

AURA OF MAGIC EXCERPT



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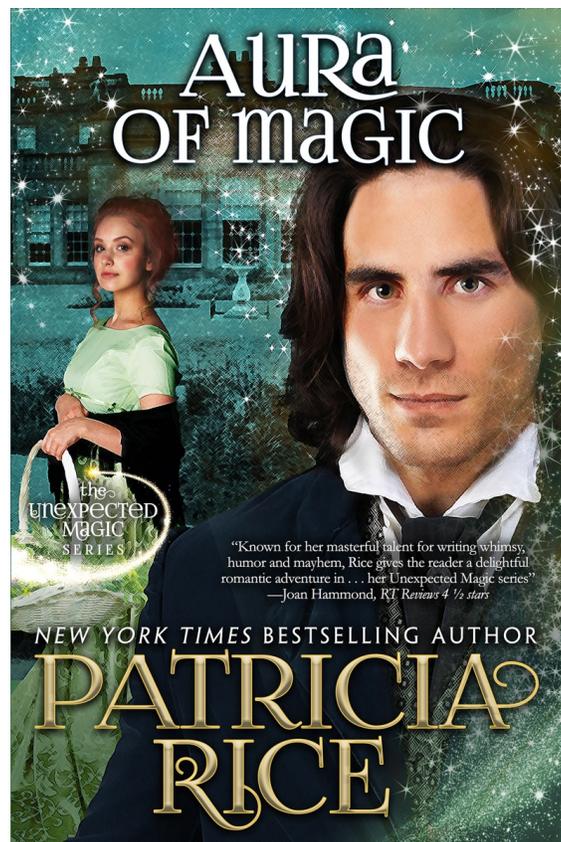
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AURA OF MAGIC



Unexpected Magic Book Four



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AURA OF MAGIC EXCERPT



JUNE 1831, London

Snarling in a fit of undignified temper, Pascoe Ives whacked his walking stick against an inoffensive hedge. A terrified rabbit leapt from its hiding place.

Imagining swinging the ebony cane at His Majesty's ministers, forcing them to leap like frightened conies, defused the worst of his frustration. Throwing back his shoulders, Pascoe relaxed his grip on the cane's crested gold handle—a crest that didn't belong to him, which was part of the whole problem. Without a title to wield, he was at the king's mercy.

As if to counter his foul mood, the gold knob reflected the fading rays of the sun on what would have been a beautiful day to escape to Brighton.

He had promised the children and servants a visit to the shore, if only in vague hope of restoring sanity in a household where none existed. The meeting with the king's cabinet shattered any illusion that he could escape the life he'd carved for himself—a life that hadn't included family until he'd arrogantly acquired one under the assumption that a wife would tend the family hearth.

As he approached his townhome, he noted a battered ostrich plume brushing the railing of his kitchen stairs. His heart stuttered and tripped. Lily always forgot her keys. She had used to sit on the step and read. . . . But this was not the modest cottage he'd once shared with his late wife.

Even thinking of Lily at this moment was a denial of the dilemma sitting on his doorstep. With a sigh, Pascoe stopped at the rail. Wearing her best traveling costume, the young nanny he'd recently hired wept on his kitchen stairs. Her tears ground all pretense of normalcy into grains of sand, the sand he would not be seeing anytime soon.

Did Brighton have sand? Traveling on official duties, he'd only seen the insides of inns, taverns, and cavernous palace chambers—never the coastline.

“What is it the children have done now?” he asked in weariness. “Vanished from the nursery? You knew they would not speak when I hired you.”

Startled, the nanny hastily wiped at her eyes with a handkerchief. “Oh sir, I tried. I truly did.”

“Yes, yes, they all do.” He impatiently tapped his stick against the stone steps. “Did they leave snakes beneath your pillow? Climb up a chimney? Or simply find a way to the roof?” His adorably precocious toddlers had done all that and more in the past.

More tears poured as she stood to face him. He towered uncomfortably over her and had to lean over to listen to her whispers. “They hate me, sir. They can hear me, I know they can, but they do nothing I say unless they wish to do so.”

Nothing he hadn’t heard a hundred times before. Impatiently, he swung his stick against the step. “Dealing with bright children requires a backbone.”

She stiffened said backbone. “Sir, I could not forgive myself if they truly vanished or got themselves in trouble, while I thought them safe and did nothing. I have no way at all of knowing where they are or what they are doing. They are so silent.”

“Until they’re not,” he added, knowing just exactly how loud they could be when they chose. “It’s a blamed inconvenient time to leave.”

“They’ll be fine with you, sir,” she said bravely. “They are eager to go to Brighton. It’s just me they find offensive. I cannot teach them if they will not listen. They are not bad children, sir.”

“They are undisciplined brats,” Pascoe growled. But there was no point in arguing. He’d tried that with the first few nursemaids, nannies, and governesses who had left, usually in tears. This one, at least, had lasted until he returned home.

She visibly steeled herself and raised her chin. “What they need is a mother, sir, a mother who can be there when you are not, who can hug them if they are frightened, and read them stories until they sleep, someone they know will always be there for them.”

They’d had a mother like that for two years. She’d died. Pascoe didn’t know when in hell he’d have time to hunt for another. If he couldn’t hire a reliable nanny, it wasn’t likely he could find a saint who would endure his absences and his children’s eccentricities, a sweet, maternal sort who would love and nurture instead of fleeing in fury and tears. Or become ill and die, he conceded blackly.

“Did Mrs. Black give you the reference I left on my desk?” he asked in resignation. He’d had hopes for this nanny. She was highly experienced, educated, intelligent, and his nephew’s wife had said her astrological chart was propitious, whatever that meant.

But he always prepared a reference for the servants working with the twins before he left town—which he would be doing shortly, again, and not for sunny

Brighton but for the gray wilds of the north. He didn't want to be responsible for women starving in the streets because his children drove them there.

"Oh, yes, yes, she did, thank you so very much, sir." She curtsied her relief.

He left her waiting for whatever transportation she was expecting and stomped up the steps, letting himself in the unlatched front door. The footman was nowhere in sight.

His beautiful—usually mute—four-year-old twins, however, bounced down the stairs crying, "Papa, Papa, see new mama now?"

He nearly keeled over in shock—his nursemaid-terrorizing urchins had just miraculously learned to speak? And the first words out of their mouths were that they wanted a mother?

How could he tell them that finding a saint did not fit into his schedule?



WYSTAN CASTLE, Northumberland

Brigid Darrow, Countess of Carstairs, paced her dimly-lit chamber with angry taps of her heels against the stone. Her room in this medieval castle where she'd retired herself had only narrow slits for windows, but it was well paneled and appointed. The company was congenial. Her fury wasn't at her newly-chosen home.

She railed at the fates, at the stupidity of men—and her thick-skulled younger brother in particular. "If you incite rebellion, the king will send armies, just as he did to Wales a few weeks ago. Hundreds died! Homes and businesses were destroyed," she cried in fear and exasperation.

Bony hands clasped together, the dunderhead rested his elbows on his knees, all lanky limbs and angry youth. "Why would the king send armies to a solitary mine in the north country? He doesn't even know we exist. We must establish our position now, before Carstairs becomes entrenched in his mismanagement."

Carstairs. She seethed at the title she bore. She had married too young to recognize that the whole wretched family was rotten to the core. Or more correctly, too mush-minded, whiskey-pickled stupid to rot.

She had married thinking she would have children of her own, children who would become responsible earls and leaders. She had failed. She had failed in so many ways. . .

She took a deep breath and tried to keep the tremor from her voice. "You are all I have, Fin. Please, do not do this, for my sake. It's sedition."

He looked up, his big green eyes so like their grandfather's that she nearly wept. "Sometimes, sis, the cause is greater than the individual. This is one of those

times. If you cannot help, I will find other ways.”

The pain of it was that she understood, from deep down inside her, in the core of integrity that their grandparents had molded. She knew the people of the village were more important than the new earl’s laziness.

But the more recent memory of poor Meg and her babe and the appalling aftermath slammed her shields back in place. “The village drove me out,” she said, revealing the very large crack in her heart, the one that needed time to heal. “They called me witch. Witch! Can you imagine how it feels, after all these years of coming to their aid, that for no explicable reason, they call me names and reject me? How can I possibly help?”

She wanted to weep, but her tears had frozen long ago.

He nodded in resignation and stood up. “I don’t know what happened, Bridey, I’m sorry. I just assume they needed someone to blame, and you were closest. But they’re changing, Bridey, they have to. We’ll be shutting down the mine soon. People will go hungry. Hungrier.”

“I fail to see what I can do,” she said, coldly drawing herself up straight and stiff as any board, arming herself with indifference. She might be lean, but she was as large-boned as her brother, and only a few inches shorter—a descendant of warriors just as he was. She’d never been the warm and cuddly sort. Intimidation came naturally to her. It had served her well as countess and even better in exile.

“You could reason with Carstairs,” he argued. “You’re still a bloody countess. You have rights.”

“No, I don’t,” she said emphatically. “Women have no rights whatsoever. It would break my heart,” she continued, “but I could find someone to help you go to the Americas if you wished. I can find someone to help you set up as an engineer anywhere. I will not help you get yourself killed.”

“Power and wealth have made you as cold as all the Carstairs,” he said bitterly. “The warm-hearted sister I once knew would never have turned her back on the people who worshipped her, no matter what the circumstance.”

“Aye, and I’m the cold-hearted witch they made of me,” she agreed callously. “I gave them my youth, my allegiance, my gifts. I provided for you and grandda. And now that I have no power or wealth, you turn your backs on me. So be it.”

“I still love you, Bridey. I just don’t agree with you. I’ve left some of grandda’s carrier pigeons on the roof. Keep them fed, please.” Sadly, he took his hat in hand and let himself out.

At least the pigeons meant that he wished to hear from her. Tears wet her eyes, but she didn’t allow them to fall. She’d cried herself to sleep that first year of her marriage at the tender age of sixteen. She’d cried when the babies of the village had

died, and she'd been helpless to save them. She'd cried when she'd lost the only baby she'd ever conceived and nearly lost her life in the process.

But she hadn't wasted all her time weeping. She'd lived and learned and educated herself in all manner of subjects—specializing in female knowledge since every man she'd known except her grandfather had scorned the intelligence and abilities of women, and their needs.

Men could have their weapons and wars and riots. They could have their alcohol and tobacco and kill themselves as they would and good riddance to them.

She would start a school and teach women so they could save the children men so carelessly left behind. That was her future. She simply needed to start looking for funds.

After Fin left and before she could send for tea to settle her rattled nerves, she heard a light tap at her door. Puzzled that it seemed to come from the lower part of the panel—since when had the household contained midgets?—she opened her senses just enough to be certain it was safe. She painfully remembered when she'd been rendered helpless through careless use of her gift. She didn't use it so casually now. In this ancient castle full of spirits, she feared her own senses.

Seeing nothing dreadful emanating through the panel, she opened the door a crack and peered down.

Surrounded in vibrant white light, two unfamiliar curly-haired toddlers with identical sky-blue eyes peered up at her. “Are you our new mama?”

Before she could gasp, or study this fascinating apparition, a well-built city gentleman in polished boots and expensively-tailored riding attire raced up the stairs shouting “Emma, Edward, where the devil. . . ?” He halted abruptly at sight of the children—and her.

Bridey stared. He stared back. The moment froze in time.

He had the most terrifyingly dramatic aura she had ever seen in her life. Every shade of clear red pulsed around him, with almost no other color infringing on that dominant willpower. She staggered backward, nearly blinded, and slammed her inner vision shut to concentrate on his less-dangerous outward appearance.

The affected monocle of a London dandy dangled from his lapel. A half dozen watch fobs hung at his waist, and he carried the kind of elaborate ebony walking stick exquisites of a prior generation once sported. Had he been less tall and muscled—or had she not seen his dangerous aura—she would have dismissed him as an absurd man-milliner.

But a second glance revealed that his breeches conformed to brawny thighs, and his boots detailed the powerful calves of an experienced horseman. His sharply carved visage displayed all male arrogance, of course—and a strong look of Ives.

Her cousin Aster had married into that family, although Aster's husband, Lord Theo, was a fairly restrained specimen. This Ives. . . she ripped her gaze from the appreciative look in his dark eyes to study the toddlers at their feet.

They eagerly awaited her answer to their puzzling question. Could it be connected to the faint violet streak she'd glimpsed in their auras? Blue hues often indicated intuition. Violet could mean a sensitivity almost as strong as most Malcolms possessed. Of course, it was said the current Ives family had descended from Lady Ninian Malcolm. . .

A bright pink light had surrounded father and children—not of them but around them.

“Please, are you our new mama?” the boy—Edward?—asked again.

Her reading of auras could be wrong, and intuition was meaningless on a practical basis. Bridey swallowed hard and called up her frozen shield.

Whoever they might be, this trio were irrelevant to everything she intended to make of her life now that she was finally free of attachments. She had no idea why they were in Wytan, an outpost of female power where Malcolm women gave birth, or why they had come to her door, but she would not welcome them.

“Of course I am not your mother,” she said frostily. “Why are they not in the nursery?” she demanded of the gentleman.

He had appeared harried and concerned as he'd raced after the children. Obviously having recovered his equilibrium, he raised his monocle now and examined her in worldly amusement, before taking his toddlers by their plump little fists. “Excuse us for disturbing you, my lady. Come along, children, have your nannies ever told you about the Frost Queen? We will find some nice lady to tell you a story.”

“But mama says she's our new mama,” the little girl protested, dragging her feet as she was led away.

“You need a mother who laughs and likes children and tells you stories,” he admonished. “Frost Queens turn children into icicles.”

“Children cannot be icicles, can they?” the little boy asked earnestly as the twins stomped for the stairs, still unhappy.

“My, you two are chatty today.” The gentleman cast a puzzled glance back at Bridey.

She shut the door, refusing to give in to curiosity. Mama says she's our new mama? They were children, that was all.

Studying the auras of strangers was a survival technique she should consider eliminating. Knowing a person that intimately on first glance was an invasion of their privacy and a shock to her system. She was safe here. Malcolm women would

never allow dangerous strangers into their home.

Well, Wytan actually belonged to Duncan Ives, the Marquess of Ashford, these days, but many of his family were Malcolm descendants, including the marquess. So they were all one big family, more or less.

Frost Queen, indeed! Where did he gather the audacity to insult her that way? If this was one of Lord Theo's brothers, and they thought they were free to come and go here, she might have to rethink making this her home.

Setting her mouth in determination, she swept down the corridor in search of Lady Aster. As sister-in-law to the marquess, her cousin had invited her here, knowing Bridey's situation. Aster would know the name of the newcomer.



SO MUCH FOR hoping that his family's doddering old castle in Northumberland might harbor a few motherly ladies who would look after the twins while he journeyed north. Pascoe shivered at the encounter with the icy specter haunting the women's floor of the old castle.

The auburn-haired Frost Queen had been much too vibrant to be a ghost—intimidatingly lovely, elegantly dressed, and probably a peeress, which would explain the arrogance. The Malcolm ladies generally married well.

But the shock of the children actually talking again—and to a woman who had clearly not encouraged their confidences—had left him off balance. Since that one demand in London after driving off their nanny, they'd not said another word, despite the opportunity provided by the endless journey up here. He'd been wondering if he'd hallucinated their earlier speech—until now.

Why now? Why her? Would any lady they encountered encourage their fantasy? Servants obviously didn't drive their need to speak.

He wanted his children to be normal and happy and that required communication. Why would they not speak when it was just him?

The housekeeper finally appeared down the hall and led them to the upstairs nursery before Pascoe resorted to pounding on doors.

"We don't have any babes in residence at the moment," the stout older woman explained, unlocking a large chamber set up for a variety of children. "The two Marys usually act as nursemaids when we have infants in residence. One will be up directly."

Thank all that was holy. Now, if only he could accomplish his task before the twins drove off every servant in the house. . .

"Thank you," he said gravely, watching as his offspring explored the long room. Wordlessly, without even looking to him for permission, they dragged two small

beds together and bounced on them while studying the shelves of toys.

“Don’t talk much, do they?” the housekeeper asked.

“Generally, not at all. They laugh, they cry, they shriek, but until today”—or the other evening, he mentally amended—“they have never spoken a complete sentence.”

That the only sentences they had completed referred to mothers, apparently plural, was a mystery he should ponder, if he were not so buried in urgent duties. Which brought him back to another task. Escorting the children here had taken more time than he should have. He needed to hurry.

“Where is Lord Theo?” he asked as a young nursemaid arrived at the top of the back stairs. She bobbed a curtsy and turned to the children.

“His lordship is at the top of the tower,” the housekeeper said with a hint of disapproval. “When he is not with his lady, he is studying the stars.”

This was the north country in June. Pascoe didn’t think there would be stars out for hours. But he understood the need to hide far from all the feminine energy inundating the ancient tower.

He watched as the nursemaid pulled an old book off the shelf and offered it to the children. Servants generally could not read, but anyone working with the Malcolms for long had a modicum of education. He relaxed as the twins obediently settled into tiny rocking chairs.

As their nanny had said—they really were good children. Except when they weren’t.

He hurried up the stairs the housekeeper pointed out. After a long journey of bouncing children, helpless servants, and the tedium of dust, mud, rain, and heat, he needed male company and masculine pursuits.

Although Theo was his nephew by society’s definition, Pascoe was only a few years older. They’d grown up together in the same nursery, if not the same schools. Eton did not accept illegitimate sons, no matter how high born.

Despite being raised in the Ives household with all the privileges of the legitimate heirs to the marquessate, Pascoe was a landless bastard. Theo’s grandfather, the first marquess, had provided heirs and spares, and then after his wife’s death, produced Pascoe with his mistress, just as his grown sons were producing Theo and his brothers. Pascoe was closer to his nephew than to his middle-aged half-brothers, Theo’s legitimate uncles.

Pascoe had always felt like the runt of an extremely large litter.

A renowned astronomer and the designer of fine telescopes, Theo leaned over the aperture of a rather large instrument, making notes on a high desk he’d built for just this purpose. His nephew was an anomaly in the family—slender, light-

haired, almost ascetic in comparison to most of the large brutes that Ives regularly produced.

But Theo possessed the formidable Ives mind. His telescope manufactory had doubled production lately, and he'd received honors for his astronomical discoveries. There was talk that he might receive knighthood.

—An honor Pascoe craved with all his heart and soul. Possibly the only honor he could achieve given his birth, or lack of it.

“What are you doing here?” Theo asked, looking up from his task. He jotted a final note and came over to pound Pascoe on the back. “But I'll not complain of your company. Do you have any notion what it's like living in an all-female household?”

“I have no notion and no wish to learn,” Pascoe retorted, finding a brandy decanter and helping himself. “I have been tormented by children and women for days, and have just been dismissed by an unknown frost queen as if I were an insignificant insect. There is a reason I prefer the road over home life.”

“You wish to earn a knighthood,” Theo said with a laugh, understanding him too well. He accepted the glass Pascoe poured for him. “Your life has no women to escape. You drive yourself. I cannot imagine who you refer to as a frost queen. Most of Aster's relations are non-stop chatterboxes. I come up here to escape them.”

“Tall for a woman, stunning mountain of dark-reddish hair, eyes as green as an Irish pasture, wearing an expression of acid disdain.” Pascoe lingered over the memory of high breasts, slender waist, and lush lips, but thought those inappropriate to mention.

“Ah, that would be Lady Carstairs, the midwife. She's always seemed pleasant enough, if not exactly friendly.”

“Carstairs?” Pascoe's blood froze. He despised coincidence. “Wife of the earl of Carstairs?”

“Widow. The current earl is apparently an ass of immense proportions who tossed her out of her home after he inherited it. Claimed she was a witch trying to kill him. She's a cousin of Aster's and reportedly a highly-trained midwife.”

Pascoe threw back his brandy, pondering this unexpected development. He needed information, and he seized opportunity where he found it. An angry widow could be informative, if he could avoid being frostbitten.

“The current earl of Carstairs is the king's godson,” Pascoe explained, grimacing. “He and his brother are the offspring of one of His Majesty's favorite admirals. I've been ordered to find out the cause of Carstairs' complaints about his rather impressive inheritance. The Northbridge mine and foundry produce almost half the iron in the country, and his workers are threatening strikes.”

Theo lifted his snifter in sympathetic toast. “I wish you well with that. From all reports, Carstairs’ laborers have good reason to be on the brink of rebellion. And if I’m gathering the situation rightly, that means if they shut down the blast furnace, the country’s ships and railroads will cease construction?”

“The kingdom’s industries will crawl to a halt,” Pascoe agreed gloomily. “And the blame will rest on me if I don’t resolve the situation. A witch? Carstairs is blaming the unrest on a witch?”

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