

SEPTIMUS HEAP

⚡ BOOK SIX ⚡

Darke



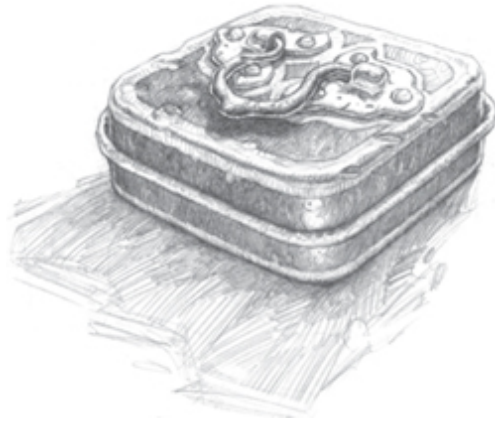
ANGIE SAGE

National Bestselling Author

SEPTIMUS HEAP

BOOK SIX

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Dedication

*For my brother, Jason,
with love*

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Prologue
Banished



It is a Darke and stormy night.

Black clouds hang low over the Castle, shrouding the golden pyramid at the top of the Wizard Tower in a dim mist. In the houses far below, people stir uneasily in their sleep as the rumble of thunder enters their dreams and sends nightmares tumbling from the sky.

Like a giant lightning conductor, the Wizard Tower rears high above the Castle rooftops, **Magykal** purple and indigo lights playing around its iridescent silver sheen. Inside the Tower the duty Storm Wizard prowls the dimly lit Great Hall, checking the **StormScreen** and keeping an eye on the **UnStable** window, which has a tendency to panic in a storm. The duty

Storm Wizard is a little on edge. **Magyk** is not usually affected by a storm, but all Wizards know about the Great Lightning Strike of Long Ago, which briefly drained the Wizard Tower of its **Magyk** and left the rooms of the ExtraOrdinary Wizard badly scorched. No one wants that to happen again—particularly the duty Storm Wizard.

At the top of the Wizard Tower in her as yet unscorched four-poster bed, Marcia Overstrand groans as a familiar nightmare flickers through her sleep. A loud *craaaack* of lightning splits open the cloud above the Tower and zips harmlessly to earth down the duty Storm Wizard's hastily conjured **Conductor**. Marcia sits bolt upright, dark curly hair awry, trapped in her nightmare. Suddenly her green eyes open wide with surprise as a purple ghost shoots through the wall and skids to a halt beside the bed.

“Alther!” gasps Marcia. “What are you *doing*?”

The tall ghost with long white hair tied back in a ponytail is wearing bloodstained ExtraOrdinary Wizard robes. He looks flustered.

“I really hate it when that happens,” he gasps. “Got **Passed Through**. By lightning.”

“I’m very sorry, Alther,” Marcia replies grumpily, “but I don’t see why you had to come and wake me up just to tell me that. *You* may not need to sleep anymore, but *I* certainly do. Anyway, it serves you right for being out in a storm. Can’t think why you want to do that—argh!”

Another *craaaack* of lightning illuminates the purple glass of Marcia’s bedroom window and makes Alther appear almost transparent.

“I wasn’t out there for the fun of it, Marcia, believe me,” says Alther, equally grumpily. “I was coming to see you. As *you* requested.”

“As I requested?” says Marcia blearily. She is still half in her nightmare about Dungeon Number One—a nightmare that always comes when a storm is playing around the top of the Wizard Tower.

“You requested—*ordered* would be a better way of putting it—that I track down Tertius Fume and tell you when I had found him,” says Alther.

Marcia is suddenly wide-awake. “Ah,” she says.

“Ah, indeed, Marcia.”

“So you have *found* him?”

The ghost looks pleased with himself. “Yup,” he says.

“Where?”

“Where do you think?”

Marcia throws back the bedcovers, slips out of bed and pulls on her thick woolen gown—it is cold at the top of the Wizard Tower when the wind blows. “Oh, for goodness’ sake, Alther,” she snaps as she pushes her feet into the purple rabbit slippers that Septimus gave her for her birthday. “I wouldn’t ask if I knew, would I?”

“He’s in Dungeon Number One,” Alther says quietly.

Marcia sits down on the bed rather suddenly. “Oh,” she says, her nightmare replaying itself at double speed. “Bother.”

Ten minutes later, two purple-clothed figures can be seen scurrying along Wizard Way. They are both trying to keep out of the needle-sharp rain that sweeps up the Way, **Passing Through** the leading figure and soaking the one close behind. Suddenly the first figure dives down a small alleyway, closely followed by the second. The alleyway is dark and smelly but at least it is sheltered from the near-horizontal rain.

“Are you sure it’s down here?” asks Marcia, glancing behind. She doesn’t like alleyways.

Alther slows his pace and drops back to walk beside Marcia. “You forget,” he says with a smile, “that not so very long ago, I came down here quite often.”

Marcia shudders. She knows that it was Alther’s faithful visits that kept her alive in Dungeon Number One.

Alther has stopped beside a blackened, brick-built cone that looks like one of the many disused Lock-Ups that can still be seen scattered around the Castle. Somewhat unwillingly, Marcia joins the ghost; her mouth is dry and she feels sick. This is where her nightmare always begins.

Lost in her thoughts, Marcia waits for Alther to unlock the small iron door, which is pockmarked with rust. The ghost gives her a quizzical look. “No can do, Marcia,” he says.

“Huh?”

“Wish I could,” says Alther wistfully, “but, unfortunately, you are going to have to open the door.”

Marcia comes to her senses. “Sorry, Alther.” She takes out the Universal Castle Key from her ExtraOrdinary Wizard belt. Only three of these keys were ever made, and Marcia has two of them: one of her own in her capacity as ExtraOrdinary Wizard, and one that she is keeping safe for Jenna Heap until the day she becomes Queen. The third is lost.