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THE HOB'S BARGAIN

PATRICIA BRIGGS



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THE HOB'S BARGAIN

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*To Michael,
Dreamkeeper and Songsmith, with all my love.*

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SPRING

REBIRTH

Changes are frightening, I thought, even when they're changes for the better. From the doorway of my cottage I looked across the yard and garden to the barn where my husband was harnessing our chestnut workhorse. *My* husband. *Our* workhorse. I tasted the thought in my mind and smiled. Frightening, yes, but exciting and wonderful, too.

The barn wasn't far from the house, but the distance was great enough that I couldn't see the lacings on the harness or the faint, pale lines near my husband's eyes where the sun didn't reach his skin when he smiled. But I could see the horse cock an ear back, listening to Daryn's soft, slow voice. I could see the wheat-gold of Daryn's hair, newly cut in honor of our wedding.

We'd been married all of a night, and though we'd been betrothed this past harvest, I still couldn't quite believe it. I'd never expected to wed at all. The morning was still chilly this early in spring. I drew my shawl more tightly around my shoulders, hugging the warmth closer. Daryn tied the traces to the croup strap high on the horse's rump so they wouldn't drag the ground all the way to the high field where he'd meet his brother and my father to continue the plowing they'd already begun. The muscles of his back flexed under the wool shirt he wore as he pulled himself to the chestnut's back in one smooth motion.

"Daryn...." I called tentatively.

He saw me in the doorway and grinned. I smiled back with relief. When he'd left the house, I'd been busy cleaning up after breakfast, pretending I fixed morning meals every day when it had always been my mother's task. Near to thirty years old, and I still couldn't make toasted bread without scorching it.

Cleaning had given me a reason for my red cheeks other than the embarrassment that had first caught my tongue when I awoke in bed with him this morning and worsened dismally with the advent of the blackened bread. I'd expected him to be grumpy, as my father always was. I should have known him better than that: Daryn didn't hold grudges.

He spun the horse on its haunches, a trick he'd taught it during the last year's long winter months while I'd watched from my parents' house. If I half-closed my eyes, I could almost see a warrior on his mount preparing for battle rather than a landsman off to work. With a snort, the horse galloped to the small porch where I stood, his heavy feet thundering on the ground like the great horses from Gram's tales of ancient heroes.

Daryn was handsome enough to be a hero, perhaps some lost prince or noble. A clever twinkle seldom left his eye, and good humor colored most of his expressions—attributes all proper heroes should have. The muscles he'd earned tilling the fields were no less impressive than those of a soldier.

and probably better than any prince would earn seated upon a throne.

Truth was, he was prettier than I, and the better part of a decade younger. His age had worried me when Father brought him home last fall. I should have remembered how shrewd my father was. Only an idiot could have found fault with Daryn, and I hope I've never been that—or at least not very often.

“Aren, my lass?” Daryn asked after a moment. I realized he'd stopped in front of me some time ago, and I'd been staring at him without speaking.

I started to say something light and funny, something to let him know it was shyness, not moodiness, that I felt, but the words stopped in my throat. A familiar chill settled into my stomach. *Not now*, I thought desperately. I reached out to his normalcy and warmth, gripping the cloth of his pant leg, and hoped for the feeling to pass. When I closed my eyes against dizziness, I saw...

...a winter lily, scarlet flower drooping and edged with brown, bobbing as something dripped on it.

As an explanation of the dread feeling that choked me, it was a complete failure. Most of my visions were like that. Later, after whatever event the *sight* had warned of took place, I could nod my head to myself and say, “Oh, *that's* what it meant.” Not very useful.

If I had to be stricken with magic, I would rather have had something like Gram's talent for healing, or my brother's knack for finding things—especially because the consequences of having magic were so deadly. My brother had died for his when I was thirteen.

He'd been in town with Father, trading fresh milk for leather to mend a harness, when Lord Moresh's bloodmage saw him and spoke my brother's death sentence. Quilliar had been fifteen, and he'd had a day to choose whether he would apprentice to the bloodmage or refuse and be put to death.

If he'd chosen to become a bloodmage, he'd have learned to kill and torture for power. After a while he'd have begun to go insane, as all the mages did in the end—some immediately, some after years of a gradual decline into madness.

He'd picked death, but not one delivered by the bloodmage. The bloodmages would have used his death, his dead body, to power their magics. So my brother walked into the middle of a snowstorm and found a place where his body would be safely hidden for three days: enough time to ensure the bloodmage had no power from him.

I couldn't tell Daryn I had the *sight*, though I'd had all winter to do it. Caution learned so harshly would not drop from me after a few months of exchanged confidences and growing love. After a night of being man and wife, I would have trusted him with my life, but I couldn't risk losing the growing softness in his eyes when he looked at me.

Looking into his eyes, I couldn't tell him what I'd *seen*.

“Aren?” he asked, concerned. “Is something wrong?”

“No. No, just be careful.” I released his leg and stepped back. I hugged myself as if it would help keep my mouth from telling him everything. I wrestled with my conscience, finally deciding that if

whatever happened was catastrophic, I would tell him about the *sight*—punishment for being too selfish to tell him now.

He grinned at me, not seeing the seriousness of my warning. “I’ll keep my feet out from under the plowshares and be back at dusk after a dangerous day of plowing fields with your father and Caulem.”

The warmth in his eyes kept his speech from being patronizing. He took my words as an expression of concern, perhaps the implied apology for my moodiness this morning that I’d meant to give him when I’d called him over.

Well, my foreseeing was not exact, predicting small harms as well as great. Perhaps someone would twist an ankle today or cut themselves on a sharp rock. Maybe it would rain. I hoped it would rain.

I set the worry to the back of my mind and kissed him when he leaned down. “See that you do,” said.

When I patted his cheek with a motherly hand, he grinned suddenly. He gave me a warm look and turned his head to bite my forefinger gently. I ducked a bit, not wanting him to see the heat in my eyes. He wrapped his hand around a strand of my hair and tugged me close again. This time his kiss left me too breathless to talk, sending the dark warning from my heart as if it had never been.

The horse shifted, pulling us apart.

“Don’t fret so much, Aren,” he said, and his voice soothed me as it did any of the other beasts he used it on. “You and I’ll do very well.”

He kissed me again and set the gelding up the path to the field before I recovered enough to speak. He knew I watched him, because he pulled the big horse into a controlled rear just before he rode out of sight. The harness was more hindrance than help in riding, but Daryn sat the horse easily. He blew me a kiss, then horse and rider plunged forward and were lost in the trees.

I shut the door of the cottage and looked about. Daryn had built the little house himself, and each joint of wood and brush of whitewash showed the care he’d taken. There was a loft for our bed, and the kitchen was set in its own nook. I’d helped to sand the wooden floor (along with everyone else in both our families), and I’d woven the small green rug that covered the trapdoor of the cellar which would keep our food cool during the summer. There wasn’t much furniture. Daryn promised that when next winter came, he’d build more. Possessively, I ran my hand over the wooden back of my grandmother’s loveseat.

Everyone in the village knew there was a strain of magic running in my father’s family. That hadn’t stopped my sister’s wedding. There weren’t so many folk around that a taint to the blood kept people from forming alliances, not when it was properly buried a generation or so back. My brother’s death brought shame to the forefront; there were no families who would have me after that.

If anyone had found out I was mageborn, they’d have killed me. By the One God’s sacred commands, mages are an evil to be eliminated, and since Lord Moresh’s great-grandfather’s

conversion, everyone in Fallbrook followed the teachings of the One God. Death to mages was more popular than some of the other edicts.

I still had nightmares about the old woman who was pressed to death by her family when I was five or six. They'd used a barn door and piled it with stones until she was crushed beneath the weight. I wasn't there when it happened, but the stones still stood. When I passed them, I always tried not to see the remains of the barn door underneath the heaped mound of rock.

Like my brother, I'd still prefer such a death over what a mage would do to me—which was just as well, for I wouldn't be given the choice of apprenticeship. All bloodmages were men.

I stayed away from town when Lord Moresh and his bloodmage were in residence. Fortunately, Fallbrook was neither his only nor his most important holding, so he was seldom here. This year there'd been a war someplace and he hadn't come at all.

I'd expected Quilliar's death to leave me an old maid no matter how hard I tried to appear mundane, but fourteen years had been enough time for memories to fade. My father needed someone to take over the land he held. My sister Ani's husband, Poul, had as much land as he could work. So Father traveled north to Beresford, which was even smaller than our own Fallbrook, and found Daryn and his younger brother Caulem, tenth and eleventh sons of a farmer with only a small plot to divide among his children. So Caulem and Daryn came to my father's house last fall to help with the harvest.

Neither old memories, the pall of the *sight*, nor the equally dismal embarrassment of burning the toast this morning could rob me of my happiness for very long. The past was gone: Quilliar's death was unchangeable. When I went to the fields at midday with food for the men, I'd warn my father to be careful. Though Ma tried to pretend I didn't have the *sight*, Father would give proper weight to it. Tomorrow I would do better with the toast.

I looked around the cottage for something to do until lunchtime, but there really wasn't anything. We hadn't been living there long enough to get much dirty. My earlier fit of cleaning had taken care of our few morning dishes.

I pulled out the quilt I was making for my sister's baby. After years of barrenness, Ani was preparing for the birth of her first child in late summer. As fast as I sewed, I might get it done by the child's twelfth year. Even so, the rhythm of sewing was familiar and relaxing.

At midday I folded the blanket and set it aside with a smile and a pat. I was not the best seamstress, but this blanket was going very well. Ma said it was the simplest pattern she knew, and even I couldn't ruin it. Stretching the stiffness of a morning's stitchery out of my shoulders, I started for the cellar to prepare a meal.

I slid the rug aside with my shoe and tugged the trapdoor open. A haunch of salt pork awaited me on one of the shelves. Sliced onto some of Ma's bread, it would make a good meal.

I'd already taken a step down the ladder when I heard a commotion outside.

Hooves thundered, and a male voice shouted something I couldn't quite make out. Horses at this time of year were bad news. Good news could wait until planting was over. I started toward the door.

“Check the barn,” rumbled someone. I didn’t know his voice, and his accent was odd. “See if they have any horses.”

I’d just been ready to call out a welcome, but that stopped me. *Bandits*, I thought. We hadn’t had robbers for a long time. Even though the King’s Highway passed through Fallbrook, we were isolated on the outskirts of civilization.

The sound of boots on the porch shook me from the stillness of shock. I pulled the rug across the outside of the trapdoor and held it in place with one hand as I climbed down the ladder. I let the door close almost completely before releasing the rug and pulling my fingers out. I hoped it would conceal the door from a cursory search; it had no lock or bar to keep anyone out.

I heard a crash that might have been the cottage door opening. Daisy, our milk cow, lowed in alarm from the barn. I hunched in the corner of the small cellar behind a barrel of flour. Boots thudded dully on the floor above me. I couldn’t tell how many people there were, but certainly more than one.

I remembered the big butcher’s knife sitting beside the ham, and I scurried out of my hiding place to get it. I wished Quilliar had shown me how to fight with a knife when I’d asked him, but he’d been growing increasingly conscious of the differences between boys and girls. He told me to ask Father, knowing it would be useless.

Wood splintered above me, and I ducked, certain they’d smashed through the floor—it sounded like someone had thrown our bed from the loft. The floorboards were new and tight. I couldn’t see through them to assess the damage the thieves were doing, but they couldn’t see me either.

I heard them laughing, and I scuttled back behind the barrel. I hoped they wouldn’t think it odd there was no meat in the house, or they might start looking for it. Maybe they wouldn’t notice the hollow sound of their boots on the floor.

Who’d have thought the *sight* had tried to warn *me* of danger? It never had before. I hunched down against the earth floor, and something more than cold began to seep in my bones.

Magic. I knew what it had to be, thought I’d never felt it before. The ground began to glow dimly, sullen red with small bits of gold here and there. As I watched, the bits of gold began to grow bigger and the red duller.

I worried for a moment that the raiders would see it, or that they’d caused it somehow, but the force of the emanation soon drove all thoughts of raiders from my head.

My body vibrated from contact with the earth. Power wrenched through me, making it hard to breathe. Did the bloodmages feel this way as they stood over their victims? By all rights I should have been terrified, but the sweet taste of magic prevented fear from touching me.

Red was woven over the gold in layers like a giant woven cloth, holding the gold back.

I stared at it, and suddenly knew what it was I saw.

Magic hadn’t always been wrestled from pain and death. Once, so long ago the memory of it had

disappeared except for Gram's tales told in secret on dark winter nights, one mageborn child to another, magic had been a joyous thing summoned from the earth. But jealous bloodmages had bound it until no one could use the wildling's power.

Beneath the red blanket, gold magic called to me, singing tenderly in my soul. Something snapped, and one thread of red came unbound. Then another.

Layer by layer the bands of red were being torn away, and the power of it lifted me off the ground. I hovered a fingerspan off the earth as one by one the angry red cords gave way. When the crimson ties broke, I could feel the corrupted touch of bloodmagic pull in places I'd never felt before—like a hair caught deep in my throat. It didn't hurt, but I could feel it all the same. The blood cords pulled me by their ties to the land of my birth, until I saw...

...a tower, dark with the force of the mage within. He called the magic tied to the land. I felt the strength of him like the heat of the smithy forge. Madness lurked in the heart of his call, adding its strength to his purpose.

Then the vision was gone. With it went the last of the binding spells of the bloodmages. I felt them go—as any mageborn native to this land would have. For a moment the floor glowed brilliantly gold, then the light traveled up the walls as if driven by demons, fading, leaving me sitting, exalted, on the ground, alone in the dark cellar.

My eyes told me the magic was gone, but where I touched the ground, my body still tingled with its sweet warmth. I felt clean, though I'd never known I was dirty. I put my fingers against the dirt of the cellar floor and knew the bloodmage's hold on the magic of the land was gone.

A loud shout drew my attention to the raiders above me: I'd forgotten about them. Without the protection of the magic, fear returned apace. For a moment, I thought they'd seen the light as well, and waited for them to storm the cellar to investigate.

My heart pounded, my breath came in quick pants, but they were only fighting over some piece of loot. Gram's silver mirror, probably.

Let them fight about it. Let them just go. The longer they were here, the better the chance they would find me. They'd been here for a long time now: they should be getting nervous. The men might be coming down from the field.

An immense pot in the cellar fell to the floor with a crash. The sound quieted the men who stood above.

"There's something below us—look for a door outside. These kinds of places usually have a cellar. There could be valuables in it."

I jumped to my feet and ran to the far side of the cellar. It was dark, but the dirt floor was clear of things that could catch my feet. There was a violent boom from above. They'd knocked over the big shelves near the fireplace.

Without actually seeing it fall, I caught the big soap-making cauldron as it slipped from the peg Daryn had worried was too small for it. I'd have to remember to tell him he had been right. Men like

that—at least Ma said they did. The weight of the cauldron made me stagger, and the handle flipped down and bruised my thumb where it rested over the edge of the pot—but I managed to hold it and my knife without making any noise.

I set the cauldron carefully on the ground. As long as nothing else fell, I was safer now. The shelves had fallen across the trapdoor. There was nothing the raiders could do to the house that we couldn't repair. Nothing they could take we couldn't live without.

I could safely marvel at my vision of the pot falling. I'd never had one so clear, never had one I could use to prevent a disaster. It must be because of the unbinding.

I would tell Daryn about the *sight* tonight, I decided. Not to punish myself, but because I could tell him how it had saved me. If magic was unbound again, maybe I could use my bit of magic to help us, help the village—as Gram had done. I was still smiling when yet another vision took me.

Daryn held the horses in place while Father helped Daryn's younger brother, Caulem, attach the harness to the plow Lord Moresh had given the village two years ago. Father was patient, letting Caulem fumble with the unfamiliar double harness. Beresford had only the older style, single-horse plows.

Something caught Daryn's attention, and he held his hand to shade his eyes as he stared into the rising sun. His body tightened to alertness, and he said something urgently to my father.

Father dropped the leather strap into the dirt and stepped forward to Daryn's side.

After no more than a look, Father grabbed Caulem's shoulders and shouted something at him, throwing the boy onto the horse that hadn't yet been hitched to the plow. He shoved the reins into the boy's hands. Caulem shouted something back, protest written in the stiffness of his jaw. Father took his hat and slapped the horse, sending it running down the path to my parents' house.

The track was wide and the horse knew every rock and rut, sprinting full-out for home. The bandit waiting in the tree at the edge of the field had a finger missing from one hand, but it didn't affect the flight of the arrow that took Caulem in the throat.

The man leaped from the tree and tried to catch the horse, but it had been thoroughly spooked by the run and the scent of blood. It was a working horse, strong enough to pull the raider dangling by its reins as if he weighed no more than a twist of straw. The man held on until he lost his footing and the horse's iron-shod hoof caught him in the leg, throwing him to the ground.

Unhindered, the animal raced on. The message that the bandits had come covered its back in a red blanket of Caulem's blood.

The vision shifted abruptly.

My father was facedown in the dirt, an ax buried in his back. Daryn stood over him, work-hardened muscles lending strength to the blows he dealt with Caulem's walking staff. The men he fought appeared only as vague blurs and flashes of weaponry. Blood ran down Daryn's face and neck until it disappeared in a larger stain of red spreading from his shoulder.

The staff he held broke, and he threw it aside, taking a step forward to protect my father. Metal gleamed, and a sword sliced into his neck.

A winter lily grew out of the unbroken ground, browning with the weight of time. A drop of Daryn's blood fell on the faded, scarlet petals.

The vision left me, and I sat where I was, stiff with shock. It was too late for me to do anything. From the position of the sun in my vision, I knew Daryn had died before I'd hidden in the cellar, running from his killers. The shock held me for a moment before the warm rush of rage followed it.

My hand tightened on the butcher's knife, and I ran for the ladder. I climbed up three rungs and pressed my back against the trapdoor, but it wouldn't move. I stepped up another rung and straightened my knees, forcing my shoulder against the door and pushing, but the shelving atop it was too heavy for me to move. I hammered it with my fists, screaming with fury at the barrier that prevented me from attacking the raiders.

At last, knuckles bloody, I stumbled off the ladder and sat on the ground—numb in body and soul. The raiders were gone. If they'd been in the house, they'd have heard me and opened the door.

I dropped the knife in the dirt and stood up again. A rough table against the wall contained a few tools in need of sharpening. One of them was a saw.

I fumbled in the darkness. My hands didn't feel quite right after hitting the door. I found the saw and set to cutting my way out. It took a long time to cut the cross braces of the door with the dull blade angled over my head. Once the braces were gone, I pulled the door into sections that fell from the opening and dropped below me.

With the door out of the way, I slid through the shelves and climbed out into daylight. Bits of broken crockery were everywhere, intermixed with chunks of wood and scraps of torn cloth from Ani's quilt.

In the barn a few chickens, still spooked by the noise of the raiders, scattered away from me. Daisy the cow lay dead in the straw. They'd hacked off one hind quarter and taken it with them, leaving the rest to rot. I looked away from the cloudy film that covered her warm, brown eyes.

Louralou, our riding pony, was gone from her stall, along with every bit of leather harness in the tack room. The piglet was gone as well. They'd left the sacks of grain.

Out of habit, I took out a fair measure of corn and scattered it for the chickens. There was a saddle blanket lying in the walkway where someone had thrown it. I stared at it for a moment.

I ought to cover their faces, I thought. The crows will come. The thought of Daryn's eyes eaten by the birds made me violently ill, and I vomited in the straw.

I rinsed my mouth in the bucket hanging in Louralou's stall, then picked up the blanket. I beat it clean against one of the stall walls, and set off to cover my husband's face.

The wind was warm, carrying with it the sweet perfume of spring flowers. Only the torn-up soil

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