

**THE  
LAST  
WARLOCK**

***(Book One of Magic's Return)***

***A Kingdom of Galahar novel***

*Written by Joanne Gatenby*

*For my daughter Adriane, on the occasion of her eleventh birthday. Although your ideas don't show up until book two, Kimmee's adventures are based (in part) on a story you once told me. Therefore, I think it only fair that you receive some of the credit.*

*Many thanks also to my younger daughter, Katie and my husband Bill, for their proofreading and helpful suggestions (even the ones I didn't listen to).*

*I love you all very much and hope you enjoy this story*

## 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.

But enough whispered tales survived to tell a sorry story of greed and wickedness.

In those long ago times, the Kingdom teemed with magic life. Fairies, dwarves, dragons, elves and trolls lived side by side with mankind, including those humans who were also able to do magic – Warlocks and Witches.

However, over time a group of Warlocks grew discontented. They felt superior to other humans, and to non-human magical creatures, most of whom they considered little more than animals.

These malcontents decided a mere mortal could not rule them, that one of their own should be supreme. In their pride, they rebelled and attempted to overthrow the rightful High King.

Fortunately some remained loyal. One such man managed to get a warning to the High King, who sent his young wife (pregnant with their first youngling) away, before gathering his faithful subjects together to do battle with the rebellious magicians. The faithful Warlock remained hidden among the rebels as a spy for the King, though in the end, his loyalty cost him his life.

Many other sorcerers, both men and women, lost their lives during fierce battles of magic. Though none who were there lived to tell the tale, it is believed that in desperation the revolutionaries finally used their magic to unleash an evil force from the underworld. Unable to control the power they had released on their unsuspecting world, they were the first to fall victim to it.

In the now famous Last Battle, while men and dwarves fought side by side against the trolls and giants, elves, dragons and fairies joined with the loyal Witches and Warlocks. They combined their magic abilities in one final, desperate effort to return the evil to its own world.

No one knows exactly what magic enchantment was used that day, but a great explosion shook the kingdom to its very foundations. The evil force was pushed back to its own world and the rebelling Warlocks and their allies were both destroyed.

The explosion was so great that it could not be contained. Much of Trifair Territory (where the Warlock Citadel was located) was left barren and desolate. Almost half of the kingdom's magical inhabitants were wiped out, along with the High King and his Companions. 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, unless with the express permission of the High King.

And so, over 100 years passed in peace....

## CHAPTER ONE

"But I tell you, he *was* a Warlock." Aged homebrew slopped over the lip of his tankard, as Peddler Hobart angrily slammed his mug of ale down on the inns well worn, but freshly scoured wooden tabletop.

Startled, Kimmee lifted her head, than quickly crouched over the scrub brush she was using to clean the floor with small circular motions, and tried to pretend she was invisible. In spite of the pads she wore strapped to her knees, they already ached from kneeling on the stone slab floor, but the pain was worth it, if she could hear the latest news first hand.

As soon as the trader had pulled his tall wagon into the courtyard of the inn, everyone had come running to greet him. Kimmee pushed her way to the front of the crowd, and her brother Aaron (leaning out an upper window to see what the commotion was about), grinned as he watched her golden red hair slip through the crowd, like a minnow through weeds. Then he caught sight of his friend Kori running across the field, and hurried downstairs to join the others.

Hobart's face lit up when he saw the young girl's welcoming smile, and he called a greeting to her. Kimmee did not miss the frown on her Mama's face, and after nodding a welcome to the trader, allowed herself to be pushed backwards by the crowd.

When she was sure her parents were caught up in their duties as hosts to the trader, and not watching their oldest daughter, Kimmee turned and ran into the inn. She knew her Da would bring Hobart in for a private talk, which was his right as host, before allowing the trader to pass his news on to the rest of the villagers.

Grabbing a bucket of soapy water from the kitchen, she pulled the back of her long skirt between her legs to the front, and tucked it into her belt, effectively freeing her legs to the knees.

Impatiently pulling her unruly curls back into a tail which streamed down her slim back, almost to her waist, then quickly tying the protective kneepads in place, she dropped to the floor on the far side of the common room and began earnestly scrubbing the inset stone floor.

By the time the men reached the common room she had almost half the floor washed, and was clearly well occupied. Glancing up casually as the men entered, she had given the trader another warm smile and respectful nod of the head, before turning back to her work.

Da shot her a hard look, but as he was fond of telling his younglings, *Never leave a mug of good home brew half-empty, a piece of your mama's delicious cornbread half-eaten, or a chore half-finished*, and since she was half-finished her work, he ignored her presence and led his guest to a table on the opposite side of the common room. Her older brother Aaron and his friend Kori had trailed behind them, eager to hear what the peddler had to say.

But that had been before Hobart began his news. Now her Da's voice was rising to override the peddler's.

"No Warlock lived through the ancients Last Battle," declared Talhort DeCoreen. "The blast that laid the land bare for three day's ride in every direction from Warlock Mountain in Trifair Territory, finished them all, or destroyed the powers of those who survived." He glared at Hobart. "My own Great-Grandda was at the edge of the blast, he saw it happen."

"This is *not* idle gossip Talhort." Hobart insisted loudly, grabbing his old battered hat from the seat beside him, and crushing it against his chest, in frustration. "I had this news directly from the King's Guard. They are hunting him even as we speak."

The young girl strained her ears to hear every word, though she knew Mama would skin her alive if she was caught listening to the men talk. For the thousandth time, Kimmee wondered why Suzain DeCoreen was so dead set against anything that smacked of magic and the old ways.

Warned by a slight sound outside the door, she suddenly turned away from the men and energetically renewed her scrubbing efforts. A moment later her Mama came sweeping through the front door, into the common room of their family inn.

Kimmee felt Mama's dark eyes rest on her briefly, but Da's voice began to rise once more, and Suzain hurried towards their table. The chance to hear the latest news was more important than

scolding a youngling for putting herself forward earlier!

Kimmees tried to stifle the familiar bitterness rising inside her. Being the eldest daughter, she would take over the inn from her Mama some day, when she was either suitably married and settled; or so old no one would want her. Therefore, she was expected to work twice as hard as the other younglings, even the boys. But because she was a girl she had to be "protected" from anything really exciting.

From under lowered eyelashes she glared in Aaron's direction. He and Kori were sitting at a table near the men, drinking in every word. No one sent THEM to the kitchen when the talk grew interesting. It was small consolation to know that later on Aaron would repeat every word she missed. It was being excluded that hurt. She carefully shifted her eyes before either of her parents took notice of her sullen stare.

Even Kori's handsome profile couldn't soften the sense of injustice she felt. In fact, his presence only added to her feeling of malcontent. Just because he was older, he never noticed her, or worse, treated her like a youngling.

Like the rest of the boys in the village, he was too busy chasing after Leela, the shopkeepers daughter. With her coal-black ringlets and plump arms, Leela was obviously a pampered darling whose pale skin rarely saw the sun.

Kimmees sighed quietly, staring fixedly at her slim fingers. Her red hair was a throwback to some ancient, and was just another way in which she was different from her dark-haired siblings.

And although she had the fair complexion redheads often inherit, working outside had tanned her skin to a pale golden brown, like fresh baked bread.

Years of hard work, fresh air and exercise had toned her slender, sturdy body, and her quick hands showed signs of hard use – scrapes and calluses that would scar and thicken over the years, until her hands became her mother's hands. No one would ever mistake her for a plump and pampered lady!

It just wasn't fair.

Kimmees's resentful gaze moved around the nearly empty Common Room. Being expected to work at the inn, and being born a girl were the two main grievances of her young life.

It was fine for someone like Mama... Suzain was a handsome, energetic, organized woman, who managed the farmhouse and inn with an ease that made it look effortless - and as innkeeper in training, Kimmees knew it was anything but! However, the inn had certainly prospered under her Mama's care.

In fact, it has been Suzain's idea to open the inn, and pass it on as dower for the eldest daughter in the family, in the same way the farm was handed down to the eldest son.

Surprisingly, Da had agreed, no doubt thinking of the dowry money he would save, Kimmees thought sourly. He had even deeded over a portion of poor farm land that faced out on the major road into the village.

She was constantly amazed at her Mama, who seemed to be able to do anything she set her mind to, even finding time to have a new youngling about every two years. So far she had produced Aaron, age fourteen, Kimmees, twelve, Lisle, ten, Samthon, eight, Petrah, six, Scuzie, four and Jarob, two.

And though Kimmees wasn't entirely sure, a certain dreamy look in her Mama's eye and a thickening around her middle, told the girl another youngling might be anticipated in the not too distant future.

She sighed once again. Of course she was as proud of their holdings and long history as the rest of her family, and she had tried to resign herself to what she considered her uninspiring fate. But still she yearned for excitement and adventure.

As a youngling she had learned every history lesson set before her, and she still read every book she could get her hands on – few as they were. She was hopefully determined to be ready if ever an adventure came her way.

The only one in her family who even tried to understand her longings was her brother Aaron. She adored her older brother, who was tall and strong, with a fine sense of humour, but sometimes

she couldn't quite stifle pangs of jealousy at the freedoms he enjoyed.

And Aaron was absolutely satisfied to follow in their Da's footsteps, which drove her crazy. If he never went more than a few leagues from the farm he would be perfectly content. Oh, how desperately she wished she too had been born a boy! She'd have been off on an adventure so fast – they'd never have caught up with her!

Loud voices rising from the group in the corner quickly called her wandering attention back to the trader and her Da, who Mama was trying unsuccessfully to placate. The peddler roared in frustration.

"Talhorth, you're as bull-headed as your Grandda. Though even HE admitted there were remnants of the others left behind after the Great War - for all they hide from the world of men, and he didn't pretend otherwise. And another thing..."

"I've heard enough." Talhorth shouted, half rising to his feet and smacking his open palm on the wet tabletop. "I'll have no more tales of magic or Warlock's in my own inn."

Kimmees hid a smile as she noticed Mama shift uneasily on the bench. Mama wanted to remind Da that the prosperous farm might belong to the men of the family, but the inn belonged to the women. However Suzain was traditional in all things, and would never correct him in front of others.

Nevertheless, Peddler Hobart was not easily intimidated. He had been traveling the back roads of the Kingdom of Galahar's seven Territories all his life, and he knew just how stubborn and opinionated some of these outlanders could be, especially in the backwaters of a rustic Territory like Uneer.

"And I tell you for the last time Talhorth DeCoreen, this is no old wives tale." He persisted slowly and firmly, his voice loud and strong enough to be heard clearly across the room. "This be truth! There ARE elves and fairies still hiding in the Black Forest, there may even be a dragon or two tucked away in the mountains of Sankten Territory, and there *IS* a Warlock loose in the land."

He might have had better luck convincing the incredulous couple in the end, if Kimmees Grandmar had not happened to wander in at just that moment. The poor old woman was getting on in years and her mind tended to wander into the past.

Worse, she was always saying whatever came to mind, which was usually the last thing she *should* be saying. She had drifted in from the kitchen unnoticed, but now her presence became all too obvious.

"Warlocks!" Grandmar exclaimed in her high quivery voice. "I met a Warlock once." She beamed short-sightedly at the startled faces that swung around to stare at her. "He did such lovely magic." Her old head nodded wisely.

"There's magic in our family you know," she confided in a loud whisper, "runs in the females." Her straggly white hair fell around her face as she tilted her head to one side and whispered confidentially. "Wouldn't be a bit surprised if some of the youngling's running around this place wasn't Witches."

Kimmees parents sat frozen in horror as the old woman rambled on. Kimmees forgot herself enough to sit up, staring at her Grandmar in wide-eyed amazement. She'd never heard *that* before!

Scandalized by her mama's behaviour, Suzain suddenly became aware of her daughter's fascinated interest in the proceedings. She rose quickly; breaking the spell the old woman had cast over her listeners.

"Now Mama," protested Suzain briskly, "let's have none of your tales. There are enough storytellers here without you putting yourself forward. Come back to the kitchen and I'll get you a nice mug of ale."

Grandmar's eyes lit up at this unexpected treat and she meekly allowed her daughter to lead her away. As she passed the staring girl, Suzain pressed her lips together.

"Never mind pretending you're doing any real work," she snapped. Kimmees started in surprise, hurt by her Mama's sharp tone. Their eyes met for a moment, then Suzain looked away, already regretting her outburst.

"Well, I guess that was uncalled for." Her Mama admitted reluctantly. "You've been tending your duties without being told for a change... though don't think I don't know why." She added

sharply. "Go on outside and get some fresh air."

Kimmee jumped at this unexpected release, untying the kneepads, and letting them fall to the floor, as she scrambled to her feet and pulled her skirts free of her belt so they dropped below her knees in a seemly fashion. She was almost out the door before Mama finished speaking.

"Mind you be back in time to help get the evening meal ready." Suzain called after her. "There'll be a crowd here wanting to hear the Peddlers news." Kimmee waved her hand to show she had heard, and then she was gone.

She headed for her favorite hiding place in the stables, well aware that Mama wanted her out of the inn so she wouldn't hear any more talk about the Warlock in either the common room or the kitchen. Though how her mother thought she'd stop Kimmee from hearing all the gossip as she served ale that night, the girl could only wonder.

Twisting her hair into a knot at the base of her neck, she pushed a stick through to hold it in place. Pulling the back of her skirt forward between her legs and tucking it into her belt once again, she climbed nimbly up the ladder into the barn's hayloft, gently slid a board aside, and pulled a book from its hiding place.

Kimmee dug a hole in the loose hay, and snuggled down spreading her skirts to keep the straw from scratching her legs. She didn't open the book right away, but sat frowning in puzzled thought.

Why did Mama dislike magic so much? Everyone said there was no real magic left, or Witches or Warlocks either, but Kimmee was firmly convince there had been at one time, and stories of the others and the before times, were among her favorites.

She sighed dreamily, lying back on the sweet smelling hay and closing her eyes. Wouldn't it be lovely if the trader was right, and there really were elves or fairies hiding away in the darkest woods? If that could be possible, then maybe there could be a Witch or Warlock hidden there too.

Her breath caught in excitement as her imagination took hold. She glanced at the closed book sitting in her lap, and wondered briefly if the trader had any new books she might exchange this one for. She knew all the tales in this one by heart.

Her favourite stories weren't written in any of the books she was allowed to see though. And they were (of course) the very ones Mama hated her younglings listening to. Tales the old men told during long winter storms, when they'd had too much of Mama's good homebrewed ale.

Tales about the famous Last Battle of the Great War, when men and those magical creatures still loyal to the High King had joined together to fight the rebel Warlocks and their troll and giant allies.

Back then the High King had special advisors chosen from the leaders of the elves, dwarves, fairies, and other magical creatures, as well as the Lesser Kings of each territory, who were called the King's Companions.

No one was certain of the events leading up to the end of the Great War, and even the best histories were vague on the details. But late at night, huddled close to the inn's great hearth fires, Kimmee had heard whispered tales about those final desperate times.

Old timers said Warlock mountain (where the explosion – whatever it's cause – had occurred) was completely sealed, and The Citadel - that mysterious fortress the Warlock's had created there (some swore it was carved from the very rock of the mountain itself), had disappeared as well.

As far as anyone knew the remains of the rebels were still shut inside the mountain, and their true fate would probably never be known. What was common knowledge was that everything inside the encircling mountain range surrounding Trifair Territory had been totally destroyed. It had lain burnt and dead for generations now.

She had heard the anger in her Da's voice when he spoke of so much land left barren and useless. It was the worst offence a farmer could imagine, and Kimmee secretly thought it might be why he hated magic so much.

Her mind wandered around the earlier argument between her Da and the Peddler. On the one hand, her Da swore that all supernatural creatures had died or lost their magic at the time of the explosion that ended the Great War.

But Peddler Hobart seemed to think that after the Great War the few remaining magical beings left in Galahar had chosen to remove themselves from the lands of humans, to live out their lives in solitude and seclusion.

Wondrous creatures of magic, like dragons, trolls, elves and fairies had not been seen since her Great-Grandda's time, and most Galaharans, including her parents, assumed that if they had ever existed they were now extinct.

Although there were still vague rumours from time to time that something mystical or magical had been seen, or heard, only a few really believed any still existed – if they ever had. Like magic itself, they had all disappeared over the last hundred years.

Kimmees opened her eyes, and gazed up at the thick wooden beams arching above her. The stable and connected barn were well built and as solid as when her Great-Grandda had raised them.

Family history was something both her parents took pride in, and Kimmees knew that their family farm and inn sat on the outskirts of a village which had been homesteaded after the war, by a group of refugees looking for peace and quiet after the horror of battle. Her Great-Grandda, Bithar DeCoreen, had actually led the party of homeless soldiers and their families to this lush valley at the far end of Galahar, in Uneer Territory. He had fallen in love with the place, and started his own farm right there. He never left the valley again.

Some time later he had married one of the women who had made the journey with his group, and that was how Torthoe DeCoreen, her Grandda, came to be born twenty years after the end of the Great War.

Her Great-Grandda had died in a farming accident when Torthoe was only eighteen, and the farm had passed to him. Not one to be rushed, he waited until he was forty before producing his own son.

And so, sixty years after the end of the Great War, Kimmees Da, Talhort DeCoreen, was born. Following a proven family tradition, Talhort was almost in his forties when he started his own dynasty.

Kimmees chuckled to herself as she considered her ancestry. Da turned out to be more productive than any of his ancestors, at least when it came to younglings, but that might have been Mama's influence.

Her Grandda had passed the farm on to Kimmees Da long ago, although Torthoe was still strong and enjoyed helping around the homestead. And Da had given Mama the family inn, which would one day be passed to her.

Kimmees sat lost in thought for a while, and then sighed. After more than one hundred years of peace, it seemed everyone was happy and settled, except her.

Determined not to waste any more of her precious free time, she sat up and opened the book at random. Her eye lit on a description of the heroine.

"Alabaster skin, raven hair, eyes like pools of night... she probably looks just like Leela!" Now that Kimmees gave it some thought, all the heroines in the books she read were slender and delicate, with silky fine hair that floated in raven or golden clouds, and they had luscious, red lips that pouted prettily.

They definitely didn't have firm muscles and roughened hands from a hard days work, or sun-darkened skin and freckles from helping in the fields or gardens, or thick curly rusty red hair, which refused to behave no matter how much it was brushed. And heaven help any daughter of Suzain DeCorren's who was caught pouting!

Annoyed to find her one means of escape reminding her of her shortcomings, Kimmees snapped the book shut and threw it across the loft.

Immediately struck with remorse for treating such a precious item so callously, she scrambled to reclaim the fallen book, relieved to find it relatively undamaged.

She stood, brushing straw from her clothes and pulling stray bits from her red curls.

"I just wish something would happen to ME!" Kimmees wailed aloud. As soon as the words were out of her mouth she glanced over her shoulder guiltily. She could almost hear Grandmar's garrulous voice mumbling, *Wishes be tricky things, be careful what you wish, mayhap it'll come true.*

Fortunately, the sound of someone entering the barn through the door just beneath her

distracted her from such uncomfortable thoughts. Shrugging away her unease, she dropped quickly to her knees and returned her book to its hiding place. Then she worked her way across the loft on her hands and knees, and cautiously peeked over the lip into the dim lower stable below.

In the soft light filtering in through cracks in the barn walls, Kimmee saw that her brother Aaron had joined her. She was a little dismayed at how pleased she felt that he too had been sent away from the oh-so-interesting argument in the inn's common room.

Unaware of her presence in the hayloft, Aaron was standing tall, a pitchfork resting against one booted foot, just the way their Da liked to stand.

Aaron must have felt some of the same anger she did at being treated like a youngling, because what followed was such a droll mimicry of their Da's walk and talk, that Kimmee had to duck her head and clap both hands over her mouth to smother her giggles.

Moving slowly so he wouldn't hear her, she pulled her feet under her, but staying crouched, she prepared to jump from the loft into a nearby pile of hay and give him a good scare. She was already anticipating the teasing she would give him for his impersonation.

Kimmee was poised over the haystack closest to her brother, when the sound of someone approaching the barn made her pause, cocking her head to listen.

As she hesitated, the big barn doors opened so forcefully they slammed against the walls with a loud crash, startling both younglings.

