

Willow Bloom and the Dream Keepers

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"When Willow Bloom's latent talents are stirred by adolescence, she is drawn into a life-or-death conflict in the hidden world of the Dream Keepers who guard humanity against the dark forces of doubt and despair. Her story unfolds into a vibrant message of empowerment, hope and inspiration for young people everywhere. This is an intriguing fantasy that leaves us wanting more."

Janeen Webb, author of *The Dragon's Child*

Prologue

Something ominous approached the planet Arn. A dark, ethereal presence spread across the cosmic sky.

As twelve golden rings appeared around the planet, each one bigger than the last, an Ancient, draped in white and gold, emerged from the outer ring. She hovered before the darkness and raised her Sceptre.

“UnderLord Maliceius, abandon this attempt to spread your vile shadow. I command it on behalf of the Ancient Realms.”

The dark ether surged forward, pulling its mass inwards to double its height. “The Ancient Realms will not stop me this time,” the UnderLord hissed.

The Ancient raised her head. “You do not frighten me, UnderLord. The Light will always prevail. You cannot succeed.” She brought her Sceptre in close and whispered “Alodin Zoinda,” and her Sceptre responded with a piercing light that radiated towards the darkness. “Retreat now or embrace the Light,” she declared.

The UnderLord Maliceius recoiled from the opposing rays. “Your efforts to stop my expansion across the universe will be futile. I will blacken the precious dreams you so faithfully protect. And I will become the Master.”

His dark mass billowed and swelled backwards as he slowly retreated from the planet Arn. An evil drone sounded from the darkness before he instantly disappeared.

As each golden ring receded, a colossal Ancient appeared and slowly they gathered themselves in a circle.

Satisfied that the UnderLord was gone, the Ancient, Varta, turned to each of them. “It has begun. We must institute the Protocol at once.”

“We must retain the integrity of dreams,” Soto declared.

“Agreed,” said Varta. “The dreams are paramount. It was only a matter of time before he returned... His nature does not allow otherwise.”

A deep sigh reverberated out into the Universe, the first in aeons.

Varta raised her Sceptre up high, initiating a discharge of violet light out into the cosmos. “It is done,” she said.

The Secret in the Woods

From the moment she had woken, Willow had felt odd. Not the general kind of odd, or the odd she felt when she knew things without ever being told about them, but a really strange kind of odd. It was as if her body moved ever so slightly out of time and rhythm and no longer fit properly. She sat in her room studying herself in the mirror, chocolate-coloured eyes staring back at her. She looked normal, and yet her head felt fuzzy – not a headache, just – fuzzy. Her body hung with heaviness, as if she was really tired, but she wasn't. And every time she moved, she tingled all over. It was really weird.

She felt a walk in the woods would help clear her head. Unlike her school friends, who lived in the surrounding villages, Willow's home was an old Cottage at the edge of an ancient forest, and Foxbury Wood was her favourite place in the whole world.

She stood up, feeling a little light-headed with the sudden movement, and slowly made her way downstairs to the laundry room, where she sat on the floor and pushed her feet into her hiking boots. It would be cold outside. She took her coat and cap from a hook and opened the back door, calling out to her parents. "Just in the woods for a bit – back soon!"

Outside, the cold air felt good. Willow wriggled her arms into her coat sleeves and pulled her woolly cap down firmly on her head. Everyone said she was the spitting image of her father, tall and sporty – but prettier, of course. Although he didn't have long dark hair that rippled loosely around his face.

The tingling continued down her arms and legs as she set off, and her body dragged with every step, as if she was walking through thick syrup. Willow began to wonder if there was something wrong with her. Should she be worried? Was she sick?

She opened the garden gate at the back of the Cottage and stepped through, into the woods. Brown and yellow leaves lay sodden on the ground. She looked around, immediately sensing something different here too. Everything appeared to be the same, but something had changed. Willow couldn't quite put her finger on it. Maybe it was her teenage hormones that explained the odd feelings. She did occasionally hear adults talk about teenagers as if they'd been possessed by some kind of alien species – maybe that strange transformation was happening to her as well.

She made her way towards a narrow track covered in a thick carpet of decaying leaves. Damp and earthy smells filled the air. Raising her face to the sun, she walked quietly, concentrating on the sounds around her. That tapping sound was a woodpecker... And the rustling sound to the left was possibly a squirrel – or maybe a badger. All around her tiny droplets of water were sliding off the amber-coloured leaves high above, and hitting the forest floor in a steady rhythm. Ever since she was little she and her father had played at guessing what the sounds were and where they were coming from. For the first time since she had woken up that morning, Willow felt soothed. And then a voice sounded in her head – or just outside of it, she wasn't sure.

Wake up, Willow... Wake Up.

She spun around, her eyes darting about the trees, her voice a little quivery. "Hello? Is anybody there?"

A quiet fell upon the woods; not even the birds were twittering. Willow stood motionless. The voice had sounded like it was coming from inside her head. But that was impossible! Why would she tell herself to wake up? She wasn't asleep! Willow let out a heavy sigh and shook herself vigorously, hoping once and for all to rid herself of the strangeness enveloping her.

The woodland noises started up again. Willow relaxed back into herself and continued further along the path, every now and then kicking up a big clump of leaves with the tip of her boot. As she walked, she let her mind wander. For weeks now she'd been struggling to come up with an idea for her birthday. Her friends Harriett and Claire were already planning their own thirteenth birthdays, but theirs would be months after her own. Willow didn't want an ordinary party; her celebration would have to be something a little different – like hot air ballooning or a trip to France for the day through the Channel Tunnel. She couldn't help but feel the expectation, even if her parents didn't say it aloud, that she, Willow Bloom, would be great at whatever she did – and this would include organising her own birthday from start to finish. Last year they gave her the responsibility of planning their entire holiday itinerary to Cyprus.

“Be clear with your focus, Willow, and you can make things happen,” they would often say.

Aagh! It wasn't that she didn't believe them, but sometimes she wished they were more like other parents and organised those things for her. And sometimes, she wished she were more like everyone else too.

Willow was three the first time her curious talent revealed itself. Her father, Thomas Bloom, was a highly

respected mathematician and professor who spent many of his days in complex calculations, trying to find answers to mysterious questions about the nature of the universe. “*Crunching numbers in search of God!*” he would often joke. One afternoon Willow had begun pulling books off the shelves in his home office, laying them on the floor and opening them at random – or so her father thought. When he went to put them away he noticed that several books were open at pages that related to his current research. Pausing to read, he was astonished to find that these pages actually helped to solve his current mathematical conundrum. Ever since then, whenever his daughter started pulling books off the shelves, he stopped what he was doing and watched her curiously. Too often to be a coincidence, the books she left lying on the floor were just what he needed to read at that point in his research.

A similar pattern had occurred with her mother. Audrey Bloom was an archaeologist with several published books under her belt. Willow had a growing fascination with archaeology, probably from watching her mother’s excited face when discovering artefacts that were hundreds and sometimes thousands of years old. Once, when she was ten, Willow was accompanying her mother on a dig when the surveying equipment used to map the earth beneath them had begun to malfunction. Work ground to a halt and everyone stood around frowning and muttering about budgets, time and weather and watching the technicians tinkering with the equipment when Willow, who had wandered away on her own, suddenly returned and seized her mother’s arm, pulling her insistently towards a particular area on the boundary of the official dig site. “Dig here!” she told her. Remembering how

Willow had helped her husband find the exact references he needed for his research, Audrey had listened and persuaded her team to change the dig location. Incredibly, they'd hit the bullseye. They may never have found the old Roman structure without Willow's intervention. From then on, if she sensed something on a site, she always told her mother, and her mother always acted. So far she had a pretty good track record, earning herself the name "Wonder Willow" within her mother's working teams. Audrey had even dedicated a couple of her books to Willow, which her daughter thought was pretty cool.

Willow. Wake. Up.

She stopped, turning instinctively. Who was that? There was no-one about, yet she was sure someone had just spoken. Up in the trees a pair of squirrels began leaping about, the younger branches bending under their weight like catapults ready to launch them into the distant woods. The tingly sensations in Willow's body suddenly became prickly and uncomfortable. She briskly rubbed her arms and legs and waited for the feeling to go away. But if anything, the sensations grew stronger.

The sound of bird calls made her look up. A large number of birds were gathering in the branches above her head. Their voices harmonised and echoed all around her. It was a lot of activity for this time of year, she mused. A movement further up the path, just beyond a raised bank, caught her eye. She narrowed her gaze, but all she could see were the trees. Had something moved? Or were these the early signs of going crazy? Maybe something freakish had happened to her brain while she slept last night. Or maybe her teenage hormones really were responsible. She walked on

distractedly, every now and then looking over to the raised bank to see if there really was something there.

A low thumping started in her ears, like a distant drum playing a purposeful beat, growing louder and louder. “What’s wrong with you?” she asked herself, shaking her head, trying to dispel the sound.

And then she saw it.

Just above the top of the bank, a green, smoky shadow floated amongst some trees. Willow stared intently, trying to make out what it was. Could it be mist? But why was it green? Stepping away from the path she walked cautiously towards the bank, keeping her gaze fixed on the swirling shadow above. The bank was steeper than she’d expected. She hesitated, but there was nothing for it, she had to investigate.

She seized an exposed tree root that was poking out of the slope at chest height, dug the toe of her boot into the slippery earth and heaved herself upward. Soon she was climbing on all fours, her jeans soaked at the knees. Reaching the crest of the bank she saw that the green shadow was no longer there. Disappointed, but not entirely surprised, Willow brushed the mud from her hands and shook clods of sticky mud from her clothes, scanning the area at the same time. Everything was as it should be. No green swirling mist to be seen. Whatever it had been, it fell into the “weird” category, though right now she really wasn’t sure of anything.

Willow sat down heavily on an old sawn-off tree stump. She wiped her hands on a dry bit of her muddy coat then rubbed them together to warm up.

“*Wake up, Willow,*” a soft voice said, and it was absolutely not coming from inside her mind.

The thumping in her ears intensified and the tingly sensations in her body grew so strong it was as if she was being pin-pricked all over. A wave of something passed through her, from head to toe – and then, there it was...

A large green, oval-shaped mist floated about a metre from the ground. Willow froze, her breath caught, eyes fixed on the cloud-like thing that was twisting gently. For some strange reason, she didn't feel the urge to run. Her chest softened as she slowly released the air she was holding and took in a new breath.

The green mist began to morph into what looked like a human, though not like any human she had ever seen before. From the elegant silhouette it was clearly a woman, but this woman was tall, taller than Willow's father. Long white and golden hair appeared, and then the most luminous green eyes were gazing at her. The ghost-woman's skin glowed in a pale, golden shimmer, gradually becoming clearer and clearer. Her flowing gown, a soft green, fluttered just above the forest floor, making her seem taller than she was.

The prickly sensations, along with the thumping in Willow's ears, had subsided, and she now felt calm, almost relaxed. She stood up slowly. "Hello..." she breathed. "Who are you?"

"Goodwill to you, Willow. It is not my intention to frighten you," the gracious lady said. "My name is Peonie. I am here to acquaint you with the world of the Dream Keepers."

Her ghost-like form had now become as solid as the trees around her. Willow stared at the large purple and white crystal sitting in the middle of Peonie's delicate crown, its colour changing from dark purple to light purple, to white and then

back again. She dragged her focus back to the lady's green eyes.

“What do you mean – you're here to acquaint me with the Dream Keepers?” she asked. “Who are they? And how did you know my name? Who are you?”

“I am the Guardian of the Doorway to the Dream Keepers,” Peonie said. “I am not a human, not an angel, not a ghost. I am an Ancient Being. I hold Doorways open to other worlds. None of this will make much sense to you right now, but it will soon.”

Other worlds! No way, Willow thought. How was that possible? Then again, how was this being, Peonie, even possible?

“You are confused,” Peonie said in her soothing voice. “But I assure you that all will become clear in time. I have been waiting one hundred and seventeen years for this day. That is how long it has been since anyone in your woods has been able to communicate with me.” Peonie's emerald eyes glistened as she spoke. “You are the first one in all that time.”

“One hundred and seventeen years! Are you serious? You don't look that old,” Willow said. “And why can I see you? What... Dream Keepers?” Was she going mad somehow? Had she bumped her head somewhere and not remembered? Or was she imagining all this? In which case she was definitely going mad. She blinked furiously but Peonie was still there. Yep, she must be clinically mad. Willow's eyes lingered on the glowing symbols wrapped around the Guardian's gold and silver armbands. Oddly, some of them looked familiar, but she had no idea why.

“Allow me to explain,” Peonie said. “Come sit with me.” She glided gracefully to a long, mossy tree trunk, sat down, and looked at Willow expectantly.

It struck Willow that Peonie’s feet didn’t quite touch the ground as she walked, and when she sat she seemed to hover just above the trunk. Willow hesitated, then sat cautiously on the trunk, an arm’s length away.

“Willow, how do you feel when you come to these woods?”

“I – I love them. I’ve always loved coming here... ever since I can remember. I felt drawn to come,” she said. “Sometimes I feel like the woods are watching over me. I know it sounds crazy, but...” Her eyes narrowed. “Why?”

Peonie’s face softened. “These woods are very special, Willow. Everything within them has a unique relationship with you and your family. And now, more specifically, with you.”

“I don’t understand... Are you saying these are some kind of...” She couldn’t believe she was going to say it: “magic woods?”

“Yes,” Peonie said.

“Seriously?” Willow asked. How could her family be part of any of this? Magic woods... *really*? She glanced at the trees around them, then turned back to see Peonie smiling. “You’re not joking, are you?”

“No,” Peonie said. “I am not.”

Willow thought about the countless times she had come to the woods and how she had always sensed a deep connection with them. It was something her friends didn’t seem to have or even understand. Well, they enjoyed nature like most people but they weren’t connected to it the way she

was. Willow breathed out. It was as if a piece of a puzzle had just been placed in its correct position, revealing a clearer picture. And with that clarity, another odd sense of familiarity bubbled up to the surface. It hit her all at once.

“I remember! When I was maybe six or seven, I saw this... this green floaty thing in amongst some trees. At the time, I thought I was imagining it. I told my parents and I remember them smiling at each other and then telling me that it was special to be able to see it. Anyway, I forgot all about it – until just now. That was you, wasn’t it?”

Peonie nodded. “I was watching over a small girl wandering in the woods on her own. And now you have been chosen to continue a very important tradition.”

“You’ve been watching over me? But why? And what do you mean, I’ve been chosen? Chosen by who? For what?”

“Chosen by the Ancients,” Peonie said. “Willow, this may sound unbelievable but your family, along with others from all over the world, have for many generations been Keepers of the Light that flows between your world and that of the Dream Keepers.”

“Ancients?” she said, brows raised. “My family – ‘Keepers of the Light’! Are you sure you have the right family? And what kind of light exactly? Why haven’t my parents ever mentioned any of this?”

Peonie leaned forward, placing her hand over Willow’s. Whoa, thought Willow as her own hand became instantly warm and tingly.

“Your parents have their reasons, I will leave them to explain your family history to you. The Light, Willow, is the connecting force that keeps your world so alive – vital – full of dreams. But this Light,” she said, becoming grave, “has

begun to fade. There have not been many Awakened Light Keepers in your Earth's past century, for reasons we will leave for now. What is important is that we re-establish the Light Flow to its full strength so your world can flourish. With training, you have the ability to help this happen. Your Great Great Grandmother Beatrice was a Light Keeper, and a wonderful one too."

"My Great Great grandmother?" Willow couldn't believe it.

Peonie stood up and gestured for Willow to follow. "Please, walk with me."

Willow brushed off her pants and joined Peonie, who was slowly gliding towards a path that led to a very old plantation of the woods. Willow felt a great sense of wellbeing envelop her. Could Mum and Dad really have something to do with this? And Gran? What could they possibly know of magic – and Light Keeping? They were ordinary people – except for Gran, she supposed, who was a roving gypsy of sorts.

"Willow, your family has lived at Taritha Cottage for close to four hundred and fifty years. It is Light Keeper Law to hand the Light Keeper's Home down from generation to generation."

"That makes so much sense now! I've always wondered why Mum and Dad talk about the Cottage like it's something sacred, as if they could never leave."

"Access to the Dream Keepers' world has been kept a secret for thousands of years, and your family helps hold these secrets within this woodland Sanctuary. There are families scattered right across your world who do the same. Some families are Light Keepers; some are Light Keeper Helpers.

Your parents come together with these families once a year at what is known as ‘The Light Gathering’.”

Willow stopped walking and turned to Peonie. “So that’s where they go!”

Peonie nodded.

“But why would Mum and Dad have kept this from me?”

“Your mother and father have been safe-guarding the Keepers’ World from you because they were waiting for you to come of age, when all of this would be easier for you to grasp. Traditionally, it is they who would reveal this world to you, in preparation for the possibility of being Awakened.”

“Awakened?”

“To see a Guardian is the first step in the Awakening process. One who is Awakened may become a member of a Fellowship of Light Workers known as the Keepers’ Society, where you can learn the hidden aspects of your world and beyond.” Peonie walked on again.

Something didn’t quite add up... Willow hurried after her. “Why are you here then? Why are you doing this and not my parents?”

Peonie hesitated before replying. “I am here because the Protocol has changed. I am here to implement the expansion of the new Protocol. Awakenings are taking place all over your Earth for all those who are deemed ready. It is imperative to increase the Light Keepers’ presence on your planet as quickly as possible.”

That sounded more ominous than Willow would have liked. “Why? Why has the Protocol changed? Is it because of what you said before about the light fading?”

“Yes. The Light must not be extinguished.”

Willow stopped again. “But I’m just... How can I be a part of something so...?”

“So important?”

“Yes. And so big,” Willow said.

“You would be surprised by what you are truly capable of. Do not underestimate yourself, Willow.” Standing quietly, Peonie looked towards several large oak trees.

Willow followed Peonie’s gaze, listening to the faint sound of leaves rustling across the forest floor.

“There is more, so much more for you to discover.” And, as if Peonie had received some kind of signal from the trees themselves, she turned to Willow with a smile and said, “These woods are ready to reveal some of their secrets to you, Willow. Are you ready?”

Willow looked at Peonie curiously. “Secrets? What kind of secrets?”

Peonie’s arms opened out to the trees. Instantly a rustling of leaves filled the woods around them and dozens of small people crept out from behind the tree trunks.

Willow stood stunned. How was this possible – in the woods behind her home? How could she have not seen them before? “Who are they?” she asked, her gaze darting from an old man with a long beard to a rotund woman not much more than knee-high.

Peonie moved in closer to the Little People. “Goodwill to you all. It is delightful to be in your presence once more.” She gazed upon them before turning back to Willow. “These are the Wood Folk. They are the caretakers of these woods, and

attend to the many life systems that keep them vibrant. These are the Beings that your world refers to as gnomes or elves.”

“They’re real?” Then, realising how rude that must have sounded, Willow wished she could take the words back. Of course they were real! They were standing right in front of her! “Sorry,” she said in a low voice, turning pink.

“There is much that your world does not see,” Peonie said. “In past times there were a small number of people outside of the Keepers’ world who could see the Wood Folk. The stories and myths of gnomes and elves originated from those sightings and experiences.”

The tallest of the Wood Folk stood only as high as Willow’s hip. Willow tried making meaningful eye contact with some of them, but each time she met with a pair of silver-grey eyes the size of egg yolks, that were spontaneously lowered. Eventually one of the Wood Folk smiled with a wide mouth. Even being half her size, this young man looked as if he could carry twice his weight. Willow smiled back.

Peonie gestured for Willow to say something.

She cleared her throat. “Hi. I’m Willow. This – you – it’s really great to be here!” Not the best introduction she had ever delivered but nothing else came to mind. “I can’t believe I’ve been coming to these woods for all these years and... you’ve always been here! You’ve probably seen me here heaps of times!” The thought of that sounded a little creepy, but she quickly shook it off. They were gnomes and elves after all.

The Woodsman who had smiled at her came forward. “I’m Fergus,” he said in rumbling tones. “We have seen you in our woods many times. We’ve been keeping them in good shape for this day,” he beamed. “They’ll be ready.” He stepped back and shuffled in amongst his friends.

Willow noticed Fergus's face redden as the Woodsman standing next to him gave him a gentle nudge. She wondered what his last comment meant – about the woods being ready.

“I’m Hendra,” a Woodfayre in the front row said. A thick lock of her rusty coloured hair fell across her face and she quickly pushed it aside. She looked up with a coy smile. “Pleased for you to see us, Willow.”

“Hi,” Willow said. “I’m pleased that I can see you too.”

Peonie now stood beside Willow. “A gathering such as this,” she declared, “has not been witnessed here for a very long while. It is time to dust off the cobwebs of the past century and initiate this Sanctuary into her duties once again. Her dormancy has been broken!”

The Wood Folk nodded and clapped. Several even cheered.

“Wow,” Willow said under her breath. All this because she had woken up feeling strange this morning!

Peonie spoke to some of the Wood Folk individually. Willow heard the phrase “Sanctuary fields and portal anchors” – which didn’t make any sense.

The Wood Folk Peonie had been talking to bowed graciously and began to move away. Peonie turned back towards Willow. “My return journey to the Guardians Realm is approaching.”

“When will I see you again?”

“When the time is right, I will return.”

Huh? When exactly would that be? Willow sneaked a glance at her watch, a treasured gift from one of her grandmother’s many trips. It was already well past midday! Thanking the Wood Folk for welcoming her, she assured them that she would be back soon. They slowly moved away,

blending back in amongst the trees, then disappeared. The sound of crunching leaves faded into the distance.

“Willow,” Peonie said, “I know many of your questions are still unanswered, but they will be answered in time.” They headed along a leafy path towards Willow’s home.

“I’ve still got heaps to ask you! Like, who are the Dream Keepers? And what exactly does a Light Keeper do? And the Sanctuary... what does that mean? What’s it for?”

The Guardian of Doorways gave a slight bow. “I understand your questions, Willow, and I, along with your parents, will be able to answer many of them. However a journey is travelled one step at a time, and your first step today would be considered a leap.”

Not quite the answer she was looking for. This walk home through the woods was very different from her walk into the woods that morning. For one thing, she no longer thought she was going mad; for another, she now had Peonie walking along beside her too – as if it was the most normal thing in the world to go for a walk with a being from another world. She could also feel an even stronger connection with everything around her. These were her woods, her secret Sanctuary! “Now I know why I’ve always loved coming here. Thanks for showing me all of this, Peonie.”

“You are most welcome. I and many others are grateful that you have begun to Awaken. Your world is already better because of it.”

Willow’s eyes welled with tears, though she had no idea why. She smudged them across her cheeks with her sleeve and walked on silently. In no time at all, they were approaching the path that led to the Cottage.

“It’s still hard to believe that this is real, that it’s really happening,” she said.

“It was an honour to appear before you after a long absence.” Peonie gazed upon Willow thoughtfully. “Until the moment of our next meeting, Willow, I bid you goodwill.”

As Willow watched, Peonie’s features became less defined, and within moments the Guardian was once again a green mist, twisting slowly, then dissolving into nothingness.

The Light Keepers' History

“Mum! Dad!” Willow shouted as she charged in through the back door, slamming it hard behind her. She leaned against the door and kicked off her muddy boots.

“We’re in the study,” her mother called from the other end of the Cottage.

Willow rushed through the Cottage in her socks, buzzing with questions. She was going so fast that she slipped on the rug in the hall and only just grabbed the handle of the door to her mother’s study in time to break her fall. She burst in. Her parents were sitting at a table at the sunny end of the room eating their lunch.

“I know!” she exploded, skidding to a stop in front of them. “I know about the Light Keepers! And the Dream Keepers! And I’ve met Peonie and the Wood Folk too!”

Her mother’s fork crashed onto her plate. She stared at Willow.

Her father began to choke. Coughing and spluttering, he grabbed his glass of water with a quivering hand and quickly swallowed. He set his glass down with a little bump and looked at his wife and then back at Willow. “Well, this is a surprise,” he said.

“A surprise! You can say that again!” She eyed her parents more intently. “Actually, you look more shocked than surprised. Isn’t this supposed to be good?”

“Of course it’s good... We’re just...” Her father glanced at his wife. Willow’s mother had pushed her plate away as if

she had completely lost her appetite. Her face was flushed and her chest heaved slightly.

“...Surprised,” Willow said, finishing her father’s sentence. “So you said. Why didn’t you tell me this stuff sooner?” she demanded. “Why did it have to be such a big secret? I would’ve handled it. This is so awesome! I want to know everything – everything that you know.” She grabbed a chair, dragged it out from the table then planted herself into it and looked at her parents expectantly.

Her father reached out and covered his wife’s hand comfortingly. “Willow, you have to understand that your mother and I are completely caught off guard. This isn’t how it’s supposed to happen, awesome or not.”

“I know. I know it’s not. Peonie said the Protocol had changed, whatever that means.”

Her parents glanced at each other again, this time with frowns puckering their foreheads. “Willow, just how exactly did you find out? What actually happened?” her father asked.

“Remember when I said I was going for a walk earlier? Well, I’d woken up feeling really weird, so I thought taking a walk would help it go away, and...”

“What kind of weird?” her father cut in.

“My whole body felt really heavy, tingly. At first I thought I was sick, but it wasn’t like that. And while I was walking, this thumping started in my ears. Then I saw the green smoky thing appear, which turned out to be Peonie! I was a bit freaked out at first, but I knew I was okay, if that makes any sense.”

“What did she look like?” her mother asked, her voice barely audible.

Willow's eyes were glowing. "Like nothing I'd ever seen before. I mean she is from somewhere else! She had this crown on her head and a green flowing robe and these armbands with symbols that reminded me of – now I remember! Some of them are in your books. Anyway, she said something about the light fading and that it needed to be stronger." Willow gazed out the window in the direction of the woods. "Just being around her made me feel so – so – I don't know. I've never felt anything like it."

Willow turned back to her parents. She hadn't seen them like this before. Her father breathed out heavily, raking his fingers through his dark hair. Her mother's fair complexion had now turned pasty and her face was etched with lines as her hand toyed nervously with one of her earrings. "What's wrong?" Willow asked.

"Sorry," her father said. "We're, I mean – wow! It's happened! Our girl has taken the first step in Awakening. I'm just glad to see you handled it with such aplomb, considering..."

"Considering what?"

"Thomas – let me," Audrey said. Her pale blue eyes softened as she looked at her daughter. "We're pleased for you, Willow, really. We're only sorry that you didn't hear about the Light Keepers from us first. It wasn't easy keeping all of this from you. You've always been so attuned with the woods, and your intuition is so strong. We knew it was only a matter of time. Just – not this soon. We were looking forward to telling you all about the Keepers when you were a little older."

"Why? Why older? I'm obviously old enough now, or Peonie..."

“Willow,” her mother said more assertively, “as your father pointed out, this isn’t how it’s supposed to happen. For one, this has never, ever happened to anyone as young as you. The Awakening process usually happens when you’re at least fifteen. And it’s the parents who introduce their children to the Keepers’ world.”

Wow, Willow thought. The youngest ever. How cool was that! “Peonie said she’d been waiting a long time – one hundred and seventeen years.”

“Yes. Yes, she has,” her mother said. “Being in a Keeper family doesn’t always mean you’ll be Awakened. Lots of families have generation gaps. And we haven’t had a Light Keeper in the family since your Great Great Grandmother Beatrice...” Her voice trailed off and her lip quivered. “I was told about them when I was fifteen, but to this day, I – I haven’t had the privilege of ever practising Light Keeper duties.”

Willow swallowed uncomfortably at the unexpected sadness in her mother’s words. She held back a few moments. “Mum,” she said softly, “why hasn’t there been a Light Keeper in our family for so long? And what exactly is a Light Keeper?”

Her mother didn’t answer straight away; there was a faraway look in her eyes. “Those are big questions, Willow, that require big answers.” Audrey slowly tucked her hair behind her ears then crossed her arms on the table. “There haven’t been many Light Keepers anywhere for over a century and there are very good reasons as to why, and we will tell you. But just not right now – not all at once. And why I haven’t been Awakened – well, I wasn’t chosen. Simple as that.” She lowered her eyes.

Willow stared at her mother. She wanted to say something but felt completely lost for words. So she had been chosen and her mother not? Why? Her mother glanced at her husband who put his hand reassuringly on her knee. Willow turned to her father. “So, what about you, Dad? Are you from a Light Keeper family too?”

“No. I’m from a Helper family. You could call me semi-retired. We help Light Keepers to do their jobs safely.”

“Peonie mentioned the Helpers...”

Audrey tossed her head lightly, as if shaking off her despondence. “Okay. What’s important right now is that you’ve been Awakened, and your father and I are here to help you.” She pulled her chair in a little closer. “First things first, Willow. Light Keepers – they are the Keepers of the Light Streams that connect our world to the Dream Keepers’ world. The Light Stream is what human dreams travel on, back and forth between Earth and the Dream Keepers’ World.” She demonstrated by placing her plate on one side of the table to represent Earth, and taking her cup and putting it on the opposite side to represent the Dream Keepers’ world. “Our dreams travel through the Light Stream, from here to here.” She ran her finger across the table. “Not the dreams you have when you’re sleeping – I’m talking about the kind of dreams you have about your life – the things that stir you, deep inside.”

“So, like, when I’m dreaming about having my own pony – that dream ends up on this Light Stream, and goes to the Dream Keepers’ World?”

Her mother smiled for the first time since Willow had charged in and dropped her bombshell. “Yes, that’s exactly

what I'm saying. And thank you for sharing that dream with us again!"

"No problem," Willow grinned. "No point in wasting a good opportunity. You taught me that." She looked over to her mother's half-eaten quiche and salad. "By the way, if you're finished, can I have that? I'm starving."

"Your lunch is waiting for you in the fridge, you know," her mother said.

"I'll eat that too. But later. I'm not moving anywhere right now."

Her mother laughed and passed her plate over. "Go on, eat up!"

"Thanks, Mum." Willow forked a cherry tomato. "So keep going – about the dreams."

"Where was I...? Ah, that's right. Our dreams are stored and protected by the Dream Keepers. Dreams of being an artist, an architect, a teacher, getting a bike for Christmas – or even a pony," her mother smiled. "These dreams flow back and forth every time you think about them – giving them the best possible chance of becoming real in our world."

A log-jam was forming in Willow's mind. For every sentence her mother spoke, at least three questions followed. She couldn't believe this whole thing was about something as vague as dreams! She hadn't thought the words "Dream Keepers" literally meant just that, though it did seem as if this was all really important, and the Light Stream did sound pretty cool. Willow bit her tongue, saving her questions.

Audrey leaned over and placed a hand softly on top of her daughter's. "A Light Keeper, Willow, helps to create the Light Stream connections. And they must originate from the Dream Keepers' world where the Light Source for the Stream

resides. That's why Light Keeper work is so important. That's why," she hesitated, "that's why a Light Keeper has to travel to the Dream Keepers' world."

"What!" Willow sat bolt upright. "Out there? In space? Whoa! Peonie said she opened Doorways to other worlds. I guess I was so blown away by Peonie and what was happening, that I didn't get everything she was saying, or put it all together into something that made sense. This is even more awesome!"

Her mother didn't appear to be as excited. "I know it all sounds 'awesome' but there's so much more to know."

"So tell me! Tell me everything!"

"We will, but we'll do it in stages." Audrey looked around her study before reaching behind her chair to grab a box of paper clips from a shelf. She placed some of the clips across the table, between her cup and Thomas's plate at the other end, then steepled her fingers alongside them. "Imagine these clips are galaxies for a moment. With our current technology, it would take many thousands of light years to cross these distances to get to the Dream Keepers' World over here," she said, tapping the plate before meeting her daughter's gaze. "So you'll have to forgive your parents if we look a little... anxious. Your personal world has just expanded by no less than seven galaxies."

Willow instantly thought of one of her favourite TV shows, *Dr Who*, and the time-travelling Tardis. She imagined spinning across the galaxies in his blue telephone box – destination: the Dream Keepers' world! She would go there to make Light Streams and save human dreams! "So it's a bit like being the Doctor with his Tardis!" she enthused.

Her parents looked at each other, unable to contain their grins.

“Not exactly,” her mother said.

“Then how do they get there? How do they do it?”

“Willow,” her father said, “the world you are entering has technology that we, as humans, find difficult to fathom. There are devices used to travel through the galaxies, and we’ll get to that, but right now we have other priorities; there are other things that you need to know first.”

“But Dad!”

He put his hand up to stop any further protests. “Sorry, but that’s just the way it is. There’s an order of events that must play out.”

“Order of events? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“The Protocol may have changed,” he said firmly, “but we still have to follow certain guidelines.”

Willow stared at her father for a long moment, shoving noisy thoughts and details into haphazard piles to deal with at a later time. “Why do you have to be so mysterious – and why are our dreams such a big deal anyway? Why go to all this trouble?”

“Willow,” her father said in a gentler tone, “imagine life on Earth without dreams. I want you to really think about that for a minute. Tell me what you see.”

She looked at him curiously. “Okay.” Willow closed her eyes, thinking about some of her own dreams. Her biggest one, for quite a while now, was to have her own pony. She tried to imagine what life would be like without that dream. Would she even be in the pony club? After all, being in the pony club was part of her original dream years earlier, along with all the small dreams, like having her own saddle and

getting a new pair of boots. Getting her first big bike was another one of her dreams. If those dreams didn't exist, would she bother with much at all? Would her life become a series of dull and menial tasks, purely for the purpose of survival? And if everyone else were like that, what kind of world would she be living in? Dreams, she realised, were more than just the ideas and thoughts that floated around in your head. They had a purpose.

Willow opened her eyes. "I get it! There wouldn't be any new music or dancing, or art without dreams." She thought of her grandmother, travelling around the world, meeting new people and learning about different cultures. "Gran wouldn't even bother travelling. There wouldn't be any fun. Life would be sad actually."

"Without dreams," her mother said, "our world would quickly plunge into darkness. Dreams are an important part of our existence as humans. We are compelled to create, and dreams are a part of the process. It's how we grow and evolve. That's why the Light Keepers' world has strict rules. We need to minimise errors, to minimise the breakdown of systems that have been in place for millennia to protect everything that makes our human existence so unique. We're not trying to be mysterious; just making sure you understand so that you're prepared."

"So-o-o, what can go wrong?" Willow asked. "Why are you worried?"

"Mostly nothing, but just about everything," her father said. "We're talking about going into a different space and time – a different level of existence. This isn't like taking a train trip into London, though that can be hazardous occasionally." His momentary grin was quickly replaced by a

frown. “The Doorways you travel through to get across the galaxies... well, the possibility of becoming stuck between the worlds is real. It hasn’t happened in over a century, but that doesn’t mean it can’t. That’s why we have rules. The more closely you follow the rules, the less chance of problems. Everything you think and do has an impact on the outcome. You need to be prepared – trained, because things don’t always go according to plan.”

Willow’s thoughts bubbled away again. Getting stuck between worlds? No thanks! “How do you get stuck?” she asked, imagining herself drifting around in deep, dark space forever...

“If a portal fails, or something unforeseeable happens,” her father replied. “Willow, you would need to know how to handle the situation. There are things... there are forces of nature that you need to learn about and understand – for your own safety.”

Willow’s initial excitement at the thought of travelling across galaxies was now somewhat subdued. “So it’s not all about the fun.”

Her father nodded. “That’s why we’re... shocked, frankly, that you’ve been Awakened so young. Light Keeper work is serious stuff.” The lines on his forehead were etched deeply now. “It’s why your mother and I will follow the Awakened Procedure to the letter. It’s how this is done, or it all becomes too much, too soon, and far too dangerous.”

Willow looked at her parents in silence.

Her father hesitated, flicking a quick glance at his wife before continuing: “Willow, we know you’re smart and capable, and when the time is right, there’s a special Academy you can go to that’s dedicated to teaching Light Keeper

duties. It's existed in France for hundreds of years, secretly teaching the knowledge and magic of the Dream Keepers."

Willow forced herself to stay seated. The idea of an Academy instantly made her forget about being stuck somewhere. "Are you serious? A magic school for Light Keepers! When can I go?"

"Steady on. Let's get the basics down first, shall we?" Thomas said. "Yes, you've been Awakened, and not by accident – we know that. No doubt the Academy will summon you soon enough. But not too soon we hope."

"What! I thought being Awakened meant I was a Light Keeper. I don't..."

"Being a Light Keeper is something you choose to be," her mother intervened. "You don't have to be one if you don't want to. Given your age, it's perfectly reasonable to say no or to delay carrying out duties until you're older. There are lots of different ways to contribute to the cause."

Willow sat there, stunned. This was like being given the most amazing gift and then having it snatched away. "You're saying I can't do this? Before I've even gone to the Academy?"

"No, that's not what we're saying," her father replied. "We're saying that we'll follow the Awakening Procedure. You have to know what you're taking on first. Surely you can see that's reasonable?"

"Tell me then!" Willow said. "Tell me what I need to know – so I can go."

Her father shook his head. "Looks like there's no delaying this – not even for a day."

Audrey turned to her husband with questioning eyes. He gave her a hopeless little smile and shrug.

She returned the slightest nod. “There’s a book, Willow, that I’ve been entrusted with. Now that you’ve Awoken, it’s rightfully yours. It’s the first step to understanding your new world.”

“What kind of book?”

“A very special book.” Her mother stood up. “I’ll go get it.”

The Keeper's Book

Willow's mother entered with a large brown leather book held firmly to her chest. Her father stood up; Willow instinctively did the same. It was as if a new presence had joined the room. But how could that be, when the newcomer was a book?

"I guess we're ready then," Audrey said over the top of the book.

"I suppose we are," Thomas agreed. He turned towards the door. "Shall we?"

Willow looked from one parent to the other. "Where are we going?"

"Not far. Just taking precautions," her mother answered. "It's easier if we just show you."

"What for? Why do we need..."

"Quit yakking," interrupted her father. "All will be revealed."

Willow followed her parents from the study into the hallway. Halfway down, just past the library, they came to a halt directly in front of an old painting of their Cottage. She watched her father carefully remove it and lean it against the opposite wall. He then placed the palm of his hand on the wall where the painting had hung and began to move his hand in a geometric pattern. Just as she was about to say something, a white light flashed beneath his palm. Willow shut her mouth and swallowed. Slowly, he lifted his hand away. An opening – a fuzzy-looking hole – had magically appeared in the wall. She stared as the hazy gap widened, grew longer, stretching

right down to the floor, until it was large enough for them to step through.

“How...? I mean, what...?”

“Magic,” her father said. “Take my hand, Willow.”

She held his hand and they stepped through the opening. Her mother followed. Letting go of her father’s hand, Willow found herself in a dimly lit room no larger than an average-sized bedroom. The hole they had stepped through slowly vanished, and the wall became solid again. “What is this place?”

“The *Keeper’s Safe*,” her father replied. “It’s where we discuss and do things of a sensitive nature – so our magic world stays a secret. Every Sanctuary home has one. This one has been here for hundreds of years. That’s why we could never sell the Cottage – even if we wanted to,” he added. “The Keeper’s Safe wouldn’t allow it. It would automatically repel anyone who showed an interest. Only Light Keepers can own it. So when the time comes – we’ll pass it on to you.”

“Wow,” Willow croaked. Her eyes danced around the room. A small table with four chairs sat to one side and a sofa with matching armchairs took up the rest of the space. The walls were covered with symbols, all glowing gold. Some of them looked like the ones she had seen on Peonie’s armbands. Even the floor and ceiling had them. Directly above her was a symbol of a triangle with three horizontal wavy lines running through it. Another, close by, was of a multi-pointed star contained within a circle. And a shelf, running the entire length of a wall, had several large crystals placed along it, all of them glowing an opalescent white.

“Wow,” she said again. Her eyes settled on a small wooden box at the end of the shelf. “What’s in the box?”

Her father walked over to the box and picked it up. He lifted the lid and immediately a small beam of light shone from inside the box.

Willow moved in for a closer look.

“Remember I mentioned different devices? Well, this is one of them,” her father said. “It’s for communicating, so we can speak to other Keeper members around the world with complete security. It even projects a holographic image of the speakers at either end.”

Willow peered inside. The white glow came from a small, polished black cube at the base of the box. “Is this from the Dream Keepers’ world?”

“Sure is,” her father nodded. “They’ve gifted our world with several devices.” He gently replaced the lid on the box and put it back on the shelf. “The crystals act like generators to power the room and the security field around the house,” he added. Sensing her next question, he said, “Later. Mum’s ready.”

“Willow,” her mother said, “come stand in front of me.”

Taking a few steps forward, Willow faced her mother. It was weird seeing her parents in this way. They were different enough already. But now... Well, now she would have to get used to a totally new level of different. But, she had to admit, it was a pretty cool one. Who wouldn’t want to discover that their family was from a secret magic world! Willow stood quietly, waiting for whatever was about to happen. Her father stepped in behind her.

Her mother cleared her throat. “A transference of energy has to take place, Willow, so I can pass the book on to you. It’s an introduction between you and the book – to enable you to read it.”

“Okay,” Willow breathed, her heart pounding. She had no idea what her mother was talking about. She watched, completely mesmerised as her mother slowly lowered the book from her chest, revealing the front cover. A large purple and blue crystal, enclosed by a green triangle, lay in the centre. “Wow,” she whispered. That seemed to be her catch-cry since entering the woods this morning; nothing else could better describe the day she was having. She read the strange words on the cover quietly to herself then looked up at her parents, confused.

“Understanding will come. But right now I want you to place your hand over the crystal,” Audrey instructed.

Willow nodded. It wasn’t often that she was stuck for words. She gently placed her hand over the crystal and a buzzing sensation went straight up her arm, not unlike the strange feelings she had felt in the woods early that morning.

With a reassuring smile, Audrey slipped one of her hands from beneath the book and placed it on top of Willow’s. Amazingly the book nudged upwards slightly. Her mother took her other hand away and let it drop to her side. Willow gasped. The book was floating in mid-air, all by itself.

“Now,” her mother said, “I want you to leave your hand over the crystal until I take my hand away. Ready?”

“I guess so,” Willow said nervously. She breathed in deeply, then slowly breathed out, but her heart wouldn’t stop thumping. What was about to happen? Was the book going to talk to them? Were they going to disappear inside the book? Maybe someone would step out from the book? She remembered a movie she had watched a few years earlier, *Inkheart*, where a book could create a world as you read it.

Willow looked over her shoulder at her father and he gave her a smile and a little nod that meant, “Face your mother.” She turned back around.

Audrey closed her eyes and took a calming breath. “*Ectu Tavis, Ruduxa Hedronym.*”

Willow stood with her mother, waiting. Long moments went by with no indication of anything unusual happening. Then all of a sudden her hand felt really warm and a light began to appear beneath it. She wanted to take her hand away to see what was going on, but her mother’s hand was still lightly holding hers in place over the crystal, and Audrey’s eyes were still closed. She waited, regarding her mother’s serene face, which looked quite beautiful in its trance-like state. After what was probably only a minute, but felt like hours to Willow, her mother’s eyes slowly reopened. Finally, thought Willow.

“I’m going to lift my hand now,” her mother said softly. “I want you to stand as motionless as possible while the Transfer takes place.”

Willow held her breath as her mother slowly raised her hand. Willow then lifted her own off the crystal. Almost immediately, a soft purple glowing mist began to weave out from the crystal towards her. Standing even more rigidly than before, her eyes followed the mist as it slowly encircled her. Her muscles gave a slight twitch at the unexpected movement of her hair. She could feel the purple mist gently tugging and lifting each strand as if it were tied to an invisible thread. One by one, the strands of her hair were delicately pulled until all of her hair was standing on end. Willow could only imagine how crazy she must look. The air around her became filled with heady scents. Flowers were quickly replaced by a woody

scent, followed by a sweet honey smell and then a burst of fresh mountain air. Over and over, they kept repeating in that order. She wanted to twitch her nose but didn't dare.

The mist wove around her quite methodically, pausing occasionally as if it was sensing something. She strained her eyes in every direction, tracking the mist as best she could. A warm and gentle pressure moved up and down her spine. She wished she had eyes at the back of her head right now, or at least some mirrors. A short time had passed when, all at once, the soft mist started retreating, gracefully releasing each strand of hair, layer by layer. With the final strand of hair back in place, the mist spiralled its way towards the book, re-entering the crystal and taking all of the wonderful scents in the room with it. A wisp of purple mist hovered briefly above the book then returned to the crystal. Willow's legs softened like jelly. It seemed to be finished. She waited a few moments just to be sure. "Is it over?" she whispered. "Can I move now?"

Her mother nodded, dabbing moisture from her eyes.

Willow breathed out a huge sigh and moved her body out of its locked position. "That was amazing – incredible!"

"You must appreciate... this ceremony isn't witnessed very often," her mother said in a soft voice.

"I can imagine!" Willow said.

"I'm so proud of you." Her mother leaned in and kissed the top of her head.

"Thanks, Mum. But I didn't do anything. I just stood there."

"That's not what your mother meant," her father said. "It's that you are now officially a member of the Keepers'

secret world.” Thomas hugged his daughter close. “Congratulations, darling.”

“Let’s sit,” her mother suggested, indicating the small table with four chairs. She held her hands out beneath the book and it slowly lowered itself into her hands again.

Willow sat between her parents watching the mist swirling inside the crystal. She could barely believe what had just happened, let alone everything else since getting out of bed only hours ago. This wasn’t some kind of fairy-tale encyclopedia or fantasy game manual, but a real, genuine magic book. She had, after all, just seen it do magic right in front of her.

“Every introduction is unique,” her mother said. “The mist – the energy of the book – responds to each individual differently.”

“It’s incredible.” The book looked much older than Willow had originally thought. She wiped her clammy hands across her thighs and gently touched the words ingrained in bright red letters against the worn brown leather. “*TriGamon Udat u Svetlo Imata*,” she read out awkwardly. “What does that mean?”

“Touch the crystal on the cover again.”

Placing a finger on the crystal, a white glow now replaced the purple mist, and something began to move inside. She leaned in closer and made out what could only be words and symbols entwining themselves, but none that she could recognise. “What’s happening?”

“Open the book,” her mother smiled.

Her father put a loving hand on her shoulder. “This is the real magic, Willow – watch.”

Willow opened the book and gawped. “The words are changing!”

“It’s written in a combination of ancient languages,” her mother explained, placing her hand delicately on the inside cover. “When you touch the crystal, the words change to that of the current reader’s language and when you’ve finished reading, the original coded language returns. Only Light Keeper and Helper families can read it. The crystal won’t interact with anyone else. It’s a security system of sorts.”

Willow watched as the words began to unravel. “This is so cool.”

“The first time I laid eyes on this Book,” her mother continued, “I thought it was the most wonderful thing I had ever seen... It opened up a whole new world, and I don’t just mean the Dream Keepers’ world. It taught me so many things – about myself – what I was capable of. I wasn’t Awakened, but I was inspired to nurture my love of archaeology instead. I acted on that dream and eventually became an archaeologist. I learnt to recognise opportunities when I saw them, and obstacles just turned into opportunities to see things differently, to get more creative.” Audrey gave her daughter a playful grin. “There was one time, early in my career, when I couldn’t get funding for a project from the usual sources. So I got together with a friend and organised a huge gala dinner for anyone who was interested – not just the inner circle of experts and donators, but for the general public too. You could say it was an early example of ‘crowd funding’. We gave a screen presentation explaining the potential of the project and offered visits to the site to any major investor if the project went ahead. Which it did, and all from the success of that dinner. Once you know about the effort involved in

storing and creating our dreams back on Earth, well, you learn not to waste those dreams.”

“Just another reason why I married your incredible mother,” Thomas added.

Audrey smiled at her husband. “He’s such a charmer.”

“Of course!” He lightly brushed his fingers across the bottom of the page. “We call this book the TriGamon. Every Light Keeper has one.”

“TriGamon,” Willow said, echoing her father’s pronunciation with the longer sound. “So that’s how you say it.” She was still watching the words change; she couldn’t tear her gaze away.

“And you know, not all of them are as old as this one. This one’s a real survivor,” he said. “It’s at least three hundred and fifty years old.”

“Wow. So are there many of these books?” she asked.

“Very few. Which is why they’re so precious,” her father said. “But we manage with what we’ve got. Any new Light Keeper family has to wait their turn for a permanent copy. And it’s no easy task crafting one of these books, even with the help of the Dream Keepers. This book is a collaboration of knowledge and magic dating back thousands of years. Every part of it has to be painstakingly reproduced with incredible accuracy through the formulas of sacred geometry, a branch of mathematics that can map the templates to ... just about everything, really. It’s the language of the universe.”

“Let me guess. You help out with the formulas, right?” she said.

“That’s my girl. Head like Mira,” he grinned.

“Huh? Who’s Mira?” she asked, looking up for the first time since the book was opened.

“You mean ‘what’s Mira?’ Only one of the most powerful computers in the world,” he said.

“Right...” Willow shook her head at him. “Thanks, Dad. You compare your only child to a bunch of wires and programmes.” She really wanted to start reading the page, but she could see the sparkle in her father’s eyes that appeared whenever he spoke of templates and formulas. Just as well his enthusiasm for his beloved mathematics had been implanted in her DNA too. “Okay! So tell me how it’s done.”

“Promise I’ll be brief,” he said with a wink. “First step: the Dream Keepers take a spark of intelligence born from the original book created in their world and then place it in a special container to keep it stable. Second step: it arrives here and we slow down the spark’s vibration by creating a compression field around it to make it more dense – but not too dense because we need the spark to retain its unique properties so the book can float and do all the other wonderful things it’s capable of. Then the spark is unified with the crystal on the front cover and voila: a book of magic and intelligence. There’s a whole lot more but we’ll leave that out for now. How’d I do?”

“That’s got to be your briefest explanation ever. I’m proud. And I kind of get what you just said, which is a bit spooky.”

“See? There’s no denying it: you’re my daughter.”

Willow turned back to the page and read the title out aloud. “*The Three Ways* – is that what TriGamon means?”

Her mother nodded.

“Walk of the Light Keepers,” she read next. Her eyes skimmed over the page, picking up on key words. *Welcome... knowledge... Ancients... duty... Doorways...* She slid her

hand over the thick parchment. Again the smell of incense filled her nostrils, though it was sweeter this time. The crinkling of the pages as she turned them made them sound old and important, as if they were carrying the knowledge of ancient secrets – which they really were!

“So what exactly are *The Three Ways*?” she asked.

Her mother softly ran her fingers over the words. “Well, for anything to happen in our world, three things must take place, and in this order: an inspired thought; an idea to create the inspired thought; and the combining of number one and two with action, thus bringing the inspired thought into reality.”

“Haven’t you just described something a bit like a dream brought to life?”

“Yes.” Audrey smiled at her daughter and adjusted her chair a little so she could face Willow better. “That’s the ideal. But what actually happens, over and over again, is that number one gets left out of the sequence.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well – many people tend to create only from ideas born out of their own, or someone else’s reaction to the world around them. They become problem solvers and the world is viewed as a set of equations to be worked out and manipulated.”

“Isn’t that normal? How else are you meant to make things happen?”

“Willow, let me put it another way. Imagine that you are following a chocolate cake recipe to bake a birthday cake. This recipe has been developed and tested by others over and over so that you can make it too. It’s a ‘normal’ cake recipe that everyone follows. Now, what if you wanted to make this

cake a little more special because it was for someone you really love? You think about this person while you are mixing the batter when suddenly, ‘out of nowhere’, you get the idea to add raspberries to your batter. Now your cake is no longer the original recipe. You didn’t need the raspberries to make the cake work, but you were inspired to create something different, inspired by someone special to you. You changed the world, just a little, by adding the raspberries.”

“Really, Mum, it’s a cake.”

“It’s an analogy, Willow.”

“I know. What you’re saying is that too many of us are making the same chocolate cake, following other peoples’ ideas. But to help things change, we need to create using inspired thought too. Right?”

Her mother nodded. “Yes. That’s why so many people keep chasing ‘the next best thing’ because they aren’t fulfilled long enough by anything they are doing, and that’s because of *how* they are doing it; they’re not deeply inspired by what they are dreaming up.”

“A bit like when a famous person wears something and then lots of people want to suddenly buy what they’re wearing,” Willow said.

Thomas leaned back in his chair. “Precisely. They want something because they’ve seen it on someone or in some form of social media. We’re not saying that fashion is evil; it’s more about understanding that the idea to buy a particular handbag or a pair of shoes can be triggered by the media and not your inspiration. On the other hand, the person who designed the bag or shoes may have been inspired to do so. We did warn you. There is so much more than you can imagine.”

“Peonie said something like that,” Willow remembered. “There is so much that your world does not see...”

“Only when you include all three steps can you have profound dreams and creations that endure, and then become inspirational in themselves,” Audrey continued. “Take the painting of the Mona Lisa, for instance. In itself, it’s just a painting of a woman with a mysterious smile. Yet to this day it is one of the most recognisable images in the world. And why? Partly because it was painted by da Vinci using new techniques, but primarily because people are fascinated by what’s behind that smile. The inspiration that da Vinci felt to paint this woman in such a way is just as powerful as the painting. It gives it depth. That’s why an original painting is worth so much. It gives the observer access to the artist and the energy of inspiration with it. A print or copy can’t do that in the same way.” Audrey regarded her daughter for a few moments. “I think that’s a good place to stop for now.”

Willow didn’t argue. “Is it okay if I take the TriGamon to my room? Can it leave the Keepers Safe?”

“Of course,” her mother said.

“The house is protected,” added her father. “It was the Transference that could have attracted unwanted attention. The book generates a lot of energy to do what it just did. We took double security measures – just to make sure.”

“Unwanted attention? What kind of unwanted attention? Who might...?”

“There’s lots of magic out there, Willow – and some of it we do our best to avoid. Where there’s light, there’s always dark,” he said.

Willow fixed her eyes on her father. “You’re saying there’s dark magic out there too?”

Thomas regarded her thoughtfully. “Hmm, how can I put this...? It’s not that magic in itself is dark. Magic just ‘is’. It’s more about how the magic is used.”

“Okay,” she said. “So how good are we, the Light Keepers, I mean, at dealing with dark magic?”

“Pretty good,” he said confidently. “We’ve had centuries of practice dealing with the Dark Forces – that’s another reason why we have our rules.”

“Good to know,” Willow said. She closed the TriGamon and stood up. “Wow, it’s really heavy.”

“It is,” her mother agreed.

“So what do I do to make it float?” she asked, visualising the book drifting upstairs to her room.

“We don’t ‘make it’ do anything,” her mother responded with a trace of disapproval in her voice. “The TriGamon is not in service to us. It’s here to assist us. And it only floats when we’re in the Safe or performing the Transference.”

“Normal way it is, then,” Willow said briskly, though she was a bit disappointed that she couldn’t command it up the stairs.

Thomas reopened the entrance with his hand while Willow watched closely.

“It’s the symbol from the TriGamon! That’s how you made the opening,” she said.

“Well done.” They all stepped into the hallway and Thomas picked up the painting and hung it back on the wall. “Now, I know I don’t need to harp on about the rules, but so you are fully aware, the TriGamon must not leave the Cottage unless on official duties, and it can never be shown to anyone outside of our magic community. Got that?”

Willow nodded.

“And always close it when you are finished. Never leave it lying around.”

“Understood.” Willow adjusted her hold on the cumbersome book and turned to leave.

“Enjoy, Willow,” her mother said. “And be patient.”

She was near the top of the stairs when she remembered that she wanted to ask her mother where to put the book overnight. As she reached the bottom step, she hesitated, hearing a despairing tone in her mother’s voice from behind the closed study door. Very quietly, she moved in closer.

“I can’t believe this is happening,” her mother said in a low voice. “She’s so young, Thomas! I know this is bigger than us and the timing is as it should be – but she’s only twelve!”

I’m nearly thirteen, thought Willow.

“I know,” she heard her father say. “But if anyone can do it, she can. She’s smart and she’s got a good head on her shoulders. We always knew it was a strong possibility that she’d Awaken, and while it feels too soon for us, the Ancients wouldn’t have been able to Awaken her if she wasn’t ready or capable. She just needs to grow up a little, and this will no doubt speed things up.”

Yay, Dad! Willow’s grip on the book tightened.

“You’re right, I know,” her mother continued in that low voice, and Willow had to strain to hear. “It’s just... this is such a huge thing for anyone to take on. I’m finding it hard to understand why they would choose her at this age.”

Thomas shrugged. “Something’s happened out there for the Protocols to change. We’ll just have to see how it plays out.”

Willow turned as quietly as she could, praying the floorboards wouldn't creak, and tiptoed back towards the stairs. Her question about where to store the Book would have to wait until dinner. With the TriGamon clutched to her chest, she climbed the stairs and wondered what huge thing could be going on out there in the Universe for her to have been Awakened right now.