

MIDNIGHT MAGIC

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ISBN 978-1-338-80438-6

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

21 22 23 24 25

Printed in the U.S.A. 40
This edition first printing 2021

The text type was set in 13.5/17 M. Bell.
The display type was set in Monstra and Inscription.

Book design by Marijka Kostiw

CHAPTER 1

IN 1491, IN THE KINGDOM OF PERGAMONTIO, THERE LIVED a twelve-year-old boy by the name of Fabrizio. He was the sole servant of Mangus the Magician.

One sweltering summer eve, near midnight, a violent storm broke over the city where Fabrizio lived. Lightning splintered the inky darkness. Thunder rumbled like siege guns. The falling rain fell with the sound of a million hissing snakes.

Dirty faced, scrawny, and shaggy haired, the boy was sitting in the dry front hall of his master's ancient timbered house, wearing an old, long-sleeved tunic with a belt made from a piece of frayed rope. His cloth boots were hand-me-downs of hand-me-downs.

Close at hand was a lantern that burned a flame no bigger than a button. There was also a cudgel with which he was supposed to beat away anyone who tried to enter the house. But as far as Fabrizio was concerned, the most important thing before him was a tattered pack of tarot cards. These cards, he believed, could fashion the future. Since he could envision no life for himself other than as a servant, it was his master's fate he wished to shape.

When the great cathedral bells rang twelve times, Fabrizio, knowing midnight was the best time to cast the cards, reached for the deck. But now that the hour had come, he was so nervous, his trembling fingers could barely square the pack of cards, much less shuffle them.

When he finally managed to do so, he took a deep breath, brushed the hair back from his eyes, and turned over the first card. It was

The Magician

Fabrizio smiled. Who else could the card represent but Mangus?

He turned the second card. It was

The Servant

This time, Fabrizio laughed. No doubt as to who *that* card represented. That his master's fate included him was exactly his desire.

Quickly, he laid out the next six cards:

The Castello The King The Ghost
The Princess The Tutor The Queen

Fabrizio frowned. He had hoped for something better.

It all looked too much like Mangus's past life. Nonetheless, the boy readied the last card, the one that would determine his master's ultimate fate.

Eyes shut, praying to see *Riches*, Fabrizio turned over the ninth and final card. When he opened his eyes and saw that the card was

Death

he gasped.

Even as he did, a crash of lightning shook the house. Simultaneously, an explosive pounding erupted on the front door. The summons came so suddenly, and at such an appallingly awful moment, the tarot cards spurted from his hands like a geyser.

Terribly frightened, Fabrizio scooped up the cards, jammed them into his pocket, groped for the cudgel and lantern, and jumped to his feet.

The knocking grew more insistent.

“I’m coming!” he cried as he hurried down the hallway.
“I’m coming!”

By the time Fabrizio reached the front door, he decided to be cautious. No telling who — or what — was on the other side. Had he not just cast the Death card?

“Who’s there?” he called.

“A message from the castello!” came a shouted reply.

The castello! Death itself would have been more welcome. Fabrizio’s first thought was to run to his master and give warning. After all, it was only ten months since Mangus, arrested and brought to trial in that same castello, had, under threat of torture, confessed and repented of being a magician. Though Mangus’s life had been spared at the last moment by King Claudio, he remained under house arrest and was watched constantly. Not allowed to even step outside, Mangus had agreed to shun all who came to his door.

So although the magician’s house was in the heart of the city, the old man and his wife — her name was Sophia — had lived like hermits since the trial. For all they knew, the rest of the world had ceased to be. Only Fabrizio was allowed to venture forth for such necessities as food.

At one time Mangus had three servants. When he went on trial, two had fled, not wishing to serve a man who more than likely was going to be burned to death at the stake for wizardry. Fabrizio felt otherwise. Having lost both his parents when he was young, he was overjoyed when the City Corporation bound him over to Mangus. In those days the magician was a rich and honored citizen. Only when he was arrested did wealth and respect evaporate. Fabrizio, however, was not going to abandon the man who had been like a father to him.

“Open up!” came a cry from beyond the door.

Hands shaking, Fabrizio pulled back the iron bolt, cracked open the door, and peeked out. By the feeble glimmer of his lantern light he saw a soldier standing in the swirling rain. The man’s black cloak whipped in the wind like an angry raven’s wings.

“A message for Mangus the Magician,” the soldier shouted above the storm.

“Signore!” Fabrizio called, reciting the response he had been instructed to give to all who came to the door: “My master, Mangus of Pergamontio, no longer practices magic! Under the loving protection of King Claudio, thirteenth of

that name, he has seen the error of his ways and has repented! Magic is an evil!”

“Evil or not,” the soldier returned over the roaring storm, “it’s urgent he come to the door!”

Fabrizio gave another practiced reply. “Signore!” he cried. “If you wish to engage my master with anything concerning his former, sinful ways, he will not see you!”

At this, the soldier shifted his position slightly, enough so Fabrizio could look upon the narrow, water-soaked street. Another flash of lightning revealed a carriage. Large and black with four ebony horses in its traces, it suggested great wealth. But the most meaningful thing Fabrizio saw was that the insignia on the carriage door — by which he might have discovered on whose authority the visit was being made — had been hidden by a piece of cloth. It made Fabrizio recall the old saying “Bad news always hides its face.”

“Signore,” he cried, “don’t you understand? My orders are to let no one in! Master Mangus has renounced his past! He wants nothing to do with those who try to lure him back to sinfulness!”

The soldier wiped rain from his face. “Well spoken, cur,” he mocked. “And, might I add, well performed.”

“It’s true!” the boy exclaimed, and made an attempt to shut the door.

The soldier kicked the door back open with his booted foot. Then he drew a scroll of parchment from beneath his cape and, attempting to shield it from the rain with his free hand, thrust it at Fabrizio. “Take this to your master,” he commanded. “It’s from King Claudio. Count Scarazoni himself awaits in the carriage to escort you.”

“*Count Scarazoni!*” Fabrizio cried. Not only was Scarazoni the king’s closest adviser, most people believed he was the real power in the kingdom. Fabrizio knew him best as the principal tormentor of Mangus at his trial.

As Fabrizio took the parchment, he said, “Signore, would you care to wait inside?”

“In a magician’s house? Are you mad?”

“Whatever you say, Signore!”

Slamming the door shut, Fabrizio all but burst into tears, convinced that, by casting the tarot cards, he had brought on his master’s doom. With leaden feet, he went off to search for him.