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Magyk

Written by

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Published by

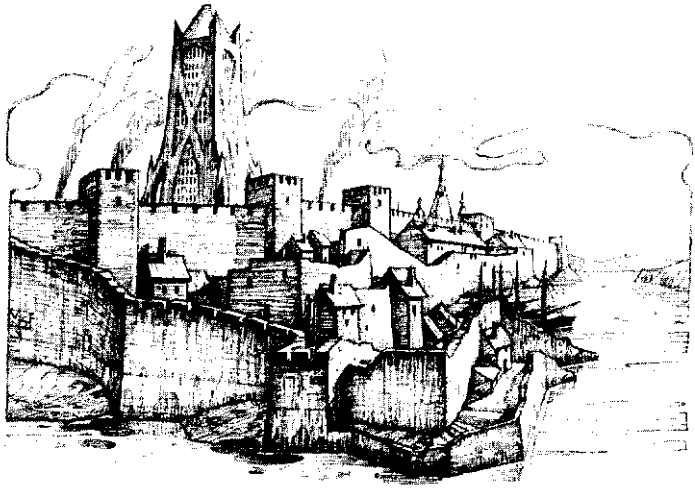
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SOMETHING IN THE SNOW



Silas Heap pulled his cloak tightly around him against the snow. It had been a long walk through the Forest, and he was chilled to the bone. But in his pockets he had the herbs that Galen, the Physik Woman, had given him for his new baby boy, Septimus, who had been born earlier that day.

Silas drew closer to the Castle, and he could see the lights flickering through the trees as candles were placed in the windows of the tall narrow houses clustered along the outside

walls. It was the longest night of the year, and the candles would be kept burning until dawn, to help keep the dark at bay. Silas always loved this walk to the Castle. He had no fear of the Forest by day and enjoyed the peaceful walk along the narrow track that threaded its way through the dense trees for mile after mile. He was near the edge of the Forest now, the tall trees had begun to thin out, and as the track began to dip down to the valley floor, Silas could see the whole Castle spread before him. The old walls hugged the wide, winding river and zigzagged around the higgledy-piggledy clumps of houses. All the houses were painted bright colours, and those that faced west looked as if they were on fire as their windows caught the last of the winter sun's rays.

The Castle had started life as a small village. Being so near to the Forest the villagers had put up some tall stone walls for protection against the wolverines, witches and warlocks who thought nothing of stealing their sheep, chickens and occasionally their children. As more houses were built, the walls were extended and a deep moat was dug so that all could feel safe.

Soon the Castle was attracting skilled craftsmen from other villages. It grew and prospered, so much so that the inhabitants began to run out of space until someone decided to build The

Ramblings. The Ramblings, which was where Silas, Sarah and the boys lived, was a huge stone building that rose up along the riverside. It sprawled for three miles along the river and back again into the Castle and was a noisy, busy place filled with a warren of passages and rooms, with small factories, schools and shops mixed in with family rooms, tiny roof gardens and even a theatre. There was not much space in The Ramblings, but people did not mind. There was always good company and someone for the children to play with.

As the winter sun sank below the Castle walls, Silas quickened his pace. He needed to get to the North Gate before they locked it and pulled up the drawbridge at nightfall.

It was then that Silas sensed *something* nearby. Something alive, but only just. He was aware of a small human heartbeat somewhere close to him. Silas stopped. As an Ordinary Wizard he was able to sense things, but, as he was not a particularly good Ordinary Wizard, he needed to concentrate hard. He stood still with the snow falling fast around him, already covering his footprints. And then he heard something—a snuffle, a whimper, a small breath? He wasn't sure, but it was enough.

Underneath a bush beside the path was a bundle. Silas picked up the bundle and, to his amazement, found himself gazing into the solemn eyes of a tiny baby. Silas cradled the baby in

his arms and wondered how she had come to be lying in the snow on the coldest day of the year. Someone had wrapped her tightly in a heavy woollen blanket, but she was already very cold: her lips were a dusky blue and the snow dusted her eyelashes. As the baby's dark violet eyes gazed intently at him, Silas had the uncomfortable feeling that she had already seen things in her short life that no baby should see.

Thinking of his Sarah at home, warm and safe with Septimus and the boys, Silas decided that they would just have to make room for one more little one. He carefully tucked the baby into his blue Wizard cloak and held her close to him as he ran towards the Castle gate. He reached the drawbridge just as Gringe, the Gatekeeper, was about to go and yell for the Bridge Boy to start winding it up.

"You're cutting it a bit fine," growled Gringe. "But you Wizards are weird. Waddyou all want to be out for on a day like this I dunno."

"Oh?" Silas wanted to get past Gringe as soon as he could, but first he had to cross Gringe's palm with silver. Silas quickly found a silver penny in one of his pockets and handed it over.

"Thank you, Gringe. Goodnight."

Gringe looked at the penny as though it were a rather nasty beetle.

"Marcia Overstrand, she gave me an 'alf crown just now. But then she's got class, what with 'er being the ExtraOrdinary Wizard now."

"*What?*" Silas nearly choked.

"Yeah. Class, that's what she's got."

Gringe stood back to let him pass, and Silas slipped by. As much as Silas wanted to find out why Marcia Overstrand was suddenly the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, he could feel the bundle beginning to stir in the warmth of his cloak, and something told him that it would be better if Gringe did not know about the baby.

As Silas disappeared into the shadows of the tunnel that led to The Ramblings, a tall figure in purple stepped out and barred his way.

"Marcia!" gasped Silas. "What on earth—"

"Tell *no one* you *found* her. She was *born* to you. *Understand?*"

Shocked, Silas nodded. Before he had time to say anything, Marcia was gone in a shimmer of purple mist. Silas spent the rest of the long, winding journey through The Ramblings with his mind in turmoil. Who was this baby? What did Marcia have to do with her? And why was Marcia the ExtraOrdinary Wizard now? And as Silas neared the big red

door that led to the Heap family's already overcrowded room, another, more pressing question came into his mind: What was Sarah going to say to yet another baby to care for?

Silas did not have long to think about the last question. As he reached the door it flew open, and a large red-faced woman wearing the dark blue robes of a Matron Midwife ran out, almost knocking Silas over as she fled. She too was carrying a bundle, but the bundle was wrapped from head to toe in bandages, and she was carrying him under her arm as if he were a parcel and she was late for the post.

"Dead!" cried the Matron Midwife. She pushed Silas aside with a powerful shove and ran down the corridor. Inside the room, Sarah Heap screamed.

Silas went in with a heavy heart. He saw Sarah surrounded by six white-faced little boys, all too scared to cry.

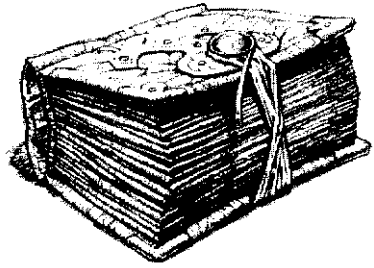
"She's taken him," said Sarah hopelessly. "Septimus is dead, and she's taken him away."

At that moment a warm wetness spread out from the bundle that Silas still had hidden under his cloak. Silas had no words for what he wanted to say, so he just took the bundle out from under his cloak and placed her in Sarah's arms.

Sarah Heap burst into tears.

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SARAH AND SILAS



The bundle settled down into the Heap household and was called Jenna after Silas's mother.

The youngest of the boys, Nicko, was only two when Jenna arrived, and he soon forgot about his brother Septimus. The older boys slowly forgot too. They loved their little baby sister and brought home all kinds of treasures for her from their Magyk classes at school.

Sarah and Silas of course could not forget Septimus. Silas blamed himself for leaving Sarah alone while he went out to fetch the baby's herbs from the Physik Woman. Sarah just

blamed herself for everything. Although she could hardly remember what had happened that terrible day, Sarah knew she had tried to breathe life back into her baby and had failed. And she remembered watching the Matron Midwife wrapping her little Septimus from head to toe in bandages and then running for the door, shouting over her shoulder, "Dead!"

Sarah remembered that all right.

But Sarah soon loved her little baby girl as much as she had loved her Septimus. For a while she was afraid that someone would come and take Jenna away too, but as the months passed and Jenna grew into a chubby, gurgling baby, Sarah relaxed and almost stopped worrying.

Until one day when her best friend, Sally Mullin, arrived breathless on the doorstep. Sally Mullin was one of those people who knew everything that was going on in the Castle. She was a small, busy woman with wispy ginger hair that was forever escaping from her somewhat grubby cook's hat. She had a pleasant round face, a little chubby from finishing off too many cakes, and her clothes were generally covered in sprinkles of flour.

Sally ran a small cafe down on the pontoon beside the river.

The sign over the door announced:

THE SALLY MULLIN TEA AND ALE HOUSE
CLEAN ACCOMMODATION AVAILABLE
NO RIFFRAFF

There were no secrets in Sally Mullin's cafe. Anything and anyone arriving at the Castle by water was noticed and commented on, and most people coming to the Castle did prefer to arrive by boat. No one apart from Silas liked the dark tracks through the Forest that surrounded the castle. The Forest still had a bad wolverine problem at night and was infested with carnivorous trees. Then there were the Wendron Witches, who were always short of cash and had been known to set traps for the unwary traveller and leave them with little more than their shirt and socks.

Sally Mullin's cafe was a busy, steaming hut perched precariously over the water. All shapes and sizes of boats would moor up at the cafe pontoon, and all sorts of people and animals would tumble out of them. Most decided to recover from their trip by having at least one of Sally's fierce beers and a slab of barley cake, and by telling the latest gossip. And anyone in the Castle with half an hour to spare and a

rumbling tummy would soon find themselves on the well-trodden path down to the Port Gate, past the Riverside Amenity Rubbish Dump, and along the pontoon to Sally Mullin's Tea and Ale House.

Sally made it her business to see Sarah every week and keep her up to date with everything. In Sally's opinion Sarah was much put-upon with seven children to care for, not to mention Silas Heap, who did very little as far as she could see. Sally's stories usually involved people Sarah had never heard of and would never meet, but Sarah looked forward to Sally's visits all the same and enjoyed hearing about what was going on around her. However, this time what Sally had to tell her was different. This was more serious than everyday gossip, and this time it did involve Sarah. And, for the first time ever, Sarah knew something about it that Sally did not.

Sally swept in and closed the door conspiratorially behind her.

"I've got some terrible news," she whispered.

Sarah, who was trying to wipe breakfast from Jenna's face, and everywhere else that the baby had sprayed it, *and* clean up after the new wolfhound puppy all at the same time, was not really listening.

"Hello, Sally," she said. "There's a clean space here. Come

and sit down. Cup of tea?"

"Yes, please. Sarah, can you believe this?"

"What's that, then, Sally?" asked Sarah, expecting to hear about the latest bad behaviour in the cafe.

"The Queen. The Queen is dead!"

"What?" gasped Sarah. She lifted Jenna out of her chair and took her over to the corner of the room where her baby basket was. Sarah lay Jenna down for a nap. She believed that babies should be kept well away from bad news.

"*Dead*," repeated Sally unhappily.

"No!" gasped Sarah. "I don't believe it. She's just not well after her baby's birth. That's why she has not been seen since then."

"That's what the Custodian Guards have been saying, isn't it?" asked Sally.

"Well, yes," admitted Sarah, pouring out the tea. "But they *are* her bodyguards, so they must know. Though why the Queen has suddenly chosen to be guarded by such a bunch of thugs, I *don't* understand."

Sally took the cup of tea that Sarah had placed in front of her.

"Ta. Mmm, lovely. Well, *exactly* . . ." Sally lowered her voice and looked around as though expecting to find a

Custodian Guard propped up in the corner, not that she necessarily would have noticed one amid all the mess in the Heaps' room. "They *are* a bunch of thugs. In fact, they are the ones who *killed* her."

"Killed? She was *killed*?" exclaimed Sarah.

"*Sbbb*. Well, see here . . ." Sally pulled her chair closer to Sarah. "There's a story going around—and I have it from the horse's mouth . . ."

"Which horse would that be, then?" asked Sarah with a wry smile.

"Only Madam Marcia"—looking triumphant, Sally sat back and folded her arms—"that's who."

"*What*? How come you've been mixing with the Extra-Ordinary Wizard? Did she drop by for a cup of tea?"

"Almost. Terry Tarsal did. He had been up at the Wizard Tower delivering some really weird shoes that he had made for Madam Marcia. So when he had stopped moaning about her taste in shoes and how much he hated snakes, he said that he had overheard Marcia talking to one of the other Wizards. Endor, that little fat one, I think. Well, they said the Queen had been shot! By the Custodian Guards. One of their Assassins."

Sarah could not believe what she was hearing.

"*When*?" she breathed.

"Well, this is the really *awful* thing," whispered Sally excitedly. "They said she was shot on the day her baby was born. Six whole months ago, and we knew nothing about it. It's terrible . . . terrible. And they shot Mr Alther too. Dead. That's how come Marcia took over . . ."

"Alther's *dead*?" gasped Sarah. "I can't believe it. I really can't . . . We all thought he'd retired. Silas was his Apprentice years ago. He was lovely . . ."

"Was he?" asked Sally vaguely, eager to get on with the story. "Well, that's not all, see. Because Terry reckoned that Marcia had rescued the Princess and had taken her away somewhere. Endor and Marcia were just chatting, really, wondering how she was getting along. But of course when they realised Terry was there with the shoes, they stopped. Marcia was very rude to him, he said. He felt a bit strange afterwards, and he reckoned she'd done a Forget Spell on him, but he'd nipped behind a pillar when he saw her muttering and it didn't take properly. He's really upset about that as he can't remember whether she paid him for the shoes or not."

Sally Mullin paused to draw breath and have a large gulp of tea.

"That poor little Princess. God help the little one. I wonder where she is now. Probably wasting away in some dungeon

somewhere. Not like your little angel over there . . . How is she doing?"

"Oh, she's just fine," said Sarah, who usually would have talked at length about Jenna's snuffles and new tooth and how she could sit up and hold her own cup now. But just at that moment Sarah wanted to turn the attention away from Jenna—because Sarah had spent the last six months wondering who her baby really was, and now she knew.

Jenna was, thought Sarah, surely she must be . . . *the baby Princess.*

For once Sarah was glad to wave goodbye to Sally Mullin. She watched her bustle off down the corridor, and, as Sarah closed the door behind her, she breathed a sigh of relief. Then she rushed over to Jenna's basket.

Sarah lifted Jenna up and held her in her arms. Jenna smiled at Sarah and reached out to grab her charm necklace.

"Well, little Princess," murmured Sarah, "I always knew you were special, but I never dreamed you were our own Princess." The baby's dark violet eyes met Sarah's gaze and she looked solemnly at Sarah as if to say, *Well, now you know.*

Sarah gently laid Jenna back in her baby basket. Her head was spinning and her hands shook as she poured herself