

# CHEMISTRY OF MAGIC EXCERPT

UNEXPECTED MAGIC BOOK FIVE



PATRICIA RICE



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# CHEMISTRY OF MAGIC



## Unexpected Magic Book Five



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## CHEMISTRY OF MAGIC EXCERPT



LONDON, August 1831

“Does Lord Dare normally generate the smell of sulfur?” Miss Emilia Malcolm McDowell inquired anxiously, holding a handkerchief to her nose as she traversed the back hall of that gentleman’s London home.

She’d occasionally heard family members refer to the viscount as Devil Dare, but she’d rather thought it referred to his bold and reckless approach to life, not the actual stench of Hell. Still, if he was as ill as her mother had said, one could make exceptions for odd odors. She, of all people, knew better than to be superstitious about peculiarities.

Lady Dare, the viscount’s widowed mother, bobbed her cap-covered graying curls. “He produces the most vile odors one can imagine. Perhaps I should not have insisted that he leave the window open even in winter,” she said worriedly. “London air can carry terrible diseases. Perhaps his illness is all my fault.”

“Then we would all be ill,” Emilia said, trying to reassure the lady while mentally re-evaluating her mission here. The viscount regularly generated the stench of sulfur and other vile odors? What kind of illness was that?

Before she could lose courage and flee, however, the lady shoved open a door without knocking. “Dare, you have a visitor.”

“Not now,” a deep male voice called impatiently from the interior. “And where is Jackson if you’re performing his duties?”

“I did not think it appropriate for a lady to visit without my presence,” the viscountess responded tartly, expressing the same impatience as her son. “Miss McDowell, I apologize for my son’s rudeness. He does know the niceties when he chooses to acknowledge them.”

“I’ve told you I don’t need any more ladies bringing me soup and patting me on the head,” he roared.

And then the room exploded. Glass shattered.

Emilia stepped in front of the much shorter, stouter Lady Dare, blocking her

from the black, malodorous cloud billowing through the open door. She held her breath and ducked her head so that her wide-brimmed hat blocked the smoke from her face.

Voluble cursing from inside the chamber, combined with a hacking cough, led her to conclude the devil had only blown up the room, not himself. “My lord, are you injured?” she called, unwilling to enter hell unless he could not escape on his own.

A large, blackened gentleman emerged from the baleful haze, brushing ash from his unbuttoned waistcoat and shirtsleeves.

She had been led to expect an invalid. She swallowed hard and again re-thought her purpose here. Lord Dare was so far from being an invalid as to resemble a veritable dragon—taller than she and twice as broad, larger than she remembered from her one brief introduction. Instead of dragon scales, however, he sported loose linen plastered with sweat and soot. Undisguised by gentlemanly attire, his powerful shoulders and solid chest created an illusion of virile health.

Only his hacking cough revealed the deteriorating state of his lungs—a dragon whose fire had died.

She recalled his hair as golden-brown, but she could not tell through the smoke. The apparition removed his spectacles to rub his eyes, leaving a ring of white around his singed dark lashes. Perhaps he did appear a trifle pale beneath the filth, she told herself. She was that desperate. And the sweat no doubt indicated fever since no actual fire emanated from his cave.

“Irritated, not injured,” he said, rudely looking her up and down. “No soup? No posies?”

“Dare, I swear. . .” The lady bit off her irritation. “Miss McDowell has a business proposition for you.” Her eagerness was obvious.

A few minutes ago, Emilia had been eager and anxious too. She’d waited years to tackle this task, studying the problem from every angle. She thought she’d finally found a perfect solution—

Faced with the devil, she was now back to wary and anxious. The frail invalid of her imagination was not quite the same as the querulous reality. Remembering all the sick people who counted on her, the future of pharmaceuticals, and the health of a kingdom—she drew a deep breath and met his cynical gaze without flinching. She had no other choices left.

“Lord Dare, perhaps this is a discussion we should have in private,” she suggested with as much hauteur as breathlessness could achieve. She wasn’t good at small talk, but she knew how to be direct.

“Do I know you?” Now that he’d stopped coughing, he cleaned his spectacles on

the shirt tail he pulled from his trouser band.

Sympathizing with his mother's irritation, Emilia refrained from rolling her eyes at this familiar refrain. It wasn't as if her height rendered her invisible, but for whatever reason, men didn't notice her, no matter how outrageously she dressed. "We met last year in Iveston, my lord, when you came to discuss glass for microscopes with Lord Theo."

He frowned, dropped his spectacles in his waistcoat pocket, and without permission, grabbed her lovely wide-brimmed hat adorned with lavender roses and removed it. She glared and snatched it back, just barely avoiding swatting him with it.

"The woman with the violet eyes," he exclaimed in pleasure, as if he actually remembered her. "Why the devil do you hide beneath that appalling flower garden? Come in, if you can bear the stench. I need to clean up before the soot settles. Mother, have Jackson bring the lady some tea." He held the door open wide to reveal the blackened ruins of a . . . study?

"Don't be improper, Dare," his mother scolded. "You must at least come into the sitting room where you can be chaperoned."

Wiping his face with his shirt tail, Lord Dare gazed upon his mother with a droll expression. "I think a dying man can be trusted to behave with all due respect for fear of what waits on the other side, don't you agree, Miss McDowell?"

She did not, but she'd been the one to suggest a private discussion. Lady Dare had some notion of her mission since she and Emilia's mother had discussed the problem of their recalcitrant offspring in advance. But Emilia preferred the terms of her proposal to be private.

"I think I can trust you to be a gentleman in your own home, under the same roof as your mother and sisters," she replied primly, avoiding the subject of what awaited on the other side of death. "Although I'm not at all certain that I can trust the room won't explode again."

"I've turned off the burners. You'll be safe." Lord Dare caught her elbow—he caught her elbow!—and dragged her inside the dimly lit chamber, closing the door on his mother.

He was fortunate she did not expire on the spot. The discomfort of his disease shot straight up her arm in pinpricks of warning.



"WE WON'T BE SAFE, not in this cesspool," the tall, be-flowered lady argued, rather dramatically wrenching her arm from Dare's hold and putting distance between them. "You cannot breathe properly in this soot. Where is the sitting room?" She

looked about as if she might find a magic door.

“I’m covered in grime. I can’t pollute the sitting room. Tell me your business and you needn’t admire my décor for long.” Dare grabbed cleaning rags from his desk drawer and began wiping down his glass beakers. At least, this time, he’d not set the draperies on fire, since there were none. He’d had the window boarded.

His damnable coughing started up again. He had no clean handkerchiefs left, so he used his shirt tail. Bad choice. When he came up for air, the lady was looking at him with a glimmer of sympathy. That was the look he despised most. He wanted to prove to her that he wasn’t exactly dead yet, except he’d more or less promised his mother to behave while they shared the same roof.

That he had sacrificed his private quarters and laboratory grated, but his remaining time in this world shouldn’t be selfishly spent sending good money after bad.

“You must lie down,” his guest said, blessedly not offering the usual weeping platitudes. “Your lungs and heart work harder when you stand. Lie down on that filthy piece of furniture over there and give your organs a rest.” She pointed at the settee that had once been a silly bit of green silk when his mother had installed it a year ago, after the last fire.

Organs? The lady dared say organs? Impressed, Dare still ignored her admonitions and returned to polishing.

She returned the horrid hat to her lustrous black hair. “We will discuss nothing unless you exhibit a modicum of good sense. I cannot deal with a suicidal madman. I apologize if I’ve wasted your time and raised your mother’s hopes.”

“I need the glassware to be clean, and it won’t be if I lie about admiring ceilings. You may speak or leave, it’s no matter to me.” Dare knew he was being abominably rude, but faced with the kind of woman he could no longer have, he’d rather she walked out than taunt him with his fate.

To his surprise, she took the beaker from his hand. “Do you keep vinegar or alcohol in here?”

His nose had almost lost its ability to smell, but she carried an air of . . . freshness. . . with her, as if the stench of his work didn’t touch her. Out of curiosity, he located the bottle of clear alcohol and handed it to her.

“Go lie down. I will clean and we will talk.”

Dare watched in fascination as the lady stripped off her gloves, expertly dipped a rag in a bowl of alcohol, and began vigorously polishing the glass as if she’d been doing it all her life. Those soft hands had most definitely not spent hours cleaning glass. They did, however, raise lewd notions of better uses for those slender fingers. In shock, he thought he needed a good lie-down. To his knowledge, ladies did not

clean glass or even recognize the need for glass to be cleaned.

His reaction to her unusual beauty was far less surprising. The combination of gleaming black hair, brilliant purple eyes, and fair skin reminded him of a common flower he'd seen in the market—not glamorous but striking.

Coughing again, he did as told and crumpled onto the settee. In truth, he needed to find breath for a discussion, and it was damned hard while breathing heavily down her delightfully long throat. Not that he was capable of breathing heavily any longer.

“That’s better,” she said in satisfaction, setting aside the sparkling beaker and picking up the difficult-to-clean, extremely expensive glass tubing.

Dare didn’t know if she referred to the glass or his position. He leaned against the pillows on the high end of the cushioned settee so he could watch her. She was tall for a woman, but the rest of her was disguised in sleeves wider than she seemed to be and skirts that belled out from her too-slender waist. “You can lose the hat. I can’t discuss business with someone whose face is concealed by all that flummery.”

She pinched the hat brim delicately between two fingers so as not to add filth to the lavender, removed it, then looked around for a safe place to set it down. There wasn’t any.

“Open a drawer. There’s nothing in them but supplies, but the interior stays clean.” Dare propped an arm behind his head and admired her graceful sway as she opened the begrimed desk and found a suitable resting place for her prized confection. Somehow, she did not strike him as a woman who cared about her attire, but she was garbed in what he recognized as the highest fashion. Living in a household of females, he was forced to notice such things.

She found his cleaning wires and cotton and began cleaning the tubing she’d left soaking in the alcohol. By damn, she knew what she was about. “Your proposition?” he asked, consumed with curiosity now.

It took a great deal to distract him from his goals these days, but this tantalizing female had managed it. Studying her, he decided her bosom probably wasn’t large, but it was high and firm above a waist so slender he could probably snap her in two. And those impossibly violet eyes. . . Where had she been when he’d been stupidly swaggering through the ballrooms of society?

Her fair brow drew down in a thoughtful line as she posed a response to his question. “My maternal great-grandfather left me a substantial estate. We had much in common, and he wished me to continue his work.”

“Which is?” Dare asked, because he was suddenly consumed with a desire to know everything about this woman of lavender mystery.



She hesitated, then said reluctantly, “Developing a truly accurate pharmacopeia.”

His interest immediately waned. “Female potions and witchery belong to the last century,” he said in dismissal. “Grass does not cure anything. Modern medicine requires experimentation and will surely encompass elements of which we know nothing yet.”

She looked down her nose at him. Perhaps her nose was a little long. And a bit sharp. Her lush lips thinned considerably with her disapprobation. And those bold black eyebrows formed jagged points of censure, which perversely thrilled him—perhaps because those huge purple eyes focused on him and him alone.

“Botany is a well-respected science. The women of my family were botanists long before the term was coined. Just because men have the freedom to explore other countries for new specimens does not make them better botanists than women,” she said coldly. “We have been using curative herbs and salves for centuries.”

Ignoring his snort of dismissal, she continued her lecture. “I am always interested in other cures, of course, and I most certainly experiment to determine the effectiveness of my formulas. . . unlike most apothecaries, I trust you realize. We are what we ingest, and if we ingest foreign chemicals, we cannot expect our bodies to do anything but reject them, often in a disastrous manner. That is not the point and is neither here nor there, however.”

“You are wrong about the effectiveness of chemicals,” Dare argued. “My physician prescribes Fowler’s Solution, a chemical mixture that has cured disease, including malaria and asthma.” And syphilis, but Dare refrained from shocking the lady with his sordid research. “It’s still in the experimental stage for consumption, but otherwise, I believe its effectiveness has been proven.”

She heaved a sigh of exasperation and picked up the next piece of glass to be cleaned. “I did not come here to argue over medicine. This is a business proposition. I have been reliably informed that your family will be thrown from their home upon your demise, a situation which you seem unwilling to rectify.”

Dare closed his aching eyes and rubbed his pounding temple. This was the reason he’d given up his private quarters—to save money. “My funds are all invested. They will pay off eventually, but they are not liquid enough yet to buy houses. I regret that, but short of finding a cure for consumption, I don’t see how you can help. Perhaps you could shoot my heir?” he asked hopefully, with an element of sarcasm, to be sure.

“An interesting solution,” she retorted in the same tone. “I suppose the lawyers could then consume your estate searching for a new heir. My solution might be a

trifle archaic, but more apt to succeed for both of us. You see, my great-grandfather was an old-fashioned sort of gentleman. He believed women should be married. So I cannot take charge of my inheritance until I am wedded.”

Dare pried open one eye. She seemed serious. She frowned as she polished a graduated cylinder. She wasn't even looking at him. He ought to be insulted. Most women flattered, flirted, and fawned all over him. Instead, he was fascinated by her lack of feminine wile, reflecting the perversity of his mind, he fully acknowledged.

A maid rapped at the door, and the lady called for her to enter. Once the tea tray was settled, the maid scampered out. Dare watched as Miss McDowell poured tea in the genteel manner instilled in all ladies of quality. She was everything society expected her to be. . . but unless the disease had eaten his brains, he was quite certain she was not at all what she seemed.

She offered the cup to him, and Dare shook his head. He'd have to sit up to drink, and he thought his head might roll off his shoulders if he tried. Despite what the poets said, there wasn't a damned thing romantic about this damnable disease. The body he'd taken for granted for thirty-one years was deteriorating faster with each passing day.

“How sizable is your great-grandfather's estate?” he asked after she'd sipped her tea, because his brain wasn't completely gone yet, and he thought he knew where this discussion was headed.

She almost stopped his heart when her wide lips curled upward and her lustrous-lashed eyes sparkled in approval.

“Grandfather's estate is large enough to purchase the townhouse your family will need when your heir evicts them. Large enough to establish the laboratory I need for my experiments. And the house and land pay for themselves,” she said in satisfaction.

“Laboratory?” A bout of coughing prevented finishing the question.

He didn't realize she'd approached until he felt her hands on his chest, pushing him back down into the confounded hard settee. Coughing too hard to object, Dare tried to concentrate on a woman's hands on him for the first time in forever. They felt good. They felt more than good. It was as if she were pushing warmth into his lungs, forcing them to open up. He almost choked taking a deeper breath than he'd been able to take in months.

She hastily backed away and stared at her now-filthy hands as if they were as diseased as he was. Her voice was a little shaky but did not reflect distaste. “Does your physician use one of those new stethoscopes?” she asked, returning to his table to clean off the soot. “The damage seems worse on one side than the other.”

What the devil did that mean? And since when did ladies lay hands on

gentlemen to whom they were not related?

He used a dirty rag to wipe his mouth, wadding up the bloody stain and flinging the rag under the chair. Now that he was breathing again, his coughing settled. "Yes, he uses a stethoscope, for what good it does. Consumption damages lungs. We don't need to cut open my chest to know that."

Although he had to wonder how she knew without use of the equipment, but he was focused on a more important topic. "You were speaking of a laboratory?" He tentatively drew another breath. The pain was less. Perhaps having a beautiful woman caressing him drew his blood downward and relieved the pressure.

Suddenly looking brittle enough to break, she focused her attention on polishing glass. "Yes, if I am to help the ill, I need a laboratory to test and perfect my medicines, understand how and why they work," she said in a voice that sounded as if she tried to convince herself.

"Now that my pharmacopeia is almost finished," she continued, gaining momentum, "my need for a true laboratory is the reason I'm eager to finally claim my inheritance. A distant cousin of mine has just married. Her new husband owns an old abbey near Harrogate where she means to establish a school for midwives. There are buildings on the grounds suitable for an infirmary, and she wants to establish her own clinic for dispensing her potions." Her tone mocked his earlier scorn. "She said there is enough room for me to establish a laboratory if I'm willing to aid her in preparing and dispensing medicines."

Dare pushed himself into a sitting position. Had she been a snake oil dispenser, he would have scorned her herbal quackery. But playing with botany had once been an acceptable lady's pastime. She didn't seem intent on poisoning him with it. Yet. "Harrogate?" he asked warily.

"Yes," she said, setting the expensive glass down with care. "I know nothing of mineral waters, but your mother indicated they were of interest to you. That is one of the reasons I am here."

"I've been attempting to separate the various minerals in spa water, looking for the curative properties," he admitted. "Harrogate's waters are particularly potent."

He hadn't forgotten the earlier part of her speech, and he continued with caution. "Once you marry, you will inherit an estate near Harrogate and this abbey?"

She nodded. Her velvet-lashed, purple eyes got wider, if that was at all possible.

Despite all her exterior composure, she was nervous, Dare realized. He was a huge brute, lying here like a bull in a field. She was a delicate lady, with a very odd mind, but that didn't change the fact that she was a gently bred female and should

not be here at all.

Which was when his lust-weakened brain comprehended the whole—she knew he was dying. She had come to him with a proposition. She needed a husband. He needed funds. But her courage had failed at the sticking point. He almost fell off the chair in his haste to show he wasn't a complete dunderhead.

Dare regained his feet, set aside the glass she was cleaning, and took her ungloved hand. Her bones were little more than twigs.

She hastily snatched her hand back, which made his next gesture awkward. Cautiously leaning on the table, because his strength frequently failed him these days, he got down on one knee.

“Miss McDowell, would you do me the delight and pleasure of becoming my wife?”

She burst into tears and sobbed, “Yes, of course, please.”

And then she grabbed her gloves and began pulling them back on.

We hope you have enjoyed this sample of

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