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opening extract from

Glitterwings Academy, Treasure Hunt

written by

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published by

Bloomsbury Publishing

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The sun shone brightly as Twink Flutterby skimmed over summer-green fields with her mother and sister. On such a lovely morning, the journey to Glitterwings Academy should have been the most delightful thing in the world.

Twink hardly noticed it. She cast furtive glances at her mother as they flew. Although Mrs Flutterby was clearly trying to act as if nothing was wrong, she seemed tired and worried. Twink bit her lip, wondering whether she should mention what she had overheard the night before.

Fortunately, Teena was too excited about returning to school to pick up on the mood. 'Oh, I can hardly wait!' she cried, doing a quick somersault in the air. 'Are we almost there, Mum?'

'Almost,' said Twink's mother. 'It's just over this hill.'

'Hurrah!' Teena darted ahead, her wings a lavender blur. A moment later she was back again. 'Mum, I can see Zuzu! I'm going to go and say hello, all right?' Without waiting for an answer, Twink's little sister sped off to greet her best friend.

In the sudden silence, Twink's mother gave her a keen look. 'You're very quiet today. Is something wrong?'

Twink looked down at her oak-leaf bag, playing with its clasp. 'No, I'm fine,' she said.

Her mother touched her arm, bringing them both to a halt. 'Are you sure?' Her violet eyes were gentle and worried.

Twink could hold it in no longer. 'Oh, Mum, I – I heard you and Dad talking about Gran last night, and how you have to go to her straight away. What's

wrong? Is she all right?' Her words tumbled over each other.

Her mother winced. 'Oh, Twink . . . we were hoping that we wouldn't have to worry you. I – well, I'm afraid your gran isn't very well.'

'What's wrong with her?' asked Twink. Her wings felt cold, despite the warmth of the summer day.

'Come, let's sit down,' said her mother, gliding towards the ground. When they were both settled on a smooth round stone, she put her arm around Twink. 'You know that your gran caught that wing-chill last month,' she said.

Twink leaned against her mother's side. 'Yes, but – but you and Dad said it wasn't serious,' she mumbled.

'It wasn't,' said her mother. 'And she's mostly over it now, but she's not really perking up the way she should. The doctor says that she's gone into the Doldrums.'

The word sent a shiver up Twink's spine. 'What's that?' she whispered.



'It's – well, it's when a fairy feels a bit down,' said Twink's mother. 'She needs cheering up, you see. So your father and I are going to go and visit her, and do what we can.'

'Will she be all right?' Twink gazed anxiously into her mother's eyes.

Her mother hesitated, and then gave a firm nod. 'Yes, I'm sure she will be. We just have to think positive.'

Twink's heart seemed to miss a beat. What did *that* mean? Was her gran going to be all right or not?

'But Twink, please don't tell Teena,' added her mother. 'I don't want to worry her.' She smiled ruefully, smoothing Twink's long pink hair. 'I didn't want to worry *you* either, but maybe it's better that you know. I keep forgetting how grown-up you are now.'

In spite of everything, Twink felt a rush of pride that her mother thought she was growing up.

'Don't worry, I won't tell Teena,' she said. 'But Mum . . .' she paused, uncertain how to put her

fears into words. She just knew she'd feel a lot less worried if her mother didn't seem so concerned.

Her mother squeezed her arm as if she understood. 'Gran will be fine, darling; I promise. Now, let's fly on to school before Teena starts to wonder where we've got to!'

As Twink and her mother crested the grassy hill, Glitterwings Academy came into view: a large, spreading oak tree rising up from a field of flowers. Tiny arched windows wound their way up the tree trunk, and the grand double doors at its base stood open in welcome.

While her mother went off to find Teena, Twink flew slowly to the third-year area, thinking of Gran. The Doldrums sounded so scary! Would her grandmother really be all right?

'Welcome back!' said Miss Twilight, ticking Twink off on her clover-leaf list. She was a tall, dramatic-looking fairy with bright silver hair and purply-grey wings. 'Looking forward to the new term?'

'I suppose,' said Twink. Miss Twilight gave her a considering look. 'I mean, yes!' Twink went on

hastily. 'I just love the summer term. Glitterwings is so pretty then!'

Oh great – I sound like Mum! she thought. Twink's mother used to be a student at Glitterwings herself, and was always exclaiming over its beauty in every season.

To Twink's relief, Miss Twilight agreed. 'Yes, it *is* pretty now, isn't it? And I've got a special surprise for the Third Years this term, too!'

'What, Miss Twilight?' asked Twink, interested despite herself.

Her year head laughed. 'Now, it wouldn't be a surprise if I told you, would it?' The tiny moonstones on Miss Twilight's robes shimmered as she turned away to greet another student.

Twink's mother flew up, shaking her head. 'Teena's already checked herself in – I just caught up with her before she and Zuzu took off to Snowdrop Branch. The independent little beetle!'

Twink smiled. Yes, that was just like Teena!

Her mother's expression grew serious again as she drew Twink away from the crowds of arriving

fairies. 'Now, Twink, promise me that you won't worry.'

Twink stared down at her pixie boots. How could she promise such a thing? Suddenly she remembered something, and she looked up. 'Mum . . . Gran went to school here too, didn't she?'

Her mother nodded. 'Yes, she did. And I'm sure she wouldn't want you to spend the summer fretting about her, Twink – she'd want you to have fun and enjoy yourself, just like you always do. All right?'

Twink took a deep breath. 'I'll try.'

'That's my girl.' Twink's mother gave her a warm hug. 'I'll send a butterfly as soon as there's any news about Gran. Have a good term, darling – and don't worry!'

Twink stood waving as her mother flew away. When she could no longer see her, Twink lowered her hand with a sigh. Not worry? How, when Gran had that awful-sounding illness?

Lost in thought, Twink picked up her oak-leaf bag and flitted towards the school. Suddenly a laughing voice called her name.

'Twink! Were you going in without me?'

Turning, Twink saw her best friend, Bimi Bluebell, come flying up. 'Oh! Bimi!' she gasped. She and Bimi always waited for each other on the first day of term, but this time Twink had completely forgotten.

The two fairies hugged tightly. 'It's so good to see you!' exclaimed Bimi.

'I know,' said Twink. 'It seems like ages!'

Bimi was easily the most beautiful fairy in the school, with her midnight-blue hair and silver and gold wings. But she was very down to earth, and hardly seemed to notice her looks. Now she narrowed her gaze, looking at Twink closely.

'What's wrong?' she asked.

'Nothing!' said Twink. She fluttered to one side as a stream of chattering second-year students flew past. 'I'm fine.'

'No, you're not,' said Bimi, following her. 'You look really pale.'

'I, um . . . caught a wing-chill over the hols, that's all,' said Twink quickly. The wing-chill made her

think of Gran's illness, and she looked away. She hated lying, but she *couldn't* tell Bimi about it – or anyone else, for that matter. She knew she'd burst into loud, babyish tears if she tried.

'Come on,' Twink said, putting on a bright grin. 'Let's go up to Violet Branch and grab the same beds we had last term!'

'OK,' said Bimi doubtfully. 'But Twink, are you *sure* –'

'Race you!' broke in Twink. She zoomed through the doorway without replying.

Inside, Glitterwings Academy rose up like a tall, golden tower, with branch-corridors shooting off in all directions. Fairies darted in and out of these like birds, for as high as the eye could see.

With Bimi just behind her, Twink sped up the trunk, swooping around clusters of hovering students. Finally she landed on the Violet Branch ledge with a hop. The bright purple violets that hung over the doorway swayed in the sudden breeze from her wings.

'Phew! You won,' panted Bimi, touching down

beside her.

'It was close, though!' said Twink. She pushed open the door to their branch, feeling slightly better after the frenzied flight.

Violet Branch was just as she remembered: a crooked, sunny branch with different levels to it, and mossy beds tucked away in unexpected places. Violets hung over each bed like a sweet-smelling canopy.

A chorus of voices greeted them. 'Opposite!' shrieked one. A lavender-haired fairy hurled herself at Twink.

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

'Hi, Bimi,' added Sooze as they pulled apart. She fluttered her pink wings with a grin. 'We saved your old beds for you two, even though they're the best ones!'

'Thanks, Sooze – that's glimmery!' said Bimi. Though she and Sooze hadn't always got on in the

past, they'd reached a truce of sorts these days. Twink was glad about it. Life had been very stressful when her two favourite fairies hadn't got on!

Twink and Bimi flew up to the smaller of the loft spaces. There were only two mossy beds up here, making a cosy little room of their own.

'Shall I take the bed by the wall again?' said Bimi. She took her cricket clock out of his cage, and fed him a bit of fresh leaf. He munched it happily.

'OK,' said Twink. She could see that Bimi was still concerned about her, and she hurriedly busied herself with unpacking. 'How were your hols?' she asked. 'Tell me everything!'

Bimi looked uncertain for a moment, and then shrugged. 'They were really good. We went to visit my cousins in Green Wood, and –'

Twink relaxed, smiling and nodding as her friend went on. Pulling out her favourite drawing of her family, she placed it on her bedside mushroom. Her parents and Teena smiled out at her.

I don't have a drawing of Gran, Twink realised with a pang. Why didn't she? Suddenly she thought she'd

give anything to have a drawing of her gran, with her purple hair and wise smile. And she couldn't even write to Mum and Dad and ask them to send one, because they weren't at home.

'Twink?' said Bimi. Twink started guiltily. Her best friend stood with her hands on her hips. 'You haven't heard a word I've said, have you?' she demanded.

'No, I have!' said Twink. 'You were saying about – er . . .' she trailed off, trying to remember.



Bimi sighed. 'Oh, Twink. Let me know when you want to talk about whatever's bothering you.'

'Nothing's wrong, I *told* you,' muttered Twink. Why couldn't Bimi just let things drop? But she knew that Bimi was worried about her, which made her feel even more wretched than before.

Suddenly Twink spotted Pix coming into the branch. 'Hi, Pix,' she called out with the others.

Then an idea struck her. If anyone would know about the Doldrums, Pix would! Twink glided down to the main floor, landing beside the clever red-headed fairy. 'Did you have good hols?' she asked.

Pix nodded as she headed to the last empty bed. 'Yes, glimmery! I got loads of studying done. How about you?'

'Er – well, not *much* studying,' said Twink, taken aback. 'I mean, I only did what we were told.'

Pix shook her head as she started to unpack. 'We're in the Third Year now, Twink,' she chided. 'You can't afford to let yourself fall behind, you know.'

'I'm not *falling behind*,' protested Twink, stung. 'I

just didn't do any extra, that's all.'

From the look on Pix's face, it was clear that she thought it was the same thing! Twink glanced around the branch to make sure no one was listening. 'Pix, can I ask you something?' she said in a low voice.

'Of course,' said Pix, pulling a pile of schoolbooks out of her bag.

Twink drew a bit closer. 'I just wondered . . . have you ever heard of something called the Doldrums?'

Pix's eyebrows flew up. 'The *Doldrums*? Isn't it that awful condition fairies sometimes get, where they don't show any interest in anything?'

'I – I suppose,' said Twink.

Pix snatched up one of her books, flipping through it. 'Yes, I'm sure it is. Oh, it's dreadful! Fairies who have the Doldrums hardly even bother to eat, or laugh, or *anything*. Here, look.' Pix found the page she was looking for and pointed. Twink craned her neck, dreading what she might see.

'Wasps, it's even worse than I thought,' said Pix, frowning down at the page. 'It says that if a fairy has

the Doldrums and something doesn't happen to snap them out of it, they might never be the same again! They just sit around feeling sad and gloomy for the rest of their lives.'

'How – how do you snap them out of it?' whispered Twink. Her wise, witty gran, sad and gloomy for ever? The thought turned Twink's blood to ice. No wonder her parents hadn't wanted her and Teena to know!

'*A shock of joy*, it says here,' read Pix. 'I suppose



that means they're surprised by something really nice, and it helps them get over it.' She shut the book, tossing it on her mossy bed. 'Why did you want to know?'

'I – nothing, it was just – just something I read in a petal mag,' stammered Twink, edging away. 'Thanks, Pix!'

To Twink's relief, no one seemed to notice that anything was troubling her – except Bimi, of course, watching from their loft. Usually Twink loved the way that she and Bimi could almost read each other's minds, but right now she thought she'd give anything for Bimi not to have a clue!

Sooze flitted over, nudging Twink with a friendly pink wing. 'Guess what?' she said.

'What?' asked Twink with a smile. At least she never had to worry that *Sooze* might read her mind – the lavender-haired fairy wasn't the sort to think too deeply about things.

Sooze lowered her voice. 'Well, I was just talking with Sili, and we reckon we know what Miss Twilight's big surprise is! We think that –'

‘Hello, my lovelies!’ boomed a voice. Mrs Hover, the matron, landed on the Violet Branch ledge and flitted heavily into the room. ‘Are we all here now? Excellent! Time for the opening session in the Great Branch – come along now, flitter-flutter!’