

LESSONS IN ENCHANTMENT
- SAMPLE

SCHOOL OF MAGIC, BOOK 1



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ONE



LYING FLAT ON HIS BACK UNDER THE WORKTABLE HE'D BUILT FOR THIS project, Andrew Blair applied his screwdriver to the undercarriage of the frustratingly useless pterotype. "My cousin should have accepted the bank's offer, then blown up the mine," he said absently, focusing on his newest mechanical contraption and not his partner's business discussion.

The wrench he reached for drifted into his hand. Frowning at the anomaly but still concentrating on his work, he continued removing the recalcitrant key.

"Blowing up the mine would have put Simon's miners out of work, an effect I thought our consortium is attempting to prevent." Hugh Morgan nudged Drew's shoulder with his boot. "You need to come out from there and sign this contract for the demolition of the tenements in Auld Town before they fall down."

"Simon would rather the dastards blow *him* up? He's been hunting for evidence for almost a year now! If he'd give up on the mine, I could invest his money in the restoration project, and he wouldn't have to be living in fear of cowards—"

A floating screwdriver slammed into the table leg and toppled to the floor. Finally drawn from his work, Drew shoved out from under the

table to glare at his cousin's six-year-old son. What in thunderation was the brat doing in here?

"A wife, my kingdom for a wife!" Drew muttered, shutting his talk of the lad's father.

A wife would keep the blasted *weans* where they belonged, right?

"You won't have a kingdom if you don't sign these contracts," Hugh informed him in the perfunctory tone that warned he was losing patience. "And if we don't start work soon, we'll go broke, and you'll never find a wife."

Hugh had a mathematical mind in the muscular body of a blacksmith. He didn't socialize well, but he spoke fluent business. Any form of social commentary indicated rebellion on the horizon.

The tool-shifting brat slipped into a corner of the workroom and closed his eyes, as if that made him invisible. Generally, the children didn't exist to Drew, but they were easier than contracts. "Enoch, get back to the nursery where you belong! Where's your damned nanny?"

"Nanny says *damned* is a very bad word, and you will go to perdition," the boy said, eyes closed and forehead furrowed in concentration. As if drawn by imperceptible strings, a screwdriver rose unsteadily from Drew's neatly organized toolbox.

Not making any progress on the pterotype, Drew caught the inexplicably floating screwdriver, stood, and brushed at the dust on his trousers. "Be damned to nanny. You're too young to be in here. Where are your sisters?"

Holding a stack of papers, Hugh blocked his access to the brat. Where Drew was long and lean, Hugh Morgan was barrel-chested and shorter. They'd fought with fists as boys, neither of them coming out the winner. Now, they tangled over stacks of legal documents. Being an adult didn't have a lot to recommend it.

"Nanny has a megrim. The twins are in the attic," Enoch announced, scampering out of the workroom before Drew could haul him out.

"What's a megrim?" Drew asked idly as he scrubbed his oily hands on a rag.

"Something nannies get, apparently. I'll never understand why your family thought you should take care of the three-headed monsters." With

more assurance now that they were back to business, Hugh showed him where to sign.

“My family believed I was getting married,” Drew said with a shrug.

Hugh snorted. “And they wanted to scare her off? Brilliant.”

His partner knew Drew’s cousin, knew his circumstances, and that Simon had gone mad crazed with drink and vengeance after his wife’s death. There were times when Drew had wondered if the children had driven his cousin to madness first.

Drew couldn’t really blame his ex-fiancée for not wanting to set up housekeeping with an instant family. Now that he considered it, Rose probably would have had megrims and retired to her room too.

He didn’t need a wife. He needed an army sergeant—at least until such time as Simon regained his senses and took the weans back, which might be never.

“You’ll not find a wife willing to put up with them,” Hugh said darkly. “We need to start this project so you can someday afford a dozen nannies. Right now, the tenants don’t pay enough to cover the enormous maintenance. We’re losing buckets of money. And you have a meeting with the consortium in an hour.”

“That entire medieval cesspool of derelicts and rats should be razed to the ground,” Drew complained, shrugging into his cutaway tweed jacket. “I fail to perceive how sinking all my funds rebuilding will earn me enough to buy food.” Although he had ideas of mechanical improvements. . . That had been one of the reasons he’d agreed to investing in the project—a mechanical lift.

Hugh was his investment manager. Without him, Drew would be living in a garret. Tinkering with ideas was not a sound financial policy, he’d learned. Some of his inventions paid off well, some not at all. He had to eat in between. He had to listen when Hugh spoke. He didn’t always understand. He simply went to business meetings and hoped to learn.

“Because you’ll be involved in restoring a historical city. They’re demolishing the old wynds and money is pouring into High Street. We’ll start in Canongate, where the investment is lower. Imagine rows of new terrace houses winding up the hill. You’ll earn more than on that tatty

machine you're working on." Disgruntled, Hugh shoved the contract back into its folder.

Aye, right, that's what he'd been thinking—refilling his coffers for his ever-needy family.

"My pterotype has universal applications more important than money. Just imagine how much faster your fancy contracts could be prepared if they could be written by my machine." Drew looked around for his cravat, and not finding it, stalked toward the parlor door.

A man with his plebian background couldn't step outside his house without a cravat and polished boots, looking like the gentleman he wasn't. He'd have to go upstairs and straighten his attire before he went anywhere. He should probably check on the nanny and the children while he was there. By the time he attended the meeting, he'd have to forget lunch, again. He didn't want to have to hire another cook, but this one had a schedule that never suited his.

He reached the foyer just as the maid let in his neighbor—*Blood and thunder!* Aware of his non-existent cravat, Drew felt like a half-naked barbarian. A pale young thing peered out from behind his broad-beamed neighbor, and his stomach cramped.

"Mr. Blair, I'm so glad I caught you." Mrs. Dalrymple rustled across the parquet. "I'd like you to meet my niece—"

A scream reverberated down the stairwell, rattling the excellent foundation. Almost relieved at the excuse to ignore the little mouse and her aunt, Drew dashed for the stairs, leaving his visitors gaping in the foyer.



"THERE YOU ARE, MRS. MAC, A LETTER THAT WILL MELT THE HEART OF THE most heartless son." Phoebe Malcolm Duncan capped her fountain pen and shook the linen notepaper to be certain it dried without smearing. The old lady liked to pretend she lived in a fancy house by using Phoebe's stationery.

The hunched pencil seller in faded mourning and black lace gloves curled her fingers into her palms and shook her scraggly gray curls. "You send it, my lady. I daren't touch it."

Spoken through toothless gums and in a broad accent, her request

was barely comprehensible, but Phoebe had heard the language of the slums since childhood and understood enough to nod and fold the letter for later mailing. Mrs. Mac's son never responded, but a mother never gave up hope.

Picking up her penny farthing, she climbed on the towering seat and arranged her split skirt to fall over her high-top shoes. Before she could continue on to her next stop, Phoebe heard Raven screech a warning overhead. She froze and opened her senses.

The rats were rushing out of Margaret's Wynd as if their tails were on fire. Even the simple-minded pigeons were aflutter. Holding on to her porkpie hat, Phoebe tilted her head to search the sky. There—right over the wynd where she'd grown up—flocks of pigeons surged upward, circling in panic. Her stomach clenched in alarm, knowing the pigeons only performed that aerial act if seriously disturbed from their roosts.

The only home she'd ever known was in the center of that medieval winding lane. Pumping the bicycle pedals, balancing the high wheel, Phoebe raced into crowded Canongate in the direction of the palace. On this main road, she dodged carts and pedestrians and curses, then shot across in front of a carter's horse, into Margaret's Wynd.

All looked normal in the grim dark lane of towering ancient edifices. A business-suited patron smoked outside the cigar store. The professor in his aging black coat lifted his top hat to her, heading for the university. An urchin played in the gutter. Clothes fluttered from the lines strung across the narrow alley.

Only she noticed the silent pigeons circling frantically in the almost invisible sky and the rats racing from their tunnels in the courtyard middens.

She heard the ominous rumble before she could see around the narrow curve to her tenement. *What in all the holy saints*— she pedaled faster.

A horrendous crash followed by a thick cloud of dust nearly pitched the bicycle over. Raven screamed imprecations. Even Piney whimpered a sleepy protest in her pocket.

Phoebe halted, planting her boots firmly on the shaking ground. In horror, she watched as the front of her home crumbled into a mound of brick and stone. The professor raced back down the street to join her.

People spilled out of the shops and taverns. The noise nearly drowned the screams and cries of the tenement inhabitants in their now wall-less building.

Gaping, not quite believing her eyes, Phoebe gazed upward at the eight-story edifice she called home. Her flat—and all the others—were completely exposed to the September wind. The medieval façade had simply fallen off the structure.

How the holy. . . By all the saints, what did she do now? Panic sank into her bones. How many people were hurt? Acting instinctively, she set aside her bicycle and headed for the rubble.

In the back of her head, a voice wailed, *Where will I go? Everything I own, everything I love, gone, crushed. My books! Daddy's portrait!*

A woman's screams halted any further hysteria.

Neighbors crowded around Mrs. Tarkington, holding her back as she tried to reach the mound of rubble still emanating centuries of thick, rock dust.

"My baby!" the mother cried. "My baby!"

Oh no, not Evie! Phoebe had watched little Evie grow from infancy. The child wasn't entirely right in the head—her mother was an alcoholic prostitute who may have passed on some disease—but that didn't mean the bonds of love weren't strong. She might not be able to save her home, but *Evie*. . .

Biting her finger, Phoebe fought past her rattled nerves. Her flat was laid bare three floors above—all her family's cherished heirlooms, her mother's treasures—but what mattered was the people here in the street.

She slipped the pine marten from her pocket, whispering soothingly, and mentally focused on an image of Evie's golden curls. "Please, Piney, find her." She knew the animal didn't understand the words so much as the pleading tone and the image she planted in his head. A member of the weasel family, Piney could squeeze into the most impossible crevasses. Maybe, if they could find Evie quickly enough. . .

She set the marten free in the shadows. She'd raised him since she'd found him as a baby in a deserted nest in one of the few remaining trees down by the ancient cemetery—a dying pine. She'd hoped to someday find him a mate, but his natural habitat had been nearly eradicated by

the growing city. She didn't stand much chance of finding another pine much less a marten.

The slender mammal wiggled from her hand and scampered over the stones to squirm under the mound of debris. Mrs. Tarkington's screams reverberated over the echoes of the crash. The neighbors not in shock tried to steer the distraught mother away. Phoebe could say nothing that might console her. All she could do was pray and concentrate on tracking her pet.

And not think about the appalling loss of her only home.

She had to focus on Piney so she didn't lose him. Overhead, Raven squawked and complained. The old bird had a right to protest. He'd made his home on the tenement roof. With the front wall gone, he'd be subject to every cold wind that battered the crumbling mortar. He'd lost his mate last winter, despite all Phoebe's efforts to keep them warm.

The wind seemed chillier than usual. Phoebe wrapped her arms around herself, grateful for the old coat she wore over her fraying gown. She had a little money, but living here, there was no point in flaunting the fact or wasting her meager savings. She had resisted applying at the veterinary college—called Dick's Vet School by the locals—for fear her mother might need more funds if her consumption worsened.

After Phoebe's father had died, her mother had created their nest egg by selling the entire tenement building to a consortium that could manage the tenants better than she could. Malcolms had lived in the once grandiose edifice for centuries—behind the ornate facade that was currently collapsed in the street. Part of the sales agreement had given them a life estate in that flat. It was the only home she'd ever known. Phoebe started to shake.

Concentrate. Follow Piney through the dust and debris—*hear a child's whimper.* Evie was alive!

Not daring to raise anyone's hopes, Phoebe slipped over to old Michael and gestured at his shovel. The cemetery worker frowned but signaled his younger assistant. As the crowd gathered in the street, wailing, arguing, or just gawking, Phoebe led the diggers to the farthest end of the rubble, where she sensed Piney nosing what could be the child's skirts. She started pulling at the crumbling stones with her gloved hands, showing the men where to dig.

These people had known her from birth. They knew her family. She didn't have to explain herself here. Men instantly followed her actions, gently pushing her aside so they could paw at the gravel and debris with their bigger, rougher hands, helping the grave diggers.

She hadn't realized she was crying until a wet spot dripped onto her dusty sleeve. She rubbed her eyes and cried more.

Piney slithered out of the debris, and she gathered him up, hugging the tiny animal as the men shouted and a mat of filthy hair appeared. Hearing Evie's whimpers, Phoebe shuddered in relief. She was no physician. She could do no more but pray.

If she'd learned nothing else in her hard world, it was that she had to act swiftly and think later. Her life, all that she owned, was in ruins at her feet. She had to keep moving.

While the hysterical mother swept in to gather up her child, Phoebe slipped Piney back into her pocket. Everything she loved and treasured—except her mother—was in that building. And her mother might die of heartbreak if she should learn they'd lost even the family portraits.

Shivering so hard that she could barely move her feet, Phoebe crawled over the crumbled mortar and stone blocking the lane. She didn't dare attempt to enter the tenement through the gaping front, but the rear staircase in the outside tower should still be solid, if she could reach the alley further down.

Around her, people wept and cursed and bewailed their wretched fates. She wanted to weep with them, but she had no one to rely on but herself. Crying would not protect her books and the artwork. She'd save hysteria for later, when the impact of homelessness fully hit her. She'd sit down and have a good howl then, when there was nothing left to be done.

She had no idea how she would cart a few centuries of belongings down three flights of crumbling stone stairs.

She did, however, know what she had to do after she'd accomplished the impossible. She simply hated sacrificing her independence to do it.

That produced a fresh spate of useless tears.