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Opening extract from

Glitterwings Academy: Seedling Exams

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Chapter One

Twink Flutterby's heart quickened as she and her parents crested the icy hill. Any moment now . . . any moment . . . and then all at once, there it was! Glitterwings Academy, its bare branches sparkling with frost in the winter sunshine.

Hurrah, good old Glitterwings! thought Twink. Even if this term wasn't going to be the easiest, she was still pleased to be back.

'Oh, isn't it lovely this time of year!' breathed Twink's mother. Twink's father chuckled, and he and Twink exchanged an amused glance. Twink's mother

always thought her old school looked wonderful, no matter what the season.

But she was right, thought Twink as they swooped to land on the frozen front lawn, where crowds of returning students were milling about with their parents. Her school *was* the most beautiful in the world!

Glitterwings Academy was located inside a massive oak tree on a hill. Tiny golden windows wound their way up its trunk, and a set of grand double doors sat at its base. Glancing upwards, Twink picked out Peony Branch, where she and her friends had lived for the past three terms. Excitement darted through her. She could hardly wait to see everyone again!

Miss Shimmery, the HeadFairy, flew forward to greet them, her rainbow wings gleaming like icicles. 'Twink, welcome back! Are you ready for the Seedling Exams?'

Twink's stomach tightened abruptly at the thought of the important exams waiting for her at the end of the term. 'I – I think so,' she said,

trying to smile.

'I'm sure you'll do well.' Miss Shimmery's blue eyes were kind. 'It's Creature Kindness you're especially interested in, isn't it?'

'That's right,' put in Twink's father proudly. 'She wants to be a Fairy Medic, just like her parents.'

An embarrassed flush lit Twink's cheeks. 'Dad!' she hissed. It was true that being a Fairy Medic was all she'd ever wanted to do, but he didn't have to *tell* everyone!

Miss Shimmery laughed. 'Well, I'm sure you'll make a splendid medic. Have a good term, Twink – and don't worry, you'll do fine.' She flitted off in a flash of snowy-white hair.

Miss Sparkle, the dour second-year head, was standing on one of the tree's frosted roots, checking in her students. Once Twink had been ticked off the list, her father handed her her oak-leaf bag.

'Don't worry about the exams. Just do your best, Twinkster,' he said, gently ruffling her long pink hair. 'That's all we want.'

'We'll be proud of you no matter how you do,

darling,' her mother assured her with a hug. 'We know you'll try hard.'

Twink waved as her parents flew off, watching until they disappeared over the hill. Then she dropped her arm with a sigh. Her mum and dad might *say* they didn't mind if she didn't do well in her exams . . . but deep down, Twink knew they'd be disappointed. They were so pleased that she wanted to follow in their wing strokes!

'Twink!' cried a voice.

Twink spun about and saw Bimi Bluebell, her best friend, flying rapidly towards her. The two fairies met with an excited hug, wings fluttering. 'I'm so glad to see you!' said Twink.

'Me too,' said Bimi, pushing back a strand of dark blue hair. 'Oh, but Twink, I'm so nervous! I can't believe we have the Seedlings this term!'

Twink felt a rush of sympathy for Bimi. She wasn't at all confident in her studies, and was even more nervous about the exams than Twink.

'You'll do fine,' she said, rubbing her lavender wing against Bimi's silver and gold one. 'You just

need to have more faith in yourself.'

'I suppose so,' said Bimi, screwing up her face. 'Anyway, let's not think about it yet. Come on, let's go and grab our beds!' Picking up their bags, they skimmed towards the school, darting around clusters of hovering, chatting students.

As they swooped through the open front doors, Twink gazed happily around her. She never grew tired of this inside view of her school: a high, golden tower, with branches leading off in all directions. Fairies swooped in and out of these like brightly coloured birds.

The two friends spiralled upwards until they came to a branch at the top of the school, with a large pink flower hanging over its ledge. Twink sighed as they touched down. 'I can't believe it's our last term in Peony Branch. I'm really going to miss it!'

Bimi nodded. 'I know, but I'm sure we'll love our new branch, too.' They pushed open the door and flitted inside.

Maybe Bimi was right, thought Twink, but no branch could ever be prettier than this. Peony

Branch was a gently curving space lined with cosy moss beds, each with a peony blossom overhead like a frilly pink canopy. Glow-worm lanterns dangled from the ceiling, casting a warm light.

A few of the others had already arrived, and were unpacking their things.

'Opposite!' cried a voice. Sooze, a fairy with lavender hair and pink wings – the exact *opposite* to Twink – skimmed across the branch and caught Twink up in a hug. 'Hurrah, you're here!'

'Hi, Sooze,' said Twink with a grin. She and Sooze had been best friends once, and were still close – though Twink knew she had the best friend ever in Bimi now.

'Hello, you two!' called Pix cheerfully from across the branch. 'Are you ready for the Seedlings?'

Sooze's smile faded. 'That's all you've talked about since you got here,' she snapped at Pix. 'Some of us aren't looking forward to them, you know!'

Her voice wavered slightly, and Twink grimaced in understanding. The term before, Sooze had been caught setting off fairy dust flares, and as punish-

ment she wasn't allowed to use fairy dust at all this term – not even for her Fairy Dust practical. As a result, she was going to have to work extremely hard to move up to the third year.

'Well, you're not alone – I'm not looking forward to them, either,' confessed Twink.

'But *you* won't be fifty points down to start with,' pointed out Sooze, her expression glum. 'I might as well not even bother.'

'Yes, that's too bad,' said Bimi stiffly.

Twink knew her best friend still hadn't forgiven Sooze for accidentally singeing off her hair with the flares – though it had all grown back now, and was just as beautiful as before.

Catching Bimi's tone, Sooze made a face. 'All right, I'm sorry *again*,' she said. 'But I'm paying the price now, aren't I?'

'You'll do all right if you try, Sooze,' said Pix earnestly. 'You've just got to take it seriously, and work hard.'

'Well, I don't know why everyone's getting so worked up,' sniffed a pointy-faced fairy called

Mariella. 'They're only exams! Besides,' she added with a smirk, 'my mum says they wouldn't dare hold any of us back, or else it would look bad on *them*.'

'Don't you believe it,' said Sooze shortly. 'They would, all right!'

'Ooh, I'm all nervous now,' exclaimed an excitable fairy called Sili. She pushed back her bright silver hair. 'Can't we talk about something else? How were everyone's hols?'

As the rest of the branch started talking, Twink

and Bimi flitted to their favourite beds at the end of the row, which the others had left free for them. Bimi shook her head as they started to unpack.

'It doesn't seem like it's going to be a very fun term, does it?' she murmured.

Twink placed a drawing of her family on her bedside mushroom, adjusting it carefully. 'No . . . I don't think *fun* is quite the word.' Then she smiled. 'It's still good to be back, though.'

Later, their belongings all put away, the Peony Branch fairies flew down to the Great Branch: a long, gleaming space lined with mossy tables and overhanging flowers. Twink fidgeted as Miss Shimmery hovered above the platform, making the usual start-of-term announcements: no high-speed flying in the school, uniforms required from the next day, no bothering the water sprites in the pond . . .

We know *all of this!* thought Twink. When were they going to find out more about their Seedling Exams? Then she sat up, her heart thumping. Miss

Shimmery was looking towards the second-year tables!

'Finally, may I request that the second-year students stay behind after dinner, so that Miss Sparkle can go over the Seedling Exams with them,' said the HeadFairy in her strong, low voice. 'That's all – I hope you all have a wonderful term!' She drifted back down to the platform.

Sooze groaned as conversation broke out across the Branch. 'Oh, wasps! How are we supposed to eat with *that* hanging over us?'

'Sooze, that's not the right attitude,' chided Pix, tapping her yellow wings together. 'I know you've got a tough term ahead, but if you just try to look on it as a learning opportunity –'

Just then the Great Branch's doors swung open. In a bright rainbow of wings, the school's butterflies floated in, carrying oak-leaf platters piled high with seed cakes and nectar. A yellow and white butterfly served the Peony table, waving its antennae in a friendly hello.

'Hurrah, saved by the butterflies!' said Sooze with

a grin. 'You were saying, Pix?'

'Never mind!' groaned Pix. 'You're hopeless, Sooze.'

Finally dinner was over, and the rest of the school had departed. Twink thought her year group looked very small, on their own in the large Branch with so many empty tables around them.

Miss Sparkle's pale wings glinted as she bobbed in the air. 'As you know, this is an extremely important term for you,' she said. 'Your Seedling Exams will decide whether or not you move up to the third year, and which advanced subjects you'll take.'

Twink's pulse quickened. Oh, she just *had* to do well! The Seedling Exams were her first step towards becoming a Fairy Medic.

'The exams for each of your five subjects will consist of both a practical and a written exam, each worth fifty points,' their year head went on. 'You must score at *least* three hundred and fifty points to move up into the third year.'

The second-year fairies hardly moved as they gazed back at her, wide-eyed and solemn. Bimi

swallowed hard, and clutched Twink's hand. Across the table, Sooze looked quite pale.

'If you wish to go on to the advanced classes in a particular subject, then you must score at least eighty-five points in that subject.' Miss Sparkle regarded them gravely. 'The best thing, of course, is to try to do well in *all* your exams, so that you have lots of choices next year.'

Creature Kindness, thought Twink fervently. As Miss Shimmery had said, that was the subject she had to excel in to be a Fairy Medic. Nothing else mattered!

Pix raised her hand. 'When do we find out about our practicals, Miss?' Her eyes were shining in expectation. Twink and Bimi exchanged a look. Trust Pix not to be worried. She'd probably get the best marks in the year, too!

'Your practicals will be term-long projects,' explained Miss Sparkle. 'They'll be announced tomorrow. Are there any other questions?'

No one spoke, and Miss Sparkle nodded. 'You may return to your branches, then. And girls, try not to worry too much. Those of you who have

been working hard all along will be at an advantage this term, but it's not too late for the rest of you. Just buckle down and study, and you'll be fine!'

After glow-worms out that night, Twink lay awake for ages in her mossy bed, gazing at the drawing of her family. Her parents' faces smiled at her in the moonlight.

For as long as she could remember, Twink had wanted to be a Fairy Medic, so she could help injured wild creatures just like her parents did. Brownie, the Flutterby family's mouse, had spent many long-suffering hours wrapped up in leafy bandages and sneezing clouds of fake fairy dust as Twink pretended to heal him.

Then, when she was older, her parents had sometimes let her come along to visit their patients: injured birds or badgers recuperating under their care, who were always smiling and happy to see them. No wonder! Everyone who knew Twink's parents knew they were the wisest, kindest fairies in the world.

I won't let them down, thought Twink firmly, closing her eyes and pulling her petal duvet around her. *I'll do well in my exams . . . no matter what!*