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## Leaf-mail

*Dear Willow,*

*By the time you read this, I will be gone. My experiments with cross-pollinating a memory flower with samples from the Great Wisperia Tree have worked. I am happy to report that I can now see ten minutes into the future. Unfortunately, I have just seen that my kidnappers will be arriving IMMINENTLY! Which means, alas, I can't even have a decent cup of tea before I send this letter via leaf-mail.*

*I once had a rope swing that might have offered a means of escape, but the baby dragon,*



*Floss, accidentally burnt it to a crisp during a rather unfortunate coughing fit on his last visit. So I fear my captors are likely to catch up with me soon. (Well, in seven minutes and thirty-three seconds to be precise.)*

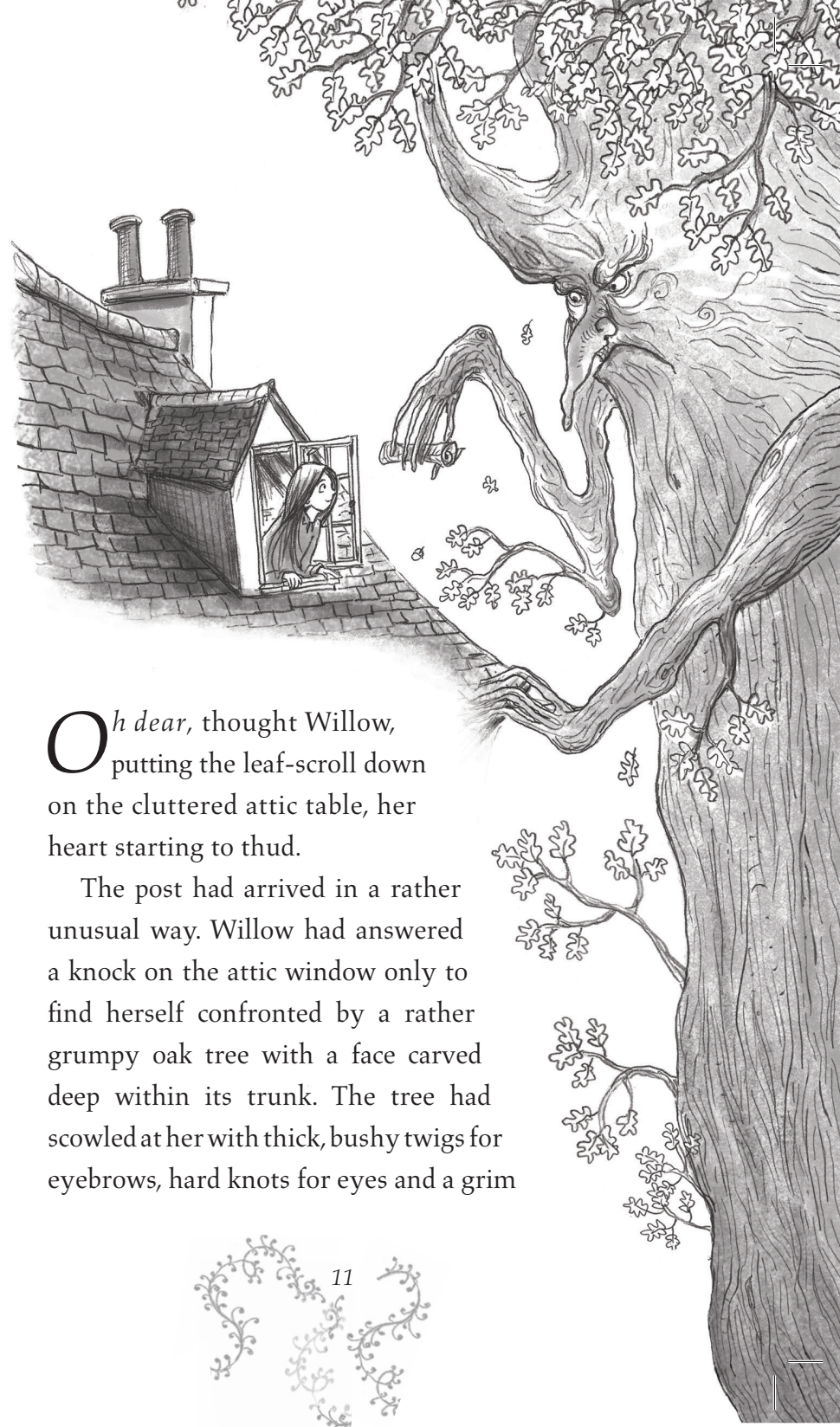
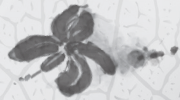
*My attempts at getting hold of the cloud dragons through pepper-tree communication haven't gone according to plan... So I thought I'd drop you a note to ask if you wouldn't mind terribly trying to rescue me? Also, could you please look in on Harold while I'm held hostage? He gets a bit lonely when I'm not here. Though he is very capable of feeding himself.*

*Hope you are well otherwise? The apple-pie blossoms are in bloom again and they always remind me of you...*

*Must dash—*

*Your friend,*

*Nolin Sometimes*



**O**h dear, thought Willow, putting the leaf-scroll down on the cluttered attic table, her heart starting to thud.

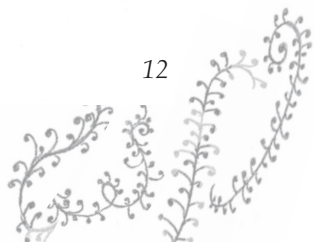
The post had arrived in a rather unusual way. Willow had answered a knock on the attic window only to find herself confronted by a rather grumpy oak tree with a face carved deep within its trunk. The tree had scowled at her with thick, bushy twigs for eyebrows, hard knots for eyes and a grim

slash of a stick for a mouth. It had made an annoyed and windy huffing sound as it handed over the leafy scroll. Then, after giving her one last thunderous glare that seemed to scorch her very soul, it had slumped back to its usual spot by the garden wall, leaving a steady stream of acorns in its wake – and a fair bit of swearing too. Mostly about being rudely awoken from a rather enjoyable *two-hundred-year nap* and NOT being a blooming *postal service*.

Willow hadn't known that trees could move, never mind *swear* or *deliver mail*. But she'd had a good guess, before she'd even read the leaf-letter, that it had something to do with the forgotten teller, Nolin Sometimes, and the way his rare ability helped him make use of the hidden magic of plants. Still, even Willow Moss, who was used to a bit of odd in her life, had to admit that this was all something of a *shock*.



Willow wasn't the only one surprised by the strange visit. So was her best friend, Oswin, who greatly resembled a cat, but was in fact a kobold – a type



of monster – who usually lived under her bed. At this moment, his panicked wailings could be heard from the fat blue stove in the corner, where he had shot off to hide when Willow answered the knock on the window.

**'Oh NO! Oh, me 'orrid aunt Osbertrude, WOT fresh eel is this?'** (Kobolds regularly overheard popular sayings from beneath beds or other hiding places, but often got them a bit confused.)

Ignoring Oswin, which was sometimes the best approach for general peace of mind, Willow took a deep breath and tried to summon Sometimes from the clutches of his kidnappers. If only he'd said who they were! She concentrated hard, her eyes scrunched up tight, silently begging her magic to work. Though begging hadn't had much effect lately to be honest.

Alas, her face formed a rather regrettable expression that made Oswin snigger behind a fluffy green paw. **'Looks like yew needs the privy.'**

Willow ignored this. Her heart pounded, but, despite how much she tried, her hands remained empty. She just couldn't seem to find her friend . . .

Which was unfortunate, as Willow had a magical ability for finding lost things. Like shoes, or socks, or,



most recently, a lost day that had been stolen by the Brothers of Wol, using a thousand-year-old spell. With the help of her friends, including Nolin Sometimes himself and Moreg Vaine, the most powerful witch in Starfell, Willow had got it back.

But she had never tried to find a missing *person* before. The closest she had ever got to that was when she ‘found’ Oswin. She had summoned him from a neighbour’s stove a few years ago and never quite got rid of him since.

Willow sighed, then glanced at Oswin with a frown. ‘Never mind how I look. Nolin Sometimes has been captured!’

Oswin sat up fast, releasing a puff of blue coal dust into the air. In his outrage, his fur went from the colour of lime cordial to bright pumpkin in an instant – one of the side effects of his koboldish heritage. He blinked large, lamp-like eyes and his ears flattened to his skull in shock. **‘WOT? Why’d they take ‘im?’**

Willow shook her head. ‘I don’t know! Maybe he’s made someone a bit cross or something?’

The kobold shrugged a shaggy shoulder, as the idea of Nolin Sometimes making someone a bit cross was entirely possible.



He couldn’t exactly help it. As a forgotten teller (or an oublier, to use their official name), Sometimes had visions of other people’s memories when he was around them – even the shameful ones. To make matters worse, he then blurted these secrets out loud. He didn’t know what was happening when the memories washed over him, so he couldn’t control this. Still, it made some people a bit angry . . . *Murderous* even, if the stories of what had happened to some of the other forgotten tellers over the years were true . . . And the trouble was, when Willow stopped to think about it, Nolin Sometimes could have been taken by just about anyone really.

She looked at the leaf-scroll again, as if hoping it would offer something – *anything* – else to help her find him. But aside from a tiny splodge that looked a bit like a flower, where the ink had run next to the forgotten teller’s name, there was nothing. Willow sighed and paced the dusty attic floor, leaving a small trail of sock prints behind. Then she tried to use her magic again, hoping that this time it would just *work*. But the problem was that lately it just *wouldn’t*.

Unbidden, her sister Camille’s voice flared in her



mind. 'Well, *I've* never been unable to use *my* magic before, not even when I had rumble fever and was nearly on my deathbed. But then I suppose it's hard to lose a really *powerful ability*. Maybe yours was so weak, Willow, that all it took to make it disappear was a really good sneeze.'

Willow took a deep breath and pushed her sister's annoying voice out of her mind. She was fairly sure magical abilities didn't just disappear with sneezes.

*Mostly sure.*

'Just focus, Willow,' she said aloud, picturing her friend's wild white hair, skinny frame, and the way he always had so many pockets filled with strange plants. She tried with all her might to find him, but nothing happened.

Until . . . *something* did.

Something a bit unfortunate, which began with a rather loud popping sound and the familiar wailings of a certain kobold.

'**Oh nooooo!**' cried Oswin. '**Oh, me GREEDY aunt, why'd yew CURSE me to live with witches?**' He dived out of the stove and shot into the much-repaired and patched-together green,



hairy carpetbag near Willow's feet, which started to shake violently.

Willow shut her eyes, afraid to look. She heard about it, though, soon enough.

There was another loud pop, followed by a bellow from her mother downstairs.

'**WILLOW MOSS! WHAT DID I SAY ABOUT TRYING TO USE YOUR MAGIC BEFORE YOU'VE RECOVERED?**'

Willow swallowed. 'Um. That I shouldn't?' she mumbled, reluctantly opening an eye, only to blanch. Most of the attic had vanished. What remained was the single floorboard on which they stood.

*It had all disappeared.*

From the kitchen below, her mother and oldest sister, Juniper, were staring up at her with identical FURIOUS expressions.

'I - um . . . erm . . . Sorry, Mum,' stammered Willow.

This was bad enough, but things were about to get a whole lot worse rather quickly.

Juniper frowned, then looked at the empty seat next to her and paled. 'W-where's Camille?'





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Willow scrunched up an eye, afraid to witness what would no doubt come next. Her mother looked from the empty seat back to Willow accusingly, her lips stretching into a thin, angry line. 'You had better not have made your sister disappear. *Again.*'

Willow bit her lip, then shared a look of commiseration with Oswin, whose eyes were peeking out of the bag in fright.

'*Oh no...*'