

Episode 20

Bloom felt like she was floating—almost weightless. Her body felt strangely light, almost as if she wasn't truly there.

Her consciousness drifted, grasping for clarity. *What had she been doing before this?*

Sleeping, right.

She had gone to bed the night before, completely drained from her sparring session with Valtor.

Despite her exhaustion, sleep hadn't come easily. Instead, she had spent hours lying awake, replaying the moment Valtor's hand had barely ghosted over the center of her back—the *nexus*, as he had called it. The memory alone was enough to send an embarrassed heat rushing to her face. The unbidden gasp that had escaped her lips haunted her. She wanted to bury herself under her sheets and never emerge again.

It was too early to wake up anyway. The soft, weightless feeling began lulling her back into rest...

Until a familiar voice whispered in her ear.

"Bloom."

The voice was like wind chimes in the breeze—melodic, soothing, and achingly familiar. Only two people could make her feel this safe. One was her mother back in Gardenia.

The other... was her sister.

Bloom's fatigue vanished instantly.

Her eyes fluttered open, and she gasped in excitement as she took in the familiar expanse of the blue void surrounding her. The infinite, endless ocean of deep sapphire stretched beneath her feet, vast and magical.

She knew this place.

Another wave of excitement flared through her as she turned and saw the glowing figure floating beside her.

Bloom: "Daphne!"

She rushed to hug her closely, floating across the dark expanse beneath her. Despite being a spirit, Daphne felt warm—real.

Bloom: "Where have you been? I haven't seen you in ages!"

Daphne's smile faltered a bit, her expression betraying the regret she felt at having to leave her little sister alone for so long.

Daphne: "I know, my little spark. I'm sorry I've been away for so long. Reaching you like this takes a great deal of energy. My powers... they're not what they used to be."

Bloom nodded, but she couldn't keep the disappointment from creeping into her heart. She always seemed to forget—just for a moment—that Daphne wasn't alive. That this was her sister's spirit left behind after she died protecting her.

Daphne: "*Bloom... while I'm so happy to see you again, I'm here for another reason tonight.*"

Her voice faltered, hesitation creeping in as if she were carefully choosing her next words.

“You know I’m always watching over you, right?”

Bloom smiled and nodded, warmth blooming in her chest. She had never doubted it—not for a second.

Daphne: “I just want you to be careful... trusting a man like Valtor.”

Bloom’s breath caught.

Her heart pounded in her chest as her mind raced for an excuse—a lie, anything that might explain this away. The paranoia that had been gnawing at her for weeks flared up, urging her to cover her tracks, to *protect* the secret she had buried so carefully.

Her mouth continued opening and closing, trying to find the right words to say so her sister would understand.

Before she could even begin to speak, Daphne raised a hand, silencing her.

Daphne: “I’m not angry at you, Bloom. I know after what happened to you last year... you must feel so alone in bearing this burden. You didn’t have many options left, so I understand.”

Bloom swallowed hard, her throat suddenly tight.

Daphne lifted a hand to Bloom’s cheek, her thumb brushing against her skin in a gentle, grounding touch. The simple gesture calming Bloom’s racing heart.

Daphne: “I fear even I don’t know how to help you, the shadow is a dark and ancient power that goes beyond what I was taught by the Nymphs. Even though I hate to admit it, if there’s anyone that can help you it’s him.”

Bloom took a breath, then forced herself to ask the question that had been haunting her since the day this all began.

Bloom: “Can I trust him, Daphne?”

Her sister’s gaze lowered. Uncertainty flickered across her face, settling like a shadow in her features.

Daphne: “I honestly don’t know. Valtor has always been an enigma, I could never guess what was going through his mind. He always served in the interest of his mothers, but he seemed to have his own agenda as well.”

Bloom frowned, a spark of curiosity cutting through the unease.

Bloom: “Wait... you knew Valtor?”

Daphne shook her head.

Daphne: “I wouldn’t say I knew him, but I met him once.”

Her expression darkened, her hazel eyes glazing over with distant memories.

Daphne: “*And that one meeting... changed the course of destiny.*”

She exhaled slowly, as if steadying herself, before meeting Bloom’s gaze again.

Daphne: “It would be easier to show you.”

Bloom barely had time to process those words before Daphne’s hands gently cradled her face.

Despite being a spirit, her touch was warm, like the gentle caress of the first rays of warm sunlight at the beginning of spring.

Bloom barely had time to take another breath before everything around her shifted.

Bloom felt herself being pulled away—twisting, drifting through a haze of memories. Flashes of Domino before the fall flickered through her mind.

Her parents’ stern yet worried faces, preparing for something inevitable.

A tiny, bundled-up baby—herself—nestled in Daphne’s arms, being carried away as fast as possible while three ominous shadows loomed closer, growing larger with every heartbeat.

Then, the sensation of solid ground beneath her feet.

Bloom’s breath caught as she looked up and saw him.

Valtor.

Standing in the grand courtyard of Domino, surrounded by the towering spires of the castle.

The thought that he was still as infuriatingly handsome as ever flitted through her mind before she could even attempt to squash the thought. She *really* hoped Daphne couldn’t read her thoughts.

Valtor was wearing some sort of armor, it looked rather light-weight, but she was almost certain it was charmed with protection spells not unlike her own transformations. The way it hugged his tall frame made him look even more imposing.

And standing before him, alive and radiant, was Daphne.

Bloom had always known her sister was beautiful, but *seeing* her like this was something else entirely.

The golden glow of her long, intricately styled hair, the delicate yet regal pins that held it in place, the breathtaking gown that shimmered like pure sunlight—and for once, the golden mask she usually wore was absent, revealing the deep hazel eyes that had always been hidden behind it.

She looked every bit the princess of Domino.

Bloom barely registered the small pang of wistfulness in her chest. *Would she have worn dresses like this too, if things had been different?*

For a brief moment, Bloom felt slightly self-conscious about her own untameable fiery hair and mundane earth clothes.

But before the thought could fester, past Daphne’s voice cut through the air like a blade.

Daphne: “What are you doing here, demon?! Get out before I call the guards—or blast you from this castle myself!”

Her voice carried an authority that sent a chill through Bloom.

There was no hesitation, no room for doubt. This was Daphne, the Crown Princess of Domino. A warrior. A guardian. A leader.

Valtor, however, seemed entirely unbothered.

A smirk curved his lips—so familiar, so maddeningly confident, Bloom did not want to dwell on the thought of how comforting it felt to see again.

His deep chuckle sent a shiver up her spine. Stars, she really needed to stop reacting to him.

Valtor: "So beautiful, yet so aggressive."

Daphne didn't flinch.

The teasing glint in Valtor's eyes vanished, and in its place came something sharper, something heavier.

His smirk faded.

Valtor: "But I am not here to fight you, Nymph. Not yet at least."

The weight of those two words made Bloom's heart hammer in her chest.

All the pretense was gone now. The playful arrogance stripped away. In its place stood someone entirely different—someone dangerous.

Valtor: "In an hour, the Witches will attack Domino."

Bloom inhaled sharply, a gasp escaping her lips.

She glanced at past Daphne, expecting shock, horror, anything—but her sister's face remained unreadable. Poised. Trained. A princess to her core.

Daphne: "And why would you warn us, demon? Why should I trust a single word you say when every one of them is laced with poison and lies?"

Valtor's gaze darkened.

Valtor: "I'm afraid my word is all I can give you."

He exhaled, almost in frustration.

Valtor: "My mothers have been planning this for months. They even kept me in the dark on the details. I just received my orders—my part in this war has already been set."

Something flickered across his face. Something that almost looked like... bitterness.

Valtor: "This warning is all I can offer you."

Silence. Daphne didn't move, didn't blink, but Bloom could *see* the wheels turning in her mind, could feel the tension in the air as she weighed his words.

Valtor turned, already walking away.

Daphne: "Then fight with us."

He stilled.

Daphne: "Help us stop them, and I will make sure you aren't sent to Omega for your crimes."

Bloom held her breath.

Daphne: "I don't know why you're telling me this, but whatever your motives are, they align with ours. If you fight with us, I will vouch for you."

A long, stretching silence.

Bloom's heart pounded, even though she *knew* how this story ended.

But still, a part of her hoped. A part of her wanted him to say yes.

Slowly, Valtor turned back to face Daphne.

And then, in a voice softer than Bloom had ever heard from him before, he said—

Valtor: "You know I can't."

The words were quiet. Weighted.

Regret lingered in his expression, his smile small.

And then the memory shattered. Bloom sucked in a sharp breath as she returned to the endless expanse of sapphire blue.

Daphne's forehead was still pressed to hers, her hands still cupping Bloom's face.

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

Daphne: "Just as he warned, the Witches attacked an hour later. And Domino fell."

Her voice was steady, but there was something heavy in it.

Daphne: "We were alone that day. The Council of Magix never came. Our supposed allies abandoned us."

She pulled back slightly, meeting Bloom's eyes.

Daphne: "But because of his warning... I had just enough time to come up with an escape plan. For you."

Bloom felt like her entire world had tilted on its axis.

Everything she thought she knew about Valtor—everything she believed about her past—was unraveling in front of her.

Bloom's world was spinning. The weight of everything she had just learned threatened to crush her.

She struggled to make sense of it—to piece together this impossible truth.

She was alive today because of Valtor.

If not for him, she would have perished alongside her sister, her kingdom, *her parents*.

Her throat tightened.

The man she had spent months fighting, despising, the one she had sworn to destroy—he was the reason she was standing here.

Daphne's voice was gentle, but firm, grounding her.

Daphne: "He didn't know about you, Bloom. So I can't say he did this out of the goodness of his heart."

She sighed.

Daphne: “But... whatever his reasons were that day, it was because of him that I had just enough time to save my little sister, even if it cost me my life.”

Bloom’s eyes welled up with tears, she tried to find the right words, tried to say something—anything. But she could only stare at her sister, her bluebell eyes glittering with tears, her chest rising and falling with shallow breaths, as everything she thought she knew about Valtor shattered before her.

The irredeemable evil, the monster, the man who had nearly taken everything from her... Had also been the reason she survived.

Daphne watched her carefully, as if giving her a moment to process the impossible. Then, after a beat, she spoke again.

Daphne: “Fate is strange, isn’t it?”

She smiled softly, but there was something *knowing* behind it—something ancient and wise and far too understanding.

Daphne: “No matter what you or I may think of Valtor, fate seems to have tied you together.”

Bloom’s breath hitched.

Daphne: “Your connection—”

A pause.

Daphne: “Your attraction to each other—”

Bloom’s entire body tensed.

Her cheeks burned, and she barely managed to keep her voice steady.

Bloom: “D-Daphne!”

Daphne only chuckled, her expression warm but serious.

Daphne: “I only say this because I love you, my little spark. But listen to me.”

Her gaze sharpened.

Daphne: “He is still a demon. Born of darkness. Created to be cunning, intelligent... and destructive.”

Her voice dropped, low and urgent.

Daphne: “Promise me, Bloom. Always stay a step ahead of him. And if—when—the day comes that he betrays you...”

A pause.

Daphne: “Make sure it doesn’t break you.”

A fire ignited in Bloom’s chest. That *familiar* spark of determination that had carried her through battle after battle.

Bloom: “I will. I’ll be careful, Daphne.”

And she meant it.

No matter what fate had in store for her, she would not fall prey to Valtor's tricks.

...Right?

Daphne softened again, reaching out to gently take Bloom's hands in hers.

Daphne: "I know I can't give you the reassurance you seek about him."

Bloom swallowed, her fingers curling slightly against her sister's.

Daphne: "But there is one thing I do know."

She squeezed Bloom's hands, her voice quiet but full of certainty.

Daphne: "The shadow virus inside you is not who you are. And your connection to Valtor does not make you evil."

Bloom stilled.

Daphne: "In fact... I think it's quite the opposite."

A mischievous glint flashed in Daphne's hazel eyes, so quick that Bloom barely caught it.

Bloom frowned. *The opposite?*

Before she could ask, Daphne smiled one last time—a knowing, almost secretive kind of smile—
And leaned forward to press a gentle kiss to Bloom's forehead.

Bloom's eyes snapped open. The golden light of morning filtered through the curtains, casting soft shadows across the room.

She lay there for a moment, staring up at the ceiling, Daphne's words echoing in her mind.

The weight of the truth sat heavy on her chest. And yet, somehow, the only thing she could think about... Was the way Valtor sometimes looked at her.

The way his gaze softened, ever so slightly, in a way she was sure no one else had ever seen.

She turned onto her side, curling into herself.

No, she didn't have any answers. Only more questions.

END