



## Chapter One

“Skulls,” said Lady Lamorna. “Definitely skulls. Rows and rows of dear little skulls, sewn all along the hem.” She sighed with pleasure as she imagined the clitter-clatter of bone on her cold stone floors. “After all, it really is time I had a new gown. Black velvet, of course, and long . . . very long. Perhaps embroidered? Hmm . . . yes. A motif of spiders, or maybe twists of poison ivy.” Her huge silver eyes gleamed. “In fact, why not interweave the ivy with spiders’ webs? That would be truly beautiful. And petticoats. Layers and layers of blood-red petticoats . . . oh, yes, yes, YES! It will be a robe beyond all compare, and I shall order it this very minute!”

Lady Lamorna snapped her long bony fingers, and within seconds a sharp-toothed bat came flipping in through the open window.

“Yup?”

“I have an order for the Ancient Cronos,” Lady Lamorna said. “I require a new robe, edged with skulls—”

“Got it.” The bat made a swift circle over the Lady’s head. “Skulls, velvet, webs, ivy, petticoats. No prob. Delivery date?”

Lady Lamorna looked put out. “Bat! Listen to me! I would like a new robe, made of deep-black velvet—”

“Told ya. I got it.” The bat circled again. “Heard you a mile away. I’m a bat, right? Bat ears ’n’ all that stuff. Now—delivery?”

Lady Lamorna gave up. “As soon as possible,” she said stiffly.

“Roger Wilco. I’ll be back soon with info on price and delivery. Have the readies ready. Coins of all denominations readily accepted. *Ciao!*” And the bat whizzed away into the purple twilight.

For a second, Lady Lamorna considered frizzling the bat to a burnt ember as it flew, but then she remembered her delicious dress. With a smile of happy anticipation, she swept toward her treasure chest, flung open the lid . . . and SCREAMED!

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They still talk about that scream in the high mountain village of Fracture. Dogs howled and bit their owners. Cats’ whiskers curled into corkscrews and fell off. Children clutched their ears and shrieked in agony. Only the old and extremely deaf were spared . . . the old, the extremely deaf, and Gracie Gillypot. Gracie had been shut in her stepfather’s cold, dark, and spidery cellar for being cheerful, and the cellar had very thick walls. Even in the cellar she heard a faint cry and wondered what it could be—but her ears did nothing worse than tingle. Her stepsister, Foyce, caught the full blast, and when Gracie was finally allowed out of the cellar, Foyce slapped her several times because her head felt as if it were full of stinging wasps, and she didn’t like it.

Gubble, crouched only a few yards away from Lady Lamorna as she hit the highest and most piercing note of her scream, sighed heavily. He’d been the Lady’s servant for more than 170 years, and he had heard her scream before. He knew what the scream meant. It meant trouble.

“*Poor* Gubble,” he said to himself. “Trouble coming. Trouble for Gubble.” He shook his head and began to suck his large grubby thumb.

Five minutes later, he realized what he had said. A huge self-congratulatory smile spread across his flat green face. “Trouble for Gubble!” he said, and the smile grew even wider. “*Clever* Gubble! Gubble’s a POTE!” And he chuckled happily.

It was lucky for Gubble that Lady Lamorna didn’t hear him. A hundred and seventy years of faithful service would have meant nothing if she’d seen him smiling, let alone chuckling. Fortunately, she was pacing the battlements of her crumbling castle, muttering as she stared out across the rooftops of the village.

“Money! Money! Money! Gold! Silver! Pennies, even! How can it *be* that my treasure box is empty? And how can I pay the crones for my beautiful, magical dress?” The Lady tugged at a lock of her long white hair. “Hmm. I could send fool’s gold, but fool’s gold lasts for one month only . . . and the Ancient Crones will strike me down with thunderbolts if they find I have paid with nothing but pebbles . . .”

Lady Lamorna stamped her foot in frustration and fury and swung back inside. “Gubble!” she called. “*Gubble!*”

Gubble half hopped, half hobbled from the dark cupboard that was his usual resting place.

“What skills do I have, Gubble?” Lady Lamorna

demanded. “What skills that will earn me a fortune in good strong gold?”

Gubble shook his head.

“*Think*, Gubble!”

Gubble opened and shut his toothless mouth. He could see by the glint in Lady Lamorna’s silver eyes that Gubble’s Trouble was extraordinarily near now, all ready to jump. Gubble gulped. He wasn’t entirely certain that he actually knew what *skills* were . . . but at the last second some kind of association of sounds dropped another word into his head—a word he knew his mistress liked. “Spells, Your Evilness,” he said. “Spells.” A happy memory came to him. “That frog thing you do. Prince. *Zap!* Frog.” Gubble’s piggy little eyes shone. “That be *magnifying!*”

“Fool! You mean *magnificent!*” snapped Lady Lamorna, but she didn’t sound nearly as menacing as she usually did when Gubble got things wrong. He heaved a sigh of relief as she strode across the room and seized a black marble urn from her mantelpiece. Peering inside, she nodded. “If we are economical, Gubble, there is sufficient spell powder for at least a dozen transformations.”

Gubble looked vacant.

Lady Lamorna tapped sharply on the heavy oak

coffin lid she used as a table. Underneath, in the coffin, the bones of her great-grandmother, the first Lady Lamorna, rattled loudly, and there was a hollow laugh.

“Good,” said the living Lady. “Great-Grandmother approves. Now, Gubble—we’ve established that my ability to turn princes into frogs is a valuable asset. So—how do we progress with this idea?”

Gubble stared blankly at his mistress. He’d understood *princes* and *frogs*, and his ears always pricked up when the word *valuable* came into a conversation, but he had no idea what the Lady wanted now. For the second time in one day, he cast wildly about in the small foggy compartment where his brain got on with its own private life. Mostly it was busy with *murder*, or *blood*, or *violent death*, but Gubble managed to track down something that seemed to suit the occasion. “Toast!” he said. Then, seeing Lady Lamorna’s face darken, he hastily added, “*And marmalade.*”

Lady Lamorna slapped Gubble. His head spun off his shoulders and thunked onto the floor.

“Urk!” grunted the head. And then, completely amazing Lady Lamorna and dazzling Gubble himself, the head made a suggestion. “Blackmail.” His mistress positively gasped. “Gubble!” she said. “I could *kiss* you!”



The head rolled away as fast as it could into a dusty corner. “Nah!” it whimpered. “Not *kisses!*” And it hid its nose in a convenient cobweb.

Lady Lamorna wasn’t listening. She had seized a piece of paper and was wildly scribbling. She took no notice at all as Gubble’s head and body silently edged toward each other and were reunited.