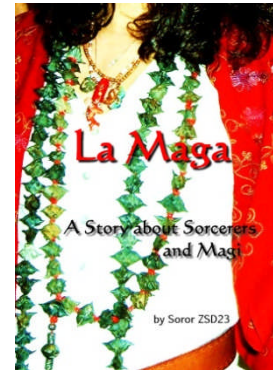


La Maga

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

by Soror ZSD23

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Chapter I

Abridged

The Conus Magus Maneuver

“Pass and photo ID. You can’t get into the class without an admission pass and photo ID: student ID, license to practice magic, magical association card. Did you not receive the notice?” croaked the hall guard. And she was frog-like—small and bloated with a thick, jowly face and bloody, popping eyes; matronly, like all school hall guards, and gobbling up whatever little power over others she could muster.

“No one ever gave me a hard time about being a walk-in,” the man protested. “I promised my son that I’d take the class with him.”

“*This* is a closed class,” the hall guard snapped, firmly affirming in her gravelly voice: “You cannot be admitted without an admission pass and a photo ID.”

“Where do I get a pass?” the man asked.

“You don’t. The class is filled,” the froggy character said.

The man stormed away. The hall guard continued barking at students and adults alike about the entrance requirements as they congregated at the threshold of a small lecture hall. There on Tuesday and Thursday mornings at the H. Trismegistus Mystical Arts Academy, a controversial celebrity lady mage—a one Professor Sofia La Maga—would be, for the first time, presenting a class called Lost and Found: Mystical Codes and Keys.

Leonard and his buddies, Anil and Bertrand, presented the appropriate documents and were admitted. Leonard’s father, Leo de Lux, a sorcerer and one of the highest ranking magistrates of the North Atlantic Sovereignty, Terra Nova, Inner Planes Regions, followed them.

“Pass and ID. No one is admitted without an admission pass and photo ID,” the hall guard rattled. Upon realizing who she was addressing, she froze. “You can go in,” she rasped to the glowering Lord Consul Leo de Lux. He sauntered in, his attaché, Victor, in tow.

The lecture hall was a dimly lit semi-rotunda with 10 rows of bucket seats. The ceiling was tin-molding speckled with whirling fans that gave a person vertigo if he stared up that way too long. The leaded windows were heavy plated, stained or ornately mottled to block out the sky or the trees or passing birds so the mind

couldn't fly outside to daydream. At the sunken hub of the semi-rotunda were a podium, a desk, and a chalk board illuminated by a bare bulb hanging from a wire.

Leonard de Lux Junior made quick work of setting up a prank while his father chatted with some people who were members of the Royal Conservationist Party. He figured he'd get away with it, and his dad would get a mean laugh from the escapade. Leonard would feel strangely proud of secretly giving twisted mirth to his father, who had been on the rag about this new celebrity teacher. With sleight of hand, he dropped a stink-bomb on the teacher's chair. When she sat at the desk to study the seating chart and call the roll, she would, you know, make a smell. Leonard twitched his eyebrows and sneered to appear daring and shameless to his buddies, who sniggered and sputtered so that their pimply, adolescent faces turned reddish and even gawker.

Leonard's father, Leo de Lux, held the esteemed and very powerful position of Consul within the Senate of the North Atlantic Sovereignty. He was a mere 43 years of age when he assumed the role 2 years previously. His position, assumed at an unprecedented young age, was a testament to his family's status and influence and also to his own prowess. He was held the academic degrees of Sortiar Excelsus and Magus Adeptus, and of course, he was a fellow in the Royal Order of Sorcerers and Magi.

The Consul was vehemently against Sofia La Maga's teaching appointment. He fought it in league with several other parents who were members of the Royal Conservationist Party. As consul, he should have had

the final say—and would have in times past—but the current popularist democratic sprawl and the rather bureaucratic checks and balances system had eroded de Lux's influence.

Leonard (Junior) and his best buddies, Anil and Bertrand, had gotten a glimpse of Sofia La Maga the day before. They gloated like the spoiled-brat junior elitist patricians that they were that the hype about the professor was nonsense. It was just as Leonard's father had insisted. Professor La Maga was nothing but a bedraggled kitchen witch.

She didn't seem at all like the stories told about her. In fact, she roamed through the secondary school's second-floor corridor as if she were roller-skating with three left feet and had a mental disposition of a hedgehog.

She was a tall, slender but robust woman with the rough-and-tumble appearance of someone who had weathered hard climbs in exotic lands. Her clothes were rustic, quaintly worn, and embellished with savage jewelry: jangling bells and sashes of bone and fur, claws, shells, and spike-studded pods. Her Medusa-like mane was haphazardly plaited here and there and cluttered her face, blinding her as she toddled along. She was gripping a mass of overstuffed folders, and from her arms dangled plastic bags filled with undisclosed items that were nevertheless heavy. They swung like pendulums in the wake of her clumsy pace. The heels of her worn leather lace-up boots alternately caught on the frayed hem of an ankle-length skirt. It caused her to wobble pathetically as the heavy bags alternately beat against her ribs.

No one offered assistance. They were busy gawking at her and probably thinking the same as Leonard and his pals were. *This* was the prodigy who had been gallivanting across exotic lands and speed-reading through mentorships with wild wizards, shamans, and anchorites?

Leonard reported the observation to his father who smirked and lectured him about how the whole wide expanse of the Inner Planes Region was going to the dogs. He blamed immigration and student exchange laws and especially the prohibition of the caste system—even though it had been nearly a century since the prohibition had been in effect.

As far as de Lux senior was concerned, it was the discontinuation of the system that had led to the irrelevancy of heredity. It made for circumstances in which the child of the lowliest peasant spellcaster (that is, Sofia La Maga) could become a prestigious mage—all because she had spent 12 years spelunking through some caves on the Inner Plane of Katmandu or Machu Picchu or . . . some place.

Leonard's father repeated that Sofia La Maga was a fake. He said that the heroic tales about her were hoaxes. He stressed that she had been ingloriously kicked out of the H. Trismegistus Mystical Arts Academy School of Graduate Studies in her junior collegiate year. She was a troublemaker who almost took the school down because of her political extremism. A *terrorist*, he insisted. Furthermore, rather than applying herself to unusual scholarship in the Terra Mysticus as claimed, she had been running some kind of inane “New Age” cult among the Commons in the Outer Planes for the past 15 years

The stink-bomb that Leonard had placed on the professor's chair resembled a lovely little seat cushion: a thin satiny, richly plush red cushion that had a violet-colored lace crocheted hem. It was doily-like: about six inches square and would let out a methane cloud if a heavy-enough weight—like that of a human body—were to bear down on it.

But Leonard wasn't the only one in the class who apparently had a foul message for the new teacher. A floppy, sad, and weedy-looking bouquet of basil, tansy, and hellebore was plopped on the podium. Leonard hadn't learned it in school, but he knew from his father's horticulturist that the message hidden in the mysterious symbolism of these particular worts and posies was to "fuck off and die."

The students were in their places, and because this was a special program, a small, exclusive group of adults were allowed to attend. They sat in the back and side tiers of seats within the small lecture hall. Some adult attendees were participating to earn CME—continuing magical education—credit. Some were attending for personal enrichment; and some, like Leonard's father, were attending to gather ammunition to petition the Academy to discharge Sofia La Maga from her teaching post and send her packing back to the Inner Planes of Mogao . . . or . . . Sedona . . . or . . . wherever.

At a point in which the fraternizing, the fidgeting, the adjusting of desk stands, and the swiveling of bucket seats came to a lull, Professor La Maga made her entrance. She was oddly dressed in a blousy white petticoat over which was a long, red shift that was loudly embroidered with images of elephants, eagles, and crocodiles. Her wild, voluminous hair was haphazardly plaited and affixed with jewel-studded clips. Somewhere

in that baubled mass of bronze and umber tresses, peered a small, sweet face that was wind-burnished and somewhat swarthy. She had yet to make eye contact with anyone, but it was hard not to notice that her almond eyes, the color of molten chocolate, glistened with an intriguingly fiery gleam.

“Hello, boys and girls!” she chirped. When she smiled, which she did often, the right corner of her mouth turned up and the left corner turned down. It was a soft and demure smile that drew out a gleeful, alright feeling in a person. It was subtle, but it should have been Leonard’s first clue not to mess with the professor. She was sly, loose, and perfuse about magical acts. But it was too late by then.

She swiped the nasty bouquet from the podium and, striding directly to her desk chair, grasped the stink-bomb, and whirled it aloft such that the corners of the lace hem whirled like the arms of octopi. She aimed her staff at it as if she were hunting ducks with a rifle. The staff, which was nothing more than a stick of petrified wood topped with a crystal skull and a jangling girdle of red ribbons, beads, shards of shells, and bones, discharged a soft blue spark. The professor comically stumbled back into the chalk board as if off balanced by the force of the shot.

The class erupted into giggles and applause that turned from amusement to mean laughter. Upon bursting, the stink-bomb rained confetti and pink flower petals on the prank’s culprit—Leonard de Lux, Junior.

Professor La Maga let the students snicker as she studied the seating chart. They watched her glance at Leonard and then past him to the Consul, who was sitting almost in line with his son but five rows back. The right side of the professor’s mouth curled up, but the left side stayed the same. Leonard guessed the

expression was a sneer of an annoyed and vengeful sort. The youth flushed hot with shame and dread. He dared not turn to see what his father's reaction to all this was but he could feel the man's mood as if it were a brush fire scorching his back.

He probably had his left hand poised, palm facing out in such a way that communicated to Victor, his attaché, that they both should remain in frozen resolve until the proverbial other shoe dropped. How was the new teacher going to handle this mess. That's probably what Leonard's father was holding his breath and bile to see.

Leonard watched the professor's brow pinch and examined how her gaze toggled back and forth between him and his father. Her expression seemed hurt and then in a voice tinged with astonishment, she said, "Junior Mister Leonard de Lux. You picked the day." She eyed Leonard as if both she and he should be amused by what had happened. She told him that he had to stand up.

His father, a severely attractive fellow who was overgroomed, befitting his patrician status and high political rank, still made no comment or rustle, and so Leonard slouched upward until he was somewhat vertical. He was a tall, lean but strongly built young man. His head was lowered so that his amber eyes peered sullenly from the tops of their orbits through a wispy fringe of dark auburn hair.

"In my beneficence," Professor La Maga announced, "and because I'm such a good sport, I'm going to give you the opportunity to redeem yourself, impress your father, and all that etcetera by demonstrating your academic prowess."

She turned her attention to the seating chart that was on her desk. On the seating chart was a color-coded note about each student's grade point average and potential area of expertise based on academic scores. The professor gazed, pan-faced, at the chart for a while. Leonard knew she was staring at an orange-yellow grade point code that was pretty bad on a prismatic scale of red to violet. She was probably wondering how Leonard had gained entrance to the class besides that he was the Consul's son. She was probably also wondering what the hell to do next.

Leonard didn't know what the chart said about his "potential area of expertise." He wasn't good at anything except orchestrating pranks.

If he was interested in anything having to do with school and magical studies, it was lost codes and keys, but those things were only covered in special graduate training programs. Whatever Leonard knew about these topics, he learned on his own. So even though the apparent reason that he was attending Sofia La Maga's class was to assist his father in discrediting her, the real, secret, very personal reason, regardless of his bad behavior off the bat, was to receive instruction in mystical codes and keys.

"Stand up straight and meet my gaze, Mister Junior," the professor announced.

The prickles on the back of Leonard's neck were saying that his father had risen from his chair. The young man, however, was paralyzed in the grip of the professor's eyes, which felt like snuggles and warm chocolate pudding.

"What is she doing?" he heard his father hiss and bang his staff on the floor.

Leonard wanted to say that the professor was mesmerizing him, but he also wanted to just let it happen. It felt too pleasant. All was lost so why not just lose it.

“Don’t belabor the point, Madam,” the Consul’s voice commanded. “The boy is clearly a moron. Come away, Leonard. It is time to go.”

But he remained unmoved without concern and watched the professor blink.

“Really,” she said. Her face lit up with relief. She grinned.

“Excuse me, Professor?” Leonard whispered.

“That’s very interesting,” she said to herself and smiled widely as if Leonard had told her something utterly fascinating. Meanwhile, Leonard’s father had again barked that Leonard should excuse himself from the classroom. Everyone else was either eking out giggles or feeling agitated.

Leonard could now clearly hear his father griping to someone that the “folk-woman” was in for it and that Leonard should be told to join his father in the principal’s office on the other side of the pavilion.

Then, as if beaming with pride, Professor La Maga announced: “Mister Leonard de Lux, Junior. Can you explain to the class the origin of the term the ‘Conus magus maneuver’?”

As if awestruck, Leonard’s eyes widened, and his lips parted. “Yes,” he replied. He had spent the summer studying the legendary history of the Conus magus charm and swimming in fantasies about how he had become unassailable, feared, and omnipotent for having discovered its lost key.

“Go ahead, then, Leonard. Please tell us,” she coached.

“In common parlance, the term ‘Conus magus maneuver’ means that a sorcerer or mage has pacified a foe, but the meaning, mostly among sorcerers, is that the sorcerer has paralyzed his opponent—that the opponent is too mystified to act,” Leonard began.

“It’s an insult,” the professor announced to the class, “mostly uttered by ‘sore winners.’”

Leonard shrugged. His father was a master of the Conus magus maneuver. He spouted the term all the time to boast about how he had gotten over on one person or another.

“Continue,” Professor La Maga requested.

“It’s a figure of speech,” Leonard said, “but it relates to a hostile magic practice—the Conus magus *charm*—which involves striking and then absorbing energy from an opponent.”

“And when is this hostile practice typically used?” questioned Professor La Maga.

“All the time but no one ever admits to it,” Leonard bluntly responded.

“Indeed, it’s rampant even among Commons in the Outer Planes Regions,” the professor confirmed. “Go on, Mr. Junior de Lux. We’re waiting to hear about the legend.”

“The term is a reference to the legendary Conus magus charm, which is much more intense than the charm of the same name used today,” Leonard said. “According to legend, the original charm was discovered by a sorcerer named Mare Maré who lived around 250 BCE. A Melanesian sorcerer who was very familiar with venomous cone snails of the South Pacific, particularly the snail that millennia later would be christened

‘Conus magus’ by Outer Planes marine biologists. Mare Maré got into the Indus somehow and then the Mediterranean rim,” Leonard explained.

“He was a sea-charmer,” Professor La Maga interjected, adding that sea-charming was how Mare Maré “managed to cross great expanses of ocean long before the invention of luxury cruise liners and why he has forever been known by the name Mare Maré, which we can translate as ‘Nightmare of the Dark Sea.’”

The professor magically materialized the tapered shell of a cone snail. Grasping it between her thumb and forefinger, she held it out so all could see how harmless it looked: white with brown and tawny bands and dapples. Red, needle-like claws jutted out of the shell’s opening.

“But this is only the tip of the proverbial iceberg, isn’t it, Mister de Lux, Junior,” she said and lobbed the deadly creature into her audience. Students ducked and screeched, but the snail dematerialized in midair.

Leonard finally turned to see what his father was doing. The man was coldly glaring at him. Then he made a slight nod of the head and flashed his pale blue eyes. Leonard took it as a gesture to continue his performance.

“Mare Maré had a rivalry-thing with a mage named Corno,” Leonard explained. “He got an empowerment from a venomous snail and absorbed—completely absorbed—Corno Magus the way venomous cone snails paralyze and consume their prey.”

“Corno the Mage was disincorporated and his energy was absorbed into the sorcerer Mare Maré,” Professor La Maga announced. She paused and grinned at Leonard. The youth gripped the desk stand affixed

to his seat because the event triggered an upwelling of woozy heat. No one—not father, mother, nor any other relation or intimate—had ever smiled at him with such affection and intrigue in any memory he could recall. It was awesome, as in frightening.

“And why aren’t sorcerers, magi, wizards, and what-not running around absorbing each other out of existence anymore?” Professor La Maga questioned.

“About 800 or 900 years after Mare Maré, they were,” Leonard exclaimed. “Mare Maré’s lineage had grown exponentially so that factions began attacking each other, and in this one book by this one historian—Gustav Galeorhinus—he said they killed each other off. So there was no more key, no lineage holder.”

“Now there’s a sleep remedy for you. You’ve read the work of Gustav Galeorhinus, Leonard?” the professor asked incredulously.

“Yep,” he boasted. The material, dry and written in quaint and wordy Victorian English, was interspersed with passages that were in Coptic, Greek, and Latin. Leonard had made as point of deciphering it all, though, because he was sure that the text held the answers to his interest.

The professor’s brow pinched and her smile seemed partly amused and partly confused. She went back to glaring at Leonard’s miserable grade point average and then Leonard’s father, who also seemed puzzled. She distractedly muttered that the loss of the key and lineage holder was no great tragedy considering the nature of the charm. “The demise of the charm heralded what?” she asked.

Leonard fell silent.

“Anyone?” Professor La Maga asked the students. “Grownups back there?”

She was about to deliver the answer when Leo de Lux announced in a direct voice slightly tinged with contempt, “The end of the Dark Ages among the Commons and the advent of the Renaissance—the Age of ‘Enlightenment.’”

Leonard watched the professor flash the sweetest smile at his father. “Thank you, Lord Consul,” she said. Leonard glanced back to see the man curl a corner of his mouth. Leonard could never tell whether that expression to which his father was habituated was a smile, a sneer, or a wince.

“The mage Gustav Galeorhinus was a little bit of a revisionist,” Professor La Maga told the class. “But assuming he was correct, what was the flaw that led to the demise of the Conus magus charm? You can sit down, Leonard. That was great. Anyone? Am I going to have to make Junior Mister de Lux the assistant teacher for the day?”

Before any teenaged students could get a word in edgewise, Consul de Lux declared that Gustave Galeorhinus’ account of the Conus magus charm was completely fabricated. He insisted and that no special or lethal key to the charm existed beyond the one used “rampantly in polite society.”

“Galeorhinus fancied himself a sea-charmer. The villainous Mare Maré was nothing more than a fictional alter ego that allowed Galeorhinus to express his aggressive tendencies through fictional reveries,” de Lux remarked. He went on to say that the practice of the actual Conus magus maneuver was so rampant that a moralistic legend—engineered by a mage (he felt compelled to drive home this point)—was made up about it,

but that it had no special origin; it was an effect of natural magic. “As mentioned by the esteemed professor, even Commons do it as a matter of course,” he sniffed.

“And there’s no Santa Claus or Easter Bunny either,” Professor La Maga added.

A few giggling sounds could be detected as well as a frantic hush or two in the aftermath of this parlay. The Consul flecked his eyes a bit and slightly grinned almost as if he were amused by the professor’s impudence.

Leonard was feeling perplexed, though. Everything he had read that summer had convinced him that the Conus magus charm was real and that it was a lost magical talent. If he could rediscover the key to the Conus magus charm, his father would have to treat him much more nicely than was customary.

The professor nodded thoughtfully and declared that she was in agreement with the Consul. A strange, peeved silence overtook the classroom. Leonard’s heart sunk.

“A number of legends about the origins of charms and lost codes and keys were made up. Sometimes this was a flight of the imagination, or because someone—such as, you know, some blowhard mage—felt compelled to engineer some kind of morality play, but there’s another reason, too. We’re going to get into all of these things this semester. What is that other thing? Very important.”

Suddenly young Leonard de Lux felt uncharacteristically inspired. “To protect the charm,” he blurted out of turn.

Professor La Maga made more flower petals shower upon him. “And we have a WINNER!” she shouted. Tiny materializations of angelic creatures flashed momentarily like soap bubbles over him. “To protect the charm. How is that Leonard?”

“The stories make you think the charm is something else than what it is and only certain very specific people know what the charm really is, what it really means, how and when to use it. The stories might even have codes in them that only they understand but that ordinary magical people—or Commons even—take at face value, so they think it doesn’t mean anything,” he stuttered. “Or else they do something really stupid and weird with it, but someone secretly knows what it really means and it has nothing to do with the story.”

“Excellent, Mister Leonard de Lux, Junior,” the professor gloated. “I can’t believe you’re the same kid who stuck a stink bomb on my chair just moments ago.”

Leonard couldn’t believe it either. He didn’t feel bad about the attention or the accusation. Everyone seemed to be having a good time.

When the class had ended and the students were filing from the room, Leonard found himself smiling at the professor. She smiled back and seemed about to say something except that other people were in the way trying to get her attention.

Leonard glared sheepishly at his father when he caught up with him. He waited to be stared down, but it didn’t happen. The two men, junior and senior, didn’t speak. In fact, Leonard’s father, rather than vindicated, seemed pacified. It made Leonard wonder whether they both hadn’t been mystified.