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Ida, the older sister, was quiet and shy and sometimes clumsy. May was the opposite. She was loud and fast and never missed a catch. If the sisters climbed a tree, Ida would get stuck and May would have to help her down. To Ida, this was all back to front. Ida was older, but May was better at everything. It wasn’t fair!

On the day that the girls fell out of this world and into another, Ida’s envy was worse than ever. That morning, the principal had made an announcement at assembly. A year 5 student was going to the regional athletics competition. The principal had called May’s name. As her smiling sister had bounded to the front, something cold twisted in Ida’s stomach. It felt like a snake made from ice.

Later, on the walk home, May was too excited to notice Ida’s dark mood. She tossed and caught her favourite red ball, chattering happily all the while about new sneakers and training schedules. Finally Ida could take no more. Surprising both of them, she snatched the ball in mid-air and flung it into the playground they were passing.

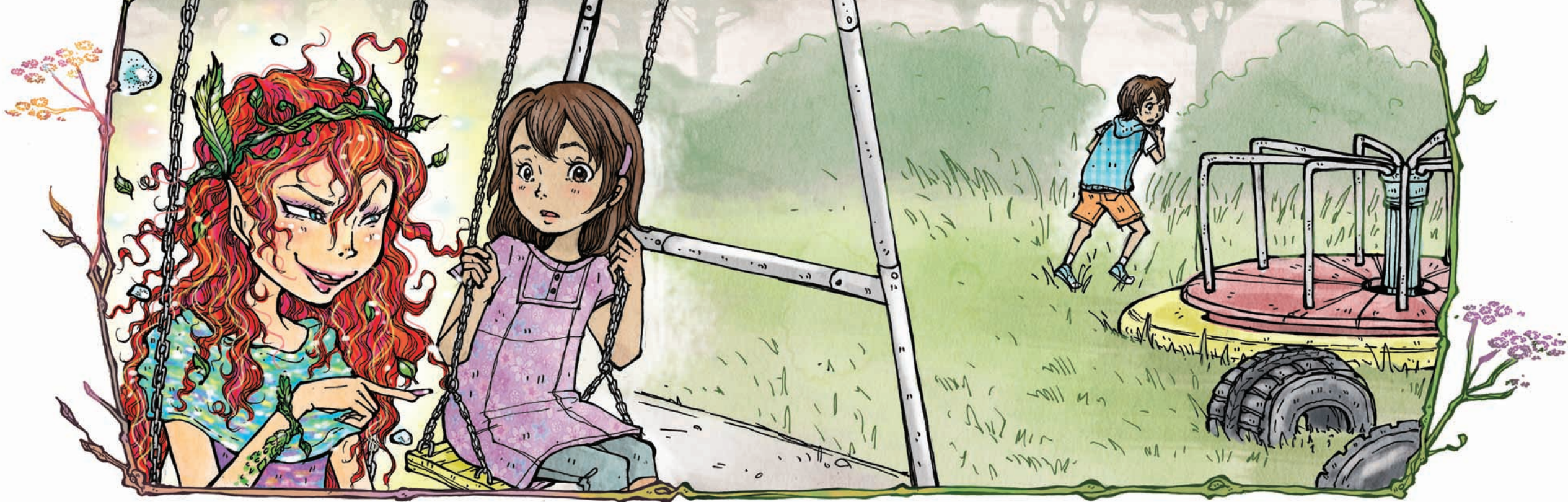


“Hey! What did you do that for?” demanded May.

“Because!” Ida retorted, “I’m sick of that ball, and I’m sick of you. You’re not as great as you think you are.”

Tears sprang into May’s eyes. “You’re mean,” she said quietly. Then she turned and ran after her ball.

Ida did feel mean, no doubt about it. But the meanest part of her was *glad* she’d upset May. For a moment, she considered leaving her sister behind – but she knew their mother would be angry if she arrived home alone. Instead, she followed May into the playground.



“What’s your name?”

Ida jumped. A girl was sitting on a swing. Ida was sure she hadn’t been there a moment ago. The girl wore a sparkly, floaty dress, as if she’d been to a costume party. Ida thought she looked too old to play fairies.

“Well?” asked the girl. “Have you forgotten your own name?” Her eyes were very green.

“Ida,” said Ida. She sat on the other swing and pushed off.

The fairy girl began to swing, too.

“Is that your sister?” she asked, pointing at May.

The snake in Ida’s stomach coiled tight. “Yes,” she replied.

“But I wish she wasn’t.”

The girl’s green eyes glittered. “Perhaps you wish she would just ... disappear?” she suggested.

“So? Wishing won’t make it happen.”

“If you wish in the right way, it could.”

“What do you mean *the right way*?”

“It’s easy,” the girl replied. “Just say these words: *Fairy folk, so wild and free, take my sister away from me.*”

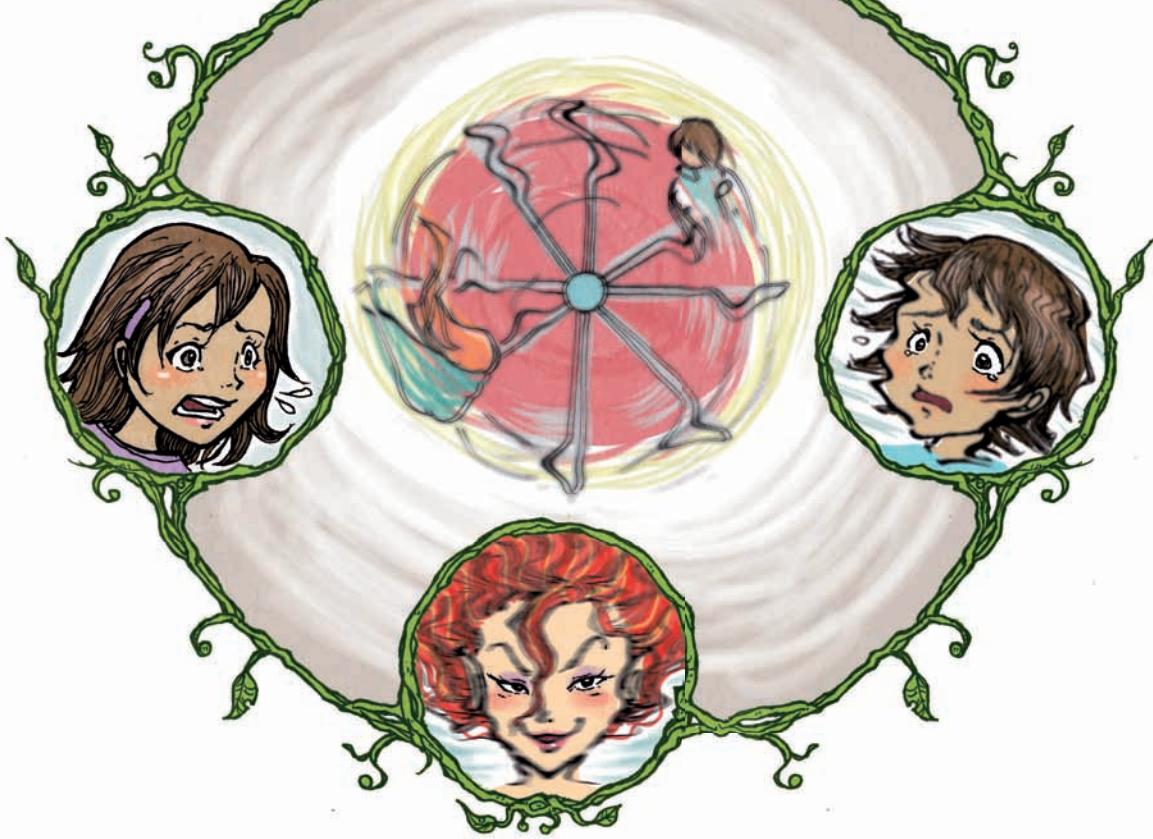
Ida felt a twinge of fear, but she said scornfully, “I don’t believe in fairies.”

The stranger smiled, although there was nothing friendly about it. “Perhaps I should ask your sister instead,” she said. “I bet she’d play my little game. She’s good at games, isn’t she?”

May had given up on her ball. She was standing on the crossbars of the roundabout, balancing as it spun around. Ida knew she’d be afraid to do the same thing, and her envy returned.

“Wait,” she said. “I’ll play.” And then she said the words.

At that, the strange girl vanished from the swing and suddenly appeared next to May on the roundabout. Ida saw May’s face, startled – and then frightened. The roundabout began to spin faster, without anyone pushing it. It spun faster and faster.



“Jump, May!” Ida screamed. But it was too late. The roundabout spun so fast that May and the girl became a blur of colour. And then they were gone.

Ida leapt off her swing and fell hard, winding herself. As she struggled to breathe, she caught sight of May’s ball, lying hidden under the slide. Dragging herself up, Ida ran to the slide and grabbed the ball. Oh, what had she done?

“May!” called Ida. “May, I didn’t mean it. I take it all back!”

Ida heard her words ringing in the empty playground. *Take it all back.* Suddenly, an idea came to her.

Holding the ball, she ran to the roundabout, which was slowing down. Leaning hard into a crossbar, Ida made it turn again, faster and faster. When it was spinning as fast as she could make it go, Ida leapt on. “Fairy folk, so wild and free, give my sister back to me,” she shouted.

The playground blurred. Then it disappeared.

When her head stopped spinning, Ida found herself in a forest. She was still clutching the red ball. Nearby, she could hear singing and laughter. Ida felt afraid, but she had to find her sister, so she followed the sounds. She didn’t have to go far.

In a clearing, the green-eyed girl was dancing in a circle with other children. “No – not children,” Ida thought. “*Fairies.*” In the centre of their circle stood May.

“May!” shouted Ida.



Still enchanted by the fairy spell, May heard nothing. But the dancers stopped and turned towards Ida. Then the green-eyed one stepped out of the circle.

“You got your wish,” she sneered. “Begone!”

“Please,” begged Ida. “I made a mistake.”

The fairy smiled her treacherous smile. “Silly girl. Let’s see if you can get it right this time.” She raised a hand and made a sign. Suddenly, inside the circle, there were three Mays.

"If you can pick your real sister," said the green-eyed fairy, "she can go with you. If not, she will dance here forever."

Ida looked at the three Mays. She could see no way to tell them apart. "May!" she called, but none of the three even blinked.

Ida's heart was beating fast, but she made herself think. She knew in her bones that she could not step inside that circle. If she did, the fairies would keep her and May both. But how could she tell the real May from the others? Somehow she had to catch the impostors out. With this thought, Ida knew how. Her heart beat faster, but she didn't hesitate. She pulled back her arm and threw the red ball.

It flew up, straight and true above the fairy ring. For a moment, it seemed to hover in the air and all three Mays remained frozen. But as the ball dropped, two of them flinched and cowered. The third smiled. She bent her knees and leapt. When her hand closed around the red ball, the two false sisters disappeared.

The green-eyed fairy screamed with fury. The other fairies scattered as May broke out of their circle, running like the wind. Ida reached out a hand, and May clasped it. Then, once more, the sky and trees spun into dizzy colour.

When the sisters found themselves back in the playground, they were still holding hands.

"Good throw," said May.

"Good catch," replied Ida.

And what then? Were the sisters always good to each other? Did they find no reason to envy each other's gifts for as long as they lived? Did they live happily ever after?

Of course not. They still compared and competed, as sisters do. Their mother would sigh and say "Be kind, girls. You only have one sister."

Ida would remember the time – now almost a dream – when briefly she'd had three. And she and May would look at each other and smile.



The Red Ball

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