

**TO
KING'S
KEEP**

(Book Two of *Magic's Return*)

A Kingdom of Galahar novel

by Joanne Gatenby

PROLOGUE

Not much in the seven Territories of the Kingdom of Galahar remained untouched by the Great War. In spite of the Lesser King's efforts, most of the records of those times have been destroyed, and the untimely death of the High King left an infant on the throne, guarded by his grieving Queen Mother.

Although little is known of those times, it is said that a group of rebel Warlock's tried to seize power, and in the ensuing struggle not only the rebels and their allies, but the High King and his loyal Companions were all destroyed, along with a large portion of Trifair Territory.

Most of the kingdom's magical inhabitants were wiped out, though some (like the dragons and giants) hovered on the brink of extinction.

Those few magical beings left alive decided to withdraw from the world of men, and spend their remaining years in hiding. Today few believe they still exist.

As they set about rebuilding their shattered lives, the surviving humans were determined to never let magic gain the upper hand again.

In an effort to make their people feel more secure the High Queen, on behalf of her newborn son (the new High King), issued a proclamation that forbade the use of magic by any creature, without the express permission of the High King. And so, over one hundred years passed in peace...

CHAPTER ONE

Felnor stopped abruptly and swung around to stare back the way they had come. Feather light shivers ran up his spine, faint, but quickly growing stronger – not a good sign! It has been difficult to explain his awareness of danger to his new friends, but after all they had been through escaping from the Warlock's castle, neither of them doubted his abilities now!

He closed his eyes and concentrated, his heightened senses searching the night, trying to determine the source of the warning. It had already been a long journey and they were all tired, but as the sun set and darkness descended, the trio found themselves reluctant to stop for the night.

They had been traveling together for over three weeks now, ever since their flight from the evil wizard Beltok through the troll tunnels beneath his castle. Each felt a growing sense of urgency to reach their destination. They all knew that the longer it took them to reach the High King, the greater their chances of being recaptured were. Aaron, who had only ever wanted to follow in his Da's footsteps, was growing increasingly sullen and withdrawn as the days passed.

His sister, Kimmee, was the first to notice that Felnor was no longer following them. She glanced over her shoulder, then stopped and turned, the stolen medallion she wore around her neck held high in her upraised hand, casting a radiant soft blue light around them. After all this time, she had the spell for creating light memorized and could invoke it without even looking at the Book of Magic they had also stolen from Beltok, which she carried in a leather pouch on her back.

Using the magical elements of the book and medallion together, Felnor and Kimmee, (along with their friend Valdic) had freed her brother, Aaron, from the slavery spell the would-be Warlock had cast over him.

Although he had helped rescue Kimmee's brother, Valdic decided he had been on enough adventures and had remained behind in his village to recover from the rhyming spell Kimmee had accidentally cast on him. The remaining trio had been forced to use magic to cover their escape from the wizard's castle, and had then decided it was their duty to warn the High King of the threat Kimmee had overheard Beltok making. The frustrated magician was determined to steal the High King's "most prized possession". Just what that item could be had been a source of many lively discussions as they traveled!

Beyond Kimmee, Aaron also came to a halt. He warily moved back to his sister's side, leaning his cheek casually against his tall walking stick, his bright eyes watching the younger boy intently.

When Aaron and Kimmee stood together like this it was plain to see they were related. In spite of the difference in their colouring, they had the same curly hair, small straight noses, high cheekbones, and dark eyes, which usually danced and shone with laughter.

While Kimmee had inherited a rare ancestral gene that made her curls reddish gold when lit by the sun, along with green eyes and fair skin that tended to freckle, rather than tan; Aaron was dark like their Ma and Da. Dark curls, dark eyes, and skin tanned deep brown in his beloved fields.

Kimmee's face was softer, rounded and pretty, while Aaron's face showed traces of the handsome man he was rapidly becoming. They even had the same habit of stubbornly sticking out their chins when they were determined to get their own way.

Now they stood silent, patiently waiting for Felnor to tell them what was wrong. The trio had been through so much together they trusted each other completely, and Felnor's ability to sense danger was one of the few weapons they had against the wizard hunting them.

A stranger might have overlooked Felnor's homely features in a crowd, unless they happened to notice his eyes. Beautiful, deep blue in colour, those eyes are filled with such warmth and friendliness that even the coldest people responded with answering smiles before they realized it.

At this moment, however, Felnor's eyes were stormy with worry. The intensity of the tingling in his spine abruptly sharpened, becoming a serious – and imminent – warning. When he whirled around and suddenly yelled, "RUN!" his companions turned and fled without question.

Their weariness was forgotten as they raced. The black night closed in around them, its dark shadows fighting the medallion's magic light. To Kimmee it felt like the very forest around them was

trying to catch them, slow them down. The trees seemed to lean closer, thin bony branches - like skeletal fingers - caught at their hair and clothes. Roots poked up from the path, eager to trip unwary feet and send them sprawling to the ground.

As they ran, Aaron tried to find out what they were running from. Felnor shrugged helplessly, unable to provide any details.

"It's not...like...seeing..." he reminded them as he gasped for air, "it's just...knowing...the danger's...there."

Aaron's eyes flicked restlessly back and forth among the trees that lined the trail.

"In this type of forest there are lots of dangerous things." The older youth told the others reluctantly. "Way-bears, musk cats, even..."

He broke off as a hideous howl filled the night. The boys eyes met, whites showing in sudden shock and terror.

"GOREWOLVES!" Breathed Felnor.

Kimmees felt the blood drain from her face, as her knees threatened to buckle under her. Then the others were pulling her unresisting body along the trail as quickly as they could.

"*Gorewolves, gorewolves, gorewolves,*" her mind shrieked over and over again. She couldn't have spoken if she'd wanted to, her tongue felt swollen, frozen to the roof of her mouth, making it hard to breath. All the horrific fireside tales she had ever heard about the ferocious creatures came crowding back into her mind.

Sharing a distant ancestor with true wolves, these huge, shaggy beasts hunted in packs, and no animal was too large – or fierce – for them to attack. They were known to take on the enormous bull helks that had no other predators, except man. It was whispered they had once been Wolfkin, members of the High King's own Companions, enchanted while in their wolf shapes by an evil Warlock.

Nothing and no one was safe once a gorewolf pack got the scent. The smell of any warm-blooded creature could excite the pack to hunt, and once their victim's blood was spilt, the vicious beasts went into a frenzy, killing anything within reach - even each other.

Pushing themselves even harder, the friends fled as fast as they could. Their breath came in burning hitches, as sharp stabbing pains cut into their sides, but they couldn't slow down.

Behind them the howling grew louder as the pack picked up the scent of their fear. They could hear the huge creatures crashing through the underbrush around them, and the pounding of huge paws on the trail behind them.

Suddenly one of the pack leaders leapt out in front of them, just to one side of their path. Wicked red eyes gleamed at them sadistically, its tongue hanging out one side of its grinning mouth.

Aaron lifted the staff he carried in his left hand. He had strapped a long knife to the end of his walking stick at the beginning of their journey, making it a formidable weapon.

He let go of his sister's hand long enough to switch the makeshift spear to his throwing hand. As the gorewolf gathered itself to leap at them, he heaved the missile with all his might.

Years of farm work had made him strong and well muscled. Hours of walking with a heavy pack on his back had strengthened him even more, while fear and anger reinforced his determination.

The makeshift spear flew straight, the tip of the knife piercing the center of one glowing red eye. With a horrid shriek the beast jerked its head from side to side, trying to dislodge the shaft.

Grabbing Kimmees hand once more, the companions dodged past the wounded animal as they listened to the growing commotion behind them. The smell of the blood from the fatal wound drove the rest of the pack to attack the dying beast.

Aaron had gained them a little time, but now the pack would be in a blood frenzy that not even a trained soldier could stop, and he had used their only weapon. What chance did three unarmed youths have against such creatures?

Kimmees heard a pitiful sobbing echoing back from the forest around them. In spite of her fear, her heart ached for whoever else was out here, caught in the path of the rampaging pack. Only when she had to wipe her eyes against her shoulder, to clear away blinding tears, did she realize SHE was the one crying.

She felt the magic medallion thumping up and down against her chest, the light it produced bouncing wildly before them. It had saved their lives on more than one occasion, but the charm was useless without the right spell.

The weight of the Book of Magic seemed to grow heavier against her shoulders. *If only there was time to stop and search for a spell...* she thought desperately, but the wolf pack was too close to risk stopping even for a moment.

Her eyes frantically searched the night, looking for a place they could defend long enough to use the magic. It would be horrible irony indeed, to be killed while carrying the means to save themselves in her pack!

She seemed helpless to stop the tears which continued to stream down her face as she ran. Her terror of the nightmare creatures grew and grew until it finally overwhelmed her senses, and she gratefully slipped into a half-trance, letting everything around her grow dim.

She seemed to float above the path, her heart aching with pity as she watched the three younglings below her running for their lives. Part of her knew it was her body that kept moving, her feet still pounding along the path, her lungs still gasping for air, but her mind shied away from the terrible danger they were in.

Seeking anything to keep herself distracted from returning to full consciousness, Kimmee turned to a persistent worry that had been secretly troubling her for some time. Beltok was a fugitive because no one was allowed to use magic without the High King's express permission.

And Kimmee had also broken this law – on more than one occasion. Now, the closer they got to their destination, the more concerned she grew. At the time there had seemed to be no other choice. Now the details of the last few weeks ran relentlessly through her fogged mind, accusing her even as her companions forced her body down the trail so fast her feet barely touched the ground.

She had lost count of the number of times she had used the medallion since she had tested the Book of Magic by casting a rhyming spell on their friend Valdic. Since then she had used it for everything from breaking the spell on her brother, to killing swarms of spiders, making light, and fighting Trolls.

Kimmee really was trying to use the magic as little as possible, at least until they reached the High King and were able to explain things to him. She had heard he was a just and understanding man, so maybe he wouldn't punish her too badly.

A rising howl close at hand snapped her back to reality with a jolt. Kimmee's fear welled up inside her, threatening to overwhelm her once again, and she struggled against it. Swallowing hard, she stuck out her chin at a familiar determined angle. She might have to die today, but she would not disgrace her family by acting like a coward.

She frowned, thinking desperately. Just before they escaped from the tunnels under the Warlock's castle they had almost been captured by two Trolls. The medallion had seemed to work on its own to freeze one of the Trolls that fought with Felnor and Aaron. As far as they knew, that was the only time the necklace had worked without a specific spell being cast.

Maybe it would help them now, if only she knew how to trigger the magic by itself! She pulled her hand from Aaron's grasp, and grabbed the swinging medallion. Aaron grabbed her by the elbow and continued pulling her along as she squeezed the charm as tightly as she could. The light shining from the charm brightened momentarily...but nothing else happened.

Another piercing howl sounded right behind them, and she shot a frightened glance over her shoulder, almost falling as her feet lost the cadence of their running. Though the boys caught her without faltering, and pulled her back in to rhythm with them, she flushed with embarrassment. Her clumsiness could have gotten them all killed!

No matter what the High King did to her, Kimmee decided, if they got out of this, if the medallion could save them somehow, she intended to use it as often as necessary. She would explain or take her punishment later, as long as Aaron and Felnor remained safe.

Her brother came to an abrupt stop, jerking Kimmee backwards. On her other side, Felnor stopped so quickly he almost fell on his face. All three of them stared in frozen horror at the trail ahead of them, where a giant gowolf, taller than Aaron, slowly crept towards them.

Drool dripped from the huge yellow fangs in its snarling mouth. The beast's red eyes shone with crazed anticipation as it slunk closer. A low grumbling noise sounded deep in its throat like an evil chuckle.

Another menacing growl from behind brought Felnor around with a gasp. Aaron stood staring at the first gorewolf as the younger boy bravely faced a second standing on the path behind them. It leered triumphantly at them, then raised its shaggy head and howled.

Answering howls came from the forest all around them and the darkness was broken by shifting, burning red lights. The fiery lights advanced until the glow from the medallion added snarling features surrounding them, and the blazing fires became the eyes of the rest of the pack.

There was no place left to run.

