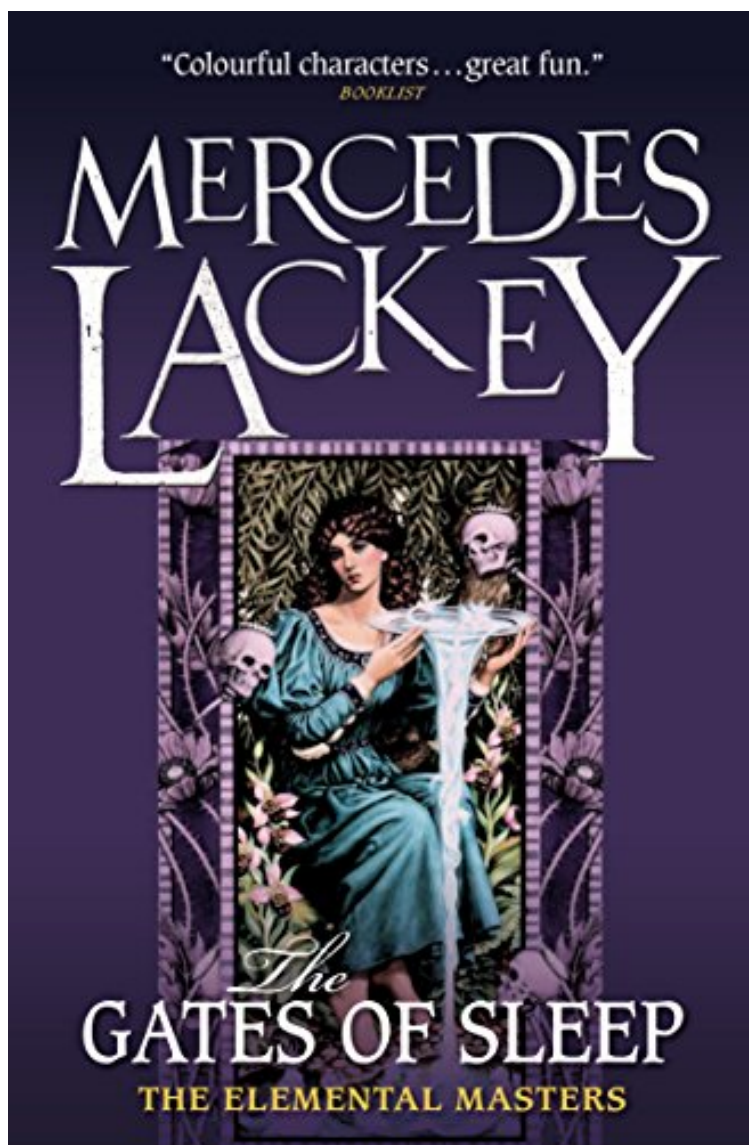


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The Gates of Sleep



Par Mercedes Lackey
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Par Mercedes Lackey : The Gates of Sleep before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Gates of Sleep:

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Description : Description du produit Marina is the cherished daughter of the wealthy Saverson family, practioners of Elemental Magic. But all is not well in this elegant, aristocratic household. Evil portents have warned her father that Marina will be killed before her eighteenth birthday-by the hand of her own aunt. And no one is sure if the family magic is powerful enough to overturn the prophesy.

Prsentation de l'diteur After the sudden death of her birth parents, Marina Roeswood meets her Aunt Arachne, who is to be her new guardian. Slowly Marina realizes that her aunt is the embodiment of the danger her parents had been hiding her from in the backwoods of Cornwall. But can Marina unravel the secrets of her life in time to save herself from the evil that had been seeking her for nearly eighteen years? Extrait 1 BIRDS twittered in the rose bushes outside the old-fashioned diamond-paned windows. The windows, swung open on their ancient iron hinges, let in sunshine, a floating dandelion seed and a breath of

mown grass, even if Marina wasn't in position to see the view into the farmyard. The sunshine gilded an oblong on the worn wooden floor. Behind her, somewhere out in the yard, chickens clucked and muttered, and two of Aunt Margherita's cats had a half-minute spat. Marina's arm was starting to go numb. The unenlightened might think that posing as an artist's model was easy, because "all" one had to do was sit, stand, or recline in one position. The unenlightened ought to try it some time, she thought. It took the same sort of simultaneous concentration and relaxation that magic did concentration, to make sure that there wasn't a bit of movement, and relaxation, to ensure that muscles didn't lock up. If the pose was a standing one, then it wasn't long before feet and legs were aching; if sitting or reclining, it was a certainty that some part of the body would fall asleep, with the resulting pins-and-needles agony when the model was allowed to move. Then there was the boredom well, perhaps boredom wasn't quite the right word. The model had to have something to occupy her mind while her body was frozen in one position; it was rare that Marina ever got to take a pose that allowed her to either read or nap. She generally used the time to go over the basic exercises of magic that Uncle Thomas taught her, or to go over some more mundane lesson or other. Oh, modeling was work, all right. She understood that artists who didn't have complacent relatives paid well for models to pose, and in her opinion, every penny was earned. She'd been here all morning posing, because Uncle had got a mania about the early light; enough was enough. She was hungry, it was time for luncheon, and it wasn't fair to make her work from dawn to dark. How could anyone waste such a beautiful autumn day inside the stone walls of this farmhouse? "Uncle Sebastian," she called. "The model's arm is falling off." A whiff of oil paints came to her as Sebastian looked up from his canvas. "It isn't, I assure you," he retorted. She didn't pout; it wasn't in her nature to pout. But she did protest. "Well, it feels as though it's falling off!" Sebastian heaved a theatrical sigh. "The modern generation has no stamina," he complained, disordering his graying chestnut locks with the same hand that held his brush, and leaving streaks of gold all through it. "Why, when your aunt was your age, she could hold a pose for six and seven hours at a time, and never a complaint out of her." Taking that as permission to break her pose, Marina leaned the oriflamme, the battle banner of medieval France, against the wall, and put her sword down on the floor. "When my aunt was my age, you posed her as a reclining odalisque, or fainting on the couch, or leaning languidly in a window," she retorted. "You never once posed her as Joan of Arc. Or Britannia, in a heavy helmet and breastplate. Or Morgan Le Fay, with a snake and a dagger." "Trivial details," Sebastian said with a dismissive gesture. "Inconsequential." "Not to my arm." Marina shook both of her arms vigorously, grateful that Sebastian had not inflicted the heavy breastplate and helmet on her. Of course, that would have made the current painting look rather more like that one of Britannia that he had recently finished than Sebastian would have preferred. And since the Britannia painting was owned by a business rival of the gentleman who had commissioned this one, it wouldn't do to make one a copy of the other. This one, which was to be significantly larger than "Britannia Awakes" as well as significantly different, was going to be very profitable for Uncle Sebastian. And since the rival who had commissioned "Saint Jeanne" was a profound Francophobe. . . . Men, Marina had long since concluded, could be remarkably silly. On the other hand, when the first man caught wind of this there might be another commission for a new painting, perhaps a companion to "Britannia Awakes," which would be very nice for the household indeed. And then another commission from the second gentleman? This could be amusing as well as profitable! The second gentleman, however, had made some interesting assumptions, perhaps based upon the considerable amount of arm and shoulder, ankle and calf that Britannia had displayed. He had made it quite clear to Uncle Sebastian that he wanted the same model for his painting, but he had also thrown out plenty of hints that he wanted the model as well, perhaps presuming that his rival had also included that as part of the commission. Marina wasn't supposed to know that. Uncle Sebastian hadn't known she was anywhere near the house when the client came to call. In fact, she'd been gathering eggs and had heard voices in Uncle Sebastian's studio, and the Sylphs had told her that one was a stranger. It had been quite funny she was listening from outside the window until Uncle Sebastian, with a cold remark that the gentleman couldn't possibly be referring to his dear niece, had interrupted the train of increasingly less subtle hints about Sebastian's "lovely model." Fortunately, Sebastian hadn't lost his temper. Uncle Sebastian in a temper was apt to damage things. Marina reached for the ribbon holding her hair in a tail behind her back and pulled it loose, shaking out her heavy sable mane. Saint Joan was not noted for her luxuriant locks, so Uncle had scraped all of her hair back tightly so that he could see the shape of her skull. Tightly enough that the roots of her hair hurt, in fact, though she wasn't apt to complain. When he got to the hair for the painting, he'd construct a boyish bob over the skull shape. In that respect, the pose for Britannia had been a little more comfortable; at least she hadn't had to pull her hair back so tightly that her scalp ached. "When are you going

to get a commission that doesn't involve me holding something out at the end of my arm?" she asked. Her uncle busied himself with cleaning his palette, scraping it bare, wiping it with linseed oil. Clearly, he had been quite ready to stop as well, but he would never admit that. "Would you rather another painting of dancing Muses?" he asked. Recalling the painting that her uncle had done for an exhibition last spring that involved nine contorted poses for her, and had driven them both to quarrels and tantrums, she shook her head. "Not unless someone offers you ten thousand pounds for it in advance." She turned pleading eyes on him. "But don't you think that just once you might manage a painting of Juliet in the tomb of the Capulets? Surely that's fashionably morbid enough for you!" He snatched up a cushion and flung it at her; she caught it deftly, laughing at him. "Minx!" he said, mockingly. "Lazy, too! Very well, failing any other commissions, the next painting will be Shakespearian, and I'll have you as Kate the Shrew!" "So long as it's Kate the Shrew sitting down and reading, I've no objection," she retorted, dropped the cushion on the window seat, and skipped out the door. This was an old-fashioned place where, at least on the ground floor, one room led into the next; she passed through her aunt's workroom, then the room that held Margherita's tapestry loom, then the library, then the dining room, before reaching the stairs. Her own room was at the top of the farmhouse, above the kitchen and under the attics, with a splendid view of the apple orchard beyond the farmyard wall.

There was a handsome little rooster atop the wallan English bantam; Aunt Margherita was very fond of bantams and thought highly of their intelligence. They didn't actually have a farm as such, for the land belonging to the house was farmed by a neighbor. When they'd taken the place, Uncle had pointed out that as artists they made very poor farmers; it would be better for them to do what they were good at and let the owner rent the land to someone else. But they did have the pond, the barn, a little pasturage, the orchard and some farm animalsbantam chickens, some geese and ducks, a couple of sheep to keep the grass around the farmhouse tidy. They had two ponies and two carts, because Uncle Sebastian was always taking one off on a painting expedition just when Aunt Margherita wanted it for shopping, or Uncle Thomas for his business. They also had an old, old horse, a once-famous jumper who probably didn't have many more years in him, that they kept in gentle retirement for the local master of the hunt. Marina rode him now and again, but never at more than an amble. He would look at fences with a peculiar and penetrating gaze, as if meditating on the follies of his youththen snort, and amble further along in search of a gate that Marina could open for him. There were wild swans on the pond as well, who would claim their share of bread and grain with the usual imperiousness of such creatures. And Uncle Thomas raised doves; he had done so since he was a boy. They weren't the brightest of birds, but they were beautiful creatures, sweet and gentle fantails that came to anyone's hands, tame and placid, for feeding. The same couldn't be said of the swans, which regarded Aunt Margherita as a king would regard the lowliest serf, and the grain and bread she scattered for them as no less than their just tribute. Only for Marina did they unbend, their natures partaking of equal parts of air and water and so amenable to her touch, if not to that of an Earth Master. She changed out of her fustian tunic with the painted fleur-de-lys and knitted coif, the heavy knitted jumper whose drape was meant to suggest chain mail for Uncle Sebastian's benefit. Off came the knitted hose and the suede boots. She pulled on a petticoat and a loose gown of Aunt Margherita's design and make, shoved her feet into her old slippers, and ran back down the tiny staircase, which ended at the entryway dividing the kitchen from the dining room and parlor. The door into the yard stood invitingly open, a single hen peering inside with interest, and she gave the sun-drenched expanse outside a long look of regret before joining her aunt in the kitchen. Floored with slate, with white plastered walls and black beams, the kitchen was the most modern room of the house. The huge fireplace remained largely unused, except on winter nights when the family gathered here instead of in the parlor. Iron pot-hooks and a Tudor spit were entirely ornamental now, but Aunt Margherita would not have them taken out; she said they were part of the soul of the house. The huge, modern iron range that Margherita had insisted on havingmuch admired by all the local farmers' wivesdidn't even use the old chimney. It stood in splendid isolation on the external wall opposite the hearth, which made the kitchen wonderfully warm on those cold days when there was a fire in both. Beneath the window that overlooked the yard was Margherita's other improvement, a fine sink with its own well and pump, so that no one had to go out into the yard to bring in water. For the rest, a huge table dominated the room, with a couple of tall stools and two long benches beneath it. Three comfortable chairs stood beside the cold hearth, a dresser that was surely Georgian displayed copper pots and china, and various cupboards and other kitchen furniture were ranged along the walls. Margherita was working culinary magic at that huge, scarred table. Quite literally. The gentle ambers and golds of Earth Magic energies glowed everywhere that Marina looked on the bread dough in a bowl in a warm corner was a cantrip to ensure its proper rising, another was on the pot of

soup at the back of the cast-iron range to keep it from burning. A pest-banishing spell turned flying insects away from the open windows and doors, and prevented crawling ones from setting foot on wall, floor, or ceiling. Another kept the mice and rats at bay, and was not visible except where it ran across the threshold. Tiny cantrips kept the milk and cream, in covered pitchers standing in basins of cold water, from souring; more kept the cheese in the pantry from molding, weevils out of the flour, the eggs sound and sweet. They weren't strong magics, and if (for instance) Margherita were to be so careless as to leave the milk for too very long beyond a day or so, it would sour anyway. Common sense was a major component of Margherita's magic. On the back of the range stood the basin of what would be clotted cream by teatime, simmering beside the soup pot. Clotted cream required careful tending, and the only magic involved was something to remind her aunt to keep a careful eye on the basin. Occasionally there was another Element at work in the kitchen; when a very steady temperature was required such as beneath that basin of cream Uncle Sebastian persuaded a Salamander to take charge of the fires in the stove. Uncle Sebastian was passionately fond of his food, and to his mind it was a small enough contribution on his part for so great a gain. The meals that their cook and general housekeeper Sarah made were good; solid cottager fare. But the contributions that Margherita concocted transformed cooking to another art form. Earth Masters were like that, according to what Uncle Thomas said; they often practiced as much magic in the kitchen as out of it. Of all of the wonderful food that his spouse produced, Uncle Sebastian most adored the uniquely Devon cream teascones, clotted cream, and jam. Margherita made her very own clotted cream, which not all Devon or Cornish ladies did. A great many relied on the dairies to make it for them. The shallow pan of heavy cream simmering in its water-bath would certainly make Uncle Sebastian happy when he saw it. "Shall I make the scones, Aunt?" Marina asked after a stir of the soup pot and a peek at the cream. Her aunt smiled seraphically over her shoulder. She was a beautiful woman, the brown of her hair still as rich as it had been when she was Marina's age, her figure only a little plumper (if her husband's paintings from that time were any guide), her large brown eyes serene. The only reason her husband wasn't using her as his model instead of Marina was that she had her own artistic work, and wasn't minded to give it over just to pose for her spouse, however beloved he was. Posing was Marina's contribution to the family welfare, since she was nowhere near the kind of artist that her aunt and uncles were. "That would be a great help, dearest," Margherita replied, continuing to slice bread for luncheon. "Would you prefer cress or cucumber?" "Cress, please. And deviled ham, if there is any." "Why a Water-child should have such an appetite for a Fire food, I cannot fathom," Margherita replied, with a laugh. "I have deviled ham, of course; Sebastian would drive me out of the house if I didn't." Margherita did not do all of the cooking, not even with Marina's help; she did luncheon most days, and tea, and often made special supper dishes with her own hands, but for the plain cooking and other kitchen work there was old Sarah, competent and practical. Sarah wasn't the only servant; for the housecleaning and maid-of-all-work they had young Jenny, and for the twice-yearly spring and fall housecleaning, more help from Jenny's sisters. A man, unsurprisingly named John, came over from the neighboring farm twice a week (except during harvest) to do the yard-work and anything the uncles couldn't do. There wasn't much of that; Thomas was handy with just about any tool, and Sebastian, when he wasn't in the throes of a creative frenzy, was willing to pitch in on just about any task. Marina stirred up the scone dough, rolled it out, cut the rounds with a biscuit cutter and arrayed them in a baking pan and slipped them into the oven. By the time they were ready, Margherita had finished making sandwiches with brown and white bread, and had stacked them on a plate. Sarah and Jenny appeared exactly when they were wanted to help set up the table in the dining room for luncheon: more of Margherita's Earth magic at work to call them silently from their other tasks? Not likely. It was probably just that old Sarah had been with the family since the beginning, and young Jenny had been with them nearly as long as she was only "young" relative to Sarah. After being cooped up all morning in the studio, Marina was in no mood to remain indoors. Rather than sit down at the table with her uncles and aunt, she wrapped some of the sandwiches in a napkin, took a bottle of homemade ginger beer from the pantry, put both in a basket with one of her lesson books, and ran out at last! into the sunshine. She swung the basket as she ran, taking in great breaths of the autumn air, fragrant with curing hay. Deep in the heart of the orchard was her favorite place; where the stream that cut through the heart of the trees dropped abruptly by four feet, forming a lovely little waterfall that was a favorite of the lesser Water Elementals of the area. The bank beside it, carpeted with fern and sweet grass, with mosses growing in the shadows, was where Marina liked to sit and read, or watch the Water Elementals play about in the falling water, and those of Air sporting in the branches. They looked like whatever they chose to look like. The ones here in her tiny stream were of a size to fit the stream, although their size had

nothing to do with their powers. They could have been illustrations in some expensive children's book, tiny elfin women and men, with fish-tails or fins, except that there was a knowing look in their eyes, and their unadorned bodies were frankly sensual. Of course, they weren't the only Water Elementals she knew. She'd seen River-horses down at the village, where her little stream joined a much greater one, and water nymphs of more human size, but the amount of cold iron in and around the water tended to keep them at bay. She'd been seeing and talking with them for as long as she could remember. She often wondered what the Greater Elementals were like; she'd never been near a body of water larger than the river that supplied the village mill with its power. She often pitied poor Sarah and Jenny, who literally couldn't see the creatures that had been visible to her for all of her life how terrible, not to be able to see all the strange creatures that populated the Unseen World! Her minor Elementals Undines, who were about the size of a half-grown child, though with the undraped bodies of fully mature women greeted her arrival with languid waves of a hand or pretended indifference; she didn't mind. They were rather like cats, to tell the truth. If you acted as if you were interested in them, they would ignore you, but if you in your turn ignored them you were bound to get their attention. And there were things that they could not resist. In the bottom of her basket was a thin volume of poetry, part of the reading that Uncle Sebastian had set for her lessons not Christina Rossetti, as might have been assumed, but the sonnets of John Donne. She put her back against the bank in the sun, and with her book in one hand and a sandwich in the other, she immersed herself in verse, reading it aloud to the fascinated Undines who propped their heads on the edge of the stream to listen. When the Undines tired of listening to poetry and swam off on their own business, Marina filled her basket with ripe apples the last of the season, left to ripen slowly on the trees after the main harvest. But it wasn't tea time by any stretch of the imagination, and she really wasn't ready to go back to the house. She left the basket with her book atop it next to the stream, and strolled about the orchard, tending to a magical chore of her own. This was something she had been doing since she was old enough to understand that it needed doing: making sure each and every tree was getting exactly the amount of water it needed. She did this once a month or so during the growing season; it was the part of Earth Magic to see to the health of the trees, which her aunt did with gusto, but Margherita could do nothing to supply the trees with water. She had done a great deal of work over the years here with her own Elemental Power. The stream flowed pure and sweet without any need for her help now, though that had not always been the case; when she had first come into her powers a number of hidden or half-hidden pieces of trash had left the waters less than pristine. The worst had been old lead pipes that Uncle Thomas thought might date all the way back to Roman times, lying beneath a covering of rank weed, slowly leaching their poison into the water. Uncle Thomas had gotten Hired John to haul them away to an antiques dealer; that would make certain they weren't dumped elsewhere. She wished him well as he carted them off, hoping he got a decent price for them; all she cared about was that they were gone. Still, there was always the possibility that something could get into the stream even now. She followed the stream down to the pond and back, just to be sure that it ran clean and unobstructed, except by things like rocks, which were perfectly natural; then, her brief surge of restlessness assuaged, she sat back down next to her basket. She leaned up against the mossy trunk of a tree and took the latest letter from her parents out of the leaves of her book and unfolded it. She read it through for the second time but did so more out of a sense of duty than of affection; in all her life she had never actually seen her parents. The uncles and her aunt were the people who had loved, corrected, and raised her. They had never let her call them anything other than "Uncle" or "Aunt," but in her mind those titles had come to mean far more than "Mama" and "Papa." Mama and Papa weren't people of flesh and blood. Mama and Papa had never soothed her after a nightmare, fed her when she was ill, taught her and healed her and yes loved her. Or at least, if Mama and Papa loved her, it wasn't with an embrace, a kiss, a strong arm to lean on, a soft shoulder to cry on it was only words on a piece of paper. And yet there were those words, passionate words. And there was guilt on her part. They were her mother and father; that could not be denied. For some reason, she could not be with them, although they assured her fervently in every letter that they longed for her presence. She tried to love them certainly they had always lavished her with presents, and later when she was old enough to read, with enough letters to fill a trunk but even though she was intimately familiar with Uncle Sebastian's art, it was impossible to make the wistful couple in the double portrait in her room come alive. Perhaps it was because their lives were also so different from her own. From spring to fall, it was nothing but news of Oakhurst and the Oakhurst farms, the minutiae of country squires obsessed with the details of their realm. From fall to spring, they were gone, off on their annual pilgrimage to Italy for the winter, where they basked in a prolonged summer. Marina envied them that, particularly when winter winds howled around the eaves and it seemed that spring would never

come. But she just couldn't picture what it was like for them; it had no more reality to her than the stories in the fairy tale books that her aunt and uncles had read to her as a child. Neither, for that matter, did their home, supposedly hers, seem any more alive than those sepia-toned sketches Uncle Sebastian had made of Oakhurst. No matter how much she wished differently, she couldn't feel the place. Here was her home, in this old fieldstone farmhouse, surrounded not only by her aunt and uncles but by other artists who came and went. There were plenty of those; Sebastian's hospitality was legendary, and between them, Thomas and Margherita kept normally volatile artistic temperaments from boiling over. From here, guests could venture into Cornwall and Arthurian country for their inspiration, or they could seek the rustic that was so often an inspiration for the artist Millais, another leader in the Pre-Raphaelite movement. Their village of a few hundred probably hadn't changed significantly in the last two hundred years; for artists from London, the place came as a revelation and an endless source for pastoral landscapes and bucolic portraits. Marina sighed, and smoothed the pages of the letter with her hand. She suspected that she was as much an abstraction to her poor mother as her mother was to her. Certainly the letters were not written to anyone that she recognized as herself. She was neither an artist nor a squire's daughter, and the person her mother seemed to identify as her was a combination of both: making the rounds of the ailing cottagers with soup and calves-foot jelly in the morning, supervising the work of an army of servants in the afternoon, and going out with paintbox to capture the sunset in the evening. The Marina in those letters would never pose for her uncle (showing her legs in those baggy hose!), get herself floured to the elbow making scones, or be lying on the grass in the orchard, bare-legged and bare-footed. And she was, above all else, nothing like an artist. If anything, she was a musician, mastering mostly on her own the lute, the flute, and the harp. But despite all of the references to music in her letters, her mother didn't seem to grasp that. Presents of expensive paints and brushes that arrived every other month went straight to her Uncle Sebastian; he in his turn used the money saved by not having to buy his own to purchase music for her. Oh, how she loved music! It served as a second bridge between herself and the Elemental creatures, not only of Water, but of Air, the Sylphs and Zephyrs that Uncle Sebastian said were her allies, though why she should need allies baffled her. She brought an instrument out here to play as often as she brought a book to read. I'm good, she thought idly, staring at words written in a careful copperplate hand that had nothing to do with the real her. If I had to I could probably make my own living from music. As it was, she used it in other ways; bringing as much pleasure to others as she could. Just as she used her magic. If she didn't make the rounds of the sick and aged of the village like a Lady Bountiful, she brought them little gifts of another sort. The village well would never run dry or foul again. Her flute and harp were welcome additions to every celebration, from services in the village church every Sunday, to the gatherings on holidays at the village green. They probably would never know why the river never over-topped its banks even in the worst flood-times, and never would guess. Anyone who fell into the river, no matter how raging the storm, or how poor a swimmer he was, found himself carried miraculously to the bank and if he then betook himself to the church to thank the Lord, that was all right with Marina. Knowing that she had these powers would not have served them or her. They would be frightened, and she would find herself looked at, not as a kind of rustic unicorn, rare and ornamental, but as something dark, unfathomable, and potentially dangerous. Her uncles and aunt had never actually said anything about keeping her magics a tacit secret, but their example had spoken louder than any advice they could have given her. Margherita and Thomas' influence quietly ensured bountiful harvests, fertile fields, and healthy children without any overt displays. Sebastian's magic was less useful to the villagers in that regard, but no one ever suffered from hearth-fires that burned poorly, wood that produced more smoke than heat, or indeed anything having to do with fire that went awry. It was all very quiet, very domestic magic; useful, though homely. And working it paid very subtle dividends. Although the villagers really didn't know the authors of their prosperity, some instinct informed them at a level too deep for thought. So, though they often looked a bit askance at the bohemian visitors that were often in residence at Blackbird Cottage, they welcomed the four residents with good-natured amusement, a touch of patronization, and probably said among themselves, "Oh, to be sure they're lunatics, but they're our lunatics." They did grant full acknowledgement of the mastery of the talents they could understand. They thought Aunt Margherita's weaving and embroidery absolutely enchanting, and regarded her lace with awe. If they didn't understand why anyone would pay what they did for Uncle Sebastian's "daubs," they recognized the skill and admired his repainted sign for the village pub, which was, almost inevitably, called "The Red Lion." And then there was Uncle Thomas. There wasn't a man for miles around who didn't know about Thomas' cabinet-making skills, and admire them. Marina's room was a veritable showplace of those

skills. In fact, it was a showplace of all three of her guardians' skills. Uncle Thomas had built and carved all of the furniture, from the little footstool to the enormous canopy bed. Aunt Margherita was responsible for the embroidered hangings of the bed, the curtains at the windows, the cushions in the window seat, all of them covered with fantastic vines and garlands and flowers. Uncle Sebastian had plastered the walls with his own hands, and decorated them with wonderful frescos. He had nobly refrained from painting his beloved medieval tales; instead, he'd given her woods filled with gentle mythological creatures and Elementals.

Undines frolicked in a waterfall, a Salamander coiled lazily in a campfire for a pair of young Fauns with mischievous eyes, a Unicorn rested its horn in the lap of a maiden that bore more than a passing resemblance to Marina herself. The room had grown as she had; from a cradle and a panel of vines to the wonder that it was now. The number of hours that had gone into its creation was mind-boggling, and even now that she was grown, she could come into the room to find that Uncle Sebastian had touched up fading colors, or Aunt Margherita had added a cushion. It was the visible and constant reminder of how much they cared for her. No one could possibly love her as much as her aunt and uncles did, and never mind that the titles of Aunt and Uncle were mere courtesy. She had never questioned that; had never needed to. There was only one question that had never been properly answered, so far as she was concerned. If my parents love me so much, why did they send me away and why have they never tried to be with me again? That there was a secret about all this

she had known from the time she had begun to question the way things were. She had never directly questioned her parents, however something about the tone of her mother's letters suggested that her mother's psyche was a fragile one, and a confrontation would lead to irreparable harm. The last thing she wanted to do was to upset a woman as sweet-natured and gentle as those letters revealed her to be! And somehow, I think that she is so very fragile emotionally because of the reason she had to send me away. She sighed. If that was

indeed the case, it was no use asking one of her beloved guardians. They wouldn't even have to lie to her. Uncle Sebastian would give her a look that suggested that if she was clever, she would find out for herself. And as for the other two, well, the look of reproach that Aunt Margherita could (and would) bend upon her would make her feel about as low as a worm. And Uncle Thomas would become suddenly as deaf as one of his carved bedposts. It really wasn't fair; the chief characteristic of a Water Master was supposed to be fluidity. She should have been able to insinuate her will past any of their defenses!" And perhaps one day you will be able to when you are a Master," giggled a voice that bubbled with the chuckling of sweet water over stones. She turned to glare at the Undine who tossed her river-weed-twined hair and with an insolent flip of her tail, stared right back at her. "You shouldn't be reading other people's thoughts," Marina told her. "It isn't polite." "You shouldn't be shouting them to the world at large," the Undine retorted. "A tadpole has

more shields than you." Marina started, guiltily, when she realized that the Undine was right. Never mind that there wasn't real need for shields; she knew very well that she was supposed to be keeping them up at all times. They had to be automatic otherwise, when she really did need them, she might not be able to raise

them in time. There were unfriendly Elementals some downright hostile to humans. And there were unfriendly Masters as well. "I beg your pardon," she said with immediate contrition to the Undine, who laughed, flipped her tail again, and dove under the surface to vanish into the waters. She spent several moments putting up those shields properly, and another vowing not to let them drop again. What had she been thinking? If Uncle Sebastian had caught her without her shields, he'd have verbally flayed her alive! Well, he hadn't. And what he didn't know, wouldn't hurt him. And besides, it was time for tea. Checking again to make sure those shields were intact, she picked up her basket, rose to her feet, and ran back up the path to the farmhouse, leaving behind insolent Undines and uncomfortable questions. For now, at any

rate. Reprinted from *Gates of Sleep* by Mercedes Lackey by permission of DAW, a member of Penguin Putnam Inc. Copyright 2002, Mercedes Lackey. All rights reserved. This excerpt, or any parts thereof, may not be reproduced in any form without permission. From *Publishers Weekly* Putting a fresh face to a well-loved fairytale is not an easy task, but it is one that seems effortless to the prolific Lackey, best known for her *Valdemar* series (*Arrows of the Queen*, etc.). In a brilliant twist, the author sets the classic story of

Sleeping Beauty in Edwardian England, imbuing her characters with the power of elemental magic, including the cursed child herself, Marina Roeswood. In an uninvited visit to her christening, Marina's evil aunt, Arachne, arrives in a puff of smoke and delivers a deadly curse, which is mitigated by the blessing of a family friend who imparts one last gift on the baby. Marina's guardians spirit her away to the Devon countryside to grow up. When we next see her, Marina is galloping through her 17th year, pursuing her magical training, though her guardians have tragically kept her ignorant of the curse. The inevitable triggering of said curse, when she turns 18, pits Marina's intelligence, cunning and magic skills against the

full force of satanic evil. Beautiful phrasing and a thorough grounding in the dress, mannerisms and history of the period help move the story along gracefully. Marina's character, along with those of her guardians, her friends and Arachne, are fully fleshed out and credible. The fact that a teenage half-trained water mage would even dare to take on a 40ish satanist may be a bit implausible, but only on second thought. This is a wonderful example of a new look at an old theme. Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc.