win this time Cassandra.”

Although this is what she had assumed, it angered her more hearing it out loud so

simply.

She closed her eyes. “When I take the stand tomorrow,” she said, “If I hold my tongue, and if my daughter remains untouched... you swear I will have what you promised?”

“I do not swear it lightly.”

Cassandra inhaled slowly. When she opened her eyes, the calculation had returned.

“I pledge allegiance,” she said. “To you. I will speak nothing of you at my trial.”

The man regarded her. “Allegiance is not spoken,” he said. “It is marked.” He extended his hand through the bars. The forcefield did not stop him.

Cassandra flinched only once before forcing herself to take the shadowy hand.

His fingers brushed the inside of her wrist. Heat seared across her skin. She clenched her teeth and began to cry and writhe in pain.

The mysterious figure completely vanished. She was left convulsing on the ground, her eyes rolling back from the searing pain coming from her wrist. As quick as it started, the pain ceased. The only thing left was a mark burned red against her pale flesh.

A single letter carved, no, branded into her skin.

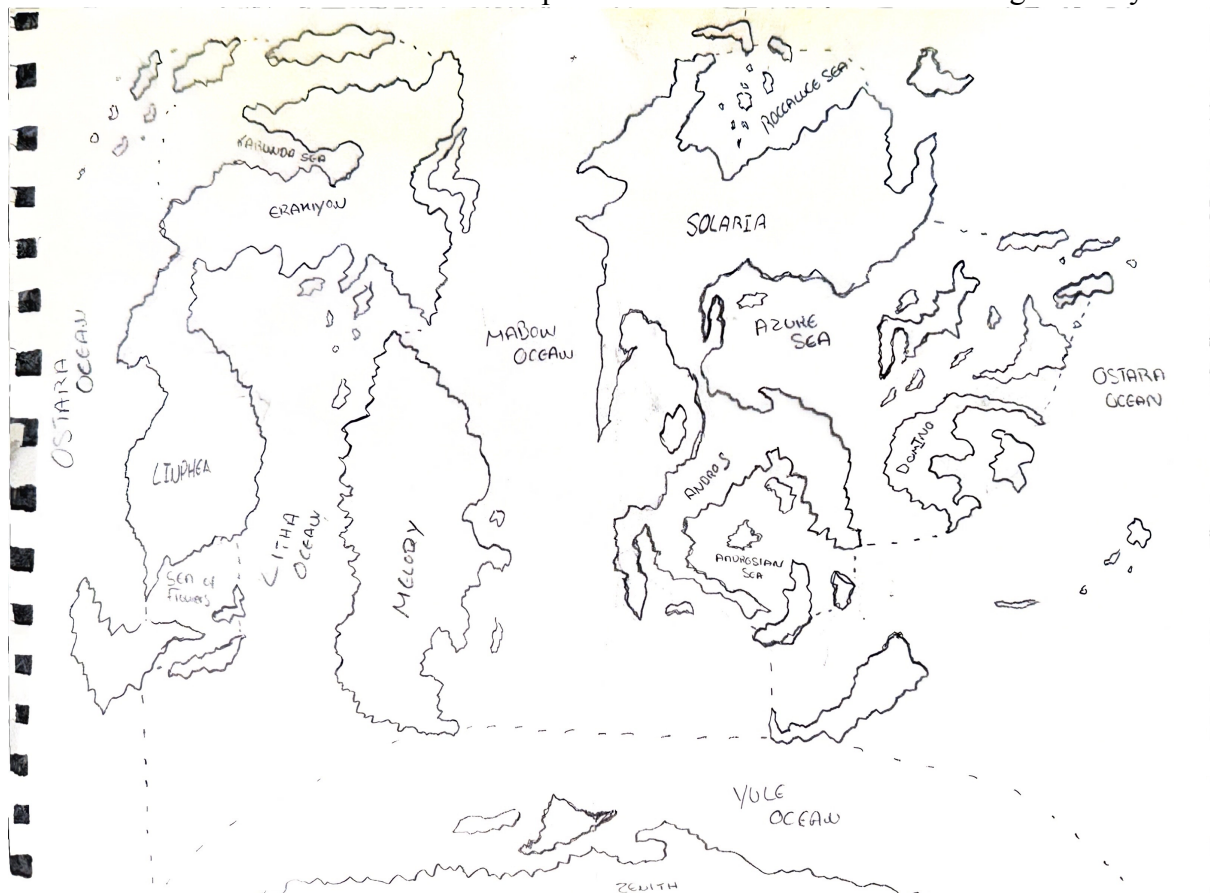
V.

To be continued...

In The Winx Chronicles Book 2: Secrets.

Bonus Content

These drawings are likely from sometime in 2021, when I was ideating with “The Winx Chronicles” idea. I knew that I wanted to plan out the world first before writing the story.



SEAS

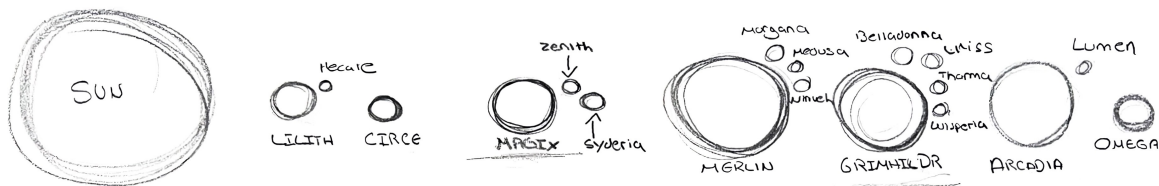
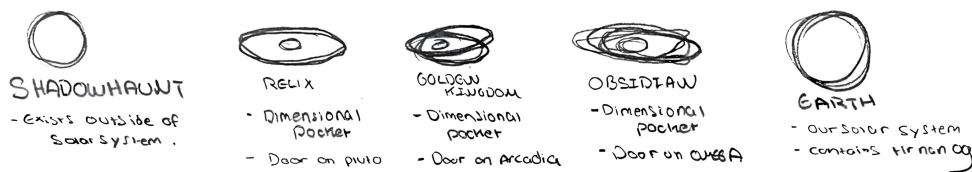
- ANDROSTAW
- ROCCALUCE
- HARUNDA
- AZURE
- FLOWERS

OCEANS

- LITHA
- MADON
- YUCE
- OSTARA

LOCATIONS:

- Adquistas city S
- Aifera School for fairies S
- Asgard Z
- Atlantis A
- Azure valley S
- Barrier Mountains E
- Beta Academy Z
- Black mud swamp S
- Callisto city S
- City of Trees L
- Cloud tower school for witches S
- Crystal Labyrinth ?
- Data Bridge castle Z
- Dolova city L
- Downland S
- Elven kingdom
- Eranlyon Institute for fairies E
- Espero city M
- Fallat city
- Lightrock Monastery S
- Golden Auditorium M
- Graynor L
- Hauram E
- Haggar E
- Harunda E
- Horia village S
- Lane roccaluce S
- Linphea College for fairies L
- Luria L
- Haggar forger school E
- ~~Magix city S~~
- Malacay potion Academy S
- Monachos S
- Ohm M
- oppositus M
- Orer city
- Osturia college E
- Pixie village A
- premetia L
- Pyras D
- Quilting mountains M
- Red fountain S
- Red tower S
- Romulea city A
- Rot city
- Wildlands E
- Zambra college Z
- Altered JUNG. - Birthplace of genes.

SOLAR SYSTEM:**Other:**

Way back in 2021 I wrote the prologue, the very first draft of this is somewhere on my old

laptop I'm pretty sure, but this version is one from 2022. So it's not the first, but a very early version of what later became the final prologue.

Piercing were the screams that echoed under the cover of roaring flames. The sound of many thousands fleeing their homes and subsequently to their peril. Three cloaked figures emerged from the fire's smoke; etched into their smiles a malevolence that bared no semblance of morality. They said not a word, only gazed into the destruction they caused as they bathed in the calamity. The three figures moved slowly; savouring every moment in the spotlight of the sparks. The street they stood on was long, and at the end of the road, atop a small hill, was a grand palace. The buildings on the street were stacked in a Grecian style, painted in different shades of pastel colours. These colours, however, were muddied by the black overcast of the sky. Although the street was wide, the miscellany of houses brought the street inwards. A fiery red-haired girl emerged from one of the homes in flames, she was evidently weak and covered in several burns. She stood directly in front of the three figures and flinched for only a moment, then she took a deep breath before a bright fiery light began to consume her, each one of her already cindered clothes burning up as they transformed into a shimmering attire, her hair was magically pinned back and finally she sprouted wings as the fire evanesced. She now wore a sparkling blue dress and gloves whilst also sporting a large pair of intricate, glittering wings. The burns that were previously present on her skin now were no longer visible.

"Fairies." Snarled one of the hags "You just don't know when to give up." She paused and looked at her two accomplices. The girl let out a breath and leapt into the air, her wings beginning to flutter. She shot a fiery bolt from her fingers at the three villains. It hit them directly and exploded in a huge display of heat and embers. She remained in the air as the

smoke from her magic cleared. The three figures were nowhere to be seen. For a moment she believed they were destroyed by the bolt but quickly resumed her caution for she knew they couldn't have gone down that easy. All that could be heard was the fluttering of the fairy's wings and the desolate howling of the wind. There were screams no longer. Flying higher she could see the expanse of the destruction. Every which way she looked she could see the memory of her home, gone. She collapsed to the ground in tears, the three hags now re-materialising before her. One walked towards her and kneeled. Her hands caressed her face slowly. "Valiant effort from an Enchantix fairy." Her claws wrapped around the fairy's neck "Unfortunately, not valiant enough." Then, from her palms, radiated an icy glow, the fairy's skin began to freeze, progressing from her neck and over her face. The fairy croaked as she tried to breathe, the skin sizzling and crackling as it was turned to solid ice. In a matter of moments, the fairy was frozen solid, her knees already melting into water under the heat of the flames. The hag cackled. They all stared in silence as she boiled away, each one of them slowly reeling their heads to face the palace atop the hill.

In the palace, a woman, cloaked and masked in sunset orange waded through the golden halls. Fighting tears, she dragged behind her a young child, masked and cloaked this time in white, barely able to keep up with the older woman. They were both running more frantically than they had ever done. The woman's platinum blonde hair leaked from her hood as she continuously cleared it away from her face. The palace was already engulfed in fire and most of the staff taken along with it. Meanwhile, the three villainesses made their way into the courtyard of the palace, setting aflame each individually crafted hedge along the path that lead to the doors. They didn't even have to enter the castle before they spotted the cloaked woman and her younger companion. They paused in consternation as the two of them ran through the grand doors. They locked eyes for what was barely a moment with the

three hags. The woman then removed her cloak and underneath revealed a glittering costume and large complex wings. She quickly picked up the younger girl and turned to fly across the courtyard. The wicked trio followed the fairy with great haste, they bore a semblance of fear. The arrogance now wiped from their smiles. The hags knew exactly who this woman was, and she frightened them.

The fairy flew down the hill that the palace was nestled on. Behind the castle, the hill turned into a cliff face. A strip of sandy beach separated it from the ocean. Ingrained into the side of the cliff was a small cave. The fairy headed there quickly, carried by her wings this time. Inside, the cave opened up into a larger dome, like area and was filled with crystals of bright warm colours and a strange obelisk stone circle structure. The woman rushed inside and set down the young girl and began to cast spells over the stone circle. In response, each of the rocks began to glow.

"Daphne." The small girl shuddered "What's going on?" Daphne turned to face her, she could see through her mask that she was trying to fight back tears.

"You're going to be okay, okay?" Spoke Daphne in an attempt to calm her. A great roar of energy then resonated from the rocks. A veil of magic appeared between a couple of the centre rocks that seemed to form a doorway. "I need you to go through that portal now,"

"Will you come with me?"

"Of course I'll come with you" Daphne affirmed, although her voice trembled "Sisters always stick together. Let's go, quickly." Her voice dwindled from confidence to a whisper. They both walked towards the veil of magical energy together, hand in hand. Suddenly there was a crash of energy from within the cave. Daphne knew in that instant that the hags had managed to find their way into the cavern. "I'm sorry" Daphne spoke quickly. Her eyes lit up in impetuosity as she pushed the small girl into the portal. The girl let out a scream as she

passed through the veil but it faded from the cave with the girl. Daphne placed her hand on the veil and dissolved it. In sheer shock and despair, she collapsed to the ground in tears.

"You're foolish, you know he will live on for all eternity. What makes you think you can hide her forever?" croaked one of the hags. Her voice sounded macabre, yet clearly frustrated.

"Quiet Liliss. No need for us to waste our breath on words she already knows to be true."

"I'm not scared" jabbed the fairy. "One day you will find her, but when that day comes she will be strong enough to snuff the darkness from the light once and for all. I hope that scared you. I hope it scares you for a thousand years."

"You remind me of your parents, Daphne," The third and final hag remarked. "I have seen dynasties rise and fall, never have I encountered such pride as I have with your family. You will fall. Liliss, Tharma. Your hands." The beings linked their hands and began to glow a light that radiated pure evil.

"May the forces of light live on. For Evermore."

The light encompassed Daphne. Then she was gone. The villains were left unsettled however for they knew that they had failed. The leader of the three let out an ear-shattering scream in frustration and cindered pride.

They all looked out into the destruction. This was the night the almighty realm of Domino fell.

The following set of images are taken directly from a good-notes file I had where I originally wrote some of what became Chapter two. Although this was intended to be chapter one.

I wrote the following passages on the train on my way to work sometime in 2022.

OUTLINE

Chapter 1

- Bloom sketching in Muir woods.
- pondering existence of the Douglas Squirrel
- She hears a sound and decides to leave
- as she leaves she gets a call from Mirzi
- once she's off the phone she hears a scream and runs to help, she has an interaction with Stella
- She goes to Mirzi's party where it's revealed someone was killed in Muir woods
- Stella shows up at the party.

Chapter 2

- She's telling the police about Stella and the scream
- She must go back to Muir to find out what happened.
- Interaction with Stella in Muir woods.
- She runs back home
- Stella shows up on her doorstep.

CHAPTER I

1 The douglas Squirrel scurried down from the tall Sequoia tree. Bloom's pencil skated across the paper as she captured the shape of the animal. ^{She wondered} If the Squirrel knew what was beyond the confines of muir woods, would it seek more from life than the menial cycle designated to it by the grand design? ^{She paused.} The rodent made its way amongst the freshly fallen autumn leaves, its paws pitter-pattering against them as it scavenged for food. Although, perhaps the squirrel is well aware of what lies beyond and that is the very reason it's content with its provincial life. Bloom picked up a nearby hazelnut and held it out for the animal. It cautiously made its way toward her hand and took the food and hurried back up the tree. Bloom frequented muir woods, it was her favorite place for her to escape and just draw. Most of her friends were off to college in the coming weeks. It's been a constant

2 The douglas Squirrel scurried down the tall Sequoia tree. Bloom's pencil skated across the paper, perfectly capturing the shape of the animal. She wondered if the squirrel knew what was beyond the confines of muir woods, would it seek more than the provincial existence given to it by the grand design. If it knew of even taller trees, would it want to climb them. If it knew of flying squirrels, would it want to fly? Or perhaps the very reason the squirrel was content was because it was somehow aware of what lies beyond, after all, there is a beauty to simplicity. The rodent made its way through the freshly fallen leaves, its feet

3 The douglas Squirrel scurried down the tall Sequoia tree. Bloom's pencil skated across the paper - perfectly capturing the shape of the animal as its paws pitter-pattered against the freshly fallen leaves. She envied the squirrel in many ways for its simple and provincial existence. It seems so content with the hand dealt to it by the grand design. Although it was ignorant of the world beyond muir woods. If it did know, would it want more? Would it be jealous squirrels that fly for all it can do is run? Bloom picked up a nearby acorn and offered it to the rodent. It inched its way over to her extended hand and took the food to begin closely examining it. She chuckled to herself as the rodent scurried back up the tree.

Bloom frequented muir woods since she was a child. It has long been a place for her to escape whatever was transpiring in her everyday life. It was beautiful, especially at this time of year

Bloom could hide forever amongst the peaceful allure of the woods. Alas, she had a curfew and the sun had already begun to wane. She put on her crimson red jacket and hap-hazardly gathered her art supplies from the ground, along with a handful of twigs and leaves, and tossed them into her bag - also red. It was her colour after all.

It was September and most of Bloom's friends had gone off to college or were leaving in the coming couple of weeks. Bloom was taking a year away from education. On one hand, she'd love to go to art school. Nothing sounds more idyllic to Bloom than the concept of drawing all day, but she didn't want her most cherished hobby to become a chore. Besides, what would she do with an art degree? Another part of her wanted to study law - to help bring justice to those who deserve it - the idea of being asked to defend a guilty client sat heavily with her. Perhaps marine conservation or fashion design as an extension of her love of art? Bloom had many ideas about what she wanted to be, but nothing tangible enough yet. That's why for the upcoming year she can help her mother run the florist.

Gardenias was the name of her mum's flower shop. Her mother, Vanessa, had opened it when she was in her twenties. She was a kindly looking lady - always sporting some kind of dungarees, effortlessly making them look stylish everytime. Her hair was always pin straight and kept in a long, neat bob - a far cry from Bloom's fey, long red hair that always appeared unkempt no matter how hard she tried. Her father having nice hair added insult to injury - he had short blonde hair that complimented his blue eyes nicely.

Bloom wandered through the grounds of Muir Woods - eager to get back before sundown at risk of a well meaning lecture from her mum. There was something unsettling about the air that night, she couldn't quite put her finger on the feeling but - BUZZ BUZZ BUZZ BUZZ. Bloom's phone began to vibrate from inside of her bag. She rummaged through the cacophany of twigs, leaves and art supplies to find it.

"BLOOM!" Shrieked a voice from the phone. It was shrill and condescending. A voice like that could only belong to one person: Mitzi. She was Bloom's friend from high school and whilst she often was difficult to get along with, Bloom valued her as one of her closest friends.

"Bloom, where on earth are you?"

The following passages are several ideas that came from trying to get Chapter One correct. I tried so many times until eventually settling on what you read in the final book. Please ignore my constant use of hyphens, I know this is not grammatically correct, and should be commas

or em dashes instead. My English teachers tried to beat this habit out of me for years, to no avail. I also know some of this doesn't make any sense, but sometimes, this is how the process starts for me. So I thought I would share. Anyways, enjoy:

Every good story starts with Wonder. Admittedly, an increasingly frugal emotion. As age corrupts the many, the few that preserve the ability are named fools. It has been said that wonder is the beginning of wisdom, Is it not then, that a child is more wise than their parent as they find wonder in the most mundane of places. In the words of Einstein 'Curiosity has its own reason for existing. The important thing is to not stop questioning.' The way Bloom saw it, who was she to argue with him?

Wonder has become an increasingly frugal emotion. As age corrupts the many - the few that preserve the ability are named fools. It has been said that wonder is the beginning of wisdom - Is it not then, that a child is more wise than their parent as they find wonder in the most mundane of places. In the words of Einstein 'Curiosity has its own reason for existing. The important thing is to not stop questioning.' The way Bloom saw it, who was she to argue with him?

Light leaked through the bars of cell. Bloom's red hair seemed to radiate a glow like a waning flame in the rays of the setting sun. Slumped on the stool - her face a grey boredom and chin resting in the palm of her hand. It felt like it had been hours. Bloom's curiosity would often get her into trouble, but it was usually met with a blithe response - not this time. What's so special about that old warehouse anyway, she thought. The place

appeared abandoned for the most part. She had clearly stumbled into something she knew very little about. What could possibly be the reason for all of this upset?

You see, Bloom's father, Mike, was the chief of the police in San Francisco - A kind and fair man. The high school jock turned loving husband turned Father. Bloom and Mike got along well and had a cheeky, boisterous relationship that was typical of a Father and son rather than a daughter. He wasn't often a stern man which made Mike's position as chief humorous to Bloom and her Mother whose only experience of him in a serious light was during a game of Monopoly. Perhaps it was from her Father that Bloom derived her sense of curiosity and altruism, although it could be construed as narcissism by some. Nevertheless they had a special bond - not that it stopped Bloom from abusing that connection to get away with more than most. This time felt different though.

The echoed sound of a heavy lock emanated down the hallway - followed by footsteps.

"Bloom, your parents are here for you, your Father wants to speak with you first - but after that you're free to go." It was Marcus, one of her Father's colleagues, he looked more concerned than disappointed.

She left the cell and began to walk towards the front of the station, to reclaim her belongings. Another officer signalled towards her Father's office. She knocked once.

"Come in" His voice came from inside. She opened the door to see her Father sat inside, purple bags under his eyes, two coffee cups on the table and paper scattered in chaotic fashion all over the desk. This was unlike the put together, organised man she knew. She sat down, as he rubbed his hands on his forehead.

"I'm sorry Dad, I didn't know-" Bloom began.

"The main thing is that you're okay, we need to talk about what you saw."

“I didn’t see anything, What’s really going on here Dad?” He paused, they exchanged a glare for a moment. “...Dad?”

“Look Bloom, I’m not meant to say anything to anyone but because I know you, and the fact that you won’t stop until you know this, I will tell you what I can. People have been going missing in San Francisco. And whoever or whatever is causing these disappearance have the CIA involved. This is serious. I am not playing with you Bloom, you have got to be careful, do not go near any active crime scenes again, do you understand?”

“Crime scene?” Bloom uttered “Someone was taken there?”

“Yes. A teenage boy was taken just before you arrived I imagine.

Scorch marks unlike anything Bloom had ever seen singed the locks of the old warehouse door. The area around was overgrown with tall grass and weeds, all of the shipping containers clearly at the mercy of the elements were covered in seemingly bright brown rust. Bloom slowly creaked open the doors. Inside, it was much the same, with a overcast of early evening sunlight illuminating the space. A map of San Francisco lay furled open on the floor with several areas circled and highlighted red. A makeshift sleeping bag was next to it.

“What on earth?” Bloom muttered to herself as she carefully searched the map, her hand gliding over the paper.

You see, people have been going missing in the city of San Francisco. Three teenagers have disappeared all without a trace and in all of the cases nothing has turned a clue other than those mysterious scorch marks that appear at the scene of every disappearance. This warehouse had been abandoned for years - ever since Bloom could remember - It was curious when she spotted those very same scorch marks on the door two days ago.

The doors flung open with a crash,

The streets of San Francisco came alive when the sun begins to set. Bloom's Father glared at her through the rear view mirror - the silence was loud.

The squirrel scurried down from the tall sequoia tree - Bloom capturing the shape of the rodent with three clear strokes of her pencil. Muir Woods was quiet this time of year. It provided sanctuary throughout her life - especially recently. Most of her friends had already left for college and the few that hadn't were leaving in the next couple of weeks. The trees in Muir were towering like natural skyscrapers - their bark a warm brown contrasting the lush green tones of the foliage. Her sketchbook was brimming with several depictions of the woods and the creatures that lived there. It was like a world away from the one she lived in, like a sanctuary from a never ending onslaught of mundane and tiresome questions.

Her Mother, Vanessa, was a generally meek lady, she owned the local flower shop and took pleasure in the simple things like making someone smile with a bouquet of pink petunias. She lived a perfect life in many ways: 'by the book' as it were. She married her high-school sweetheart and moved to the city to start a new life together. Mike worked as the chief firefighter in the San Francisco area. Much like his wife - he enjoyed the simple things as well. It made for a loving environment for Bloom to grow up in, but it was often

constricting and lacked the grandeur Bloom desired more than anything. She wanted more than college, a job, a husband and death. It was easy to forget, so far out in the woods, that feeling of looming mundanity that was creeping up on her with the march of time.

Bloom finished shading the fur of the Douglas squirrel and placed the paper amongst the rest of her sketches in her book. Her supplies were scattered amongst the copper fallen leaves of the forest, scooping up both her supplies and Muir woods into her bag as she packed them away - she'll deal with it later. The sun was setting and she needed to get home before her Mum decided she'd been brutally killed or kidnapped. Her doubts weren't misplaced, people have been going missing in San Francisco. Bloom began her walk back to her bike at the entrance of the forest, the crunch of her footsteps creating a symphony with the tweeting of the birds.

She pulled open the rusted, old, warehouse doors. Inside was a makeshift sleeping bag, made out of what looked to be old fabric and tarp. A desk with a lamp, various photos and handwritten scribenings. There was also a pinboard with a map of San Francisco city. Marked on it several locations in bright red marker.

"I knew it" whispered Bloom under her breath as she looked over the map. Each location circled was the crime scene for one of the disappearances. You see, people have been going missing in San Francisco. Each one a riddle - an enigma - and the cops seem completely stumped as every lead they follow ends up at a dead end. First it was Billy Ware - just sixteen years old - but a promising lad to say the least. He was walking home from school when he disappeared. Then it was Clara Dunkley - nineteen and worked at the local bakery. She was taken outside of her home, right under her parents's noses. Eight missing

cases later and we arrive at Selena O'Keith. Eighteen years old, kind - apparently. She must have taken a wrong turn at night into an alleyway and then never came out. It's been months but not a single body has been found, no trace of the missing people other than their memory. All of them young adults, all of them taken in San Francisco.

The following is a scene that was originally meant to happen at the end of Chapter Twenty-Eight, and when I say originally, I mean until about four days prior to release. This was the final scene I cut as I realised that It wouldn't make any sense for how I know book two begins. So, please consider this non-canonical, but an interesting look into an alternate ending to the book.

It was the final night at Alfea and Bloom was out with Sky, Brandon, Flora and Stella in Roccaluce town. The lake shone at this time of night. It stretched out to the mountains in the distance. The water only broken by the occasional ripple of something unseen beneath. Lanterns hung from the lower branches of the trees behind them, casting light across the grass.

Music drifted faintly from the restaurant where everyone else was sat. Brandon had been attempting to juggle cupcakes all evening and had, somehow, managed to set his sleeve alight in the process. Stella had scolded him for it as it was a new shirt.

Sky and the others seemed to get along well which is more than Bloom could have ever wanted. She was talking some time to herself to sit by the water and could hear everyone's laughter behind her. However, she didn't feel compelled to go back. Things felt calm at night by Roccaluce. She wondered, does the lake remember every girl who had ever

stood on its banks and wondered who she was going to become?

She wrapped her arms around herself and looked out.

“It’s strange,” she said, though she wasn’t talking to anyone in particular. “A year ago I didn’t know what I was. Now everyone does.” She exhaled through her nose. “Sky’s trying very hard to pretend none of that changes anything, I can’t help but feel it complicates things though. It was easier when I thought I was the girl from Earth and he was the squire from Eraklyon.”

Bloom smiled but kept her focus on the lake.

“Stella really likes Brandon, and I think he knows it now as he’s learning he can get away with anything around her. He can’t. But we’ll let him think that for now. Flora is already planning to bring half of Linphea’s gardens back to Alfea in September. I can’t wait to see the flowers and to bring some back to my mum... my Earth mother.”

Bloom skimmed the water. The ripples seemed to continue on forever.

“I have been pretending I’m okay with the answers I have, but in truth I still have so many questions. Questions I-“

The forest behind her made a sound. Bloom turned quickly and summoned a ball of fire in her hand. She rose slowly and turned her head and scanned the tree-line. The lantern light did not reach that far, the forest was draped in deep shadow, but someone was stood there, watching her. Bloom could just make them out.

Bloom stepped away from the water.

“Hello?” she called to them.

The figure did not retreat. Moonlight slid between the branches and caught on pale fabric.

Bloom gasped and stepped toward it. “Come into the light,” she said. For a moment,

nothing happened. Then the figure came into the open.

Golden hair was lit up by the moonlight and long pale orange robes fell at her side.

“Hello, Bloom.”

“Hello, Daphne.”

* * *