

CHAPTER 1

*H*ERE COMES TROUBLE!

That was my first thought when the horse and carriage stopped in front of our house.

But, with permission, I must begin by telling you my name is Fabrizio, and I am the thirteen-year-old servant of Mangus the Magician. That morning, I'd been doing one of my many chores — sweeping the hall — and had opened the front door to brush out the dust and let in the morning sun. So it was me who saw the carriage arrive with its team of horses. Painted on the carriage door was the crest of Pergamontio's king, Claudio the Thirteenth. Whenever *that* carriage with *that* sign came to our house, it always brought disaster.

No sooner did the carriage stop than a man leaped out.

He was a tall, sharp-faced man, with a pointy nose, thin lips, bright eyes, and a spiky red beard. His shimmering green silk jacket reached his knees. On his legs were multi-colored leggings and fine leather boots. A flat black cap sat on his head. Sticking up from that cap was a peacock

feather whose vanes came together in the shape of a blue-green eye that seemed to glare at me with anger. But what made me truly uneasy was the dagger that hung from his belt, its blade so sharp it glittered.

All that said, Master and Mistress insisted that whenever anyone came to our door — beggar or baron — I must greet them with courtesy. I, therefore, dropped my straw broom, hurried forward, and bowed.

“Signore,” I said, “with permission, how may I be of service?”

The man barked back: “I am Signor Lorenzo Rozetti, Pergamontio’s royal tax collector, in the service of King Claudio. In the person of me, he commands Mangus the Magician to attend him immediately.”

Mangus was called “the Magician” because he had performed magic shows in Pergamontio for many years even though he refused to admit he knew *any* true wizardry. Then King Claudio forbade the performances. So whenever my master’s name — Mangus — was linked to the word *magic*, I was instructed to say, as I did: “Signore, my master no longer performs magic.”

But I do, I reminded myself, not that I was about to admit it.

“I don’t give a fig what Mangus does,” returned Signor Rozetti in an arrogant voice. “The king commands he come at once.”

Trying to hide my alarm, I said, “Yes, Signore, of course. Absolutely. I’ll tell my master right away.”

I started to go, but being worried, I stopped and turned back. “Signore, with permission, may I tell my master something more?”

“Advise him,” said the tax collector, putting a hand to his dagger’s hilt, “that he might not return home.”

Truly frightened, I slammed the door shut, bolted it, and raced down the hallway to where my master was.

Mangus’s study looked the way a magician’s room should look. Below a low, soot-blackened oak-beamed ceiling, everything was shadowy and still. Only a few fingers of light slipped through the solitary window’s splintered shutter, lighting up motes of dust that swirled through the gloom like stars in a midnight sky.

On the floor, a firepot offered no heat, just ashes.

Against the walls, sagging shelves were stuffed with battered books and musty manuscripts. Many of the volumes were about magic, charms, and omens. Though I was forbidden to read those books, you may be sure I did — in secret. Of late, I'd been studying omens, which allowed me to foresee the future.

Many a midnight I heard the old man's feather pen scrape and scratch like a scurrying rat, which convinced me he was writing mystic incantations. But when I asked him what he had been composing, all he would say was "Philosophy."

I didn't believe him.

In the room's center stood a heavy oak table, on which a human skull had been placed. (I had no idea whose.) In the empty head was a thick candle, placed so that light could shine through the hollow eye sockets and brighten any pages that lay before Mangus. That morning, the candle had become as lifeless as the skull: a most regrettable omen. Moreover, Master had fallen asleep over his writing, another unlucky sign.

As for Mangus, he was a short, stoop-shouldered, and

sad-eyed old man, with a much-wrinkled face from which dangled a frowsy gray beard that looked like a tattered paintbrush. On his head was a leather cap with flaps that covered his few strands of gray hair as well as his large, hairy ears. Draped over his back was a dark wool cape, while on his feet were boots of moth-eaten rabbit fur.

What you need to know is that I had come to live with Mangus and his wife, Mistress Sophia, two years before. I had been a homeless street orphan, and they brought me into their home so I might take care of them and their house. So I cleaned, ran errands, and fetched what they needed. In return, they fed me and gave me a straw bed in their tiny attic. I am happy to acknowledge they treated me kindly. Moreover, in such free time as I had, I did as I wished. To be sure, I had no money, but I was content.

That said, my sole complaint was that the old man *refused* to teach me any magic. He claimed he didn't know any. How exasperating. How annoying. How regrettable. If I'd known even a bit of magic, I would have done all manner of marvelous things.

In truth, my great fear was that the old man might die

without passing on any of his secrets to me. If that happened, I'd become what I had been before: an orphan beggar on Pergamontio's streets. You may be sure, then, beyond all else, I needed to keep Mangus alive.

I touched the old man's arm and said, "With permission, Master. You must get up."

Stiff from sleeping in an awkward position, Mangus sat slowly and rubbed his wrinkled face with half-mittened hands. He pulled at his beard and yawned.

(This worried me because as I had learned in one of his books, if you don't cover your mouth when you yawn, evil spirits can slip into your body.)

"Is it . . . is it already morning, Fabrizio?" Mangus asked in his scratchy voice.

Knowing the king's summons would upset him, I was reluctant to speak.

Mangus turned to look at me. I was wearing my patched tunic with a frayed rope belt around my waist and cloth boots on my feet. My thick black hair was — as always — a snarl. But I suppose the only thing Mangus noticed was my dark eyes, my stub nose, my olive

complexion, and my round face, which at that moment I'm sure was full of worry.

“Has something unpleasant happened, Fabrizio?”

“Forgive me, Master,” I replied. “A gentleman is asking for Mangus the Magician.”

“Tell him to go away,” muttered the old man, and he leaned back over the table and cradled his head in his arms.

I gave him another gentle poke. “It's the royal tax collector, Master. Sent by King Claudio.”

“Why should the king send him?” muttered Mangus. “I have no money.”

“All he would tell me is that you might not return home.”

Those ominous words made Mangus pop up so fast it caused him to wince. His face had turned paler than usual. “Fabrizio, did he truly say such an appalling thing?”

“Master, I know it's better to have no answer than a bad one, and I did ask for more facts, but that's all the signore would say. Though it's unpleasant, I'm afraid you must go. With permission, I'll be at your side.”

“Ah, Fabrizio, the more you hurry, the shorter your life.”

“Forgive me, Master, people say that the shorter the

life, the greater the need to hurry. Perhaps you should use your magic to make yourself disappear.”

“Fabrizio, you know I’ve nothing to do with magic.”

“Master, magic is the best way to make people respect you.”

“Nonsense.”

“If the world makes no sense, Master, nonsense must do.”

The old man smiled. “Fabrizio, if the devil appeared, you would joke with him.”

“Alas, Master, I fear that the devil is already at our door.”

Mangus’s good humor faded. His sad gray eyes filled with anxiety. “Did the king truly ask that I come?”

“Not *ask*, Master. Command.”

“Then I have no choice,” Mangus said with a sigh. With that, he set his hands on the chair armrests and pushed himself into a standing position. Once up, he wobbled, but when I reached out to steady him, he waved me away.

“Master, I’ll go with you to the king. Shall I tell Mistress we’re leaving?”

The lines on Mangus’s face deepened. “Yes, go tell her. The least I can do is say farewell to my good wife.”