

Chapter 1

The forest hated humans.

At least, so it seemed. Being a warren of hungry monsters and deadly plants, bubbling with chaos magic, gave it a certain feeling.

Cantor slipped through it, finding the spaces, sensing the dangers. He had just enough of his own magic to do so, just enough skill to dissuade what he couldn't avoid. A quick shuffle of his feet, perhaps a short melody, and whatever threatened him would understand that he wasn't there, wasn't a threat, or wasn't edible.

It was tiring. Hard enough hiking miles through the woods without the constant need to be aware, to keep moving, to avoid, to manipulate, to stay patient enough to deal with it all without resorting to violence. But it was the afternoon of a long day, and he was losing it.

A particularly nasty cedar tree lay just ahead; he could feel its anger vibrating, hear the rustling of branches.

"Sin's wages!"

He stepped toward the edge of the path, to move into the undergrowth. It was passable; the thick canopy restricted the light, limiting the growth, at least a little. Still difficult to traverse, a tangle of mossy logs and tough, thorny branches, full of lesser dangers that liked to remain hidden from the larger monsters. But it was easier than trying to persuade the tree to leave him alone.

Movement. A man-wolf crept out of the forest, crouched at the base of the tree's massive bole. As tall as a human, all dark brown fur, curving fangs and razor claws, the wild ones such as this were little more than sacks of anger and hunger.

The creature looked up. Their eyes locked. The wolf's head lowered slightly, its long pink tongue slipping out of its mouth, anticipating fresh meat.

Cantor's patience snapped.

“Enough!” He pulled his sling off his belt and grabbed a round rock from his pocket, dropping it in the weapon’s pouch. He spun the cord three times around his head, released the free end. The stone streaked through the dappled green light to crack against the thick, rough trunk, right above the wolf’s scalp. The creature’s head spun, took in the gouge the missile had made in the wood. Turning back to Cantor, it saw the sling already spinning again, another rock weighting the end. Glaring, the wolf sprinted off into the woods.

Which Cantor didn’t see, as he was diving away from the sharpened spikes the tree shot at him, in its fury at the attack on its trunk.

“That wasn’t very nice,” observed someone.

Cantor came up onto one knee, watching the tree warily; it was moving a little, but no more darts flew toward him. He slowly rose, scanning the woods, but sensed no other imminent danger.

“I’m over here.”

His eyes found the owner of the voice. A pixie, not much bigger than Cantor’s hand, sat primly on a branch to the side of the path, legs crossed, his long pink hair gathered in a tail, delicate wings folded on his back.

Cantor frowned as he brushed dirt and twigs off his robes, tightened the strap that held the bag holding his guitar; he liked to have the instrument, even on trips like this where music wasn’t the job, but it was annoying when it banged around and got in the way. “Not nice? The Shambles aren’t a nice place. The wolf was thinking I’d make a meal. Besides, I missed it on purpose. Just trying to scare it.”

“Sure. Still not a good idea. You’ve been walking along, singing, using magic to keep the creatures away, or to avoid them. But then you take a shot at one and break a piece out of a tree? You trying to make everything even angrier than usual?”

Cantor could feel the weight of the forest’s regard all around him. He raised his hands, scanned the gloom. “Look, friend....”

“Ellis is the name.”

“Ah, Ellis. Cantor. Look, Ellis, I’m tired. Walking through the woods in the Medials is hard enough. In the Shambles, it’s like things never stop coming.”

“If you can’t be civil, they won’t.”

Cantor dropped his hands, walked over to the pixie. The minstrel was a tall man, rangy but solid, dressed in brown, both wool and leather, in robe, treads, tunic and boots. His hazel eyes were almost level with the small creature where it sat on its branch. “Maybe, Ellis, you can go argue with Shaman Bellows, who’s been telling me I have to go see the guide, the angel. The new angel. Maybe you can talk to the angel and tell her to get out of my head, because she’s there all the time, whether I’m awake or asleep.”

“That makes her the woman of your dreams, doesn’t it?”

“No, she’s the woman *in* my dreams, whom I’d rather not have there. She’s a chaos blasted angel! My ‘spiritual guide’. And she keeps blathering away in my head that I need to come see her.”

“Oh, blather, is it? The spiritual guide is blathering? That’s how you take the message from the gods?”

Cantor reached up, rubbed his eyes. He really needed to control his temper, his mouth. The Shambles were not the place to get carried away. He took a deep breath. “Well, she doesn’t exactly sound like an angel is supposed to sound, at least not the way I’ve been told.”

“Ah. Well, yes, she’s an odd one, if she’s the one I’m thinking of. You’re headed in her direction.”

“You’ve met her? How is she odd?”

“Oh, you’ll see.” The pixie’s eyes scanned the woods. “Better get going. Everything around here’s still grumpy, and that wolf might come back with his friends.”

“What do you care?”

The pixie shrugged his small shoulders. “Dunno.” A small grin. “It all looks interesting.”

“Glad to provide the entertainment.” He faced the path, gathered himself, reached out with his internal sense. Yes, that tug led ahead still, the pull he’d been experiencing for some weeks.

He scanned for more feelings of anger, of hunger in the woods, but found nothing; no new danger lurked nearby, just the tree he’d struck. He looped

through the forest to avoid it, then went back on the path.

The pixie buzzed up beside him. Cantor eyed the little creature as it hovered. "Really? You're going to follow me to see what happens?"

"Like I said, this all looks interesting." The small creature moved ahead of Cantor, turned and flew backwards, facing him. "I saw you singing to those centaurs back there, and you danced past the Blackberry Collective. I don't know why sentient plants are such suckers for that."

"What about it?"

"You have some shaman powers already."

"Yes. That's supposedly why the angel called me. She's going to finish the job and give me all of a shaman's abilities."

"Hopefully, in a way that leaves you alive and sane."

Cantor stopped. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just the usual. You know how it is. When the angels transform humans into shamans, mages, chaordics, it can go badly. Chaos magic does weird things to people, and it's unpredictable."

"Tell me something I didn't know."

"Sure. I already did; like I said, this angel isn't normal, and she's very new. I'm not sure I'd trust her with my sanity."

Cantor's head drooped. "Sin's wages." He stood there for a moment. "And everyone wonders why I don't want to do this. 'Go get some magic', they say. 'Be a help for your people.' 'It's your destiny.'" He closed his eyes. "What a pile of crap."

The pixie giggled. "Can't disagree. So why come?"

"Because Shaman Bellows won't shut up about it, and the angel won't leave me alone, either. One's in my ear, one's in my head."

"Interesting effect. Just think, what if you could compose music like that?"

"I think people like the way I compose and play music just fine. I don't need to be stuffed full of chaos magic to do it."

He set off down the path again, sensing, watching. The sun was still high in the early spring sky, though only the glow was visible through the thick canopy of evergreen and leafed trees, the wide, gnarled limbs and trunks. The air was

redolent with the smell of forest and moisture. Ivernia's west coast was wet, the storms bumbling in from the sea; the clouds collided with the mountains that ran down the center of the continent, dumping their freight on the slopes, forests and swamps below. No rain had fallen today, but it never dried completely, and the damp air and ground, the deep cover of leaves and needles, made for a quiet space, broken only by the wind, the rustle of leaves and branches, and the occasional scuttle of small feet, or the cry of some creature off in the distance.

"So," said Ellis, flitting beside Cantor, "what are you going to do with your new power when you get it?"

Cantor shrugged his pack and guitar a little higher on his shoulders. "No idea. Nothing special. Whatever happens, I'm going to continue doing what I've been doing. Traveling around, making music."

"That's it? Not going to help humanity?"

"Not particularly. I don't want more power, I didn't ask for it. So I'm going to do what I've always done, and help myself."

"Ah, I see. You mean, help yourself to other peoples' stuff?"

Cantor halted again, glared. "And what do you mean by that?"

The pixie waved a hand. "Oh, pixies hear things. Pixies see things."

"Maybe," said Cantor slowly, carefully, his teeth ground together, "pixies should stop being so nosy. Maybe pixies should leave."

"My, so grumpy. Look, you could have found an elf, instead, who wouldn't have provided any conversation at all, being as you're a human."

Cantor's hand clenched on his sling. He restrained himself from pulling out a rock, and growled, "I'd like that a lot better. Silent companionship."

"But..."

"Goodbye."

The pixie fluttered a moment longer, then muttered, "Fine," and zipped off through the forest.

Cantor watched the creature go, breathing slowly, calming himself. He straightened, resettled his load.

Time to get this over with. He grimaced. *Why, in the name of chaos, can't everyone and everything leave me alone?*

He marched off down the path.

Cantor stepped off the forest path into a clearing. A clearing that was occupied.

A woman hung in the air, upright, arms spread wide, a gesture meant to be welcoming — at least, that's what the lore said. She wore a long black robe that cascaded below her feet. Waves of dark hair fell down her back and chest. Both robes and hair moved as if in a breeze, rippling slightly.

To Cantor, the air in the clearing was absolutely still; it was that point late in the afternoon when calm comes to the day, so what breeze caressed the angel, he didn't know. He dropped his pack and guitar, walked over, looked up at her.

Her eyes were all black, no pupil visible, staring ahead, unseeing. She said no word, made no move.

"Well?" he growled. "You've been blabbing in my head for weeks. Nothing to say?"

The head turned, the eyes focused on him. Her lips compressed, brows furrowed. "I don't know."

"You don't know? You dragged me all the way across the Shambles to tell me you don't know?" He crossed his arms. "I didn't want to come, but you're hard to ignore. Then I arrive and hear this?"

"I didn't ask to be here either!"

Cantor's mouth worked open, then closed. "Really? So, what, you're a puppet, and someone's pulling your strings, making you act like an angel?"

Her eyes snapped back to straight ahead. "Feels like that, at times. Most of the time." She turned to him. "All the time!"

He shook his head, looked around the clearing, near perfectly circular and covered in green sward. The undergrowth beneath the surrounding trees was thicker here where the light streamed from above.

It was warm for the season, and he was hot and sweating from the journey. He closed his eyes for a moment, gathered himself. "So, you're supposed to do something to me, aren't you? Turn me into a proper magic user: a shaman, or a mage, or a chaordic?"

"I guess so."

"You guess so? Angels don't say, 'I guess so.' You're just supposed to do it. What happened the last time someone showed up?"

She was silent for a moment. "There wasn't a last time."

"I heard you were new, but...I'm the first seeker who's come to find you?"

"Yes."

"Oh." He rubbed his eyes, breathed, pushing down a wave of panic. "But you know what you're doing, right?"

"No."

"What do you mean, no?"

"Oh, my! Aren't you supposed to be the supplicant, on your knees before me, begging to be made whole, or fixed, or whatever in the name of chaos I'm supposed to do to you?"

He stared at her. How had he got stuck with the world's first clueless angel?

The events of the day rolled through him like a wave, a barrage of absurdity. He burst into laughter.

She spoke through clenched teeth. "I really don't see what you find funny."

He chuckled one last time, shook his head. "Am I even in the right place? Did something else pull me here?" He squinted up at her, blocking out the sun with one hand. "Are you really an angel, the angel who called me?" Angel glamor glowed around her, a softness that masked her somewhat, but the long hair, the olive skin, the oval face and straight nose were just as she'd appeared in his dreams. It was tough to tell height, but she seemed small. "Not that I've ever actually met an angel, but you seem real enough."

"Well, that's something," she sneered. "Thanks."

"Look, I'm just trying to understand why I hiked through the Shambles, worrying about being eaten or having some tree shove a branch through me, to come and find you."

"You want me to commiserate with you? How about me? 'Oh, Robin, so sorry you're stuck there.' 'Oh, Robin, there's no one to talk to.' 'Oh, Robin, you must be so lonely.' A little sympathy might be helpful!"

"Yes, well, sorry, it sounds terrible, but...I can't exactly take you to the tavern

for a heart to heart and a pint." He ran a hand through his hair, gazed around, found a boulder to sit on. "And...helpful?" He snorted, waved a hand. "With what? You called *me*. I came here because you wouldn't leave me alone until I did. You're supposed to perform magic on me. You can't." He leaned forward. "If you can't do anything you're supposed to do, what happens now? Can't you ask the other angels? We're told that even though you're all stuck and can't move, you talk somehow."

She shrugged. "It doesn't work very well."

"What?"

"That communication. Yes, I can hear them, sort of. They can sort of hear me. But it's not very strong, words disappear, are too quiet, or all fuzzy. I've got nothing useful from any of them."

"Well, that's wonderful. Tell you what, let's just forget the entire experience, please."

She hesitated. "I should try to make the change, shouldn't I?"

"Why," he growled, "would I want you to? For all I know, you'll turn me into a tree, or a mushroom." He looked around the clearing. Small clusters of fungi sat at the bases of the bushes and trees. A few waggled themselves at his words. He thought one might have winked. "By the Mother, what a mess."

"I am not!"

"No, not you...Robin is it?" She nodded, tight-lipped. He continued. "I mean, I guess you *are* a bit of a mess, but this whole situation is a mess. No, I don't want you to turn me into anything. I didn't want to be here at all. I didn't want to march through the Shambles. As far as I can tell, the only thing this is making me is unhappy."

"I saw you," she said. "I saw inside your dreams. You have enough chaos magic that you can pass through the forest, soothe the creatures and plants when you need to. Why did that trigger me to call you?"

"Why in Mother's name are you asking *me*?"

Her hands, still outstretched to either side, clenched into fists. "What happened to me is wrong! I don't want magic. I hate magic!"

"What, so you're from the plains? Don't they all hate magic?" He frowned.

“You’ve become one of the most magical creatures, in one of the most magic soaked areas of Ivernia, and you hate magic? That’s ironic, don’t you think?”

“It’s horrible, is what it is.”

He looked at her, then around the clearing, the rocks and trees. “I suppose it is, and I’m sorry you got stuck with it; it’s a pretty lonely life. But all the other angels seem fine; they remember their human life, but don’t regret what they are now. Evangelina, the angel nearest Gallagher, has been there for centuries, without a complaint.”

“Well,” her voice was quiet, “I’m hardly a normal angel.”

“No, you’re not.” He rose, took up his pack and guitar.

“Where are you going?”

“Back to civilization. Back to Gallagher, to get on with my life, with, apparently, no extra powers.” He nodded, glanced down the path. “And I’m happy about that.” He settled his load on his back. “Goodbye, Robin.” He took a step toward the path.

“You can’t go!”

He stopped, the desperate, angry edge to her voice pulling him around. “Why not?”

“I’m...I’m supposed to change you!”

“But you told me you don’t know how, and you’ve done nothing to convince me that trying is a good idea.” He stood a moment longer, then half lifted a hand, shook his head. “No, this has all been pointless.”

“Pointless?” Fury flashed through her eyes, the distress in her voice fell away. “What’s happened to me is pointless?”

“That’s not what I said!”

“It’s how it felt! Maybe I can’t turn you into a shaman, but right now, if I could, I’d turn you into a rock, or a...a turd! That’s what you deserve for leaving me here!” Her hands flexed into fists; blue chaos magic erupted from her body, swirled down her arms, which came together, pointing at Cantor. “Ugh!” she cried. “What’s happening?”

The magic reached her hands, then flew off, coalescing into a single ball that writhed and changed shapes as it shot at the minstrel.

“No!” he yelled. “Don’t...”

The blue orb stopped in front of him, continuing to shift, forming a square, a box hovering in front of him. A picture decorated the lid. Cantor looked at it, frowned. “Tarot cards? But you haven’t made me a shaman. How can I use the cards?”

She could only stare at him helplessly. “I know no more about this than anything else. Don’t shamans use them to predict the future?”

“Sort of.” The box snapped open, and a card spun out, hung in the air in front of him. He frowned. “The Hanged Man?”

“What does that mean?”

“Um, if I remember my mother’s teachings correctly, it means change, sacrifice. That I’m giving up something to move ahead.” The card vibrated, as though in some kind of agreement, then spun back into the pack. With a puff of blue, the box disappeared.

Robin stared at the space where it had floated. “So, you’re a shaman now?”

“No! At least, I don’t feel changed, and none of the magic actually touched me. The cards are here somewhere, but I’ve no idea how to summon or use them.” He looked down at himself; no, he felt no different than he had when he’d arrived. “Time to go before you decide to do more inadvertent magic.”

Her head drooped, the anger gone, the despair flooding back in. “Please....”

“Please what?”

“Please...don’t leave me here.”

He looked away. “I...Robin, I can’t take you with me. I can’t free you.” He sighed. “I mean, I would if I could, but you’re an angel, and these are the laws of chaos magic, created by Mother, enforced by Mischief and Constantine. Mischief doesn’t have a lot of rules for the Shambles and Medials, but one of them is apparently that angels appear in a spot, stay in that spot, and don’t get lonely.”

“You could stay,” she said quietly. “Talk to me.”

“Live here? Where? Build a hut, gather food, haul water?” He looked up at her, floating, unmoving, saw the pain there, and the truth of her plight knifed through him; she wasn’t an angel, she was just a frightened young woman trapped here in an angel’s body, and there was no way to escape.

But he couldn't help her, it wasn't in his power, and what she was asking of him was to give up everything himself, just to keep her company. "Robin, lone humans don't live in the Shambles for a reason — we get eaten. And I have a whole life to get back to. Again, I'm sorry about what happened to you, but I should go."

He turned and headed off down the path.

Robin watched him stride off into the forest, his brown cloak trailing around booted feet. The late afternoon sun gilded the scene, turning the leaves and trees to gold, pouring shining rivulets down his hair. The still air was moving again, and swirls of leaves picked up off the ground, just a little, dancing across the sward. It was pretty, it was quiet.

Empty of anyone or anything to talk to.

"Some angels get very lonely, my friend. Very lonely, and very afraid, indeed."

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