

STARFELL

Willow Moss and
the Lost Day



DOMINIQUE VALENTE

The magic is waiting...

Dominique Valente
Starfell: Willow Moss
and the Lost Day
Серия «Starfell», книга 1

Аннотация

The most spellbinding new children's fantasy series of 2019, with beautiful black-and-white inside illustrations by Sarah Warburton. Perfect for fans of Cressida Cowell and Nevermoor. Willow Moss, the youngest and least powerful sister in a family of witches, has a magical ability for finding lost things – like keys, or socks, or wooden teeth. Useful, but not exactly exciting . . . Then the most powerful witch in the world of Starfell turns up at Willow's door and asks for her help. A whole day – last Tuesday to be precise – has gone missing. Completely. And, without it, the whole universe could unravel. Now Willow holds the fate of Starfell in her rather unremarkable hands . . . Can she save the day – by finding the lost one? Step into Starfell, a world crackling with warmth, wit and magic, perfect for readers aged 8–12.

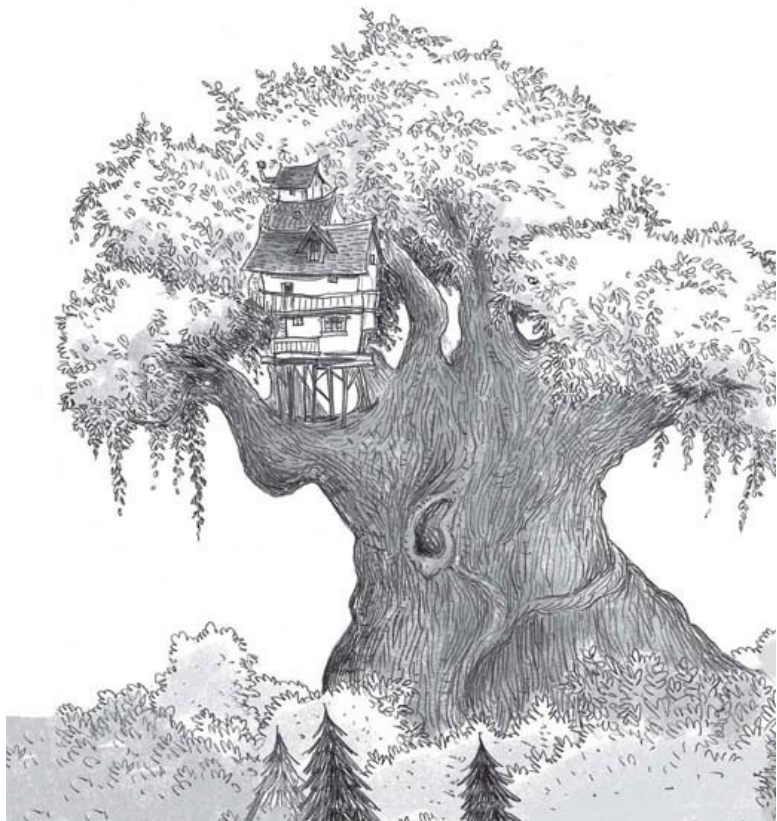
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ILLUSTRATED BY SARAH WarBURTON



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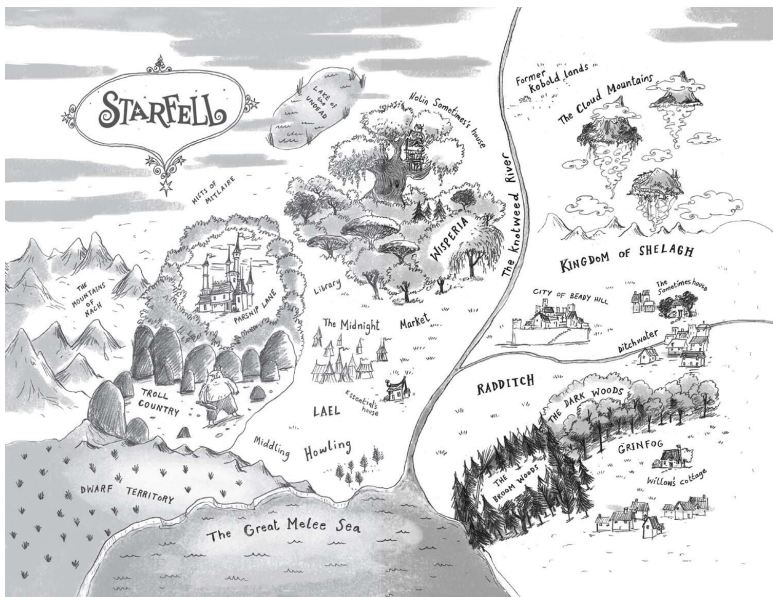
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*For Catherine, who loved it first, to Helen for helping to make
a dream come true and to Rui for always believing that it would*





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1

The Girl Who Found Lost Things

Most people think being born with a magical power would be a bit of a dream come true. But that's only because they assume that they'd get *exciting* powers, like the ability to fly, become invisible or turn an annoying relative into a pig. They think *magic* is a big feast, where everything is laid out, ripe for the picking.

However, in the world of Starfell, not everyone who is lucky enough to have a bit of magic up their sleeve these days gets the really good bits – like, say, the triple-chocolate fudge cake. Some

just get those wilted carrot sticks that no one really wanted to eat anyway. This seemed to be the unfortunate case for Willow Moss, the youngest and, alas, least powerful member of the Moss family.

Willow had received an ability that was, in most people's opinions, a little more magical scrapyard than magical feast. Useful, but not in a snap, fizzie and bang sort of way. Not even a little snap, or a low sort of bang, though there was almost a fizzie, when you squinted.

Willow's power was in finding lost things.

Like keys. Or socks. Or, recently, old Jeremiah Crotchet's wooden teeth.

That hadn't been fun; the teeth had landed in Willow's outstretched palm, covered in gooey saliva from the mouth of Geezer, the Crotchets' ancient bullmastiff.



After the Crotchets paid Willow a spurge – the standard rate since she was six – Willow decided that an increase was long overdue. She also made a vow from then on to keep a fisher's

net with her at all times to catch the more unsavoury items she was likely to find.

So, while it wasn't exactly a profitable talent, it did put food on the table – usually a half loaf of bread most days. Which was something at least. Unless you compared it to her middle sister Camille's talent. Camille had recently lifted a plough, donkey still attached, off Garron Jensen, *with her mind*.

Yup ... Camille's powers were *a bit* flashier.

It was at age six, when Willow's power had finally surfaced, that her father had explained to her that the world was made of different types of people. 'They're all necessary, all important. It's just that some attract a bit more attention than others. There are people like your mother, who commands respect the second she walks into a room. (The fact that she hears dead people speak helps with that a bit too.) Same with your sisters. And then there are people like me and *you*.'

Which hurt. Just a little.

Willow, despite her name, was short with long, stick-straight brown hair and brown eyes to match. She looked a lot like her father, while her sisters had inherited her mother's striking looks – tall with flowing black hair and green eyes that were described as 'emerald-hued'. Although Willow was pretty certain no one in the Moss family had ever seen an emerald close up.

When Willow complained to Granny Flossy that she didn't look like her striking mother and sisters, Granny had harrumphed. She didn't have patience for vanity. She couldn't

afford to with green hair. Granny Flossy had once been one of the best potion-makers in all of Starfell, but was now called ‘Batty Granny’ by most people due to a potion explosion in the mountains of Nach that had caused some rather interesting effects, one of which was the colour of her hair.

‘Tsk, child. Your eyes may not be “emerald” like the others, but they’re as good as,’ specially when it comes to spotting things that others don’ seem to see,’ she said with a sly grin, before she stashed a few of her dodgier potions beneath a loose floorboard in the attic that only Willow seemed to know about.

Granny Flossy was right about Willow spotting things other people seemed to miss. It had become a talent over the years. Like today, while she stood in the cottage garden in her usual position, looking at the small line of people that snaked round the low stone wall, all seeking Willow’s help to find their misplaced possessions.

‘I just can’t seem to find them. I’ve looked everywhere ...’ said Prudence Foghorn from behind the open gate.

‘Did you try on top of your head?’ asked Willow.

‘Oh my!’ said Prudence, feeling the top of her head only to discover her missing rhinestone spectacles. ‘Silly me,’ she said with an embarrassed giggle before turning away.

‘That’ll be one spurge,’ said Juniper, Willow’s oldest sister, coming out of the cottage and witnessing the exchange.

‘But she didn’t do any magic,’ complained Prudence, eyes popping in surprise.

‘She still found your glasses, didn’t she? You got the same result that you came here for, didn’t you? It’s not her fault you’re too blind to look in a mirror.’ Juniper was relentless, and under her glare Prudence conceded and handed over the spurge.

‘I heard witches weren’t meant to ask for money in the first place,’ whined skinny Ethel Mustard from near the back of the queue. ‘They’re not meant to profit from their gifts,’ she said rather piously, gimlet eyes shining.

Ethel Mustard, it has to be said, was the sort of person who secretly wished that their village, Grinfog, had been granted Forbidden status by the king. This would ensure that people like Willow and her family – *magical people, really* – would have to go and live *Somewhere Else*.

‘Who told you that?’ said Juniper, rounding on Ethel, who appeared to shrink under Juniper’s dark frown. ‘When a carpenter makes you something, you pay him, don’t you? My sister supplies you a service, so why would it be any different with her?’

‘Well, because she’s *not* like everyone else,’ whispered Ethel, two high spots of colour appearing on her cheeks.

Juniper’s eyebrows lowered. ‘*Well*,’ she drawled, ‘perhaps then you should pay her more?’



There was collective grumbling from all around.
Juniper's power – besides getting money out of people – was

in blowing things up. So no one grumbled too loudly. No one wanted to anger someone who could blow *them* up.

Willow sighed. She was planning on raising her price to a fleurie and a Leighton apple, but she wasn't convinced that using her scary sister to bully it out of people was the *best* way to go about it. It wasn't that she was overly fond of Leighton apples, but Wheezy the Jensens' retired show horse was. Willow passed the old horse every Thursday when she went to the market. The children from the village had labelled him Wheezy because every time he came trotting to the pasture his chest made asthmatic wheezes. Considering that he went to the trouble to come greet her, Willow liked to have his favourite treat.

'The trouble with you, Willow,' said Juniper, who Willow couldn't help noticing had failed to hand over the spurple, 'is that you don't place enough value on your skills – such as they are.'

'Skills! What skills?' came Camille's mocking tones as she emerged from the cottage, dressed head to foot in a long black robe made of rich, shimmery material.



‘Oh, you mean as a magical bloodhound?’ She smirked. Ignoring Willow’s protests, she turned to Juniper and said, ‘Ready?’ The two were heading off to join their mother for the Travelling Fortune Fair.

Willow closed her eyes and concentrated on breathing deeply. When she opened them she saw that her sisters had sped off down the lane, their black hair and cloaks flowing in their wakes.

Resignedly she turned back to her queue of customers and jumped.

The queue had vanished, and in its place stood a lone woman. She was tall and reed-thin, with black hair framing a pale, slender face marked by high arching eyebrows. She wore a long dusky gown with purple pointed boots, and an expression that made Willow’s spine straighten before her brain could muster an objection.

The woman raised a brow and said, ‘Good morning?’



‘G-good morning ...?’ managed Willow in response, wondering who the woman was.

There was a small part of Willow’s mind that held its breath. It was the part that seemed to be listening to her knees, which had begun to shake, as if they knew a secret her head did not.

‘Moreg Vaine,’ said the woman with casual nonchalance, as if declaring yourself the most feared witch in all of Starfell was an everyday occurrence. Which, to be fair, for Moreg Vaine, it probably *was*.

‘Oh dear,’ said Willow, whose wobbling knees had proved correct.

Moreg Vaine’s mouth curled up.

In years to come Willow would still wonder how it was possible that she had managed to keep her feet on the ground when a whisper would surely have knocked her over.

Yet never in Willow’s wildest fantasies of meeting the infamous witch Moreg Vaine could she ever have imagined for a moment what happened next.

‘Cup of tea?’ suggested Moreg.



2

A Question of Time

Willow followed Moreg Vaine into the cottage, staring in bafflement as the witch went about lighting the coal in the blackened stone fireplace, and filling the old dented teakettle with water. Moreg patted down her robe, withdrew a package and nodded to herself as she poured something into the pot.

‘Hethal should do nicely,’ she said, drumming a finger against her chin. Seeming to remember herself she said, ‘Take a seat,’ offering Willow a chair at Willow’s own kitchen table.

Willow sat down slowly. Somewhere deep inside she clung to the faint hope that this was all just a dream, or perhaps the witch had come to the wrong house by mistake? Even so, her manners soon caught up with her and she mumbled, ‘Er, Miss Vaine ... I-I can do that if you’d like ...?’

Moreg waved her hand dismissively. ‘No matter – I remember where everything is.’

Willow’s mouth popped open in surprise. ‘You do?’

Taking down two cups from the old wooden dresser, Moreg shrugged. ‘Oh yes. It’s been a long time, of course, but Raine and I go back many years.’

‘You know *my mother*?’

Moreg placed a chipped blue mug decorated with small white flowers before Willow and sat down opposite with a dainty teacup for herself.

‘Since we were young girls. Did she never mention it?’

Willow shook her head a bit too vigorously.

Willow knew, logically, that her mother – and she supposed *Moreg Vaine* – had once been a young girl, but it was a concept her brain couldn’t fully grasp. Like trying to understand why anyone would willingly choose to spend their time collecting postage stamps. All she could manage was a polite, puzzled frown.

Moreg said offhandedly, ‘It was a long time ago, I suppose, long before you were born. Like many of our people – magical people, that is – our families lived in the Ditchwater district.

Your mother was great friends with my sister, Molsa, you see. As children they did everything together, setting bear traps to catch the local hermit, holding tea parties with the dead, dancing naked in the moonlight ... but things changed – they always do, and many of us have moved on ... It's safer that way, and Molsa is gone now.' Moreg cleared her throat. 'Never mind that, though, drink your tea.'

'Um,' was all Willow managed in response, trying really hard NOT to picture her mother dancing naked in the moonlight.

Willow looked at the witch, then away again fast. Moreg's eyes were like razors. Willow's throat turned dry as she remembered one of the scarier rumours about the witch. And they were *all* rather scary to be sure. It was said that Moreg Vaine could turn someone to stone just by looking at them ... Willow glanced at her mug and wondered, *Why IS she here? Making me tea?* She took a sip. It was good too. Strong and sweet, the way she liked it. And the cup was hers – one of the few items in the cottage that was. It stood alone among the haphazard collection of cups and saucers that bowed the Mosses' kitchen dresser.

She supposed that senior witches made it their business to know which mug was yours. *At some point I'm going to have to actually ASK her why she is here*, Willow thought with dread. She took another sip of tea to stretch that moment out just *a little* longer.

Maybe, Willow wondered, *Moreg is here to visit Mum?* That seemed the most likely explanation.

Willow hadn't taken more than two sips before Moreg dashed her hopeful musings. She looked at Willow, with her eyes like deepest, blackest ink, and said rather worryingly, 'I need your help.'

Willow blinked. 'M-my help?'

Moreg nodded. 'It's Tuesday, you see. I can't quite put my finger on why or how ... but I'm fairly certain that it's gone.'

'G-gone?'

Moreg stared. 'Yes.'

There was an awkward silence.

Willow stared at Moreg.

The witch stared back.

There seemed to be no other explanation. The witch must have gone *mad*. Granny Flossy said it happened to the best of them sometimes. She'd know, of course, having gone mad herself.

Some said Moreg Vaine lived alone in the Mists of Mitlaire, the entrance to the realm of the undead. Willow supposed that would be enough to drive anyone round the bend. Mad and powerful seemed a rather dangerous combination, so she gave the witch a slightly nervous smile, hoping that she'd just misunderstood. 'Gone? The d-day?'

Moreg nodded, then got up and took the Mosses' Grinfog calendar from its peg behind the cottage door and handed it to Willow.

Willow looked.

She wasn't sure what she was meant to be looking at; she was

half expecting to see that the week just skipped from Monday straight to Wednesday. She was mildly disappointed to find that it had not. Tuesday was still there. Along with the Leightons' advertisement for apple cider to cure all ailments.

'But it's still ...?'

Moreg nodded impatiently. 'It's there – yes – but look closely.'

Willow looked. Printed on each day of the calendar were fairs, village meetings, harvest schedules, phases of the moon and other events. Each day had at least one item – except Tuesday.

She frowned. 'But that could mean any—'

'—thing. Yes. I thought that too. But, still, I can't shake this feeling that it means *something*. Something bad.' Moreg paused before explaining. 'Do you remember what you did on Tuesday?'

Willow frowned. She closed her eyes and for just a second a big moth-eaten purple hat with a long green feather sticking up jauntily to the side swam before her eyes, with Granny Flossy's face turning away from her, and for a moment she felt her stomach clench with fear. But then, just as fast as the image had appeared, it was gone, taking the momentary feeling of disquiet along with it.

She thought hard, the way you think about a dream that feels so real when you just wake up but is gone within seconds and is almost impossible to recall. On Monday she helped farmer Lonnis find his lease. Without it he would have lost his rights to grow oranges, but luckily Willow had been dispatched, and all was well with Lonnis Farms now – she'd got a whole bag

of oranges for that. Then she'd come home and helped Granny Flossy to repot the grumbling Gertrudes. The sweet purple fruits were used for masking some of the nastier flavours from her potions (it didn't really work, just like most of Granny's potions didn't really work since her accident). On Wednesday she'd gone to the market – helping the housewives of Herm find their misplaced household goods. Thursday, her mother left for the fair, and then it was today ...

‘Not really – I can't seem to remember what I did that day.’

Moreg nodded, then sighed. ‘I was hoping it may be different, but it's the same with everyone I've spoken to – they seem to recall most of what they did this week, but Tuesday is a real blank.’

Willow bit her lip, hesitating. ‘But isn't that ...?’

‘Normal?’ supplied Moreg, waving her hand dismissively. ‘Yes, of course. Most people struggle to remember what they had for dinner the night before. Usually, though, if they put their minds to it, something will come up. But the thing is, when it comes to Tuesday, not a single person I have questioned can remember what happened. *Not even me.*’

Willow frowned. She had to admit that it was strange. ‘How many people have you asked?’

Moreg gave her an appraising look. ‘All of Hoyp.’

Willow's eyebrows shot up. That *was* surprising: an entire village. Okay, a small village that was really more like one long road, but still, that was around fifteen families at least.

Another thought occurred to her. She hesitated, but asked anyway. ‘Why did you say *even me*?’

A ghost of a smile crossed Moreg’s face. ‘You’re sharp – that’s good. I meant only that it was strange, as it had never happened to me before.’

Willow was taken aback. ‘You’ve never forgotten what you’ve done before?’

‘Never.’

Willow’s eyes popped. She didn’t really know what to do with that information. She felt equal parts awe and dismay at the prospect.

Moreg changed the subject. ‘I believe that you are a finder?’

Willow hesitated; she’d never been called that before. Mentally she cringed. The closest she’d ever come to being called that was when her sister Camille took to calling her ‘Fetch’ for a large portion of her childhood. She’d stopped that now. Mostly.

‘Yes. Well. No. Not exactly. I mean ... I find things ... things that are lost.’

Moreg said nothing.

Willow filled the silence in a rush. ‘I mean ... I could find your keys if you lost them, but I don’t think I could find an entire day ... even if it was lost.’

Moreg raised a brow. ‘But you could try, couldn’t you?’

Willow considered. She could. There was nothing stopping her from at least *trying*. She took a deep, nervous breath, closed her eyes, and raised her arm to the sky, concentrated hard on

Tuesday then –

‘STOP THAT THIS INSTANT!’ thundered Moreg, jumping out of her seat so fast she overturned her chair, which hit the flagstone floor with a deafening clatter. Willow gulped, while Moreg watched her lower her arm as if it were a dangerous viper. Clutching her chest, the witch took several sharp, shuddery breaths.

‘SUCH A FRIGHT! MY HEART!’



Willow's voice shook as she spoke in a tone trying its absolute best *not* to make an accusation. 'I don't understand – you asked me to ... try?'

Moreg rubbed her throat, and after a moment her voice went back to almost normal, though there was a faint squeak if you listened closely enough.

'Q-uite right, quite right,' she repeated. 'Yes, I *did*. I do want you to try, just not quite *yet*. Dear Wol, no! Not without some kind of a plan first – we can't just go in and get it. One can only imagine the consequences ...' she said with a violent shudder that she shook off. 'Bleugh!'

At Willow's frown Moreg explained. 'I believe,' she said, her black marble-like eyes huge, 'that had you succeeded in finding the missing Tuesday and brought it into our current reality, the result would almost certainly have been catastrophic – it's possible that the very structure of our universe would have split apart, creating a sort of end-of-days scenario ...'

'Pardon?' asked Willow.

'I believe it may have ended the world.'

Willow sat back, heart jack-hammering in her chest. Finding out that she could have ended the world was, to say the least, a sobering thought.

Moreg, however, seemed back to normal.

'The thing is, until we know what happened we could just make things worse. Worse than it already is now, and right now

it's about as bad as can be imagined.'

Willow frowned in confusion. 'What do you mean? I know it's not ... um, great that Tuesday has gone missing, but it's not the end of the world, surely? It's just one day ...'

A day that no one seems to have missed anyway, so what was the harm, really? thought Willow.

Moreg blinked. 'Actually, it might be the *end of the world* if we don't find it. **Whatever happened to last Tuesday may affect the very fabric of Starfell, causing it to unravel slowly, thread by thread.**'

Willow's mouth fell open dumbly as she gasped. She hadn't realised it could be that serious.

Moreg nodded. 'Which is why we will have to start at the beginning. We can't very well proceed until we know for sure what happened. Or, more importantly, why.'

She looked out of the window, frowning slightly, then blinked as if she were trying to clear her vision. 'There's someone I think we're going to need, someone who can help us ... which might prove a little tricky as we need to find him first.'

'Oh, why's that tricky?' asked Willow.

Moreg turned to look at her, a faint smile about her lips. 'He's an oublier, you see, one of the best in Starfell, no doubt, coming from a long line of them. The problem is that finding an oublier is almost impossible unless you know where to look.'

Willow looked blank. 'An ouble— A what?'

'An oublier. It's in the Old Shel, you see.' Which Willow had

always taken to mean when words had more bits in it. Modern-day Shel was the language most people spoke in Starfell, apart from High Dwarf that is, but the latter was mostly because of all the colourful ways one got to swear. ‘It’s pronounced *oo-blee-hair*, or – as they are more commonly known today – forgotten tellers, people who see the past.’

‘Like the opposite of a seer?’

Moreg drummed her chin with her fingers. ‘Sort of—’

‘Like my mother,’ interrupted Willow, whose mother was a well-known seer, and took her travelling fair all across the kingdom of Shelagh telling fortunes.

Moreg seemed to have something stuck in her throat because she answered with a strained voice. ‘Er, yes, like your mother. Though most people who call themselves “seers” and say that they can see the future have no idea how it is really done, and often claim to have some connection to the “other side”, to the dead, who supposedly let them know when things are about to occur,’ she said with a disbelieving sniff. ‘True seers are, of course, very rare. But they have been known to read patterns in the smallest events, allowing them to see possible versions of the future. For instance, if they see a particular flower blooming in winter when it usually blooms in spring they can work out that a typhoon is coming in the summer.’

Willow stared blankly.

Moreg continued, ‘Unless they somehow encourage the last tree sparrow to build its nest before midnight on the spring

equinox, for example. Do you understand?"

Willow made a kind of nod, mostly because it seemed like it was expected. But she didn't really understand *at all*.

Moreg continued, not noticing Willow's confusion. 'Forgotten tellers, on the other hand, read people's memories of the past, which come to them like visions when other people are around. They are, alas, rather unpopular compared to seers, and have very few friends, as you can imagine ...'

Willow was puzzled. 'Why's that?'

'Well, seers should be unpopular too. No one wants to be around someone who can predict their *death* ... Yet so very few of them really *can* predict such things – so they make excellent friends as they always tell you just what you'd like to hear. Forgotten tellers, on the other hand, seldom, if ever, tell you what you'd actually *like* to hear. They tell things most people would prefer to forget, things you may wish to pretend never happened ...'

Willow's eyes bulged. 'Really?'

Moreg nodded. 'Oh yes. Take poor old Hercule Sometimes, a powerful forgotten teller. He was found drowned in a well after he walked past the Duke of Dittany and embarrassed him in front of the captain of the king's army. The duke had been boasting that he had fantastic natural archery skills, and that the very first time he'd used a bow and arrow he'd hit the bull's-eye. Apparently Hercule stopped in his tracks, slapped his knee, started chortling and said, "You mean when you fell over

backwards in a field after you'd released the arrow and poked a bull in the eye with your bow?" Moreg chuckled. 'See, he'd seen the duke's memory of the day and, well, the duke was less than impressed, as you can imagine ...'

'But why did he tell the duke?' gasped Willow.

Moreg's lips twitched. 'Couldn't help himself – forgotten tellers see things as if they just happened. And they often blurt it out before they realise. They aren't stupid – they're just not always aware of what happens to them when they're having a vision. Making for rather awkward social situations. As a result very few oubliers have lived to tell their tales and have an alarming capacity for turning up buried beneath people's floorboards or at the bottom of wells. They often carry their own food for fear of being poisoned. They're deeply suspicious of gatherings of people, partly because they get flooded with other people's memories, and partly because the more visions they have the more chance they have of getting themselves into trouble by offending people. So the few that have survived are virtually hermits, who start running the minute they see anyone approaching ...'

'Oh,' said Willow with a frown. 'How are we going to find one, then, if they're impossible to find?'

'Tricky, I said,' grinned Moreg. 'But not impossible, if you know where to start.'

'And you do?'

'Oh yes. I've found in life that sometimes it's useful to look

back a little, to see when you need to go forward.'

'Huh?'

'We're going to visit his last known address.'

'Oh,' said Willow, blinking at the ominous use of 'we'.

'I think you may need to pack a bag.'

'Oh dear,' Willow whispered.



Meanwhile, far away in a hidden stone fortress, where no magic had been able to penetrate for a thousand years, a figure stood alone in the tower and waited.

Waited for the raven, and the message that could lead to his downfall, betraying his plans before he was ready to seize power.

There were shadows beneath his eyes; sleep was a tonic he could ill afford.

But no raven came this day. Just as it hadn't come the day before.

At last he allowed himself to breathe a sigh of relief; at last he allowed himself to believe. It had worked.

He put the box inside his robes, keeping it close to his heart. It had done its job well. Never again would he let the witch get the better of him.

He left the tower, and found his faithful followers waiting on the winding stone staircase for the news. 'She can't remember?' asked one, his face dark, hidden behind the hood of his robe. 'Does that mean she won't be coming?'

He gave a low, mirthless laugh. 'Oh, she will. I have no doubt of that. But this time I will be ready.'





3

The Monster from Under the Bed

Willow spent the next quarter of an hour trying *not* to picture the look on her father's face when he got home from his job as a farm manager for Leighton Apples and found her gone. Moreg, meanwhile, explored the Mosses' 'fascinating cottage garden' in an attempt to give Willow a moment to pack in privacy.

In her small bedroom, which she shared with Camille, Willow took down Granny Flossy's old green shaggy-hair carpetbag from atop the cupboard; it was made from the long hairs of a Nach

mountain goat. Willow had often wondered if it was age that had turned it green, or if there really were green mountain goats ...

Willow tried to think of what she might need.

She'd never spent the night away from the cottage before, not even to go to one of her mother's travelling fairs. She'd somehow always been too young or, when she was old enough, too established as the 'sensible one' – which translated as 'the one who was better suited to look after her father and Granny Flossy'.

Not that she minded looking after Granny. They looked after each other really. The two had been a pair since she'd come to live with them the year Willow turned five. Willow's father was sometimes a bit embarrassed by his formerly famous mother, whose potions had once been highly sought commodities, but which now mostly exploded in clouds of coloured smoke that left rat tails on the ceiling.

He tried to forbid her from making them, and tried locking away her supplies. He didn't seem to notice how Granny Flossy's shoulders slumped whenever he reprimanded her, or how much it hurt her when he treated her like a child. Willow knew, though, just like she knew where he hid the key. It was why Granny brewed most of her potions in secret in the attic when he was gone. Willow and Granny spent most of their days there together, with Willow trying her best to ensure that Granny's potions didn't blow up the roof again. And even though Camille said that the pair were perfectly matched because Willow's magic was rather humdrum and Granny's was rather disastrous, she didn't mind.

Somehow that made things better, not worse.

But now, as a result of being at home with Granny Flossy all these years, her 'worldly' experience was rather limited, to say the least, and she had absolutely no idea what someone was supposed to take on a potentially dangerous adventure. Moreg had told her that they might be gone for a week, or two, if everything went according to plan, and that it was best for the moment not to say anything about what they were really doing in case her parents came tearing after them (which might make saving the world harder than it needed to be).

Willow's sensible side had come up with a few objections. Like, why, for instance, she had the questionable luck of being home alone when the most feared witch in all of Starfell came knocking? Or the fact that this plan meant that no one knew where she was going, or, more importantly, who she was with ...? A rather *fearsome* who as it turned out.

But 'no' didn't seem a word Moreg Vaine often heard. So Willow had said yes, partly because she was a bit too afraid to say no, but also because it sounded like a pretty serious problem, so shouldn't she try to help ... if she could? But mainly she'd said yes because hadn't she always secretly wished for something like this? Even that morning while she was hanging up her sisters' underwear on the line she had wished that she could go somewhere *exciting* just once, somewhere beyond the Mosses' cottage walls, and do something that didn't involve finding Jeremiah Crotchett's teeth. But, as Granny Flossy always

said, wishes are dangerous things, especially when they come true. Which was why, now, she was a bit worried that this was a bit more adventure than she'd bargained for ...

Willow looked at her belongings and frowned. She probably needed more than just an extra pair of socks?

It took her another five minutes to gather everything she might need, which coincidentally amounted to everything she owned:

★ *Her second dress, pond green* – previously belonging to Juniper and taken up rather haphazardly by her Granny Flossy, so that it bubbled around her feet like a balloon

★ *Three pairs of thick bottle-green wool socks*

★ *A large, rather lumpy fisherman's jersey of indeterminate colour, mostly pea green* – a hand-me-down from her father

★ *An enormous, and very old, slightly mouldy-looking khaki-green nightdress* – once belonging to Granny Flossy

★ *One pale-blue scarf dotted throughout with small white horseshoes* – still belonging to her sister Camille

Briefly she wondered why almost everything she owned was a rather unfortunate shade of green. She then stood thinking for a minute, her fingers drumming her chin, trying to make up her mind: should she, or shouldn't she? Then she knelt down, and after a bit of scrambling she pulled out the monster who lived under the bed, claspng him firmly by his long tail. This was to his absolute horror, which sounded like this: **'Oh no! Oh, me greedy aunt! A pox on you from all of the kobolds!'** and she

put him alongside her worldly belongings.

‘Monster’ was a bit of a stretch. Oswin was, in fact, a kobold, a species that only *just* fell into the classification of monster. But it was best not to tell Oswin this as he was very proud of his monster heritage.

Through groggy slits that exposed luminous orange eyes that hadn’t seen daylight for several weeks Oswin was glaring at her now. His lime-green fur was turning a ripe pumpkin colour in his outrage and his bright green-and-white striped tail electrified with indignation.



‘Wot choo go and do that for? Grabbing peoples by the tail? Is that any way to treat a body? No respect ... and

me being the last kobold and all!’ he muttered darkly. Then he scratched a shaggy ear with a long, slightly rusty claw and grumbled, **‘I ’ave ’alf a mind to leave ... Specially after I got you them awfully resistible feet thingamababies, which you *never* even fanked me for,’** he pointed out with a deep hard-done-by sniff.

Oswin was always a bit cross, so Willow ignored this.

The ‘thingamababies’ that he referred to were her next-door neighbour Mrs Crone-Barrow’s ancient, rather dead-looking bunny slippers. Willow had made the mistake of muttering one night that her toes were cold, so Oswin had gone next door and prised the prehistoric slippers from the old woman’s sticky, corn-crusts feet with a butter knife. Willow had woken up to the feeling of something warm, wet and icky attached to her feet, followed very closely by the sound of her own screaming when she realised what it was. She still shuddered at the memory.

Despite this, there was the faint, *very faint*, chance Oswin might come in handy on an adventure thought Willow. He was really good at spotting magical ability, as well as detecting lies, and his thick kobold blood allowed him to resist most forms of magic. He was also her only friend, and who would remember to feed him when she was gone?

Oswin, despite his threat, had made no attempt to leave and was now taking care of some morning monster ablutions: checking his fur for any stray bugs and polishing his teeth with a corner of Willow’s bedcover. In fact, Oswin had been threatening

to leave the relative comfort beneath Willow's bed ever since Willow first caught him three years ago. 'Caught' being the operative word, like an infection.

Willow had been called to the Jensens' farmhouse to deal with a case of a missing monster, wondering on the way over why the Jensens would want to *find* a monster ... She decided not to think about it too much because, as her father always said, spurgles don't grow without fertiliser. But when she arrived and Mrs Jensen pointed to the stove, squealing, 'It's in there ...!' Willow had been a little confused.

'What's in there?'

'The monster, of course.'

Willow had frowned. 'But, Mrs Jensen,' she'd replied, 'I can't deal with monsters!'

'You have to – you're a witch and ... he's lost ... Isn't that what you do, find things?'

'But ... how can he be lost if he's right *there*?'

It turned out that the Jensens knew he was a lost monster because Oswin had told them so shortly before he took up refuge in the stove. He refused to come out or to tell them where he was from for that matter. Later Willow would find out that this was a sore point, as he and his fellow kobolds had been banished from their home and scattered throughout Starfell due to a bit of thievery on the part of his aunt Osbertrude.

But Willow hadn't known any of *that* when she'd taken him from the Jensens' stove. She'd figured that if he really was 'lost',

it couldn't hurt to try 'finding' him with her magic, using these precise words:

'I Summon the lost monster currently residing in the Jensens' stove in Grinfog, the kingdom of Shelagh, Starfell.'

It didn't hurt to be precise about such things just in case there were any other Jensens in any other parts of the world who also had lost monsters to contend with.

And Oswin had arrived into her outstretched arms with an orange plop. He was the size of a large and fluffy tabby cat, but one who glowered at her with cat-like fury. In fact, if you didn't know better, and you were really quite stupid, you might mistake Oswin for a cat. To be sure, there were the pointed ears, the fluffy fur and the very stripy tail. He even (to his shame) had white paws, which made him look very tabby-like indeed. All *cat-tastic* really, except that he was green (when he wasn't cross, which was seldom), with very sharp monastery claws, the rather persistent smell of boiled cabbage, the stealing, the ease with which kobolds got offended, and the unfortunate truth that occasionally, when they were offended *enough*, they exploded. Which isn't great when they live under your bed. Oh, and the fact that he could talk – you don't get many tabby cats that can chat.

And once Oswin was 'found' he was determined to stay that way ... choosing to stay with Willow from then on and showing his appreciation for his new home under Willow's bed by bringing her 'presents' from the neighbours. Which wasn't good for business. Especially if your clients found out that the person

who found their lost things also seemed to be the one who took them in the first place.

Willow cleared her throat. 'Listen, Oswin, apparently Tuesday has gone missing ... and we are going to help Moreg Vaine to find it.' Then, because she felt that perhaps it was the right thing to do, she added, 'Er ... you may want to pack a bag.'

Oswin turned tangerine; his eyes bulged to the size of tennis balls. **'Wot? We?'** His catty lips silently mouthed the words **'Moreg Vaine'** and his fur-covered body turned from carrot orange to a rather ill-looking shade of green like pea soup. **'Wot choo go and sign us up for a rumble with a madwoman for? Vicious witch, she eats peoples! She pickles children in ginger! Makes candles with yer earwax! And she blew up me cousin Osloss when he found 'imself in 'er pantry! Don't even think about it! I aren't going, *nohow, no way!* Staying right here ... I's got me a duty to stay as the last kobold anyhow,'** he said, glowering at Willow, his claws digging into the bedcover in stubborn revolt.

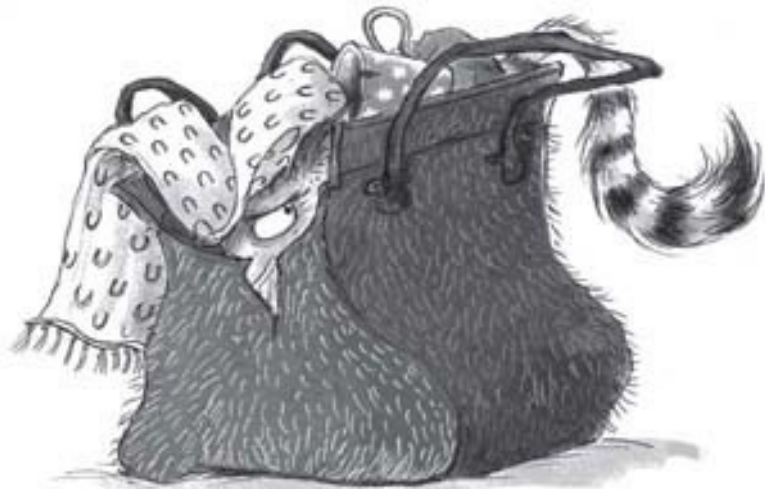
Willow sighed, then snatched him by the tail once more, and shoved him into the hairy carpetbag. 'Never mind all that,' she said dismissively, ignoring his hissing and muttering. She knew that kobolds blew up regularly, with or without a witch's help, and usually survived relatively unscathed. 'You're coming; now stop your grumbling.'

It was a *little* worrying, though, that rumours of Moreg Vaine even terrified the monster population.

Oswin sat in the bag with a huff, muttering darkly while Willow turned to the task at hand. The blue horseshoe scarf.

Would she *need* it? Was it necessary? Or was that really beside the point?

It was pretty, expensive and didn't actually belong to her. It belonged to her middle sister, Camille, who had received it from one of her many admirers. Knowing that Camille would be furious when she saw the scarf gone gave Willow a grim satisfaction that only those with older siblings understood. So she packed it in the bag along with everything else, closed her bedroom door and set the hairy bag down on top of the kitchen table with a thud (to Oswin's outrage). She decided at the last minute to add a half loaf of bread and her mug.



Then, fighting mounting panic, she scribbled her father a note:
Dear Dad,

Tuesday has gone missing

The witch Moreg has asked for my help

The witch Moreg has need of my skill – yes, really

She scribbled over her first attempt and discarded it in the wastebasket when she remembered that honesty wasn't what they were going for. Not that he would believe her anyway ... Then she tried again.

Dear Dad,

I've gone to help Mum and the girls at the travelling fair, sorry.

There is half a roast chicken in the icebox, and a loaf of bread under the tea towel.

If I'm not back in a week, please visit Wheezy for me. He likes the red Leighton apples, and won't be fooled by the green gumbos.

Love,
Willow

Leaving the note on the kitchen table, she tried not to think of what her father would say when he got home. Or what he would do to her when he realised that she wasn't with her mother and sisters at the travelling fair. There was no point in thinking about it.

Borrowed trouble. That's what her dad called it. He always said that the god Wol provided enough daily things to worry about and there was no use borrowing tomorrow's troubles as well. Though Willow doubted he'd appreciate her using his own logic against him.

Green hairy bag in hand, she whispered a warning to Oswin to keep quiet or she'd hand him over to Moreg Vaine for her ginger pickling, and with slightly trembling knees she closed the cottage door.

'Ready?' asked Moreg, who eyed the bag with some surprise, though she didn't comment.

Willow definitely didn't feel ready.



4

The Portal Pantry

As Willow followed the witch down the lane, leaving the cottage behind, there was a small part of her that wished one of her sisters – preferably Camille – would walk past just then. She thought how nice it would be to tell her that the most revered witch in all of Starfell needed *her* help.

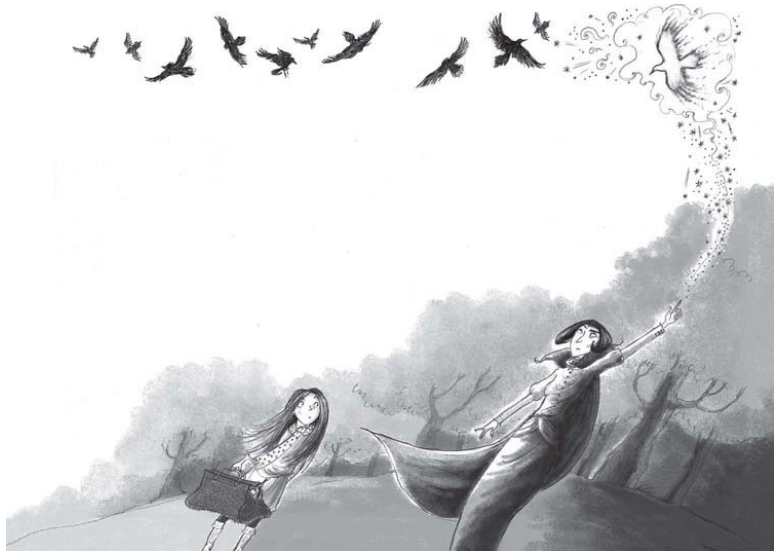
But of course they passed no one. They walked along the winding dirt road that led away from Grinfog and its rolling fields and orchards. It forked left towards the shadowy woods

that loomed on the horizon – woods that Willow had always been encouraged to stay out of.

‘This way,’ said Moreg, and Willow bit her lip nervously before she followed. Looking over her shoulder, she saw Wheezy, the Jensens’ retired show horse, standing forlornly in his field down in the valley with his purple wool blanket on his flanks. She supposed dismally, her knees trembling, that of course the witch would go through the dark woods rather than through the main roads that led out of Grinfog. From the slightly shaking carpetbag in her hands she could tell that Oswin was thinking the same thing.

As she turned to follow the witch into the woods a raven circled above their heads, making a strange, haunting cry. In the distance more ravens appeared. Willow couldn’t hide a shudder, but Moreg looked up and smiled as if they were all old friends. Catching sight of Willow’s face, the witch said, ‘You know, a group of ravens are often called an “unkindness of ravens”, but I prefer the less well-known term, a conspiracy.’

Willow frowned, her eyes following the birds as they circled. A conspiracy didn’t sound much better. As she stared she saw one particular bird edge closer to Moreg; it looked different to the others, as if one of its wings was made of ink or smoke. Before Willow could comment, Moreg held up one long slim finger, and the bird vanished with a rapid beat of its black wings. Willow swallowed, eyeing Moreg warily. Had she made the bird disappear with a simple lift of a finger?



‘Come on,’ said Moreg almost nonchalantly. ‘We’ll stop a bit later for the night.’

As Willow followed the witch she thought about some of the other rumours she’d heard about Moreg over the years – like that she kept ravens, and that they carried her beneath Starfell into Netherfell so that she could dance with the dead. She darted a glance at Moreg and thought about asking if any of *that* was true, but then, catching sight of the witch’s face, she changed her mind just as fast.

There was so much, though, that she did want to know. Like ... did the witch really live in the Mists of Mitlaire – the fog that

drove most people insane? Did she have several magical abilities as some had said? Or was that just a rumour, like the one Oswin had told her about the witch pickling children in ginger ... which she still hoped was untrue.

They had been walking for nearly a mile through deep, dark woods, the air smelling of pine and moss and the cold and damp inching along Willow's toes, when Moreg slowed down. 'We'll be heading to the city of Beady Hill in the morning,' she said. 'It was the last known address of the forgotten teller we need, but it's some distance away – so we'll need a bit of help getting there.'

Willow wondered if she meant that they needed to catch a coach. But she had hoped that just maybe her adventure with Moreg would involve a bit of broom flying ... so she dared to ask, 'Um, you ... erm, don't want to fly?'

Moreg stared at her and Willow felt her cheeks burn slightly. But then the witch nodded. 'I would. I had a flying carpet for a while – quite rare, you know. A three-seater, once belonging to a Tetan king, I believe, but that's long gone now. Flew away right off the line, no doubt furious that it had been washed. Old carpets can be quite tetchy. Ordinarily I don't do brooms. I've never found one I really liked – it's such a stereotype, if you ask me, witches and brooms ... Same with the hat. Never wear one if I can help it.'

Willow supposed that when she thought 'witch' a picture of a broomstick did float into her mind. Although, admittedly, the few witches she had met only owned a broom that did nothing

more remarkable than sweep, but she had hoped that Moreg Vaine would be the exception. After all, she was *Moreg Vaine*.

‘I’ve always wanted to try a flying broom,’ admitted Willow, who’d long wished for one of her own, and couldn’t help feeling a little disappointed. If ever there was a time for a flying broom, surely saving the world was *it*.

Moreg looked at her, shrugged and said, ‘Well, I suppose time is of the essence, and we are going past Radditch in any case ...’

Willow blinked. Radditch ... Something tugged at the corner of her mind. Weren’t the people there known for something? Something to do with making things fly? A faint curl of hope expanded in her chest. Was the witch saying what she thought?

‘So, despite my misgivings, I think we’ll have to get some brooms, yes.’ Moreg didn’t look all that happy about it, though. ‘First thing in the morning.’

Willow let out a small whoop of glee, and did a little jig, which made Oswin huff inside the carpetbag. She schooled herself fast when Moreg blinked at her in surprise.

‘Um,’ said Willow, clearing her throat self-consciously. ‘Oh, okay, if you really think that’s best.’

Dusk was setting as, sometime later, Willow and Moreg entered a fragrant wood. They walked on until they came across a small clearing covered in purple clover, where Moreg told her they’d be stopping for the night. ‘We’ll make an early start to Radditch tomorrow.’

Despite the promise of acquiring flying broomsticks, Willow

was grateful to rest for the night. Her feet were sore, and she was tired and hungry. She set her carpetbag down, and then did a double-take when she saw what Moreg was doing. Seemingly, from out of nowhere, the witch had whipped out a large cast-iron pot, which she placed over an odd violet-hued flame that was suspended in mid-air. ‘I hope you like nettle stew – it shouldn’t take too long.’

‘H-how did you do that?’ exclaimed Willow.

Moreg waved a palm distractedly while testing the stew with a wooden spoon, and muttering, ‘Needs salt, definitely.’ She patted the front of her cloak, reached inside, and withdrew a small ceramic pot from which she took a pinch of salt and sprinkled it into the pot. Then, seeing Willow’s bemused stare, she said quite nonchalantly, ‘Oh this? Been cooking all day.’

Willow blinked. *What?*

Moreg, however, looked unfazed. ‘Oh, how rude of me. Would you like a seat?’ She asked, proceeding to pull out a folded blue chair from within her cloak. She sprung it open and offered it to Willow, who took it rather bemusedly. She watched as Moreg took more things from within the cloak’s folds – including a small green table, and two knives, forks, plates and purple glasses. Moreg patted her cloak, rolled her eyes heavenward, and sighed deeply, ‘I must have left the good wine in my other cellar – looks like we’ll be roughing it. Just the rynflower cider for us. I suppose we’ll survive,’ she said, pulling out a small jug with a doubtful expression.

Willow stared. *Her other cellar?* How on Starfell did the witch manage to keep all of that in one cloak? And manage to walk? The obvious answer was of course magic. But that was a broad answer, and magic, as far as Willow knew, didn't work the way people believed it should. Not any more, not since it was nearly ripped away a thousand years before during the war started by the Brothers of Wol, a religious order who tried to rid Starfell of magic because they believed – and, alas, still did to this day – that people born with magical abilities were unnatural, and that their bodies were possessed by evil. The battle resulted in what was known as the Long War. The old witches and wizards gathered together their best spells to fight them, but they were stolen, and the Brothers of Wol killed thousands of witches and wizards, destroyed enchanted forests and burned all the spell scrolls they could to try to rid the world of magic.

But they had failed. They didn't know the truth. Magic never dies – it simply waits until we are ready for it. When centuries had passed it trickled back, ever so slowly, into Starfell.

But this magic wasn't like the magic from before. It had changed. Perhaps it had learnt. Maybe it worried that if it gave too much it would be ripped away again. When it did at last come slowly slinking back, it did so cautiously, only gifting a few with tiny slithers of itself.

These days people who had a magical ability usually didn't have more than one, yet they still called themselves witches and wizards. But they were not like the old witches and wizards from

before, known now as the old magicians of Starfell, who didn't just have a singular magical ability – they had many. Magic in the world was different then too; it ran freely through the land, through the streams and rivers, mountains and glades. And some of the most powerful magicians back then harnessed this magic through powerful spells.

But that world was long gone. Just like those old powerful spells that the magicians had gathered together to fight the Brothers of Wol, which had passed into myth as the Lost Spells of Starfell. Today few witches and wizards could perform even the simplest spells, and, as far as Willow knew, no one with a magical ability could do what Moreg seemed to be doing now, which was to use magic like it was available on tap.

‘How do you keep all of that with you?’ Willow asked.

Moreg, who had just taken a fancy purple cushion out of her cloak, looked up and shrugged. ‘Oh ... I don't. I believe in travelling light really.’



Willow's mouth fell open. 'B-but then how do you have all this stuff?' she exclaimed, looking from the table to the stewing pot and folding chairs in disbelief.

Moreg cocked her head to the side. 'I don't, not really – it's a portal cloak. I had it made in Lael, so now I have access to my store cupboard, cellar and kitchen at home – very useful, I can tell you.'

'A portal *cloak*?'

Moreg dished up the thick, hearty stew, handed Willow a heavy stoneware plate and sat down opposite her on her own fold-up chair, plumping the purple cushion, which she put behind her back. 'Lousy lumbago,' she muttered. Then seeing that Willow was still waiting for an answer to her question she said, 'You know what a portal is?'

Willow thought. 'It's like a door to somewhere else?'

'Exactly, except it doesn't need to be a door, it can even be a—'

'A cloak,' breathed Willow in wonder.

Moreg smiled. 'Quite.'

'Wow.'

'It has its uses. Not all of us have your skill – anything you need summoned like that.' She snapped her fingers. 'That's truly something.'

Willow shrugged. 'Only if it's lost, though. It's a bit annoying. I can't summon my own toothbrush unless I've lost it first ... and leaving things at home doesn't count as lost.' She ran her

tongue over her teeth and sighed. She had, in fact, forgotten her toothbrush.

Moreg tapped her nose conspiratorially, then winked. 'But you work around that ... don't you?'

Willow's mouth fell open in surprise. How did she know? Could she really read minds, like some people thought?

Willow did 'lose' things that might be useful later. You couldn't be too deliberate or else the magic wouldn't work, but if, for example, you placed a spare bit of change in a pocket that you 'forgot' had a hole in it, well, it could save you running home for your wallet on market day. (Incidentally this had caused Prudence Foghorn to appear momentarily impressed the other day, before she asked after Willow's more *remarkable* sister Camille.) Sometimes it helped you to plan ahead when you wanted to 'accidentally' lose a rather lumpy old quilt that had been made from several of your granny's hairy dresses. You'd have to forget on washday, just, for example, while you were hanging it up to dry, that there was a gale-force wind forecast. But who knew when you might need to summon the warmth of an additional quilt?

Moreg laughed, but she looked no less scary. 'It's what I'd do myself ... that's the secret to being a good witch. Always be a step ahead if you can. *Practical makes perfect.*'

Willow frowned. 'I thought it was practice?'

Moreg scoffed. 'That's just for people who like to waste time. Who needs to practise something when they can be prepared the

first time around?’ she said, tapping her cloak.

That seemed true enough.

A small, rather grumpy voice from within Willow’s hairy bag mumbled, ‘**An’ oo ’elps ’er to lose fings so she can find it? Jes like a witch to take all the credit. Din’t she say jes the other day that she wished she could lose her fisher’s net ... sayin’ that it would be a bit more featrical when the time came for her to find people’s lost thingamababies she could summons it and ketch it? So din’t I frow it into Lost Man’s Lake where fings disappear never ter be seen again ... Not that she cares. Oh no! Stick me in a bag made of ’air, only the last kobold and all ... not like I *wanted* any of the stew, nohow.**’

A loud silence followed this. Moreg looked at Willow. Willow looked at Moreg.

Then. ‘What was that?’ asked the witch.

‘That,’ sighed Willow, ‘was nothing ...’

The witch raised a brow and Willow hastened to add, ‘That you would care to know about. Trust me.’

Witches for the most part aren’t stupid, so Moreg didn’t press it. But she did say rather loudly, ‘A witch’s business is none but her own. However, my cellar and pantry are off bounds ... not unless *a kobold* wants to be turned into a full tabby cat.’

There was a distinctive gasp from within the bag. Willow snorted.

After helping Moreg do the dishes (Moreg, of course, had hot water and a tin basin ready), Willow climbed into her camp bed,

and even though it was her first night away from the cottage in her whole life she fell instantly asleep, despite Oswin's grumblings. **'Why she 'ave to take it that far? Turn me into a common cat! Jes because I's a monster don' mean I don' 'ave feelings ... sniff.'**

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