

FAIRY OAK

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Gnane*



The Power of the Light

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della Quercia

Elisabetta Gnone

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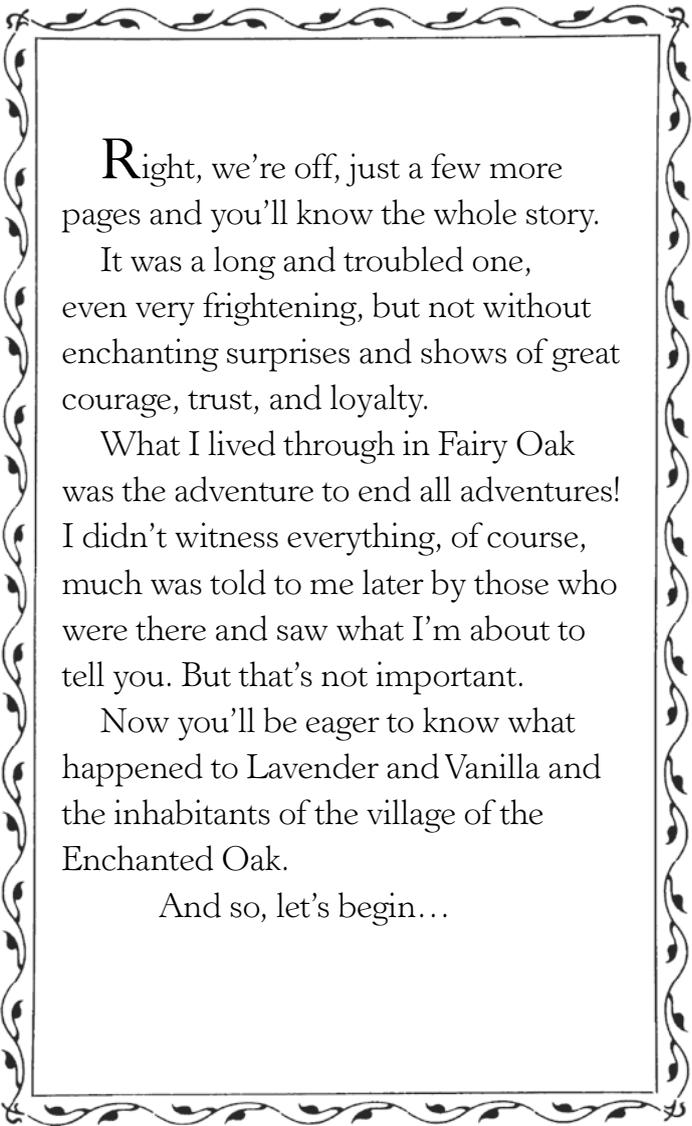
THE POWER OF THE LIGHT



Book 3

Translated from the Italian by Alastair McEwen

*To Laura queen of hearts
and Claudia princess of flowers.
And to the realm of witches, wizards,
Gnomes, cats, and dogs that surrounds them.*



Right, we're off, just a few more pages and you'll know the whole story.

It was a long and troubled one, even very frightening, but not without enchanting surprises and shows of great courage, trust, and loyalty.

What I lived through in Fairy Oak was the adventure to end all adventures! I didn't witness everything, of course, much was told to me later by those who were there and saw what I'm about to tell you. But that's not important.

Now you'll be eager to know what happened to Lavender and Vanilla and the inhabitants of the village of the Enchanted Oak.

And so, let's begin...



The First Sign



A large snowflake drifted across the landscape in front of our window. As I often did of an evening, I opened my diary to bring it up to date. Almost immediately, though, my thoughts began to race faster than my pen. Unable to keep up with them in ink, I closed the book and after having tucked in the girls' blankets I sought comfort in my new ball of wool.

With the coming of the first cold days, a ball of wool left over from the girls' pullovers had become my bed, in place of the slice of bread, and I was glad about that: as well as keeping me warm, the wool gave off the scent of the southernwood twigs Dahlia used to put in the drawers and cupboards. In the cosy warmth, in that familiar scent, I looked at the night and thought.

What a lot of things had happened since my arrival in Fairy Oak.



“During the first days it was one surprise after another” I recalled with a smile. Always open-mouthed, asking what this or that thing was... what a foolish and incompetent little fairy I was! And the expression on my face, the first time I saw the houses of the village, from the pointed roofs to the stone walls! Oh, they were really beautiful, with big gardens and verandas, but new to someone like me who came from the Kingdom of the Silvery Dewes, where there weren't any houses, but meadows and flowers and calm lagoons. I was amazed to discover that human beings also loved flowers, so much so that they grow them in winter, sheltered from the cold, in transparent little buildings they call greenhouses. My family's greenhouse stood up against the sunniest wall of the house, comfortable and placid like a satisfied cat, among luxuriant rose bushes, clusters of lavender, and fragrant herbs: mallow, rosemary, mint, tarragon... On the shadiest side, instead, grew azaleas and rhododendrons. And did they grow! Over the years they had hidden the path that led to the garden and from May to June they were covered with flowers as big as the balls with which the children played in the pretty, sun-soaked squares of the village. White, pink, purple...

Along the wall that skirted the road flourished the hydrangeas, my favourites, and I always eagerly waited for them to flower, just after the majestic and elegant



peonies came into bloom. My family had a magnificent garden.

The style of the clothes! Now I remember that this too had been a surprise. The sound they made, especially in winter, when Magicals and Nonmagicals wore layers of clothes, one on top of the other, to protect themselves from the cold: *swish...swish...* went Lalla Tomelilla's long clothes... *swish... swish...* when people went out to do the shopping... *swish... swish...* when they hugged one another. They even had a good smell, a fragrance of biscuits, flowers, home... Ah, the scents of Fairy Oak, now I knew them well, but when I sniffed wine for the first time and freshly baked bread, fairyofmine!, I nearly fainted. Not because they weren't good, you understand, it's just that there was nothing like them in the Kingdom of the Silvery Dews, where there was no smell of cut grass, no scent of trampled grapes, no aroma of blackberry pie or the warm smell of the smoke that emerged from the chimneys in winter and tickled your nose - never mind the smell of a stormy sea... It took me a whole year to learn to recognize the seasons in the world of men.

Ten years had gone by since then, ten years from my first encounter with she who, by sending for me, had changed my life.

“Dear Tomelilla, meeting you was the biggest thrill of



my life” I thought, hugging my ball of wool. The stoves had consumed the last log of the evening and the air in the room was beginning to get cold. “How much longer?” “...*If you accept, your position with our family will last fifteen years, after which you will once again be free to look after new children...*”

This is what my witch wrote in her letter. Another five years, and then the girls would be big enough to fend for themselves and I would have to leave that house. On thinking about how the time had flown, I shivered again.

What a lot of things we had been through. Nicethings, nastythings, thrilliterrifictings, right from the very first day! To and fro along that corridor waiting for the twins to be born... and then? Along they came at last, one twelve hours after the other. Lavender and Vanilla, identical and different right from the very first moment. But the real difference between them was not discovered until the day when the Enemy launched His first attack: as they were fighting to defend themselves, Vanilla showed she was a Witch of the Light, and Lavender a Witch of the Dark. Then all was clear: their different personalities, their fears, their enthusiasms: opposite, always.

“Poor Tomelilla”, I thought “You so deeply regretted not guessing sooner, but how could you? No brothers and sisters had ever possessed different powers before!”



Since then we had been at war.

In the last few months, the Enemy's attacks had become more frequent and more ferocious and fear had crept into people's hearts as spear-grass creeps across the fields. Even in the rare moments of peace it was hard to weed it out. On the contrary, it spread, conquering more territory and leaving less and less room for joy and smiles. And as always happens, when a people's freedom and their survival are put to a severe test, trust and patience disappear. And so, even in Fairy Oak, distrust and rancour had set in.

Those were truly bad times and for this family it was a millitrillion times more so. Because, by now we knew: He wanted the twins!

Tomelilla had explained this to me well: Light, the one, Dark, the other, united by blood and love, Vanilla and Lavender represent what the Terrible 21st has always been fighting against: Equilibrium and Harmony. Life.

This is why He had tried to abduct them, this was why He was besieging our village: to take them and carry them off. Perhaps only one of them. It would have been enough for Him to separate them, to organize things so that one sister became alienated from the other, in her mind and heart, and the Ancient Alliance between Light and Dark would break. Then He would have become King.



The pitiless king of a land without light.

I turned to look at them: I would have done anything to protect them. Not merely giving up sleep. I would have stopped eating, drinking, existing, if it had been necessary. They were my girls; I had seen them born and for a fairy this creates an indissoluble bond. Their pretty faces, snub noses, unruly hair, white cheeks, their light breathing... these were the most familiar things I had. I loved them deeply and would never have let anyone hurt them.

Nonetheless, in those dark days, something had happened that made me feel more powerless than ever against the Enemy.

During the last battle, even though terrifying and fearful monsters had surrounded Fairy Oak, Lavender had left the village. The next day, serene and without a scratch, or any sign of fear, she had returned. Where had she been? "I fell into a trap", she had told us. What kind of trap? She hadn't explained and this made me feel a bit uncomfortable.

That night too, even though all was calm and tranquil... something was bothering me. Silencing my thoughts for a moment, I realized that inside, and outside, the silence was so deep that it irritated my ears. Not a sound, not even the wood which at that hour would creak as it released the heat of the day; not so much as a dry



leaf trembling in the breath of winter, not so much as the hooting of owls...

“How odd” I thought. “It’s as if this night, still and suspended, were in obscure expectation of... something.” Even the trees, who had always been my friends, looked at me with a hostile expression. The slender black branches seemed sharp-pointed hooks ready to claw... “Who? Who is hiding in the dark?” I asked myself, frightened. Was something about to happen? My antennae were not quivering... true, but that didn’t mean much.

I looked at the sky, in search of a sign, and to my surprise I found it mute, its humour veiled by a single colour.

“That’s odd too” I said to myself. “It’s night, yet the sky is grey!”

My thoughts instantly flew to the Terrible 21st and out of alarm I spoke, instead of thinking.

“The Enemy is on the hunt once more!” I said out loud.

Immediately afterwards, a surge of rebellion seized me and got the upper hand. “No, no, no...” I protested to myself, shrugging off those ugly thoughts. “It’s your tired eyes, Telli, and the worries and anxieties of these days that prevent you from seeing hope. It’s not a new attack that the Valley senses coming, but of a sign of peace.”



And why not, after all? After so many months of battles, clashes and fears, didn't we deserve, perhaps, a little sign of peace, which would instil courage and serenity in all of us, sorely tried as we were? Let it come then, and soon.

"Oh, fairyofallfairies" I prayed, looking outside "if something is going to happen, let it be a nicething..."

I hadn't finished that thought when a snowflake entered the motionless picture on the other side of the window and, heedless of the dark plot I saw in it, it breathed life into the scene, dancing from north to south.

Electrified by the sight, I jumped down from my ball of wool, locked the window with a fairy spell... and flew to Tomelilla.



A Hint of Fear



I was the only light in the house and my gleam created a circle of light around me. A little circle, but enough to illuminate the narrow wooden walls of the staircase and the faces portrayed in the photos hanging on both sides: Dahlia's and Tomelilla's grandparents, some great-great-great aunts and uncles, Tomelilla on the day she won her first prize, Dahlia with the girls, Cicero with his spyglass, Vanilla with a little bird perched on her finger, a cat curled up in a vase of heather, the girls on their first day at school, a freckled girl holding a funny dog in her arms, the certificate of "Expert Meteorologist" awarded to Cicero, the girls' "Apprentice Witches" diplomas, me wide-eyed on the day Tomelilla gave me the jam jar, Dahlia and Cicero on their wedding day, looking very elegant on their little red plush thrones, the village on a knot day... "And this one? I don't remember this one"



I said to myself, stopping for a moment in front of the last photo.

“Here’s hoping that Tomelilla isn’t too fast asleep. In fact, here’s hoping she isn’t asleep at all, otherwise I’ll have to raise my voice and I’ll wake everyone up!”

I knocked: *Tap-tap-tap-tap...*

“Tomelilla, it’s Telli! I have to tell you something!”

“Come in” said a calm voice from inside.

I pushed the door open and since the bed was empty, I looked for her in the dark. She was in front of the window, kneeling on a cushion. She was wearing a soft blue woollen dressing gown that highlighted the long white plaits hanging down her back. She was looking outside, with her elbows leaning on the window sill and her chin between her hands.

“Have you seen it too?” She asked. “I love it when it snows in Fairy Oak.”

“Oh, me too” I said. And I raised my voice a little. “Because snow is our friend! Don’t you find, Tomelilla that the snow is our friend?”

She gave me a sidelong look.

“What’s the matter with you, have you swallowed a spelling-book? And why are you yelling so much?”

“Do you remember that winter, when little Vanilla wandered away from the house to play in the snow and we managed to find her by following her tracks, and



how much fun the kids have playing the midnight games you organize in the garden when there's lots of snow?

She thought for a moment: "Of course, this snowfall might offer us a few advantages. Tracks are clearly visible in the snow and for the Dark Enemy it might be more difficult to hide."

"Precisely!" I exclaimed, glad she had understood. "The Emissary's black cloaks will stand out like raven's wings and this will make things easier for the patrol watching over the village. And, I must admit, it'll be easier for us fairies too. Not to mention the reflection: as long as the snow lasts it will never be totally dark! The snow is on our side!"

She smiled and went back to looking outside.

We stayed in silence for a few moments, as the snow silently erased all differences and made everything equal in the world around us.

Suddenly, however, something flew in front of the window, making the flakes whirl.

"What was that?" I asked, backing away from the window in fright.

"I have no idea!" exclaimed Tomelilla.

In that moment the door of the house banged: *SLAM!*

We turned around simultaneously and with hearts in our throats we dashed down the stairs.



On the floor below, we found Cicero in his pyjamas, going down in front of us.

“Did you hear it too?” Tomelilla asked him.

“Yes... yes” he replied, still half asleep. “Has someone gone out?”

“Or someone’s come in!” said Tomelilla. “You two go to the girls, I’ll go downstairs.”

Vanilla’s and Lavender’s bedroom door was ajar, as I had left it. I pushed it and a rectangle of light revealed Lavender, or rather what I guessed was her because she had the blankets pulled right over her head. I went in, followed by Cicero: Vanilla was sleeping too, lying on her tummy, as she often did, with one hand behind her head and one knee bent.

“Everything’s calm upstairs” I said, joining Tomelilla on the ground floor. “And here?”

“All seems calm here too” she replied, appearing from the kitchen. In her haste she had forgotten to put on her slippers and now she was walking on tip-toe on the freezing stone floor.

“Good, then I’m off back to bed” said Cicero from the stairs.

“We’re coming too” I said, as behind me Tomelilla was shaking her head in puzzlement.

“I wonder what made that noi ...”

She stopped dead and slowly took a step backwards.



“Who is it?” I asked below my breath.

She didn’t reply. Her heels were resting on the floor and she was walking on the spot.

“What is it?” I asked again.

“The floor is damp here” she said.

“Damp?”

“Yes, someone has come in!”

“But if it’s damp only there...”

Guessing my thought, Tomelilla took a few steps around.

“No, here it’s dry” she said, coming back. She was pensive. Then, she suddenly had an insight. “Whoever came in, can fly!” she exclaimed, with her eyes in the shape of snow crystals, dashing into the kitchen. She came out carrying a white sack.

“Quick, let’s call Dahlia and Cicero.”

We rushed upstairs and got poor Cicero out of bed again, and this time Dahlia too.

“Take a handful of flour and puff it all around you!” ordered Tomelilla.

“Wha...?” said Dahlia, heaving herself up all tousled. “Is it already time to bake the bread?”

“No, no, no, it’s nothing to do with bread!” replied Tomelilla, handing Dahlia her dressing gown. “An intruder, more like: if he has made himself invisible, this will unmask him!”



Dahlia leaped out from under the blankets.

“Someone has come into our house? Oh, dear me!”

“To tell the truth we’re not exactly certain that someone has come in, it’s merely a precaution” I said to reassure her, while Tomelilla wagged her finger to tell us to be quiet and calm down. Trembling with cold and fright, Dahlia took her dressing gown and covered herself.

“We don’t want to cause a panic” said Tomelilla, opening the sack of flour. “So let’s leave Vanilla and Lavender to sleep and try to be a bit smarter. Now, if he were a Magical of the Dark he could disappear, but he couldn’t dematerialize, right?” As she explained, Tomelilla started distributing handfuls of flour to all of us. “And if, instead of flying, he walked, he would leave tracks, wouldn’t he? Now, keep puffing the flour around you and if you see tracks, call out. Dahlia, you and Cicero check the girls’ room and the floor above. Telli and I will comb the rest of the house.”

We started from the bottom, in other words from where the house was scariest: we visited the Spell Chamber. Then, having gone back along the corridor and up the two steps, Tomelilla opened the door of the laundry room: the sheets hanging up bellied out towards us and I got a fright.

“It’s only the draught, scaredy cat!” said my witch. “Now use your light to illuminate that corner, it’s easier



to hide in places like that!”

“Oh, great!” I thought.

Three steps up from the laundry room, on the right, was the cupboard below the stairs.

“In there too?” I asked.

“Of course!”

“But even the girls have trouble getting in there...”

“So? We don’t know how big the intruder may be. If there’s only one of them...”

“Heavens above!”

“There’s no one here. May we go back upstairs?” I pleaded, shooting out of the cupboard in a flash.

Finally we went back to the kitchen, where everything was ready for breakfast, and from there we went down the step that leads into the dining room: the stove was still giving off a little heat and through the windows I saw that the garden was already all white. We moved on into the room with the fireplace where a crackling sound made me jump.

“It’s the embers, Telli: no one has put them out!” whispered Tomelilla, who added: “That’s bad! You never know what’s smouldering under the ashes... Without burning yourself, light up the hood over the fireplace.”

“Must I go in there? But it’s all dark!”

“That’s why you must go in, Telli! Or do I have to change shape? Come on, I’m right here beside you...”



We checked behind the doors and under the armchairs, after which we went into Cicero's study and the pantry.

We opened cupboards, drawers, every cupboard door and chest in the house, until we found ourselves on the first floor once more.

"We've puffed flour all over" said Cicero, taking Dahlia under his arm. "Now we're going back to bed."

"Very well, very well" replied Tomelilla. "Sorry if I disturbed you."

Dahlia made a gesture as if to say "it's nothing" and we, just to make sure, checked the girls' bedroom again.

"Do you notice anything strange?" she asked, entering the room on tip-toe.

I looked around carefully: half of the room was in perfect order, the other half was a complete shambles.

"Everything's normal" I said.

Tomelilla lifted the hem of her dressing gown and, walking like a crane in a reed-bed, she stepped over the obstacles between her and Lavender's bed.

"I'll never understand this difference" she muttered. "It seems as if in this part of the house the power of gravity has got the better of will power!"

She was right: Lavender was excessively untidy and all her things seemed destined to live scattered about on the floor or piled up on a chair.



In Vanilla's part, instead, every object had its place, a destination. Her collection of erasers and pencils neatly organized in jars, her books lined up on the shelves, her toys in the basket, her schoolbag lying closed by the leg of the table, her clothes put away, except one outfit, a woollen dress in blue and grey checks that has laid out on the chair, ready to be put on the next day.



I checked to see if the alarm was set for the right time, nudged back a book jutting over the edge of the bedside table and headed for the door, thinking that Tomelilla would do the same. Instead, I saw she was sitting next to Lavender and staring at her with a look full of apprehension.

She was sitting upright, with her hands in her lap and looking uncomfortable. After all, she was sitting on a mountain of clothes: those of that day, the day before,



and the day before that too... Lavender piled them up in a desultory way from one week to the next on what, in our memories, was a handsome red chair made of woven straw in the old style of Fairy Oak.

Oh, yes, disorder ruled in Lalla's realm. Even her tiny bedside table was cluttered with objects: Grisam's ring, the magic compass Tomelilla had given her, a glass of water that had been stagnating there for days, a hair grip, three books: *Raising Spiders at Home*, *the Ancient Chronicle*, and a manual she had borrowed from her father, titled *Enchanting Corners and Secret Paths of Greenvale*. This latter was lying open, face down. Tomelilla inserted a bookmark and closed it. Then, with a long sigh, she leaned over to give Lavender a kiss and got to her feet. When she was at the door, she touched the back of her dressing gown and in that moment a bitter line, at the corners of her mouth, wiped all trace of tenderness from her face.

"Is everything all right?" I asked her in a low voice.

She said nothing and went out.



