

STARFELL

Willow Moss and
the Vanished Kingdom



Books by Dominique Valente

STARFELL: WILLOW MOSS AND THE LOST DAY

STARFELL: WILLOW MOSS AND THE FORGOTTEN TALE

STARFELL: WILLOW MOSS AND THE VANISHED KINGDOM





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Willow Moss and
the Vanished Kingdom

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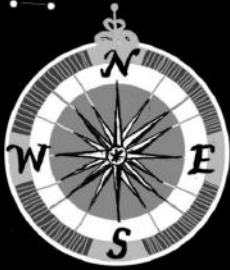
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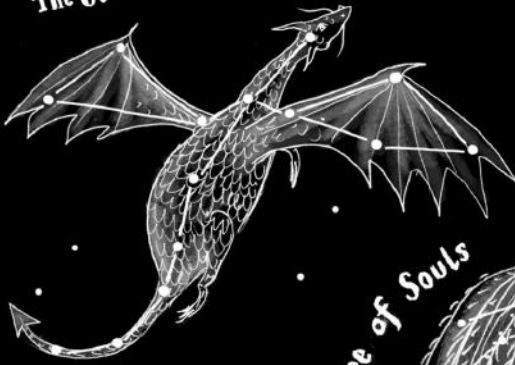
*For Rui, thank you for always
helping me find the magic*



THE WEST



The Old Winged Dragon



The Witch's Last Brew



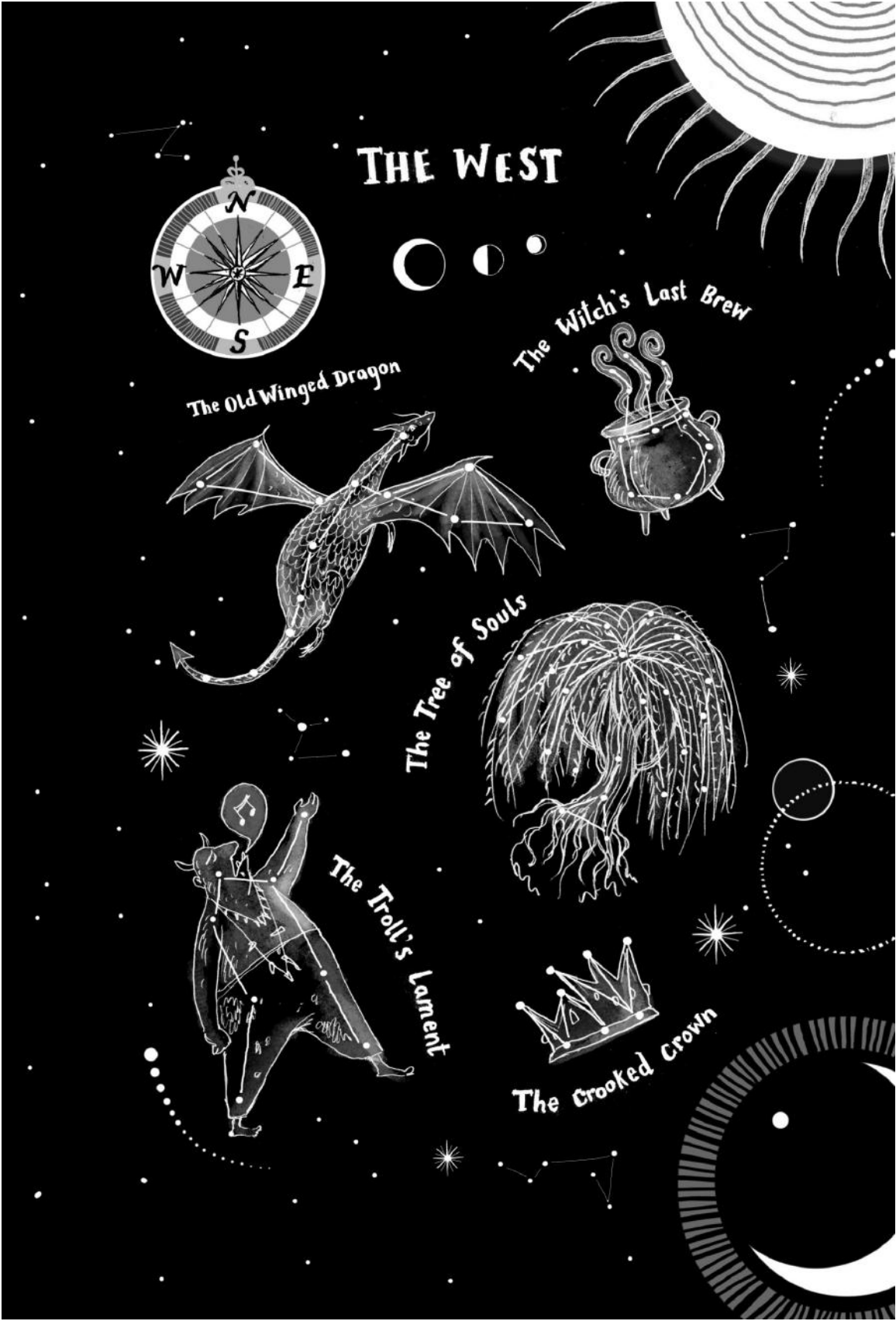
The Tree of Souls



The Troll's Lament



The Crooked Crown



THE EAST

The Old Hag



The Man
who Lost his Shoe

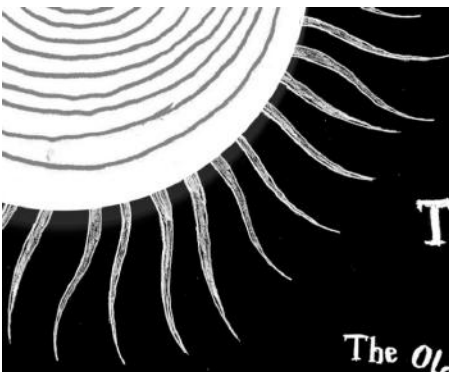


The Big Dinner Party

The Wise Elf at
the Bonfire



The Flight of
Whispering Geese





★ THE Grimoire Gazette ★

THE OFFICIAL ENCHANCIL NEWSLETTER REPORTING
ON THE STATE OF MAGIC ACROSS THE WILDS OF STARFELL

★ Letter from the Editor ★

Well, chins have certainly been wagging about the appointment of the new leader of the Brothers of Wol, Silas Wolbrother! His leadership has kicked off with a radical new amendment to the treaty between magical and non-magical citizens - magical children below the age of thirteen will now be allowed to attend non-magical schools for the first time in Starfell's history.

Head of the Enchancil (Enchanted Council), Celestine Bear, believes that Silas's appointment as leader of the non-magical community will ensure a happier era for us all. In an exclusive interview (*page two*), she says, 'Look at what Silas has achieved in such a short time. Admittedly, it's not something we magical folk ever actually asked for, so it's a total surprise, but what a win! Who knows? One day we may even be able to convince the Brothers that a school of our own won't result in them being blown to smithereens. It's just so promising!'

However, our notorious twelve-year-old correspondent,

Willow Moss, disagrees. *Gazette* readers will no doubt be familiar with the young witch's wild stories - for example, her accusation that the very same new High Master 'stole a day' (which, conveniently, no one can remember).

'Silas cannot be trusted. The Enchancil have been tricked by him somehow,' she claims, adding that he is 'actually a wizard - who wants to steal everyone's magic'. Apparently, Willow discovered Silas's 'diabolical plan' while on a trip to the realm of the undead a few months ago.

'Clearly, young Willow has lost the plot,' counters Bear. 'Everyone knows that it is impossible to simply "visit" Netherfell - unless you want to lose your soul! The girl is delusional.'

However, some Enchancil members were concerned by Willow's claims - as she was backed by the infamous and powerful witch, Moreg Vaine. At Moreg's request, Willow was allowed to address the Enchancil with her latest tale some months back, despite being underage, and she has been sending the *Gazette* a steady stream of letters about it ever since.

Yet fears died down quickly after Moreg went silent on the issue. In fact, she has been missing in action for the past three months.

Bear adds, 'Thankfully, sense seems to have prevailed and most now agree that this rumour about Silas boils down to the fact that Willow is either rather unwell or has a desperate need for attention. The fact that Moreg has sloped off - well, that should speak for itself. She's probably embarrassed that she was ever taken in, if you ask me.' *More on pages three, four and seven, and find Willow's latest outrageous letter on page nine.*

Another occurrence that has got lips flapping this week is a clash between the elvish city of Lael and the town of Library, as a priceless scroll has been stolen from the bookish town. Many elves believe that the scroll contains the location of the vanished elvish kingdom of Llandunia, which disappeared, along with Queen Almefeira, during the Long War.

However, most Library historians believe that this is just a myth, as no one has been able to decipher the scroll in over a thousand years. 'It could be something as boring as an old elvish recipe for bread,' said one of the Secret Keepers, Copernica Darling, when pressed. 'Still, it is an ancient, unique artefact and that makes it very valuable. We are offering a reward for its safe return.' *More on page ten.*

Speaking of strange thefts, there has been a string

of these recently. Towns around the Midnight Market, Lael and Howling have fallen victim to burglary - including my own home, though the only thing taken was an old eyeball I was saving for a rainy day. Enchancel enforcers believe that the suspects could be linked to a group of pirate-wizards who are trying to reclaim the Ditchwater district within the city of Beady Hill, which was granted Forbidden status earlier this year . . . *More on this on page eleven.*

Finally, in Troll Country (*see our double-page spread on pages twelve and thirteen*), new attempts to expand Troll territory into Dwarfish lands have been met with resistance.

Magnus Pack, a spokesdwarf, says, 'We will not give so much as an extra toehold to those flat-footed monsters. To see our beloved forests trampled by their clubs and heavy feet? They must be mad.'

Troll chief Megrat hurled a studded club at me when I asked for a comment. I was given to understand by her daughter, Calamity, that this meant I should run, so I did.

Rubix Grimoire

Editor-in-chief

The hare was a scrawny thing with long limbs, patchy grey fur and an ear that looked like it had endured some chewing.

It was perfectly ordinary, apart from the fact that it was glowing faintly blue and was, in fact, a ghost.

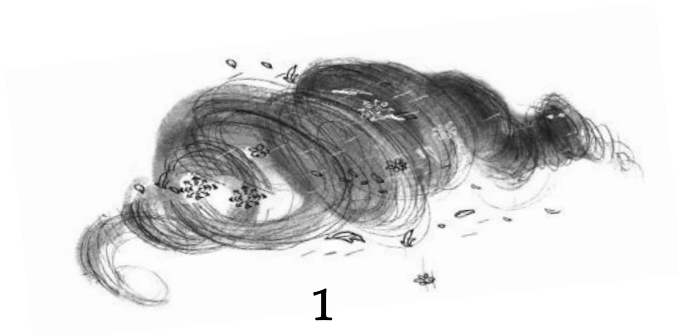
The witch kept a watchful gaze pinned on it as it followed after her from a distance.

Then she reached inside the pocket of her new portal cloak and, after a bit of rummaging, took out a bed roll, a cheese sandwich and a rolled-up newspaper. She was saving the crossword for later.

It would be some time before she knew again the full comforts of home . . . For now, there was business to do – a witch’s business, which is always her own.

Up above the purple marshes, the sky had turned to pewter, and the part of herself that had taken a moment to listen to the song of a passing sparrow heard a storm begin to brew. One that had little to do with the weather.





A Blundering Beginning

In a blister of a village called Mild, where the sun was hunkering down for a sulk, Willow Moss was having a bad day.

See, it was her first day at a new school – a school that was governed by the Brothers of Wol. And, while first days at a new school are always a bit tough, Willow's seemed destined to set the record for Worst Day Ever and, with the day being young, there was always the chance that things could actually get *worse*.

As far as thoughts went, this wasn't exactly a comforting one. But that's the trouble with thoughts, you know? The bad ones grow like spiky weeds and, if you aren't careful to prune them, you'll be left with a mind full of thorns. And what Willow was thinking right then was that, if she could do it all over again,



she would go about things a bit differently . . .

For instance, she might have reconsidered entering the school grounds on the back of a flying broomstick named Whisper . . .

She had realised this was a mistake rather quickly.

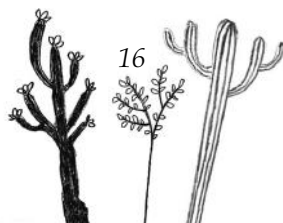
Thanks to the screaming . . .

. . . And the way the students scrambled to hide beneath their desks when she entered the classroom. There was also the boy in the corner making the sign of Wol at her as if to ward off evil. Then there was the fact that the teacher had flattened himself against the wall when she turned to him, arms raised above his head, as if Willow were a dangerous viper poised to strike.

Not exactly *ideal*.

The second thing she might have reconsidered was bringing along the monster from under the bed.

Oswin, the monster in question (and her best friend), chose that precise moment to pop his shaggy head out of the hairy green carpetbag she was carrying. His green, lamp-like eyes squinted in the daylight as he





harrumphed, ‘**WOT** a bunch o’ cumberworlds . . . Yew’d fink they’d **never** seen a witch afore. ’Tis not like yer **gonna** ketch ’em all an’ turn ’em inter stew or **sumfink** . . .’ A low belly rumble followed this pronouncement, and he added, a little mournfully, ‘**Actuallys**, I could jes *murder* a **bowl** of stew abouts now . . .’

This, unfortunately, elicited more panicked wailings.

‘It’s a talking cat!’

‘Why is that cat green?’

‘Did it just say it wants to turn us into STEW?’

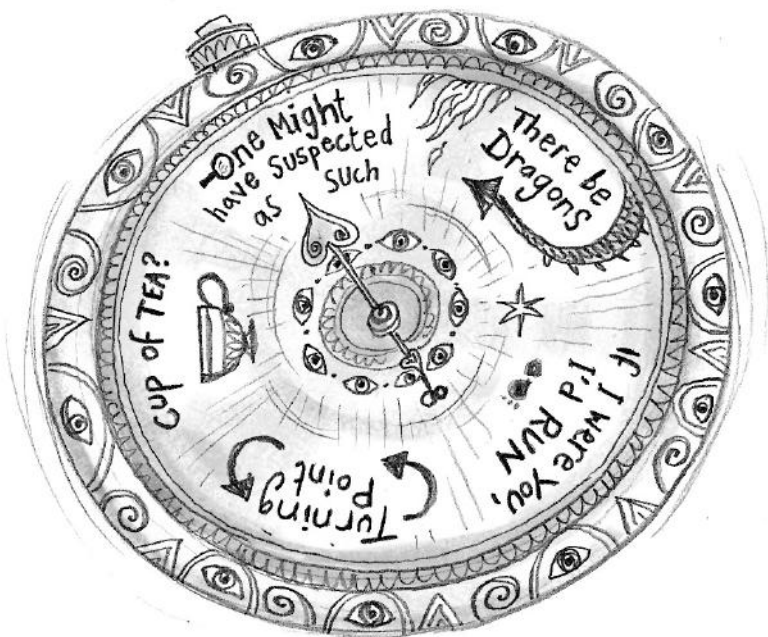
‘Oh Wol, it’s changing colour!’

‘Oh, the smell! Oh, save us . . .’

And that sort of thing.

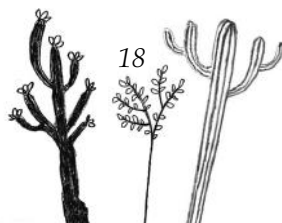


Willow fished out the StoryPass from her pocket. It was a compass-like device from the town of Library that was supposed to help with novel cataloguing, but offered useful life advice as well. The five points were:



It was currently pointing to *'One Might Have Suspected as Such'*.

Willow sighed, then pushed Oswin's head – which had turned from the colour of pea soup to a violent blood-orange – back in the bag.





‘I is not **A CAT** . . . I is the monster from under the bed! **Honestly**, wot do they teach kits in skewls nowadaisies?’ he hissed.

‘Just leave it,’ Willow whispered, pinching the bridge of her nose.

There was a harrumph from Oswin – who was in fact a kobold, a subspecies of monster. Alas, he did look like a cat, but calling any attention to this resemblance made him rather upset – and this, in turn, made him change colour. Sometimes, if you upset him enough, he *blew up* . . . which would only make the situation worse.

This was not at all how Willow had hoped things would go today.

Before she’d left home that morning, Willow’s father, Hawthorn, had given her a packed lunch that included two gumbo apples and a sandwich filled with eel-liver paste. It was one of those situations in which the phrase ‘it’s the thought that counts’ was sure to apply. Hawthorn’s almond-shaped eyes, which looked so much like Willow’s, had sparkled.

‘Oh, Willow,’ he’d beamed. ‘I still remember my years at school rather fondly, despite all the scars. It will be such fun to compare notes.’

Willow had felt momentarily uneasy as she nodded



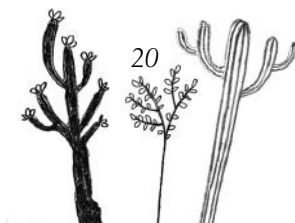
and smiled. She did not enjoy lying to her family, pretending she had come round to the idea of attending school, but she could see no other choice.

Her wrist still ached from writing urgent letters about Silas to the *Grimoire Gazette* that were dismissed or ridiculed. The editor, Rubix Grimoire – once an ally, and the guardian of Willow’s good friend Essential – had seemingly turned against Willow altogether. And Moreg Vaine, the one person who might have been able to persuade the Enchancil of the truth, was nowhere to be found. All of this had caused Willow more sleepless nights than she could count.

She was tired of being ignored. Tired of having no answers. She needed to find out for herself why the Brothers of Wol had suddenly changed their minds and allowed magical children into their schools . . . and why nobody else seemed confused by this reversal.

In her hairy green carpetbag, Willow had packed enough clothes and food to last for a few days, and she’d left a note in her bedroom telling her family she wasn’t coming home until she’d got to the bottom of what was happening.

So a better, more well-thought-out plan might have been for her to try to *blend in* a bit more with





the non-magical children – to keep her head down and her eyes and ears open. Instead, she was standing out in a rather worrisome way. But Willow couldn't help thinking that Oswin had a point. The class's reaction to her was a little . . . puzzling.

The village of Mild was only about five miles away from Grinfog, where Willow's magical family lived, so she'd assumed they would've heard about her. Yet, considering most of the children's reactions, she might as well have come from somewhere as far away as Starfell's second moon, Hezelboob (which was said to have spun off several thousand miles away from its first moon, Jezelboob, many eons ago in the luminary equivalent of a family spat). Perhaps it was more than that, though – perhaps they *had* heard of her, but were still afraid?

Thankfully, a small handful of children from Grinfog were looking just as puzzled as Willow was by the panic. Willow recognised a boy with green eyes and dark brown skin named Peg Spoon, who she often saw down by the river, fishing. He shot some of the others a bemused look before giving Willow a small wave, which she returned.

Willow then took a deep, steadying breath and



gave the teacher an encouraging look. 'I'm Willow ... Willow Moss? There's no reason to be scared ...'

She looked from him to a little girl who had started crying and back again. The crying got louder. The teacher's eyes continued to bulge.

'Erm. Blink if you can hear me,' she said.

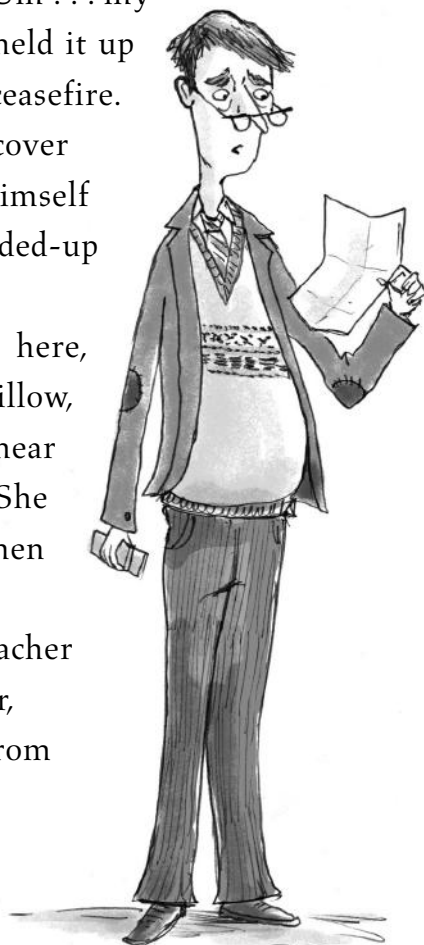
The teacher, dutifully, blinked.

Willow tried to explain. 'Um ... my mother wrote a note?' She held it up like a white flag declaring a ceasefire.

The teacher seemed to recover slightly, finally unsticking himself from the wall to take the folded-up piece of paper from her.

'I'll just sit down over here, all right?' suggested Willow, heading to a vacant desk near the centre of the classroom. She was surprised and pleased when Peg came to sit next to her.

'Y-yes,' squeaked the teacher as he began to read the letter, the blood draining further from his face.





Dear Sir,

We are proud to be sending our youngest child, Willow Moss, to attend your school. What a time to be alive! We – her parents – are delighted at the amendment to the treaty. I can only imagine your own excitement – I just wish I was there to witness it!

I can't foresee a teacher of your fine calibre having any doubts about managing someone with a magical ability. (I'm sure there will have been rigorous training for this new endeavour, and I trust that only the most stalwart of educators have made the grade.) However, if you experience even a momentary twinge of concern, have no fear! I can reassure you that in sending you Willow, who is the least dangerous of my three witch daughters, there will be no risk of her blowing up any of your students or sending them hurtling through the sky with her mind! (Kids, am I right?)

Admittedly, there is the small but, alas, real danger that she might make one or all of the children disappear due to an ability she



acquired in recent months. (We blame puberty – it’s havoc.) Nonetheless, rest assured in the knowledge that, for the most part, she has this under control (except when she sneezes) and is able to return those she has vanished fairly unscathed. No doubt this will offer complete comfort all round.

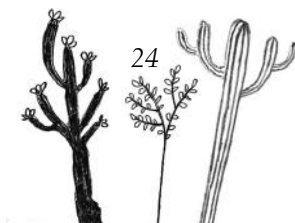
In terms of her educational background, Willow has been home-schooled by her granny – the renowned potion-maker Florence Moss – who has sadly passed on. However, as my mother-in-law had lost most of her marbles before she died, due to a potion explosion in the mountains of Nach, this means you may have your work cut out for you. Sorry.

Sincerely,

Raine Moss

Resident witch of neighbouring Grinfog,
renowned seer and creator of the Travelling
Fortune Fair*

*Tickets available by raven, half-price for the
Midnight Market (sale offer for the period of
the Greening Moon only)





The teacher blinked a few times as he read, then reread, the letter – perhaps in the hope that it was all some sort of dream. Finally, he looked at Willow the way someone might contemplate a large spider.

‘Do you . . . um, feel well?’

‘Perfectly, thank you.’

He cleared his throat, then glanced at the letter again, his skin mottling slightly. ‘No . . . er . . . c-colds or s-sniffles at all?’

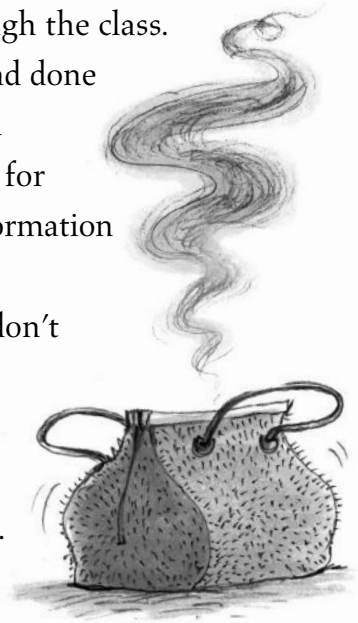
It took a moment for Willow to grasp what he was referring to. ‘Oh, that? I feel fine! Besides, I recently worked out that if I hold my nose when I sneeze, no one seems to disappear.’

Another shockwave went through the class.

The truth was that when she had done that – held her sneeze in – she had made *herself* vanish instead. Only for a minute. But Willow filed this information under ‘Things Best Left Unsaid’.

‘And the, um . . . creature? We don’t usually allow . . . pets.’

‘**A WOT?**’ came Oswin’s outraged voice from the carpetbag, which began, worryingly, to smoke.

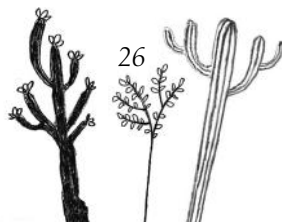
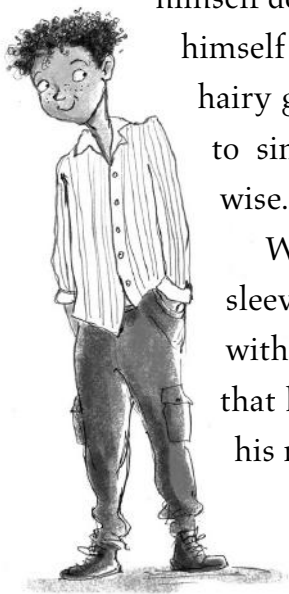


Willow pulled a grim face and shot back quickly, 'That's all right, as Oswin isn't a pet. And he won't cause a problem.' She turned to Oswin's now pumpkin-orange eye, just visible through a hole in the hairy bag, with an expression that threatened . . . consequences. The sort of consequences that resulted in a *bath*.

There was a sulky sort of grunt from inside. 'Fine. **But 'tis bad enough when these cumberworlds fink I is a cat. "Pet" jes takes the blimmerings cake. No respect, an' me being the last kobold an' all . . .**'

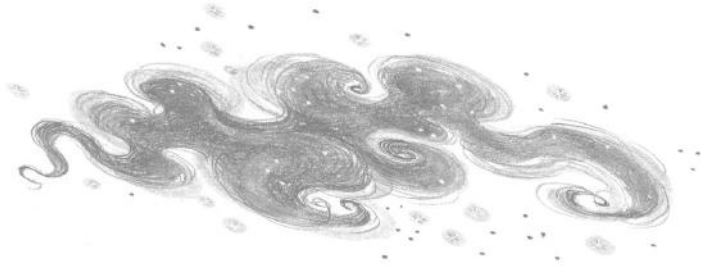
'Um, right. V-very well. Erm. Welcome, Willow. I am Master Cuttlefish,' said the teacher, patting himself down in his nervousness, as if to assure himself of who he was. He glanced at the hairy green bag at Willow's feet, then chose to simply ignore it, which was probably wise.

Willow felt someone tugging on her sleeve and turned to find Peg looking at her with wide green eyes. Up close, she noticed that he had a smattering of freckles across his nose. 'You can make people vanish?'





A Blundering Beginning



The spirit hare stood in the clearing.

'You have what I have asked of you?' said Silas.

The hare stared at him for a long moment, then opened its mouth. It made a hacking, coughing sound, then something round and grey rolled towards him.

It was an eye.

A clouded eye.

Silas bent down and picked it up gingerly. The thing looked dead, but as he touched the eye it grew darker, like a day shrouded in fog.

The wind began to whistle, and up ahead a storm gathered.

Silas allowed himself the smallest glimmer of a smile. 'You have done well.'

