



The
Wizard
of Dark Street

SHAWN THOMAS ODYSSEY

The
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of Dark Street

AN OONA GRATE MYSTERY



SHAWN THOMAS ODYSSEY

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we bring stories to life

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Summary: In 1877, in an enchantment shop on the last of the Faerie roads linking New York City to the Land of the Fey, just after twelve-year-old Oona opts to relinquish her apprenticeship to her uncle, the Wizard, and become a detective, her uncle is stabbed, testing her skills.

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For Anne, Barbara, and Shari.
The magic is real.



Be sure to check out Shawn Thomas Odyssey's mysterious performances and curiously concocted music videos, all created specifically for this book, at www.thewizardofdarkstreet.com.

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Acknowledgments

On the fourth of November, 1876, the Wizard of Dark Street placed the following advertisement in the classified section of the *New York Times*:

WANTED: ONE WIZARD'S APPRENTICE.
Must be punctual, literate, courageous, clever, imaginative, adventurous, mysterious, open-minded, openhearted, intuitive, and above all else must be trusted with some of the most secret and powerful knowledge in this world or any other.
No experience necessary.
Please send résumé to:
Pendulum House, Number 19
Dark Street, on the Drift
New York, New York (Little London Town)

Within three days of the advertisement's publication, the New York City post office received a grand total of 3,492 letters addressed to Pendulum House, Number 19. To the postmaster's great displeasure and utter vexation, no Dark Street could be found on any of the regular route maps, city plans, or postal grids. Nor could anyone recall ever having heard of a Little London Town located anywhere within New York City. The letters were stamped ADDRESS UNKNOWN and returned to their original senders.

Six Months Later



CHAPTER ONE

Oona and Deacon

(Monday, May 14, 1877)

Magic is a fickle thing,” said twelve-year-old Oona Crate. “I prefer things that work.” Deacon stood upon her shoulder, silent and foreboding. Black as midnight and glossy as in the magnificent enchanted raven ruffled his feathers as the two of them peered curiously through the window of The Dark Street Enchantment Shop, the storefront where Oona’s uncle sold his latest bits of magical wonder. Behind the shop’s cobwebby windows could be found all manner of mysterious things: charmed feather dusters that giggled when dusting, and sponges that gargled a tune. Even burning lamps and never-melting ice—two of the Wizard’s best sellers—lined the shelves, ready for purchase and gift wrapping. But Oona had little interest in entering the shop today. Nor did anyone else, it would seem.

The storekeeper, Mr. Alpert, a grizzled old man with an enormous overbite and glasses as large as round as tea saucers, sat idly at the front counter, his magnified eyelids drooping as if he might doze off at any moment. From the look of the empty store, one might begin to think that magic was about as exciting as watching fruit dry on a windowsill. Not very exciting at all. And quite honestly, the store itself looked in dire need of a good paint job.

Next door, however, a handsome, newly painted storefront stood squarely between the enchantment shop and the shoemaker’s shop on the other side. With its doors open wide, the shop in the middle was a bustle of activity. A large sign over the shiny front window advertised: MR. WILBER’S WORLD OF MODERN WONDERS. Shoppers and lookie-loos alike jostled to get out of one another’s way as they pressed through the doors of Mr. Wilber’s fantastic shop, which sold everything from the latest modern toothbrushes and bicycles to photographic equipment and spectacular newfangled waffle irons. Nearly any technologically advanced gadget to have come out in the present year of 1877 could be found at Mr. Wilber’s World of Modern Wonders.

Mr. Wilber, a gawky toothpick of a man with a flat face and highly pronounced Adam’s apple, never looked bored, such as Mr. Alpert so often did, and Oona supposed that this was because Mr. Wilber was far too busy trying to keep up on the demands of his technology-craving customers.

Oona sighed. The day was bright and the air clean. The smell of spring leaves and dust on cobblestones permeated every shadowy corner of the street. Gazing at her reflection in the enchantment shop window, Oona straightened the lace-trimmed bonnet on her head before running her fingers through the front of her hair. The hair had grown little, if at all, since the incident with the guillotine the previous night, and she couldn’t keep from readjusting her headpiece to flatten her hair down—a near impossible proposition.

“You’ve got to be more careful!” That had been her uncle’s advice on the subject of her nearly getting her head chopped off. His words had been direct, and his tone uncharacteristically stern. “I will only agree to this detective business of yours if you promise not to go getting yourself into such terrible trouble. I mean it, Oona! Igregious Goodfellow is a scoundrel, a thief, and a homicidal maniac.”

all rolled into one. You're incredibly lucky that it was only your hair that got caught in that horrible man's guillotine. You should never have followed him to his secret hideout. The moment you discovered he was the Horton Family Jewelry Store thief, you should have left matters to the police."

Oona had rolled her eyes at that. Surely her uncle knew better than to place his faith in the police. For nearly three years, ever since Head Inspector White had taken over the top position, the Dark Street Police Department had become an utter joke in the eyes of both law-abiding citizens and criminals alike. It was no secret that crime on the street was at an all-time high.

"You are lucky that you managed to slip out of those ropes before that madman released the blade," her uncle had continued in a stern voice, "and that Deacon got to the police as quickly as he did, or ..." The Wizard sighed, shaking his head. "You are still a child, Oona. And you are not your father."

Those words had hurt. Oona had needed to bite her tongue to keep from telling the Wizard that her father was not her father either, and that her father was dead, buried six feet under the ground in the Dark Street Cemetery. But why bring that up? It would only have upset him.

Her uncle may not have been the greatest magician who had ever held the highly honored position of Wizard of Dark Street—some even criticized his magical abilities as downright mediocre—but he was surely the greatest uncle and guardian a girl like Oona could have hoped for. And besides, he had, after all, agreed to let her out of her magical obligations so that she might better pursue her true interest in detective work. What more could she have asked from him? So Oona had agreed, no more snooping around deadly criminals ... if she could help it.

Presently, she turned her gaze north, and before her lay all of Dark Street, the last of the thirteen Faerie roads, connecting the World of Man to the fabled Land of Faerie. A broad cobblestone avenue more than thirteen miles long, the street stretched out in a continuous line, a world unto itself, unbroken by cross streets or intersections. The buildings rose up from the edges of the sidewalks like crooked teeth crammed into a mouth too small to fit. They listed and leaned against one another for support, giving the impression that if one of the buildings should ever fall down, then all of the others would quickly follow, toppling one by one like dominoes.

She considered the street for a moment, this ancient world between worlds, with its enormous Glass Gates at one end and the equally vast Iron Gates at the other. And yet of these two gateway streets only the Iron Gates ever opened, and then only once a night, upon the stroke of midnight, when the massive doors would swing inward on hinges as big as houses, opening for a single minute upon the sprawling, ambitious city of New York. For the amount of time it took a second hand to travel around the face of a clock, the Iron Gates remained open to any who should choose to venture across the enchanted threshold. Few ever did. Few ever even noticed.

In a city such as New York, even at midnight, the people were too busy getting from one place to another to observe anything out of the ordinary. And those who did see the street suddenly appear out of nowhere might simply pretend that it was not there at all. They might turn their faces, and when they looked again, the street would be gone, and they would tell themselves that it had been a trick of the light. Nothing more. The children of New York would surely have been more apt to see the street than adults, but of course, at midnight most good little children were tucked safely away into their beds, dreaming of stranger places still.

But if an outsider *had* ventured through the gates, what he or she would have found was a place not so different than the city from which they had just come. A place filled with everyday people going about their everyday lives—lives of simple pleasures and skullduggery alike. They might first notice how the majority of residents on the street carried on their conversations in various British accents instead of American ones, and how some of the inhabitants referred to the street as Little London Town. A visitor might then observe how, no matter the season in New York, freezing cold or

blisteringly hot, the temperature on Dark Street would be breezy and mild, just cool enough for a jacket or shawl. Or it might be pouring rain on the street, yet New York would be dry as a bone. And the peculiarities would not stop there, for upon closer examination the outsider would find that, here the shadows appeared slightly darker, so that they might think twice before stepping on them, for fear of falling in. They would discover a world where the blue of the sky in daytime appeared almost purple, and by night the stars shone bright enough to read by. It was a place as ancient as the wind, where candlestick trees replaced light posts, and street clocks told jokes as well as time.

Yet to the sensitive tourist, even more striking than the discovery of new and enchanted things was there the subtle sense of magic lost—a street that had forgotten more magic than drops of rain had fallen to the earth. It was an ancient road, from time before time. Since before the construction of the Iron and Glass Gates, before the building of Pendulum House, and the naming of the first Wizard, and even before the great Magicians of Old fought their terrible war against the armies of the mighty Queen of Faerie, Dark Street existed. In one form or another it had always been there, a bridge between the fantastic and the ordinary, between magic and reason, between the Land of the Fay and the city that never sleeps.

Oona returned her attention to the enchantment shop window and stared for a moment at her reflection in the wobbly glass. Large green eyes with thick, curling lashes blinked as they took in the heart shape of her face, and the full-skirted, gray dress that cinched in around her waist. Really, her uncle had been right. What had she been thinking to believe that she, a slight four-foot-three-inch-tall girl, could ever have hoped to apprehend a dastardly lunatic like Igregious Goodfellow, the Hortons Family Jewelry Store thief? At twelve years old she was still a child in the eyes of Dark Street society, and yet her birthday was only three months away. Thirteen was a special age for a girl on Dark Street. It was the age when she became a lady proper, the age at which many girls entered the Academy of Fine Young Ladies. It was a prospect that Oona had no interest in. She preferred to continue her independent studies with Deacon. The raven was, in her eyes, the best teacher on Dark Street.

As it nearly always did, the thought of her birthday sent a shock of guilt through her, bringing with it a wave of sadness that seemed to make the daylight dim slightly, and turn the soft breeze to a chill. The image of her mother's wondrous face drifted through her mind like a distant ghost—those great green eyes so similar to Oona's own, with a bright, radiant smile like a gleam of sunlight—another image, this one of Oona's baby sister, too small and too young even to walk, clapping her tiny hands in her mother's arms. The image was burned into Oona's memory like a cruel scar: the mother and the baby beneath an enormous fig tree, its leaves rustling in the breeze as the magic lights danced around them, swirling faster, and faster, and then ...

Oona quickly shoved the thought away. She swallowed a lump in her throat and thrust her finger into the air. "I prefer science, Deacon! Not spells, and wands, and magic rings. Give me facts. Give me logic. Give me the most incomprehensible riddle ... the most complicated problem. That is what I love."

Her tone was markedly serious, and her London Town accent both highly educated and refined.

Deacon dug his talons into her shoulder, ruffling his thick black feathers as the two of them began to stroll up Dark Street in the direction of Pendulum House. Horse-drawn carriages clattered and clacked up and down the broad avenue, and the sidewalks bustled with pedestrians, all of them hurrying this way or that, hardly taking notice of the girl with the chopped hair and the raven on her shoulder. Surely they had all seen her before. She was the Wizard's niece after all. His apprentice. More than that, however, she was the so-called Natural Magician: a freak of nature so rare that only every hundred years only one might be born.



“You are very special, Oona,” the Wizard had explained to her nearly five years ago on her first day as his new apprentice. Several months past her eighth birthday, she’d listened eagerly to the gray-bearded man she so revered, her father’s older brother. “I myself am what is called a *Learned Magician*. Like nearly all the magicians who have ever lived, I have had to learn magic through decades of hard scholarship and training. Someone like myself must *force* magic to do my will. But a *Natural Magician* such as you, Oona, is a human being born with the extraordinary magical powers of a faerie. No one quite knows why. Indeed, some believe that Natural Magicians have active faerie blood in their veins, but so far as I know, that is but a rumor. And yet, unlike faeries, who are born with the instincts and know-how to control their spectacular magic, Natural Magicians must *learn* to handle their powers. They must be taught. You must be trained.”

And Oona had trained. For nearly two years the Wizard had schooled her. She lived with him in the great Pendulum House, assisting him, absorbing all she could, honing her skills so that one day she might become the next great Wizard, which was the title given to the head of all magical activity on Dark Street, and the protector of the World of Man.

“What good is being the head of magical activity,” Oona had once asked the Wizard, “when no one on Dark Street does any magic? There aren’t any magicians anymore, Uncle, except for you and me.” He had read in the *Encyclopedia Arcanna* that Learned Magicians used to number in the thousands, both on Dark Street and in the World of Man.”

The Wizard nodded. “Yes, but that was nearly five hundred years ago. After the end of the Great Faerie War—after Oswald the Great closed the Glass Gates, cutting Dark Street off from Faerie—the magic began to weaken. People eventually lost interest in the old ways, and, as it is said, the world moved on. You are correct, Oona, that there is less interest in magic than there ever has been before. Some would even call magic impractical. But there are still those out there who might find some bit of spell work in a book and attempt to use it. There are still innumerable magical objects out there, many of them faerie-made bits of mischief left over from five hundred years ago. It is the Wizard’s job to handle such occurrences when they arise, and of course to protect the World of Man, should the Glass Gates ever be broken and the Land of Faerie once again be opened. It is an important job we do in keeping magic alive. Do you believe that?”

On that day, which now seemed like a lifetime ago, Oona had nodded that she did believe. But that would all change. It would change a year and a half later, the very day she’d turned ten years old, when the sudden and hard truth that magic could not be trusted proved itself to Oona once and for all.



Presently, Oona paused to examine one of the famed Dark Street candlestick trees. An oddity like no other, the trees lined the shopping district of the boulevard like living lampposts, their flames flickering faintly against the bright light of day. Between two of the branches, a plump little spider worked tirelessly in the late-morning breeze. Oona reached into one of her dress pockets. Though she may not have possessed the most fashionable sort of dresses, Oona found the multitude of pockets sewn into the folds of her skirts to be quite handy. They allowed her to carry around all sorts of useful objects: a needle stuck in a bit of cork, a small ball of string, red phosphorus matches, a bit of metal wire she’d used to pick the lock on Igregious Goodfellow’s hideout, paper and pencil, and many other functional things that never failed to come in handy.

She removed a small magnifying glass and used it to study the web. The spider worked away seemingly unaware of Oona’s huge eye leaning in close to observe. The strangeness of a tree that sprouted candles instead of fruit did little to capture Oona’s interest, yet the complex pattern and dazzling intricacy of the spider’s web drew her curiosity in like iron shavings to a magnet; each strand

of the web was a trap, yet also a clue; each clue connected to another, all of them spiraling into the center, where the core of the mystery resided.

It's beautiful, Oona thought. Meticulous and reliable.

At last she pulled away from the web and looked at the magnifying glass itself. She held it up, watching the sun glint off the gold rim. The well-worn handle was lacquered oak, and the two-and-half-inch-wide glass was flawless. This had been her father's very own magnifying glass, and sometimes when she looked through it she could imagine that she was seeing through his eyes. It was possibly the dearest possession she owned.

She pocketed the glass and started up the street once more, tossing her hand in a dismissive gesture. "So, Deacon, it would seem that the day I have been waiting for has finally arrived. Tonight is the Choosing." At just the mention of it, Oona could feel her heartbeat quicken and her palms go wet, though whether from nerves or excitement she could not have said. Rubbing her sticky hands together, she said: "Tonight my uncle chooses my replacement."

Deacon bristled on her shoulder. "Hmm" was his only reply.

Oona gave him a sideways glance. "I take it you are not pleased. Tell me, Deacon. Why should I be the least bit upset about giving up my position as Uncle Alexander's apprentice?"

Deacon made a cawing sound as if this was all he intended to add to the conversation, but finally he spoke.

"Perhaps you should be upset because you've trained for the position since you were eight years old, the youngest apprentice ever." His tone of voice was that of someone who undoubtedly has had the same conversation countless times before. "Perhaps because—despite your outright refusal to perform any magic whatsoever—you are the most competent and informed talent to have held the position in over a hundred years. Or perhaps because your uncle is so desperate to find someone to replace you that six months ago he placed an advertisement in the *New York Times*. It's simply unheard of."

"But don't you see, Deacon?" Oona said. "This is the perfect opportunity for me to start my dream."

"I take it you are speaking of The Dark Street Detective Agency?"

"It does have a nice ring to it, don't you think?"

Deacon cocked his head to one side. "It is rather plain, if you ask me, but it is your dream, not mine. And I must confess, I don't understand how finding lost puppies could possibly be any more exciting than performing complicated magic."

"But that's just the thing!" Oona said so loudly that several pedestrians glanced in her direction before continuing on their way. "At least in finding lost puppies there is a point to be accomplished," she said. "A sequence of events happens, and I am able to follow those events through a series of clues. That, Deacon, is true purpose! What use is there in floating teacups and silly love potions?"

"There is more to magic than that, and you know it," Deacon said. "What about the great Magicians of Old?"

Oona shook her head. "Ancient history."

"But I myself am a product of magic," Deacon insisted. "Your uncle created me as a present for your eleventh birthday, and there is nothing silly about me."

Oona raised a playful eyebrow at him. "I sometimes wonder why my uncle created a raven encyclopedia for me, rather than an owl. Owls are such noble creatures ... if only in appearance. Or perhaps a magpie, which could better understand the emotions of a girl. Or even ... a rook."

"A rook?" Deacon bristled, ruffling his feathers indignantly. "A rook couldn't hold half a haiku in its pea-size brain," he continued, "let alone the entire *Encyclopedia Arcana*, *The Complete Oxford English Dictionary*, and *The Dark Street Who's Who: 36 B.C. to Present*. There is no other bird in a

the world more intelligent than a raven. You are simply taking your present frustrations out on me.”

Oona nodded. It was true. Deacon was a wealth of information. The *Encyclopedia Arcanna* was perhaps the most comprehensive set of texts to be found on nearly all things magical, and the dictionary came in quite handy, especially when she was writing angry letters to the Dark Street Council about the stupidity of the police department. But it was the *Who’s Who* that Oona found to be the most fascinating book in Deacon’s memory, because the *Who’s Who* was a set of reference books that briefly described the lives of nearly every inhabitant of Dark Street, alive or dead. It was truly handy to have around. And in spite of her baited words, Oona was quite certain that Deacon had become far more to her than just some novelty pet—a bird that could talk. He was unique, there was no denying that, as there were no other talking birds like him to be found anywhere in all of the world so far as Oona knew, but he was more than just that. By all accounts, he was a true friend, and after nearly two years of his company, she could not imagine life without him.

The two of them walked on in silence for several minutes before coming to a stop in front of an empty lot. The buildings on this part of the street were so crooked and crowded together—with shops below and apartment houses above—that this sudden empty space between the buildings seemed almost startling to behold. In the center of the vacant lot stood a barren mound of dirt. Flanked by a theater on one side and an apothecary on the other, the unsightly hill rose up several feet from the sidewalk, where a leafless, gnarled-looking tree grew at its top like a twisted claw. A twelve-foot wall of crumbly stones cut across the back of the lot, and Oona felt a shiver run down her arms.

“Take this, for instance,” she said. “Witch Hill. It is a complete mystery waiting to be solved. How many witches live inside? What do they do in there? Do they work magic, or are they simply called witches because people fear them? No one knows. Why is it that when one of the witches comes out, it is always one of the girls, and never a full-grown witch? And of course, the most pressing question: Why do they not plant a more appealing tree atop of their home, such as an apple tree or a nice willow?”

“According to the *Encyclopedia Arcanna*,” Deacon said, “the original witches of Witch Hill were once highly active magicians on Dark Street. They were called the Sisterhood of the Witch, but that was hundreds of years ago, and when the Glass Gates were shut, they all moved underground. The following generations all stayed there. The entrance to the hill appears to be enchanted, so that whenever one of them does come out, no one can see where she came from.”

“Yes, yes, I know all of this,” Oona said, and then began to sing the lyrics to a traditional Dark Street children’s rhyme.

*The witches moved beneath the hill
And to this day they live there still
What they do, you’ll never know
You’ll never see them once they’ve grown
For only girls are seen up top
Upon the street and in the shops
A mystery that is worth unearthing
How the witches keep a-birthing
All alone, a woman’s clan
Without the benefit of man*

Oona paused a moment before adding: “I tell you, Deacon, sometimes I believe that this street is full of mysteries that I should like to—”

But a sudden fit of shouting cut her short. Oona whirled around, searching for whoever was making such an awful racket. Peering across the street, her eyes widened as they took in the scene. She shook her head at first, not understanding, and then, like the unveiling of some strange new work of art, the mystery spread out before her, opening its darkened doors and inviting her in.



The first thing she noticed was an enormous top hat taking up most of the sidewalk across the street. It stood nearly seven feet tall and sat at the base of the vast granite steps in front of the Museum of Magical History. The hat appeared to be carved out of stone, and Oona guessed it to be part of some effort to draw people inside the museum. Immense as it was, the museum was a seldom-visited place and it could be safely said that if modern-day magic could not capture the public's interest, the certainly the history of magic was even less likely to do so.

The steps to the museum were usually as empty as a poor man's belly, and yet today, a tall, gaunt-looking man with a waxed mustache stood on the topmost step. Stranger still, the man appeared to be having some sort of argument with someone, except that there was no one nearby for him to be arguing with. The fingers of his left hand clenched tightly around a folded red umbrella, while his right hand waved wildly in the air. Oona could hear the peculiar man shouting something, but she couldn't make out the words.

The man slowly began to descend the steps, pointing at some invisible person with the tip of the red umbrella. He was halfway down the stone staircase when Oona asked: "Who is that madman, Deacon?"

Deacon peered across the street. "According to the Dark Street *Who's Who*, his name is Hector Grimsbee. He was an actor, a member of the Dark Street Theater until just last year when a scandal got him kicked out. It had something to do with a sandbag and a director's head. The *Who's Who* also mentions that he has been blind since birth."

"Blind since birth?" Oona asked. Her heart lurched as she watched the man make his way back up several of the stone stairs, his arms continuing to flail in all directions. "That's quite dangerous. Are you who is he arguing with?"

"I haven't a clue, though perhaps—" But a sharp cry cut Deacon short. A woman's shriek.

Oona's head jerked around. She saw no one in obvious distress: only a scattering of pedestrians, many of whom, like her, were looking around to discover who had screamed. Perhaps it had not been a woman's scream after all, she considered, and then wondered if the sound had perchance come from Hector Grimsbee, and she simply hadn't realized it. But when she turned back to the museum, the blind man was suddenly gone. She scanned the sidewalk in both directions, but Grimsbee was nowhere to be seen.

"Did you see that?" Oona asked.

"What?" asked Deacon.

"The blind man on the steps. He just disappeared."

"Nonsense," Deacon said. "There are no records of a person being able to simply disappear. At least not in recent times. Such arcane magic as invisibility and human teleportation vanished with the last of the Magicians of Old nearly five hundred years ago."

"Then where is he?" Oona asked. "I only looked away for a few seconds."

"He must have gone in the museum," Deacon reasoned.

Oona hesitated to agree. It seemed unlikely that the blind man could have moved so fast, but after a moment's consideration, she nodded. "That seems to be the only logical explanation."

A second shout, this one a clear cry for help, pulled her attention to the dress shop next door. The

shop was squashed between a handbag store to the left and the museum on the right. A sign above the window read: MADAME IREE'S BOUTIQUE FOR FINE LADIES.

A girl of Oona's own age, or perhaps a little older, stood in the center of the arched doorway. Her golden hair fell down the sides of her cheeks in curling locks. She wore a tightly corseted dress with red and gold stripes, and she was dazzling to behold. Though Oona had never met the girl before, she recognized her to be Isadora Iree, the daughter of Madame Iree, the most famous dressmaker on all Dark Street.

"Help!" Isadora shouted. "Police! Madame Iree's has been robbed! The dresses are all gone! Help!"

Oona's heart skipped a beat, and her eyes widened with excitement. "A case, Deacon!"

And then just as quickly, her mouth turned to a frown. Head Inspector White was striding purposefully up the sidewalk, his black coattails billowing out behind him, his pale white face like a reflector in the sunlight.

"Young lady!" the inspector shouted. "I am the police. Now stop shouting 'help,' or I'll have to cite you for unnecessary repetition."

Oona's hands flew to her hips. "There is no such law," she said, though not loud enough to be heard from across the street.

Deacon, who knew Oona all too well, said: "Perhaps we should let the police handle this ... alone. Remember what you promised your uncle."

Oona's forehead wrinkled above her nose. "What I told Uncle Alexander, Deacon, is that I would keep away from deadly criminals. How many deadly criminals do you think steal dresses?"

"Any criminal can be deadly," Deacon said.

Oona paused. There was certainly truth to Deacon's words. Hadn't her own father been killed while attempting to apprehend a pair of thieves? And *he* had been the Head Inspector of the Dark Street Police Department—Inspector White's very own predecessor. Torn between keeping her promise to her uncle and making sure Inspector White didn't bungle the case, an idea popped into her head like a mischievous sprite.

She grinned as she stepped from the curb to cross the street. "I believe I will keep my promise, Deacon. It's just that ... Well, there is the little matter of the masquerade."

Deacon shook his head, clearly confused at the sudden change of subject. "The Dark Street Annual Midnight Masquerade?" he replied. "You are referring to the dance held at Oswald Park?"

She swerved to step around several potholes in the street. "You have deduced correctly, Deacon."

"I don't understand," Deacon said. "The ball is tomorrow night, and you've never expressed an interest in attending ... not this year or any other."

Oona shook her head. "You see, Deacon, you know nothing of the problems of a girl. Nothing at all. I've already quite made up my mind. I *will* be attending the masquerade."

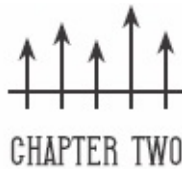
"And when did you come to that decision?" Deacon asked, though he sounded as if he already knew the answer.

"Why ... just now," she replied innocently, and then added: "But there is one tiny problem."

"And that is?" Deacon asked dryly.

Oona sighed. "It seems I have absolutely nothing to wear!"

With that, Oona strode through the arched doorway into Madame Iree's Boutique for Fine Ladies.



The Missing Dresses

Four well-dressed ladies huddled close together in the front room of Madame Iree's Boutique for Fine Ladies. They stood near the sign in the window that read: OPEN BY APPOINTMENT ONLY.

A single dress stood in the window. It was a small dress, clearly made for the likes of someone smaller than Oona, but all the same, the moment she entered the shop, the dress drew in her gaze. The fabric seemed to shine with a light all its own, and if Oona had been asked to describe the color, she would not have been able to choose. One moment it appeared a shimmery blue, the next a dazzling shade of green, and for an instant Oona found herself wishing that the dress weren't so small, otherwise she should very much like to have it.

Deacon adjusted his position on her shoulder, and she pulled her gaze away from the dress, back to the shop.

Madame Iree was a tall, matronly woman with a prodigious bosom. She wore the most opulent jewel-studded dress Oona had ever seen, and she stood apart from the other ladies, looking as if she might faint at any moment. On her head she wore a hat that sprouted so many exotic feathers, it looked like it might take flight at any moment. Her picturesque face was lined with concern, and Isadora stood at her mother's side, patting her hand, trying to console her.

Oona took in the shop. For years it had been a fancy of hers to venture into Madame Iree's and to see some of the most beautiful dresses on all of Dark Street. But Madame Iree was extremely selective of her clientele. The shop was not at all what Oona had expected. The front room was set up for tea service, with two cloth-covered tables surrounded by chairs near the front window. A glass case containing various accessories stood near one red-and-gold-striped wall, and an open doorway at the far end of the room led into another room at the back. The air smelled of lavender potpourri.

"What has happened?" Oona asked.

Inspector White's impossibly white face poked out of the doorway at the back of the store and was quickly followed by his lanky body. "I'll be asking the questions!" he said as he stepped through the threshold, nearly tripping over his own feet in the process. He swept his suspicious gaze around the room. "What sort of illegal activity has been going on in here?"

"We were having tea," said Isadora. "I already explained that to you, Inspector, before you were back there to see the showroom."

"Tea?" said the inspector. "And do you expect me to believe that?"

"Well ... yes," said Isadora, pointing toward the empty cups on the tables.

"Hmm," the inspector intoned. "I thought this was a dress shop, not a tea shop."

Madame Iree looked all at once highly irritated on top of being distraught. "We sometimes have tea here. But that is not the point. Inspector, someone has stolen my dresses!"

The inspector noticed Oona standing near the front entrance. His eyes narrowed. "What are you

doing here, Miss Crate? I've told you before to stay out of police affairs."

Oona swallowed hard, but the lie was already upon her lips. "I was shopping for a dress for the masquerade tomorrow night."

And making sure you don't bungle this case, she thought to herself.

"You?" said Isadora Iree. She released her mother's hand and cast a long look over Oona. The girl did not appear impressed. Oona cleared her throat nervously as Isadora's disapproving eyes came to stop at the top of her head. Oona adjusted her bonnet in an attempt to flatten down the front of her chopped hair. Isadora smirked. "I'm afraid you cannot shop here. Not unless you are a student or an alumna of the Academy of Fine Young Ladies." She considered Oona for another moment, her pretty little nose squinching up as if Oona were giving off an undesirable smell. "Which I'm guessing you are not. I mean, just look at that hair."

Several of the older ladies tutted their agreement, and Oona could feel her face flush with embarrassment. Before she could find a suitable reply, however, Isadora added: "In case you didn't know, the word *alumna* means a female who has graduated from the academy."

Oona frowned. She knew what the word *alumna* meant, and she also knew that Madame Iree sold dresses exclusively to the academy and its lifelong members. It was for this reason that Oona had never entered the shop before today. Presently, she looked around at the other ladies' faces and began to wonder if she actually wanted to offer her help at all. Noses raised, they stared at her with an air of both surprise and contempt, as if she had soiled their beloved store by simply stepping inside. She was nearly ready to turn right around and leave them all to the idiocy of Inspector White—*Who cares about their stupid dresses, anyway?* she thought—when Deacon spoke from her shoulder.

"When did the theft occur?" he asked.

"It is strange enough that your bird can talk, Miss Crate," said the inspector, "but I will not have him asking ridiculous questions at my crime scene. Is that understood?" He turned back to Madame Iree. "Now ... when did it happen?"

"Sometime in the last hour," said Madame Iree. "We were all out here in the front room having tea." She pointed toward the door at the back of the store. "The door to the showroom was locked shut as it always is when I am not showing a dress. And then around two o'clock, Isadora wanted to show the ladies the gown she would be wearing tomorrow night to the Midnight Masquerade. But when she unlocked the showroom door, I found ... I found ..."

She gestured weakly toward the door. "The dresses are all gone. They were all in there an hour ago when I locked the door, but now ... oh, dear ... now the only dress left is the one in the window."

The ladies all turned to admire the dress in the window, and for a long moment the room was silent as if the dress had somehow hypnotized them. Madame Iree breathed a deep sigh. "At least that one was spared."

"It truly is a masterpiece, Mother," said Isadora. "I wish it weren't so small, or I should like to wear it to the masquerade."

"I told you, Isadora," said Madame Iree, quite irritably, "the glinting cloth I used to construct this dress was the last remnant of a six-hundred-year-old faerie-enchanted fabric. It was one of a kind, and there was only enough cloth to make a dress for a younger girl. Certainly younger than anyone at the academy." Madame Iree sighed. "That is why I placed it in the window. It is no more than a showpiece, I'm afraid. Oh, what I would give for a bit of turlock root, so that I might grow young and wear the dress, even for an hour." The four older ladies gave a collective sigh, as if this idea were quite appealing to them as well.

"Turlock root is a mystical root known for its powers of reversing the aging process," Deacon said, apparently unable to keep from dispensing his vast knowledge of the magical world. "But it grows only in the Land of Faerie."

Oona was sorely tempted to point out to him that there was turlock root growing in the inner garden at Pendulum House, along with countless other mystical plants native solely to the Land of Faerie. But then again, the Wizard's house was the only structure outside of Faerie that had been built upon imported Faerie soil. Some of the plants were quite powerful, and highly dangerous, which was why the inner garden was kept secret from anyone other than the Wizard and his apprentice.

"Did I not tell you to keep that bird quiet?" Inspector White nearly shouted.

Madame Iree slapped an open palm to her chest. "All my precious dresses, gone!"

The four ladies fell in around the dressmaker like a flock of chickens consoling a mother hen.

The inspector snapped his fingers, a look of sudden realization flashing across his face. He turned dramatically on his heel and made his way back into the showroom. While everyone else was distracted with consoling Madame Iree, Oona seized the moment. She quickly crossed through the front of the shop and stopped in the doorway to the next room.

Several ever-burning lamps hung against the walls, illuminating the showroom in a ghostly light while a beautiful crystal chandelier hung unlit from the center of the ceiling. At present, the room was nothing more than a gathering place for naked mannequins. It was a strange and almost eerie sight, if the space were a showroom for invisible dresses.

The floor was polished wood, gleaming and flawless, and in the center of the room, a single white candle lay conspicuously tipped over on its side. A long mirror hung against the wall to the right, and Oona could see the back of the inspector's black jacket in the reflection, his split coattails moving in sync with his lanky legs as he moved about the room. In front of the mirror stood a raised platform where the customers could stand and admire themselves as Madame Iree made alterations. The inspector stepped onto the platform and stared fixedly at his own ghostly reflection.

Oona ignored him. She was looking at the single candle on the floor. It seemed a curious thing quite out of place, and yet it was no real mystery where it had come from. Her gaze rose to the crystal chandelier, which hung from the high wood-paneled ceiling. She counted seven unlit candles, and one empty candleholder. Clearly the candle had fallen ... but why? She was about to propose the question to the inspector, but at the moment, Inspector White appeared quite occupied with his own reflection.

Oona could only shake her head as she watched him attempt to straighten his tie. When this did not satisfy him, he proceeded to adjust the way his well-fitted jacket hung from his shoulders. He frowned, unable to get the desired effect he was looking for. Finally, he went so far as to straighten the entire mirror on the wall. At last he grinned, quite pleased with what he saw.

He turned from the mirror and struck a pose as if someone were about to take his photograph. But seeing that Oona and Deacon were the only ones watching, his mouth flattened into an irritated line. He moved to the center of the room and stood directly over the candle on the floor, spreading his arms wide. "I see no evidence of a break-in. There are no windows, and the only way someone could have gotten in is through that door." He pointed to where Oona and Deacon stood half silhouetted in the doorway. "Perhaps *you* are the thief, Miss Crate."

Oona took in a sharp breath at the accusation.

"Don't be ridiculous," said a voice from behind her. Oona turned to find Isadora Iree staring down the sides of her nose at her. Isadora stood a good inch taller, and her expression was disapproving. "I know who you are. You're the Wizard's niece. And I heard that you're so stupid and incompetent that he fired you, and now he's looking for a new apprentice."

Oona could feel her temper beginning to rise. She had heard similarly false rumors going about town, and she had told herself to ignore them. *She* knew they were not true, and yet it irked her to have this infuriating girl throwing the rumor in her face.

Isadora looked over Oona's shoulder at the inspector. "You see, she doesn't even deny it. She's too stupid to have stolen the dresses. I mean, look at what she's wearing. Such drab, gray colors in the

springtime. She wouldn't know what to do with high fashion if it fell in her lap."

~~A new voice cut into the conversation, this one thick with an Irish accent. "And you wouldn't know what to do with common courtesy if it hit you in the head, Isadora."~~

Isadora whirled around. A boy had just entered the shop. He wore a raggedy black cloak about his shoulders and a tattered, cockeyed top hat on his head. He was a fine-looking boy whom Oona had seen out on the street from time to time, but only from a distance. His name, she knew, was Adler Iree and he was Isadora's twin brother.

"Adler!" said Madame Iree, her bracelets clicking and clattering as she waved away the cluster of consoling ladies. "What are you doing in the boutique?"

Adler sauntered into the ladies' dress shop as if it were the most natural place in the world for him to be. In the crook of one arm he carried a large book, which he promptly set on the tea table and then plopped himself down in one of the chairs. From this angle, Oona had a perfect view of the boy's face. It was handsome enough, with high cheekbones like his sister's, and the two of them shared the same bright blue eyes and dark eyelashes. But while Isadora's features were clearly more soft and feminine, it was the strange tattoos on Adler's face that, more than anything else, told the two of them apart.

An intricate pattern of symbols laced together across his cheeks and around his eyes: a mysterious assortment of squiggles and stars and lines, some of which resembled ancient runes and Egyptian hieroglyphs. They varied in color from purple and blue to shimmery lines of gold and silver. A pair of tiny scarlet-colored crescent moons had been inked in at the corners of his eyes. The tattoos were an unmistakable sign that Adler Iree was a member of the Magicians Legal Alliance, the guild for the practitioners of magical law. Adler Iree was studying to be a lawyer. Upon the completion of every new course of study, the guild of lawyers bestowed a new symbol upon the faces of its members. Adler's tattoos were, as of yet, still sparse. The faces of some of the most esteemed members of the Magicians Legal Alliance appeared almost to shimmer, showing none of their original skin color at all.

"Adler, I asked you a question," Madame Iree told her son. "You know how I feel about having boys and men in the shop."

Adler raised an eyebrow and pointed toward the doorway to the showroom. For an instant, Oona thought he was pointing at her. Her heart quickened, and her cheeks flushed. Her breath caught in her throat, and she suddenly remembered the very sad state of her hair. But an instant later Oona realized that the boy was not pointing at *her* but at the inspector, who stood just behind her. She found herself feeling both disappointed and relieved at the same time.

"That's a man there," the boy said, his finger leveled at the inspector. Adler's thick Irish brogue, so very different from his mother's and sister's cultured English accents, only added to the boy's mysterious qualities. Adler leaned forward in his seat, blinking at the inspector. "At least, I'm thinking so. You are a man, aren't you, Inspector?"

Before the inspector could reply, Madame Iree let loose a heavy sigh, and said: "Inspector White is here, Adler, because someone stole all of the dresses out of the showroom."

Adler nodded. "I know, Mother. The news is all over the street. That's why I came, to make sure you were all right."

"Oh, I see," said Madame Iree, who once again looked as if she might faint. Her flock of ladies rushed in again to give her support, but she shooed them away. "Those dresses were all custom made for the Midnight Masquerade tomorrow night. Twelve dresses in all, and they were all for students at the academy. The girls will all be so disappointed, because they will have nothing to wear to the event. It is all just horribly, horribly wrong!"

The inspector pushed his way past Oona and stopped before Madame Iree. "I see no possible way anyone could have broken into that showroom while all of you were out here. You, Madame, must

have misplaced the dresses.”

“Misplaced?” said Madame Iree, her welling tears all at once replaced with rage. “I’ll misplace you, you useless fool!” She shoved her nose as close to the inspector’s ghostly face as her immense bosom would allow. “Get out of my shop, you walking catastrophe in inspector’s clothing! Get out before I knock you out!”

The inspector began slowly to back away through the front door, but Madame Iree continued to stalk him, looking as though she might bite him on the nose.

“You ... You wouldn’t dare harm an officer, Madame,” the inspector stammered.

Madame Iree considered him for a moment, and then whirled around. “Everyone out! And that includes you, Adler and Isadora. And your little friend as well.”

Isadora scowled at Oona. “She’s not my friend.”

“The feeling is mutual,” Oona replied, before attempting: “Ah ... Madame Iree. Might I have a look around? I might be able to find some clue as to—”

“*Out!*” Madame Iree cried, stomping her foot so hard that her hat toppled off her head.

Oona’s mouth clamped shut, and she and Isadora headed toward the exit. As the two of them passed the tea table, doing their best not to look at each other, Adler Iree stood. Taking his enormous book once again under his arm, he cocked his head to one side and gave Oona a quick wink before stopping at the doorway and extending his hand.

“Ladies first,” he said.

Oona’s cheeks flushed red. All thoughts of trying to persuade Madame Iree to let her examine the shop were gone, and she once again remembered the dreadful condition of her hair. Madame Iree slammed the door behind them. The flock of older ladies dispersed in a chattering knot in one direction, and the inspector sauntered off across the street in the other, leaving Oona, Deacon, Isadora and Adler alone in front of the store. Halfway across the street, the inspector tripped on a cobblestone and fell flat on his face. He quickly pushed himself back up, peering at the elbow of his jacket, and then glared over his shoulder with an accusatory expression on his pale face. Oona was certain that he was about to blame her or someone else for tripping him, but instead he abruptly marched off down the street in the opposite direction he had been going.

Adler laughed. “Dark Street’s finest!”

“Indeed,” said Oona, unable to keep the corners of her mouth from creeping upward.

“You think you can do better?” said Isadora, the gold stripes of her dress glinting in the sun.

“Better than Inspector White?” Oona asked. “I should say so. Anyone could solve a crime better than Inspector White.”

Isadora looked unconvinced. Deacon rustled his feathers uneasily as she leaned in close, hands on her hips. “Prove it,” she said. “You get those dresses back before tomorrow night, and I suppose that would prove you’re smarter than ... well, than you look. My own masquerade dress was in the showroom. It is very pretty, and very extravagant, and *you’re* going to get it back for me.”

There was more than a hint of dare in her voice, and Oona was about to tell Isadora that she couldn’t care less how fantastic Isadora’s dress was, and that she could find it herself, thank you very much.... Only what came out of Oona’s mouth was: “You’re on.”

Isadora grinned. “That’s good, because I want to look my best tomorrow night when I attend my first dance as the Wizard’s new apprentice.”

She turned and sauntered away down the street, giving a catty little backward wave over her shoulder as she went.

Oona felt a sudden tightening in her chest. “*She’s* applying for the position of Wizard’s apprentice?”

Adler Iree gave her a wry smile, the scarlet moons at the corners of his eyes crinkling up as he d

so. "Oh, to be sure," he said in that thick Irish accent of his. "We both are."

Oona's astonishment showed clearly on her face. Just why she was so surprised to hear this news she did not know, but for some reason coming face-to-face with her would-be replacements suddenly made her decision to give it all up very real indeed. Adler bowed slightly before saying: "I suppose I'll see you this evening, at the Choosing," and then turned to follow his sister down the street, leaving Oona with a strange mix of emotions. Intrigue and apprehension, nervousness and sadness all swelled in her at once.

"Perhaps we should be returning to Pendulum House," Deacon suggested. "Your uncle did say that you would need to be present for the Choosing. Shall we hail a carriage?"

"I suppose so," Oona said, though absently. Her mind was all over the place: the Choosing, the missing dresses, her promise to avoid danger, the candle on the floor of the showroom, Isadora Iree's challenge, Adler Iree and his wry smile. All of it danced through her head in a confused jumble. What she needed was ...



"A walk," Oona said.

"What?" asked Deacon.

"I will walk home, Deacon. I'll need to clear my head if I'm going to solve this case."

"But it's nearly three miles to Pendulum House," Deacon pointed out.

The nearest clock was on the other side of the street, in front of the Dark Street Theater. The hands of the clock were too small to read from where she stood, so Oona stepped into the street. She was halfway across, attempting to re-create the layout of the showroom in her mind, when Deacon shouted: "Look out!"

Oona flinched as a horse and carriage came perilously close to hitting her. It swerved at the last moment, the horse whinnying its displeasure as one of the wheels struck a pothole and the entire carriage came to an abrupt halt in front of her.

"Oh, blast it, now look what you done!" cried the driver. He snapped at the reins, but the horse could not move forward. Finally, the driver jumped down and spat on the cobbles. He was a short man dressed in the blue-and-white uniform of a cabdriver. "Why don't you watch where you're going, miss? Look what you did. Gone and made me swerve right into that bloody pothole! And I pride myself on knowing how to *avoid* potholes, I do." The driver turned to the open carriage window, and said: "Sorry about this, sir, but that girl there made me swerve. Otherwise, I'd surely have missed those missing cobbles. I know this street like the back of my hand, I do. Now if you'll just sit tight, I'll have us out in a jiffy."

The driver scowled at Oona, and she could hear him mumbling something about losing his tip as he pulled a plank of wood from the driver's seat and attempted to lever the front wheel out.

Oona was about to apologize when she realized that the passenger in the carriage was staring at her. He was a boy, perhaps thirteen years old, with a chubby round face. His neatly cut brown hair was parted down the middle, and a set of small spectacles rested upon his nose. He stared out the carriage window with eyes as round as full moons. And then it occurred to Oona that the boy was not looking at *her* but at the museum behind her, as if he saw something there that amazed him. Oona turned to see what the boy was looking at, but she saw nothing out of the ordinary: only the enormous sculpture of the top hat and the empty steps leading to the museum. The sight of the steps reminded Oona of the blind man she'd seen standing there, just before Isadora had come rushing out of the shop.

The man who seemed to have disappeared, she thought.

When Oona turned back around, the boy in the carriage was looking at her.

“Hello,” she said.

“Oh,” the boy said, looking quite startled that Oona should have spoken to him. “Hello,” was all he had time to say before the carriage lurched forward and the driver climbed back onto his driver’s seat and snapped the reins. As abruptly as the carriage had stopped, it began to roll again, making its way up the street in the direction of Pendulum House, kicking up bits of dust behind it that swirled and danced in the afternoon breeze.

She finished crossing the street and started up the sidewalk toward the street clock. “Who was the boy?” she asked.

“I haven’t the slightest idea,” Deacon replied.

“You mean there’s no information in the *Who’s Who*?” Oona asked, more than a little surprised.

“None at all,” Deacon replied. “Whoever he is, he must not be from Dark Street.”

“Someone from New York then?” Oona asked. It was not unprecedented that people from the outside world ventured onto Dark Street. Most of them happened upon the street by accident, but it was still unusual. While it was true that Dark Street received most of its food and products from the outside world, it was much more common for the merchants of Dark Street to venture out to get the supplies than for outsiders to bring them in.

Oona stopped at the foot of the old ironwork street clock in front of the Dark Street Theater. A sign over the box office read:

THIS FRIDAY ONLY

OPEN-CALL AUDITIONS FOR *OSWALD DESCENDS*

Oona tutted. *Oswald Descends*, a play named after Oswald the Great, the most powerful of the Magicians of Old, told the story of the crucial role he played in the Great Faerie War nearly five hundred years ago. The play was put on at least once a year without fail. Oona found such old-fashioned stories of magic and history quite boring, although she had to admit that the final scene of the play—when Oswald descends the steps of Faerie, locked in battle with the terrible Queen of Faerie—was always quite spectacular. Unfortunately, you needed to sit through the entire play for one bit of excitement at the very end.

The clock read 2:36. Since the Choosing was set for seven o’clock, this left her more than enough time to reach Pendulum House on foot. Satisfied, Oona turned to go, but just then, two metallic-sounding voices emanated from deep inside the iron clockwork, half-startling her.

“Knock, knock,” said the first voice.

“Who’s there?” asked the second.

“Kent.”

“Kent who?”

“Kent remember my name, I’m so bloody drunk. Now open up!”

Oona rolled her eyes. Nowhere else but on Dark Street did the street clocks tell not only time but jokes as well ... and quite bad ones at that.

Her shadow stretched out behind her as she strolled up the street, wondering how she might solve the case of the missing dresses with so little information. Especially when she was unable to examine the crime scene itself.

Her pace quickened as she passed in front of Oswald Park—the mile-long recreational area named after the great magician—though not solely because of the young hooligans in shady hats near the front gate. Oona had Deacon with her, and the menacing-looking raven would make most anyone think

twice about approaching her. The real reason she quickened her pace was because it was at Oswa Park that she had conjured her last spell. It was there that the magic had flown out of her control.

The iron bars separating the park from the street slid quickly past as she attempted to hold her eyes dead ahead. But the pull was too strong. She stopped a little ways past the entrance, pressing her face to the fence and peering through the bars at an open, grass-covered space near the center of the park.

It wasn't always an open space, Oona thought grimly. Not too long ago there was a great tree there. A huge fig tree where people could sit under its branches and lean against its trunk.

"Hey, girlie," said a voice, and Oona turned to see one of the shadowy, hat-wearing young men approaching her. His voice was rough from smoke. "You got a light, girlie?"

Deacon puffed up his chest, his head rising to his full menacing height. "Back away, sir!" he haw-cawed.

The hoodlum quickly backed away, turning to his companions, who were all having a good laugh. Oona watched him go. In the distance she caught sight of the very top of the Black Tower. The ominous-looking tower was the tallest structure on Dark Street, and it could be seen from miles away. Also known as the Goblin Tower, the solid black, windowless structure was a relic of the past: a prison built to hold powerful faeries during the war. It was said that the Magicians of Old had placed goblins inside as keepers of the prison, and that they lived there still, to this day. Oona didn't know if she believed that, but it was true that people were so fearful of the tower that no one wished to live too close to it, and so that was where they had built the cemetery. The tower rose up out of the center of the graveyard like some enormous black tombstone.

It was there, beneath its shadow, that Oona had watched them first bury her father ... and then months long after, her mother and baby sister had joined him in the Crate family plot. Oona had not been back since.

Currently, she returned her gaze to the place where the tree had once grown near the center of the park, and a sudden wave of grief and guilt washed over her. Decorations were being put up in preparation for the masquerade the following night. Lanterns were being hung in trees, and tables were being set up around the pond. Streaming bits of shiny fabric dangled from branches, giving the park a whimsical appearance, but going to the masquerade all at once seemed like a bad idea.

How dare I think of having fun in that place, she thought. They were killed there. And it's all my fault.

The thought was cruel and biting, but Oona heard the truth in it. And then she thought: *It's the magic that killed them. The Lights of Wonder did it ... Lux lucis admiratio ... it's the magic's fault.* And she felt the truth in this as well. She turned away from the park with a sudden urge to run, feeling more certain than she had in weeks that she was making the right decision to give up her apprenticeship. She couldn't wait to sign the papers and have the whole business over with, to be done with magic and all of its ridiculous instability.

She simply couldn't wait for the Choosing to be finished.

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