

✱ 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. Sluggish ripples disturbed the mire, broken only by the occasional shift 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 marsh like fingers grasping for escape.

Stormy moved through the marsh with her characteristic impatience. Her boots cut through the mire, splashing brackish water as she weaved around 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-stained seams. None of it seemed to slow her. Her focus remained sharp.

"Icy," she called, echoing across the clearing.

A bitter wind curled through the trees as Icy emerged. She stepped from behind a gnarled willow with deliberate composure. 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, sleek, sharp-lined, and regal. Power clung to her presence. Every step landed

with intention.

“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. Darcy recoiled in shock.

“Alive?” Icy stepped forward. “Are you sure it wasn’t a glamour or a decoy?”

“I’m sure. I watched her walk in, radiating that familiar Solarian arrogance. Alive, smug, and acting like she’d not been marked for execution.”

“She was meant to be intercepted before returning to Magix,” Darcy muttered. “My contacts 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’s attention sharpened. “Who else?”

“Two girls,” Stormy said. “One could be Solarian. Not royalty, but refined, disciplined. She kept herself between Stella and the door. The other...” she paused, her features tightening, “was strange.”

“Strange how?” Icy asked.

“Red hair. 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, they’d be on our watchlists.”

“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 let me get away."

"You're saying it was in your presence?" Darcy leered.

Stormy nodded with a grin, "It must have been and we know it's not in the ring of Solaria. They mentioned Alfea, They're heading there."

Icy's eyes flashed. She 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's jaw 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 shook her head. "She said her name was Layla. No crest. No insignia. But she moved like someone descended from the founding families. She knew how to fight. She was 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 acted 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 sensed the weight of their intent. Shadows crept closer, the air thick with promise and unease. Without another word, the witches turned and vanished into the fog. The clearing fell still once more, the black waters holding their secrets.

* * *