

An illustration featuring two black mice and several spider webs. One mouse is perched on a web above the word 'CHAPTER', and the other is on the ground below the number '1'. The spider webs are drawn with fine lines, creating a delicate, web-like pattern around the text.

CHAPTER 1

Mallory Vayle – a young and not-especially-happy-about-it necromancer – sighed as she spotted the sign above a shop door. The shop was called Les Wigs and its window display was filled with featureless wooden heads wearing a variety of wigs in all the latest styles. The skull under her arm was going to make a thing of it. She just *knew* it. Mallory quickened her pace.

“Wheee!” squealed the skull. “Mallory! *Mallsy!* Look! Check. It. Out! *Look!*”

Pretending not to hear, Mallory hurried on.

“Oi, Bumface. Do not even,” screeched the skull. “Stop. If you do not stop, the huff that Maggoty will throw down will be a mind-bendingly monumental huff from



which you – Mallory so-called Vayle – will never recover. Years from now, people will ask ‘What happened to old Buttcrack Vayle? Why is she dribbling like that?’ and the answer will be it was Maggoty’s stupendous huff what done it.”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake.” Mallory stopped, her boots crunching on snow and her breath frosting in the air. As if she didn’t already know the answer, she asked, under her breath, “What is it, Maggoty?”

An elderly couple passed her, arm in arm, the man’s top hat and woman’s bonnet collecting snow. Glancing down at the human skull wearing a mouse-eaten wreck of a wig beneath Mallory’s arm they hurried on, giving her odd looks over their shoulders.

Mallory winced. Lately, a lot of people gave her odd looks.

“Oh pur-leease,” Maggoty replied. “Like you don’t know there’s a fancy-schmancy ooh-la-la wig shop across the street.”

Looking around to see if anyone was listening, Mallory said quietly, “You mean Les Wigs?”

“Is it called Les Wigs? That means it’s *French*,” Maggoty squealed, excited. “Everyone knows the French make the

best wigs. It’s because French people are all bald.”





Mallory thought about that for a moment. “No, I don’t think they are,” she said eventually.

“Pff, shows what you know, spotty,” the skull snorted. “It’s true. They’re all completely smooth. Like baby dolphins. Les Wigs! Look at it. A wig shop. No, it’s posher than a shop. A wig *emporium*. A wig *palace*.”

Mallory gazed at the shop window. It *was* very expensive-looking – all soft pinks, velvet and ribbons. Above the door, “Les Wigs” was written in curly writing. “We’re late,” she said. “There’s no time for your wig nonsense.”

As soon as the word left her lips, she knew it had been a mistake.

“Nonsense?” squealed the skull. “*NONSENSE*? Oh. Oh. Maggoty is feeling woozy. Everything is going dark.”

“The drama,” said Mallory, rolling her eyes. “All right, you can do some window shopping. One minute.”



“Want want want,” squealed Maggoty half an hour later. “Want want want want want want want WANT.”

Mallory glanced down at the mess of filthy curls under her arm. The wig in the shop window, she had to admit, was much nicer than the one Maggoty was wearing.



Which wasn’t saying much. If she tied the rotting corpse of a dead rat to Maggoty with string, it would be an improvement. *Less smelly too*, Mallory told herself as she looked up at the window display again. The wig took centre stage. Pale silvery blue, it had been styled with the hair whirled up on top like whipped cream. Curls hung where the wearer’s ears would be. Gems sparkled here and there. Ostrich feathers sprouted from the back. In a little stand next to it, a beautifully handwritten card said “The Eleganza”.

“What does it say? What does it say?” asked Maggoty for the fifty-eighth time.

“It says ‘The Eleganza,’” sighed Mallory. “Remind me to teach you to read.”

“The *Eleganza*,” sighed Maggoty, his voice dreamy. “Maggoty wants it. And since you haven’t lifted Maggoty’s curse like you promised the least you could do is buy cute wickle Maggoty, who wuvs ’oo vewy much, a new wig. A-hoo-hoo-hoo. Get *down*.”

Mallory winced again. Maggoty was right. She *had* promised to find a way to lift the curse that had trapped his spirit inside his own skull. “I’m working on it,” she murmured, knowing that she hadn’t been





working on it very hard. The truth was, deep down she didn't really *want* to free Maggoty from his curse. Annoying as the skull could be, Maggoty was her friend – her *only* friend. She wasn't ready to lose him. "Really, Maggoty, we'd better go. It's cold. We're going to be late and—"

"Wig," Maggoty's voice wheedled. "Wiggy wig wig wig. If 'oo wuvved widdle Maggoty, you'd buy him a wig."

"It has a price as well as a name," said Mallory. Pressing her nose to the cold glass, she peered at the little card, adding, "And it's far too high."

"Ask yourself this, Boo: can anyone put a price on a wig like that?"

"Yes," said Mallory. "Someone already has. I just said, didn't I?"

"All righty then. Ask yourself this: how much is the love of a spotty-face bum-trumpet for her favourite skull worth?"

"A lot less than seventy-nine pounds, six shillings and sixpence," said Mallory, looking around. She had been talking too loudly. And she had forgotten that no one else could hear Maggoty. City folk – always keen on a free show – were stopping to watch her argue with an empty



skull in a shabby wig. "We have to go," she muttered, walking away.

"But *wiiiiiiiiig*," Maggoty wailed. "*WIIIIIIIIIG*."

"Shhh," Mallory hissed, keeping her head down as she approached a woman who was stuffing her face with pie. She recognised her. A few weeks earlier Mallory had seen her waiting outside a shop, hoping to gawp at the dead body of its owner.

"Oh, huwwo, it'ff 'oo. The ffkull girl," said the woman, spraying crumbs on to the fresh snow at her feet. She swallowed, then added hopefully, "Seen any good corpses, love?"

"No," Mallory answered, wincing again. The Skull Girl. That was what people called her now.

Disappointment crossed the woman's face. She glanced at the city's clock tower. "Oh well, it's only nine o'clock. Still early, eh?" she said, refilling her mouth.

Head down, Mallory hurried onwards, her feet crunching a trail in the snow as she passed beneath hissing yellow street lamps, ignoring the eyes on her back and the still-complaining skull. People hurried home around her, most discovering they really, *really* needed to be walking on the other side of the street when they saw





her coming with Maggoty tucked under her arm.

For every person who dodged out of her path, Mallory's heart sank a little further.

People were talking, she knew. The city loved to gossip and she had given them plenty to gossip about. Weeks earlier, she and her aunt had put on a Grand Séance. During the show, spirits had shown themselves at Mallory's command and she had used a powerful blaze of darkest magic to defeat the wicked shadow of Hellysh Spatzl. Mallory's Aunt Lilith had advertised it as an evening to remember, and the audience *had* remembered. Too well. They had told other people too. Rumours had spread around the city.

They said that the Skull Girl could raise the dead. Gossipers whispered to each other that she was a . . . what was the word? Sounds like knicker-romancer. Oh yes, that was it: Mallory was a *necromancer*. A death wizard. A child of *mwah-ha-ha-HA* darkness.

Mallory was not happy about this, but it wasn't as if the rumour wasn't true, even though it left out important bits. Yes, she could see dead people and had some other strange powers she didn't fully understand or even *want* to understand. She had been born that way and there wasn't

a lot she could do about it. But the gossips never said anything like "Yes, she's a bit spooky, but what Mallory Vayle really likes is laying on her bed with her chin in her hands reading books about ponies" or "She's actually a neat, sensible young person who keeps her room tidy". No. It was all stuff about dark magic and how the skull she carried around contained an evil spirit.

Even Mallory had to admit that that part of the rumour was especially true, but again it left out important information. Maggoty's spirit *had* been trapped inside the skull by Hellysh Spatzl five hundred years ago, but he wasn't properly *evil*, or at least not *completely* evil. On a scale of one to ten, with one being a floppy-eared bunny and ten being a wild-eyed axe murderer with a curly moustache, Mallory put Maggoty at about three, which could sometimes go as high as five when he was in one of his moods. But anyone who took the time to get to know him would soon learn that while Maggoty Skull was annoying and wig-obsessed, he wasn't *evil*. Since Mallory was the only person who could hear his voice, though, no one ever took the time to get to know him.

Mallory sighed as her feet *scrunch-scrunch-scrunched* through the snow. She hated gossip. Although sometimes



it could be quite helpful.

Because there was another rumour going around the city. A rumour that was whispered quietly from mouth to ear among frightened folk. A rumour she didn't mind quite as much. It said that if you were having a certain kind of problem, Mallory Vayle could help.

And *that* rumour was the reason Mallory was hurrying through fresh snow on a cold night, towards an address her aunt had scribbled on a scrap of paper while Maggoty Skull sang a heart-breaking musical number called "The Wig I've Left Behind" under her arm.

