

Chapter 1

Mahogany brushed a hot pink curl from her eyes and checked the compass. Seelie Park's sodium lights bathed the area in a yellow glow, nullifying the silver radiance of the full moon. A soft breeze, scented with jasmine blossoms, cooled her bare arms. Inside the compass's domed enclosure, a needle fashioned from the wing bone of a Jersey Devil spun wildly. Compasses crafted from a Devil's bones never failed to locate magical dead Folk, but Mahogany had doubts about the accuracy of this one.

She tapped the glass and sighed. The needle slowed, swayed back and forth, and gave a final wistful rotation. It pointed toward the dark street west of the park. Pandemonium's clock tower chimed twice, signaling safety for the magical people in town. The bell's resonance reverberated through the moon-glazed night, waking a dog who gave a series of irritated barks at the troublesome clock.

"Finally," Mahogany said, gazing in the needle's direction. "Bazgul, come."

A football-sized tarantula skittered out of the yellow-black shadows, carrying something in its mandibles.

"You ate before we left the house." Mahogany tried to give the spider a warning glare, but her love for indulging the lesser demon supplanted her temporary annoyance. Bazgul had come to her when she was a child. He'd appeared in her crib as a giant spider and had stayed by her side ever since. Most children would have rejected an eight-legged companion. For Mahogany, it was love at first sight.

Bazgul tilted his fuzzy head. The lifeless baby bird grasped in his mandibles scraped softly over the short-cropped grass. The street lamps' yellow light glinted in his eight eyes. It was as close to a pout as Bazgul could manage.

Mahogany placed her hands on her hips. "Don't look at me like that. You know I can't say no when you beg. Be quick."

The demon-spider threw his head back, releasing the baby bird. The tiny carcass cartwheeled into the air like a beanbag thrown by a drunk during a game of cornhole. Bazgul's mandibles separated into a gaping maw filled with razor-sharp teeth, and the dead bird tumbled into his waiting jaws. With a satisfied crunch, the bird disappeared. Bazgul scampered to Mahogany and climbed her leg, shrinking as he went. By the time he reached her shoulder, he'd deflated to the size of an everyday tarantula.

"All right, buddy," Mahogany said, heading towards the dark street. "Let's go find us a dead wizard."

She was new to the job of magical relics collector. Agalia Sorrowsong, the curator of Pandemonium's History Museum, had offered her the position six months ago. When a magical person passed away, their enchanted objects needed to be collected before they fell into the wrong hands. Code for humans. Cedric, the previous collector, had expired during a routine pickup. One devious sorcerer who'd been visiting Pandemonium when he'd died had a penchant for booby traps. Cedric, an 80-something-year-old human, had stumbled unwittingly into a hallway filled with enough firepower to

make Laura Croft rethink her career choice. Poor old Cedric had wound up decapitated and eviscerated before a pack of hungry wolves finished off his corpse. This horrific death sent the local authorities, primarily non-magical Folk, into a tizzy.

After Cedric's death, Agalia set her sights on Mahogany. At first, the offer surprised her. Agalia, an old-school sorcerer, had never shown Mahogany, a human, any kindness. Agalia informed Mahogany that the Guild forbade magical Folk from becoming relic collectors because of their high status in the community. Plus, the job didn't take any real brain power. A stumbling block Agalia knew Mahogany wouldn't struggle with. The only qualifications needed were the knowledge that magic was real, being human, and delivering the items desired by the Guild of Myth and Magic.

Mahogany jumped at Agalia's job offer despite the risks of bodily harm. She welcomed a break from her dull routine of selling herbs at Haughty Hemlock. Plus, the idea of breaking into magical Folk's homes gave her a thrill.

The needle shifted and swayed as Mahogany navigated through the deserted street. In a final flurry of motion, the bone needle rotated several times and stopped. The house was one of four brownstone apartments typically rented by summer tourists.

"Okay, Bazgul, this looks like one." Mahogany scowled at the prospect of an out-of-town wizard dying in a rental. Mahogany knew the magical residents of Pandemonium's quiet village and was curious about what she might encounter inside. She took a deep breath to quiet her nerves at the thought of ending up like Cedric. Giving a final cursory glance to the sleeping street, she approached the dark house, tiptoeing to keep her bootheels silent on the sidewalk.

She tiptoed up the stone steps to the sturdy front door and reached for the polished brass mail slot, intending to send Bazgul through to slip the lock. The door creaked inward an inch as her fingertips grazed the metal flap.

Mahogany froze. She'd never arrived at an unlocked house, much less an open front door. Magical people were a paranoid bunch. Leaving one's home open for anyone to enter uninvited didn't happen—unless you were a witch in the woods who enjoyed the taste of lost children.

The door creaked, sending a chill down Mahogany's spine. She stepped up to the threshold and pushed the door wide, suppressing the feeling that something abysmal awaited her.

"Hello?" she half-called, half-whispered into the dark entryway.

She received no answer, which both relieved and frightened her. Mahogany summoned her courage and slipped through the door, shutting it with a soft click.

Dim light trickled through two narrow rectangular windows flanking the door, partially illuminating the front hall. Mahogany could make out a coat rack piled with heavy tweed jackets. Beyond that, shadows lurked at the edge of the glow. The oppressive aroma of dying flowers, dust, and kerosene clouded the air.

Mahogany wrinkled her nose and grasped the silver pentagram necklace she'd worn as long as she could remember. "Bazgul, light."

The demon spider emitted a blue-green glow, brightening the foyer.

Near the entryway's center stood a squat, round table holding a vase of wilting roses. Their drooping flowers kissed the dusty tabletop on crooked stems. Inset bookcases lined the walls—the shelving bowing under the weight of their contents. Teetering piles of books had bled from the overstuffed shelves at the edge of the worn parquet floor, stacked in haphazard heaps.

Mahogany took another step into the cluttered foyer, and something crunched under her turquoise cowgirl boot. She glanced down, revealing a shattered antique hurricane lamp.

Her dread rising, Mahogany took in the foyer again. Her first impression of an untidy wizard vanished. The mess was more than clutter. Someone had deliberately trashed the place. Books lay in disarray, as if flung from their shelves, their spines broken and pages torn. A painting of the Massachusetts witch Trials hung near the stairs and bore a giant slash, splitting the canvas in two.

“Bazgul, I have a bad feeling.”

The demon spider shifted on her shoulder, mandibles chattering.

“I want to get out of here too, buddy, but we have a job.” Mahogany took a deep breath, settling her nerves. She pulled a crumpled paper from her pocket and smoothed it against the thigh. Black ink emerged from the blank sheet, pooling in the center before sending out liquid tendrils, forming the list of objects.

“A figurine of an Egyptian cat containing—” A moan from a room to her right cut her words short.

Fear gripped Mahogany's stomach. “Hello?” she called into the ransacked house.

A moan answered her, and she followed it.

Mahogany found herself in what appeared to be a study. Silver moonlight mixed with the yellow of the streetlamps streamed through a large arched window facing the street. Two red velvet sofas flanked an enormous stone fireplace, between which sat a low coffee table. Above the mantel hung a massive, gilded mirror reflecting the room. Even more rows of books lined the walls.

As she glanced around the study, Mahogany found it in the same disarray as the entry hall—books flung from their shelves, pictures ripped from the walls, broken glass crunched underfoot.

“Hello?” she called again. She tiptoed to the center of the room and peered between the large couches. A pair of dirty sneakers, more gray than white, peeked out from the edge of the coffee table.

Mahogany crept over to the dirty sneakers and found them attached to the feet of a young man. His pale skin glowed against his dark, untidy hair. A wide halo of blood encircled his head. Nearby, a heavy, granite bust of Mother Shipton lay on its side—a dark red stain with several strands of hair clung to the sculpture's bottom edge.

The young man moaned again. Mahogany stepped over a large crystal vase and moved to his side. A dozen or more red roses lay wilting on the floor.

“What happened?” she asked. “Who did this to you?”

The young man opened his eyes. “I don’t ... I didn’t see.”

Mahogany placed a shaking hand on his chest. “It’s okay. You’re going to be fine.” She reached into the back pocket of her jeans for her cell phone, her heart hammering against her ribs. She’d never stumbled upon anyone dying. Most of the houses she’d visited in the last half year had been occupied by elderly Folk who had died of natural causes. But nothing like this.

“Mike,” the young man groaned. “You need to help him.”

“Who’s Mike?”

At that moment, a metallic glint caught the corner of Mahogany’s eye. She turned from her phone and spotted the body of a bearded older man on the opposite side of the coffee table. Behind a pair of round glasses, his unblinking eyes stared straight ahead—pupils dilated in death. Over the top of the coffee table, the hilt of a long, jeweled dagger protruded from the wizard’s back.

“Mike, I presume,” Mahogany said to the dead wizard. A chill crept up her spine as she gazed into his dead eyes.

Bazgul hissed and tensed on her shoulder, his blue-green light snuffing out. A floorboard behind Mahogany creaked.

The hair on Mahogany’s neck rose, and she craned, peering over her shoulder. A figure clad in a dark hoodie stood over her, a fireplace poker gripped in their raised hand.

Bazgul leaped from Mahogany’s shoulder, growing in size as he sailed through the air, and landed on the obscured face of the hooded figure. The figure screamed before crumpling to the floor—Bazgul clinging to their face. In the distance, sirens cut through the night.

Mahogany stared open-mouthed at the writhing, hooded figure before gathering her wits. Jumping to her feet, she raced towards the exit. Bazgul hopped onto the leg of her jeans as she passed. She reached the front door, yanked it open, and escaped into the warm summer night.