PRAISE FOR THE MARVELLERS

"*The Marvellers* deserves the highest compliment I can give a book: I want to live in this world. You can stop looking at admissions brochures for all those other schools of magic. The Arcanum Training Institute for Marvelous and Uncanny Endeavors is definitely where you want to apply."

—**RICK RIORDAN**, #1 *New York Times*–bestselling author

"With fantastical twists at every turn, Clayton has created a world that readers won't want to leave. *The Marvellers* is magical!"

—**ANGIE THOMAS**, #1 *New York Times*–bestselling author of *The Hate U Give* and *Concrete Rose*

"A 'Marvellerous' middle grade debut! Delightful, charming, exceptionally clever, and filled with suspense and humor."

—**LISA McMANN**, *New York Times*–bestselling author of The Forgotten Five series

"Never in all my years of reading have I encountered a book that so seamlessly weaves together mind-bending marvels, cultural relevance, and powerful historical themes . . . all in a richly imagined world I would give anything to live in."

—**NIC STONE**, #1 *New York Times*–bestselling author of *Dear Martin*

"An expertly crafted amalgamation of rich, cultural representation wrapped up in a magic school adventure . . . sure to be a well-loved favorite."

—**J. ELLE**, *New York Times*–bestselling author of *Wings of Ebony*

"Dhonielle Clayton's beautiful prose showcases how honoring differences and sharing gifts can build the strongest friendships. *The Marvellers* illuminates stellar storytelling through the lens of a Black girl learning to embrace the full potential of her magic."

—**KAREN STRONG**, author of *Just South of Home* and *Eden's Everdark*

"A new classic. Clayton creates a luminous world where everyone can find themselves within the halls of the Arcanum Training Institute. I'm ready to be transported into the sequel!"

—**ZORAIDA CÓRDOVA**, award-winning author of *Labyrinth Lost* and *The Way to Rio Luna*

"The fantasy adventure the world needs. *The Marvellers* is a cultural reset, the kind of thorny, exciting, and magical story that I've needed my whole life. Where's book two? I already need it!"

—**MARK OSHIRO**, author of *The Insiders*

ALSO BY DHONIELLE CLAYTON

Tiny Pretty Things

Shiny Broken Pieces

The Belles

The Everlasting Rose

Shattered Midnight

Blackout

AS A CONTRIBUTOR

Meet Cute

The Radical Element: 12 Stories of Daredevils, Debutantes, and Other Dauntless Girls

Unbroken: 13 Stories Starring Disabled Teens

Black Enough: Stories of Being Young and Black in America

THE MARVELLERS

DHONIELLE CLAYTON

SQUARE FISH
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For the kids missing from magic stories who started to believe that there was nothing marvelous about them

&

for Jason Reynolds, who hates dragons!
Beloved readers, be sure to ask him why.

THE PARAGONS

PARAGON OF TOUCH

"The hand has no fear!"

The brave

PARAGON OF VISION

"The eyes are wise!"

The sage

PARAGON OF SPIRIT

"The heart beats true!"

The intuitive

PARAGON OF SOUND

"The ears listen well!"

The patient

PARAGON OF TASTE

"The tongue tells truth!"

The honest

THE ARCANUM TRAINING INSTITUTE FOR MARVELOUS AND UNCANNY ENDEAVORS

LOWER SCHOOL

Salutations and Greetings of the Most Magnificent Kind,

We are thrilled to inform you that you've been accepted into the Arcanum Training Institute for Marvelous and Uncanny Endeavors. Only the marvelous can attend. It is an honor to be chosen by the Heads of the Arcanum, and this invitation means that you demonstrate what it takes to join us. But remember, only your work will guarantee that you can earn the proper degrees to stay with us.

Once your starpost arrives in the Stariary, you will receive a message noting the coordinates of the Level Ones' Stardust Pier and the Institute's location this year.

All the light to you and yours! Good marvelling!

Laura Ruby
Executive Assistant to Headmarveller MacDonald and Headmarveller Rivera of the Lower School

P.S.: No Fewels allowed! If you share this letter with a non-Marveller, it shall disintegrate into dust. Don't test it. You will regret it.

PART I

A BRAND-NEW WORLD

CHAPTER ONE

THE LUCK ROOT

Marvelous.

The lucky kids got called that. Praise like honey drizzled on hot biscuits. But Ella's family didn't believe in gassing you up. Clothes ironed? Make your bed? Clean your plate? And most importantly, did you mind your business so nobody was minding *you*?

Even now, during the greatest . . . the awesome-est . . . the most spectacular thing that had ever happened in all eleven years of Ella Durand's life, her parents were squabbling and telling her what to do.

"Did you use the hangers? Gran pressed those mantles herself after the old iron did a poor job," her mama said. "I don't want to see them wrinkled."

Three juju-trunks floated in the middle of the Durands' living room with all of Ella's things neatly arranged and ready for inspection. Their silk linings glowed as a good-fortune spell infused itself into her belongings.

"Yes, Mama," Ella replied, annoyed.

"The conjure-cameo?" her papa asked.

"Yes, Papa." She patted her chest, the carved medallion of her parents' faces tucked just beneath her shirt.

"And the braid-hands?"

Ella pointed at the vanity case, where a wax copy of her mother's hands sat. "Of course."

Mama tugged one of Ella's long twists. "I *won't* have my baby so far away with her head looking a mess. I spelled them with your favorite styles. You remember how to work them? Their waking song?"

"Yes—"

"Aubrielle, my sweet, she has everything she needs." Papa looked above his newspaper, *The Conjure Picayune*. He tapped his black top hat, which made the ring of tiny human skulls on its brim smile at her. "We should get a move on."

Mama sighed. "Sebastien, I *still* don't know about this."

That sparked their eighty millionth argument about Ella attending the Arcanum Training Institute for Marvelous and Uncanny Endeavors.

Ella plugged her ears. They'd been fussing all summer. Mama and Gran wanted her to stay home and continue to attend Madame Collette's Conjure École. The whole community was conflicted about whether she should be going. But Papa thought it was time for a new adventure, and she was *more* than ready to leave home.

Everyone went silent as Gran's rooster companion, Paon, marched in from the gallery porch and crowed.

"Y'all quit all that hollering, you hear?" Gran shouted through the window. "You're ruining a perfectly good sunset.

This second line is loud enough. The parades are doing too much this year."

Ella hid her smile. "Can we put my trunks in the car now?"

"I'm coming! I'm coming! I'm coming!" Her little sister, Winnie, burst into the room. Her own little juju-trunk tailed her, the edges of it spilling over with toys.

Ella scowled at her. "We've been over this a thousand times. You're too little."

"Fine, but can I see your letter again?" Winnie gazed up at her.

"But you've got to read it to me—"

"I don't like to read," Winnie whined.

"Then you can't see it."

"I just want to *look* at it." Winnie pouted.

"A deal is a deal."

"Okay!" She stomped her tiny foot. "Okay!"

Ella's hand relaxed, and with a sigh she gave up the letter. Winnie fingered the night-black envelope like it was a slice of hummingbird cake, her mouth salivating, ready to gobble it up. She tilted it left and right to see it twinkle, squealing as the envelope's five symbols winked. An eye blinked, a mouth smiled and poked out a tongue, an ear wiggled, a tiny hand waved, and a little heart pulsed. That was Ella's favorite part too.

The five Paragons of Marvelling.

She couldn't wait to learn what was marvelous about her and to join a group based on her talents.

Winnie pinched the stardust seal and opened it, then began to read.

Ella would never get over how amazing it sounded. Her very own invitation. Her very own chance to be a Marveller.

"How do you get a marvel?" Winnie asked.

"You're born with one. They come from your family or community—"

Papa cleared his throat. "Many Marvellers I know have chosen their marvel as well."

Ella whipped around. "I didn't read that—"

"Much to learn, baby girl." Papa returned to his paper.

"What will mine be?" That had been the question Ella had toyed with all summer.

"A conjure marvel, of course," Mama replied like it wasn't even a question.

"There's coupons in here too. Did you see them? They move, and the numbers keep changing like they're fighting with one another. This one says it has the cheapest weather jars—WAIT! No, now it's that one." Winnie's eyes grew wide.

Ella was amazed by the wiggling coupons and their incessant battles. Sandhya's Splendiferous Sundry now boasted the most affordable astrolabes, and the prices from Woodfolk's Wonderous Wares flickered angrily.

"I want to go too," Winnie begged. "I want a marvel. Maybe I can talk to merpeople."

Ella swiped the invitation back. "Don't ruin everything, okay?"

Papa shot Ella a look and picked Winnie up like she was nothing more than a scoop of chocolate ice cream. "Cricket, in just five years, we'll be packing you up too. The second you turn eleven."

"If everything goes all right . . . ," Mama whispered under her breath, but Ella chose to ignore that.

Of course everything would be fine. Better than fine. Spectacular, in fact. Marvelous indeed.

Winnie sniffled and buried her face in Papa's shirt. His bullfrog companion, Greno, croaked as she climbed out of his pocket and got all tangled in his long locs while Mama's chubby alligator, Gumbo, tromped into the room, then nosed around Ella's open juju-trunk as if he were the missing piece.

"Is it really in the sky? How does it even float? Isn't an Institute too heavy to fly?" Winnie asked. "What are Marvellians *like*? Can we go to their cities?"

"You'll see, my beloved." Papa tried to calm her down. "You'll see."

Ella glanced at her satchel spilling over with all the research she'd done this summer at the Griotary, listening to all the books and pestering all the griots to tell her all the things they knew about Marvellers and their Training Institute. Mama and Papa interacted with very few Marvellers, so she didn't know as much as she wanted to.

"Conjuring ain't marvelling, that's for sure," Gran shouted from the porch with a laugh. "And living all the way up in the sky like that can't be natural."

Ella squeezed her eyes shut and let her imagination run wild. She had dreamed about what the Institute would be like all summer. But just like the Institute changed locations every year, she'd read, it also never looked the same way twice. While poring over old brochures, she noticed that sometimes it looked like an art museum, other times a grand hotel, occasionally a

camp, and most often, a boarding school. Ella tried to guess how it would look now.

Her parents had told her as much as they could about the Arcanum Training Institute because they *too* had never visited. No Conjuror had ever been a Marveller before.

Until Ella.

Marvellers were born with marvels, light inside them that allowed them to perform magical feats. They lived in the skies above and away from non-magic-having Fewels . . . and Conjure folk.

They were decidedly *not* the same.

Conjurors were born with a deep twilight inside them, allowing the work of crossing spells and tending to the dead in the Underworld. Now Ella would be the first one to enroll, and when she passed all the tests, she'd be the first to join the Marvellian community. Officially. She'd make her family proud. Especially her papa.

Ella's heart beat as if a firefly had been trapped in her chest. She felt like she was ready for anything.

Mama took one last look into Ella's juju-trunks, then she nodded with approval, eyes softening. Ella waved her hand over the latches and the lids flipped shut. She hummed the sealing spell Mama had taught her to make sure everything stayed secure.

"Please get in the red car," Ella ordered.

They sparked and zipped through the back of the house.

Gran hobbled in from the gallery. "Give me some sugar before you leave me."

Ella dove headfirst into the soft, round middle of her grand-

mother, inhaling as much of her scent as she could: a little honey, a little lavender, and a little butter.

"Just remember you come from a mighty tree." Gran lifted her sleeves and flashed the conjure mark on her brown skin.

Intricate tangles of roots and writhing flowers grew in inky, raised lines along both Gran's and Mama's bodies. Over the years, they'd become more and more complex, traveling along their backs and arms and legs. Ella loved tracing her fingers over it when Gran let her oil her scalp, surprised at how it constantly changed—a new bud here, a new flower there as her grandmother used her skills. Both of them were covered with a road map of talents and abilities.

Conjure always left its mark.

Gran kissed a finger and touched the tiniest mole on the back of Ella's neck, a kidney bean–shaped spot that resembled a tiny birthmark to most, or an unfortunate puffy tattoo to others. It had sprouted like a new seedling ever since she started to work with Gran in their family pharmacy, learning that belladonna loves compliments, trips to the Underworld require pennies in your shoes, and conjure skillets are best seasoned with twilight stardust. The spot had been just the same for so long until it cracked open like a bean bud; a thin line similar to a pen stroke grew out of the mole. Her first mark as a Conjuror that began just as her mother's had, and her gran's had, and her great-grandmother's before that—eager, ready for her to do more conjure work.

"It's opening up even more. I won't get to see the progress. But you'll write to me?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And tell me everything?"

"Of course."

"And don't go wandering around those cities. It's unnatural to be up there like that. Bad things happen—"

"I know, Gran." Ella had heard the story about her mama's twin and how she'd gone missing the one and only time the family had ever gone to a Marvellian city. Her name added to the countless other Conjure folk who had never returned after traveling to the sky. But nothing like that would happen to her. "I promise I'll be safe."

Gran kissed her forehead and helped her pull one of her crisp white mantles over her clothes. "You do us proud now, you hear?"

Ella most definitely would.

"Don't let them give you any trouble," she said.

Ella winked. "Never."

"You ready?" Papa asked.

She took one last look around. Conjure skillets sat on the stove; the family altar blazed bright with tall candles and portraits of smiling ancestors. Shelves full of glass jars boasted twilight stars. The garden crept along the wall as if it too had come to say goodbye. "See you later," she whispered before darting into the courtyard.

Ella skipped under a massive live oak that grew out of the center, its ancient arms a canopy of wind chimes, blue glass bottles, and shimmering orbs. She gazed up and whispered goodbye to it too. The tree shook.

"Hurry, Ella," Mama called out. "A storm's coming."

Papa's red car sat in the carriage area.

Ella, Mama, and Winnie piled inside. The conjure emblem

on the house gates flared as it opened. Ella held her breath. This was it.

Papa eased through the streets of New Orleans. Fewels rushed here and there, never looking up or noticing how conjure families opened their windows and sang colorful parasols into the city sky to help hold back the rain. Their stomps and claps rumbled beneath the thunder. A chorus of voices trickled into the car: "Storm keep passing on. Let them journey on. Keep passing on!" Gran always said, "Conjure's like a really good song, one with a melody and rhythm only *we* can hear and feel."

The car inched along under the beautiful canopy. Ella spotted candles left in windows and galleries dressed in black, red, and green, all in support of her decision to go to the Arcanum Training Institute. Many folks wore their Sunday best and threw conjure-roses—the beautiful black flowers freckled with crimson that every Conjuror kept close for luck—as the car passed.

The petals rained down on them, and Ella's heart swelled as the well-wishes made their way through the car windows.

"Good luck, Ella!"

"Praying for you and your success."

"May the ancestors protect you."

"Be safe."

People bowed and tipped their hats.

"The Duvernays don't have a candle in their window," Winnie pointed out. "The Beauvais either."

"Hush now," Mama replied. "Never mind that."

Ella was too excited to even ask what that meant as Papa passed the red gates of the Underworld at Congo Square, the gargantuan deathbulls towering over the city and keeping

watch on those wishing to enter the Land of the Dead. She blew a kiss at them, and they each nodded their great heads in her direction.

"Will you miss them?" Winnie asked.

"I don't think so. Well, maybe not for a while." She had been so ready to leave home for so long that she couldn't even possibly think she'd be homesick.

"Will you miss *me*?" Winnie's eyes grew wide.

Ella tickled her little sister until Papa paused in front of Ella's best friend's house. Reagan Marsalis's whole family stood on their small lawn ready to greet them. Mr. Marsalis lifted his top hat, and Mrs. Marsalis blew kisses. Ella grinned so hard her face hurt.

Reagan raced over to the car, her brown cheeks sweaty from the September heat. Ella rolled down the window.

"For luck." Reagan held out a bright blue luck root from the Underworld. One of her favorite plants.

Ella reached for it, and the flower walked from Reagan's hand to hers. "Thanks."

"Write me?" Reagan asked.

"Every day."

Ella pressed her face to the window, watching as Reagan chased the car until Papa turned toward the dock. She wished Reagan would've accepted her invitation and come with her.

But just as a pinch of sadness threatened to squeeze her heart, a Marvellian water-zeppelin sat on the water waiting like a fallen star.

Ella's stomach flipped.

This was the most important night of her life . . . maybe of all their lives.

The Marvellian Times

THE ARCANUM TRAINING INSTITUTE TO OPEN ITS DOORS TO CONJURORS

OP-ED by Renatta Cooper

September 20

A brand-new day at the Arcanum's Lower School—and not everyone is happy. So many angry people will be protesting outside those gigantic sky doors.

Why?

They've done the unthinkable . . . opening the 250-year-old center to the Conjure folk of the world.

After prominent American conjure-politician Sebastien Durand won his case in the Marvellian Courts of Justice, the ban was ruled unlawful and at odds with the Marvellian Constitution.

A magical edit was proclaimed. The Constitution amended. Now Conjure folk can come on in.

But only one little Conjuror enrolled . . . Sebastien's daughter, Ella Durand.

Stars, help her!

CHAPTER TWO

THE STARDUST PIER

The ride to the Stardust Pier felt like a lightning flash. One moment Ella and her family were skimming across the Gulf of Mexico and the next they were in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, standing on the Stardust Pier, awaiting the arrival of the sky-ferries for the next leg of their journey. The late September heat clung to her skin.

Plump star-lanterns drifted overhead like ginormous glow-bugs. Other water-zeppelins peeked their heads above the water, dropping more families on the ever-growing platform. Ella could've sworn she felt it expand under her feet little by little to make sure everyone fit.

Dressed in all white, her fellow Level One trainees were doves ready to fly off with their marvel-valises. She glanced at her floating juju-trunks, strange in comparison. But she took a deep breath, then smoothed the front of her new uniform and tested pulling the hood up around her long twists. The excitement made her fingers quiver. No more quilted aprons

or conjure jackets or family crossing rings. Something new. Something different.

"I expect weekly starposts, little girl," Mama demanded.

Ella looked up at her mama, the moonlight drenching her brown skin. She was still impossibly beautiful even when upset. "Yes, Mama."

"It's a huge responsibility to be the first. You don't just represent yourself, but all of us." Papa put a warm hand on Ella's shoulder.

"I know," Ella replied.

Winnie tugged at her. "Who are *those* people?" She pointed at the back of the woman nearest them.

"Security coppers," Mama whispered.

"What's that?" Winnie asked.

"Like Fewel police." Ella thought they looked like a bunch of angry toy soldiers. The liquid gold crests on their jackets glowed, and she wished she could reach out to touch the *M* symbol.

"Do they have to be with *us*?" Winnie leaned in closer. "I don't like their weird dogs." A few gripped the leashes of red-eyed wolves. "And their birds look mean too."

They sent black ravens into the sky above, and they surveyed all the arriving water-zeppelins.

"*Tsk*. None of that. Mind your business. They're here to make sure everything goes smoothly," Mama replied.

Ella wouldn't let herself think about what *not smoothly* looked like. She'd planned out every detail: choosing the outfits her parents and sister wore, making sure Gran twisted her hair and threaded it with charm ribbons, and tucking her best

friend Reagan's trusty luck root into her pocket. She kept slipping her hand inside to tickle it, enjoying how its leaves reached up to meet her fingertips. It made her feel like Reagan was holding her hand.

The night had to be perfect. And she would be perfect.

Ella waved at onlookers on nearby platforms. She figured since they were staring so bad, she might as well say hello. People held up signs, but strangely she couldn't make out the words on them even when she squinted. The night air thickened and turned hazier each time she tried. Weird. Maybe it was a Marvellian thing. She still had so much to learn.

"Can you see those?" she asked Papa.

"No," he replied. "Must be nothing worth repeating."

Ella gave the crowds her biggest and brightest smile and tried to hold the grin for as long as possible. The press-ferries flew overhead with their cameras incessantly flashing as they sent their news-boxes out by the minute.

Papa pointed up at the moon. "I'm excited to fly!"

The Arcanum Training Institute's sky-ferries would arrive any minute. Ready to pick them up. Mama always said a watched pot never boils, but Ella was certain the thick clouds would erupt with light any second.

The excitement and anticipation bubbled up inside her.

The crowd headed toward a turbaned brown man on a dais.

"Welcome, welcome! What a glorious night . . . actually, a truly *marvelous* night if I do say so myself . . . and I do say so." The man waved his arms around. "The line starts here. Right over here. This way. Last names, please!" A glittering scroll floated just above his shoulder, and she knew her name was on it.

"Ella, Ella." Winnie slipped her hand into Ella's free one.

"Look—there's stars on your dress. When those things"—she pointed up at the floating star-lanterns—"get close, you can see them."

"It's not a dress, it's a Marvellian Mantle," Ella corrected, because big sisters didn't let little sisters go around sounding foolish.

Winnie reached to touch her mantle again, but Ella dodged her little fingers. "You'll get it dirty."

"I don't want to wear a white one."

"All Level Ones do," Ella informed her.

"I want blue 'cause it's my favorite color." Winnie's eyes filled with tears.

"Blue is for Level Threes. Besides, you're too little to come," Ella reminded her sister, although this time she felt a little sad.

Mostly, Winnie irritated Ella, getting into her room or whining about playing or wanting to always do everything she was doing. But as Ella stared out at the other kids on the platform, she wondered how many new friends she'd make and how long that would take. She already missed Reagan, but deep down she thought maybe she'd miss her little sister too. She could always count on Winnie to want to be her best friend forever, no matter what.

A gasp startled Ella, disrupting her thoughts. Whispers crackled in hundreds of different languages.

Mama's chubby alligator, Gumbo, slithered out of the water and onto the pier, slapping his tail with excitement.

"There you are," Mama said to Gumbo. "Getting old, eh? That deep water tough on you, old boy? Got here just in time to see our girl off."

Gumbo grunted.

A few kids scampered even farther away from them while others inched closer to have a look.

She'd read that most Marvellers had pets and sometimes monsters in their homes, but only Conjurors had companions, which were like your animal soul mates. It had always been so normal to Ella . . . up until this very moment. As she stood on the pier, all those *regular* things about her family seemed so different even among these very *different* people.

But she was ready to tell everyone about it all. She just knew everyone would love it.

✦ ✦ ✦ ✦ ✦

"LET'S GO CHECK IN, SHALL WE?" MAMA SAID.

"Oh, you're finally ready?" Papa smiled.

Mama clucked her tongue and placed a firm grip on Ella's shoulders as they made their way toward the turbaned man with the floating scroll. The coppers clung to them as they joined the line. Everyone stared. Ella winked just like Gran did when people were looking her way.

The man smiled at them; his long beard twinkled as if it were filled with stardust. His ornate turban changed colors, the folds cycling through peacock blues and sherbet oranges and butter yellows, while its tiny diamonds caught the moonlight. He wore a deep red Marvellian mantle, the black lapel covered in all sorts of mastery pins that Ella couldn't wait to ask him questions about. She knew from her research that he was an Arcanum instructor with at least an eighth degree in his marvel. The Arcanum Training Institute's crest—a five-pointed star—pulsed on his chest as if it were made of living veins.

He gazed down at Ella. "Last name . . . though I think I already know it."

"Durand," she replied.

The scroll opened on its own, each name shining as he read it. "Davidson, Delilah. Nope. Doumbouya, Hassan. Not you. Duca, Giulia. Not quite. Domen, Yuyi. Perhaps close. Ahhh . . . Durand, Ella."

She nodded.

"And I am Masterji Thakur, a Paragon of Taste with a spice marvel." He held out his hand to shake hers. She took it, and he wiggled her arm until she smiled. When he let go, a tiny star anise danced in her palm. "The tongue tells truth! Welcome. So glad you are here. Looking forward to getting to know you."

While Mama and Papa spoke to Masterji Thakur, Mama's alligator companion nudged her leg and smiled up at her with a full set of sharp teeth. Ella bent down to kiss Gumbo's wet nose. More people turned to look, and Ella supposed that maybe having a twelve-foot alligator beside you might be strange. A boy inched close to them, squinting and staring, followed by a little girl sneaking up to admire Gumbo's tail. Mama turned to say hello, and Ella began to explain, but the kids scuttled away.

The pier went silent.

The first sky-ferries sliced through the clouds, their brass noses radiating like suns. The sky-ferries' bellies held the initials A.T.I. Engines blazed bright with stars spinning in their gilded spheres. Ella thought it was almost as if a pod of whales had taken flight after strapping enormous glass carriages to their stomachs. She spotted plush sofas and fancy dining carts and twinkling lights inside them.

Ella gasped. "Papa, what's in those engines?"

"That's stellacity. You'll learn all about it." He rested a hand on her shoulder.

Ella held her breath and opened her eyes as wide as possible. She wanted to see every single detail: how they landed on the water with barely a whisper, how their bodies resembled a night sky full of stars, how clouds of steam hissed from their fins.

Out of the first one stepped a beautiful brown woman wearing a paper wreath of marigolds. Draped in a black Marvellian mantle, she held a cane that sparkled in the moonlight. Ella knew that she was one of the most important people at the Institute *and* the reason Ella was even here.

Headmarveller Paloma Rivera.

Ella had seen her face projected from the Marvellian newsboxes in Papa's office. She'd sneaked in to watch and listen to all her speeches about how the Arcanum had to be open to all, and how Marvellian society must make space for all magical human beings.

Ella stretched up on her tiptoes to have a closer look. She was even more beautiful in person.

Headmarveller Rivera greeted Masterji Thakur and directed the floating scroll to jump into her pocket. "Welcome, Marvellian families, to the most wonderful starry night. The start of a brand-new journey for our children." Her voice was as gorgeous as she, sweet and sunlit like a jar of honey. "I am just one of a dynamic pair to lead the Arcanum Training Institute for the coming year. Headmarveller MacDonald is awaiting our arrival."

With a flap of her mantle, a flurry of papel picado exploded from the folds. The tissue paper cutouts boasted little elephants, pigs, cows, snakes, and roosters. The tiny rectangles

swarmed the crowd and burst with noise. She put her hand on her lapel, tapping an ornate pin. "I am a Paragon of Touch with a paper marvel. The hand has no fear!"

A few others repeated the phrase back at her, and Ella realized that they, too, were Paragons of Touch.

Ella glanced up at Papa. "I can't wait to have a marvel."

"Soon, baby girl, soon." He squeezed her shoulder. "You'll have your marvel and your motto, and take your place here."

Mama's eyes narrowed, and Ella heard her suck her teeth. But Ella couldn't wait to belong.

More papel picado rained down on them. A magenta elephant roared its tiny trunk at Ella. She tried to catch it, but the creature poofed into a ball of smoke.

The crowd clapped as the woman took a small bow.

"All the light to everyone. What we practice is no easy feat. It takes discipline, honor, and focus to develop the light inside you. So glad you all are here." Ella felt the woman's eyes land on her and her family. "Children, say your farewells, and let us fly, shall we?" She motioned her arm to the right. "It's time to usher in the next generation of great Marvellers."

The sky-ferry doors opened with sighs of steam. Kids kissed their parents and shuffled forward to line up. Ella turned to say goodbye to Mama and Papa.

"Ha, I don't think so," Mama said. "We'll be coming with you."

Ella started to pout, but Headmarveller Rivera stepped out of the crowd and made her way over.

Everyone turned to watch.

Ella held her breath.

"Would you like to ride with me?"

Ella stared up into the Headmarveller's warm eyes. The

woman had the kind of smile you could feel. Ella glanced over her shoulder at Mama, waiting for her to nod.

"I assure you, it's very comfortable," Headmarveller Rivera added.

"We would love to," Papa replied. "Right, Aubrielle?"

Mama's eyebrow lifted. "Yes. Yes, of course."

Headmarveller Rivera winked at Ella. The coppers escorted them into the largest sky-ferry while the other trainees and their families moved as far away from them as possible.

Mama looked nervous. Papa squared his shoulders. Ella beamed and felt special.

"Welcome!" Headmarveller Rivera opened her arms.

The sky-ferry spread out before them: lush velvet seats, brass buttons Ella wished she could press, and a constellation map glimmering with colorful animals.

"This way." An usher led them down the long aisle.

"All this room for just us," Papa remarked.

"Gumbo needs three seats anyways," Mama added.

"Your comfort is important to us." Headmarveller Rivera pointed Ella's parents to a booth.

Ella bounded ahead, looking for a spot with the best view. Winnie followed, then sat opposite her.

A woman in a pillbox hat held a tray of bubbling drinks. "Care for a fizzlet? We have all flavors. What's your pleasure?"

Ella took a purple one. Winnie took a green one.

"Be sure to drink it quick, otherwise it might just float away," the woman warned. "It'll also help your ears adjust to the altitude as we take off."

Ella guzzled it; the sweet bubbles burst on her tongue.

"Look!" Winnie pointed out the window.

Ella looked out. The sky-ferry door closed. The stellacity spheres burst with light as the engines began to hum.

The sky-ferry lifted in the air, and her stomach dropped like she was on a roller coaster. She grabbed Winnie's hand and squeezed it tight.

There was no turning back.

ELLA GAZED DOWN, AND SHE COULDN'T SEE THE STARDUST PIER anymore. They were passing floating lighthouses, slicing through dark and stormy clouds. The minutes stretched to what felt like hours, and Ella worried they'd never get there. But just as frustration bubbled up in her chest, the grounds spread out beneath them like one of her gran's quilts stitched with threads of light.

The whole place held wonders: starfruit trees and moonflowers, a vertical maze of wires lifting cable cars and trolleys to gilded docks, balloons dropping fireworks, and the gates of the Arcanum Training Institute for Marvelous and Uncanny Endeavors shining like sunrays fashioned into iron spindles and copper spires. The wild metals writhed, moving towers and turrets around like musical chairs. They stretched so high Ella couldn't see where they ended and began. The windows glinted as if welcoming her with a wink.

Ella gasped.

She desperately wanted to belong here.

She would do whatever it took. She would master every level. She would pass every test.

She would become a Marveller.

The very best one.