

Leona closed her eyes and started to Weave.

The Cathedral funerary was always cool and quiet, even in the middle of the day, but at this time of night it was a haven of silence against the rest of the world. Most of the other apprentice priests found the room depressing, or even creepy, but Leona liked the still and minimal atmosphere. It was soothing.

It was also very private, a factor she desperately required right now. Aether flowed down her arms as she stretched her senses into the realm of potential, drawing strands of power to herself with an ease born of extensive practice. She didn't need to think about the formal or complex motions her fingers were about to make, beyond making sure she was careful in getting started. Touching her thumb tips to her middle fingers to form a circle, she pulled the power into the real world, then let her mind wander.

She opened her eyes and focused on the man in front of her, her patient. Sprawled in a wicker chair, usually reserved for grieving family members, his manner was detached and erratic, his gaze constantly wandering. *Papaver addict*, she thought to herself, recognizing all the signs in spite of the assurance of the woman who brought him in that he was simply sick with a fever.

It didn't do to dwell on it. Despite years of effort by the Grand Magus to highlight the social crisis *papaver* had brought with it, it was still seen as a wonder drug and any addiction to be a poor man's disease. It was a hard argument, when the drug really did help... most of the time.

With her thoughts as light as she could manage, Leona focused on the rich cut of the cloth on the man, noted how it hung from his shoulders as if it were either unfitted, or he had become suddenly slight and shriveled inside of it. She noted the purple silk kerchief at the breast pocket, the stamped gold cuff-links. He was missing a cravat and pocket watch.

All of this kept her from focusing too hard, or overusing her abilities. Her hands moved of their own accord, waxing and waning layers of aether over the patient like waves caressing a beach. In more expert hands, the restorative Weave she was using could calm troubled minds, ease tremulous spirits and purge some impurities from the body, but she was not experienced enough yet to make full use of it. Instead, to prevent herself using too much aether, she tried

not to focus too hard on any one area of the man for long.

In the back of her mind, she could almost see inside the addict's head, seeing his skull as a lit night sky full of blinking and flashing lights. Yet, with every wave of the Weave, the lights dimmed, until they started to go out one after the other, covered in soothing darkness. She forced herself not to think about it, and to keep her mind away from her own personal thoughts too, lest that color her Weave also. *Focus on the now. On how cold and hard the stone is to kneel on... on the scent of Father Clarence's cologne... on the fact someone didn't sweep this room properly last night... on the flowers that are wilting and need changing...*

"That's good, Leona. You can stop now."

Leona jolted and blinked as the deep male voice cut into her thoughts. With a twist of her wrists, she ceased the flow of aether through her body and shook herself, focusing fully on the world around her.

In his chair, the patient lay almost dozing, his eyes lidded and still. At peace. Next to him, Grand Magus Clarence Ruthersford, brother to the King and head of the Church, personally lent in to check the man's pulse and the dilation of his eyes, then turned a crinkled and warm smile to her.

"He will sleep well now. Excellent work, child. Such a gift you have."

"Thank you, Father."

"I am sorry to have drawn you into working this evening. I know you've had a long day, but with all the Magus orbs being used for the celebrations tonight..." The Magus turned and laid a hand on her shoulder, his tone as genuine as the reassuring squeeze he gave in thanks for her efforts... but she could see the edge of a question in his eyes as she looked up at him.

"It's no trouble, Grand Magus," she said, offering a wan smile. "I'm glad I could help... here, at least."

*Not now, Father... she silently prayed. Please don't ask me about this morning. Not until there is no one else around, no one to see me crying. Please don't ask me how I failed, again.* Leona squeezed her eyes shut against the well of emotions and memories rising inside her head as she turned away, fiddling with the cord around her habit.

After arriving at the Cathedral's school when she was a mere six years of age, she had

swiftly been picked up to study under the Grand Magus himself, to the point she considered the influential Magus to practically be her father. A fact that made any of her failings hurt twice as much, for fear she impugned his reputation by proxy... and that she had failed once more to give him something to be proud of.

*Don't think about it now. There'll be time later.* Opening her eyes and pushing her thoughts aside, Leona bowed as she held the door open for Father Clarence to step outside, then busied herself with sweeping the dirtied areas of the funerary she had noted, while the Magus brought in the noblewoman to collect the patient.

"Praise be to the Lights! You are a saint, Father..." Leona vaguely recognized the woman as she came into the room and rushed across to the recumbent man. Despite the fact the woman had endeavored to cover her features with a wide brimmed hat and a sedate hooped dress, Leona recognized her as one of the more regular visitors to the Cathedral during the week.

"Hardly so madame," sighed Father Clarence, "but we will always try to soothe, and to heal. Now, you remember what I told you?"

"Yes, Magus, though I assure you he has but a fever..." In spite of being in the presence of one of the most holy and important men in all of Arlatene, the Lady's voice rose as she spoke, her tone piqued. Leona was glad to have her back to the two adults, so neither saw her roll her eyes at the obstinate denial in the words. *Come on, Madame... we all know it's no fever, why pretend? We don't judge, and unlike all of you society ladies... we don't gossip either.*

"Nevertheless," pressed the Magus. "You have done an excellent job caring for him so far, and you must maintain your vigil if he is to recover fully."

"Of course," said the noble, scaling her tone back.

"No *papaver*, no matter how much he may think it will aid his aches. Jena's cleansing fire can sometimes do a body good, and with time his tremors and distraction will pass."

"Yes, Father. I will pray daily, I swear it," Now, some humility crept into the woman's tone, as if she had remembered where she was, and that despite the fact the healing Leona had performed would ultimately have no cost... a payment of some kind was still appropriate. Prayer, if nothing else.

"If you can, encourage him to come to the church whenever possible, but do not let him travel alone," the Magus went on, then turned his tone light and tactful. "It would

not do for his... fever... to come back by an inopportune detour."

"...thank you, Grand Magus."

"Peace be upon you, Madame Ferminlier. *Apina.*"

"*Apina.*"

Leona found herself making the sign of the Lights on automatic as the adults exchanged the final word of any prayer, but she didn't turn around until after she heard the Madame and her 'sick' relative leave. Setting the broom she had been using aside, Leona turned around and opened her mouth to ask the Magus why he entertained the woman's lies, hoping to head off his inevitable questions about how her morning had gone.

As it turned out, she need not have worried about distracting attention. Jumping in surprise as the door opened again and slammed back into the wall, Leona heard herself gasp as Brother Kristoff bustled through it, and closed it behind him, face pale and aflutter.

"Kristoff? Whatever's the matter?"

"Sorry, Grand Magus... sorry. You have to come at once. It's terrible!"

"What is? You're supposed to be at the Palace!"

"That's just it sir! The palace! There's been a break-in!"

