

SEPTIMUS HEAP

✦ BOOK THREE ✦

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#1 National Bestselling Author of *Magyk*

Physik

Book Three of Septimus Heap

by Angie Sage

+> **Prologue** <+
The Portrait in the Attic



Silas Heap and Gringe, the North Gate Gatekeeper, are in a dark and dusty corner of the Palace attic. In front of them is a small door to a **Sealed** room, which Silas Heap, Ordinary Wizard, is about to **UnSeal**. "You see, Gringe," he says, "it's the perfect place. My Counters will never be able to escape from there. I can just **Seal** them in."

Gringe is not so sure. Even he knows that Sealed rooms in attics are best left alone. "I don't like it, Silas," he says. "It feels peculiar. Anyway, just because you've been lucky enough to find a new Colony under the floorboards up 'ere doesn't mean they'll *stay* here."

"They jolly well will stay if they're **Sealed** in, Gringe," says Silas, clutching his box of precious newfound Counters, which he has just caught. "You're just being funny because you won't be able to entice this bunch away."

"I did not entice the last bunch either, Silas Heap. They came of their own accord. Weren't nothing I could do about it."

Silas ignores Gringe. He is trying to remember how to do an **UnSeal Spell**.

Gringe taps his foot impatiently. " 'Urry up, Silas. I got a gate to get back to. Lucy is most odd at the moment and I don't want to leave 'er there alone for long."

Silas Heap closes his eyes so that he can think better. Under his breath, so that Gringe cannot quite hear what he is saying, Silas chants the **Lock Incantation** backward three times, finishing it off with the **UnSeal**. He opens his eyes. Nothing has happened.

"I'm going," Gringe tells him. "Can't 'ang around like a spare part all day. Some of us 'ave work to do."

Suddenly with a loud bang, the door to the **Sealed** room slams open. Silas is triumphant. "See—I *do* know what I'm doing. I *am* a Wizard, Gringe. Oof! What was that?" An icy gust of stale air rushes past Silas and Gringe, dragging their breath right up from their lungs and causing them both to subside into fits of coughing.

"That was cold." Gringe shivers, with goosebumps running up and down his arms. Silas does not reply—he is already in the **UnSealed** room, deciding on the best place to keep his Counter Colony. Curiosity gets the better of Gringe and he tentatively enters the room. It is tiny, little more than a cupboard. Apart from the light of Silas's candle, the room is dark, for the only window that it once had has been bricked up. It is nothing more than an empty space, with dusty floorboards and bare, cracked plaster walls. But it is not—as Gringe suddenly notices—entirely empty. In the dim shadows on the far side of the little room a large, life-size oil painting of a Queen is propped up against the wall.

Silas looks at the portrait. It is a skillful painting of a Castle Queen, from times long past. He can tell that it is old because she is wearing the True Crown, the one that was lost many centuries ago. The Queen has a sharp pointy nose and wears her hair coiled around her ears like a pair of earmuffs. Clinging to her skirts is an Aie-Aie—a horrible little creature with a ratty face, sharp claws and a long snake's tail. Its round, red eyes stare out at Silas as though it would like to bite him with its one long, needle-sharp tooth. The Queen too looks out from the painting but she wears a lofty, disapproving expression. Her head is held high, supported by a starched ruff under her chin and her piercing eyes are reflected in the light of Silas's candle and seem to follow them everywhere.

Gringe shivers. "I wouldn't like to meet 'er out on me own on a dark night,"

he says.

Silas thinks that Gringe is right, *he* wouldn't like to meet her on a dark night either—and neither would his precious Counters. "She'll have to go," says Silas. "I'm not having her upsetting my Counter Colony before they've even got started."

But what Silas does not know is that she has already gone. As soon as he **UnSealed** the room, the ghosts of Queen Etheldredda and her creature stepped out of the portrait, opened the door and, pointy noses in the air, walked and scuttled out—right past Silas and Gringe. The Queen and her Aie-Aie paid them no attention, for they had more important things to do—and at long last they were free to do them.

Snorri Snorrelssen



Snorri Snorrelssen guided her trading barge up the quiet waters of the river toward the Castle. It was a misty autumn afternoon and Snorri was relieved to have left the turbulent tidal waters of the Port behind her. The wind had dropped but enough breeze caught the huge sail of the barge—named *Alfrun*, after her mother who owned it—to enable her to steer the boat safely around Raven's Rock and head for the quay just beyond Sally Mullin's Tea and Ale House.

Two young fishermen, not much older than Snorri herself, had just returned from a day's successful herring catch and were more than happy to catch the heavy hemp ropes that Snorri threw to shore. Eager to show their skills, they tied the ropes around two large posts on the quay and made the *Alfrun* secure. The fishermen were also more than happy to dispense all kinds of advice on how to take the sail down and the best way to stow the ropes, which Snorri ignored, partly because she hardly understood what they were saying but mainly because no one told Snorri Snorrelssen what to do—no one, not even her mother. Especially not her mother.

Snorri, tall for her age, was slim, wiry and surprisingly strong. With the practiced ease of someone who had spent the last two weeks at sea sailing alone, Snorri lowered the great canvas sail and rolled up the vast folds of heavy cloth; then she heaved the ropes into neat coils and secured the tiller. Aware that she was being watched by the fishermen, Snorri locked the hatch

to the hold below, which was full of heavy bales of thick woolen cloth, sacks of pickling spice, great barrels of salted fish and some particularly fine reindeerskin boots. At last—ignoring more offers of help—Snorri pushed the gangplank out and came ashore, leaving Ullr, her small orange cat with a black-tipped tail, to prowl the deck and keep the rats at bay.

Snorri had been at sea for more than two weeks and she had been looking forward to stepping onto firm land again, but as she walked along the quay it felt to her as if she were still on board the *Alfrun*, for the quay seemed to move beneath her feet just as the old barge had done. The fishermen, who should already have gone home to *their* respective mothers, were sitting on a pile of empty lobster pots. "Evening, miss," one of them called out.

Snorri ignored him. She made her way to the end of the quay and took the well-trodden path that led to a large new pontoon, on which a thriving cafe was built. It was a very stylish two-story wooden building with long, low windows that looked out across the river. The cafe looked inviting in the chill early-evening air, with a warm yellow light coming from the oil lamps that hung from the ceiling. As Snorri walked across the wooden walkway that led onto the pontoon she could hardly believe that, at long last, she was here—at the fabled Sally Mullin's Tea and Ale House. Excited, but feeling very nervous, Snorri pushed open the double doors to the cafe and nearly fell over a long line of fire buckets full of sand and water.

There was always a general buzz of friendly conversation in Sally Mullin's cafe, but as soon as Snorri stepped over the threshold the buzz suddenly stopped, as though someone had thrown a switch. Almost in unison, every customer put down their drink and stared at the young stranger who wore the distinctive robes of the Hanseatic League, to which all Northern Traders belonged. Feeling herself blushing and wishing furiously that she wasn't, Snorri advanced toward the bar, determined to order one of Sally's barley cakes and a half-pint mug of the Springo Special Ale that she had heard so much about.

Sally Mullin, a short round woman with an equal dusting of freckles and barley flour on her cheeks, bustled out of the kitchen. Seeing the dark red robes of a Northern Trader and the typical leather headband, her face took on a scowl. "I don't serve Northern Traders in here," she snapped.

Snorri looked puzzled. She was not sure that she understood what Sally had said, although she could tell that Sally was not exactly welcoming.

"You saw the notice on the door," Sally said when Snorri showed no sign of leaving. "No Northern Traders. You are not welcome here, not in my cafe."

"She's only a lass, Sal," someone called out. "Give the girl a chance."

There was a general murmur of assent from the other customers. Sally Mullin gave Snorri a closer look and her expression softened. It was true; she was only a girl—maybe sixteen at the most, thought Sally. She had the typical white-blond hair and pale, almost translucent blue eyes that most of the Traders had, but she did not have that hard-bitten look that Sally had come to remember with a shudder.

"Well..." said Sally, backtracking, "I suppose it's getting on to nightfall and I'm not one to be turning out a young girl into the dark all on her own. What will you have, miss?"

"I ... I will have," Snorri faltered as she tried hard to remember her grammar. Was it, *I will have* or *I shall have*? "I shall have a slice of your very fine barley cake and a half-pint of the Springo Special Ale, if you please."

"Springo Special, eh?" someone called out. "There's a lass after me own heart."

"Be quiet, Tom," Sally chided. "You'd best try the ordinary Springo first," she told Snorri. Sally poured out the ale into a large china mug and pushed it across the counter toward the girl. Snorri took a tentative sip and her face wrinkled in disgust. Sally was not surprised. Springo was an acquired taste and most youngsters thought it was revolting; indeed there were some days when Sally herself thought it was pretty foul. Sally poured a mug of lemon and honey for Snorri and put it on a tray with a large slab of barley cake. The girl looked like she could do with a good meal. Snorri gave Sally a whole silver florin, much to Sally's surprise, and got back a huge pile of pennies in change. Then she sat down at an empty table by the window and looked out at the darkening river.

Conversation in the cafe started up again and Snorri breathed a sigh of relief. Coming into Sally Mullin's cafe on her own had been the hardest thing she had ever done in her life. Harder than taking the *Alfrun* out to sea on her own for the first time, harder than trading for all the goods now in the *Alfrun's* hold with the money she had saved up for years, and much, much harder than the crossing over the great northern sea that separated the land of the Northern Traders from the land of Sally Mullin's Tea and Ale House. But she had done it; Snorri Snorrelssen was following in the footsteps of her father, and no one could stop her. Not even her mother.

Later that evening, Snorri returned to the *Alfrun*. She was met by Ullr in his nighttime guise. The cat emitted a long, low welcoming growl and followed his mistress along the deck. Feeling so full of barley cake that she could barely move, Snorri sat in her favorite place at the prow, stroking the NightUllr, a sleek and powerful panther, black as the night with sea-green eyes and an orange-tipped tail.

Snorri was far too excited to sleep. She sat with her arm draped loosely over Ullr's warm, silky-smooth fur, looking out across the dark expanse of river to the shores of the Farmlands on the opposite banks. Later, as the night grew chill, she wrapped herself in a sample length of the thick woolen cloth that she planned to sell—and for a good price, too—in the Traders' Market, which started in two weeks' time. Balanced on her lap was a map of the Castle, showing how to get to the marketplace; on the reverse of the map were detailed instructions on how to obtain a license for a stall and all manner of rules and regulations about buying and selling. Snorri lit the oil lamp she had brought up from her small cabin below and settled down to read the rules and regulations. The wind was still now, and the fine drizzle of the early evening had died down; the air was crisp and clear, and Snorri breathed in the smells of the land—so different and foreign from the one she was used to.

As the evening drew on, small groups of customers began to leave Sally's cafe, until just after midnight Snorri saw Sally extinguish the oil lamps and bolt the door. Snorri smiled happily. Now she had the river to herself, just her, Ullr and the *Alfrun*, alone in the night. As the barge rocked gently in the outgoing tide, Snorri felt her eyes closing. She put down the tedious list of permitted weights and measures, pulled the woolen cloth more tightly around

her and gazed out across the river for just one last time before she went down to her cabin. And then she saw it.

A long, pale boat outlined in a greenish glow was coming around Raven's Rock. Snorri sat very still and watched the boat make slow, silent progress up the middle of the river, steadily drawing closer to the *Alfrun*. As it drew near, Snorri saw it shimmering in the light of the moon, and a shiver ran down her spine, for Snorri Snorrelssen, Spirit-Seer, knew exactly what she was looking at—a Spirit Ship. Snorri whistled under her breath, for she had never seen a boat quite like this one. Snorri was used to seeing wrecks of old fishing boats steered by their drowned skippers, forever seeking safe harbor. Every now and then she had seen the ghost of a warrior long-ship, limping home after a fierce battle, and once she had seen the ghostly tall ship of a rich merchant, with treasure pouring from a gaping hole in its side, but she had never seen a Royal Barge—complete with the ghost of its Queen.

Snorri got to her feet, took out her Spirit eyeglass, which the wise woman in the Ice Palace had given her, and focused it on the apparition as it drifted noiselessly by, propelled by eight ghostly oars. The barge was decked out in flags that fluttered in a wind that had died long ago; it was painted in swirling patterns of gold and silver and was covered in a rich red canopy, strung from ornate pillars of gold. Beneath the canopy sat a tall, erect figure staring fixedly ahead. Her pointed chin rested on a high, starched ruff, she wore a simple crown and sported a decidedly old-fashioned hairstyle: two coiled plaits of hair tightly wound around her ears. Next to her sat a small, almost hairless creature that Snorri took to be a particularly ugly dog until she saw its long, snakelike tail curled around one of the gold pillars. Snorri watched the ghost boat drift by, and she shivered as a chill ran through her—for there was something different, something *substantial*, about its occupants.

Snorri put away her eyeglass and climbed through the hatch to her cabin, leaving Ullr on guard on the deck. She hung her lamp from a hook in the cabin roof, and the soft yellow light from the lamp made the cabin feel warm and cozy. It was small, for most of the space on a Trader's barge was taken up with the hold, but Snorri loved it. The cabin was lined with sweet-smelling applewood that her father, Olaf, had once brought home as a present for her mother and was beautifully fitted out, for her father had been a talented