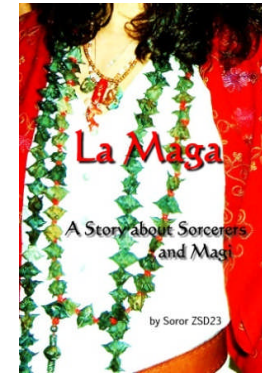


La Maga

Being the First Story in a Series about **Sorcerers and Magi**

by Soror ZSD23

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Chapter III

Abridged

Magus Celestus

Sofia La Maga entered the banquet hall in the company of the dean, Dr. Giordano Bruno. Reggie Solaris noticed. He nudged Leo and derisively uttered, “Who says time doesn’t stand still?” Leo sniffed just as disdainfully and turned his back to the woman. He was 8 years La Maga’s senior, but he remembered the gossip about her from bygone days even before she got into trouble with the State. He had witnessed the girl’s conspicuous familiarity with Bruno, who at that time was a young assistant dean.

Back in the day, Leo had the opportunity to observe the adolescent La Maga coming and going from Bruno’s apartment all throughout her latter years of secondary school. Leo had been on the cusp of his

appointment to the Senate and was working as at the Mediation Council, which was directly across from the Mercury Gardens in the heart of the capital of the North Atlantic Sovereignty. The Gardens southern perimeter abutted the H. Trismegistus Campus Pavilion. You didn't have to sit there long to see everything in the world go by.

Yes, Leo had noticed La Maga's comings and goings. He had been curious about them and what she was all about or would turn out to be. As he remembered it, La Maga was a sharp, adept, and precocious young woman who might have been too bright for her own good or social status. In Leo's unspoken opinion, he didn't think Bruno—despite his reputation for being a player even among his bright-eyed and infatuated students—was dallying with that particular underage maga. He suspected, from certain subtle signs that everyone else was too lazy or dull to notice, that Bruno had given the young La Maga the Pyr Sacra empowerment and had adopted her as his “magical child”—his magical heir . . . his lineage-holder. In Leo's mind, that was more provocative than carnal relations.

Still, it was difficult to decipher whether a mentorship or libidinous tryst or both was between them. Of course it was more entertaining to consider that Bruno and La Maga were lovers. But if Sofia La Maga Magus were the lineage-holder of Dr. Giordano Bruno Sortiar, being so would be a serious and peculiar matter. It meant that La Maga knew and could do all of the wily and threatening things that Bruno could. It was hard to believe looking at her, especially now: a disheveled, wind-blown, bohemian lady mage, reared by folk practitioners, and given to bleeding heart politics and Eastern mysticism.

Leo was torn between observing and ignoring Sofia La Maga during the parent-alumni reception. Like pausing to gape at a train wreck, Leo gave in to observe how bubbly La Maga and Bruno appeared in each other's company.

She was clad in a belted alb and matching dalmatic of unbleached raw silk gauze, which was gossamer and had an off-white coral hue. Overlaying these gown-like ceremonial dresses was a rosy red cape on which was embroidered a flower sacred to magi: the rose. Amulets made of coral, azurite, malachite, and other sacred stones embellished her chest, and instead of a turban, a zucchetto—at type of beanie—rested on her head. Affixed to the zucchetto was a long, red veil of lace netting that obscured her face. Bruno himself was clad, not in sorcerer's garb, but a dapper dark gray three-piece suit.

Leo watched Bruno lift the veil from before La Maga's face and fold it back over the zucchetto. An odd feeling struck him; he expected to see the two kiss like bride and groom after the exchange of vows, but that didn't happen. They simply continued to kid and chat. But the maga did look rather heavenly that night in contrast to how disheveled and savage she had appeared since her return to Terra Nova. No. She was cleaned up for this event and dressed in proper magian ceremonial attire. Her hair was loose, although it had been trimmed and styled for the evening's event. Still voluminous, it fell in neat ringlets over her shoulders and not too far down her back. Leo studied all the details.

"I saw the maga nuzzling up to the good doctor Raphael Magus at the Phoenix and Harp yesterday evening," Reggie muttered slyly. Leo commented that he wondered whether the maga and Alan Raphael weren't an item again. "Or perhaps she's making up for lost time juggling beds with Bruno and that blustery boor."

Reggie Solaris, a polished and stocky man with neat, dark hair, very blue eyes, a seductive smile, ruddy skin, and a gift for gab, was Leo's closest friend. He reported that a slew of persons were in the company of Raphael Magus and La Maga at the Phoenix and Harp Country Club the night before. He added that he hated it when magi invited their folkie, plebian friends to the Phoenix and Harp.

Reggie had been Leo's long-time compatriot in important endeavors such as womanizing and carousing. The man's household was something of a polyamorous tribe: three consorts each of whom shared affections among themselves as well as among extramarital liaisons. Through these, Reggie had a healthy lot of children who may or may not have been expressions of his gene-pool.

Leo's own father had had four bitterly competitive consorts and no time to know too many of the 13 persons—four sons and seven daughters—he had sired from interacting with them. Two of the man's sons had died, though; victims of a magical attack launched against the de Lux clan that almost claimed Leo as well. The other surviving son, Leo's eldest full brother—12 years his senior—was left unscathed, but that revelation took years to surface, considering that the fellow had been long disowned and considered a renegade with whereabouts unknown.

This elder brother had adopted the fatherly role when Leo was very young. He was doting and supportive for a time, but something went wrong in his mind. After white magian garb and politically charged prophetic tracts about an uprising that would overhaul the eon were found in his living quarters, the brother was sent—or rather exiled—far, far away, across the sea. And although the family told all who asked that he was studying abroad, he actually had been discreetly committed to a sanatorium in the snowy northern

hinterlands of the Terra Principalis. It was a mean and flippant jibe for his siblings to refer to him as Old Saturn, because he had been disarmed and exiled to a place like Hyperborea. Leo was 8 years old at the time, the same age that Leonard had been when his mother departed to start over elsewhere.

The brother had escaped the sanatorium and became a shadowy figure at the helm of a secret and virtually untraceable illuminist society called the Lions of Light.

Leo nudged Reggie upon spying the arrival of Alan Raphael Magus at the reception. He was conspicuously dressed in a blindingly white and gold dalmatic, chasuble, and matching cope. His head was wrapped in a relaxed, rakishly-styled turban with a long tail that ended in a large, spun-gold tassel, and he wore white stockings and white and gold slippers that had long toe boxes that curled into decorative whorls.

“By Jove,” Leo jocularly swore. “Forgot my sunglasses at home.”

Ceremonial vestments were, like among some Outer Plane Christian clergy, modeled after late Greco-Roman attire. The first layer was the alb, a belted, long, straight gown with long, fitted sleeves. Over or in place of this was worn the dalmatic, a knee- or ankle-length smock with wide sleeves. The chasuble was an embroidered, sleeveless piece of apparel that slipped over the head and draped over the shoulders. It was worn over the dalmatic. Finally, the cope, a richly decorated, hooded cape, might be worn.

Magi almost always wore vestments that were some variation of white accented by gold thread and, occasionally, they included a layer of apparel that was either bright red or some light to brilliant shade of blue. For headdress, they wore turbans or else zucchetos, earning them the disparaging name, among sorcerers, of “beanie-heads.” The women often pinned gossamer veils to their headgear.

Sorcerers were more free about the color schemes of their ceremonial clothes. Purples and brilliant to dark blues or greens were popular, as was black, of course. They preferred the miter—a squat, five-sided hat—or else tall conical hats as a headdress.

Although Leo and Reggie took pleasure in scoffing at Raphael Magus' ostentation, they, too, were clad in voluminous whorls of flashy fabric. Leo himself was clad in as many layers of apparel as Alan Raphael. Not shining white, they were a mélange of purples, greens, and blues with blood red accents and weighted with heavy brocaded mosaics of gem beads. His bejeweled miter had long ear flaps and a high cone-like top. It and his cope forebodingly jangled with jingle bells. His excuse and solace, however, was that, unlike Raphael Magus, he would've much preferred to wear a dapper three-piece suit, like Bruno had, but being who he was, he had to endure being weighted under this mass of regalia when he showed up at these kinds of events. He often wondered whether the exercise was meant to help high-level dignitaries maintain their miserable and menacing attitudes while in public.

In the midst of making small talk with this or that person he overheard La Maga speaking with Professor Vetiver and a couple named Cosmo and Celeste DiCosimo about an audience she had had with Ambassador Gregory Hrasvelg, and his wife, Magdalene.

"She was very gracious," Leo heard La Maga say of Madame Hrasvelg. "And the Ambassador. They treated me very nicely. When I heard they wanted to see me, I had reservations because, you know . . . patricians." La Maga's voice dropped off, but Leo could hear her, Madame DiCosimo, and Professor Vetiver speaking in hushed contemptuous tones. Their whispers were punctuated with snide laughter.

“What a shame about the nephew,” Celeste DiCosimo gasped. “Who would think a kid from such a family would be doing that. But it’s always kids from those people. If they were ordinary pleb or folkie kids, the government would crack down on this nonsense in a second.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if someone up in the ranks is profiting from it,” La Maga said. “But it was heartbreaking about the Hrasvelg’s and the kid’s mother, because they were really really nice people. See, I’m getting all teary-eyed about it.”

Leo turned to observe Madame DiCosimo and Professor Vetiver peering at Professor La Maga in consoling manners. The maga did, indeed, have red, moistened eyes and exuded a very tender sadness.

“And how did the rite go?” Cosmo DiCosimo asked.

“I think it went well,” La Maga replied thoughtfully.

A wave of surprise washed over Leo as the gist of the eavesdropped conversation came to light. Sofia La Maga had performed the Lux Clarus Rite for the nephew of Ambassador Hrasvelg. The youth had been a casualty of the Phaeton maneuver, a particularly dangerous—and illegal—adolescent amusement.

No one ever thought his child participated in Phaeton maneuver matches. This was precisely why de Lux continued to campaign that the blame for such mischief should fall on the parents—all of the parents of participants in Phaeton maneuver matches that came before the law. He would impose heavy fines and even incarceration of these parents and quite remedial rehabilitation for the participants. Such measures would bring a very abrupt end to the ritual, but too many members of the Senate and other legislative bodies thought that these measures were draconian. Reggie also had cautioned Leo that, although his supporters liked his

fire-and-brimstone bit, it was well known that the Phaeton maneuver was an illicit pastime of patrician youths. Were the ritual more aggressively exposed, elite persons in government and business in the North Atlantic Sovereignty would be singled out and held accountable for the crimes of their sons. In addition, their involvement in sports gambling rings would be outed.

And so de Lux lost any expectation that his desire for accountability would be adopted, but this allowed him to be even more dramatically fiery about his views. In turn, he humored advocates who wanted more public education campaigns and special school programs to discourage young men from engaging in this lethal game. The whole thing and its complications angered him.

He approached Reggie, who was leering at some young women who were writhing on the dance floor. Leo asked him if he knew anything about the purpose of Sofia La Maga's audience with the Hrasvelgs. "What rock have you been sleeping under?" Reggie snorted. "You need to get out more." He motioned toward Gwen and Marina. "Look at them." They were still at the bar.

The women were ogling the men and touching each other. Gwen brushed her hand over Marina's breast and pinched a nipple. Marina overdramatized her enthrallment. Leo and Reggie were left focusing on the mark the now erect nipple made through the woman's clingy blouse.

It was apparently too much—or perhaps just enough—for Reggie. He caught the gaze of the youngest consort within his pride. Leo watched that lithe, exotic-looking thing join Reggie as he approached the two other women. The temptresses proceeded to fondle the younger woman while Reggie salivated on the bacchanalian eye candy.

Another fellow sidled up to the group. Then a mediator with whom Leo also was in the habit of having interludes, Vinca Blanco, brushed passed him. She widened her eyes and batted her lashes. “Join the fun, Lord Consul,” she purred. “You are the best altar for a girl to get sacrificed on.”

While Leo was deciding whether to leap in, another gentleman grasped Vinca’s arm as she went skipping toward the lusty amassing.

Leo watched the clique bristle and grope and make its way toward the exit. The players looked back at him in hopes he would follow. Reggie’s voice finally rang in his ear despite that Reggie had already left the hall. “We’ll be at Sarin’s place if you change your mind, buddy.”

There was the impulse to go, but indifference as well. It would have been crazy for Leo to admit to Reggie Solaris that his interest in that sort of entertainment had waned. In the moment, it was intoxicating, but Leo found that, for him, it not only lacked potency; it seemed a bit of a waste of power. He lusted, for sure, but he lusted for another kind of experience. Something . . . transcendental. Vinca did have advanced skills in sex-energy practices, but Leo had concluded that, even though she was adorable, her key wasn’t all that great. He himself occasionally used thought-forms or multiple partners to dabble in sex magic, but something eluded him.

He wandered to the bar and got a tumbler of bourbon. The aura left there by his sometime friends was as steamy as a midsummer day; the kind of day that is so hot and languid that it makes a person mildly hypoxic because the breath is shallow and labored. It was a groggy sensation that Leo nevertheless

experienced as a cloying pressure in the lower regions of his pelvis—his cock—the anatomical site where so much of one’s personal energy sunk, turned inert, dissipated, and squandered itself on banalities.

Only a few years ago, Leo would’ve relished this sensation and gone off to select a consort wannabee or two for an exhaustive reverie. It was annoying now. It was like a dull earache or a cramping hunger pang that couldn’t be sated. Leo observed it as if it were a discipline to do so.

He doffed his heavy miter and freed himself from the weight of his bejeweled and bell-lined cope. He whipped the scapular from his shoulders and loosened the layers of cord belts that gripped his waist.

The music had stopped. Dr. Bruno was smacking his staff against a microphone at center-stage of the band shell. He was tall man with thick black hair and a swarthy, meaty face that exuded a sly joviality. Although he had been lanky—almost willowy—in his youth, he had become rather husky with age. He was always dapper, though, standing there in his slick, satiny, gray suit accented by a silver handkerchief. He gripped a serpentine staff made of silver, gold, lead, and yew in one hand and a tumbler of scotch and soda in the other.

“I’d just like to say that it’s great to have you all here as we begin yet another academic year at the Hermes Trismegistus Campus Pavilion,” he began. “The Graduate Academy has been repeatedly cited as a top-tier institution for magical studies, and the Secondary School is also quite distinguished. And now we’re really pushing the envelope with the professorship of our very own prodigal child so-to-speak, Lady Sofia La Maga Magus who has just begun presenting some advanced training courses at the Secondary School.”

Mild applause interjected Bruno’s speechifying.

“In response to requests, we’ll be sponsoring a program in the near future in which the esteemed maga will entertain us with her exploits in the exotic planes of the Mysticus and the Terra Origen. Isn’t that right, Sofia?” Bruno exclaimed.

La Maga shyly acknowledged him by smiling and fidgeting.

“Apologies if I’m boring you about this woman. It’s just that the Academy is taking this occasion to award her for her achievements with . . . *an honorary degree of Magus Celestus!*” Bruno exclaimed, as if announcing a grand prize to a game show audience.

Leo watched surprise alight on La Maga’s face. Her entourage took turns embracing her.

Some people applauded and remained attentive to the toast and honorary confirmation; others turned their backs in attitudes of contempt and dismissal and went back to conversations and diversions. Leo observed a gaggle of associates from the RCP shake their heads, smirk, and laugh ruefully. They would be gossiping about the presumed sexual history that Bruno and La Maga shared.

Bruno had to beckon La Maga twice before she approached the band shell to accept her degree confirmation. She stumbled on her way, seeming unwieldy in stiletto-style shoes that were red and brocaded and looked more like objects d’ arte than footwear.

Leo watched Bruno present the maga with a new staff. The wood might have been linden, holly, or a combination of both. It was coated in a lattice of gold, brass, and silver and had a rose-shaped finial made of red coral and carnelian. It was difficult to detect, but Leo observed a small gold glyph of the Hebrew letter

tau: τ --a symbol of the sacred center and of God's splendiferous beauty—mounted on the tip of the central bud of the finial.

Bruno cupped his hand on Sofia's head so that his thumb pressed against her brow. At that, Leo imagined that he saw a brief luminescence descend on her. Bruno was bestowing an empowerment oddly and tepidly displayed for all to see. The maga neither winced nor gasped, only twitched as if goosed, so that her upper body became suddenly taller. Leo could see that her gaze was turned upward as if toward a vision. It was as momentary as much as it was momentous. Perhaps it was a magian-style initiation, soft and mushy and lacking the tooth of real initiatic experiences to which sorcerers were privy. The woman didn't display any confusion or expression of awe or surprise in the aftermath. She cheerfully embraced Bruno and toddled away from the band shell to accept more congratulations from her friends.

Within minutes, however, she was briskly walking past the bar to the rest rooms. Leo observed how her pace had changed. She was no longer clumsy in her shoes but, instead, glided with determination. Leo snorted at the silly affectations so many magical persons felt compelled to adopt.

Upon returning from her bathroom break, she approached the bar and began quizzing the bartender about the wines that were in stock. The bartender found himself lining up a rainbow of goblets for a wine tasting exercise. All that was lacking was a spittoon. Leo materialized one and to express his ridicule of La Maga's behavior, he spit a stream of bourbon into it for the entertainment of his barside buddies. Then he sauntered toward the maga and grasped a long, slender goblet of a pale yellow liquid. He shook the glass to make the wine swirl and aerate. He examined how the "legs" of the wine washed against sides of the glass,

and he inhaled the aroma. He passed his hand over the goblet's mouth and handed it to La Maga. "Now try it," he said.

She glared at him, but with an uneasy smile, she sipped the wine and seemed pleased.

"Oh yes," she exclaimed in utter mirth. "This is what real wine tastes like." She held the goblet out to the bartender. The fellow gaped at Leo as if he hoped the Consul might reprimand the woman for her guff. Leo simply smirked, being slightly amused.

"Austrian Rieslings are superior to the German these days," he muttered. "The industry became a victim of the Chaos Principle several decades ago. It was really more of a media hoax."

Made wistful and chatty through the magic of strong drink, Leo explained to the maga that a handful of producers had been caught adding a sweetener—a glycol derivative—to their vintages. "I knew the sorcerer who engineered that. He made a bundle," Leo remarked.

The press sensationalized the questionable practice, reporting that the additive, diethylene glycol, was a component of antifreeze. As damage control, Austria imposed upon its wine producers the strictest rules and standards ever anywhere. "Rendering more recent Austrian wines the purist you'll ever experience outside of the barrels in your father's barn, Lady La Maga," Leo exclaimed.

"Ah. Well, I didn't know that," she simpered. Leo grimaced and rolled his eyes because he was sure that she did. He nevertheless congratulated her on her prestigious honorary degree and told her that she now had to aspire to acquire the degree of Sortiar Excelsis.

She confided that Bruno had just informed her that the Sorcery Education Oversight Committee had told him that if she completed the Sorcery Clinics series and did the required lab work, she could take the test for Sortiar Adeptus level 3. “So, I have to go back to school,” she said grimly. “It’ll take a few years, but it might be nice to try for an Sortiar Excelsus degree,” she mused.

“Accelerate the process and take on a mentor,” Leo suggested. “I could put in a recommendation for you with Medea Sarin Sortiar. I’m in the habit of having ‘relations’ with one of her relations,” he snickered and called to mind such a provocative image of Marina that his eyes rolled up and his skin flushed. He laughed giddily but meanly when he said, “I can’t think of anyone more challenging for a person as distinguished as yourself than Medea Sarin Sortiar. She might be a little too dark for you, though, but then I heard you were involved in some dark practices in the Mysticus. Feeding demons and cavorting with infernal deities . . .”

“Wrathful deities,” La Maga corrected him. “I wouldn’t call those practices ‘dark.’ They were something . . . different. I did almost do something with a cadaver once, but I chickened out.”

“Animating a cadaver,” Leo clucked.

“Yeah. But I couldn’t do it. I mainly did meditations and emanations of deities, mostly the Lunar Goddess cycle,” she stuttered.

“Mmm-hmmm,” Leo muttered. Word was that the maga had become a goddess-worshipper. The term “quaint” came to mind, but he didn’t utter it. Another tumbler of bourbon or a magical goblet of wine from the array before him? He couldn’t decide.

“One of my great grandfathers was a sorcerer,” she announced.

“The grandsire of the folk practitioners who adopted you or another great grand sire?” Leo replied.

The maga became very silent in response. She pulled away from the bar side and backed away, looking sad and disappointed. “Thanks for speaking with me, Lord Consul, but I ought to go back to . . .” Her index finger lamely gestured toward her entourage—Raphael Magus and the lot of them who were still mingling on the main floor of the banquet hall.

“Running from me so soon?” Leo exclaimed and, feeling particularly wicked, launched a lusty Sweet Surrender maneuver of the sorcerous kind on the maga. “I didn’t mean to strike a nerve,” he lilted. “Stay and tell me a story about this great grandfather.”

The maga stood wavering, likely smitten by, or at least assessing, Leo’s magic against her. Her breath billowed high in her chest and her skin flushed dewy.

“I’m not a folk practitioner; I’m a mage,” she plaintively said.

“Of course, La Maga Magus. You’ve proved yourself a curious credit to your ‘family’ and society. Of this, there is no doubt,” Leo replied.

At which, the maga nodded, and with a sneer, deflected Leo’s Sweet Surrender maneuver with such force that he was quite deliciously stricken with a rush of sex so strong that he feared he might mess himself with ejaculate underneath the layers of ceremonial garb he was wearing. He should’ve been very piqued at having the tables turned—and would be later when he recovered—but he couldn’t help but indulge in the sensation that gripped him.

“*Lady La Maga, we should have done that together, I think,*” he gasped. His hand drifted out to paw at her, draw her nearer to him, smell her, seduce her possibly.

“Yeah, well, if you weren’t such a nasty ass,” she replied and immediately went on to babble that her great grandfather was a *fattucchiero*, a “fixer.” “He specialized in coercion and binding spells. He was busy making money casting evil eyes, and my great grandmother was busy raking in dough for lifting them.”

The banter was mildly deflating, but she licked her lips and batted her eyes when she was done. Leo wondered what he was dealing with. He felt swimmy and dreamlike from the spell that had ricocheted back on him and had to remind himself that he was dealing with his own magic, not hers. He was oddly impressed—with himself or her, he couldn’t decide.

What else did he know about her? His mind catalogued through it. She was an orphan adopted by folk practitioners who, for generations, had been immigrating and expatriating from the Inner Plane and, except for an anomaly here or there, they had never academically applied themselves to the magical or mystical sciences. They were folkies with questionable magical fluency. Leo’s ancestors, on the other hand, had fled from the Inquisition to the Inner Plane Regions during the late 15th century. Over the generations, they had distinguished themselves as gifted sorcerers in the Inner Plane Regions and influential powerbrokers in both the Inner and Outer Plane.

Given that fact, Leo was concerned about his son Leonard’s fate. Between his lack of academic achievement and the emotional scars of being abandoned by a perverse mother (and no doubt, Leo’s own lack of attentiveness—Leo conceded as much), the boy was pretty much useless. Leo was had resolved to set

him up in a sinecure in the Outer Plane where he probably would oversee one of Hipparchus Gorgon's enterprises—not that he relished the thought of his son joining the ranks of Gorgon's demonic minions. Given the boy's track record, unless he founded some kind of religious cult in the Outer Plane (and Leo didn't see that happening), Leonard's options were limited.

In that regard, Leo had secretly softened about Sofia La Maga. It was her treatment of his son during that first codes and keys class. She could've humiliated the boy—and Leo by extension—but she turned it around. She had done this either out of the kindness of her magianism, desire to pacify Leo's well-publicized malcontent about her, or her own crafty designs. Regardless, the point was that she had been rather tender and encouraging toward Leonard. In response, the youth revealed to her—and everyone else, including Leo—that he was not an idiot.

Bruno stepped up to Leo and Sofia and asked the maga whether she was ready to depart. He turned to Leo and told him that an entourage was convening at his place. “The beach house, not the apartment,” he said. “Ambassador Hrasvelg is planning to show up around 10. So, if you want, you can still grab a quick lick at the Sarin orgy and then swing by.”

Bruno pivoted on his heels and strode away. Leo was left feeling dumbfounded.

Abruptly making off after her escort, Sofia uttered, “Have a nice night if I don't see you, Lord Consul. Enjoy your lust charm.”