

PATRICIA C. WREDE

The Magician's Ward

For Lois Bujold, without whom this would still be stuck in Chapter 7. Twice.

Acknowledgments

This book would not have been possible, let alone finished, without the aid and comfort of the following people:

Pamela Dean Dyer-Bennet, Beth Friedman, Raphael Carter, Sarah Withee, and Elise Matthesen, who helped with sundry accents and foreign languages, and James Bryant, who provided the answer to a tricky research question. Any errors are, of course, my own.

My critique group, The Usual Suspects past and present, who were amazingly good about sitting through the same scenes over and over until I got them right, and who performed prodigious feats during the final days of production: Lois McMaster Bujold, Peg Kerr Ihinger, Elise Matthesen, Bruce Bethke, and Joel Rosenberg.

My editors, Delia Sherman and Patrick Nielsen Hayden, who were supernaturally patient when patience was most required, and who somehow knew exactly when it was necessary to crank up the heat.

Caroline Stevermer, Rosemary Ighel, Lois Bujold, and Pamela Dean Dyer-Bennet, who provided much-appreciated moral support, encouragement, lunches, and a careful eye to period detail.

My family, who were exceedingly understanding as regards late Christmas presents and last-minute cancellations.

Cold rain drizzled on the dark London streets—at least, it looked cold. Kim peered out her bedroom window at the deserted square two stories below and pulled her shawl closer around her shoulders, though the fire in the grate was almost too warm for comfort. She hadn't had to shelter herself from the rain, shivering, in a doorway for nearly a year, but the memories lingered.

Still no sign of Mairelon. Is he going to stay out all night? Kim thought resentfully. He goes to jaw with Lord Shoreham and eat at the Royal College of Wizards, and I'm stuck here with a great big thick square book and that poker-backed aunt of his. She shook her head. It was not what she had expected a year ago when she had agreed to become Mairelon's ward and learn reading and magic. Then, she had thought it would be a great adventure.

" 'Anything might happen,' I thought," Kim said aloud to her reflection in the rain-dark window. " 'Anything at all.' I must have been touched in the head." She crossed her eyes and stuck out her tongue at her mirror image.

"Dicked in the nob, that's what I was," she muttered.

The bedroom door opened. "What did you say, Kim?" Mrs. Lowe asked in a mild, disapproving tone.

With a faint sigh, Kim slid off the window seat and turned. The relentless respectability of Mairelon's paternal aunt was very wearing. It seemed much longer than a week since they'd found her ensconced in the townhouse on their arrival in London. And since they were all technically guests of Mairelon's brother Andrew, who as elder son had inherited the townhouse, there was nothing to be done about Mrs. Lowe except spend time elsewhere. Which Mairelon had been doing rather a lot. Kim wished she had that option. "I didn't say anything," she told Mrs. Lowe in as mild a tone as she could manage.

"I was sure I heard your voice." Mrs. Lowe hesitated. "It wasn't any of that . . . that thieving cant, was it?"

"Flash lingo," Kim said helpfully.

Mrs. Lowe frowned. "After all my nephew has done for you, the least you could do is to be more careful of your language."

"Mairelon doesn't mind the way I talk."

"My nephew is not always as conscious of the social niceties as he should be," Mrs. Lowe said. "Nonetheless, they must be observed. And you really should refer to him as 'Mr. Merrill.' He is your guardian, and it would show a proper respect."

"Did you want me for something?" Kim asked, hoping to dodge the discussion. "I have a lot of studying to do." She waved at the fat, leather-bound book on the nightstand beside the bed, and suppressed a grimace. Three more volumes were waiting for her in the library below. Why he keeps shoving them at me when he knows I'm no great hand at reading . . .

“More magic, I suppose.” Mrs. Lowe shook her head. “I’ll speak to Richard about that in the morning.”

“Speak to him?” Kim said, beginning to be alarmed. For the past week, Mrs. Lowe had made Kim’s life a respectable misery. She had insisted that Kim accompany her to pay interminable morning calls on dull but acceptable acquaintances, forbidden all walks alone, and made it quite clear that, in the unlikely event of Kim’s encountering any of her former friends, Kim was to cut them dead. Thus far, however, she had not attempted to interfere with Kim’s magic lessons.

“I am sure you will have plenty of opportunity to study when you are back in Kent,” Mrs. Lowe said. “Magic is all very well, but it is hardly a necessary branch of knowledge for a young woman in your situation. While you are in London, we must make the most of your chances. I cannot say I have any great hope of success, given your . . . circumstances, but there are one or two possibilities—That is why I wished to talk to you tonight.”

“I don’t understand,” Kim said warily.

“Mrs. Hardcastle knows a gentleman who sounds as if he will do very nicely. Well, perhaps not a gentleman, but respectable enough. She has arranged for us to meet him tomorrow afternoon and I wished to warn you to be on your best behavior.”

“Best behavior—You can’t be thinking of getting me leg-shackled to some gentry cull!”

“If what you just said was some sort of reference to arranging a suitable marriage for you, yes, that is precisely what I was referring to,” Mrs. Lowe replied stiffly.

Kim didn’t know whether to be amused or appalled. Her, married to a toff? In her wildest notions, she had never thought of such a thing. She looked at Mrs. Lowe, and her amusement died. The woman was serious. “It’d never work.”

“It certainly won’t if you burst out with a remark like that over Mrs. Hardcastle’s tea table. Consider carefully what I have said, and be prepared tomorrow, if you please. I am afraid that your interesting background means that you are unlikely to have many opportunities of this nature; you would be ill advised to waste this one. Good night.”

Kim stared at the closing door, then flung herself back into the window seat. Marriage. She’s the one who’s dicked in the nob. There isn’t a toff in London who would marry a penniless nameless sharper, even if I have gone all respectable. She shifted restlessly in the window seat. Respectability did not sit comfortably with her, but what other choices did she have?

She couldn’t go back to the streets, even if she were mad enough to want to. What with all the regular eating, she’d filled out more than she’d have thought possible; posing as a boy now would be out of the question. She hadn’t the training to be a housemaid or take up a trade, even if she could find someone to hire her. Mrs. Lowe’s “respectable gentleman” wasn’t a serious possibility, but sooner or later Kim would have to think of something. She couldn’t stay Mairelon’s ward forever.

Though that doesn’t seem to have occurred to him.

But Richard Merrill—whom she still could not think of as anything but Mairelon the Magician—didn't look at things the way other people did. Well, if he did, he'd never have got himself made my guardian. For all the awareness he showed, you'd think he was perfectly willing to go on feeding, clothing, and housing Kim until they both died of old age.

Maybe she should ask him about it. Maybe she would, if she could figure out what "it" was exactly—or at least well enough to explain. "I'm bored" would only get her a larger stack of books for study; "I'm not happy" sounded ungrateful; and "Your aunt is a Friday-faced noodle" was insulting. But there had to be some way to put it.

Meanwhile, she had three more pages of Shepherd's Elementary Invocations to decipher before morning. She didn't want Mairelon to think that she wasn't working at her lessons, not if the Mrs. Lowe was going to ask him to stop them. Sighing, Kim climbed out of the window seat.

The text on magic occupied Kim for several hours, but when she finally laid it aside and went to bed, she found it impossible to sleep. She lay in darkness, staring up at the plaster ceiling and listening for the clatter of Mairelon's carriage on the cobblestones outside. Around her, the household quieted as the housemaids and sculleys finished their day's work and climbed the narrow servant stair to their beds under the eaves. The watchman's cry, muffled and perfunctory, came faintly through the window. Poor old cull, Kim thought as a gust of wind sent raindrops rattling like gunfire across the panes. I'm glad I'm not out in this.

Suddenly she sat bolt upright in the bed. That sounded like . . . The noise came again, so close but clear. Someone's downstairs. Someone who's got no business being there.

Kim slid out of bed. Her eyes slid past the bellpull without pausing. If she summoned a maid, she'd only have to send the girl for a footman, and by the time all the running around was done the cull downstairs would have gotten away. And if she was wrong, if there wasn't anyone, she'd have to endure endless lectures from Mrs. Lowe. She could call someone when she was sure.

She started for the door, then stopped. Her white nightdress stood out in the darkness; she didn't want the cracksman to spot her and pike off before she got a footman or two to help catch him. Her dressing gown was a dark, rich blue that would blend with the shadows; she picked it up and struggled into it. Then she eased the door open and slipped into the darkened hallway.

Moving lightly, she made for the stairs. Another soft, scuffing sound came from below, followed by a distinct creak; hadn't anyone else noticed? Probably a novice, on his first crack ladder. Somebody should have told him to stick by the walls. Mother Tibb wouldn't have sent anybody out there that didn't know at least that much.

Suiting her own actions to her thoughts, Kim plastered herself against one wall and started down the stairs, setting her bare feet as near the wall as she could. No creaks betrayed her. Halfway down, she caught the flash of a dark lantern and froze. The light flickered past. A moment later, a figure skulked down the hallway, opening doors and peering through them. The strong smell of cheap lard candle and the scent of wet wool preceded him; he must have been standing in the rain for some time to be so drenched. Finally, with a grunt of satisfaction, the man let the last door swing fully open and disappeared into the library.

The library? What could a thief want from the library? The silver was downstairs, on the ground floor, and Mairelon's brother didn't keep valuables on display in his townhouse. The whole thing had more of a rum look by the minute. Kim frowned, considering; then a hastily stifled expletive decided her. There was no knowing what this cove was up to. She'd just make sure he couldn't pilfer off, and then she'd call the footmen.

Silently, she crept down the remaining steps. A cautious look showed the cracksman bent over the end table, peering at the shelves behind it by the light of the dark lantern. Kim smiled grimly and, holding the handle to prevent the betraying click of the latch snapping into place, carefully closed the library door. Now, if she could just lock it in place somehow. . . . But the door had no lock, and there was nothing nearby she could use to jam it. Magic, perhaps? She ran over in her mind the short list of spells she could cast with some reliability. There was one that might do the trick, if she could get it right.

She took a deep breath, then focused her eyes on the handle. In her mind she pictured it as it was, staying as it was, motionless, frozen, immovable, and in a voice barely above a whisper began the spell that would make the image real.

An outraged bellow and a loud crash from inside the library rattled her concentration. “-sta, atque—” she continued, and then the door burst open, knocking her sprawling. An instant later, the escaping housebreaker stumbled over her and went down. Kim shouted and grabbed at him. Her hands slid against silk, then tightened around thick, damp wool. The burglar twisted and something tore; the man scrambled away from her, leaving her holding a scrap of cloth.

Kim tried to roll to her feet and ended up tangled in her dressing gown. The man regained his feet and pelted down the hall, just as a sleepy-eyed footman appeared on the far stairs. The burglar shoved the hapless footman against the wall and dashed down the stairs and out of sight. Crashing noises and yells marked his continued progress. The footman recovered himself and plunged after his assailant. More shouts drifted upward.

As Kim, muttering curses, struggled to a standing position at last, she heard footsteps on the stairs behind her. She turned and found Mrs. Lowe, lamp in hand, staring at her with shock and disapproval.

“Kim! Whatever have you been doing? And in such a state!”

Kim glanced down. Her dressing gown had come undone, and she showed distinct traces even in the lamplight, of having rolled about on the floor. A torn and ragged bit of lace trailed off the hem of her nightdress, and her hair was probably every-which-way, too. Mrs. Lowe, of course, was turned out in more proper style—not a wisp of gray hair escaped from under her dainty lace cap, and her dressing gown was crisper and neater than Kim's had been even before her encounter with the burglar. Kim pulled her dressing gown closed and discovered that several of the buttons were missing.

“I heard someone in the library,” Kim said as she scanned the floor for the buttons. One of them lay next to the baseboard, beside a piece of wood with a splintered end. Kim bent toward it.

“Nonsense. You were dreaming, I'm sure.”

“I wasn’t asleep.” Kim reached for the button, and her fingers brushed the splintered wood. A light tingling ran up her arm, and she jerked her hand back in surprise. Magic? She touched it again. Not a strong spell, but recent. Mairelon’ll want a look at this. Frowning, she picked up wood and button together and shoved them in the pocket of her dressing gown.

“If you did hear something, it was probably one of the maids. They keep different hours in town, and I expect you are not yet accustomed—”

Kim tucked another button in the pocket of her dressing gown and looked back at Mrs. Lowe. “It wasn’t one of the maids. They wouldn’t be carrying on like that if it had been,” she added, waving at the stairs. The shouts and crashing noises had ceased, but it was nonetheless obvious that there was far more activity on the ground floor than was normal at this time of night.

“At least you had the good sense to put on your dressing gown before you came down,” Mrs. Lowe said, tacitly conceding the point. “Still, wandering about the house en déshabillé at this hour is most irregular, no matter what your reasons.”

“I bet Mairelon won’t think so.” The injudicious words slipped out before Kim thought.

Mrs. Lowe’s thin lips pressed together in a hard line. Then, in deceptively soft tones, she said, “Mr. Merrill, Kim, not Mairelon. Showing proper respect is—Where do you think you are going?”

“To find out whether they’ve caught the flash cull that was turning out the library.”

“Indeed you shall not,” Mrs. Lowe said. “You will return to your room at once, and we will discuss matters further in the morning.”

“What matters?” said a new voice from the lower stairs.

“Mairelon!” Kim said, turning toward the voice with a sigh of relief.

Richard Merrill climbed the last few steps and stood eyeing Kim and Mrs. Lowe with a quizzical expression on his round, cheerful face. His dark hair looked damp and a little disheveled, but his coat and pantaloons were immaculate. Kim wondered what he had done with his cloak. Probably left it in a heap in the front hall because the footmen were too busy chasing burglars to take it.

“What matters?” he asked again. “And why wait to discuss them? From the look of things no one’s going to get any sleep for hours. Kim, Harry says he rescued you from someone, or possibly several someones, who from his description were apparently seven feet tall and more indestructible than the strong man down at Astley’s Amphitheatre. Ought I to congratulate him, or should he merely be sent to the kitchen to sleep it off?”

Before Kim could answer, Mrs. Lowe frowned and said in tones that promised dire retribution for someone, “Who is Harry?”

“One of the footmen. He’s on his way to the pantry to receive a hero’s due, on the strength of a bruised shin and a knock on the head. The question is, does he deserve it?”

“He got banged up against the wall when that cracksman piked off, that’s all,” Kim said. “Unless they had a run-in later.”

“No, the fellow got clean away. Still, I think we’ll leave Harry to his laurels, well-earned or not. What I want now is the rest of the story.” He looked at Kim expectantly.

“I was upstairs when I heard—”

“Not tonight, Kim,” Mrs. Lowe broke in. “You have had quite enough excitement for one evening, and tomorrow is going to be a busy day. I’m sure that if Richard thinks about it, he’ll agree that you ought to be in bed. You’ll have plenty of time to talk in the morning. Come along.”

Mairelon put out a restraining hand. “I appreciate your concern, Aunt, but I wish to speak to Kim now, if she’s agreeable. It won’t take long.”

“Of course I’m agreeable,” Kim said.

“That’s settled, then.” Turning his head, he called down the stairs, “Hunch! Bring a lamp when you come up.”

Mrs. Lowe looked startled. “Kim is not the best judge of what is most appropriate, Richard. If you will stop for a moment and think, you will see that.”

“What? No, no, Kim is quite good at this sort of thing. Go on, Kim—you were upstairs, and you heard something.”

“She will catch a chill, running about half dressed at this hour,” Mrs. Lowe said firmly. “She belongs upstairs in her bed.”

“Half dressed?” Mairelon said with mild interest. He looked at Kim and shook his head.

“Nonsense. She’s wearing a dressing gown. Now, I’ll grant you, it wouldn’t be quite the thing if she were going to go walking in Grosvenor Square in the rain, but I promise you I won’t let her. We’ll stay right here in the library.”

“Kim needs her rest, Richard.”

“She’s more likely to get it if she has a chance to talk first,” Mairelon said, frowning slightly.

“I’m not sleepy,” Kim put in.

Mrs. Lowe sighed. “If you insist, Richard. I shall join you as chaperone, of course.”

“I think not.” Mairelon’s attention was firmly fixed on his aunt at last, and his expression had gone bland and unfathomable, the way it did when he was about to be particularly stubborn about something. Mrs. Lowe did not seem to realize it.

“Richard, Kim’s reputation—”

“—is quite safe. I’m her guardian, remember.” His tone was polite and gentle, but brooked no contradiction.

Mrs. Lowe hesitated, then acquiesced. “Very well, Richard. No doubt you have your reasons. I must tell you, however, that it is most irregular, and the possible consequences—”

“In the morning, Aunt,” Mairelon said. He glanced at Kim and gave a tiny nod in the direction of the library. Turning back to Mrs. Lowe, he went on in a soothing tone, “As you said, it’s late, and I’m sure this has been a strain on your nerves. Things will look different when you’ve had a good night’s sleep.”

Kim slipped quietly around behind him and into the darkened library. The murmur of voices in the hall continued; then she heard heavy footsteps on the stairs, and Mairelon’s voice: “The library, Hunch.” She stepped back as Mairelon’s manservant came through the door, carrying a candle. He was tall and thin, and everything about him drooped: his shoulders, his mustache, the baggy trousers he insisted on wearing.

“’Ere now, Kim, where—oh, there you are. Stay still; I’ll ’ave these ’ere lamps lit in a minute.”

Light flared, then steadied as Hunch adjusted the lamp-wick. “There. Now—’Struth! The ’Arry wasn’t ’alf right, by the look of it. What ’appened?”

The burglar’s dark lantern lay on its side next to an overturned end table; it was a good thing the candle had gone out. A dozen books were scattered across the floor, some looking as if they had fallen when the table went over, others as if they had been dropped or thrown.

“An excellent question, Hunch.” Mairelon entered, closing the door firmly behind him. “We’ve heard Harry’s tale; I trust yours will be somewhat . . . less imaginative, Kim.”

“I thought I heard something, so I came down to have a look,” Kim said. “A man with a lantern was in the hall, looking in all the rooms. He went into the library. I was going to lock him and call a footman, except he must of heard me working the spell or something, because he came charging out while I was still in the middle of it. He tripped over me, and I yelled, and he got away from me. The footman—Harry?—was coming up to see what the noise was, and the rum cove ran straight into him before he piked off down the stairs. That’s all.”

“Brief and to the point,” Mairelon said. “Though not, perhaps, up to Aunt Agatha’s standards of elocution. What a good thing we sent her off to bed.”

“I found this in the hallway after the turn up,” Kim said, pulling the scrap of wood from his pocket and laying it on top of the books. “I don’t know what it is, but it’s been magicked.”

Mairelon picked up the scrap and turned it over in his hands. It looked like a piece of wooden rod, about four inches long and as big around as Kim’s little finger. “Technically, the term is ‘infused,’ not ‘magicked,’ but in a general sort of way you’re quite right.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Something that’s been enchanted, or ‘magicked,’ as you put it, has had a spell cast on it. Something that’s been infused has had a spell stored in it.” Mairelon frowned at the piece of rod.

“What kind of spell?” Kim asked.

Mairelon blinked, then smiled. “That is the next question. One of them, anyway. Normally, once the spell has been invoked, it’s used up—there’s no way to tell what it was.”

“That’s normally,” Kim said, recognizing the tone. “What’s weird about this?”

Mairelon’s smile broadened. “Whoever made it was exceedingly clumsy; it’s as if he put the spell together from bits and pieces. And not all the bits and pieces went off when the wizard invoked it.”

“’E’s a beginner, then?” Hunch said.

“Mmm. Possibly. But Kim’s a beginner, and she could do a better job than this.”

“Well, are there enough bits left that you can tell what it was supposed to do?” Kim said, trying to decide whether she should be pleased or insulted by the comparison.

“Let’s find out, shall we?” Mairelon pointed the piece of rod at the nearest bookcase and muttered something under his breath.

Nothing happened. Mairelon frowned and said something longer that sounded like Latin to Kim. As he spoke, he waved the rod in a slow circle.

Several of the books began to glow with a soft, golden light. Mairelon gave an exclamation of satisfaction, then began muttering rapidly, moving the rod in a rapid, complex pattern. The glow dimmed, then steadied. After a moment, Mairelon relaxed and set the rod on the table.

Kim looked down. The books that lay scattered about the floor were all glowing as well. "This is crazy! He couldn't of sherried off with all those."

"If it were that simple, we wouldn't have books all over the library floor," Mairelon said. "I'll wager he was looking for one or two particular volumes. The question is, which ones?"

"If you was to clean up a bit o' this 'ere mess, you might 'ave an easier time figuring out," Hunch said.

"An excellent notion." Mairelon stepped forward and lifted the little table back onto the crocodile paws. "Put the books here, and we'll have a look."

Hunch picked up the scattered volumes, while Kim rather gingerly helped Mairelon pull the glowing books from the shelves. When they were all piled on the end table, they made an impressive heap.

"Now, what have we here?" Mairelon murmured. "The Mountains of Doubt, Collegium Sorceria, Discoverer, Après Cinq Cents Ans, Fire Keepers Vol. VI—I wonder why he didn't want the first five?—A Pottery Pigeon, Reflecting Quadrille, Maturing Without Heaviness. . . . Our housebreaker appears to have excellent taste."

"Well, 'e can just taste things somewheres else next time," Hunch muttered.

"I am inclined to agree with your recommendation, Hunch," Mairelon said. "I don't suppose you got a look at his face during all the excitement, Kim?"

"No," Kim said with regret. "I got a piece of his coat, though. He's a toff, or someone who wants to be."

"Really?" Mairelon looked at Kim with interest. "How did you deduce that?"

"He was wearing a silk waistcoat. I felt it. And this isn't homespun." Kim pulled the top piece of wool from her pocket. Two buttons came with it and bounced off under the settee.

"Ripped his coat, did he?" Mairelon said. "How lucky for us."

"Lucky?" Kim said, mystified.

"Yes, of course." He crossed to the heavy table in the middle of the library and studied it a moment, frowning. "Help me move this closer to the center of the room. Hunch, get me the blue chair and a pot of ink. Oh, and an unused candle for Kim."

"You ain't doing nothin' dreadful now, Master Richard," Hunch said in a stern tone. "Not in Master Andrew's 'ouse."

"Hmm? Oh, not at all, Hunch," Mairelon said as he and Kim shifted the table. "It's only the spell Shoreham's been working on for a while—an adaptation of the standard scrying spell. He showed it to me the day before yesterday; it's quite clever. You'll see."

“All right, then,” Hunch said, though he continued to frown. “Lord Shore’am is a proper gentleman.”

Mairelon shot his servant an amused glance and pulled a handkerchief from his pocket. Carefully, he spread it over the tabletop, smoothing the creases with his fingertip. The corners of the handkerchief hung over the center of the table’s sides, so that a triangle of bare wood was left in each corner.

“Yes, but what is this spell supposed to do?” Kim said.

“Help us catch our burglar, with luck,” Mairelon replied. “Hunch, where’s that ink? Thank you. Give Kim the chalk.” He set a small ink bottle on one of the bare corners of the tabletop.

“Mairelon—”

“You’ll see in a minute. Now, what can I use—ah, yes, this will do nicely.” He plucked a small silver salver from a shelf beside the door and positioned it carefully in the exact center of the handkerchief. “There. Hand me that scrap of cloth you found.”

“Mairelon, I’m never going to learn any magic if you don’t give me any explanations,” Kim said in exasperation as she gave him the piece of wool.

“And you’ll never be a great magician if you can’t make half an understanding do for a start,” Mairelon said, dropping the scrap into the salver. “A competent one, perhaps, but not a great one. The chalk, if you please.”

Sighing, Kim handed him the chalk. He sketched three careful crosses in the remaining corners of the table, then drew an unsteady circle around the salver on the handkerchief. Absently, he stuck the chalk in his coat pocket as he surveyed the setup. Then he looked up at Kim. “Now you must demonstrate the results of your studies for me. I want you to set the ward.”

“Me?” Kim stared at the candle in her hand, suddenly appalled. The warding spell was nearly always set when a complex or dangerous enchantment was being attempted; in theory, it protected the mage from outside interference, and any bystanders from the consequences of a spell gone wrong. In practice, the degree of protection such a spell afforded was directly related to the skill of the spellcaster. An apprentice’s ward was unlikely to stand up to more than an apprentice-level mistake. And Mairelon wanted Kim to set a ward while he worked a new spell.

“Don’t worry,” Mairelon said. “This is a relatively simple enchantment. Normally, I wouldn’t bother with a ward at all, even though this is the first time I’ve ever cast it. But you can use the practice, and it will keep our work from disturbing anyone. Or from attracting attention outside the house,” he added as an afterthought.

Only partially reassured, Kim nodded. She thought for a moment, to make sure she had the steps of the warding spell clear in her mind. Then she took a deep breath. “Fiat lux,” she said, concentrating on the candle.

The candlewick burst into flame. Kim held it still for a moment, until the smell of melted

beeswax reached her and the tingly pressure of a spell in progress ran up and down her arms. The ~~keeping her eyes fixed on the candle, Kim turned and walked in a slow, clockwise circle around~~ Mairelon and the table. As she walked, she recited the words of the warding spell four times, once for each side of the table. She had more difficulty than she had expected in judging her speed correctly so that the words came out even, but she managed it. When she reached the spot where she had begun, she turned to face Mairelon and said the final "fiat." With considerable relief, she felt the ward rise around them like an invisible curtain.

"Very good," Mairelon said softly. "I couldn't have done better myself. Now, watch carefully, and try to split your concentration so that you can still hold the ward while you watch. You may not always have someone handy to cast a ward for you when it's needed, so you'll need to learn to hold it without even thinking about it."

"Sort of like picking a lock and listening for the nabbing culls at the same time," Kim said, nodding carefully. She felt the ward shift as she spoke, and hastily returned her attention to it. When it was steady again, she whispered, "Only trickier."

Mairelon laughed. "Yes, I imagine it would be. Very well; it's my turn."

He picked up the scrap of cloth and concentrated for a moment, then crumpled it and dropped it into the salver. The springy wool flattened out immediately, but the scrap was too small to cover much of the salver. Uncorking the bottle of ink, Mairelon poured it slowly over the cloth. The ink soaked quickly into the wool, then rose around it in a flat black pool. Mairelon studied it a moment, then picked up the salver and tilted it this way and that until the ink coated the bottom with a shiny blackness.

When he was satisfied at last, he set the salver on the handkerchief once more. Holding his left hand over it, he began speaking, too rapidly for Kim to follow. The tingling sensation of a spell in process struck her with renewed force, and she had to concentrate to keep control of the ward. Mindful of his instructions, she tried to pay attention to Mairelon's spellcasting, but her Latin and Greek were still rudimentary. She recognized perhaps one word in twenty, but even the unintelligible phrases had the hard-edged feel that only came with magic. They hung in the air around Mairelon's hand, building the invisible, dangerous structure of the spell.

Kim suppressed a shiver. She did not want to distract Mairelon; even a small mistake would send razor-edged words flying like shards of shattered glass. She wondered whether she would ever be sure enough of her control to risk building a spell around her own hand. It seemed unlikely, but a year ago the thought of learning magic at all had seemed not merely unlikely, but impossible.

Mairelon finished speaking and, without moving his arm, folded his outstretched fingers toward his palm. The hovering spell slid past his hand onto the ink-covered salver. "Now, we look," he said.

Puzzled, Kim stared at him; then she realized that he meant for her to look at the salver. She lowered her gaze, and saw that a picture had formed on the surface of the ink, like a reflection in a mirror or a puddle of water.

A man muffled in a scarf, top hat, and long cloak hurried along a narrow street. The shop

windows behind him were dark and shuttered, and the wind whipped his cloak out behind him. “Well, well,” Mairelon murmured. “It looks as if you were right, Kim. Our housebreaker is a gentleman. Let’s see. . . .”

The picture in the ink wobbled, then shifted so that the man was hurrying directly toward them. His head was down, and one hand gripped the brim of his hat; between that and the scarf, little of his face was visible. Gold gleamed on his middle finger, and Kim leaned forward to look more closely.

“Blast!” said Mairelon. “I wanted a look at his face. Perhaps if we try another angle—”

The image wobbled and distorted, like a reflection in water when a pebble drops into it. Kim got a brief impression of blue eyes and a damp wisp of hair plastered wetly to a high forehead, and then the picture was gone. The shiny surface of the ink reflected only a glimmer of light from Kim’s candle.

Mairelon scowled at the salver, then reached for the ink-soaked wool. As he lifted the cloth, the ink slid off like hot oil running out of a pan, leaving the threads clean. “You can drop the war now, Kim,” he said as he pocketed the scrap.

Obediently, Kim recited the closing phrase and blew out the candle. Hunch collected it and the empty ink bottle and carried them off. Mairelon continued to frown at the salver. “That was nearly as useful as I’d hoped,” he said. “Perhaps I should have waited; we might have gotten a glimpse of his rooms. But I was hoping to see his face, and I didn’t want him to have a chance to change his coat.”

“Well, if you’d waited much longer, he wouldn’t of had the coat at all, I’ll bet,” Kim said.

“Why do you say that?”

“Why else would a toff be on Petticoat Lane at this time of night, unless he had something for the togs-men?”

Mairelon blinked. “Petticoat Lane? You’re sure?”

Kim snorted. “I spent enough time there. He was just down from Flash Annie’s, by where Willie Bast used to lay up. It’s a good job for him that it’s a mucky night out, or he’d be rid of more than his coat.”

Hunch returned and picked up the salver with a disapproving look. “Are you done with this Master Richard?”

“What? Yes, of course. Did you notice anything else, Kim?”

“He has blue eyes,” Kim offered. “And he wears a gold ring with a flower on it and a ruby in the center.”

“And he has his boots from Hoby,” Mairelon said. “It’s not much to go on, but it’s a help. Now, let’s make a list of these books and see what we can tell from it.”

The pile of books on the table had stopped glowing sometime during Mairelon's scrying spell. Mairelon sat down and began sorting through them, while Hunch brought him a pen, paper, and a fresh bottle of ink. As Mairelon wrote titles, Kim shifted books so he could see the ones he hadn't written down yet, and in ten minutes the list was complete.

"There," Mairelon said, and glanced around the library. "I believe that's all we can do tonight." He picked up his list and, in the absence of a blotter, blew gently on the ink to hasten its drying.

"What about tomorrow?" Kim said.

"Tomorrow, I'll take this over to the Royal College and see whether Kerring has any thoughts on it."

"Who's Kerring?"

"Lord Kerring is head archivist at the Royal College of Wizards," Mairelon replied. "There's a connection among all these titles, he'll spot it. He might even have some idea which wizard would be likely to know a bit about burglary."

"That cove didn't know the first thing about the crack lay," Kim said. "I wouldn't of heard him at all, if he had."

Mairelon looked thoughtful. "Possibly he's more of a magician than I'd been thinking. If he was depending on magic to pull off his theft—"

"He was still a clunker," Kim said firmly. "And I didn't notice any spellcasting."

"He invoked the spell he had stored in this," Mairelon said, holding up the broken rod.

"Then why didn't I notice it?"

"Because it was invoked, not cast," Mairelon replied. "The spellcasting took place when the spell was originally stored in the rod, which could have been hours ago, or even days. When the spell is invoked, you wouldn't notice anything unless you were touching either the storage container or the object the spell was intended to affect."

"I think I see," Kim said.

"If our burglar had another trick or two like this, he could have used them without alerting you," Mairelon went on, fingering the rod. "Rather a good precaution to take if you're going to burglar a wizard's house, now that I think of it. I believe we should set a few wards around the house tomorrow, just in case he comes back."

"What if that there burglar comes back tonight?" Hunch said.

"Then the library will no doubt be a wreck when we come down in the morning, Harry will probably collect another lump on his head, Aunt Agatha will be prostrate with the vapours, and I shall have to apologize to everyone for my carelessness." Mairelon smiled sweetly at Hunch. "Unless,

course, you spend the night here, on watch.”

“I might ’ave known you’d think of that,” Hunch muttered. “Well, as long as you don’t go haring off after ’im while I’m busy elsewhere.”

“Hunch! Would I do such a thing?”

“You ’ave before.”

“I’m a reformed character.”

Kim choked back a snort of laughter. Mairelon turned and looked at her with more disapproval.

“I seem to recall telling Aunt Agatha that I’d send you up before you took a chill. As we appear to be finished here, for the time being—”

“As long as you don’t go haring off after that burglar without me,” Kim echoed.

“You’re getting to be as bad as Hunch,” Mairelon said, and Kim laughed and left him.

When Kim came down to breakfast the following morning, Mairelon was there before her. Mrs. Lowe was fortunately not in evidence, and Kim bolted her meal in hopes of getting away before she turned up. After five minutes, Mairelon looked up and said mildly, "What's the rush?"

"Mrs. Lowe," Kim replied, then flushed as she realized how it must sound. Well, she wanted to talk to Mairelon about his aunt, hadn't she? She just hadn't planned on blurting it out over breakfast. She must be more tired than she'd thought.

"Ah." Mairelon looked suddenly thoughtful. "Has Aunt Agatha been so much of a problem?"

"Nothing I can't manage," Kim said. Then honesty forced her to add, "Yet."

Mairelon glanced at Kim's almost empty plate. "I see."

Gathering her courage, Kim said, "Yesterday, she said something about—"

The far door opened, and Mrs. Lowe entered. "Good morning, Richard. You're up early. Good morning, Kim."

"I've a busy day ahead of me," Mairelon said, rising politely to greet her.

Mrs. Lowe helped herself to eggs and herring from the platters on the sideboard, then joined them at the table. Much to Kim's relief, she took the chair beside Mairelon. "I hope all this running about will not go on indefinitely," she said, picking up her fork.

"Some things are difficult to be definite about," Mairelon said.

"Your levity is unbecoming, Richard, and not at all to the point," Mrs. Lowe said, giving him a stern look. "In another week, the Season will be upon us, and as you have chosen to come to Town for once, I shall expect you to find a little more time for your social and family obligations."

"Oh, you may expect whatever you like, Aunt." Mairelon's tone was careless, but there was a set to his shoulders that told Kim he was not pleased.

"People are already arriving, and I fear there are still quite a few who are . . . confused about your proper standing."

"I can't imagine why. I'm the least confusing person I know."

Kim choked on her toast. Mrs. Lowe frowned, but it was impossible to tell whether it was at Kim or at Mairelon.

"I think you are being deliberately dense, Richard," Mrs. Lowe said after a moment. "I am, of course referring to your role in the theft of the Saltash Set from the Royal College of Wizards several years ago."

“I had no role whatever in the theft of the Saltash Set,” Mairelon said, frowning. “I had no role in its recovery. Rather a large one.”

“Yes, of course, Richard, but still. . . . Your innocence may have been established in a legal sense—”

“Not ‘may have been,’ ” Mairelon put in, his frown deepening. “Has been.”

“—but there are those in Society who still have doubts. Your . . . eccentricities since your return have done nothing to reassure the ton.”

“Eccentricities?” Mairelon raised his eyebrows.

“As you chose not to appear socially during last year’s Season, you perhaps do not realize just how much talk there has been.” The muscles in Mrs. Lowe’s neck tightened, and Kim realized that she was carefully not looking in Kim’s direction.

Kim tensed angrily, then forced herself to relax. It wasn’t exactly a surprise that Mrs. Lowe disapproved of her, and it might be true that the existence of Mairelon’s unusual ward had somehow tarnished his reputation. Toffs were odd that way; even after a year of life among the gentry, Kim knew she didn’t understand them.

“Gossip drives the Season,” Mairelon said, and there was a faint edge beneath the outward blandness of his tone. “I’m glad to have been of service.”

“It is no service to yourself or your family,” Mrs. Lowe said severely. “If you do not excuse yourself a little this year, I shall have to wash my hands of you.”

Kim looked up hopefully, but managed to bite her tongue before anything untoward slipped out. Mairelon, however, caught her expression and laughed. His reaction drew his aunt’s attention to Kim, and, after giving them both a quelling look, Mrs. Lowe said, “There is another thing I have been meaning to speak to you about, Richard.”

“And what is that?”

“Your ward’s education,” Mrs. Lowe replied, and Kim’s stomach clenched.

“Kim has been doing very well,” Mairelon said. “She’s learned to read, and her magic skills are coming along nicely. It will be a while before she has the necessary Latin and Greek, of course, but she has a remarkable memory for chants and invocations, and an eye for detail that will be very useful when she gets to more advanced work.”

Pleased and a little surprised by the unexpected compliment, Kim looked down at her plate.

Mrs. Lowe coughed. “I was referring to her social education, Richard. It has been sadly neglected. No doubt you had your reasons, and it could not matter much while she was safely in Kent, but now that you have brought her to London it is imperative that she learn how to go on.”

“Why?” Kim demanded, looking up. “It’s not as if I’m going to balls or anything.”

“So long as you are my nephew’s ward, you will undoubtedly meet persons of consequence from time to time,” Mrs. Lowe said. “Your behavior toward them will reflect on your guardian, and on the rest of his family. And while the Merrill family is undeniably well-connected and well-off—”

Forty thousand pounds in the Funds is only “well-off”? Kim barely managed to stop herself from shaking her head in disbelief.

“—connections are no protection from scandal.” She turned to Mairelon. “So long as her time is so completely occupied by her magic studies, Kim is unlikely to learn what she needs to know in order to cope with Society.”

“But does Society know how to cope with Kim?” Mairelon murmured. “Still, perhaps you’re right.” He looked at Kim. “How would you like to come along to the Royal College of Wizards with me this morning? It’s time you had a look at it, and I’m sure you’ll like Kerring.”

Kim, caught with her mouth full, could only nod emphatically. Mrs. Lowe frowned. “Richard! That is not at all what I meant.”

“No? Well, I’m sure it will work out.”

“Furthermore, Kim and I have an important engagement this afternoon for tea,” Mrs. Lowe said. “She can’t possibly spend the day at the Royal College.”

“Oh, it won’t take all day,” Mairelon assured her. “Kim, if you’re finished lingering over your breakfast, we should be going.”

Kim dropped her cutlery at once and stood up. Mrs. Lowe frowned. “Richard, you can’t take that girl out in—I mean, her conduct is not always to be depended upon.”

Mairelon smiled seraphically. “According to you, neither is mine. We’ll make a splendid pair. But don’t worry; Hunch will keep us on the near side of acceptable behavior. Kim?”

Choking back laughter, Kim followed him to the door, while Mairelon’s aunt sputtered in annoyance behind them.

The Royal College of Wizards occupied a long, rectangular building on the Thames, across from Westminster Abbey. The central section dated back almost to the Conquest; the rest was the work of latter-day heads of the college who had maintained their privileged position against subsequent kings and bishops alike. Westminster Hall, where Parliament met, had had to expand into the palace upriver, instead of onto the desirable land already occupied by the wizards.

Kim did not have much chance to study the outside of the building. As soon as their coach pulled up at the entrance, Mairelon jumped down before the footman could reach the carriage door. He headed briskly for the weathered oak doors of the college, leaving Kim no choice but to hurry after him. Inside, they whisked past the main hall, allowing Kim only a glimpse of threadbare banners and stone pillars, and a brief whiff of musty air. They climbed a narrow flight of stone stairs, whose centers had been worn down a good two inches by centuries of magicians hurrying up and down. At last, they emerged in a small, bare entrance room with two other doors. Without hesitation, Mairelon crossed

the far door and tugged sharply on the faded bellpull beside it.

“Now, if Marchmain hasn’t got all the apprentices busy hunting out historical documents for some project or other—Ah, here we are.”

The right-hand door opened, and a slender, brown-haired young man entered and peered at them nearsightedly. “May I be of assistance?”

“I’m Richard Merrill, and this is my apprentice, Kim. We need to see Lord Kerring, if he’s here. Is he?”

“I believe so,” said the young man, “but he’s busy.”

“Kerring’s always busy. We’ll see him anyway. Come along, Kim.”

“I don’t think that’s a good—” The young man broke off. Mairelon had already brushed past him and disappeared through the doorway.

“Don’t worry,” Kim told him as she followed Mairelon. “If this Lord Kerring could know Mairelon—I mean, Mr. Merrill—then he’ll know who to blame for interrupting him. And it won’t be you.”

With the apprentice trailing after, they made their way through a maze of narrow corridors. Finally, Mairelon stopped before a door that, to Kim, looked exactly like all the others they had just passed. He waited just long enough for Kim and the apprentice to catch up, then opened the door and they went in.

The room on the other side was much larger than Kim had expected, but there was very little space to walk in. Bookcases not only lined the walls but poked out at right angles to them, leaving only narrow aisles which were further choked by occasional precarious stacks of books on the floor. A narrow table beside the door was piled shoulder-high with books, and there were more books under it. The room smelled of musty paper, old leather, and dust. Kim sneezed.

From one of the alcoves, a deep voice boomed, “What’s that? Who’s there? Never mind, just go away. I’m working.”

“You’re always working, Kerring,” Mairelon said. “We’ll leave as soon as we’ve gotten a couple of answers.”

A very hairy head poked around the side of one of the bookcases. “You’re not going to get them that—Richard Merrill! Why didn’t you say it was you? What have you gotten into this time?”

As he spoke, Lord Kerring emerged from behind the bookcase, and Kim could not help staring. At first, she thought he was short, but as he came toward them she realized that he was actually of average height; he only looked short because he was so round. He was of middle age, and his clothes looked like something out of one of the ragbags on Thread-needle Street—they had clearly been of excellent quality when they were new, but now they were so rumpled and dusty that they would not have looked out of place on a costermonger in the Hungerford Market. A tuft of cat hair clung to the back of one sleeve. He had dark, curly hair and a bushy beard, both much in need

trimming.

Kim stared. He's a lord ? And a wizard to boot?

"Come in, sit down," Lord Kerring said, waving the relieved apprentice out the door. "Is that that young wizard you found last year? Introduce me."

"I'll be happy to, when you give me a moment's breathing room," Mairelon said. "Kerring is my ward and apprentice, Kim. Kim, this is Lord Kerring, one of the senior wizards of the college."

"Enchanted," Kerring said, and bowed with unexpected grace. His eyes twinkled as he added, "Though not in the literal sense. Why haven't you brought her before? Will you be coming out this year, Miss Merrill?"

"Just Kim. I don't think so." Or rather, when hell freezes over. She had a momentary, dazzling vision of herself whirling across the dance floor at an elaborate ball, then shook her head. Even if I got an invitation, I'd end up sitting out. The Society toffs agree with Mrs. Lowe. "Miss Merrill has been very kind, but I don't really belong in Society."

Kerring gave her a sharp look, as if he knew exactly what she had been thinking. "Nonsense, my dear. A wizard is the social equal of anyone."

The beginnings of a frown vanished from Mairelon's face. "You're quite right, Kerring, and it's a solution I hadn't thought of. Thank you."

"You're welcome. I think." Kerring looked at Mairelon blankly; when this was not enough to produce an explanation, he opened his mouth to continue. Mairelon forestalled him.

"Now, if you'll just give me a hand with this other matter, we'll leave you to your books." Mairelon drew a piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to Kerring. "Can you tell us anything about these books? What they might have in common, or why anyone might want them?"

Kerring studied the list, frowning. "It's an odd assortment. What is it, someone's collection that you're thinking of buying?"

"Part of my brother's library, actually," Mairelon said.

"They don't seem much like his kind of thing," Kerring said. "I wonder. . . . Wait here for a minute." He disappeared behind one of the bookshelves, and Kim heard the sounds of drawers opening and closing, and paper rustling. Finally Kerring reappeared, carrying Mairelon's list and a little sheaf of documents.

"Found it!" he said triumphantly. "I thought these were familiar. They're part of the collection your father had me assess about, oh, fifteen years ago."

"Only part?" Mairelon said.

"The part I recommended he buy." Kerring waved the sheaf of documents. "The whole collection was much more extensive. It belonged to a Frenchman, an émigré who ended up in debtor's

prison. De Cambriol, that was his name. His wife was a French wizard, one of the group they call Les Griffonnais; she was just beginning to make a name for herself when she died. That's why your father was interested in her books."

"Her books?" Kim said. "I thought you said they belonged to her husband."

"He inherited them," Kerring said. "It was quite a nice little collection, actually, but he wasn't a wizard himself and had no interest in magic, so when he fell on hard times, he sold them off. Didn't do him much good, I'm afraid. Too many gambling debts; the proceeds from the sale didn't even begin to buy him out."

"And my father bought them," Mairelon said in a thoughtful tone.

"Some of them," Kerring corrected him. "Madame de Cambriol's magic collection, to be precise, plus one or two others he thought looked interesting. I thought he'd bought her livre de mémoire, too, but I don't see it on your list. Pity; there's a deal of interest in the Griffonnais these days. Your brother could have gotten a nice price for it."

"What's a . . . a livre de thingummy?" Kim asked, at the same moment that Mairelon said "Interest?"

Kerring's beard split in a grin. "One at a time. A livre de mémoire is a sort of book of notes that a lot of French wizards keep. A memory book, we'd call it."

"Just who is interested in Les Griffonnais?" Mairelon said. "And why?"

"Everybody," Kerring replied, gesturing expansively. "Because of the restoration of the French monarchy, you see. Now that they've finally gotten rid of that pushy little Corsican they let take over the country, there's a lot of curiosity about things under the old regime."

"I believe there was rather more to Napoleon than that," Mairelon murmured. "Thank you very much for the information, and if you hear of anyone asking specifically about Les Griffonnais or Madame de Cambriol, do let me know. Andrew might be interested in selling off some of the books."

Lord Kerring gave Mairelon a sharp look. "You're up to something, Merrill, and don't think I don't know it. I expect a full account for the archives once it's over, whatever it is."

"If you insist," Mairelon said. "I believe we have what we came for. Good day; perhaps I'll see you at the club next week."

"No doubt. Good day, Miss Merrill. I expect I'll see more of you when you start your journeyman's work. And I assure you that it will be a pleasure." Kerring bowed.

"Thank you, my lord," Kim stammered, and managed to curtsy without losing her balance. Kerring gave her an avuncular smile, and a moment later she and Mairelon were outside the library once more.

Mairelon was frowning slightly as they started down the hall. Thinking again, Kim thought of herself. Well, he can just think out loud where I can hear it. "Now what?" she asked him.

“Mmm? Kerring is an old reprobate at times, but he’s a sound man and there’s no denying he knows his work.”

“Fine for him,” Kim said. “But what do we do now?”

“We go back to the house and see whether we can turn up Madame de Cambriol’s memoir book. If it’s not there, we’ll know our burglar got what he was after.”

“But you don’t even know whether it was in the library to begin with,” Kim said.

“If Kerring thinks my father bought it, I’m willing to wager he did,” Mairelon said. “There might even be an inventory around somewhere. We’ll have to check. Come along; we haven’t time to waste.”

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