

FATE

THE WINX SAGA

The Fairies' Path

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Scholastic Inc.

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THE HEART GROWS OLD

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The Beginning of the Fairy Tale

Bloom Peters pulled her grubby sleeping bag up to her chin, shivered on the deflating air mattress laid on the cold floor, and wished for home.

No kindly fairy godmother came to grant her wish.

The warehouse where she spent her nights was a space that could give you nightmares, and Bloom didn't need any help in the nightmare department. There was detritus heaped in the corners of the cavernous space, and sometimes Bloom heard weird rustling coming from that direction—rustling that she'd firmly decided *not* to investigate. Moonlight sent shafts of cold illumination down through the apertures in the roof, like alien spaceships searching for an abductee.

Luckily for Bloom, her nightmares were about burning homes and not chilly warehouses. And she couldn't have nightmares if she never slept.

She sat up in her makeshift bed and reached for her notepad, using her phone to light the top page.

Bloom's list of ideas was titled *What the hell is happening to me?*

Pyrokinesis?

Mutations?

Superpowers?

Fireproof?

Under her list of ideas, she'd written the results of her experiments.

July 6th—candles—no burns.

July 8th—camping stove—no burns.

July 10th—blowtorch—no burns.

Experimenting on herself had been scary, but not as scary as the memory of her home burning. Every night, she relived the fight she'd had with her mom, and then the moment she'd woken to find her house in flames. She'd known that somehow, she'd done this. She'd charged through her burning house into her parents' bedroom to find the bed, the curtains, the whole room a seething inferno. Even the ceiling was a sea of flame. Bloom remembered her dad coughing desperately on the floor, her mom wrapped in a blanket and covered in burns. As though the fire had lunged to swallow her mom, when Bloom would never ...

Bloom would never. Only she had.

Every night, she crept out of her nice, normal bedroom in her nice, normal, being-reconstructed-from-fire-damage home. She came here and huddled on the floor and tried to think her way out of this. Bloom considered herself a fighter, but she was the one who'd hurt her mom. She didn't know how to fight herself.

Another rustle came, this one much louder. Bloom's head jerked up. She couldn't see much through the grime-smearred windows. If someone had seen a teenage girl sneak into the abandoned warehouse, they might get all kinds of ideas.

Bloom put down her phone and her notebook. Let them try to come at her. She'd hurt her own mother. She wouldn't hesitate to go scorched-earth on a creep. Literally.

There was another sound, an echoing footstep. Bloom's hands clenched into fists. She felt an itch in the center of each palm, like heat building.

The sound of the footstep hadn't come from the direction of the door.

Bloom spun around to see the woman.

This was no ordinary intruder.

This woman was clearly extraordinary. There was no question about that. She was tall, a middle-aged white woman in

conservative clothes with an ash-blonde mane severely pinned up, dark decided eyebrows, and an air of immense dignity. Her presence seemed to transform the grubby warehouse into a stateroom.

Also, the wall behind the woman had opened into a shimmering portal of light. Just another clue that something unusual was going on.

“Bloom Peters?” said the stranger. “I’m Farah Dowling. Please try to forget my first name immediately. If you come to my school, you won’t be using it. Headmistresses don’t have first names.”

Bloom’s first shock was fading.

“If I come ... to your school,” said Bloom. A jagged laugh erupted from her throat. “Oh, a mysterious stranger has come to tell me about her school for wizards?”

“Not wizards,” said the woman.

Bloom waved this off. “Is this the part where you tell me I’m magic now?”

“You always were, Bloom,” said Headmistress Dowling. “You just didn’t know it yet.”

That was enough. She might have mysterious powers that were out of control, the world might be going mad, but her parents hadn’t raised her to listen to strange adults who approached in the dead of night with what sounded like a cult recruitment speech. Bloom snorted, abandoned her sleeping bag, and made for the door.

The woman’s voice stopped her at the mouth of the warehouse.

“I know about the fire, Bloom.”

Bloom trembled like a candle flame in a gust of wind. Slowly, she turned around. The woman was watching her with a steady gaze, keen but not unkind.

“Where are you going? You can’t go home. You’re too afraid you’ll hurt your parents again.”

Headmistress Dowling was right. Bloom shivered. Even in California, the nights could get cold.

Dowling moved toward Bloom, and Bloom held still, caught by a mixture of fear and hope.

“You’re looking for answers. I’m a teacher. That means I have all the answers. Or at least, I’ll tell you that I do.”

Bloom wanted to go home even more than she wanted answers, but she couldn’t find a safe path. Not on her own.

So when the woman spoke, Bloom listened.

FAIRY TALE #1

*Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild ...*

—W. B. Yeats

FIRE

I had only just arrived at the castle, and honestly, I was in shock.

Chill, Bloom, I kept repeating in my mind, but it was hard to be chill in fairyland. I hadn't expected my new fairy school to look like the castle in an illustration from the book of fairy tales I used to treasure. Once upon a time, it was my favorite possession, the fanciest book I owned, with golden swirls on the cover. But I'd grown up and packed the book into my old toy chest along with my teddy bears. I'd thought I was long past fairy tales.

That was before I used magic to burn down my house. My toy chest and my fairy-tale book had burned, too.

Even as a kid, I'd never expected to actually step into a fairy tale. The whole landscape was like this. Verdant rolling hills that looked soft as green velvet, dark deep forests, and now a castle surrounded by gates and gardens.

There were domed towers on either side of the castle, and the roof was speckled with turrets. The walls seemed to be granite, but smoother somehow, like granite turned to glass or given a magic gloss. Maybe fairies could do that.

I had no idea what fairies could do. Yet apparently, I was one.

My book of fairy tales hadn't included a swarm of kids around my age. One long-legged, capable-looking African American chick strode by, wearing a denim jacket and carrying a bag full of athletic gear. Wait, she wasn't African American. Fairies didn't have Africa or America. I didn't know the name of the fairy realm I was currently in. Also, I hadn't pictured fairies being into extreme sports.

Another girl, pale with a cloud of brown hair, was clutching several plants to her bosom as she hurried across the courtyard. A third sauntered by, vaguely punk rock and olive-skinned and wearing enormous headphones that buzzed faintly on her ears. I hadn't pictured fairies rocking out, either.

There was a rangy guy with skinny jeans, overly sardonic eyebrows, and a knife-bridge nose. California had plenty of white boy edgelords, but this edgelord had an actual knife. Oh no, *actual knife!* I wasn't interested in getting to know Knife Boy better.

A stunning blonde girl with porcelain skin was taking a selfie with a group of overawed younger students. A luminous wisp floated in the air, making her glossy hair shine. Talk about a beauty angle. Seemingly, fairies could create their own beauty lighting.

I checked my phone. Headmistress Dowling had told me an older girl called Stella would meet me and show me the ropes. Stella was late, and I was tired of waiting. I could find my way on my own.

I started forward, hesitated and redirected, and then started forward again. Boldness was everything.

"Wow," said a voice. "You are so lost."

Some guy was talking to me. Thankfully, not Knife Guy, but ... sorry, Some Guy, I don't have time for you.

Some Guy continued, his voice thoughtful. "The issue is you overcommitted. I mean, you're essentially running. And now that I'm here, you can't possibly give me the satisfaction of turning around."

I sneaked a look at him and grinned. His hair had coiffed peaks like a gold helmet and his shirt was pink, which I liked because gender stereotypes were for the weak. He even had a summer tan that fishbelly-pale redheaded me could only dream of. But no matter how cute he was, I wasn't going to encourage him.

"I guess that means we have to do this forever. There are worse things, but—"

I stopped and turned to him. "I don't need help, but thanks."

Now I was looking at him properly, Some Guy was *very* cute, with a hero jawline and a confident air. Some Guy might be cute, but I was the independent type.

Some Guy teased: "Don't remember offering it. So presumptuous. You must be a fairy."

Well, that's what Headmistress Dowling had told me. I took a deep breath, and said it out loud for the first time. "Yes. I am a fairy."

The castle and the cute boy went hazy around me for a minute. I continued bantering, but I wasn't doing a great job at hiding how overwhelmed I was. He guessed I wasn't from around here, and his gaze softened as though he felt bad for me.

Back in California, I hadn't fit in. Could I here? This boy seemed so completely at home, in a castle, in a world where fairies were real. Part of me wanted to keep smiling at him, and part of me wanted to find my own way.

"Dude! Quit perving on the first years."

Cute Guy turned around at the voice, which belonged to Knife Boy. Oh, hell no. I was out of here.

I made my way toward the staircase while the pair bro-hugged. Knife Boy was apparently called "Riv." Well. My name was Bloom. I shouldn't judge.

The blonde with the magic beauty lighting caught up with me at the staircase. She would've been even more beautiful if she hadn't been wearing an expression suggesting she smelled something bad.

“Bloom?”

I guessed that something was me.

“You must be Stella. Hi. I’ve been waiting. I just kinda got impatient.”

Stella didn’t seem impressed by my impatience, but she led the way through the castle, waving an airy hand around at the impressive surroundings. Some of the chandeliers in this place were so dainty and delicate, they looked like stars suspended on gilt ribbons. The rooms were large and bright, with sunbeams dyed by stained-glass windows that were as intricate as the embroidery on a princess’s hem. Much of the stained glass was different shades of green, subtly coloring the air around us as though we were in a world made of jade and emerald.

Stella wasn’t impressed, but she was totally impressive herself. She wore her hair in a cool looping braid, a trenchcoat with a *haute couture* air, and awesome red boots. I was a boots girl myself, plus I wore red and pink because redheads weren’t supposed to and I liked breaking rules. All my dresses-and-boots ensembles would pale compared to Stella, though. Even Stella’s hand was decorated. I nodded toward her ornate jewelry. “That is a lot of ring.”

“Family heirloom,” said Stella. “A gateway ring. The only thing that keeps me sane in this place is the ability to leave it.”

She continued talking, full of ennui about the fairy-tale castle, while I sneaked another look at her ring. “If you ever want to go back,” Stella said as she deliberately flashed it at me. She was making some kind of power play, and I didn’t know why.

This girl Stella didn’t know how badly I wanted to go back home. But I couldn’t. That woman, Headmistress Dowling, had promised me answers.

I let Stella lead me upstairs to the set of rooms in the fairy-tale castle that she referred to as the Winx suite. I dumped my bags, but I didn’t pay much attention to what Stella was saying. I was focused on answers.

My first order of business was finding Headmistress Dowling

again.

FIRE

A fairy who seemed mostly interested in her phone directed me to the headmistress's office. Once there, I only found more questions. There was a globe in the office that showed realms instead of continents. There was a realm called Eraklyon, which sounded like a dragon clearing its throat. Apparently, the realm I was currently in was called Solaria.

The fairy school Alfea. The fairy realm Solaria. Worlds away from California, and home.

And Headmistress Dowling, the woman with the answers. My only hope. She fit in here against the background of books and ornate stained glass, her globe of the realms and her shining desk. She stood at her desk, elaborately carved chair and circular mosaic windows of green glass behind her, telling me I was a Fire Fairy.

"That much I know," I said dryly, and then asked my first question. "So. When do we start?"

Ms. Dowling answered in a measured tone. "Classes begin tomorrow. You'll start with the basics. Learn to use your magic slowly, but safely."

It stung. I thought, since she came to get me herself, that she might be giving me special lessons. But no, I was just another student at fairy school. Fine with me. My mission was to get out of here as quickly as possible.

Thus, one word she'd used concerned me. "When you say *slowly* ..."

"I mean it. Magic can be dangerous, as you well know. Our curriculum is designed with that in mind. Trust the process."

With an edge in my voice, I said: "The ... slow ... process."

"Alfea's graduates have ruled realms and led armies. They've forged powerful relics and rediscovered long-lost magic. They

shape the Otherworld. If you succeed here, you will, too.”

Her voice was soft, serious, and compelling. Her words unrolled in front of me like another map of strange realms. Ms. Dowling gave a great recruitment speech, but I wasn’t looking to be recruited.

“This place ... the Otherworld, Alfea? Honestly, it seems”—*like a storybook come to life*—“amazing. But it isn’t my home,” I told her. “I don’t need to rule a realm or lead an army. I’m here because you promised you’d teach me control.”

I didn’t want to beg for reassurance. She provided none.

Ms. Dowling met my beseeching gaze with her own cool, level stare. Her voice drew a line under the conversation. “No, Bloom. You’re here because you knew you had no other choice.”

I almost hated her for not helping me, but she was right. This was the place I could learn control. My parents deserved better than a child gone wild as a forest fire. I was doing this for them.

FIRE

I’d do anything for my parents, including lie to them about my new boarding school in Definitely Switzerland. My afternoon video chat with them was slightly awkward, especially when Mom and Dad hinted about seeing the view from the window. If only fairyland had ski slopes!

Mom and I used to play pretend that I was a princess, back in the days when she thought I’d grow up to be a cheerleader and maybe prom queen. We’d get dressed up and she’d play me cheerleader-type music. I remembered one chant that went *Close your eyes and open your heart!* The cheesy brainwashing hadn’t worked. I never much cared about frilly princess gowns, but I liked the idea of being at home in my princess castle.

In my fairy-tale castle daydreams, the princess got a room of her own.

In what beautiful blonde Stella had called the Winx suite—a bright series of rooms with tall windows and a view I couldn't allow my parents to see—only one person got a room of their own. To my total lack of surprise, that person was Stella.

The second room was occupied by Musa, the girl with the buzzing headphones I'd spotted earlier, and Terra, who was even now bustling through the rooms placing plants on every available surface. I was sharing a room with a girl called Aisha. I'd noticed her athletic bag earlier, but now Aisha's impressive array of sports medals on her dresser were shining more brightly than the mirror. I didn't know where Aisha herself was. She moved fast, loping through our rooms with terrifying grace and speed.

She seemed nice, but I didn't envision myself being bosom buddies with a supreme jock.

When Mom, always waiting for my transformation into Ms. Popular, asked about the other girls, I shrugged. "Honestly, it's five girls in an enclosed space, so ... it's only a matter of time before we descend into a *Lord of the Flies* situation and kill one another."

My mother didn't love that answer. After our usual back and forth, my parents asked to see the Alps again. I stared around in panic. I couldn't provide my parents with a socially successful daughter or the Alps.

On my nightstand, a light bulb went off. Then on. Then off again.

Aisha's calm voice said: "All right. Lights out. Phones off."

I told my parents I loved them and signed off. Then I was free to express my everlasting gratitude to Aisha.

She smiled faintly, but I thought there was warmth there. "Do I want to know why they think you're in the Alps?"

"My parents are both human. They're apparently not allowed to know anything about this place, so they think Alfea is an international boarding school in Switzerland."

Aisha sounded startled. "Human parents, fairy daughter?"

I'd been hoping that wasn't as unusual as Aisha's tone said it

was. She didn't seem the type to startle easily.

I busied myself with unpacking to hide my discomfort. "Ms. Dowling said there's a fairy somewhere in my family tree? A long-dormant magical bloodline?" I sighed. "One day I will get used to how ridiculous all this sounds."

Aisha's surprise became wry amusement. "Oh my God. Have I just met the one person in the universe who's never read Harry Potter?"

"How dare you. If you knew how many hours I have wasted taking online Sorting Hat quizzes ..."

"Ravenclaw?"

"Sometimes Slytherin," I admitted.

Sometimes I cheated so I wouldn't get Slytherin. I worried that made me more Slytherin than ever.

"That explains the lies, then," Aisha said mildly. For the first time, I noticed that Aisha had cool cobalt blue streaks running through her box braids.

"Gryffindor?" I shot back. "Explains the judgment."

Aisha and I both grinned. Then I grabbed my makeup bag and headed for the bathroom. So far, I kinda liked my new roommate. If we did all end up murdering one another, maybe I'd kill Aisha last.

That still left the spot for who I'd kill first wide open.

I passed Stella's room to see her studying the glittery and silvery outfits laid out on her bed like a general planning a campaign.

"May I help you?" Stella asked, without a glance at me.

Headmistress Dowling said Stella was supposed to be my mentor. Though she'd shown little interest in helping me so far.

"You're changing?" I asked.

"I am."

"I thought the orientation party was a casual thing?"

"It is."

Just to clarify, I said: "A casual thing you're changing for."

“People have seen me in this outfit. They’ll expect something different.”

Stella said this as if it were obvious. She contemplated a different skirt with the intensity of a thousand suns.

I blinked. “People expect you to wear multiple outfits a day?”

“People expect me to care how I look.”

Stella’s eyes flicked to my very casual outfit. She glided over to her mirror without another word. As she gazed at her reflection, her eyes glowed a sudden umber yellow, startling as car headlights in a girl’s face. Another shimmering magical light appeared. Casually, Stella plucked the magic light from the air, placing it at an angle to illuminate her outfit.

I froze, caught like a rabbit in the headlights of magic.

“Something else?” Stella sounded bored.

“That light. It’s magic, right? How exactly do you ...”

“I’m a mentor,” Stella said firmly. “Not a tutor.”

Okay, Stella, message received.

Stella relented. “This is something you’ll learn your first day in class, but fairy magic is linked to emotion. Could be good thoughts, could be bad. Love, hatred, fear. The stronger the emotion, the stronger the magic.”

“So do you hate me or fear me?” I teased. “You were staring at me when you did that spell. And I’m pretty sure you don’t love me.”

I was kidding, but Stella seemed to take me seriously.

“I don’t know you,” she answered. “I’m sure once I do I’ll find ... something to love.”

The way she looked at me said she wasn’t so sure. At the same time, it was kind of nice that Stella wasn’t discounting the idea. There were times I looked in the mirror and didn’t see much to love.

I wondered if any of my new suitemates ever felt that way. Happy bustling Terra, cool girl Musa, glamorous Stella, and Aisha who seemed so grounded. Somehow, I suspected not.

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She reached for her headphones like a drowning person reaching for a life raft.

Terra rattled on. “Also, like, I wouldn’t bring it up to her. Let’s just ... all of us ... blanket statement: Who cares?”

“Weirdly enough, that’s my motto in life. So we are golden.” Musa meant this as a way to kindly but firmly disengage. Terra the Terror didn’t get it.

“Do you want a succulent? They’re hip. Low maintenance. Very you. Not that I really know you, but—”

“If I take it, will you stop talking?” Musa snapped, and then instantly felt bad. “Terra. I’m just having fun.”

Musa took the plant, giving Terra exactly what she wanted, and was rewarded when Terra turned away. Relieved, Musa quickly slid on her headphones.

Then, disaster. Because Terra didn’t really want Musa to take a plant. She wanted Musa to engage, to be interested, to be overwhelmed by Terra’s jumbled rush of emotions. To drown in them.

“Actually, this one might be—”

Musa turned her back so Terra couldn’t see her face. She hoped desperately that Terra would give up and leave her alone.

There was a knock on the door. Musa glanced toward it, guessing this was calm-waters Aisha, or firebrand Bloom. Stella was so clearly not the knocking type.

Aisha popped her head in. “Did you say you grew up at Alfea?”

Sports fiend Aisha wanted to find a pool to swim in, because she had to swim twice a day every day or perish, apparently. Terra burst into a totally unhelpful torrent of information about the pond where the Specialists trained. According to her, the military division of the school took turns tipping each other into the water while they sparred.

Musa left Aisha to deal with Terra.

Get used to disappointment, Musa thought, about Aisha and Terra both. Aisha wasn’t getting a pool, and Terra wasn’t making any

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Die. We all die.”

That sounded okay. Not too scary.

Terra’s new roommate, Musa, who was too cool for school and certainly too cool for Terra, said: “Yeah. That old-age decapitation really sneaks up on you.”

Terra bit her lip. Musa must think she was really dumb.

Aisha was building a magnificent cookie tower on a napkin. The Leaning Tower of Cookies. Terra nervously eyed the food laid out on the tables before them. Sometimes she felt as if food might bite her before she bit into it. She couldn’t take cookies. All the other girls in the Winx suite were so skinny and pretty. If Terra ate a bunch of cookies, people would say, “No wonder she looks like that.” But if Terra got a plate full of carrots, people would say, “Who does she think she’s kidding, when she looks like that?” It was hard to know what to do.

Musa and Aisha were joking around about how many cookies Aisha was eating. It looked as though Musa actually did know how to smile.

Musa nodded at the cookies. “No judgment, but—”

“I eat a million calories a day. If I didn’t swim, I’d be massive.” Aisha sounded amused as she spoke. She looked and moved like a lean, mean, beautiful machine. Of course she found the idea of being massive hilarious.

“I used to dance,” said Musa. “I get it.”

They really seemed to understand each other. They really seemed to be getting along.

“And on that note ...” Aisha rose in quest of more cookies.

Musa teased, “Second round. Damn. Twice a day. Every day. You weren’t kidding.”

Aisha laughed and headed off. Musa moved to put her headphones back on now that Aisha wasn’t there to have fun with.

Terra spoke more sharply than she’d meant to. “So you heard her earlier?”

Musa said, “What?”

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EARTH

Terra was passing busily through the party carrying food trays when a scene of horrible injustice caught her eye.

Oh, for the love of ... Riven was menace-flirting at some poor Specialist boy. This was Riven's typical behavior when he felt off balance. Terra had once witnessed Riven looming at a fern in a way that suggested he either wanted to prune viciously or make out.

At the time, she'd thought: *Bless this mess*. These days, she was more of the opinion that this mess needed composting.

The poor boy must be a first year. Terra didn't recognize him from last year. Riven had an arm around him and was making him drink something that Terra highly suspected was alcoholic.

The new boy's eyes said *help me*. So Terra did.

"Really? Bullying the new kid? Be more obvious."

Riven smirked, because of course he did. "Can't bully the willing. Right?"

There was something loaded about Riven's tone.

"I don't know what that means!" the new boy said sharply.

The new boy was clearly feeling uncomfortable. Terra sympathized. The poor thing mustn't take Riven's terrible personality personally.

"Ignore him," she said, indicating Riven. "He thinks he's some badass; you should've seen him last year. He's just a tragic nerd in disguise."

Riven's eyes narrowed. "And she's just three people in disguise."

There was a silence ringing amid the noise of this party where Terra didn't fit in. The new boy gave her a guilty look, silently offering to do something, which was so nice of him but not necessary.

Terra told the sweet boy, "I got it. But thanks." She let her chipper tone drop as she stepped up to Riven. *What a relief*, she thought distantly. No need to fake nice at Mr. Skinny Jeans

had made the earth the sky, and then made it rain. Water struck the fire like a blue sword, and halted my destruction.

WATER

Aisha wasn't used to Alfea, but she was used to being part of a team. She was glad she had suitemates, and even gladder she had a roommate rather than being alone like Stella. She'd liked Bloom right away, too, appreciating Bloom's directness and her easy humor.

Bloom setting fire to the woods was a drawback, but Aisha was trying to deal. If she could make the girls in the Winx suite feel as though they were her team, then she knew she could take anything Alfea threw at her.

Aisha had hoped for something from her brand-new roommate. Not an explanation, necessarily, but possibly a "sorry for almost setting you on fire"?

But Bloom didn't say anything. Instead, she ran out of the forest and back to the castle.

Aisha chased Bloom into the courtyard, trying to explain how reckless she'd been. "You were a runaway train, Bloom! You had no idea what you were doing!"

"Which is why I was out there *alone*, trying to figure it out."

"Brilliant idea," Aisha said. It was the dumbest idea she'd ever heard in her whole life.

Bloom snapped, "I didn't grow up here. I don't have fairy parents. I've done magic once in my life. And it was ..."

"What? Terrible?" Aisha asked wryly. "I'm shocked. I flooded my entire secondary school after I failed a math test. Taps, sprinklers ... *toilets*. Have you ever waded through human excrement? I have. Not pleasant. But sometimes being a fairy means you have to deal with crap."

It was meant to be a funny story, one that would make Bloom

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Stella's tone gave Musa pause. Plus, Musa could tell Aisha was really upset. Deliberately, she let her powers turn on, and faced Stella with her eyes glowing.

"Your face looks so calm, but you are wracked with guilt," she informed Stella.

Aisha gave Musa a look. Musa was familiar with the look.

"You're a Mind Fairy," Aisha observed, but there was no other judgment.

Aisha turned to Stella just as Terra came out of her and Musa's room.

"A Mind Fairy?" Terra repeated sharply. "What's your connection? Memories, thoughts—"

"Not a great time," Musa pointed out.

Terra's gaze traveled from each of her suitemates to the other. "Everything okay?"

Aisha sighed. "Not really. I'm looking for Bloom, and for some reason, Stella's feeling guilty about it."

Stella gave a sigh, as though overcome by tedium.

"Could everyone please save the drama for drama club?"

Stella was determined to pass this off, Musa realized. And Musa wasn't going to fight her on it, not now that Terra knew what Musa could do, too. Musa knew how that would turn out, could already sense the horror Terra would feel coming toward her. Musa was suddenly and unutterably weary. Stella could keep her secrets.

Only Terra was moving toward Stella, and the way she moved wasn't Terra's usual going-nowhere happy bustle. The way Terra moved was that of a woman on the warpath.

Musa was almost impressed.

"She was talking to Sky, wasn't she?" Terra demanded.

"And?" Stella demanded haughtily in return.

Terra pursued: "And I know what happened to the last person who *talked* to Sky. I was here last year, remember?"

A crack appeared in Stella's veneer as she shot back, "You don't know the full story!"

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“I think so? What the hell was that thing?”

Terra said in a fearful voice, “I’m pretty sure it’s called a Burned One.”

I couldn’t believe they had all come here, for me. There was only one of my suitemates missing.

“Wait. Where’s Stella?”

“I don’t know,” Aisha answered. “Why?”

I said numbly, “That thing took her ring.”

SPECIALIST

Sky couldn’t get California girl Bloom out of his head. He was thinking about her while he was in the shower.

Oh no, Sky corrected himself in dismay, as his inner Riven made a comment about that one. Not like that. Just ... how pretty she was, her red hair bright as a new copper penny, in the sunlight streaming through the courtyard. How funny she was. She’d looked so lost, trying to find her way around a strange castle, and that had drawn Sky to her like a moth to a Fire Fairy.

Sky had already done something a little bit sketch. At the orientation party, he’d found Terra Harvey, Professor Harvey’s daughter. Sky had an in there. Terra was drifting around looking happy and dreamy-eyed.

“Hey,” he’d said to her. “Terra, right?”

Terra blinked at him. “Yes.”

“Sorry if this is awkward,” Sky said. “But I was wondering ... Bloom’s your suitemate, right? And I assume ... you have her number ...?”

Terra lit up like a light bulb. “And you’d like me to give you her number!” she exclaimed.

“Not if you think it’s weird,” Sky said hastily. “Or aggressive.”

“I don’t think it’s weird, Sky,” Terra assured him. “I think it’s beautiful. Love is beautiful!”

nonchalant lady shower of togetherness. Terra didn't know if they would both fit, and she wasn't interested in learning.

"No, I, uh ... I was gonna change, but ..." A brainwave struck. "I forgot my bra."

Aisha pointed to the bra on top of Terra's pile of clothes.

"That one?"

Terra gabbled excuses—this bra was too small, it was maybe on fire, she'd never seen this bra before in her life—as Aisha started stripping for her shower.

To change the subject, Terra asked: "Have you seen Stella? I don't think she came back last night."

Stella had probably been with Sky. But would Sky really get back together with Stella, after last year ...?

Nonchalant about this as about all else, Aisha shrugged. These were Terra's longed-for Winx roommates. Staying out all night with boys. Getting super naked. Each one of them cooler than Terra would ever be.

Terra grabbed her clothes and fled.

FIRE

First day of classes, I thought. Time to learn, and not think about being a changeling, or burned monsters chasing me. Happy thoughts, just like in *Peter Pan*! That's how you fly.

Not literally, because fairies didn't have wings anymore. Emotionally. Emotionally, I would fly. No bad thoughts.

Through my open bedroom door, Musa's voice filtered. "I didn't even think those things were real, but we all saw it. It was creepy as hell. It looked like it wanted to kill her—"

Even Musa's detached voice sounded worried. How could I stop thinking about burned monsters if people wouldn't stop talking about them? I willed Musa to quit killing the flying vibe.

"What about my ring?" Stella demanded.

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electrical properties ...”

A girl I didn't know, with dark mischievous eyes and a cleft chin, stepped up to the Vessel. Suddenly, her eyes glowed gray, and arcs of lightning zapped around the bowl. She slanted a confident smile over at Ms. Dowling.

Ms. Dowling continued as if she hadn't seen the girl's almost-taunting smile. “Whatever your element, the emotions underlying it are the same for all fairies.”

Ms. Dowling hadn't given the other girl a glance, but she nodded at me as I approached the Vessel. I tried to take regular breaths and cover my nerves with swagger. I laid my fingertips on the stone loops and curls covering the Vessel.

The steady voice of Ms. Dowling urged me on. “Open yourself up to the magic of the world around you.”

I tried.

I stared at the bowl.

Nothing was happening.

“Focus on clear, positive feelings,” Ms. Dowling encouraged.

“Yep,” I said.

Happy thoughts. Flying feelings. Come on, dammit.

“There's an emotional wellspring that lives deep inside you. Find it. Step into it. Push through your doubts.”

Even Ms. Dowling was starting to sound doubtful. Time stretched on, and the Vessel stayed humiliatingly unresponsive to my touch. The other first years were murmuring behind my back, their whispers filling the stone circle like fog.

Very quietly, I heard Musa say: “This is a disaster.”

And I knew she was right.

FIRE

After class, the other first years were still gossiping about me, and Ms. Dowling drew me aside under the trees. Even the green leaves

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Riven scoffed. “Your finger slipped? That’s what you’re going with? I’m feeling generous. I won’t feel that way much longer.”

As Dane put his phone down, Riven leaned forward to observe the long stream of texts between New Boy and Terra. Yeah, it appeared they had a real dialogue going. Riven shook his head.

Okay, he decided. He could be like Sky. Do a good deed. Take Dane under his wing.

Yeah, Riven was feeling benevolent. And if that annoyed Miss Terra and all her vine friends, too bad. Riven was virtuously devoted to helping the new kid, who flushed deeper under Riven’s continued attention.

“First piece of advice? Pick your friends carefully this year. Second? Focus. Get your mind in it. You fought Kat with your limbs and you lost. Being a good Specialist is not about how big you are. It’s about strategy.” He called out: “Hey, Mikey! Let’s do this.”

Dane eyed Mikey with alarm. Probably because Mikey was huge, and Dane was worried Riven’s pretty face would get messed up.

Mikey lumbered across to the sparring mat, where Riven walked to meet him. Mikey came at Riven hard. Riven parried two crushing punches. Then he launched himself and took Mikey to the floor in a choke hold.

Riven glanced up to see if Dane was watching. Of course Dane was.

First lesson. That’s how you win, new kid. No mercy. Not for anyone.

Good deed for the day done, Riven strolled away from the training area to find some of his friends. The universe gave him a reward for his virtue when Mystery Girl zipped over to his side.

She couldn’t stay away, Riven thought.

“Lurky stoner guy, right?” asked Mystery Girl.

“Or Riven,” Riven suggested.

She made a face. In the sunlight, she was even cuter. He could reach out and press a fingertip against the cleft of her chin.

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began to plan how to find the monster Dowling had trapped and reclaim the ring. Finally, people were concentrating on the important things: Stella's jewelry.

As he leaned over the map, Stella put her hand on Sky's back. Scratching gently. Tracing. Marking her territory. Apparently, Bloom talked to her mother every night and got showered in praise and affection, but Stella's mother had taught Stella more important things. Such as how to stake a royal claim.

Sky began pointing things out on the map with soldierly precision. He was a knight aiding the princess.

"There's only a few buildings outside the Barrier where they could secure a creature like that. And I'm pretty sure I saw Silva heading in from the east this morning, so." His strong fingers traced the map. "There's a barn and a mill—"

"Barn is my bet," Terra piped up. "My dad fortified the beams to chain a wounded horse when I was little. I still remember sneaking in and—"

Stella cut her off. Somebody had to stop Terra's incessant chattering. It was a mercy for Terra, and certainly a mercy for anyone who had to listen to Terra. It was a public service Stella was undertaking for her people. "So we just have to sneak out there to the barn and get my ring."

"Strange how casually you're tossing about the word *we*," Aisha remarked.

Funny how Aisha was so eager to help Bloom and so reluctant to help Stella. She'd chosen her side pretty fast.

Musa chimed in, "Seems like more of a *you* kinda deal."

Apparently, all the suitemates had.

"Except *I* didn't lose it." Stella gazed at Bloom significantly.

Message received. "When do we go?" Bloom asked.

Everyone exchanged apprehensive looks. Naturally, Aisha the interferer was the one who spoke up to protect her precious roommate.

"Gonna be blunt here. Sorry. Bloom, you have zero control over

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phone buzzed with a text from Dane, telling him Callum was en route. Baby Specialist Dane was coming in useful. Riven was glad he'd decided to become a mentor.

Riven and Beatrix left in a hurry. Riven never noticed the electric sparks playing along the surface of the stone bookcase, revealing the outline of a secret door.

He did notice Beatrix's self-satisfied smile as they hurried along, but he misinterpreted that. He assumed it was all about him.

FIRE

The stone circle at sunset was beautiful. The glow of the setting sun gave every stone a halo. It seemed like at any moment in this space, magic might happen.

But magic wasn't happening. I kept trying, and failing.

"I hear you're broken," said Princess Stella, strolling into the circle.

And now Stella had come to be tactful to me. Great.

I tried to ignore her taunting and insisted: "I'm still gonna help you."

"And I'm thrilled," Stella drawled, "but I'd prefer we wait until you aren't completely useless. What's the damage?"

I wasn't sure Stella was the best person to let in, but she was the one who was here.

"I ... don't know," I admitted. "And the more I try to figure it all out, the harder it gets."

I made a frustrated gesture to my notebook. Stella eyed the book with even more disdain than she usually exhibited.

"That thing is your problem. You can't think your way into magic."

I sighed. "I know. It's all about clear and positive emotions. There's a page dedicated to them."

"Wait. You made a list?"

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EARTH

The setting sun shone through the opaque panes of glass in the greenhouse, onto winding vines and vivid flowers. Some were classified as magical. Some were not. It didn't matter. Every flower was magic to Terra.

Set at intervals amid the greenery were black lab tables, where they could perform the wonders of science amid the beauty of nature.

Terra was always happy here, and she'd never been happier than she was at this moment. In her special place. With Dane, who was taking an interest in her chemistry equipment and pretending he didn't know what a pipette was. He got her to say the word five times.

She tossed a dead leaf at him. "Do it again and this whole flowerpot's coming at ya."

Dane grinned. *He was so, so cute*, Terra thought. This was just like last year, being happy in the greenhouse, having someone to hang out with.

Except this was way better than last year, because Dane was a wonderful, adorable person. And Terra was almost sure Dane liked her back.

She touched a plant, and made it bloom into a sunset-orange flower. Just for him.

Dane smiled, teeth white and bright, looking truly impressed.

Then his phone buzzed. Dane texted back, then returned his attention to Terra and asked what they were making.

Terra replied eagerly, "It's an oil. Well, technically an unguent. But thin for an unguent."

She and her suitemates were on a secret mission, to save Stella's royal ring from the Burned One. Stella had thanked Terra personally for helping.

"Ah," said Dane. "An un ... guent."

Maybe Dane didn't understand what a cool thing they were