Chapter 1

Hazel Congelier weaves her way through the afternoon bustle of downtown Allegheny City. Her pocket watch ticks out an insistent rhythm, and a black cat of delicate proportions matches her hurried pace. Newsboys shout, trolleys squeal, and spidery crawlers drag their carriages with an eight-legged clang. And yet, the footfalls of a policeman carry sharp as church bells through the coal-smoke air.

She spotted him when she turned the corner, gun at his hip and whistle on his lips. Nothing in Hazel’s appearance marks her the scary blasphemer she just happens to be. She knows this. Except maybe he’ll suspect that the cat at her ankles isn’t an ordinary cat; maybe he’ll see the nervous glint in her eye. Maybe he’ll want to know what magic she’s hiding, and maybe he’ll find out.

*I’m sorry, officer. I was just going to meet my master for a birthday party in a secret haven for sorcery and the like. Spell casting is punishable by death, you say? No, I was not aware*.

Hazel ducks into the alley at the center of the block and presses herself into the shadows against grimy brick. She counts the passersby to the runaway rhythm of blood in her ears. *One,* a well-dressed working girl with t-strap toes. *Two,* a fat cat businessman with a comb-over. *Three,* the blue-uniformed officer with deafening footsteps.

He saunters by without so much as a glance in her direction, heading off to stop more obvious criminals, and freeing her to face a magical door. This chipped-paint, rusted-handled door is one of many secret entrances scattered across Allegheny City, but they all lead to the same place. Magic has little regard for geography.

Hazel steals a glance toward the busy street and roots through her shoulder bag. At the bottom sits a rumpled page bearing a single word: “open.” Like the door—like her—the page’s magical nature is hidden from ordinary eyes. To her, there are swirls of visible energy woven into ink and paper, the framework for a spell. Sparks fly from her fingertips to her wrist, tracing golden pathways over her freckled hands. It’s a flimsy thing, small magic, but she knows the Church and the police wouldn’t find it so insignificant if they caught her using it.

***Are you just going to stand there?*** the cat says, his words sounding into Hazel’s mind. His name is Soren, and he is Hazel’s familiar. He’s the reason she can do magic, the reason sparks fly from her fingertips, and the reason she can go through this door. He’s also the reason she fears policemen and priests and the reason her heart threatens to escape from her throat.

She fights the urge to kick him for his comment. With affection, of course.

*Aren’t you proud?* she shoots back silently. *We passed a police officer on the street and didn’t even end up dead*.

***Yes, yes. Very proud. I’d be prouder if you’d managed to get here on time. Prouder still if you bothered to open the door.*** Soren gives her an impatient flick of his tail, but there’s an amused glint in his golden eyes. The delicate hands of Hazel’s pocket watch seem to crescendo to deafening levels. *You’re-late, you’re-late, you’re-late*, they tick-tock against her hip.

“*Open,*” she whispers. The world goes black for a split second, and she tugs at the magic hovering between her and Soren, willing the spell to take shape. In an instant, it’s done. The door opens, and the pair step through.

She finds herself on the other side of reality, faced with an indoor bazaar, a hidden city in miniature for the fantastic and wonderful and magical things that the outside world has declared undeniably and wholly evil. Dozens of makeshift structures line the walls and form cramped alleyways, stacked three high into teetering towers. A roof hovers high overhead, rafters in evidence from the building’s days as a warehouse. It’s closed in, but the air here is clean, free from the heavy smog of the outdoor streets. The magic users and familiars that roam its creaky corners breathe deeply and speak freely.

A large wooden sign, hanging on the nearest second-story platform, reads “A SANCTUARY FOR FAMILIARED CITIZENS.”

Hazel stands up tall. Walking into Sanctuary has always felt like coming home after a long day in the rain or snow. She’s been coming here a few times a week since she was nine years old, when she started her apprenticeship with Master Sorcerer Astor Congelier. Here, she can shed her secrets like a damp coat or cold boots, and her feet know the twists and turns of this place as surely as they know her own bedroom. She pushes past familiar stalls, one labeled “Magical Remedies” and the second labeled “Magical Maladies,” overseen by identical salt-and-pepper women with identical salt-and-pepper dogs. A hook nosed crone tries to sell her a talisman for attracting “the right sort of man.”

She picks her way to the back wall. There, a brick building stands beside all the slap-dash civilization that surrounds it. On its front is a massive mural, painted in blinding-bright colors, of a dragon waltzing in a rumple-front ball gown with a monocled turtle, each holding massive mugs of frothy beer. The top reads thusly:

THE DRUNKEN DRAGON: FOR WHEN A TIPSY TURTLE JUST ISN’T ENOUGH

Hazel’s lips curl into a smile. Despite the dangers of the outside world, this is still a safe haven, a sanctuary, for the weird and the whimsical. This is a place for drunken dragons and tipsy turtles to cast spells without pounding hearts and over-the-shoulder glances.

Inside the bar, a pianist with a beagle at his feet pounds out a bright tune, and a man lounges atop the gleaming upright. People dance in a gap between the high tables and long bar. They are as varied as the people outside—well-dressed and fraying, men and women, old and young. Few are quite so young as Hazel, though. Magic is generally an adult game.

“Hazel, dear girl! There you are!” the man shouts from atop the piano. He hops down in pink-shoe sprightliness. He is short, only inches taller than Hazel’s rather meager five-feet-no-inches, but his voice and presence dominate the bar. Purple suspenders poke out of his suit jacket, and a red-and-green parrot takes up residence on his top hat. His name is Nixby Glass, and the Drunken Dragon is his natural habitat. He is the owner of Sanctuary, and the overseer of magic in Allegheny City. Nothing happens in this magical city without his knowledge or approval, but Nixby Glass a jovial sort of dictator. It is also his birthday and his party, though no one seems to quite know exactly how old he is. As far as Hazel is concerned, he has always been and might always be.

“Hello, Master Nixby,” she says. He pulls her into a tight hug, and then holds her at arms’ length.

“Look at you. It’s a good thing you came. I have a birthday present for you.” Nixby produces a wooden box bearing a shiny bow and presents it to Hazel with a wink and a parrot-dipping tip of his hat. He ushers her to one of the high tables.

***Excuse me if I don’t watch this charade*,** Soren says. He disappears into the crowd, and she lets him go. He doesn’t like Nixby at all, but Nixby is everything that Hazel has always wanted magic to be. He is storybook-fantastic, far removed from the paranoid everyday of Hazel’s apprenticeship.

“Master Nixby, it’s *your* birthday, not mine,” she says. “Besides—don’t you think I’m a little old for you to keep giving me presents every time I see you?”

“How old are you, again? Forty-three? Eight-eight? One hundred and six?”

“I’m seventeen, Master Nixby.”

“So young as that? I think you can still indulge an old man who likes to dote on you, no?”

“I suppose for another few decades, I’ll be young enough for that.” She gives him a well-rehearsed, indulgent smile. Soren is right. This sort of greeting is a charade, one that they’ve acted out a hundred times before, whenever Nixby shows up for dinner or “borrows” Astor on some magical business in the city. But Hazel loves the familiarity of it anyway, loves having a secret ritual that doesn’t feel dangerous or scary at all. She takes the box and pulls open the bow in a smooth motion. Inside is a heavy silver pendant, an oval with a carved out rose. A blushing smile spreads across her lips. “You shouldn’t have, Master Nixby.”

“Well? Turn around so I can put it on you. Hurry now,” Nixby says.

“Hurry now. Hurry now,” Nixby’s familiar echoes from atop his hat. Nixby calls him Luck the Liar, and he is the only familiar that Hazel has ever known to speak out loud. He does so sparingly, and only as a real parrot would, though Hazel is sure that he would be capable of actual conversation if it suited him. Luck simply seems to lack the inclination.

***You would not find him a good conversationalist,*** Soren says from afar. Hazel ignores him.

She turns, and Nixby fastens the necklace for her. It hangs heavy over her high-neck blouse, and she takes a deep breath, enjoying the weight of it. It’s a necklace for a grown woman, and she finds that here, in a room containing more than a few old men who knew her when she was still losing baby teeth, having something so definitively adult makes her feel more herself.

“Absolutely stunning,” Nixby says as she turns with a little film-star flourish. “Now, I have to attend to my other guests, but it was so good to see you, darling.”

“Happy birthday, Master Nixby.”

“Thank you, my dear.” With that, Nixby rejoins the crowd, a king among his people.

From a table against the wall, Master Sorcerer Astor Congelier watches her with customary intensity. His red bearded jaw carries an impatient edge. Hazel’s master is not a man well suited for parties, even those thrown in his honor. Perhaps especially those thrown in his honor. Nixby says he’s too young for such stern expressions, though Hazel thinks that if Nixby himself is any indication, the decades that separate the two men might bring with them more merry eccentricities than scowls.

Soren is already next to him, standing beside his enormous familiar, an Irish wolfhound he calls Lady. Hazel considers pretending she hasn’t seen him, just so she can wade in through the festivities, maybe sneak a glass of champagne or find someone she knows.

***He’s already seen you.***

Avoidance, it seems, is not an option.

“Hello, Master.”

“You’re late. I told you to be here at three,” Astor says.

“I’m sorry, Master, I was—”

“Did you get your schoolbooks?” Astor asks, cutting off her explanation. Hazel has a lot of explanations—she couldn’t find the book she needed for Botany, and then she missed the trolley, and then she got off at the wrong stop, and then the sidewalk was unimaginably crowded and *then* she was late. Forty-five minutes late. Astor is not a fan of excuses, though. He *is* a fan of punctuality.

“Yes, Master.”

“Do you know your route to school?”

“Yes, Master.” Hazel had been attending a public high school for the last three years, but at the end of last year, the administration suddenly had a lot of questions about why exactly there didn’t seem to be any confirmation that Astor Congelier was truly Hazel Congelier’s uncle as they claimed. So for her last year she’s transferring to a new school. It doesn’t much matter to Hazel either way—it’s difficult to maintain friendships with people when you’re lying to them all the time, after all, and she isn’t really leaving anyone behind.

“Good,” Astor says, his hand straying to his short beard and his eyes straying to the crowded room. “Very good. Any trouble getting in the door?”

“No, Master. It’s a simple spell.”

“Were you careful?”

“Very.” She doesn’t tell him about the police officer. There are too many officers of the law willing to arrest her to tell her master every time one decides to saunter in her direction.

“Good,” Astor says. His face softens as his eye catches on Nixby, who spins in tight circles on the floor with one of the tallest women Hazel has ever seen. Hazel never sees Astor so happy as when he is in the presence of his former master, even if he happens to be at a party. Nixby has a knack for melting Astor’s stoic affect, revealing the downright affable man that he keeps stored away for special occasions. For a moment, sitting broad shouldered and smiling, he almost looks as young as he is. “Our Nixby is in fine spirits.”

“Master Nixby is always in fine spirits.” An indulgent smile clings to her lips as she watches Nixby waltz across the room, Luck squawking out the next song from atop his hat.

“You say that because you never had to endure one of his lessons,” Astor says.

“Is that where you learned it from?”

“Mmm. Be careful, girl. I just might pull out one of his techniques. Did I ever tell you that Master Nixby once—”

“Made you sit on the roof for six hours until you managed to float your way down without any clues or hints at all? Yes, I’m pretty sure I heard that once before, Master,” Hazel teases. It’s one of Astor’s favorite stories, and either he or Nixby tells it on every holiday and during every visit.

“No, no, this was a different time. This time I was only twenty-six, barely half trained, and—”

The Drunken Dragon’s front doors *slam* open, and the deafening crack triggers an expectant hush among the bar’s dancers and drinkers and talkers and laughers. The piano clanks to a discordant finale. A rumple-coat, wild-eye newcomer stumble-foots in. He looks up through stringy fringes of graying hair.

“Paladins,” he says.

The world stands still. Hazel grabs Astor’s hand. He squeezes back. The silence of held breaths and stretched seconds permeates the space.

Time catches up. A nearby dancer trips. A waitress drops her tray with a glittering spray of broken flutes and champagne droplets. Lovers push to be close to one another, strangers find comfort in nearby bodies. Shouts, screams, murmurs, cracked glass. Panic. It rings against Hazel’s ears.

***Stay calm,*** Soren says. Hazel clings to Astor’s hand. She is silent; she is still.

She isn’t calm.