

"Darkly
delectable"
Alex Foulkes

"Stuffed with
imagination"
Sinéad O'Hart

The Train of DaRK WONDERS



Alex Bell

Illustrated by Beatriz Castro

The Train of
DARK
WONDERS

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Alex Bell



A Rock the Boat Book

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*For my niece, Jessica Bell.
I hope you enjoy reading this book one day.*





CHAPTER 1

Bess Harper gritted her teeth, determined not to cry as she walked up the steps to the front doors of Harper's Odditorium. Even the whispering flowers adorning the walls of the building were shedding their dark petals as if in mourning and murmuring sadly to themselves. Bess loved Grandfather Henry and his peculiar museum, and now it seemed she would lose both in the space of a single week. She couldn't bear the thought that she would never again curl up beside Pops on the battered sofa in his study, listening to tales of his travels and adventures.

As if that weren't bad enough, Bess's dad and her Uncle Norman were sure to inherit the Odditorium and they intended to sell off the exhibits and close its doors forever. For some reason, Uncle Norman really seemed to hate the place. And her dad was a quiet man

with no interest in strange museums and no desire to quarrel with his older brother.

“It’s just a pile of old junk,” Uncle Norman had said when he’d come to dinner the night before. “It ought to have been scrapped years ago.”

“What about Blizzard?” Bess asked. “The Odditorium is his home!”

“We’ll find another home for him.”

“But you’re always saying he’s a horrible beast that no one in their right mind would want!” Bess protested. “What if he goes to someone who doesn’t treat him properly? Someone who doesn’t understand him?”

“Bess, please. You’re giving me a headache.” Uncle Norman let out a weary sigh. “You can rest assured that we’ll find a home for him in a zoo somewhere. That’s where he ought to have been all along. My father had no business keeping a creature like that in the Odditorium.”

Bess later overheard Uncle Norman telling her parents that he’d tried calling a couple of zoos, but they were both full. So he had phoned the local glue factory instead and now poor old Blizzard was due to be shipped off and turned into glue sticks. That was her uncle’s plan at any rate, but it wasn’t *Bess’s* plan.

The grown-ups were visiting the Odditorium today to meet her grandfather’s lawyer and hear the reading of

the will. They had agreed Bess could tag along, so that morning she'd thrown on her favourite Bigfoot T-shirt (for luck), tied her frizzy brown hair into two plaits (for convenience) and given herself an encouraging smile in the bathroom mirror (for courage).

Certainly no one else was going to encourage her with what she had in mind. Her rescue plan was dangerous, desperate and really not at all sensible, but it was also her only chance. When Bess smiled, it made her freckles more pronounced against her white skin. This reminded her of her grandfather and strengthened her determination. She took a deep breath and nodded at her reflection. She could do this. She had to. For Blizzard – and all the other exhibits.

By the time she got to the Odditorium, Uncle Norman and the lawyer were already there. Bess knew she wouldn't have long. She left her parents in the study with the other two and darted down the dusty corridor.

When it was originally built, some fifty years ago, the museum had been a grand mansion. Henry Harper had designed it himself, which was why it had a pleasing number of secret passages and spiral staircases hidden behind sliding bookshelves and paintings. Bess made her way to one of these secret passages now, grateful for the short cut it provided to the other side of the museum.

Uncle Norman and Bess's dad had both grown up here with their father and their mother, Lucy, who had passed away before Bess was born. The building hadn't been an Odditorium back then of course, but Pops had already been working on filling the rooms.

He'd often entertain Bess with accounts of his early quests for strange and interesting objects. Bess was never quite sure how much of this was truth and how much was fiction. Pops refused to speak about the years before he came to Roseville, including the family he'd left behind. Bess's dad and uncle had never met their grandparents. Nobody knew how Pops had made so much money either – enough to build this very mansion. Bess liked to think he'd been a jewel thief or something equally thrilling.

From the outside, the Odditorium still looked like a house with its pillars and balconies. For as long as Bess could remember, the walls had been covered in whispering flowers, their black petals edged with dark purple and dusky red. Henry had loved the flowers, but most people were wary of them because of all the teeth – sharp little rows nestled in the centre of the petals. The whispering flowers had never bitten anyone that Bess was aware of, but she'd always had the feeling that one day they just *might*.

They whispered non-stop, day and night, and sometimes you could glimpse the small dark flicker of a tongue within the petals. It was impossible to tell what they whispered about – although Bess had often strained her ears trying – because they all spoke different things at different times, creating a murmuring hush of sound.

Beyond the front doors, the Odditorium was transformed from the home it had once been. After the boys had grown up and moved out and Lucy had died, Henry expanded his collections until they filled most of the rooms. Then one day he decided to open his doors to the public, and nothing had been the same since.

The museum could certainly do with a good clean and a spruce-up. It had been closed for over a month, ever since Pops fell ill. There was only a handful of staff and they'd been let go when the Odditorium closed. All except Jamie, the caretaker, who'd been coming in twice a day to feed Blizzard, water the whispering flowers and check that Jessie the haunted doll wasn't causing too much havoc.

Jamie was a very old friend of Bess's grandfather and had worked at the Odditorium ever since it first opened. He knew how to handle all the exhibits safely

and had done an excellent job of looking after the place, but it had still been hard for Bess not to be allowed to go there herself. At least she'd been permitted to visit Pops in the hospital, but it had seemed so wrong seeing him there, surrounded by white sheets and beeping machines. He belonged in the Odditorium with all his beloved books and fascinating objects.

She was glad to be back at last, although it was strange to find the museum deserted. Usually there were a few people wandering about, inspecting the curiosities or gazing up at the gigantic whale skeleton suspended from the lobby ceiling. But, when Bess emerged from the secret passage into a corridor, there wasn't a soul around. Motes of dust danced in the beams of light slanting through the large windows and there were several impressive spiderwebs spun round the chandeliers too. Bess was relieved that she could still make out the Odditorium's distinctive smell, her favourite scent in the whole world – a mixture of wax, maps and yellowed old bones.

Her footsteps echoed loudly as she hurried down the corridor, glancing into various rooms along the way. She wished she had time to rescue some of her other favourite exhibits – the mechanical fortune-teller, the complete set of elephant armour or the

taxidermy specimen of a two-headed cat. But she would need every moment for Blizzard today. He was quite old now and moved about at a painfully slow speed – when he deigned to move at all.

She soon reached Blizzard's room at the end of the corridor. It was locked, as expected, but that wouldn't stop Bess for long. Pops had taught her many skills, some of which her parents knew about – such as map-reading – and others that she and Pops had kept secret. Bess's parents had no idea she knew how to charm a snake or catch a haunted doll, and they certainly hadn't a clue that she was an expert at lock-picking. She'd become even better at it than Pops in the end.

A few months ago, on her eleventh birthday, he'd given her a secret present – a little leather pouch filled with lock-picking equipment. There was a message inscribed on the inside of the flap:

For my darling Bess,

*May you find great adventures behind any
door you choose.*

*Love and mischief,
Pops xxxx*

Bess never went anywhere without it and it took her less than a minute to get through the door. Back when the museum had been a mansion, this had been the ballroom. Uncle Norman always complained it was yet another example of Pops's eccentricity that he'd built such a lavish mansion for a family of four. Bess got the impression that her uncle and dad would both have preferred an ordinary home like their friends'. But Bess thought ordinary was overrated.

It took her eyes a moment to adjust to the murky darkness. The tall windows were lined with heavy wooden shutters because Blizzard was sensitive to light. The smell was just the same as always – swampy water mixed with a tang of bony fish and musty damp. Traces of the ballroom's previous use still remained in the cobwebbed chandelier hanging from the ceiling and the pale blue marble floor. When Pops had been younger and Lucy was still alive, they'd thrown lavish Christmas parties and invited the whole town. There hadn't been a swamp inside the ballroom back then of course.

The Odditorium had many large rooms, but the ballroom was the only one big enough to house Blizzard's immense tank. It took up almost the entire floor and contained an artificial swamp as well as a

beach lined with glowing red heat lamps. There were several trees spread throughout the massive space, with long tendrils of hanging moss trailing down from their branches. In years gone by, visitors had sometimes complained that the darkness and the dense vegetation made it difficult to see inside the tank properly, but Pops had always insisted that an animal's comfort must come first.

Blizzard was much easier to spot nowadays though. At almost sixty years old, he spent most of his time basking beneath the heat lamps. Bess very much hoped this would be the case today as she ran up the curved staircase to the viewing platform. She peered over the side of the tank and, to her relief, there Blizzard was, stretched out upon the sand, snoring softly.

Bess paused for a moment to marvel at him. She didn't care what her uncle said – she thought he was spectacular. After all, it wasn't every day you got to stand so close to a three-metre-long white alligator.



CHAPTER 2

Pops had had strict rules about putting animals in the Odditorium. He would never remove anything from the wild if it was able to flourish there. But if a creature wasn't safe in its natural habitat for some reason, then he would consider rescuing it and providing a home at the Odditorium. He'd taken Blizzard in when the alligator had been just a hatchling. It seemed that someone had purchased him as a pet before thinking better of the idea and flushing him down the toilet. Pops had found him during one of his walkabouts through the sewers.

“People dispose of all kinds of unwanted and fascinating things that way,” he'd told Bess. “That's why I like to have a browse down there from time to time.”

Albino gators couldn't survive in the wild because their colouring meant they would be attacked by

predators when they were small or else their delicate skin would get burned by the sun.

Bess had always adored Blizzard, but she knew full well he didn't feel the same way about her.

"You're just a walking snack as far as he's concerned," Pops had warned her quite cheerfully. "That's why you must always be very careful around his tank. Absolutely no messing about in the ballroom. Do all the messing about you like in the other rooms, but safety first when it comes to alligators, my dear. He'd happily gobble you up given half the chance, and that would be a very difficult thing to explain to your parents."

Blizzard was rare and beautiful, but he was also deadly. After all, he was basically a dinosaur and his alligator nature meant he wasn't capable of showing affection to anyone or anything – except perhaps his heat lamps. But he was now old and slow, and Bess had seen her grandfather put on his muzzle a couple of times when he needed to be moved from his tank in order for it to be cleaned. She was pretty confident she could do the same thing herself. At least she *hoped* she could. It didn't seem like there was any other option if she wanted to save Blizzard from his unhappy fate.

She turned to the cupboard on the balcony, entered the combination code and rummaged around inside until she found the key to Blizzard's tank, along with his muzzle and lead. They were made of strong leather, which was more than sufficient since all an alligator's biting strength is contained in the act of closing its mouth, not opening it. Bess had read once that a simple elastic band would be enough to keep a gator's jaw shut. She wouldn't like to test that theory, but she'd seen the muzzle in use enough times to know that it was up to the job.

Time was ticking on and she didn't know exactly how long she had left before the grown-ups came to find her and marched her out of the Odditorium forever. So she ran back down the stairs, draped the leather lead across her shoulders and unlocked the door of the tank. Taking her courage in both hands, she stepped inside.

Blizzard was still snoozing so this was her best chance of getting the muzzle on him without losing a finger. She held her breath and tiptoed over the sand. To her relief, Blizzard stayed snoring as she slipped the muzzle over his long head. She was just able to fasten the buckles before he opened one pink eye to stare lazily at her.



He blinked his eye shut, trying to go back to sleep, but Bess was having none of that. She tugged and heaved at the lead with all her might until the huge creature finally lumbered to his feet with a huff of irritation.

Blizzard slunk along beside her obediently enough as they entered the corridor, probably anticipating a dead rabbit as a reward. Bess's heart began to lift. The plan was working! Just a short distance away was the entrance to the sewers, hidden behind a large painting which swung open like a door. Pops had once shown her the spiral staircase behind the wall and told her

how he used it to get into the underground tunnels whenever he fancied a poke around down there.

Bess had asked if she could go with him, but he'd shaken his head. "When you're older perhaps. I'll take you then."

But now Pops was gone and they'd never get the chance to explore down there together. The sewers were the only place Bess could think of that would be dark and wet enough for Blizzard. And there'd be no people to scream at the sight of him down there either. He'd have to catch his own food of course, but she hoped he'd be able to manage. If nothing else, it was better than him ending his days as a pile of glue sticks.

She was almost at the hidden entrance when a door banged somewhere behind her. "Bess! What on earth are you doing?" a voice exclaimed.

Her heart sank into her boots as she slowly turned round to face her uncle.

"Good Lord!" he said, staring at her with a horrified expression. "Is that the *alligator*? What are you thinking of? Take him back to wherever he's supposed to be at once!"

Bess tightened her grip on Blizzard's lead and firmly planted her feet, determined not to be bullied. "I

overheard you on the phone,” she said. “And I won’t let you sell Blizzard to the glue factory. I won’t.”

Uncle Norman shook his head and straightened his tie. It was a gesture he often made whenever he was irritated, which seemed to be most of the time.

“Sell him?” he replied in a scornful tone. “You must be joking. No one wants a beast like that. I was going to give him away. I’d have paid them to take him off my hands frankly, but never mind that now. I’ve been looking all over this blasted place for you. We’ve been talking to the lawyer and it seems there’s been a terrible mistake. Your father and I haven’t inherited the museum after all.”

“What?” Bess felt a flash of hope. Perhaps the new person wouldn’t feel the same way as her uncle and there might be a chance for the Odditorium. “Who’s the owner then?”

Uncle Norman’s mouth tightened and he straightened his tie again. “You are.”

He then reached into his pocket and uncurled his fingers to reveal a shining golden key lying in the palm of his hand.



CHAPTER 3

At first, it seemed Bess's problems were solved. She would keep the exhibits safe – including Blizzard – open the Odditorium once more and everything would be all right.

Only it wasn't quite that simple. When the weekend arrived and Bess flipped the sign on the door to OPEN, there was no rush of excited visitors like she'd been expecting. In fact, the Odditorium was open for three whole hours before anyone walked inside. Even then it was only a confused lady who had got lost and was looking for the hat shop. To make matters worse, Jamie wasn't around to help her. He'd left a note on Pops's desk saying that the whispering flowers had run out of food and he'd gone to look for some. Bess thought he'd probably be back within an hour, but he was away all weekend.

She set off for home on Sunday evening feeling thoroughly dejected. She lived with her parents in a small, tidy, extremely ordinary house. There was nothing unusual about it at all, except perhaps for the fact that it had rather a lot of flowers. There were floral patterns on the wallpaper, painted daisies on the china, rose prints on the bedsheets and so on. Bess thought that a cursed mirror or a sabre-toothed tiger skull would improve the place immensely.

Almost everyone in Roseville was keen on flowers of course since the small town was known for its impressive rose garden. It was located opposite the Odditorium and was famous for its special roses that bloomed all year round. A large team of gardeners looked after it, including Bess's parents.

Mr and Mrs Harper didn't hate the Odditorium in the way that Uncle Norman did, but they didn't love it either. Bess's parents had no desire to be amazed and astounded. They just wanted to have a nice early tea round the kitchen table, then perhaps do a jigsaw puzzle before taking a lukewarm bath and going to bed.

"Sometimes things skip a generation and that's what happened with your uncle and dad," Pops had told Bess. "I thought there might be a glimmer of hope for

your father once, long ago, but now I realise that neither of them has got an adventurous bone in their body. I imagine they'd both be quite happy to spend the rest of their lives in Roseville."

It was the closest he'd ever got to talking about his own parents. That and telling Bess that their family had always had green fingers. Even Uncle Norman owned a cactus collection he was rather proud of. And Bess had her own unique skills when it came to gardening too, only her speciality involved something more interesting than flowers.

After another disappointing day at the Odditorium, Bess found the sight of all the roses on the dining-room wallpaper even more depressing than usual. To make matters worse, Uncle Norman had come for tea.

"Business isn't exactly booming at the Odditorium from what I hear," he said the moment they sat down at the table. He looked extremely pleased by this. "I'm not surprised. Visitors have been dwindling at that mouldy old place for years."

"There is no mould," Bess replied, spearing a carrot on her plate with rather more force than was necessary. "Just dust and cobwebs."

"People weren't coming any more even before Father fell ill," Uncle Norman went on as if Bess hadn't spoken.

“I’m afraid that’s true,” Bess’s dad said, although at least he looked regretful. “The thing is, not everyone is...well, quite so fond of odd things as you are, Bess. Most folk around here would rather spend their free time taking a stroll through the rose garden or painting pots at the pottery café or some such.”

Bess pulled a face. What was the matter with people? How could anyone possibly prefer painting pots to looking at an albino alligator or a haunted doll? She shook her head in despair.

“Well, I think those people are silly,” she said. “And if they don’t want to come to the Odditorium then it’s their loss.”

“Actually,” Uncle Norman said with a horrible smile, “I think you’ll find it’s very much *your* loss, *Elizabeth*.”

Bess winced. Her uncle was the only person who ever called her Elizabeth, probably because he knew how much she disliked it.

“The Odditorium can’t run on air,” Uncle Norman went on in a self-satisfied tone. “There are bills to be paid and expenses to be met. The caretaker will expect to receive wages. If you can’t get the place to pay for itself, then you’ll have no choice but to sell it. I give it a few weeks – a couple of months tops – and then

the Odditorium will be out of business. And good riddance. It's been a burden and an embarrassment to our family for too long."

Bess stood up from the table. "It's not an embarrassment to *me*," she said, feeling hot and angry. "I'm proud of what Pops created. I love it there."

Uncle Norman looked expectantly at her parents, waiting for them to scold Bess for answering back, but they were both intent on examining the daisy-patterned plates before them.

"Well, that," her uncle said coldly, "is why you have very few friends at school from what I understand."

Bess gave a sharp intake of breath and felt a flush of shame prickle over her skin. She'd only really ever had one proper friend – a curly-haired girl called Milly. They'd been as close as sisters in infant school, but as soon as they moved up to juniors Milly formed friendships with a couple of other girls – Olivia and Kayleigh. These new friends definitely weren't into haunted dolls and albino alligators. They liked unicorns instead.

They'd even formed their own Unicorn Club – one that Bess was absolutely not allowed to join. Not that she wanted to. There were too many rainbow tails and sparkles for her liking. But she still missed Milly

sometimes. And no one likes eating their sandwiches by themselves at lunch and having no one to partner with in class. It mortified Bess that her parents had mentioned her friendless state to her uncle of all people.

“Norman!” her dad snapped with a rare show of irritation. “That’s quite enough!”

But Uncle Norman was already gathering up his things to leave. “If you’ll excuse me,” he said, “I think I’ve lost my appetite.” A moment later, he was on his way, the door banging shut behind him.

“He may be my brother, but he can be a singularly unpleasant person sometimes,” Mr Harper said with a sigh.

“No arguments here,” Mrs Harper said, looking equally exasperated. “Don’t pay him any attention, Bess.”



Uncle Norman might have been an unpleasant type, but sadly it turned out that he was right about the bills. Bess found stacks and stacks of them in her grandfather’s study when she visited the Odditorium after school the next day. Jamie had obviously returned from wherever he’d gone to because there was a new note from him on

the desk telling her that the whispering flowers needed food URGENTLY.

Bess shook her head and moved the note to one side. The flowers would have to wait – there were more important matters to attend to. She felt like a bit of a snoop as she started to go through Pops’s desk, but everything in it belonged to her now after all, and she needed to start cataloguing and organising things.

She was also half hoping to find a map that she’d once seen lying on the desk. It had been old and yellowed, the thick parchment curling at the edges. And it had featured names that Bess had recognised from her storybooks. Places like Cinderella’s Palace, Snow White’s Forest, Jack’s Beanstalk and the Evil Queen’s Castle. Bess could still picture the vibrant red apples and the golden gleam of spinning wheels painted in the margins.

She had only got a brief glimpse before Pops had snatched the map away. Usually he was keen to explain where various items came from, but he’d shoved it into one of the desk drawers and refused to answer any questions about it. This had piqued Bess’s curiosity and she’d always wondered about that map, but now she couldn’t find it anywhere.

Bess let out a sigh as she added another bill to the pile. Somehow or other she needed to find money for electricity, wages and rabbits for Blizzard. The whispering flowers still looked sickly and Bess's poisoned-apple tree was in a bad way too, according to Jamie. The caretaker had done the best he could with it, he'd said, but it was very particular. Now that she was here, Bess decided she ought to go and check on it herself. She left the study and went down the corridor to the room where the tree was on display.

Pops had said that Bess was the only person he'd ever known who had managed to grow one. A few years ago she'd picked up a sprig of apple blossom in her garden and decided to have a go at pressing it. She'd seen her mum do this with roses and thought there was something quite interesting about putting a specimen between the pages of a large, heavy book until it dried out. A flower could be kept for a hundred years or more that way.

She'd taken the blossom into her house and found the largest book she owned – a hardback volume of fairy tales. She then tucked some newspaper into the book and carefully pressed the blossom inside. The first time she'd checked on her specimen she'd been in for a shock. Instead of a single dried blossom, an entire

miniature tree had unfolded from within the pages. Its roots were wrapped round the spine of the book and apples the size of marbles hung from the branches, startlingly red.

When she'd shown it to Pops, he'd told her it was a very difficult thing to press a tree, something even the most skilled botanists struggled to achieve. And it seemed to have soaked up some of the words from the fairy-tale book too, because it was no longer an ordinary tree but a poisoned-apple one.

"Where did you get that book anyway?" Pops had asked. He'd looked disapproving, which was odd because Pops normally loved books.

"Mum bought it, I think. Why?"

Pops had sniffed and given the book a disdainful look. "I don't much care for fairy tales, that's all. They only tell one side of the story."

Pops had gone on to explain to Bess that there were several different types of poisoned-apple tree. There were ones to make a person fall asleep, ones to make them lose all their memories and ones – like Bess's tree – to make a person tell the truth.

"The apple blossom is interesting too," he'd said. "The truth can be a dangerous thing of course, and so perhaps people are right to fear the apples. But truth

is also knowledge and knowledge is a priceless gift. One sniff of the scented blossoms and you'll be gifted with the knowledge of a fact you didn't know before."

When Bess had asked how Pops knew so much about poisoned apples, he'd laughed and tickled her under the chin. "I know many things about many things, dear one. You should know that by now."

He was certainly right about the apple blossoms. Bess had learned a lot of interesting tidbits from them over the years – including that it's impossible for a pig to look up at the sky and that lobsters pee from their faces. You sniffed the blossom and the fact just appeared in your head as if someone had spoken the words aloud.

With Bess's permission, Grandfather Henry had put the pressed tree on display in the Odditorium, but now she was dismayed to see that its leaves were drooping sadly and it didn't have a single apple. She carefully closed the book, the tree folding itself up neatly between the covers, and decided to take it home. Nobody would miss a lone exhibit and she could better nurse it back to health if it was enjoying the company of her other pressed trees.

Bess had done several more since that first one and had quite the miniature forest on the bookshelves of

her bedroom. She'd experimented with using blossom, leaves, fruit and even pieces of root, and was fascinated by the way the book itself had an impact on the specimen. A volume of spooky stories had produced a bone-white ghost tree with spectral branches, while a dictionary had created a tree made up of words – some of which Bess had never even heard of. One of Bess's favourite pressed trees came from a book about the ocean, which had grown a tree made of coral and covered in tiny starfish.

Bess wondered now whether some of these trees might make good exhibits for the Odditorium. She needed to get visitors in and fast. Perhaps people didn't realise it was open again. On returning home, Bess had just enough time before bed to draw up some flyers to hand out the next day. Then she fell into a restless sleep.



The following morning Bess went straight to the rose garden to hand out her flyers. But she quickly discovered that the inhabitants of the town didn't much care whether the Odditorium was open or not.

“That old place?” one smartly dressed woman remarked. “I thought it had closed down years ago.”

“Oh no, we’re still open!” Bess hurried to reassure her. “And we’ve got all kinds of fascinating creatures to see, curiosities to inspect and—”

“That may be, but once you’ve seen them you’ve seen them,” the woman interrupted. “And everyone knows that the Odditorium hasn’t had anything new on display for years.”

Bess was baffled. Personally she’d never get tired of looking at Blizzard, let alone all the other awesome things in the museum.

“Perhaps if you were to improve your facilities?” one cheerful man suggested. “I mean, there isn’t even a café or a giftshop. It would be nice to be able to buy a tea towel or a magnet or something.”

Bess had always thought that the Odditorium could do with both a giftshop and a café – maybe an ice-cream parlour with extraordinary flavours and spectacular sprinkles. She had lots of ideas, but she couldn’t carry out a single one without money. And right now she still had no idea how to get her hands on any.

She trudged back to the Odditorium, but on reaching it she stopped short in horror. The whispering flowers normally clung to the walls, but during the night their vines had broken through the windows

and reached into the museum itself. Not only that, but Bess could see chunks of brick and plaster on the ground where the flowers had chipped bits away from the building.

Pops had told Bess that the whispering flowers could be dangerous, but she'd thought he meant because of their teeth. She'd never imagined they might be a threat to the Odditorium itself. She hurried inside only to find that the flowers were everywhere. Their whispering had taken on an urgent, frantic sort of tone, although Bess still couldn't make out any individual words.

Much of the ground floor was already scattered with broken glass and wilting dark petals, and when Bess walked into one of the rooms at the back of the Odditorium, she saw vines reaching in through the broken window, creeping along the ceiling before her eyes. Within minutes, the room was a forest of flowers so dense that Bess couldn't even find her way back to the door.