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PROMOTION

Septimus Heap, ExtraOrdinary Apprentice, was woken up by his House Mouse leaving a note on his pillow. Blearily he opened his eyes and, with a sense of relief, remembered where he was—back in his bedroom at the top of the Wizard Tower, Queste completed. And then he remembered that Jenna, Nicko, Snorri and Beetle were still not home. Septimus sat up, suddenly awake. Today, no matter what Marcia said, he was going to go and bring them back.



Septimus sat up, picked up the note and brushed a couple of mouse droppings off his pillow. He carefully unfolded the tiny piece of paper and read:

FROM THE DESK OF
MARCIA OVERSTRAND
EXTRAORDINARY WIZARD

Septimus, I would very much like
to see you at midday in my study.
I hope that is convenient for you.
Marcia

Septimus let out a low whistle. Even though he had been Marcia's Apprentice for nearly three years, he had never had an appointment with her before. If Marcia wished to speak to Septimus, she would interrupt whatever he was doing and speak to him. Septimus would have to stop what he was doing *right away* and *listen*.

But today, his second day back from the Queste, it seemed that something had changed. As Septimus read the note again, just to make sure, the distant chimes of the Drapers Yard clock

drifted through his window. He counted them—eleven—and breathed a sigh of relief. It would not be good to be late for his first-ever appointment with Marcia. Septimus had slept late, but that was on Marcia's instructions; she had also told him that he did not have to clean the Library that morning. Septimus looked at the rainbow-coloured beam of sunlight filtering through the purple glass in his window and shook his head with a smile—he could get used to this.

An hour later, dressed in a new set of green Apprentice robes that had been left out in his room for him, Septimus knocked politely on Marcia's door.

"Come in, Septimus." Marcia's voice drifted through the thick oak door. Septimus pushed open the creaky door and stepped inside. Marcia's study was a small wood-pannelled room with a large desk set under the window and a fuzz of Magyk in the air that set Septimus's skin tingling. It was lined with shelves on which were crammed moth-eaten leather-bound books, stacks of yellowing papers tied with purple ribbons and a myriad of brown and black glass pots that contained ancient things even Marcia was not sure what to do with. Among the pots Septimus saw his brother Simon's pride and joy—a wooden box with *Sleuth* written on it in Simon's loopy Heap

handwriting. Septimus could not help but glance out of the tall, narrow window. He loved the view from Marcia's study—a breathtaking vista across the rooftops of the Castle to the river and beyond that to the green slopes of the Farmlands. Far, far in the distance he could see the misty blue line of the foothills of the Badlands.

Marcia was sitting behind her desk in her much-worn—but very comfortable—tall purple chair. She looked fondly at her Apprentice, who was unusually well turned out, and smiled.

"Good afternoon, Septimus," she said. "Do sit down." Marcia indicated the smaller but equally comfortable green chair on the other side of the desk. "I hope you slept well?"

Septimus took his seat. "Yes, thank you," he replied a little warily. Why was Marcia being so *nice*?

"You've had a difficult week, Septimus," Marcia began. "Well, we all have. It is very good to have you back. I have something for you." She opened a small drawer, took out two purple silk ribbons and laid them on the desk.

Septimus knew what the ribbons were—the purple stripes of a Senior Apprentice, which, if his Apprenticeship went well, he would get to wear in his final year. It was nice of Marcia to let him know that she would make him a Senior Apprentice

when the time came, he thought, but his final year was a long way off, and Septimus knew only too well that a lot could go wrong before then.

"Do you know what these are?" Marcia asked.

Septimus nodded.

"Good. They are yours. I am making you Senior Apprentice."

"What, *now*?"

Marcia smiled broadly. "Yes, now."

"Now? Like, *today*?"

"Yes, Septimus, today. I trust the ends of your sleeves are still clean. You didn't get any egg on them at breakfast, did you?"

Septimus inspected his sleeves. "No, they're fine."

Marcia stood up and so did Septimus—an Apprentice must never sit when his tutor is standing. Marcia picked up the ribbons and placed them on the hems of Septimus's bright green sleeves. In a puff of Magykal purple mist, the ribbons curled themselves around the hems of the sleeves and became part of his tunic. Septimus stared at them, amazed. He didn't know what to say. But Marcia did.

"Now, Septimus, you need to know a little about the rights and duties of a Senior Apprentice. You may determine fifty

percent of your own projects and also your main timetable—within reason, of course. You may be asked to deputise for me at the basic-level Wizard Tower meetings—for which, incidentally, I would be very grateful. As Senior Apprentice, you may come and go without asking my permission, although it is considered courteous to inform me where you are going and at what time you intend to return. But as you are still so young, I would add that I do require you to be back in the Wizard Tower by nine P.M. on weekdays—midnight at the *latest* on special occasions—understood?"

Still gazing at the Magykal purple stripes shimmering on the ends of his sleeves, Septimus nodded. "Understood . . . I think . . . but why . . . ?"

"Because," Marcia said, "you are the only Apprentice *ever* to return from the Queste. Not only did you return *alive*, but you returned having successfully completed it. And—even more incredible—you were sent on this . . . this terrible thing before you had even got halfway through your Apprenticeship—and you *still* did it. You used your Magykal skills to better effect than many Wizards in this Tower could ever hope to do. This is why you are now Senior Apprentice. OK?"

"OK." Septimus smiled. "But . . ."

"But what?"

"I couldn't have done the Queste without Jenna and Beetle. And they're still stuck in that smelly little net loft in the Trading Post. So are Nicko and Snorri. We *promised* to go right back for them."

"And we will," Marcia replied. "I am sure they did not expect us to turn around and fly back immediately, Septimus. Besides, I haven't had a moment since we returned. This morning I was up early getting some ghastly potion from Zelda for Ephaniah and Hildegarde—both of whom are still very sick. I need to keep an eye on Ephaniah tonight, but I shall set off on Spit Fyre first thing tomorrow morning to collect them all. They'll be back very soon, I promise."

Septimus looked at his purple ribbons, which had a beautiful Magykal sheen, like oil on water. He remembered Marcia's words: *"As Senior Apprentice, you may come and go without asking my permission, although it is considered courteous to inform me where you are going and at what time you intend to return."*

"I shall get them," he said, swiftly getting into Senior Apprentice mode.

"No, Septimus," Marcia replied, already forgetting that she was now talking to a *Senior* Apprentice. "It is far too risky, and

you are tired after the Queste. You need to rest. *I* shall go."

"Thank you for your offer, Marcia," Septimus said, a trifle formally, in the way he thought Senior Apprentices probably should speak. "However, I intend to go myself. I shall be setting off on Spit Fyre in just over an hour's time. I shall return the day after tomorrow evening by midnight, as this can reasonably be classified, I think, as a special occasion."

"Oh." Marcia wished she hadn't informed Septimus quite so fully on the rights of a Senior Apprentice. She sat down and regarded Septimus with a thoughtful look. Her new Senior Apprentice seemed to have grown up suddenly. His bright green eyes had a newly confident air as they steadily returned her gaze, and—yes, she had known something was different the moment he had walked in—he had *combed his hair.*

"Shall I come and see you off?" Marcia asked quietly.

"Yes, please," Septimus replied. "That would be very nice. I'll be down at the dragon field in just under an hour." At the study door he stopped and turned. "Thank you, Marcia," he said with a broad grin. "Thank you very much indeed."

Marcia returned his smile and watched her Senior Apprentice walk out of her study with a new spring in his step.