

* 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, fizzle and bang sort of way. Not even a little snap, or a low sort of bang, though there was almost a fizzle, 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 spurgle – 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.



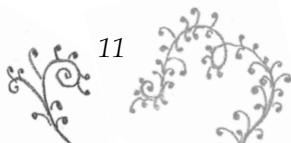
So, while it wasn't exactly a profitable talent, it did put food on the table – usually a half loaf of bread most days. Which was something at least. Unless you compared it to her middle sister Camille's talent. Camille had recently lifted a plough, donkey still attached, off Garron Jensen, *with her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

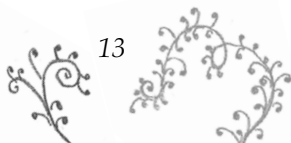
‘That’ll be one spurgle,’ said Juniper, Willow’s oldest sister, coming out of the cottage and witnessing the exchange.

‘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 spurgle.

‘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*.

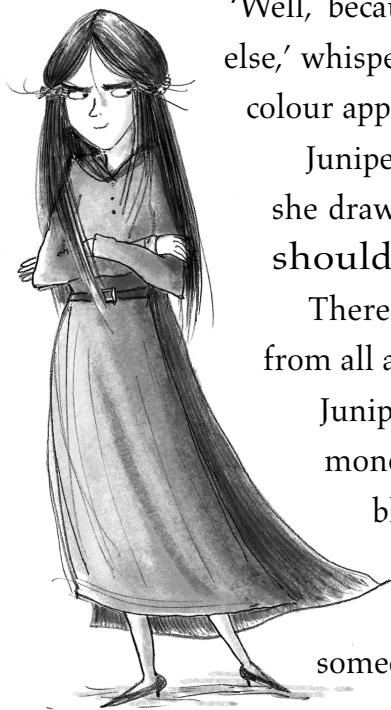
‘Who told you that?’ said Juniper, rounding on Ethel, who appeared to shrink under Juniper’s dark frown. ‘When a carpenter makes you something, you pay him, don’t you? My sister supplies you a service, so why would it be any different with her?’

‘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.

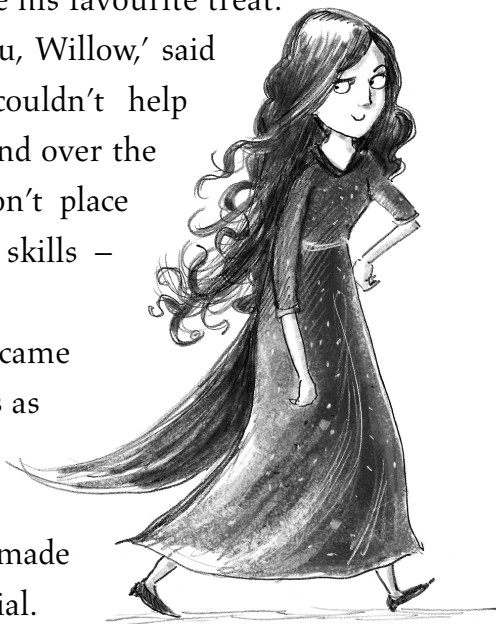




Willow sighed. She was planning on raising her price to a fleurie and a Leighton apple, but she wasn't convinced that using her scary sister to bully it out of people was the *best* way to go about it. It wasn't that she was overly fond of Leighton apples, but Wheezy the Jensens' retired show horse was. 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 spurge, '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.