

The greatest stories ever told are never told only once.

Spectacle cradles them, whispers betray them.

Touched by the hands of dreamers

Shaped by the certainties of pragmatists.

Through the victors and through the defeated.

Harnessed for the light or for the wicked.

By those pure and those nefarious.

They morph, they flow like water.

They become what we need them to be.

A spark of hope for some.

A bitter reminder for others.

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

A story of power, wonder, hope and friendship.

A story of despair, destruction, loss and betrayal.

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

To whom who you cast judgement upon.

For every creature from human to god is foiled.

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

Allow me to tell you a familiar tale.

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

And despite all of the horrors of the world.

Still believe in it, to this day.

In charm. In enchantment. In wonder.

* Prologue *

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

"Fairies." snarled one of the hags. "You don't know when to give up."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Daphne." the small girl stuttered. "What's going on?"

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

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

"Will you come with me?"

"Of course I'll come with you," Daphne affirmed, although her voice trembled.

"Sisters always stick together. Let's go, quickly." Her voice dwindled to a whisper.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"May the forces of light live on. Forevermore."

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

cindered pride. They looked upon the ashes.

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

* Chapter One *

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

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

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

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

through her hair anticipating a question.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“That would be great, thanks!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I'm enjoying what we're doing right now...”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bloom clenched her fists. “We manage.”

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

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

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

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

portfolio.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

against Dad at our next game night!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bloom took her coat from the door, left the shop, hopped on her bike and set on her way to the woods. Despite her parents being the most wonderful, and her teachers being the most supportive. Everyone else, including herself, knew it and believed it to be true; there was simply nothing extraordinary about Bloom. Except for the fact that she was a fairy. A powerful one, at that, and brilliant with a pencil, mind you. She did not know it of course... not that she could draw, although she doubted herself as all good artists do, but a fairy? How

could she know such a thing? Fairies aren't real after all, they're creatures of folklore, as mythical as the stories in Plato's writings... or so you've been told. What a presumptuous lie.

* Chapter Two *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Always," Kelly said, her interest genuine.

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

"Where are these from?" Kelly gawked.

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

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

Bloom shrugged, a bit embarrassed. "I'm not really sure. She just... came to me."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Ah, of course. Have fun!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It's Bloom."

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

"Magic?" Bloom said under her breath.

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

"So?"

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

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

trees.

"Keep your voice down! This isn't a joke, You know what you saw Billie..."

"It's Bloom!"

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

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

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

"Bloom, please wait, don't leave! You're in danger!"

* Chapter Three *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There are no such things as fairies.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm sorry."

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

The Creature.

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

She woke up.

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

It was a dream. Just a dream.

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was exactly as she remembered. Horrifyingly accurate.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Homework, Mum. It's just stress," she said.

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

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

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

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

Bloom forced another smile. "I will."

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

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

Stella.

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

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

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

"I'm heading out!" She shouted over her shoulder, already halfway to the door.

Vanessa rushed to the hallway. "Where are you going?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"My... my sweatshirt?" Bloom replied, surprised.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* Chapter Four *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You're adopted?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

had no real choice.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I haven't... told my parents yet. About anything that happened last night."

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

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

"Don't you worry Bloom, subtlety is my middle name" Stella flourished.

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

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

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

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

Stella smiled slightly. "You sound like you like it here"

"Well i'm definitely very lucky to have grown up here... but there are so many places far more wonderful i'm sure."

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

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

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

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

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

Stella listened intently, her eyes softening as Bloom continued.

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

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

Bloom met Stella's gaze, feeling the weight of her words. "I don't know if I can."

Stella grinned, "Well, you'll have to see what paths life decides to roll out for you!"

Bloom laughed, the mood easing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Maybe it only found me whilst we were out."

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

"Unless... unless it's scared of you."

"Scared... of me? Stella, that doesn't make any sense."

"No, it doesn't. There's quite a lot about you that doesn't make any sense Bloom."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* Chapter Five *

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

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

reflection of the moon was hard to tell.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It's okay, it's not your fault." Bloom replied. "Let's find my parents."

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

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

"What is that?" Bloom asked in a whisper.

"Blood," Stella replied grimly "It's faint, but it's fresh."

Bloom's stomach churned. "My parents?"

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

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

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

here too.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"We're fine Bloom. We were sleeping."

"Sleeping, what do you mean sleeping? Stella what does she mean?"

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

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

"What is light going to do Stella?"

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

"Okay. I'm going to get you out of here, I promise. Can you walk Mum?" Bloom asked.

"Yes I think so, but your father, he's bleeding."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And then, it did.

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

“What’s happening?” Vanessa whispered.

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

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

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

Mike gasped, Bloom could feel him tense.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But the fight was far from over.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This time, the attack hit its mark.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Well it did. You were great Bloom!"

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

"It's not here... That creature could have put that ring anywhere, it's lost."

"Stella, i'm so sorry."

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

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

Stella's expression shifted from triumph to shock in an instant. "How is that possible?"

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

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

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

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

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

But then, something deep inside her stirred.

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

felt unnatural. It felt wrong. It felt powerful.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I'm a fairy.

And then, everything went black.

* Chapter Six *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Did you tell them... about me?"

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

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

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

something incredible about yourself in the process.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bloom couldn't help but smile. "That's great. I'm so happy for you Stella."

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

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

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

Bloom looked confused. "What do you mean?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You're not?"

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

okay?"

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

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

Stella nodded. "I understand. I'll be here if you need me."

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

Telling her parents the truth.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mike looked at Vanessa "Of course, Bloom. We're listening. What happened?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Stella smiled, "thank you."

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

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

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

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

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

The sound of her phone interrupted her thoughts.

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

'There has been a change regarding your application'

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Dear Miss Peters, we are pleased to inform you...'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

decision."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Bloom, are you alright?"

"I think I want to go with her?"

"What?" Vanessa said. Mike snapped back.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Just like that" Vanessa replied. "Make us proud, Bloom"

"Thanks Mum" Bloom stared into her mother's eyes for one final time.

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

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

"Wait!" Bloom called out, frantic and urgent.

Stella paused mid-action, facing her with wide eyes. "What is it? What's wrong?!"

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

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

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

"I'm serious," Bloom said "I'm ready."

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

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

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

"No... nothing!" Stella said with resolve.

"Nothing? What about money?"

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

"I know Stella."

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

"I'm ready, to Solaria!"

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

* Interlude One *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“The crystal... is yours...?”

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

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

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

“It’s hard to say... we haven’t heard anything back yet.” Darcy uttered, her voice silken and sly.

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

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

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

“What about Griffin?” Darcy injected.

“What about her?”

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

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

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

What had stirred it from its dormancy?

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

* * *