



EXCERPT FROM SPELL OF THE MAGI

Magi of Rulari – Book 1

Rebecca was born to the Magi in a land where it means slavery or death. All her life she has hidden from the Shan's Proctors who control the enslaved Magi. To keep her family safe from them, she will risk anything, tell any lie, even trick an innocent man into a forbidden marriage. She never expected to fall in love, but it happened. Now she and Andre must defy the Proctors with nothing but his skill with a blade and her untried magic.

gaildaley2955@comcast.net

Spell of The Magi

A Portal World Tale

Gail Daley

In The Beginning

On a planet called Earth in the Milky Way Galaxy, a way to open a Portal from world to world was discovered in the late 22nd Century. Were these new worlds simply other planets in the known galaxy or did the gateways lead to other dimensions with other physical laws? Or perhaps—both?

Earth itself was constantly beset by strife and wars. The Portals became simply another item to be fought over. It came to pass that a group on the losing side of one of these conflicts captured and held a Portal for a space of half a year, and seeing inevitable defeat in their future, sent their families ahead to another world. As the winning forces flooded the city, the last of the losers fled through the Portal, erasing their destination as they left so they couldn't be hunted down by their enemies.

Travel now to the world of Rulari, the new home of the escaping Terrans. Home also to refugees of a race descended from felines as men were descended from primates. Because of the Ley Lines, both groups arrived approximately in the same areas of Rulari and at roughly the same time. The laws and customs of the two societies were quite different, and although at first both groups were tolerant of these dissimilarities, disputes began to arise between them and gradually a kind of armed hostility became a way of life between the two populations.

Both peoples discovered that not only did time march differently on Rulari, but this new world answered to the rule of will, of heart, of mind and of magic as much as the laws science had governed earth.

Humans are adaptable and began to prize those families with the ingrained talent to use magic. Most Magi had the innate ability to learn magic but affinity for certain types of abilities usually manifested in those with strong magi talents.

In the years since man first came to Rulari, Places Of Power were searched out by both Terrans and Cat Men. The Terrans established new portals enclosed in keeps, and held by seven of the most powerfully gifted families. Formidable wards were created and set in place to ensure the keeps stayed in the control of the families, who were sworn to serve the best interest of the magic users or Magi as they came to be called. One of these ancient keeps was Ironlyn, on the northwestern sea of the country of Askela. It has been held by a family named Mabinogion for nearly two hundred years.

The Witchlings

Kathlea Mabinogion, heritary Draconi to the shire of Ironlyn, was a powerful, unregistered Magi. Her much loved husband Maxton was a great soldier, but he had no talent other than his swordplay. Magi were highly valued in the kingdom of Askela but only if they were a registered member of the Shan's Elite Magi Proctors. Unregistered Magi were hunted by the Magi Proctors and forced to join. When a Magi joined the Proctors, to ensure loyalty only to the Shan and the Proctors, the Proctors insisted all family ties be broken. To breed stronger Magi, the Proctors choose a mate for you. It mattered little to the Proctors if the Magi 'recruited' was already married, in a relationship or if they even liked their assigned partner. Had she been a registered Magi, Kathlea would never have been allowed to marry Maxton who had no Magi Talent. If the Proctors caught her now, they would try to force her to mate with a male Magi they had chosen, and her children would be tested for Magi talents. Any of her Magi gifted children would be separated from her and sent to a special school where they would be brainwashed in loyalty to the Proctors above all else. Maxton would be killed outright.

Not all Magi were in favor of being required to join the Proctors. Years ago, the rebellious unregistered Magi of Askela had formed a network called the Magi Cadre which was organized to enable Magi to escape the nets spread by the Proctors. Travelers like the Maginogion family picked up Magi hiding from the Proctors and aided them to escape to neighboring countries where the Magi Laws were different. For the truly desperate, there was Ironlyn Keep and a Gate to another world. As the spymaster for the Cadre, Lewys Mabinogion, Kathlea's father, traveled around the kingdom eking out a living selling spices, potions and medicine to various villages. While Lewys and his family worked at overseeing the Cadre network, Lerrys Maginogion, a cousin with few Magi abilities held Ironlyn for them.

Magical in itself, for many years Ironlyn had defied attempts by the Shan and the Magi Proctors to force their way into it. Unable to break the wards or decipher the spell that created them, the Proctors continually searched for members of the bloodline in the hope they would be able use one of the blood to force a way into the Keep and control the Gate.

Kathlea had born Maxton three children, Rebecca, age ten and the twins Catrin and Owen, age four, all of whom were showing signs of nascent Magi talent. There was also hope of a fourth child, but on that fatal day when the Proctors found them, Kathlea hadn't yet shared that news with her family.

The Proctors found them on Rebecca's tenth birthday. Her grandparents had driven their wagon into a nearby village to meet their contact and pick up a Magi hiding there. Kathlea and Maxton had stayed behind because it was rumored the Proctors were in the village, and Lewys Maginogion felt that two Traveler wagons would draw too much attention.

Rebecca and the twins had been playing under the wagon when Kathlea suddenly stood up and looked towards the town.

"What is it?" Maxton demanded.

"He's coming!" Kathlea gasped. "I feel him. He knows I'm here."

She turned to Rebecca. "Go! Hide where we found the berries. Be quiet, and keep the twins quiet also. Don't come out whatever you see or hear. Promise me!"

"I promise," Rebecca said. She grabbed Catrin and Owen's hands and ran into the bushes. They barely made it before the Proctor and his men thundered into camp.

Unknown to Rebecca, her mother cast a shadow spell on the children to keep them from being noticed. While her attention was diverted, the Proctor cast a Binding Spell on her to keep her from using her Rainbow Magic to help her husband as he fought the Proctor's guards. Rebecca could see the bubble of magic over her mother push outward as Kathlea tried to break through it. Hidden in a hollow in the brush with her hands covering the mouths of her brother and sister, she watched in terror as her father fought the guardsmen who came with the Proctor.

Catrin whimpered. "Hush!" Rebecca breathed and the children obediently stilled.

The Proctor had brought ten guards with him. Maxton fought like a demon to reach him, slaying all but four of his guards before an unlucky strike brought him down. Kathlea screamed.

"Shut up woman!" the Proctor yelled. "You are Magi and a strong one. I will let him live if you do not resist."

Sobbing, Kathlea allowed herself to be led away, the bubble binding her to the saddle. The remaining guards loaded up their dead and wounded comrades and followed their master.

Rebecca made the twins wait until the Proctor and his men had disappeared before they came out of hiding. Maxton was unconscious but alive. Anghard, Rebecca's grandmother had just begun to teach the girl healing, but she bathed and bound her father's wounds as well as she could, applying a poultice of crushed bayberry and skunkweed to stop the bleeding.

Lewys and Anghard had been forced to watch as the Proctor led their captive daughter through the village, arriving back at the camp to find Maxton alive but still unconscious.

As soon as he recovered, Maxton left to follow them and rescue his wife from the Proctors. The family packed up and left the area, traveling in a roundabout way toward the Capitol city of Khios where the Proctors were headquartered, hoping to be able to help their daughter and her husband.

Lewys learned through his contacts that Kathlea had arrived there and been taken into the inner courts for training, but he could discover nothing more. Almost a year later, news came that Maxton and Kathlea were both dead.

"It is a tale of love and defiance to inspire rebels against the Proctors for generations," the woman, an escaped Magi, brought the news. "He fought his way in to her, and they defied the Chief Magi Proctor himself, but they were trapped on the highest tower of the castle above the ocean cliffs. They kissed each other and jumped into the ocean. It is believed they drowned."

Anghard sobbed. Lewys Maginogion's face was hard.

"Someday, I will kill them," he said. "All who support this cursed system that destroys families."

The woman telling the tale looked frightened. "There is more," she whispered. "It is rumor only, but they say before her husband found her your daughter birthed a babe who was smuggled out of the compound by a servant woman."

"What happened to the child?" Anghard asked, a desperate hope in her voice.

The woman shrugged. "Your daughter had been kind to her and she was well paid to smuggle her out of the nursery. That is all I know. I'm sorry."

"You are sure the babe was a girl?"

The woman hesitated. "That is what I was told, but—"

Anghard pressed her hand. "Thank you."

She turned to her husband. "We can't go back to Ironlyn until we find the child, Lewys."

Fire Magic

Thirteen years passed but the family never forgot their lost daughter or the child she might have born. The night the wasting fever took Rebecca's grandmother, spring was just starting to push up through ground that was frozen hard with winter. She and Catrin had been able to find only a few spring blooms to scatter on Anghard's body as they prepared it for the dawn service.

Rebecca stood under the funeral pyre looking up at the sky, feeling the weight of responsibility on her shoulders now that her grandmother was no longer there to share it. Anghard had fought the wasting sickness, and fought hard, but after months of agonizing illness, she succumbed. "You will be Draconi now," she told Rebecca. Holding her granddaughter's firm young hand in her wasted one. "Take care of your grandfather and your brother and sister. It will be up to you to find our lost one." She had pressed an amulet into Rebecca's hand. "Use this to help you skry for her."

"I'll find her grandmother," she vowed. "Mother is gone, but if her child lives, I'll find her. I promise."

Rebecca's straight, blue-black hair, plaited into a braid as thick as a man's arm, fell to her waist. Clear grey eyes below slanted eyebrows stood out against her porcelain complexion that never took a tan. The resemblance between her and the woman now resting on the funeral pyre had been uncanny.

"It's hopeless; we will never find our baby sister," Catrin said, wiping her eyes. She and Owen were sixteen now, a tall strapping pair, with curly dark hair, their father's green eyes, and sunny smiles. Just now their faces both showed evidence of grief.

Rebecca looked over at Lewys Maginogion's ravaged face. He would miss his beloved Anghard. She reached for her sibling's hands. "He will stay with her tonight, I think. Let's go back to camp."

Dinner that night was a simple stew which they ate in silence. Afterwards, Owen moved the rope corral around the unicorn herd to a fresh location. The herd consisted of twenty mares and half-grown colts. It was their Grandfather's pride and joy. Moving from village to village, Lewys would occasionally sell one of the younger ones if he decided an owner was worthy to own one, but they all knew the herd was destined for the pastures of Ironlyn when they finally took up residence there.

Anghard's funeral pyre would be set afire at dawn, as was the custom. Rebecca and Catrin were finishing up the supper dishes and setting out the bread to rise for breakfast

the next morning, when they had unwelcome visitors--several men from the town outside the Trade Station where they camped.

The leader, John Thomas Lazarus was an important man in the nearby village of Joppa. He had expected these Travelers to be awed by his importance, and was displeased when they were not.

"What, no dancing around the fire? I was looking forward to that," he said jovially.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Lazarus," Rebecca replied quietly. "We are not entertaining visitors tonight. This is a camp of sorrow. Our grandmother Anghard passed into the great beyond this afternoon. Please excuse us."

She went back to wiping down the clean plates, ignoring him, hoping he would take the hint and go away.

Instead, he threw some coins down on the ground. "Here, I'll pay for my entertainment."

She made no move to pick up the coins. "No, Sir."

Lazarus frowned, but he hesitated. "Maybe I should ask the old man. Where is he?"

"Grandfather is sitting vigil with Grandmother," Owen, who had just returned to the camp, replied.

Lazarus looked at him in incredulity. "You mean someone really did die?"

The three just looked at him in silence.

"I see. Alright, I'll be back tomorrow then." He turned and left.

Owen spat on the ground at his back.

"Make sure he really leaves," Rebecca said. "I intend to skry for our lost sister tonight, and I don't want a witness."

"He and the others have left the Trade Station Circle and headed back into town," Owen reported. "Becca, are you sure this is a good idea? Grandmother always did it before."

Rebecca pulled out the bronze stone that had been Anghard's last gift to her. "Yes. I feel her spirit strongly tonight. She will help me before she passes on. I know it."

Catrin unrolled the ancient map of the kingdom, stretching it on the wooden folding worktable that served a variety of uses. She held down the map corners with four flat stones.

Rebecca pulled the necklace over her head and held the stone in one hand. She cut a small prick in her finger and rubbed it over the stone. Holding the stone over the map, she rubbed the blood on its surface.

"Bone of my bone, blood of my blood, flesh of my flesh, seek now she who is lost."

Catrin picked up the knife and did the same. Handing the knife to Owen, she too rubbed the stone and map with a bloody fingertip, and repeated the chant.

After a second's hesitation, he repeated the actions and joined in the chant.

At first, nothing happened, but finally, the stone began to swing gently. There was a surge of power and then the stone pulled strongly toward the west, finally coming to rest on the symbol for the village of Buttersea.

All three felt the soft caress as Anghard left them for the final time.

"What have you done?" Lewys demanded.

Catrin looked up at him with tears running down her face. "It was grandmamma. I felt her," she sobbed.

"We all felt her," Rebecca said coolly. "Look, we have a destination."

Lewys stared down at the map with the stone resting on it. "Yes," he sighed. "We will be going west in the morning. I heard from Cousin Lerrys. He needs to leave Ironlyn. The local Proctor is getting suspicious because so many Magi have disappeared in the area surrounding Ironlyn. We will go home. That village is on the way. If your sister is there, we will find her."

Rebecca nodded. "We will be ready."

"I need to go into Joppa tomorrow and pick up the supplies I ordered. You three will stay here and pack up so we can leave when I return," Lewys instructed.

At dawn, Lewys came to wake them. They stood quietly, while he lit the pyre, watching in silence as Anghard's earthly remains were consumed.

Breakfast was a subdued meal. Afterwards, Lewys put a pack saddle on one of the mares, saddled his stallion, Sunrise and left for Joppa, the village outside the Trade Station. His grandchildren began packing the two wagons for the journey. It was a complicated process. The limited space meant that everything had to be stowed in exactly the right place or it wouldn't all fit.

Packing took longer than it should have because Owen kept stuffing things in higgledy-piggledy. It was obvious he was in a hurry. After she had unloaded and re-packed the things he had already packed several times, Rebecca turned to him in exasperation. "What is wrong with you? This will take forever if you aren't more careful. Why are you in such a hurry?"

Catrin laughed. "He wants to get done so he can hurry over and say goodbye to Fiona," she said with a knowing look.

"The Station Master's daughter?" Rebecca inquired.

Owen nodded.

"Okay, take off then," his sister said. "The way you're working, we'll get on better without you. Scram!"

Her little brother kissed her cheek and loped off toward the Trade Station.

"Grandpa told us all to stay here," Catrin remarked.

"I know," Rebecca replied, "but he's only young once."

Catrin laughed and began repacking the pots and pans Owen had made a mess of.

"Leave a space for what Grandpa is bringing back," Rebecca reminded her.

"What is it, do you know?" Catrin asked.

"Not a clue," her sister replied. "He was very mysterious about it."

"Well, we've finished," Catrin said, a few minutes later. "I suppose we can harness the unicorns. Whose turn is it today?"

Lewys' prize unicorn herd were mostly draft animals and to keep from overusing any of them, the family rotated the ones used to pull the wagons.

"Let's rotate the teams," Rebecca suggested. She went to the rope corral and called four mares to her. She was about to lead them over to the front of the first wagon when they again had an unwelcome visitor; Lazarus was back.

"Not leaving already are you?" he asked Catrin, looking the girl up and down in a way that made her flush with embarrassment.

"Yes, we are," Rebecca answered him. She deliberately led the four large unicorns between him and Catrin, forcing him to move back out of the way.

"Really?" he sneered. "Leaving without allowing me to sample your wares? I don't think so."

Rebecca's eyes narrowed. She understood exactly what type of 'wares' he referred to, but pretended she didn't.

"I'm afraid we've already packed away our herbs and medicines, Mr. Lazarus," she said.

"I'm not talking about any piddly spices girl and you know it," he said.

"Catrin, get in the wagon and lock the door," Rebecca told her sister.

Catrin hesitated, but obeyed her.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Lazarus," Rebecca continued, "but we aren't receiving visitors, and my grandfather and brother will be back soon. I need to get our unicorns harnessed. Please excuse me."

She lined up the unicorns and was preparing to throw the first harness over one's back when Lazarus grabbed her.

Rebecca fought him, but he was stronger than she. When she landed a lucky kick on his knee, he slapped her hard across the face. The dizzying blow stunned her long enough for Lazarus to rip her blouse open. He yanked her to him and mashed his mouth down on hers.

When she tried to turn her head away, he grabbed a handful of her hair and forced her face back to his. With her arms pinned against his body, she was unable to move. Finally, she managed to free one of her arms and stabbed at his eyes with her fingers.

Lazarus hit her again, this time with his fist. She stumbled and fell to her knees, dizzy. He knocked her the rest of the way to the ground, following it up by falling on her body. He tore her blouse the rest of the way off, biting at her bared breast. The pain brought her awake, and she clawed at his face and head.

When she felt him fumbling at the buttons on her pants, she knew she wasn't going to be able to stop him unless she used her Magi talents. Rebecca was a fire Magi; fear and anger ignited her Magic. A fireball burst in his face, causing his greasy hair to catch fire. Lazarus screamed and drew back, slapping at his burning hair.

Suddenly, he was knocked off Rebecca by the solid *twack!* of a camp shovel wielded by Catrin, who had disobeyed her sister and come to help. He fell to the side, unconscious, with his hair still smoldering.

When Lewys and Owen arrived a few minutes later, they found Rebecca leaning on her sister's shoulder while Catrin applied one poultice to her swollen face and another to the vicious bite mark on her breast.

Lewys looked down at Lazarus in silence. He had checked the man for life signs and was disappointed to find him still alive. "You should have made sure he was dead," he informed his granddaughters.

"We can still do that," Rebecca said, half hysterically.

"No, child we can't. It would be murder. Owen, go and get Trade Master Jordan."

When Catrin started to take Rebecca inside the wagon, Lewys stopped her. "Better he sees her just like she is, so he knows this was justified," Lewys said.

The Trade Master arrived in Owen's wake, puffing. He was a round man, no longer made for running.

"Oh, no, Oh, no," he kept repeating, wringing his hands. "This is bad."

"It was self-defense," Lewys reminded him. "Look at my granddaughter. Since when is it bad to stop a man from raping her?"

"Since the man is John Thomas Lazarus!" Jordan snapped. "You don't live here. He is the most powerful man in this county. He owns half the farms around here and at least a third owe him money. He pretty much does as he pleases."

"Including rape?" demanded Lewys.

"I've heard rumors," Jordan said. "Well, the first thing is to get you out of here. You boy," he pointed at Owen. "Get those unicorns harnessed. I'm going to the village to round up a few men to help me collect Lazarus and take him back into town to a healer. You need to be on the road by the time I return from town. I can give you about an hour. Who knows? Maybe he'll die in the meantime and solve both our problems."

While Lewys and Owen harnessed the unicorns to the wagons, Rebecca threw off her torn blouse and put on a loose comfortable shirt. She mounted the wagon box and took her place to drive.

"Are you able to do this, girl?" her grandfather looked up at her from the back of his golden unicorn.

She set her hat firmly on her head and nodded. "Yes, lets just go away from here."

They camped that night by a small creek deep in the black leaf forest, Lewys having decided that it would be wiser to avoid the Trade Stations until they were a long way from Joppa. Spring had brought out a few fresh grasses in the glade next to the stream for the animals to feed on.

Rebecca woke several times in the night, shaking with terror. After the third time, Catrin, whose skill lay in healing prepared a sleeping draught for her. Gradually the night terrors eased. To avoid thinking about it during the day, she kept herself as busy as possible.

The morning after they left Joppa Trade Station, Lewys ordered the sides of the wagons whitewashed, so they would appear a different color. Catrin was told to prepare a concoction he said would dye the unicorn's coats a different color. It turned Sunrise and the mares' golden coats to a dull brown.

To make Owen appear older, he brought out a fake beard for him to put on each morning, and told him to stop shaving. He would do the same.

It was while they were dyeing the unicorns that Rebecca found the three hungry kittens near the body of their mother. They were only a few weeks old, and hadn't yet grown the white manes they would have as adults. Gathering up the kits in her arms, she brought them back to camp. Milking one of the nursing unicorns, she mixed the rich milk into a feed for them.

For several weeks, the family continued to travel north and west avoiding any villages and Trade Stations. Spring was in full bloom, when they camped in a clearing outside the village of Duranga. Duranga had no proper Trade Station, but the town had designated the clearing as common ground where Travelers or Trade Caravans could stop over.

A Spell Is Cast

Harry Sims, the proprietor of the Glass Slipper Tavern, was an unhappy man on this fine spring evening. He should have been happy. The Glass Slipper was full. The Spring Jamborees for local stock collection and sale had just finished, and all the holdings, small and large were in town and spending coin freely.

The chief cause of his unhappiness was not the rowdiness of the crowd; he was long accustomed to that. No, the cause of his worry was the five-man dice game going on in the corner. Harry knew four of the five players well. Leej Jonsyn, the rug merchant, was losing and was going to be in trouble with his wife. Ruddy Tyer, a long, skinny kid from Gryphon's Nest, was still reasonably sober but he would lose his Jamboree bonus before the end of the night. Charger French, a squatty rider from back in the badlands with, it was said—but *not* where he could hear it—a reputation for shady deals. The fourth player was Jajson Buttersnake the son of old 'Rock' Buttersnake, the biggest cattle breeder around. Jajson figured he was top dog in the town of Duranga because no one dared challenge the son of old Rock. Rock ran a tough, salty crew of drovers. They didn't much like the boss's son, but they would take his side in a fight.

It was the fifth dice thrower who worried Harry. Harry had seen him ride into town earlier that day on the highbred, dapple war unicorn presently taking up space at Harry's hitching rail. The stranger wasn't a big man; he stood around five-eight with a short, neatly trimmed black beard and cold green eyes. To Harry, who as a young man had seen quite a few of his kind, the stranger had 'Merc' written all over him. His clothes were of too good quality and too clean, his thigh-high boots too new and shiny, and the saddle on that fancy unicorn stud was too pricey for a coin-a-day drover. His needle-gun was tied low on his leg in a well-worn holster, and unless Harry was mistaken, in addition to the knife on his belt, he had a blade down his back, one in his boot, and a second gun hidden in his other boot.

Absently, Harry polished a glass while he tried to place the man. He didn't look that familiar, but the blood feud over to the south between the RedBird and Smoker clans had just finished. Before he died, the Smoker Chief Hutchins had claimed Rupert RedBird was hiring paid Mercs, and the stranger had ridden in from the south.

The practice of hiring fighters from the Merc Guild in disputes wasn't against the law, but it was disapproved of by Shahan Tarragon. Since the Merc Guild was extremely powerful and used by many to settle disputes, his disapproval didn't mean much. The Guild was composed of hundreds of small and large bands of independent fighters and was reputed to have ties with the Wild Magi. The Mercs were completely independent of any government, and the Guild's influence stretched through all seven of the human kingdoms. Siding with the Shahan against the Guild might mean you couldn't hire their fighters in your next conflict. Few landholders wanted to chance angering the Guild by doing so. Rumor had it the Shahan was also trying to consolidate more power to the crown by discouraging the larger holders from keeping their own private armies. The Shahan wasn't having much luck with that either.

Because of his father's mental illness, the Shahan had been named Regent and virtually ruled Askela in his father's stead. A smart young man, the Shahan knew any attempt to

force the nobles to disband their large standing armies using his Magi Proctors might cause a rebellion against his already uneasy reign. Shahen Rupert didn't take any overt steps to interfere with the mercs. It was common knowledge the neighboring Kingdom of Jacite would attack immediately if a war broke out between the Shahen and his nobles. Despite the Proctors' Magi talents, they were outnumbered by the Mercs who had the assistance of the Wild Magi if the landowners called on the Merc Guild for help against him.

Harry swore softly to himself. If he was correct about the identity of the fifth dice player, it meant he belonged to a troop he could call on if there was trouble. He was alone right now, but that didn't mean he didn't have allies nearby.

Harry was sure trouble was brewing because Jajson Buttersnake was drunk. When he was sober, he was a poor player and an even worse loser. Because he ran with the Buttersnake mob, he was usually safe when he had a tantrum; no one in his right mind wanted to start a fighting ruckus with Old Rock's crew.

Harry had a bad feeling the fifth dice player wouldn't give a damn how tough Old Rock Buttersnake's crew was. There was just something in that dark face that said, 'I don't care'. The fight would probably cause a lot of damage before things got settled. And it was going to happen in his place too, he thought bitterly.

Suddenly Buttersnake stood up, scattering dice and coins. "I want a new set of dice!" he cried. "You shouldn't have won that throw!"

The stranger came up out of his chair in one swift, clean movement. He slapped Jajson across the mouth, knocking him into the crowded bar.

The room exploded away from young Buttersnake. Leej Jonsyn, the rug merchant, dived away from the table so fast he knocked over his chair.

Jajson Buttersnake staggered to his feet, a trickle of blood dribbling from the corner of his mouth. He was white with fury. "You cheated!" he shrieked, pawing for his gun. He fumbled and almost dropped it in his rage.

The stranger waited until Buttersnake had his needlegun coming level before he drew and fired. His gun made a loud snapping noise as the puff of compressed air sent a fatal needle right down Buttersnake's throat.

In that instant, Harry recognized the fighter. Hammer Smith was the handle he went by, but Harry had come from the coast, and he knew Hammer Smith's real name was Andre Benoit. Benoit was a free-lance Merc who at the tender age of sixteen had joined the Mercs. He was from the coastal area at the south end of the kingdom. He typically took on jobs that didn't require the services of an entire troop, but he held the Merc rank of a lieutenant. Hammer Smith was reputed to be in his twenties, but he was already known as a dangerous man. It was said that he never drew a weapon unless the man was armed and facing him but if you pushed him, you died. Jajson Buttersnake died.

In the stillness after the weapon fire, Hammer Smith calmly reloaded his weapon, scooped up his coins from the table and quietly walked through the swinging doors. Whispers started in his wake.

"Shot him in the mouth," someone said.

"Old Rock isn't going to like this," said another man.

"He won't care. That's a hard man," a voice said.

Hammer Smith mounted the dapple unicorn and set off at a brisk trot.

"So much for a warm bed for me and a soft stall for you, Blackfeather," he said. "Unless I'm mistaken we're going to have a bunch of irate drovers on our tail soon. Why did I sit down at that game, anyway?"

Blackfeather's stride increased to a smooth, ground-eating lope. The double moons were full, making the road as clear as day, but Hammer Smith knew he was going to have to leave it soon. He started looking for a good place to leave the trail. Behind him, he could hear angry shouts and then the snap of needle gunfire.

"Okay boy," he spoke softly to the unicorn, who cocked an attentive black ear, "let's ride some lightning."

Blackfeather was fast. Hammer Smith had traded him off a Cat Man who had used him for racing. The trouble was he had beaten every unicorn in the area so often that no one would race against him anymore, and the Cat Man was broke. Hammer Smith had traded him a half-broke unicorn with the disposition of a poison beetle crossed with a snapdragon, an extra needle rifle and twenty coins in eating money.

He knew if he could get a start on the impromptu mob forming behind him, he could make it across the line into Cat Man Territory. Not the safest place in the world to be, but safer than here, as it was unlikely any posse would follow him there. The Shahren had given orders that entering Cat Man territory was forbidden. No one wanted to re-start the raiding again, and the Cats would undoubtedly see any group of armed men as breaking the treaty. Single riders entered at their own risk, and with a little luck, might be ignored.

Suddenly ahead of him came the pound of running hooves and a wild screeching yell. Perhaps a mob coming in late off a Jamboree? If so, it suited Hammer Smith's needs just fine.

He checked the unicorn and faded off to the side, stopping under a kaleidoscope tree about twenty feet away from the road. The moon flecked through the shiney, semi-transparent leaves, causing light and dark shadows that blended with Blackfeather's coat, making the unicorn practically invisible.

A more cautious man would have taken the opportunity to scuttle out of there quick. But Hammer Smith was not a cautious man. Grinning, he watched as the mob from town ran full tilt into the celebrating drovers.

Chuckling, he started Blackfeather around the tree and to the north at an easy lope, heading into a forest of more kaleidoscope trees. In the melee behind him, he heard the snap of air guns as some fool started shooting; he knew everybody soon would be doing the same.

Karma has a way of catching up with a man. He paid a price for the inattention caused by his unholy amusement. In the darkness, he never saw the tree branch coming that dealt his head a smashing blow; stunned, he blacked out. Only his instinctive riding ability and Blackfeather's superb gait kept him from falling off. Several times, Blackfeather shifted stride and course to ensure his rider stayed in the saddle. Puzzled at being given no other signals, Blackfeather continued to travel west, taking the easiest route.

The sun was just coming up when Hammer Smith awoke. Blackfeather had slowed to a walk. Muzzily, Hammer Smith peered around. His head hurt and he was having trouble focusing his eyes. Blackfeather mounted the top of a small rise and started down toward a creek gurgling below.

Hammer Smith blinked harder to focus his eyes because he was sure he was seeing things. The loveliest girl he had ever seen knelt by the water washing her face. Straight black hair fell in a curtain to the ground around her, some of the strands floating in the water.

Blackfeather stopped at the edge of the creek and lowered his head to drink. The girl lifted her head to stare back at Hammer Smith out of the clearest gray eyes he'd ever seen. She stood, pulling her hair back over her shoulders. Her crimson night robe clung to the swell of her breasts and hips, making a bright splash of red against the green plants growing on the bank of the stream.

At that moment, Hammer Smith was beyond appreciating nature's decorating schemes. The whole world felt unreal. There was no one in it but him and the girl, and never would be. He nudged Blackfeather across the stream and stopped beside her.

She looked up at him with no sign of fear. He stared down at her. It seemed as if her eyes grew enormous and he was diving into a huge pool of gray water. This time, he did fall off his unicorn.

Rebecca tried to break his fall, but since he outweighed her, she ended up on the ground with him on top. Awkwardly, she sat up, wriggling out from under his weight. His head lolled back against her breast.

"Gosh!" exclaimed her sixteen-year-old brother Owen, "where did he come from?"

"Over the hill," Rebecca said absently, looking at the dark face. He wasn't bad looking; of course, you couldn't tell much with that beard...

"What's the matter with him?" demanded Owen's twin, Catrin. Like Rebecca, she was still in her nightclothes.

Rebecca had found the caked blood matted in his hair.

"He's been hurt," she said. "One of you go and get Grandpa."

"Gosh!" said Owen again. "That's a funny place to get hurt. Do you suppose somebody whacked him?"

"Maybe."

Blackfeather nudged Hammer Smith curiously with his soft grey nose. Why was he so still? Absently, Rebecca patted him.

"He'll be fine," she said to the unicorn. Blackfeather snorted gently and wandered off to crop some grass growing by the bank.

Pulling up the straps of his suspenders, Lewys Maginogion, awakened out of a sound sleep by Catrin, hurried up to them. His sharp old eyes took in the situation at a glance.

"Owen, unsaddle that unicorn and take care of it. Catrin, go fix up a bed in my wagon."

As the two hurried to obey, he knelt beside Rebecca.

"He's got blood on his head. Owen thought maybe he'd been whacked in a fight," she said.

Gingerly Maginogion turned Hammer Smith's head, running a finger in the gash on the top of his head and forehead.

"You'll make it bleed again," protested Rebecca.

"He's out like a candle. Doesn't feel a thing. We'd best get him in the wagon and that wound dressed before he wakes up."

Unobserved by Rebecca, Lewys Maginogion looked pensively down at the lovely visage of his eldest granddaughter, who was looking down at the face of the young man resting in her arms. It had been months since the incident at Joppa, and in all that time his beautiful Rebecca had not voluntarily let any man touch her, flinching even whenever Owen or her Grandfather came close to her accidentally. Yet she held this stranger against her with no sign of shrinking.

They put the unconscious man to bed in the wagon Owen shared with Lewys. As Lewys cleaned and dressed the wound, he thought about what he had learned in the village yesterday, and a plan began to form in his mind. Only if the young man proved worthy of course...

Twenty minutes later, dressed in a grey cotton shirt and trousers, Rebecca was sitting on a folding campstool, brushing her hair with the aid of a hand mirror.

A pan of sliced meat was sizzling on the fire, and Catrin, similarly dressed, with her long curly hair tied back was making sourdough wafers, her face flushed from the fire.

Owen was brushing the mud from the stranger's unicorn. Blackfeather seemed to enjoy it, one hip cocked as he sleepily munched a bag of grain.

Lewys Maginogion surveyed his brood proudly. They were good kids all of them. Owen was growing tall and straight as a young fire tree. He was gangly still, but his green eyes met a man head on.

His twin, Catrin, took after Lewys' mother, being tall and buxom with thick, curly dark hair. For all she was starting to draw the men's eyes like bees to nectar, she was still enough of a child not to notice their admiring stares.

His gaze dropped to his oldest granddaughter. With her hair drawn back, the resemblance to his dead wife was eerie. Rebecca wasn't the looker Catrin was; her red-lipped mouth was too wide, and those gray eyes under her slanted brows gave her heart-shaped face an unearthly beauty, but he knew from his own experience many years ago just how potent a spell that exotic loveliness could cast. He had been caught in just such a web years ago when he first laid eyes on his dead wife, Anghard.

"All of you, come here," he said. "I need to tell you what I learned in the village yesterday. Catrin, leave those biscuits alone. We won't starve in the next ten minutes.

Obediently, Catrin and Owen seated themselves on a nearby log. Rebecca turned to face him on the folding campstool, a thick black braid lying over her shoulder.

"John Thomas Lazarus has put out a reward for our arrest for unauthorized magic. I saw it posted on the wall outside the sheriff's office."

"But we haven't done anything!" Catrin cried, tears trembling on the ends of her lashes.

Rebecca said nothing, but she shut her eyes and clasped her hands in her lap. Magic users were regulated by the Shan. Powerful and mid range users were recruited to serve in the Shan's Magi Proctors. Less powerful magic users were required to buy a license to use magic, or if proven to be of the right bloodlines, used as breeding stock. In either case, Magi were tested and licensed and paid a fee to the King to practice their arts. At least it worked so in theory. In practice, the rule of the Proctors over Askela's Magi gifted was absolute. Almost no licenses to practice magic were ever issued. Unauthorized users could be hung without trial if they committed crimes using magic. Their only choice to escape this fate would be to join the Wild Magi, if they could find them.

Owen started to curse, and was immediately called to order.

"Owen I'll not have you using words like that in front of your sisters," Lewys said sternly. "Besides, saying a thing like that about a man can get you killed in a challenge."

"Even when he deserves it?" asked Catrin wryly.

"Yes," her grandfather said flatly. "Especially if he deserves it. It's about how powerful he is, not if he deserves the name."

After a short struggle with himself, Owen said, "Yes sir. Sorry, girls."

"Never mind that," Catrin said. "What are we going to *do*?"

Her grandfather patted her hand. "I'll think of something," he said. In fact, he already had a plan in mind, but he wanted to talk to their guest before he came out with it.

"Now, how about breakfast? Am I to starve to death today?"

"Grandfather, what exactly does that notice say?" demanded Rebecca.

He took it out of his pocket and handed it to her. She frowned as she read it aloud. Travelers such as themselves always had a bad reputation in any new town, being automatically suspected of thievery and other less savory actions. Combined with hints of outlaw magic this spelled real trouble. Lewys and Owen were wanted for the assault and attempted murder of John Thomas Lazarus, Catrin and herself for a magical assault on Mrs. Charity Lazarus and for burning a wagon. All were hanging offenses, and the fact that most of it was a tapestry of lies wouldn't matter. In fact, only Rebecca had used any magic; Catrin had used a shovel, and Owen and Lewys had both arrived after the incident was over. Although defending herself hadn't been a crime, with the memory of the day the Proctor took her mother fresh in her mind, Rebecca didn't think being turned over to the Proctors was a better fate.

They had left Joppa quickly after the incident hoping to avoid notice by staying off the regular trade routes. They never gave their real names when plying their trade as sellers of herbs and medicines, but the descriptions of them on the flyer were good. Upon fleeing Joppa, they had turned the gaudy signs on the wagon's side inward and whitewashed the outside so the wagons looked more like ordinary travelling wagons. Unfortunately, Lewys' treasured herd of beautiful, golden draft unicorns were very noticeable. They had been forced to stop several times and reapply the dye that turned their golden coats to a muddy brown.

"Sorcery my foot!" Owen exclaimed. "That old hag probably died of spleen when she found out what her supposedly God-fearing husband was up to!"

"Look for the mote in your own eye," quoted Lewys, "before speaking of the one in your neighbors."

Owen made an angry noise. "I don't care! And don't quote that stuff at me! I'm sick to death of—"

"Stop it! Please!" Rebecca cried.

Everyone looked at her in astonishment. She was weeping. Rebecca never cried.

"This is all my fault," she sobbed. "I should have just done what he wanted—"

"Wash out your mouth of that filth girl!" Lewys roared. "No granddaughter of mine and Anghard's would make a whore of herself for any reason! You did just as you should have," he added more gently. "So did Catrin. What's done is done, and we live now, not in the past."

"Uh—breakfast is ready," Catrin inserted. "That is if anyone is interested."

They stayed another day by the creek finishing the laundry, tending to the wounded man and touching up the dye they applied to the unicorn herd. The man didn't really wake up, but Lewys was able to get a couple of spoons of broth down him.

The first night after everyone had gone to bed, Lewys sat up late. Another man might have been ashamed of himself for what he intended to do. Lewys Maginogion was not. He had a plan to protect his family but he needed more information about his patient before he could decide how much of it was workable. He opened the saddlebags Owen had taken off the unicorn. There wasn't much in them. One of the bags held a clean shirt, an extra needle gun, a small sleeve weapon, a package of kophie and a battered cup and pot. The other held tools for making needles and small containers of compressed air. The most interesting thing he found was a brass badge marked with three stars, a sword crossing an ax, bisected by a Magi wand etched on its face. It was a Merc Badge. The three stars meant the young man held the rank of lieutenant in the Guild. There were those in the Cadre who despised the Mercs, but Lewys wasn't among them. He had spent a little time as a young man with a Merc troop when he had considered becoming one of the Wild Magi. Wild Magi were a loose group of powerful Magi affiliated with the Mercs, but except in a few cases, not members of the Guild. The Guild actually preferred to use them rather than the Proctors, because they would take the oath to a Merc Commander, whereas the Proctors owed allegiance only to the Shan. The Proctors hated them, but only the most powerful of the Proctors dared to challenge one of them.

The saddle bags also held a gold pendant with a man and woman's image painted inside and a small packet of letters.

Most of the letters were addressed to Andre Benoit. The oldest of these was dated almost ten years ago and had been written to a schoolboy.

*My dear son, Lewys read, Mr. James, the head master from St. Anthony's visited us today and I am afraid your step-father is **very** angry with you. Dearest, you must learn to control that dreadful temper of yours or one day I fear it will lead to serious trouble. I am proud of you for standing up for that poor young man, but was it really necessary to half-drown his tormenter in the chamber pot? And did you really need to break a valuable urn over Jimmy Hendricks head? Not but what I do sympathize with your desire to hit him with something. A more horrid brat I've yet to meet, and his mother is just the same—but I hear your step-father coming. All my love dear and do try to stay out of trouble for a few days. Mama.*

There were several others, all in the same vein. The last one was not written by his mother. Instead, it was written by the Cleric at a church.

My Dear boy, my heart goes out to you at this time. I wish I could be with you to comfort you, but as I cannot, I can only tell you to call upon He who is our greatest comfort in our grief as well as in joy. Your mother did not suffer at all. Dr. Thomas tells us the fall killed her instantly. Your poor step-father is sorely stricken. I hope this mutual sorrow will heal the gulf between you. Call upon me if you should feel the need for my services and I will come. God be with you, Respected Vincent McCauley

There were two other letters. One was from someone named Marie. It was just a note thanking him for the money to get back home to her family and telling him of her upcoming marriage.

The last one was addressed to someone named Hammer Smith, desiring him to come to a village named Cutterston and quoting a price of seven thousand silver coins for unnamed

services. Lewys looked again at the dappled unicorn. It was a fine animal, obviously well-bred. A mount such as only a wealthy man or a highly paid mercenary might ride. The man's clothes were good quality, and his weapons well cared for. He was probably a successful Merc then.

Thoughtfully Lewys re-folded the letters and replaced them. A handful of letters wasn't much to base his plan on, but they were all he had. 'The Divinity helps those who helps themselves' he reminded himself. It had been one of Anghard's favorite sayings. Just the thought of her somehow made her seem closer. Would she have approved of what he intended? He thought so. Comforted, he turned into his bedroll and went to sleep.

The next morning dawned bright and clear. Looking into the wagon Lewys found his patient awake.

"Well," he said, "you scared us a mite son. How do you feel?"

Andre Benoit touched his head gingerly. "If I move will it fall off?"

"Headache? Well, I think that can be helped." Lewys rummaged around in Anghard's medicine box until he found a small leather packet filled with white powder. He poured a tiny amount of the powder into a tin cup, added water and swished it around.

"Here," he said, "handing Andre the cup. "This should do the trick."

Andre accepted the cup gingerly. "Who are you?" he asked.

Lewys looked at him in well-feigned surprise. "Why don't you know?"

There was a small silence as Andre finished his medicine. "No," he said at last, "I don't guess I do."

He paused, searching his memory and then he frowned. "As a matter of fact, I don't think I know who *I* am."

"Good Lord," exclaimed Lewys. "I've heard of such a thing, but—"

Andre took him up sharply. "What do you mean?"

"Why, memory loss after a blow to the head. When I worked on a cattle station one summer, a fella got kicked in the head by a wild steer. He claimed he didn't know who he was either. Of course, we didn't believe him at first, but we came down to it in the end."

Lewys rubbed his chin. "As I recall, that fella never did get his right memory back."

Andre carefully set his cup down on the wooden chest next to him. "Do you know who I am? How I got here? How did I get hurt?"

"Whoa son," Lewys flung up a hand. "One thing at a time. First, your name is Andre Benoit and you're engaged to marry my eldest granddaughter Rebecca."

Lewys told that whopping lie without a blink. He rushed on before Andre could question him. "You're in bed because it looks like someone took a whack at you. We're not sure how it happened. You rode off hunting pronghorns yesterday and your unicorn brought you back. I'm afraid there isn't a lot more I can tell you about yourself before you joined us a couple of weeks back, because we only just met you, but your war bag is under the bed."

For once in his quick-tongued life, Andre was struck speechless. The story sounded fantastic and he wanted to hear more, but he was tired and found himself drifting back to sleep. Lewys watched him for a minute more, then rose and left the wagon.

That had been relatively easy compared to what was next—explaining to Rebecca, Catrin and Owen what he had done and getting them to go along with it.

The girls were down by the creek, washing clothes. Owen was making a fresh pot of kophie. He had heard what had gone on between Lewys and Andre. He scowled at his grandfather and opened his mouth to speak. Lewys shook his head at him.

"Where are Rebecca and Catrin?"

"Down at the creek doing laundry."

"Good. Come with me; we're going to have a family conference."

"We just did that yesterday," Owen grumbled under his breath as he followed Lewys. "Much good as it did us."

Arriving at the creek, Lewys said jovially, "You two girls look as lovely as flowers in springtime this morning."

Catrin and Rebecca exchanged glances over the bucket of dirty clothes. When their Grandfather started showering compliments, it generally meant he was up to something.

"Thank you," Rebecca said politely.

Both girls waited.

Lewys cleared his throat. "All of you read that wanted notice I brought back from town, didn't you?"

"We read it, Grandpa," Catrin replied.

"Well, then you know there weren't images of us, just a description of an old man, two girls and a younger man. We can't avoid the villages and trade stations forever and it occurred to me that what we need here is a bit of misdirection. Now we can't change our looks, but we can become a party of five instead of four. Ironlyn is still many weeks' travel from here and there are several villages between it and us, including Buttersea where we have to stop if we want to look for your sister. If we travel through those villages as a party of five, everyone who sees us will think of us as a group of five people not four, even if the fifth member of the group doesn't stay around long."

Catrin was the first to speak. "You're talking about the man on the war unicorn. Has he agreed to this?"

Owen made a rude noise. "He'll probably stay. You should have heard that pack of lies Grandpa fed him!"

"What if he finds out about the wanted notice?" Rebecca asked. "He might decide to collect the two thousand coins by turning us in."

"He might not turn us in, but not want to stay either—"

"Quiet!" Lewys glared them individually into silence.

"Our young friend—his name is Andre Benoit incidentally, has lost his memory because of that clout on the noggin he took."

"Permanently?" Owen asked. "What if he starts remembering?"

Lewys waved that aside. "Makes no difference. It'll stay lost long enough to suit us. Now stop interrupting me! Where was I?"

"Memory loss," Catrin supplied.

"Yes. Well I told him we met him a couple of weeks ago on the trail. He went hunting for meat and came back with a cut across his head. I also told him he was engaged to Rebecca so he'd have a reason to stay around."

Benignly he smiled at his offspring, who stared back at him with varying degrees of exasperation, horror or amusement.

"Why you old reprobate!" Catrin exclaimed.

"You," said Owen forcefully, "are a sneaky, underhanded, unscrupulous old—I don't know what."

They both carefully did not look at Rebecca who had gone dead white. She raised stricken eyes to her grandfather.

"I'm sorry Grandpa, but I *can't*," she whispered. "He might want—I can't do it."

Lewys jerked his head at Owen and Catrin. "You two go back to camp. Rebecca and I need to talk. And mind, you remember what I told you if you talk to Andre."

Obediently they started back to the fire. Lewys put an arm around Rebecca and felt her involuntary stiffening.

"Child, you've *got* to do it. Ironlyn is the last hope of the Magi. You know we need a safe place to go—it's getting dangerous to keep up the traveling medicine wagon, we are beginning to be too recognizable. The Proctors were asking questions about us in the last town before Joppa. That flyer will give them the excuse to hunt us down. It takes one of the blood to hold Ironlyn and control the Gate. We can't allow it to fall into any hands but ours. Besides the Magi Cadre is counting on us to take over at Ironlyn. You know how important that is to what we do."

She pulled away from him and covered her face with her hands.

"Don't you see, he's going to think its *real*! I dread having even you or Owen touch me and I know you aren't going to—every time a man even touches my hand I remember—"

She broke into sobs.

Lewys' heart ached in pity, but he steeled himself against her tears. If she didn't overcome this fear, she would go maimed all her life.

"Rebecca, you know it isn't natural to feel that way. You must face your fear and overcome it. What is between a man and a woman is good, not evil."

"What happened to me was evil!" she flashed.

"The man is evil and what he did was bad," Lewys agreed. "I'm sorry your first experience was so ugly, but you cannot allow it to rule your life child. Do you want to end your days a sour old maid with no children to light your days as you light mine?"

Her eyes closed. "Grandpa, please!"

Lewys sighed. "Well, child I won't force you to do this for our benefit. The Magi Cadre will find someone else to handle Ironlyn. I can sell the unicorns—"

"Stop it!" she cried. She knew her grandfather loved his unicorn herd second only to his family. It would break his heart to let them go. Her refusal would bring hurt and destitution on everyone she loved and the innocents they were charged to protect. She lifted her chin and wiped her eyes.

"You're right. There is no other way," she took a deep breath and gave him a watery smile. "I'll try the best I can."

Lewys hugged her. "That's my brave girl. I knew I could count on you."

Rebecca deliberately forced her body to relax. Andre would be in bed for another day or so, she hoped. Perhaps by that time she could learn not to flinch.

Catrin and Owen both looked at her anxiously when she and Lewys returned to the fire.

"Are you alright, sis?" Owen asked, his eyes widening as he realize Lewys still had his arm around Rebecca's shoulder and she had not only walked all the way back to camp that way, but didn't move away.

"I'm fine Owen," she smiled at him, a rather strained smile, but a real one nonetheless. "I have agreed to Grandpa's plan."

Owen opened his mouth, thought better of what he had been going to say, and shut it again.

Lewys gave his granddaughter a last hug and moved toward the fire. "Catrin are you burning the biscuits?"

"No, Owen is. It's his turn to cook," she replied.

"*Aggh!*" Owen leaped toward the fire to rescue his mistreated breakfast.

Rebecca took a deep breath, poured a cup of kophie, and mounted the wagon steps. Andre was awake.

"I brought you a cup of kophie. Breakfast will be ready soon."

"I hope you're Rebecca, because if you aren't, I'm engaged to the wrong girl."

An involuntary laugh was surprised out of her. "What a thing to say! It would serve you right if I denied it!"

He smiled back at her, running his eyes over her possessively.

To cover her nervousness, she said hastily, "Here, let me help you sit up. You can't drink kophie lying down."

This was an error, she soon discovered. It brought her entirely too close to him, making her sharply aware of him as a man. He did nothing to ease her nervousness and when she attempted to help him sit up so she could place a pillow behind his back, he put both arms around her waist and leaned against her, inhaling her scent from her breast.

"Ummn—you smell good," he said.

"Your kophie will get cold," she said, pushing against him.

"Better cold kophie than a cold woman," Andre retorted teasingly. But he allowed her to settle him back against the pillow and hand him his cup.

"Where's yours?" he asked, lifting the cup to his mouth. Any doubts as to Lewys Maginogion's veracity had vanished the instant he set eyes on his supposed fiancée. It seemed the most natural thing in the world to him that he should have wanted to marry Rebecca. She was everything he had ever dreamed of in a woman. He was a little puzzled and hurt at her reaction to his embrace though. His dream woman wouldn't have pushed him back.

Rebecca retreated to perch on the foot of the blankets. "Grandpa says you don't remember us."

Andre almost laughed aloud at this simple explanation for her stiffness. She must feel extremely awkward to have him declare he was in love with her, ask her to marry him one day and then the next be told he didn't remember her. No wonder she hadn't responded.

He smiled warmly at her. "I plead guilty, but since I fell in love with you again on sight, I feel I deserve a suspended sentence, don't you?"

Rebecca's lips twitched. "Maybe I do and maybe I don't. There's your pack. Breakfast is in ten minutes." Shaking her head, she left the wagon. A few minutes later, she heard Andre's boots hit the floor. [FIND OUR MORE](#)