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Opening extract from

# Queste: Septimus Heap Book Four

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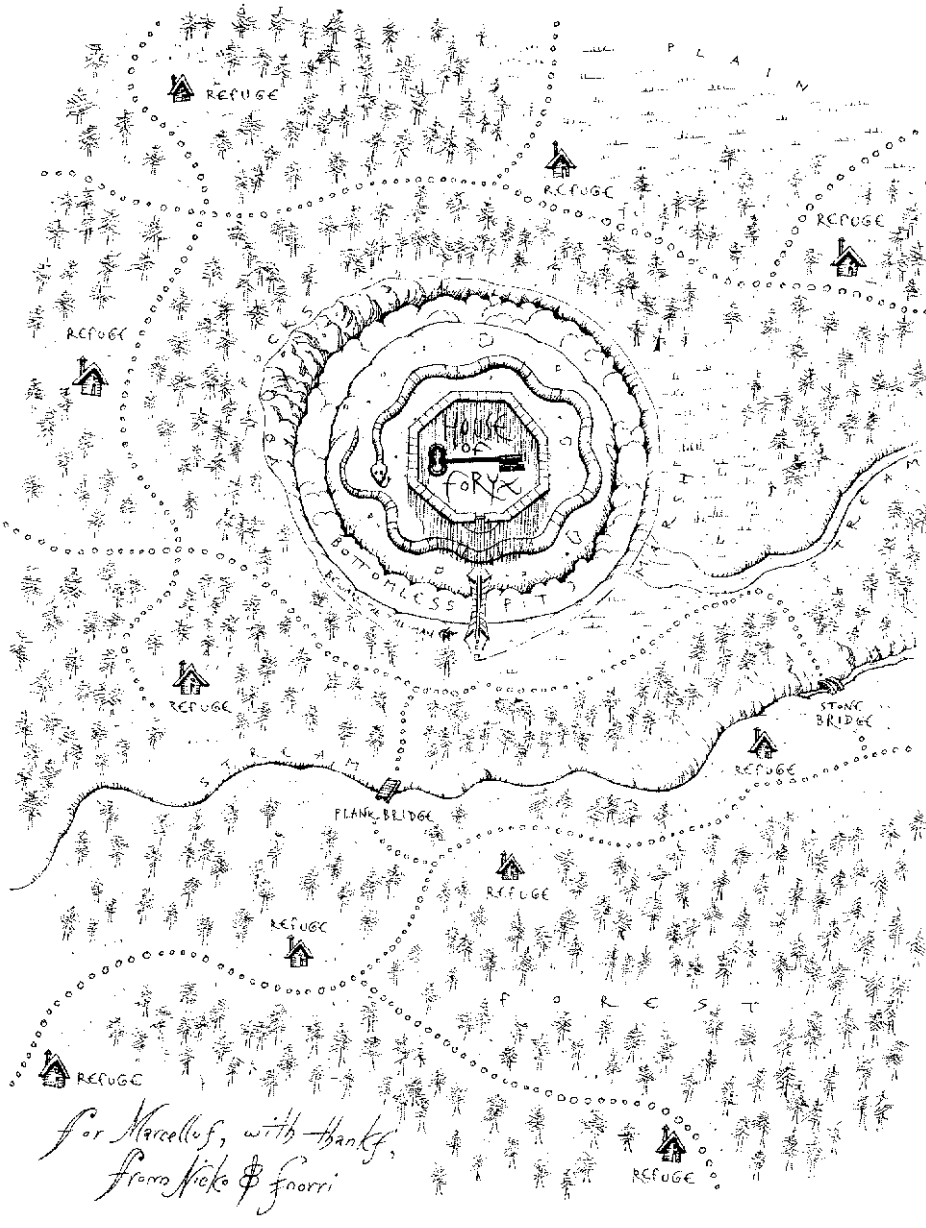
**Angie Sage**

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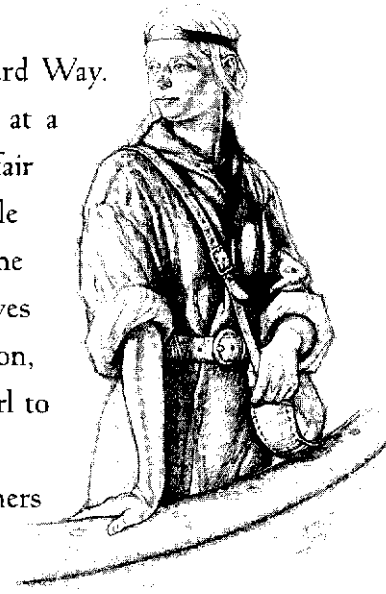
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*For Marcellus, with thanks,*
*from Nicko & Snorri*

# PROLOGUE: NICKO AND SNORRI



*It is the weekly market* on Wizard Way. A girl and a boy have stopped at a pickled herring stall. The boy has fair hair, twisted and braided in the style that sailors will be wearing sometime in the distant future. His green eyes have a serious, almost sad expression, and he is trying to persuade the girl to let him buy her some herring.

The girl, too, has fair hair, but hers is almost white. It is straight and long, held in place with a leather headband, the kind worn by Northern Traders. Her pale blue eyes look at the boy. "No," she tells him. "I cannot eat it. It will remind me too much of home."

"But you love herring," he says.

The stallholder is an elderly woman with pale blue eyes like the girl. She has not sold a single herring all morning and she is determined not to let a chance of a sale go by. "If you love herring, you must try this," she tells the girl. "This is done the proper way. It's how herring should be pickled." She cuts a piece, sticks a small pointy wooden stick into it and hands it to the girl.

"Go on, Snorri," says the boy, almost pleading. "Try it. *Please.*"

Snorri smiles. "All right, Nicko. For you, I will try it."

"It is good?" asks the stallholder.

"It is good, Old Mother," says Snorri. "Very good."

Nicko is thinking. He is thinking that the stallholder speaks like Snorri. She has the same lilting accent and she does not have the Old Speak patterns that he and Snorri have become used to in the few months they have already spent in this Time. "Excuse me," he says. "Where are you from?"

A wistful look comes into the old woman's eyes. "You would not understand," she tells him.

Nicko persists. "But you are not from here," he says. "I can tell by the way you speak. You speak like Snorri here." He puts

his arm around Snorri's shoulders and she blushes.

The old woman shrugs. "It is true I am not from here. I am from farther away than you could possibly imagine."

Now Snorri is looking at the old woman too. She begins to speak in her own language, the language of *her* Time.

The old woman's eyes light up at hearing her own tongue spoken as she had spoken it as a child. "Yes," she says in reply to Snorri's tentative question. "I am Ells. Ells Larusdottir."

Snorri speaks again and the old woman replies warily. "Yes, I do—or did—have a sister called Herdis. How do you know? Are you one of those thought-snatchers?"

Snorri shakes her head. "No," she says, still in her own language. "But I am a Spirit-Seer. As was my grandmother Herdis Larusdottir. And my mother, Alfrún, who was not yet born when my great-aunt Ells disappeared through the Glass."

Nicko wonders what Snorri could possibly be saying to make the old woman grip her flimsy stall table with such ferocity that her knuckles go white. Although Snorri has been teaching him her language, she spoke to the old woman much faster than he was used to and the only word he recognised was "mother".

* * *

And this is how it happens that Great-Aunt Ells takes Nicko and Snorri to her tall, thin house in the Castle walls, throws a log into her tiled stove and tells them her story. Many hours later Snorri and Nicko leave Great-Aunt Ells's house full of pickled herring and hope. Most precious of all, they have a map showing the way to the House of Foryx, the Place Where All Times Do Meet. That evening Snorri makes two copies of the map and gives one to Marcellus Pye, the Alchemist in whose house they are staying. For the next few weeks their days are full of plans as they prepare for their journey into the unknown.

It is a grey and rainy day when Marcellus Pye stands on the Castle Quay and waves their boat farewell. He wonders if he will ever see them again. He is still wondering.

# I

# NICKO'S RELEASE



*Jannit Maarten, boatbuilder, was on* her way to the Palace.

Jannit, a lean, spare woman with a long stride and a sailor's pigtail, had never in her strangest dreams thought that she would one day be tying up her rowing boat at Snake Slipway and heading for the Palace Gates. But, on a chilly grey spring day, here she was, doing just that—and feeling more than a little apprehensive.

Some minutes later Hildegarde, the sub-Wizard on door duty at the Palace, looked up from her night-school assignment titled "The Politics, Principles and Practice of Transformation". She saw Jannit hesitantly walking over the wide plank bridge that spanned the ornamental moat and led to the Palace doors. Happy to have a break, Hildegarde jumped to her feet with a smile and said, "Good morning, Miss Maarten. How may I help you?"

"You know my name!" said Jannit, amazed.

Hildegarde did not tell Jannit that she made it her business to know everyone's name. Instead she said, "Of course I do, Miss Maarten. Your boatyard repaired my sister's boat last year. She was very pleased with the work."

Jannit had no idea who this sub-Wizard's sister could possibly be, but she could not help wondering what boat it was. Jannit remembered boats. She smiled awkwardly and took off her battered sailor's boater, which she had worn especially for her visit to the Palace—it was Jannit's equivalent of a party frock and tiara.

"Ladies are welcome to keep their hats on," said Hildegarde.

"Oh?" said Jannit, wondering what that had to do with her.

Jannit did not think of herself as a lady.

"Is there someone you wish to see?" Hildegarde prompted, quite used to tongue-tied visitors.

Jannit twisted her boater around in her hands. "Sarah Heap," she said. "Please."

"I will send a messenger. May I tell her what it is you wish to see her about?"

After a long pause Jannit replied. "Nicko Heap," she said, staring at her hat.

"Ah. Please take a seat for a moment, Miss Maarten. I will find someone to take you to her right away."

Ten minutes later Sarah Heap, thinner than she had been but still in possession of the usual quota of Heap straw-coloured curls, was at the small table in her sitting room. She gazed at Jannit with worried green eyes.

Jannit was perched on the edge of a large sofa. Although Jannit felt ill at ease, this was not the reason she was on the edge of her seat. It was because that was the only space left on the sofa—the rest was covered with the clutter that always seemed to follow Sarah Heap. With a couple of plant pots digging into her back and a teetering pile of towels settling cosily up against

her, Jannit sat up very straight and then almost jumped off the sofa as a soft quacking came from a pile of clothes beside the fire. To Jannit's amazement, a pink-skinned, stubble-covered duck wearing a multicoloured crocheted waistcoat emerged from the pile, waddled over and sat beside her feet.

Sarah clicked her fingers. "Come here, Ethel," she said to the duck. The duck got up and went to Sarah, who picked it up and sat it on her lap. "One of Jenna's creatures," Sarah said with a smile. "She never was one for pets and suddenly she has two. Strange. I don't know where she got them from."

Jannit smiled politely, unsure how to begin telling Sarah what she had to say. There was an awkward silence and at last she said, "Um. Well . . . it's a big place you have here."

"Oh, yes. Very big," said Sarah.

"Wonderful for a large family," said Jannit, immediately wishing she hadn't.

"*If* they want to live with you," said Sarah bitterly. "But *not* if four of them have decided to live in the Forest with a coven of witches and they refuse to come home, even for a visit. And then of course there's Simon. I know he's done wrong, but he's still my first baby. I miss him *so* much; I would love to have him living here. It's time he settled down. He could do a

lot worse than Lucy Gringe, whatever his father says. There's plenty of room for them all here—and children, too. And then there's my little Septimus. We've been apart all these years and there he is, stuck at the top of that Wizard Tower with Marcia Fusspot Overstrand, who whenever she sees me has the *nerve* to ask if I am enjoying seeing so much of Septimus. I suppose she thinks it's some kind of joke, since I hardly *ever* see him now. In fact ever since Nicko . . ."

"Ah," said Jannit, seizing her chance. "Nicko. That's what—well, I expect you can guess why I'm here."

"No," said Sarah, who could but didn't want to even think about it.

"Oh." Jannit looked down at her boater and then, very purposefully, put it on top of a pile of something behind her. Sarah's heart sank. She knew what was coming.

Jannit cleared her throat and began. "As you know, Nicko has been gone for six months now and as far as I understand, no one knows where he is or when—indeed, *if*—he is ever coming back. In fact—and I am very sorry to say this—I have heard that he will never return."

Sarah caught her breath. No one had dared to say this to her face before.

"I am very sorry to have to come here like this, Madam Heap, but—"

"Oh, it's Sarah. Please, just call me Sarah."

"Sarah. Sarah, I am sorry, but we cannot struggle on without Nicko any longer. The summer season is looming, when even more foolhardy idiots will be putting to sea to try and catch a few herring. They'll all be wanting their boats ready, plus the fact that the Port barge is in for repair *again* after this month's storms—well, we are facing our busiest time. I'm so sorry, but while Nicko is still apprenticed to me, according to the Boatbuilders Association training regulations—which are an absolute minefield, but I do have to abide by them—I cannot engage anyone else. I urgently need a new apprentice, especially as Rupert Gringe is nearing the end of his Articles soon."

Sarah Heap clasped her hands together tightly, and Jannit noticed that her fingernails were bitten down to the quick. Sarah was trembling and did not speak for some seconds. Then, just as Jannit thought she would have to break the silence, Sarah said, "He *will* come back. I don't believe they went back in Time—no one can do that. Jenna and Septimus just thought they did. It was some wicked, *wicked* spell. I keep

asking Marcia to sort it out. She could Find Nicko, I know she could, but she's done nothing. *Nothing*. It's all *a complete nightmare*!" Sarah's voice rose in despair.

"I'm so sorry," Jannit murmured. "I really am."

Sarah took a deep breath and tried to calm down. "It's not your fault, Jannit. You were very good to Nicko. He loved working for you. But of course you must find another apprentice, although I would ask you one thing."

"Of course," replied Jannit.

"When Nicko returns, will you renew his apprenticeship?"

"I would be delighted to." Jannit smiled, pleased that Sarah had asked for something she could readily agree to. "Even if I have a new apprentice, Nicko would step straight into Rupert's shoes and become my senior apprentice—or journeyman as we call it down at the yard."

Sarah smiled wistfully. "That would be wonderful," she said.

"And now"—this was the part Jannit had been dreading—"I am afraid I must trouble you to sign the Release." Jannit stood up to pull a roll of parchment from her coat pocket, and the pile of towels, suddenly losing their support, fell down and took her place.

Jannit cleared a space on the table and unrolled the long piece of parchment that formed Nicko's apprentice Indentures. She secured it top and bottom with whatever came to hand—a well-thumbed novel called *Love on the High Seas* and a large bag of biscuits.

"Oh." Sarah caught her breath at the sight of Nicko's spidery signature—along with her own and Jannit's—at the foot of the parchment.

Hastily, Jannit placed the Release—a small slip of parchment—over the signatures and said, "Sarah, as one of the parties who signed the Indentures, I have to ask you to sign the Release. I have a pen if you . . . if you can't find one."

Sarah couldn't find one. She took the pen and ink bottle that Jannit had taken from her other coat pocket, dipped the pen in the ink and—feeling as though she was signing Nicko's life away—she signed the parchment. A tear dripped on to the ink and smudged it; both Jannit and Sarah pretended not to notice.

Jannit signed her own signature next to Sarah's; then she took a needle threaded with thick sail cotton from her bottomless coat pocket and sewed the Release over the original signatures.

Nicko Heap was no longer apprenticed to Jannit Maarten.

Jannit snatched up the hat balanced behind her and fled. It was only when she reached her boat that she realised she had taken Sarah's gardening hat, but she stuffed it on her head regardless and rowed slowly back to her boatyard.

Silas Heap and Maxie the wolfhound found Sarah in her herb garden. Sarah was, for some reason Silas did not understand, wearing a sailor's boater. She also had Jenna's duck with her. Silas was not keen on the duck—the stubble gave him goose bumps when he looked at it and he thought the crocheted waistcoat was a sign that Sarah was going a little crazy.

"Oh, *there* you are," he said, heading along the neatly tended grass path towards the bed of mint that Sarah was absentmindedly poking at. "I've been looking everywhere for you."

Sarah gave Silas a wan half smile in reply, and as Silas and Maxie ploughed through the defenceless patch of mint, she did not venture even a small protest. Silas, like Sarah, looked careworn. His straw-coloured Heap curls had recently acquired a grey dusting of salt and pepper, his blue Ordinary Wizard robes hung loosely from him, and his silver Ordinary

Wizard belt was pulled in a notch or two more than usual. Accompanied by the heady smell of crushed mint, Silas reached Sarah and launched straight into his prepared speech.

"You're not going to like this," he said, "but my mind is made up. Maxie and I are going into the Forest and we're not coming out until we've found him."

Sarah picked up the duck and hugged it tightly to her. It let out a strangled *quack*. "You are a pig-headed fool," she said. "How many times have I told you that if you would only get Marcia to do something about this horrible Darke Magyk that has trapped Nicko somewhere, then he'd be back in a moment. But you *won't*. You go on and on about the stupid Forest—"

Silas sighed. "I told you, Marcia says it's not Darke Magyk. There's no point asking her over and over again." Sarah glowered so Silas tried another tack. "Look, Sarah, I can't just do nothing, it's driving me crazy. It's been six months now since Jenna and Septimus came back without Nicko and I'm not waiting any longer. You had the same dream as I did. You *know* it means something."

Sarah remembered the dream she had had a few months after Nicko disappeared. He was walking through a forest deep

in snow; it was twilight and in front of him a yellow light shone through the trees. There was a girl beside him, a little taller and older than he was, Sarah thought. The girl had long, white-blond hair and was wrapped in a wolfskin pelt. She pointed to the light ahead. Nicko took the girl's hand and together they hurried towards the light. At that moment Silas had started snoring and Sarah had woken up with a jolt. The next morning Silas had excitedly described a dream he had had about Nicko. To Sarah's amazement it was identical to hers.

Since that moment Silas had become convinced that Nicko was in the Forest and he wanted to go and search for him. But Sarah had disagreed. The forest in the dream was not, she had told Silas, the Castle Forest. It was different, she was sure of that. Silas, in turn, had also disagreed. He knew the Forest, he said—and he was *sure* it was the Castle Forest.

In their time together Sarah and Silas did not always agree, but they would quickly resolve their differences, often when Silas brought home a few wildflowers or herbs for Sarah as a peace offering. But this time there was no peace offering. Silas and Sarah's arguments about forests became increasingly bitter and they soon lost sight of the real reason for their unhappiness: Nicko's disappearance.

But now Silas had just bumped into the departing Jannit Maarten, who was carrying Nicko's ex-Apprentice Indentures. He had made his mind up. He was going into the Forest to find Nicko and *no one* was going to stop him—particularly Sarah.