**Milo**

The first time she saw him was a week before the big day; Alther’s Apprentice Test. Marcia was standing outside in the Palace lawns, casting countless spells one after another as she quietly recited them from memory. Picnicking families kept their distance, and she couldn’t blame them. There was something distinctly off-putting with a Wizard practicing spells in her winter robes in the middle of Queen Mathilda’s rose gardens.

It was rather commonplace to see a young Wizard out practicing these last few months- Marcia was only one of the dozens of hopefuls who’d jotted down their names when Alther’s list had gone round the Tower, advertising for the new Apprentice tests which would take place on Midsummer’s night.

In fact, the Wizarding Tower was crammed full of them, falling over each other’s feet and blotting notes with spilled ink. Marcia had thundered out of there a couple months ago, when the number of blundering idiots had become too large to bear, intent on finding a new place to practice.

Her house in the Ramblings, roughly the size of a broom shed, was no good. Even if she’d manage to keep the place intact, there were always neighbors ready to complain to the landlord and she’d be kicked out to the streets.

It wouldn’t be the first time, but Marcia tried to avoid these unpleasant occurrences, as they left her stinky and dirty until someone else took pity on her and gave her half a crown to rent a room. So Marcia had gone over the the Palace grounds, which were always open to the public for as long as she could remember.

She’d stand out here until it was pitch-black and she couldn’t even see her hand in front of her face, and then she’d stumble back to her apartment and get up at the crack of dawn to do the whole thing over. She had to get the Apprenticeship- it was the only job she ever dreamed of, and the only way to prove her parents wrong. She *would* be the EOW one day, just they wait.

Today was especially hot, and it was difficult coping with her warm winter clothes and her gurgling stomach. She had enough money to afford a set of clothes, even second hand, and they were thick winter clothes so that she would survive the Big Freeze. Whenever the snow came around she would congratulate herself at the sensible decision, but now it made her hot and cranky, and her stomach growled emptily.

She ignored the discomforts and tried her charm again, the **Reverse** charm. A mirage swam in front of her, a mirage of the rose bush before her, each rose in the right place, but flipped over, like a mirror.

Marcia shuddered. She hated the **Darke** side, and there was a nasty dose of **Darke** in this spell, but she held the mirage for a full 21 seconds, before a swift summer breeze swept through it, vanishing the mirage.

Marcia silently applauded herself, knowing full well that for the test she’d need to know to hold a Mirage for only five seconds. She took a stumbling step forward, but a sudden light-headed dizziness took over her, and her stomach protested even louder.

The **Darke** spell had taken more out of her than she thought, and she started to retch and sputter dryly, though nothing rose out of her throat. Her digestive juices stinging her stomach, Marcia groaned and took a step towards the Palace to get herself a cool glass of water before continuing.

She had hardly gone a meter when her legs gave away under her and she collapsed towards the ground.

Someone caught her. Strong arms placed her gently on the ground, and a grinning youth stood before her.

“You okay?” He asked, grinning.

His hair was curly black, and his eyes stormy grey. His accent, if she wasn’t mistaken, was tinged with Northern Trader and his teeth sparkled in the sun. He smelled of sun and was well-tanned. A sailor, then. Marcia hoped he wasn’t drunk. She wasn’t up to fighting anyone off, not in her state.

“Thank you,” she said curtly, raising her green eyes to stare into his, hoping the stranger would take off.

Most of the Northern Traders didn’t respond kindly to magic. This one, it seemed, didn’t seem to like it either, because he took off across the lawn. Marcia grimaced. The lad had only been trying to help, but she was anything but flirty, and hated to be anything but self-sufficient.

She tried to get to her feet, but her body flatly refused, and she groaned limply, closing her eyes for a moment. When she opened them, the sailor youth was holding a tin cup to her lips.

Surprised, she took a couple of sips, and almost spat it out. It was Sally Mullin’s Springo Ale.

“Calm down,” said the sailor soothingly, “you’ve overexerted yourself, that’s all.”

When she drained the cup, a sudden warmth replaced the dizziness that was there before, and she accepted the sailor’s hand. It was rough and steady, and she blushed slightly as she got to her feet, before scolding herself. She couldn’t allow herself to be drunk before a test.

“Thank you sir,” she said courteously, walking back to her practicing corner. “My name is Banda, Milo Banda,” said Milo.

She felt it would be rude not to reply.

“My name is Marcia Overstrand,” she said, before returning to her studies.

**Cerys**

She saw Milo a couple of times during that week. Once, he passed her with a bouquet of flowers in his arms, and waved merrily when he saw her.

“Wish me luck,” he’d said, “I’m going to see the Queen.”

Marcia wished him luck, a bitter taste in her mouth. She wished that bouquet of flowers had been for her, but after that thought she’d threatened herself, by saying that if Milo continued to be a distraction, she’d have to find another place to practice.

On the morning of her test, as Marcia’s stomach was doing somersaults, Milo walked past the Wizard Tower.

“You’re shaking,” he said in his calm manner as she shook his hand.

“I’m scared to death,” she confessed. “This is the big day. If I blow it- I don’t know what I’ll do.”

“You won’t blow it,’ said Milo confidently, landing a kiss on her cheek. She stood there, dumbfounded, until Alther swept into the Tower and let her in.

Milo’s confidence warmed her like a blanket from the insides, and when it was her turn, she executed her spells perfectly. Alther took her as his apprentice, and from then on, she didn’t see much of Milo.

Sometimes she’d spy on him and Queen Cerys walking hand in hand down the docks. She’d once glanced out of the window of the Pyramid Library and saw them kiss passionately, before Milo boarded his ship and sailed off.

She’d stood there for the better part of the day, her hand brushing against the spot where Milo had kissed her good luck, trying to reassure herself it hadn’t been a dream.

The day of the engagement ball she was in an awful mood, though she simply told Alther she was indisposed. He insisted on her coming to the ball, and though she tried to worm out of it, it was rather hard to argue with Alther.

When they got there, Queen Cerys was bustling around, but Milo was nowhere to be seen. A half-hour later, after increasing nerves, Marcia decided it was best to sneak out and go home. As she was about to leave the Palace grounds, Milo showed up, wringing his hands.

“What’s the matter?” Marcia asked him despite of herself.

“The rings!” Milo groaned, “they’re gone!”

Marcia pulled out her **FindSeek** magnet that she’d gotten from Alther on her last birthday. Within moments, two engagement rings attached themselves to the magnet. Milo pried them off.

“Thank you,” he said softly, planted a kiss on her cheek and ran into the Palace.

The next time she saw him, he was standing nervously at the EOW’s doors, a large envelope in his hands.

“Marcia!” He said when she opened the door, a book tucked under both arms, “I’d like to invite you and Alther to Cerys’ and my wedding.”

Marcia stared in shock for a moment before gingerly taking the envelope and slamming the door into Milo’s face.

Then she stoked up the fire and threw the envelope in, where it turned the flames to green as the paper was violently devoured. It felt good, though for the next two weeks she had to insist to Alther that they had gotten an invitation and that he thrown it into the rubbish chute.

On the wedding day, she faked sick, though she was really ill from jealousy. She quietly admitted to herself that she’d wanted to marry Milo, kind Milo, and put Queen Cerys in her right place. Alther didn’t let it go unnoticed and sat next to her until the wedding. She didn’t tell him anything but something in his blue eyes told her that he knew.

“At least Milo will be around more often,” he’d finally said.

But Milo did leave; once, twice. The third time he came back in time to discover Queen Cerys was pregnant. Alther was jubilant.

“A new heir to the castle!” He said happily, “I remember the days when Queen Cerys was still a Princess… oh let us hope it is a girl!”

Marcia bit her lip and poked at her parchment, so that at the end of the week all her notes looks like they’d passed through a demilitarized zone.

When the Princess was born, she and Alther ran to the Palace, stopping only to dress presentably. They burst into the Queen’s room, where Queen Cerys was cradling her newborn daughter. Alther immediately started setting up his apparatus, as Marcia eyed the baby. True, she wasn’t the one for children, but deep inside her she still wished that the dark haired creature balanced on the Queen’s lap was hers and Milo’s.

It happened so quickly. The palace doors crashed open, and standing there was a woman in dark clothing. She had a gun. Something went flying out of it; a silver bullet that found a home in the young Queen’s heart. She ceased breathing immediately, her eyes glazed.

Marcia cried out. Alther looked up from fiddling with his machine, just as another silver bullet shot him in the chest. Surprise echoed in those blue eyes, surprise and regret. He cast a **Shield,** but Marcia could see the purple magyk waning.

“Take the child and run,” he muttered, before collapsing.

Marcia collapsed alongside him, tears flooding down her cheeks. She felt as though she too had been shot in the side. Not Alther… her father.

“Take this,” said Alther weakly, grabbing at the **Akhu** amulet he wore, tied with a shoestring, “take it…”

“No!” Marcia cried out.

Alther couldn’t be dying. She couldn’t take the necklace while he still had a chance.

There were tears in his blue eyes, but he pressed the necklace into her hand, and she slipped it onto her neck. She was filled with power, of the such she never felt. Energy crackled through her, Alther slumped to the floor in a pool of his blood. His **Shield** died, and Marcia could no longer **Feel** his presence. He was gone.

There was no time to spare. Marcia leaped to her feet and grabbed the baby Princess, who stared at her with wide eyes. Then she **Transported**. She appeared in front of the bridge, fondling the child.

She had to make sure someone found it- a safe someone who would raise her until it was safe for her to claim her Queendom, and The Time Was Right. She set the baby in the snow, just as Silas Heap came around the corner. He bent up to pick up the little girl, and then looked around.

Marcia acted by impulse.

“She was born to you, you understand?” She told Silas.

“Nobody must know about this.”

She retreated back into the shadows, and headed towards the Wizard Tower to try to find Milo. It would be 12 years before she saw him again.

**Twelve years later**

Twelve years had passed. Marcia, as she firmly told herself, had given up on Milo ever returning. A storm had probably shipwrecked him long ago. Maybe he’d gone back to the place he came from. Besides, she had everything else she wanted. Septimus was the perfect apprentice- a bit messy, yes, though that stage was passing, and nosy, too.

One bright day, as he struggled with a **Firebird** charm, he asked almost absently who Jenna’s father was.

“Her *father*?” Asked Marcia, almost dropping the kettle, “why, Silas Heap.” Septimus had stared at her in his don’t-kid-me look.

“My Dad found her,” he said sensibly, “I’m talking about her real dad. Was he killed too?”

Marcia swallowed drily. Septimus knew nothing about her and Milo, and yet he was the first person in twelve years to voice concern about his absence. The rest of the Tower had moved on, assured that they had a Princess to keep them safe. “DomDaniel didn’t kill him,” said Marcia miserably. “He’s been missing for the past twelve years.”

Septimus looked at her sympathetically, in the look that showed he was wiser beyond his years, and sadder as well.

“In the young army,” he said slowly, his voice choking up, “I had a friend. His name was 409. He died in a Do-or-Die, falling off a boat. I tried to get the Lead Cadet to go back and look for him, but nobody cared.”

Marcia, who was suddenly suppressing tears, could only squeeze Septimus’s hand in comfort as tears rolled down his cheeks as well. That night, she heard sobs coming from Septimus’s room. He was sitting on the bed, damp with tears.

“I had a nightmare,” he whispered at the sight of Marcia.

Marcia knew all about nightmares. She sat at the edge of his bed and gave a brave smile.

“I have nightmares too, sometimes,” she whispered.

She covered him with his blanket, before getting out of the room. Tomorrow, he should have a day off. The stress was getting to his head. As for boy 409…. Marcia had wished she knew.

It wasn’t good to keep all that grief inside. She gave a bark like laugh. What a hypocrite. She’d never talked with anyone about her own grief. Maybe it was time to give it a shot.

**The return of the Milo**

She saw a figure, striding on the docks, a figure that she knew from sunlit days. A messy, suntanned person, his eyes a little sadder and his shoulders slumped. But there was no doubt about it.

“Milo!” She cried, and without giving a second though, she whirled into his waiting arms.

“I missed you,” he whispered, his voice rough.

“Me, too,’ she muttered.

A couple evenings later, Milo knocked at her door, way past midnight. She opened the door cautiously. He was standing there, looking forlorn, so she let him in. “Marcia,” he said, his voice choked, “I’m sorry I have to ask this of you… but you’re the only one who can tell me. Please, I need to know.”

He looked at her squarely.

“What happened- that night?”

Marcia fell into her armchair, her green eyes wide. She’d only told Alther, had quietly relayed her nightmares to him.

But this man, before her… he deserved to know. It was his daughter and his wife that were crippled by that night.

She just didn’t know if she was up to it. Jenna was the only other survivor, and she remembered nothing. Marcia took a deep breath and told him.

She was reduced to tears as she recalled Alther in a pool of his own blood, of Jenna mewling pitifully. When she finished, Milo was silent and she was crying, hot tears gushing.

The last time she’d cried had been that night. Now she was a wreck, her body shaking and her chest heaving. Strong arms engulfed her in a bracing hug. Milo smelled of the sea, and the dampness on his face told her he was crying too.

They hugged each other until the sun rose. Then Milo got to his feet, bowed solemnly, and said thank you, before leaving. Marcia lay there, curled up and drained, until Septimus found her and called for Alther.

They’d been polite to one another after that, and Marcia knew he was still too heartbroken over Cerys to love anyone else. But he did know what it felt like to lose a child. Which is why, the day Septimus vanished, she made her way to the palace, where Milo was living.

Alther, however she loved him, never had any children and never worried over them as she was worrying about Septimus. He was gone, possibly forever, in the hands of a madman. So she hesitantly knocked on Milo’s door. He opened it, dressed in a long robe.

“I’ve heard,” he said instantly, “come in.”

Marcia collapsed in an armchair.

“I don’t know what to do,” she said tiredly, “I feel so useless.”

“You’re not useless,” said Milo forcibly, “Septimus learned everything from you. He’ll find a way back. He loves you, Marcia.”

Those stormy-weather eyes met hers and she gave a shuddering sigh.

“You just wait and see,” said Milo, taking her hand. “I thought Jenna was dead, but she wasn’t. She grew up to be a lovely girl. Everything will be alright.” Marcia clasped her hand in his.

“I hope. If Septimus doesn’t make it back, it’ll be just me again, and I don’t think I can bear that.”

“You’ll never be alone again,” Milo promised, “because I won’t budge from your side.”

Marcia studied him. He’d changed. He was sadder, quieter. They’d both lost something of themselves that night.

“I love you, Marcia,” said Milo quietly.

He kissed her on the cheek, in the exact spot where he’d kissed her good luck, all those years ago.

For the next seven years, they’d gone out to the theaters together. Once, they kissed in the sitting room, until Septimus had walked in and almost fainted. Their relationship wasn’t very secret after that.

But the thing that did it was the nightmare.

Marcia was dreaming about flying, flying high over mountains. She was looking for someone. Milo. Why was she looking for him? Suddenly, her dream shifted to the night. Of Alther falling to the ground. Of the light leaving Queen Cerys’ eyes. Of her bloodstained robes.

She’d screamed, still asleep and wildly kicking. Septimus had come running, 21, now.

“Marcia!” He said, trying to shake her awake, “it was only a bad dream.” Marcia openly her eyes blindly, crying, panicking. Septimus had a feeling she could barely feel his presence.

He started trying to sooth her, and she slowly calmed down just enough to see him.

“The same nightmare?” He asked.

Marcia nodded. This time, it was so vivid, so real… she felt as though she’d lost contact with the real world.

“I’m going to call Milo,” said Septimus.

When he was gone she continued crying, tears leaking down her cheeks and staining the pillow.

She was cracking, cracking from her near-death brushes, cracking from worry. Milo was still in his pajamas when he came, his stormy eyes worried.

“Septimus told me,” he said, before easing himself onto the bed, “everything is going to be alright.”

He stroked her hair and opened the windows, before making her a cup of tea. Marcia sipped it gratefully, though she was still shaking. Milo put his arms around her and muttered gently.

“I’m here… everything is going to be okay…”

Marcia relaxed in his arms as he stroked her hair, and fell asleep to a blissful dream.

The next morning, Milo was still there. He handed her a cup of tea.

“Feeling better?” He asked.

Marcia nodded.

“I’m afraid it’ll come back like always.”

Milo smiled. “I’m not leaving you here, if that’s what you think. Don’t worry, I’ll protect you.”

It was somehow nice to be coddled by him. She let herself be taken care of until the shaking subsided.

“I love you.” She muttered.

Marcia went down the stairs, with little sadness in her eyes, yet from her nightmare. Milo was waiting for her downstairs.

Marcia was happy to see him, although she couldn’t understand why he was there, they saw each other just an hour ago.

When he saw her on the stairs, he walked a few more steps towards the stairs, his hand clutching something inside his pocket.

“I’m sorry about the impossible number of times you have to see me in one day, but I couldn’t wait anymore.”

Milo bent down on one knee, taking a small box out of his pocket.

Marcia was so shocked she couldn’t even smile.

Everything happened so fast, and it took Marcia a moment to realize what was going on. Suddenly, because of the position she stood in, the heel of Marcia’s shoe broke down, and she fell off the stairs.

As the first time they met, Milo caught her, this time without saying a word. Once she was standing, she saw his small, questioning smile, the one she loved for many years, and the stormy eyes, now happy without a bit of sadness.

“Marcia, will you marry me?” he asked.

With a smile on her face, one that surely wasn’t there a minute ago, she answered:

“Yes”.

Milo put the ring on her finger, and kissed her.

All the wizards, till then staring at them, started applauding loudly. Septimus was standing in the corner of the room, shocked but happy. Marcia deserved this. Alther was next to him smiling, as a long story he loved had ended happily ever after.

When Marcia and Milo pulled away from one another, their smiles were bigger than ever. Alther and Septimus stepped towards them.

“Well, I always knew this will happened one day” said Alther, laughing.

Both he and Marcia remembered that day, years ago, when Alther tried to find the light points in Milo and Cerys’ wedding.

“But really, I always felt like something was wrong about Milo and Cerys, and that it should be different.”

“Who is going to tell Jenna she has a stepmother?” Asked Septimus suddenly. “You!” said Marcia and turned around fast to talk to Milo, who put his arm around her.

**The Wedding**

The days afterwards were different and crazy. Marcia nearly never stopped smiling, and Milo was in the EOW apartment most of the day. Jenna, in return, almost never showed up there, trying to avoid meeting Milo.

The whole castle was amazed; they’d never imagined their EOW was human enough to love; and definitely not to get married.

“What will Queen Cerys say?”

Was the most commonly whispered thing, but there was neither hide nor hair of her in the weeks leading up to the wedding, even when grand invites were sent around the castle.

The wedding day was a fine summer’s morning. Birds chirped in trees, and the winds blew through the Ramblings. Inside the EOW apartment, Marcia was being covered with purple silk and ermine. Her long black hair gleamed in the sunlight. She wore no makeup, but her pointy purple shoes were decorated with little white beads.

Needless to say, she looked ravishing. Jenna, who was her bridesmaid, humped.

“I can’t believe I’m going to be at my father’s wedding.”

Marcia couldn’t help but laugh.

“Sorry, Jenna. I hope you won’t begrudge me the right of being your stepmother.”

“I don’t need another one,” complained Jenna, but she offered Marcia a winning smile and beckoned towards the door.

“C’mon. Sep and Milo are already there.”

For the first time in her life, Marcia turned the stair to fast to get there already, and then wished she hadn’t as several Wizards dropped their toast and tumbled down after her.

Marcia walked out to the courtyard and through the gates, where crowds of people were already standing in anticipation. She swept down the cobbled streets, her dress fanning out behind her, her purple shoes gleaming in the sun.

Milo was standing on the steps, wearing what seemed to be Marcellus’s clothing, which was proper wedding tradition. His gown and shirtsleeves were so long they scraped the floor, all in a crimson red color. A golden sword hung by his side, and his curls were neatly trimmed.

Marcia couldn’t help but smiling.

“A sword? To our wedding?”

“You never know when you may need it,” smiled Milo, and Marcia’s heart fluttered in her chest.

Gringe, who had agreed to stand as priest and marrier, studied Marcia’s clothing.

“Right. Now, Milo Banda, of the Northern Lands, will ye take Marcia Overstrand as yer lawfully wedded wife?”

“Yea,” said Milo, smiling warmly at Marcia, but he suddenly saw someone else standing in her place. A black haired- purple eyed someone.

Cerys. Their wedding day was a million miles away, on a sunny day just like this one.

“Marcia Overstrand, do you take Milo Banda as your lawfully wedded husband?”

“Yea,” said Marcia.

“You may now kiss.” Said Gringe.

Milo kissed Marcia, suddenly forgetting Cerys, and everything else but Marcia. But the woman he loved right now.

The wedding moved on. People crowded past her and Milo, threatening to part between them, trying to congratulate them. She didn’t care. All she wanted at the moment was to be alone with Milo, to get some peace and quiet.

Milo’s stormy-grey eyes scanned the wedding, landing on the dance floor. “Let’s dance,” he said warmly.

“I don’t dance.” Said Marcia stubbornly.

Milo smiled.

“It’ll be fun. I’ll teach you.”

Marcia shrugged and let herself be led to the dance floor, where the Heap boys were dancing wild war dances and Jenna was dancing with Beetle. Septimus sat in the corner looking a bit left out, and Marcia could see Rose and Foxy nearby, dancing.

The music changed to a slow waltz. Milo put his hands around her waist and directed her around the dance floor. Marcia placed her hands on his and they waltzed easily across the room. It was as simple as walking.

A crack sounded, as the custom made purple python shoes broke. Milo lead her to take as seat, and helped her remove them.

“How do you wear these?” He asked.

Marcia shrugged, swinging her hurting toes.

“When nobody’s around, I wear Crocs.”

Milo laughed as they watched Septimus dance with Syrah Syara, and Jenna and Beetle kiss.

“I have a feeling this wedding will be the first of many,” said Milo, taking her hand.

Marcia nodded wearily, placing her head against Milo’s shoulder.

“I’m tired,” she confessed.

“Sleep well,” said Milo warmly, “I’ll be right here.”

Septimus glanced over his shoulder to see them both holding hands, their heads resting on one the other. Jenna saw him and turned her head at the same direction. As she watched them Marcia raised her head, and whispered something into Milo’s ear. He nodded and smiled, and the two of them slunk back towards the Wizard Tower.

The doors opened and they went out to the dragon ledge, which was wide enough for them both to sit. The sun rose shakily into the sky, washing the world with light. Up on the dragon perch, in the view of the entire Ramblings could see them, they kissed.

Queen Cerys saw them. With a yell, she **Caused** the dragon ledge to crumble and fall. Marcia managed to jump back into the Wizard Tower, while Milo plummeted to his doom.

Marcia grabbed the **Flyte** charm and jumped out the window. She swooped down and grabbed Milo a yard from the ground, before carrying him in her arms back to the Wizard Tower. Wild applause followed, and Milo hugged Marcia.

“You just saved my life,” he said.

“Way to state the obvious.” Laughed Marcia, “that’s why I married you.”

Milo kissed her forehead before yawning.

“Come on,” he said, “let’s retire.”

Marcia followed him away from the window as a new dawn rose over the castle.

**The Cerys strikes back**

From then on, life seemed good. Milo was in the Wizard Tower most of the time, and Marcia couldn’t be happier.

Well, at least until a month after the wedding. Queen Cerys was wandering around the castle, as she did since the wedding, trying to find Marcia and Milo. This day she found them. They were standing on Milo’s ship, *the Cerys.* Milo was about to leave for a long trip, and Marcia came to say goodbye.

Her green eyes were open wide with worry, and Milo tried to calm her down. “Don’t worry, Marcy. I’ll be alright. I’ll come back as fast as possible, I promise.” Marcia smiled a small smile.

“I’ll miss you…” She said.

“I’ll miss you too. I love you.”

That was enough for Cerys. Marcy? I love you? What happened to the beautiful things Milo told her? For example, that he won’t leave her!

“Hello, Mr. Banda.  Or maybe it’s now Mr. Banda Overstrand?”

“Cerys? What are you doing here?”

Milo was very nervous, and not because of the force to face his ex-wife. He was nervous because he was stuck between two women he loved, and he was scared of what they might do to each other, while he won’t be able to help.

“What am I doing here…? Interesting question. I think you know, or you no longer care about me enough to think of that.”

“Cerys…”

Milo tried to stop her before she started shouting. It didn’t work.

“Do you understand what you did to me?! Both of you? You, Miss Overstrand, stole everything I had! My castle, my daughter and now my husband! And you Milo Banda, somehow let that happened and hurt me more than she did!”

As much as Milo didn’t want that to happened, he and Marcia started answering together to Cerys, both shouting.

“I stole nothing from you! I saved this whole castle and your daughter…” “And she didn’t ‘steal’ me, Cerys, I chose to marry her, because guess what- I love her!”

Cerys saw Milo taking Marcia’s hand in his hand, trying to tell her something without words.

“You loved me once, but see what happened to that!” Cerys shouted.

“Or maybe you never loved me! You know what, that might be the explanation for everything! I saw how you looked at her, even back then, when we were married. You always wanted to know what’s going on with her! The first thing you told me after you proposed was that we have to invite her!”

Milo stepped forward, hoping to keep Cerys’ wrath far away from Marcia, but she stopped him gently.

“Let me,” she said quietly but determinedly, “I’ll sort it out.”

Milo gaped at Marcia. He’d never seen her looking so calm, her green eyes glittering steadfastly and a grim smile on her face.

“Come on,” she said kindly than Milo thought possible, “let’s talk.”

Cerys looked as if she would like to kill her but graciously followed Marcia to the end of the room.

“Cerys,” said Marcia sensibly,

“I understand that this is hard for you, but I don’t think you’ve quite gotten it- the rules of the living. I am alive, Cerys, while you are not. The living will always continue past, while the dead stay stuck. Milo has to move on, Cerys, or he will be just as dead as you. Your death broke his heart and shattered his soul, and your spite is doing the same thing after he’s just allowed himself to heal. If you love him- and I know you despise me, but you do love him, please let me help him and him help me. You’ve forgotten who I lost that day, Cerys; my father, Alther, the only person I had back then. Please, Cerys, leave us be.”

Marcia was begging, her green eyes sparkling and her manner unusually soft.

Cerys studied her for a long while, and then spoke as if she was a very small child trying to make sense of the world.

“It isn’t fair,” she said, “that you should have him as I sit in the Queen’s Room, alone and forgotten.”

“You aren’t alone,” said Marcia, “many of the castle remember you; they call you the Good Queen Cerys. You can show up for banquets and feasts. You are not yet an Ancient, and you will not be one for a long time. But you cannot disturb the living course, Cerys. You must know this.”

Cerys didn’t answer for a moment. When she started talking, she said:

“Fine, I’ll let you be. But you must know that I’m doing this for Milo, and just for him. If he leaves you, or something happened to you, I won’t let him be sad about this for long. I’ll do the same thing you are doing, and help him move on.”

Marcia smiled a small smile.

“If it will make him feel better, then of course you will do it.”

Milo started walking toward them.

“Is everything OK?” He was talking to Marcia more than to Cerys.

After all, she was the one that could seriously get hurt.

Marcia nodded happily.

“Yes, we are good. Cerys let us be.”

A rush of wind past them told them that Cerys was gone.

“I’m glad that’s settled,” said Marcia cheerfully, and Milo wondered what she’d told Cerys, but decided to store that question away for later.

“I’ll be back in another month,” said Milo, hugging her gently, “stay safe.” “Who, me?” Teased Marcia, “I’m safe as anyone. ‘Bye.”

She hugged Milo as he hurried aboard with his crew, and soon the ship was out at sea. Marcia turned to find Septimus. She had something to say to him.

**Giving up the job**

Septimus was nowhere to be seen, although Marcia was sure he was there earlier. She found him at the Pyramid library.

“Septimus. I need to talk to you. Can you please sit down and look at me?” She said watching Septimus pacing around. Septimus sat down on the table.

“Good. Well, I’m sure you are going to be completely shocked, but I think that soon I’ll leave the job. And you’ll be the ExtraOrdinary Wizard. Being the EOW was my biggest dream, and it’s still the only job I want to have. But right now, with everything that’s going on, my biggest dream is to see this world. So I think I’ll live this place soon, and we - Milo and I, are going to live in a tower we’ve found, called the Keep. My question to you is, will you let me go? Do you agree to be the EOW in a month or two?”

Septimus stared at Marcia with eyes as wide as saucers. Marcia, whose identity was firmly latched to the castle, who seemed to *be* the EOW and nothing more, was going to quit? She’d been EOW for a very long time; twenty years or so, perhaps even more. He’d heard countless stories from Alther how hard she’d worked to get her dream job, and he knew how much she loved the job and how much it meant to her. And now she was going to simply give it up? He’d passed his Apprentice test with flying colors three and a half years ago, but had stayed put as her personal assistant.

He’d never really considered becoming EOW except for at an older age, when Marcia would quietly retire. Ha, Marcia never did anything quietly. He’d honestly never even thought of anyone else but Marcia being the EOW.

“Leave?” He managed to croak, “You want to quit?”

Marcia nodded quickly, as if she wanted to get it over with quickly.

“Yes, Septimus, I’ll always be there for you; but I don’t want all the fuss, and besides, no EOW has ever been married. I think that’s just a sign that you can’t be married to both the job and a person.”

Septimus could see she was serious, more serious than anything.

“Yes,” he stammered, ‘I’ll be the EOW, but I won’t be even half the one you are.”

Marcia smiled her eyes full of relief.

“Thank you, Septimus,” she said, before bursting into tears.

She hurried out of the room and to her quarters, where Alther was meditating quietly.

“Marcia,” he said when he saw her tear-streaked face, “come now, my child… what’s the matter?”

“I’m quitting Alther. I’m leaving the job.”

Alther looked at her, somehow not surprised.

“Oh, Marcia… That’s OK. I know it’s hard to leave the job, but doing it from choice is a lot better than any other way. You have whole life in front of you, you have a man you love, and there is absolutely no way you are not going to be in this castle every other day. There in no way to keep you away from danger. Do what you think is best; Marcia, you know the best thing for you and Milo.”

Marcia wished she could hug him but settled on a watery smile.

“Thank you, Alther,” she whispered, “I’m sorry I’m leaving you.”

“Don’t be silly,” said Alther, “you mastered your Transport in year three. You’ll pop in to visit all the time, no matter how busy you are.”

Marcia managed a real smile this time, knowing Alther was fully right. “But…” she sighed, “I feel guilty at leaving Septimus to the job. He’s so young. I was at the same age and I wouldn’t of managed without you and all during the first year I hardly managed at all. I don’t want the same thing that happened to me to happen to Septimus, seeing as nothing is causing me to pull away from my job except selfish desires.”

Alther laughed.

“Marcia, you are anything but selfish. You want a life with Milo, and that’s acceptable. Septimus learned from you. He’s been training for ten years. He’ll be fine and a good EOW, and of course he’ll have me.”

“Thank you, Alther.”

“Of course, Marcia. I will always be there for you, if you need anything. Although I think that after all, you can trust Milo for being there too.”

Marcia almost laughed.

“Are you sure you are okay? Let me understand that, you think Milo can be trusted to be there for me?”

“Well,” said Alther, “I think he had proven himself in caring for you enough for me to trust him, somehow”.

Marcia smiled.

“You always had a problem with trusting him.”

“I saw you back then, Marcia. I know how much Milo can hurt someone without noticing. I knew that you, as strong as you are, were and still totally in love with him, and if he would have you hurted in any way, you would have been broken. I couldn’t let you get hurt that much. But now I know that Milo will be broken as you will if he’ll hurt you in any way, so I trust him.”

**The Keep**

Dusk settled as Marcia kissed Milo goodbye and Transported with a shimmer of purple. Milo shouldered his bag and clambered aboard his boat, before starting out sail towards the Keep, as the yellow sun disappeared in the evening sky.

The Keep was a tumbledown tower that looked surprisingly like Marcia’s old home, the Wizard Tower. It had the same swirling staircase, though this one didn’t move, and despite its grim demeanor it was actually quite cozy.

Marcia hurried to light a fire in the old grate that had served as an long dysfunctional fireplace, choked with rocks and soot. She was really surprised the place hadn’t yet fallen down. It’d been owned by a crazed old Alchemist (she personally suspected Marcellus although she wasn’t positive.) The rumors were that he’d enchanted the place and used it for his experiments, and although it’s seller had energetically promised her the house had been cleaned out several times over, she still wasn’t going to let her guard down.

Suddenly she wished that Milo was here- anyone, really. She didn’t like the thought of sleeping on the floor all by herself. A sudden movement made her jump, and she cast her eyes around the tower.

All was still. Marcia resigned herself to get to her feet and start with a quick Cleaning spell. When she’d cast it to her satisfaction she glanced approvingly at the room. It was much bigger-looking now, and not such a dump after all. She made her way up the steps, her shoes clacking against the moist stones, a sound she’d grown to love over the years.

Those clacks had always announced her entrance so dramatically and had served her well as the EOW. Now that she thought of it, there was nobody here to intimidate except for Milo, and she had a feeling shoes weren’t really all that frightening to a toughened sailor.

For a moment she thought wistfully about the Wizard Tower, where Septimus was eating dinner in her apartment- that was his now, probably with Jenna and Beetle.

With a pang she thought about another trio who’d sat around dinner in much the same manner- She, Milo and Cerys. It would be so strange to live alone here. She didn’t know how witches managed to stay sane after years alone.

Her thoughts settled on Aunt Zelda’s rickety house and suddenly her mouth filled with the taste of soft boiled cabbages. Alright, so maybe some of them weren’t sane after all. Wizards were social creatures, something she’d sometimes regretted after saying ‘good morning’ for the millionth time every day, but she did admit it’d be awfully lonely here.

Maybe Septimus and Jenna would come visit, she thought, before dismissing the thought as she climbed up the last flight of stairs. Jenna and Beetle were getting along nicely. They’d probably settle down to have a family, what made Marcia suddenly feel old.

Although she’d once grumped that she hated children, her years with Septimus weren’t all that bad. But she was too old to have a squalling newborn in the house… she’d spent that stage of her life locked up in a dusty old tower. Another sudden movement caught her eye, but there was nothing in the bedroom, which was a handsome room, with wide windows overlooking the sea.

The next room was her study, which was filled with all sorts of things the Alchemist had left here. Marcia vowed to chuck them out the second she could.

The third room was to be a map room, Milo’s trip-planning room, though he’d promised to be home more often.

And finally- she opened the last bedroom, which was small and modest. Although she tried to stop herself, an image popped up in her brain- this room was the perfect size for a child’s room. *Stop it,* she told herself. She was old and this was wishful thinking.

She stormed down the stairs rather angrily and settled down by the fire. Before she’d realized it, she’d fallen asleep.

The first thing Marcia heard once she woke up was someone talking. That’s weird, she thought. It does not sound like Milo, but who else can it be?

“She must be Madame Marcia!”

Marcia heard the voice saying. Definitely not Milo, she thought.

The most formal name Milo had ever called her in was Mrs. Banda, as a joke. So who is this person? Who was in her house? Before she could raise her head or say anything, she heard another voice.

Be quiet! Let her sleep!”

At that point, Marcia opened her eyes.

She saw… What looked like dust bunnies on legs, with spindly limbs and soft downy hair. Their dim eyes, which took a moment for her to find were the same color as the gritty grey skin, and seemed to take almost nothing in.

**“**What, what’s going on? How did you get here?”

One of the creatures answered her.

“We live here. We are sorry we have interrupted your sleep. We should go now and let you sleep.”

“Wait, what do you mean live here?”

“We were the slaves of the one who owned this place and his family. He told us to stay here and be the servants of some people called Marcia and Milo.” Answered one of the creatures nervously.

Marcia stared at him, surprised, before answering:

“Well, I’m Marcia and Milo is my husband.”

She stopped for a second. It still felt so good to say those words, even six months after the wedding.

“But what I don’t get is why you are servants of someone. Coming to think of it, a better question is why are you slaves?”

“He rescued us, Madame,” said one of the creatures. “We were to be locked up in the Palace forever doing service for the Queen-” the other creatures shuddered, “but our Master said it was cruelty and had some of us rescued. The lucky ones went to his workshop, far away, in the warmth of the Fyre, and the unlucky were sent to this barren, cold place.”

“So it was Marcellus!”

Exclaimed Marcia, quietly touched at Marcellus’ kindness and extreme foresight, “but what were you needed for at the Palace?”

None of the creatures answered, though several stared at their toes.

“It is a delicate matter,” the lead one finally said, “and we’ll not discuss it.” Marcia nodded wearily.

“Well, then, I see no reason for you to stick around in this old tower. How about you go join your family?”

The creatures shook their heads. “

We are still bound to you, Madame,” said another one, “and we’ll stay here until Master calls us back.”

“Right then,” said Marcia, “then you might as well tell me your names.” “We’re Drummins,” they said, before introducing themselves with the oddest bunch of names she’d ever heard.

“Pleased to meet you,” Marcia said when they’d finished, “but if you don’t mind I’ll go back to sleep. It’s been a long day.”

All of the Drummins started bowing their way out of the room and scurried off, and Marcia fell asleep.

Milo came the next day, and was more than a little surprised to find the Drummins waiting to get his coat. He’d brought the furniture and all of their personal belongings, and the next couple of days were full of organizing boxes and things.

**The truth**

About a week after they’d settled down, Septimus had shown up, promising that Jenna was on her way on the Dragon Boat.

“How’s it going?” Marcia asked as they sat next to the fire.

Septimus looked older than the last time she’d seen him, and the purple robes were very becoming on him.

“Pretty well,” answered Septimus, “but it’s terrible in the Tower without you, to tell the truth. Everyone is awfully glum.”

Marcia gave a half-laugh.

“I never was under the impression anyone really liked me.”

After hours of conversation, Jenna showed up looking rather distracted.

“Hi,” she said, giving Marcia a hug, “Marcia, can I talk to you for a moment?”

“Sure,” said Marcia, slightly taken aback.

What did Jenna want to talk with her about? She wasn’t exactly great in the love department; look at all the years it took for her to marry someone. Septimus looked a little glum but said easily that he really had to get back to the Tower and vanished in purple magyk.

Jenna sat opposite Marcia and started her story.

“My grandmother, Queen Mathilda, talked with me last night,” Jenna said quietly, before proceeding to tell Marcia something that made her face pale.

That’s ghastly! That’s just horrible! Let me make sure I got it right; the queens used slaves to have children, to make clones of themselves? That’s sound like a children-making machine! That’s insane! I got the thing, it’s keep the castle safe, but isn’t there a better way to do this then ruining the lives of the queens *and* the slaves?” Jenna nodded miserably.

“Wait,” she said “There’s more. I have found the source of all the trouble since the day I was born. You see, I wasn’t born that way. I’m not a DNA copy of my mother. The **magyk** Hotep-ra cast was broken. The castle isn’t safe anymore. All that had happened because my father was Milo.”

Marcia stared at her for a moment, and then said:

“So you are telling me that Milo had caused all that trouble? All the bad things that had happened to the castle, to you, to me, were his fault?”

Jenna nodded again.

“I’m sorry to say that, but yes.”

“Well,” Marcia started “I’m sure you are going to hate me because of this sentence, but… Milo is such an idiot, but I still love him.”

Jenna stared at her, shocked. She didn’t answer.

Marcia sighed and smiled.

“I can’t hate Milo and Cerys for defying this treacherous system. They weren’t doing it maliciously. They did it for love. Jenna, I know this hard for you to understand, but please be patient. The quality of mercy is not strained.”

Jenna gave a shaky laugh.

“Thanks, Marcia,” she said, as a hammering sounded on the door.

“That’ll be Milo,” sighed Marcia before standing up to let him in,

“I’ll be going then,” said Jenna, before getting up hurriedly and slamming the door. “What’s wrong with her?” Asked Milo, befuddled.

Marcia sighed.

“Nothing. She’s just had a rough day. The Drummins have cooked a marvelous dinner.”

Marcia sighed as they sat down to eat, wondering if the world would be a better place if only she’d married Milo first.

**Kelda**

It was the Big Freeze. Milo hadn’t yet returned from a journey to the Northern Lands, trading lightly used snakeskin shoes.

Marcia sat by the hearth on the new plushy sofa, worrying.

“He promised to be back by first snowfall,” she fretted, “and it’s been snowing straight for two weeks.”

“Now, now, Madame Marcia,” said Lucius, her favorite Drummin, “it’s not the first time Captain Milo’s been late.”

Marcia nodded, trying to take comfort but not succeeding.

“He’s never been late like this, with the Big Freeze just around the corner.” The second Drummin in the room, Draco, gave a gusty sigh.

“Alas, Madame, the post has been out of order for weeks. The last letter we received from the Captain was a month ago.”

Marcia got to her feet suddenly.

“I’m going to wait for him by the docks,” she said firmly.

“He may not even be coming today!” Protested Lucius.

“He’ll be coming,” said Marcia. “And I’ll come back with him by tonight.”

She swept from the Keep, her winter cloak fastened tightly over her shoulders and her special winter snakeshoes on her feet. She walked out to the small landing, tripping over snowdrifts and wiping flakes from her eyes.

She despised snow. It reminded her too much of her childhood in the Northern Lands, her fingers freezing because she had no mittens, her stomach growling because food was scarce.

And the night she’d run away from home had been the worst; the now famous Bebba Blizzard had started its way, and she could still remember the feeling of being utterly frozen, so frozen she couldn’t even think, much less talk.

She’d collapsed on the steps of the Wizard Tower in the snow, and Alther had found her and had ever since decided to teach all his apprentices the art of finding people in the snow, which was very common in the castle.

Suddenly, she caught a glimpse of red in the snow. She strained her eyes to make out the figure in the snow. A child. She rushed forward filled with deja vu, before digging the frozen child out.

It was covered in countless warm layers, so that she couldn’t see its face or features. Marcia cast one last desperate look at the port before running back to the house with the girl in her arms.

She undid the child’s clothing and replaced them with a too- large nightgown and several cloaks and pairs of socks. It was a girl, perhaps five years old, and she was hardly breathing.

Marcia pushed her closer to the fire until she was almost touching the flames. Finally she took a deep breath and did what she’d done countless times to countless children, and did the pink breath thing, as curls of cotton-candy colored magyk brushed the girl’s face.

She remember teaching this to Septimus, who’d complained he’d never need it. Marcia smiled grimly, as the girl’s eyes opened. They were magyk.

She had green eyes, just like Marcia’s but long blonde hair of a Northern Traders. She flinched when she saw Marcia.

“What happened? Who are you?”

Marcia smiled at her.

“Hello. I’m Marcia Overstrand. I’ve found you in the snow, outside. I brought you to my home. You were frozen. But now you are safe. Don’t worry. You can stay here and keep warm.”

“Thank you” the girl whispered.

“You’re welcome. But… Why were you out in the snow? It’s really freezing outside.”

“My family abandoned me. The left me out there, alone, just because, because I can do Magyk.” The girl said in a weak voice, her green eyes full of tears.

Without thinking, Marcia hugged the girl, who started crying on her shoulder. “Hey, don’t cry, don’t worry. I won’t throw you out. I am a wizard too. Now calm down. What’s your name?”

Taking a few deep breaths, the girl said: “Kelda.”

Marcia wrapped her in yet another cloak.

“Well, Kelda, I promise you you’ll be safe here. I ran away from home, once.” Kelda stared at Marcia with huge eyes, still shivering.

“Really?” She whispered.

“Yes. And I know how to take care of children. I’ll take care of you.”

Kelda smiled wearily, her head drooping onto her chest. Marcia picked her up and put her on the couch before covering her with a quilt.

“Lucius,” she said, “make some soup.”

Lucius nodded and scurried to the kitchen, just as the door swung open. It was Milo.

“Milo!” Marcia said as Milo took off his cloak and boots, “what took you so long?”

“The blizzard took me off course,” said Milo, “and the journey took twice as long as I thought it would. I’m so glad to see you!”

He glanced around the warm room.

“Who’s the girl?”

“Her name is Kelda,” said Marcia, “I found her outside in the snow.” Milo stared at her.

“Another one! Marcia, you collect orphans and abandoned children!”

Marcia rolled her eyes. “She needs a home.”

“What are we going to do with her?” Asked Milo softly. Marcia smiled.

“She’s alone in the world, Milo. I see it as my duty to make sure she’ll be alright. She’s only a little girl.”

Milo kissed Marcia on the forehead, smile lighting up on his face.

“I understand,” he said gently. “The second upstairs bedroom is free.”

A few hours later, when Kelda was already asleep, Milo and Marcia sat by the fire, talking.

“Marcia, do you want to do this? Do you want to adopt that girl?”

“I…” started Marcia. “I don’t know. Maybe… Maybe we are too old for all this, maybe…”

Milo took Marcia’s hand.

“I want you to be happy. That’s all I care about. But I also want to have a family, with you. The question is, do you want that too? Do you want us to make Kelda part of our family?”

Marcia didn’t answer for a moment. She knew what she wanted.  But yet, maybe they were too old, maybe they are just not the right people to raise a child. But Marcia knew that no matter what, she won’t give up on what she want. When she finally answered, she said yes.

The next morning, Milo went to the port to find clothing for Kelda, who’d devoured two bowls of sticky porridge. Marcia looked at her in interest, wondering if it would be rude to ask her where she’d come from. Kelda was curled in front of the hearth, her eyes sad, wrapped in a dozen cloaks in different sizes.

“Milo’s gone to buy you clothes,” Marcia said finally.

“Kelda, I have to ask you something. Would you be willing to consider living with Milo and I?”

Kelda stared at her with shocked eyes.

“You don’t have to answer now,” Marcia quickened to say, “say when you make up your mind.”

Kelda nodded slowly. “I’ll live with you,” she said softly, snuggling in the large robes.

“You’re nice.”

When Milo returned with several pairs of trousers and a pair of boots, Kelda changed clothing. All of a sudden she looked rather normal, not lost or confused.

“I’m going out to scrub the *Cerys*,” Milo said.

Kelda looked at him with her green eyes.

“Can I come with you?” She asked.

Milo nodded, and Marcia watched them go, her husband and her daughter, hand in hand towards the boat.

A couple days later, Kelda discovered the weapons room. It was a fine room, Milo’s map room, filled with daggers and swords and bows.

“Don’t go in there!” Marcia said after Kelda had ducked out in surprise, “it’s dangerous.”

“I want to be dangerous,” said Kelda. “Can you teach me?”

“Yes,” said Marcia, “I’ll teach you; and Milo will teach you swordfighting but you must be careful.”

And so the magyk lessons began. Marcia had found a new apprentice and she’d never been happier. She taught Kelda defensive and offensive charms and every morning they studied.

In the afternoon, Milo would give her a little wooden sword and tell her to spar. One day, as spring bloomed, Marcia asked them as they were swordfighting- “Kelda, who was your family?” Kelda frowned. “I don’t remember,” she said after great difficulty, “I don’t know, Mother.”

She’d called her mother twice before, and each time Marcia flushed with happiness again.

On her seventh birthday, Milo took her as a treat to the Tower. Kelda was enchanted. Septimus, who was still EOW, showed her around, and she met his apprentice, Tod.

“I want to be an apprentice,” she told Marcia that day.

“And you’re going to be one,” promised Marcia. “You already know more than Tod. If you study hard, you’ll be the EOW one day.”

Kelda believed her.

**Kelda’s mistake**

Kelda wanted to be good at swordfighting, too. So, every day Milo was home, she begged him to fight with her. One day they even convinced Marcia to join, and found out she was really good at it.

After that, Kelda spend many days sitting outside, watching her parents fighting, sometimes for hours. On one of the hottest days of the year, after a really long battle between her parents, Kelda took Milo’s sword. Marcia and Milo didn’t notice.

They sat down to rest, laughing. Milo’s sword was too heavy for Kelda, who was just seven years old. She tried to carry it, and when she finally managed to hold it up from the ground, it was way too close to Marcia, and she cut her shoulder.

A serious cut. Marcia cried in pain, tears in her eyes. Kelda dropped the sword and fell to the ground, crying.

“I’m sorry, Mother! I just wanted to try! Are you alright?”

“Yes, I’m fine” said Marcia, although Milo, who jumped to his feet, could tell she was lying.

“Don’t touch your father’s sword again! It’s really dangerous. If you’ll do it again, I’ll tell Milo to do not give you anymore sword lessons, understand?”

Kelda nodded, still crying.

“Now go up to your room, Kelda.” Said Milo. “I’ll make sure your mother is fine and come to talk to you.” Kelda went up to her room, still crying.

She couldn’t really remember her old family, but she did remember one thing- she’d been left in the snow because of accidental magyk, hurting someone.

A sister? A cousin? She couldn’t remember, but it was obvious she was simply a walking disaster.

Marcia and Milo were her parents for two years now, but would they still want her after this? She could hear Marcia’s pained voice in the living room, as Milo bandaged her shoulder. Would she have to leave? She cried all day until she heard a knock on her door. It was Milo, his expression grim.

“I’m sorry,” cried Kelda, “forgive me!”

Milo smiled softly.

“We forgive you, Kelda. Marcia’s going to be alright. But there is a new rule- you mustn’t touch any sharp weapons. You’re to play only with your wooden sword.” Kelda hugged Milo gratefully.

“Can I go apologize to Mother?” She asked timidly.

Milo nodded, and Kelda ran downstairs to Marcia. She was sitting on the couch, her expression pained as a bloody bandage wrapped around her arm. “Mother!” Said Kelda, running up to her, “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, Kelda,” said Marcia softly, “everything’s alright.”

“Will you be okay?” Asked Kelda, her eyes wide.

Marcia nodded. “I’ll be fine. Go up to your room, please, I want to talk to Milo.”

Marcia and Milo talked for a long time that night. The next morning, Milo’s room was locked and bolted.

Marcia didn’t spar again, though Kelda sometimes did with her father. She spent most of the time learning magyk though, intent of becoming EOW.

**Yet another family**

When Kelda was eight, a family showed up at the Keep. Two men, and an old, wizened lady.

“Excuse me,” they said, “would you happen to know where Milo Banda lived?” “Here,” said Marcia, surprised.

Milo barreled out of the doorway and towards the family.

“Mother! Fanda! Anaconda!”

“You know these people?” Asked Marcia.

Milo grinned wildly. “Yes. They’re my family.”

That evening Kelda was sent up to her room while they discussed their whereabouts. Milo and Marcia told their story as did Fanda, Anaconda and Milo’s mother, a woman named Danda.

“How did you end up with Milo?” Asked Marcia.

“His father insisted,” said Danda, “and said that rhyming names weren’t the greatest. He was named Milo after the family turtle.”

Milo blushed, embarrassed.

“So, is this queen Cerys?” Asked his mother, smiling blandly at Marcia.

Milo gave a nervous laugh.

“No, mother, this is my second wife, Marcia.”

“Marcia, eh?” Asked his mother, “like the old nasty EOW?”

Marcia flushed angrily.

“Quite like that actually. I was the EOW.” Danda looked amazed.

“And your daughter?” She asked, “the one upstairs? Is she Jenna?”

“No,” said Milo, “that’s Kelda. She lives with us now, but she’s adopted.” Danda nodded.

“And your other children?” She asked, “don’t you have a child?”

She turned to Marcia.

“Septimus was my apprentice,” said Marcia a little stiffly.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, what are you doing here?”

“We heard about Milo here,” said Anaconda, “and we thought he’d like to go treasure-hunting with us.”

Marcia stared at Milo, trying to shake her head without showing her displeasure.

“No,” said Milo, and Marcia wanted to kiss him, “I have a family to raise, Anaconda. I’d rather not get into so much trouble.” He bid his family goodbye, and they left.

**The spy**

On Kelda’s ninth birthday, Marcia and Milo took her to the Wizard Tower, for a whole day. Kelda stared at the mighty Wizard Tower, awed by the floor, who shaped itself into high letters.

**Hello, Keeper of the Ways,** it said as Marcia’s shoes tippity-tapped across it. **Hello, Milo Banda,** it added, and when Kelda peered at it one last time, it added; **Hello, Kelda Banda**.

Kelda giggled with excitement, looking around the lobby. There were a handful of Wizards, including two good-natured looking twins who looked an awful lot like Uncle Septimus.

“Hey,” said one, “it’s Marcia’s kid.”

They introduced themselves as Edd and Erik.

“Mum’ll be pleased,” said one of them, “she’s been going on about you. I’m sure she thinks you’re being tortured, living with Marcia and all.”

Kelda stared blankly at him.

He cracked a smile. “Just kidding, Marcia’s not that bad. But to live with her- Blimey, poor Sep. I’ve got no idea how he survived.”

With a jaunty wave he headed down Wizard Way. Milo, who heard the whole conversation, laughed.

“Some people think your mother isn’t a great person to live with. Personally, I never understood the reason” He said, “Don’t think of it. There will always be someone who doesn’t like you. Now come upstairs, your mother is probably already there.”

However, when the two of them went up the stairs, there was no sign of Marcia. When they reached the twentieth floor, Septimus told them Marcia was downstairs, talking to Dandra Draa, in the infirmary.

Something in this sound suspicious to Milo, but he couldn’t understand why. Dandra had been one of Marcia’s only good friends at the Wizard Tower after Endor’s death. Why would it be strange that she’d gone straight to visit a friend?

But something uneasy stirred in Milo’s stomach anyway… something he’d felt that terrible night he’d landed at the port and heard of Cerys’ death. It was as if a snake was tumbling in the darkness of his darkness, lashing out at every twist.

The Wizards had a name for it- **Feeling** for your loved ones. Milo considered it more trusting your gut, but knew it was all the same. Marcia was in trouble. He sprinted to the infirmary without another thought, leaving Kelda alone in front of Septimus’s rooms.

The infirmary was on the third floor. Milo hated the steps- he tried to run down them but would smash into something the moment a Wizard changed the speed. Cursing the best sailors’ curse he knew, he skidded into the infirmary, where Marcia was sitting calmly on one of the sickbeds.

Dandra Draa was holding a teacup and walking towards her. Milo breathed a sigh of relief- it was only something he ate. Marcia was fine, laughing and chatting with Dandra. All was well.

Suddenly, Dandra reached for something silver in her pocket. Something that glowed dully in the sunlight. She pulled out a silver gun, armed with a silver bullet. A bullet that never, ever missed.

Milo didn’t think. He lunged at Dandra, knocking her to the floor, making the teacup shatter. But her fingers had already found a grip on the trigger. And she pulled.

An explosion filled the infirmary, and Kelda heard it. Septimus did too, flying out of his rooms and running down the steps, his face right.

“Marcia!” He yelled, without a word, and Kelda ran after him.

Milo was on the floor. His body shuddered as blood pooled around him.

Dandra got to her feet. Her gun was empty, and her plan foiled.

Milo was as good as dead. But she had to get Marcia. Her target since day one. When the ghost of Miriam Overstrand had appeared, demanding revenge, she’d joined her ranks, and armed with a gun had gone to assassinate the person who once was her friend.

Money and power can do that to people, especially people who lived in poverty for years.

Dandra had almost failed her mission. But she still had a sword. She pulled it out of her sheath, just as Marcia crashed to the floor next to Milo.

This couldn’t be happening…. No… flashbacks of that night, where she’d lost Alther, Milo and Cerys echoed in her brain and paralyzed her. She placed her hand on Milo’s chest.

There was a heartbeat. The weak thud of Milo’s heart told her to pull herself together. She wasn’t going to lose him. Absolutely not. Not when they had a child to raise and a home to live in.

Marcia saw the sword shrieking down on her and pulled out Milo’s, strapped to his belt like always. Now his insistence to blades everywhere- even their wedding day- didn’t seem to be ridiculous. She parried the stroke and sprang to her feet.

She had no time for magyk. Swords were quicker than saying even a few words. She had to play Dandra’s game. Thank goodness for all the lessons from Milo. Dandra swept her sword towards Marcia’s legs, and Marcia blocked the blade and pushed Dandra against the wall.

Why would Dandra betray her like this? Marcia wanted to curl up in a ball and cry. She had had enough of her friends and family dying and betraying her. The least she could do was protect the ones she had.

Septimus and Milo. Dandra managed to feint a move and slice Marcia’s wrist. Blood ran down it, flying it the air as Marcia used her swordswomanship to drive her sword home- to Dandra’s throat.

“Dandra,” she said, “why? Relent! You’re my friend!”

“Not anymore!” Said Dandra.

She cleverly jabbed Marcia in the stomach, and black dots swam before her eyes. She pressed her sword into Dandra’s neck and she quit breathing.

Then Marcia collapsed onto the floor, her blood pooling at her feet. She couldn’t think clearly. The only thing she knew was that she has to get to Milo. She has to help him. He had just saved her life. She couldn’t let him die. Not Milo. Not the only one she truly loved. If he died, she will be alone, and everything that they had; their love, their home, their child, it would all be gone.

She dragged herself on the floor till she reached him. Then, with her last powers, she did one of the most powerful spells she had ever done, and hoped it was enough to save Milo’s life. Before she could understand if it worked or not, she fainted, her hand on Milo’s chest.

Kelda and Septimus found them like that, 30 seconds later. Milo started to feebly stir.

“Quick,” said Septimus after he scanned the room, “Kelda, I need you to call Rose, or any one of the wizards. Can you do that?”

Kelda nodded, her legs lead, as she stared, shocked, at the gruesome scene in front of her.

Septimus muttered a quiet spell that lifted both Milo and Marcia onto sickbeds one next to the other. He had work to do. Rose came a minute later, dressed in nursing clothing. Septimus was most worried about Marcia but knew that Milo’s wounds were more critical.

And he couldn’t let Milo die. He started dressing the wound, amazed that Marcia had managed to do a **HeartSeal** on Milo. It stopped blood from circulating his veins, and was dangerous if used for over a minute, but if she hadn’t done it Milo would be dead.

He undid the **HeartSeal** before dressing the wound. The silver bullet was in there somewhere. He decided to **Find** it, and it flew out of Milo’s gut and into Septimus’s hand. It was covered in blood. He placed it aside before binding his gut. Rose started binding Marcia’s stomach.

“Marcia’ll be fine,” she said nervously, “she’s strong.”

She put a little magykal paste on her wound and it started fading, slowly but steadily. Milo, however, was hardly breathing.

“Help me with him,” said Septimus, pointing at Milo. Rose rushed over and started applying all sorts of Magykal things to him.

“Call Marcellus,” she finally said, “we need Physik here.”

It was Simon that answered Marcellus’s door.

“Simon!” Said Septimus, “come quick! Milo’s hurt!”

Simon ran after his brother, and the two burst into the infirmary where Simon pulled out his physik bag.

When he declared he was done, Rose and Simon left. Septimus stayed, his hand in Marcia’s, as he stared uselessly at the wounded couple.

He’d forgotten about Kelda, who came into the room, her eyes still wide with fright.

“How are mother and father?” She asked quietly.

“Fine,” said Septimus, “they’ll be okay. Come with me.”

He led her up the stairs to the ExtraOrdinary rooms, where Tod was sitting. “Tod,” said Septimus, “this is Kelda. Give her your bed tonight, okay?”

Tod nodded and embraced Kelda, who fell asleep in her arms. Septimus rushed back to Marcia.

Marcia woke up at the sounds of footsteps, though she only opened her eyes when the person making them sat down and took her hand. It was Septimus, his eyes filled with worry.

“Milo,” Marcia gasped, her stomach paining her, “is he alright?”

Septimus nodded.

“Simon says he’ll be fine. But he’s badly hurt.” Marcia turned over to face Milo, who was sleeping peacefully, oblivious to the world.

“Oh Milo,” she whispered, “how did you stop a silver bullet?”

“It had the initial M.B on it,” said Septimus.

“Then it was for Milo!” Said Marcia.

Septimus smiled wryly.

“It could’ve been for either of you. You’re Marcia Banda now, remember?” Marcia gaped at her apprentice who smiled back at her.

“Oh… Why, Milo? It could have been just me. If Dandra had hurt me a bit more, you would have been dead.”

Marcia was now whispering to her husband, wishing he could answer, wishing she could know for sure he is fine.

“How did you know?  You knew? You knew this will probably end your life, but you still jumped?” tears were sliding down on Marcia’s cheeks. Septimus saw that. He didn’t say a thing. Milo always did better than him in comforting Marcia.

She sat down straight now, her tears wetting the blanket over her legs.

“You gave up everything for me? But… You didn’t have to, you could’ve just left me, you could’ve…”

“You would’ve done the same,” said Septimus “He was trying to do his best in keeping the people he loves safe, and he did well. He saved your life.”

“I know” Marcia whispered, wondering why he’d bothered.

Without him, she was no better off than a **Thing**, lifeless and unfeeling. What use was it, living, if there was nothing to live for?

“Marcia,” said Septimus, her good old apprentice, the person who kept her anchored, “Milo will be okay. Calm down. You have a visitor.”

It was Sarah Heap. She bustled around the place like a lost tornado, muttering and sighing and fussing.

“Sarah,” said Marcia suddenly, tiredly, “would you please go and take Kelda down here? She’s probably scared out of her mind.”

Sarah nodded.

“Poor soul… and what with parents rushing round the place and getting themselves hurt..”

She bustle by Marcia, but not before whispering to her, “don’t worry, Marcia, everything will be fine.”

Sarah Heap thought, as she went up the stairs, that maybe Marcia was human after all. Kelda sat in the sickroom, holding Marcia’s hand worriedly.

“Mother,” she said quietly, “will father be okay?”

“I hope so,” said Marcia, tears pooling in her eyes, “but as you see, I’m in no fit state to get back home. You’ll have to go live in the Palace for a while with Queen Jenna, okay?”

Kelda nodded quietly, and followed Sarah Heap to her new, temporary home. Queen Jenna was deeply shocked to hear of Dandra’s betrayal, but she hugged Kelda tight to her swollen stomach. Beetle, the father of Jenna’s child and her husband, made up Jenna’s old room for Kelda, who was treated like a princess, but she sorely missed Marcia and would go to the Wizard Tower every day.

She’d sometimes have lessons with Tod, surprising Septimus with her great knowledge of magyk which almost surpassed his apprentice’s.

“I’ll be the ExtraOrdinary Wizard one day,” said Kelda solemnly, and both Tod and Septimus believed her.

Milo still hadn’t woken up. He was healing, but his eyes hadn’t opened once. “Will he wake up?” Marcia asked Simon and Marcellus desperately.

They could only shrug, unsure. Marcia’s wound was almost healed, a long pink scar where Dandra’s sword had been driven into her stomach. She wouldn’t leave the sickroom however, sitting on Milo’s bed and muttering for him to wake up. She almost always held his hand.

One night, when they were the only people in the sickroom, Marcia heard a voice. “Marcia?” Asked Milo.

Marcia let out a sound of joy and turned to face Milo, who’d opened his eyes at last.

“Milo,” she whispered, “Milo, you’re awake.”

She got off her bed and bent next to his head. “I’m so glad,” she said, surprised to see herself crying.

“Me too, Marcy, me too,” said Milo, gently kissing her on the forehead. “Milo… Thank you. I…”

“Well, it was my turn to save your life,” laughed Milo. Marcia smiled. Even after a half death experience, he was the same Milo.

Tod and Kelda found them in the morning, both asleep with smiles on their face, holding hands.

“Do your parents always falling asleep holding hands?” Tod asked Kelda, “because I think it’s the third time I’m seeing them like that and I meet them both only once a year.”

Kelda smiled.

“They sometimes fall asleep like that, yes. But you know what this means? Father woke up!”

The sound of Kelda’s joyful voice woke them both up. Kelda ran toward them. “Father! You woke up!”

“Yes, Kelda, I did,” said Milo, hugging Kelda.

“Now careful, please, and let me give your mother a hug too.” Marcia was sitting on Milo’s bed, still smiling. Milo hugged her tightly, whispered a few words in her ear, and then kissed her.

**Anaconda**

A few months later, Kelda and Marcia sat down to eat breakfast, waiting for Milo to come back from the port. After a minute or two, he walked in, smiling, but with worry in his eyes.

He sat down next to Marcia, and his smile faded.

“Marcia... My brother wants to invite you to a friendly swordfight.”

“What?!” Marcia stared at him. “Why?”

“I don’t know… I would have told you do not go but... “ Milo lowered his voice “I’m afraid he is not going to give up… If you won’t come he will come to you.”

Marcia sighed, her expression set as she buttered her toast.

“Your idiot brother can do what he likes,” she grumbled, “I’m not going to swordfight anyone.”

Marcia hadn’t picked up a sword since the time Dandra had betrayed her, and she wasn’t eager to, either. She stayed far away when Milo continued teaching Kelda the way of the weapon, locked up in her workroom studying an old, ancient text Marwick had sent her.

She wasn’t going to rough-house with Milo’s brother like a three year old. She had far better things to do.

“You’ll just have to tell him I’m busy,” she said, taking a bite of her toast before turning to Kelda, “now, Kelda, have you mastered your **Cheese Charm** yet?”

Kelda nodded proudly, pulling the sticky cheese charm out of her pocket. It was inscribed with spidery handwriting that instructed the holder to turn things into Brie. Milo had gotten it for her at the Port and she’d been trying to use it for weeks.

“Very well,” said Marcia. “Now, you’ve been working wonderfully in the last month. I want you to run along and do as you like today.”

Maybe she’d be able to finish transcribing that ancient scroll of Marwick’s, Marcia thought. She promised to send it along by the Midsummer solstice, which was nearing rapidly. Kelda’s expression brightened.

“Okay!” She said, turning to Milo, “can I sail with you today to the Port?” Milo nodded, smiling.

“Of course, darling. We’ll clean the dishes and be on our way.”

When Kelda had finished cleaning the dishes, she went to put on her sailing garb and ran off with Milo to the *Cerys*. Marcia smiled as she watched them hurry off. Her Kelda was a big girl now, almost ten. Soon enough she’d try to be apprenticed to Tod, Marcia knew.

Tod was eighteen by now, and Septimus was already talking of retirement in another 2 years, when she’d be done with her apprenticeship. A knock on the door made her whirl around and look outside, and then she uttered a sailor’s curse she’d learned from Milo. It was Anaconda.

He stood outside, a floppy hat in his hands and a sword in his belt. Marcia sighed, rolled her eyes and opened the door.

“Good day, Mr. Banda,” she said stiffly, suddenly noticing that Anaconda’s eyes were unfocused and his breath reeked of beer, “what can I do for you?”

“Fight me!” Declared Anaconda, leaning against the open door in stooped drunkness, “I need to see your skill and mastery in swordsmanship!”

“I’m sorry, Anaconda,” said Marcia, trying to keep the disgust out of her voice, “but I’m very busy today. I have an ancient text to translate and I really must get to it.”

“Nonsense!” Said Anaconda, pushing past her into the house, “fight me, dear lady!” He pulled out his sword.

“Anaconda,” said Marcia firmly, “put down the sword. Now.”

Instead of doing that, he swung his sword, leaving Marcia no choice but to back further into the kitchen. She was swordless and alone, but she did have magyk. She tried to throw up a shield to protect herself, but it was no use. Anaconda’s sword burst her shield every time she tried.

Anaconda slowly pushed her to the wall behind her. She knew she was in trouble. She had three more seconds before it’s over, Anaconda will push her to the wall, and she will have no way to stop him. The first thing that jumped to her mind was crazy, but she has no time to think.

She grabbed the **Cheese Charm** Kelda left on the table, and used it. Hot, melted cheese flew in the air and stopped Anaconda for a moment, for he was unable to see what’s going on. This moment was all she needed. She used her **Magyk** to create a rope and, with the help of a kitchen knife, she tied Anaconda.

With the knife still in her hand, she bent down next to him, noticing a small note which fell out of his pocket. It read; *must remind myself to get Miriam to pay me.*

“So you’re working for Miriam!” Said Marcia “How will I get rid of you?”

She studied the Cheese Charm on the table. This might be the best way…. She grabbed it and pressed it against Anaconda’s forehead. He turned to good, Brie cheese in minutes.

“That’ll make a good sale for Milo,” said Marcia, before going up to her study to finish transcribing Marwick’s scroll.

Kelda’s tenth birthday stirred a bit of excitement in the Banda household. Marcia bought a book for her, an inscribed Charm book. Kelda was very nearly as skilled as Septimus when he finished his apprenticeship. She had no doubt Kelda would make a name for herself at the Tower.

But for now Marcia wanted to keep Kelda here, close to home. Maybe in a couple of years or so she’d take her to the Tower to show Tod, maybe when she was fourteen. Milo, however, was pleased that Kelda was 10.

“Bigger and bigger every day!” He said, “I’ll get you the greatest present someone’s ever got!”

However, he wouldn’t agree to tell either of them what that present was. He took the translated scroll back to Marwick one day and returned with a bulging bag. “What’s inside?” Marcia asked when he shut it inside his workroom.

Milo only smiled mysteriously.

On Kelda’s 10th birthday, the day they’d found her in the snow, the Drummins made cake which turned out surprisingly well. Marcia looked at Kelda. 5 years had passed since they’d found her in the snow, some of the best 5 years of her life…

Milo, grinning hugely, brought out the bag. He spilt it on the table, and out crawled hundreds of thousands of… rocks.

Marcia shrieked.

“What are they?” She asked.

“Petrocks,” explained Milo, “Marwick’s house is full of them.”

Kelda laughed delightedly, bringing the petrocks a dish of milk and leftover cake.

“They’re so cool!” She cried, and Marcia could see the delight in her eyes.

She ran around and played with the rocks all day and that night they followed her to her bedroom. Marcia placed the spellbook on her bedside table, a little disappointed in herself. After all, not every child wanted a book for their birthday. Sometimes a bag of rocks would do.

Marcia left the room and went down to the living room. Milo sat there, smiling. When he saw Marcia’s face, he stood up.

“What happened, Marce?” Marcia shook her head.

She didn’t know herself. It was something between her desire Kelda will be EOW, and the feeling she shouldn’t give up Kelda so fast. Not mention she didn’t know what Kelda wanted right now, and the feeling she doesn’t know how to be a good mother.

Look at what she did as a mother until now, what she did while her child was around; let her fight with a sword, lock her up in her room for hours, killed her friend and turned her husband’s brother into cheese.

What a great mother, teaching her daughter the “right thing to do”. Sure. Milo looked at his wife, trying to understand what happened. Somehow, he had managed to do it, time after time.

“You are a great mother! Marcia, without you, both Kelda and I wouldn’t be here alive.”

Milo put his arms around her, hugging her tightly. Marcia stood there, fighting the tears.

“You are the only person I trust to raise my child, including Cerys, and not just because I love you. You’re honest, warm and helpful. But you’re also strong, and you’ll do what it takes to make sure the people you love will be safe. You can teach someone a lesson they will never forget, and they will still trust you with their life. Believe me, I know.”

Marcia fought back tears and smiled at her husband.

“I trust you more than anyone,” Milo said quietly. “I love you.”

They sat like that, hand in hand, as the stars rose and the earth spun.