Helping your children choose books they will love

I reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

Fyre: Septimus Heap book 7

Written by

Angie Sage

Published by

Bloomsbury Children's Books

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

✲ PROLOGUE ✲
HARBINGER

A flame burns at midnight. On an island in the wild Marram Marshes, a young woman holds up a lantern. Her long dark hair blows in the warm wind, salty from the sea; the lantern light glints off the gold circlet around her head and the golden edging to her long red robes – the robes of a Castle Queen.

The Queen is not alone. Beside her is an old man with long, wavy white hair held back with an ExtraOrdinary Wizard headband. He is resplendent in purple robes richly embroidered with Magykal symbols – this is the very first ExtraOrdinary Wizard, Hotep-Ra.

The island on which they stand is an ancient Listening Place, and Hotep-Ra is Listening carefully. As he stands statue-still, absorbed in something far away, his frown deepens. "It is as I feared," he whispers. "They have discovered me at last."

The Queen does not understand Magyk, but she respects it because it once saved her daughter's life. She nods sadly. She knows that this will take Hotep-Ra away from her forever.

A flame burns at half past midnight. The Queen and Hotep-Ra are underground, and the light from the lantern shows a smooth white wall covered in bright columns of hieroglyphs.

The Queen is searching for a symbol. She soon finds it: a blue-and-gold circle enclosing a dragon. She places her hand on the circle and they wait. The Queen sees Hotep-Ra twist the ring on his right index finger: a delicate gold dragon with its tail in its mouth and a bright-green emerald for its eye. The ring is beautifully made, but the loveliest thing about it is the soft yellow light that comes from deep within and glows in the shadows of his hand.

And now, with a deep, slow rumble, the wall of hieroglyphs begins to move, rolling back to reveal a dark, wide space before them. The Queen smiles at Hotep-Ra. He returns her smile a little sadly and together they step forward.

The Queen holds up her lantern and its light illuminates a pair of brilliant white marble columns that rise up into the darkness. They walk between the columns, and progress slowly across the mosaic floor, bright with reds, yellows, whites and greens. And then they are there. The Queen hands her lantern to Hotep-Ra and he holds it high so that its light shines on the most beautiful creature he has ever seen: his faithful Dragon Boat.

The Dragon Boat's hull is broad and sturdy, built for the sea, and recently Hotep-Ra has gilded it. This – and the mast with its azure sail – is the inanimate part of the boat. The rest is living dragon. Tucked neatly alongside the hull are the dragon's wings, shimmering folds of green. Her head and neck are the prow and her tail is the stern. The half boat, half dragon lies in a deep sleep, alone in the darkness of an ancient underground temple, but she is awakened by the opening of the wall. Drowsily she raises her head, arching her neck upwards like that of a swan. The Queen approaches the

dragon quietly, careful not to alarm her. The dragon opens her eyes, she bows her head and the Queen loops her arms around the dragon's neck.

Hotep-Ra hangs back. He looks at his Dragon Boat, resting on the mosaic floor as if waiting for the water to rise and carry her away to distant lands. Indeed, that was what he had planned for her, to take her on the last journey of his old age. But now that his enemies have tracked him down, Hotep-Ra knows he must leave his Dragon Boat hidden safe below the ground, keeping her secrets from them. He sighs. The Dragon Boat must await the time when she will be needed by another Dragon Master. Hotep-Ra does not know who that will be, but he knows that one day he will meet him.

The Queen promises the Dragon Boat that she will return in a year to the day, but Hotep-Ra promises the Dragon Boat nothing. He pats the dragon's nose, then turns and walks quickly from the temple. The Queen runs after him and together they watch the wall of hieroglyphs rumble closed once more.

They walk slowly along the sandy passageway, which takes them to one of the hidden exits near the edge of the island. There, Hotep-Ra pulls off his Dragon Ring. To the Queen's amazement, he tosses the ring on to the sandy floor as if it were nothing to him. It lies on the floor, its light fading away.

"But that's your *ring*," whispers the Queen, shocked.

Hotep-Ra gives a weary smile. "Not any more," he says.

The Queen and the ExtraOrdinary Wizard return to the Castle, but Hotep-Ra does not leave right away. He knows he is running the risk of drawing his enemies to all that he cares

about, but there are things he wishes to do in order to make the Castle and its Queen as safe as he can.

Hotep-Ra Engenders protected Ways to allow the Queen to visit the Dragon Boat and other places that are special to her in safety. He fills his Wizard Tower with all the Magykal power he can spare and sets up a system of Questes for the brightest and best ExtraOrdinary Apprentices. That way he believes that he will still get news of the Castle and will be able to give advice if needed. He asks the Queen to visit his beloved Dragon Boat every MidSummer Day, and deep in the Castle wall he creates a Dragon House as a place for the Dragon Boat to rest when one day it will be safe for her to come to the Castle.

But Hotep-Ra has stayed too long.

Forty-nine hours after he Listened to his enemies approaching, Hotep-Ra is on the Palace landing stage, saying farewell to the Queen. It is a dark and thunderous day, with a spattering of rain that mirrors the Queen's feelings about Hotep-Ra's departure.

Her barge lies ready to take him to the Port, where he has a ship waiting. As Hotep-Ra is about to step aboard there is a massive clap of thunder and the Queen screams. But she does not scream because of the thunder; she screams because of what she sees flying out from the black cloud overhead – two Masters of the Darke Arts, Warrior Wizards, Shamandrigger Saarn and Dramindonnor Naarn. The Wizards shoot down from the sky, a trail of darkness streaming from their robes, which spread out like ravens' wings, showing their iridescent blue-green armour beneath. Like two huge birds of prey the Wizards drop down, their piercing green eyes focused on their quarry below.

Hotep-Ra's enemies have found him.

The last time they found him, Hotep-Ra was saved by the Dragon Boat, but now he knows he will have to face them alone. The Queen, however, has other ideas. From her belt she takes a tiny crossbow and loads it. And then, as Shamandrigger Saarn and Dramindonnor Naarn swoop in for what they think will be the kill, the Queen shoots the bolt.

It hits Dramindonnor just below the fourth rib on his left-hand side. He crashes to the ground, and the landing stage shudders with the force. But the Darke Wizard merely winces and as the blood gushes out, he Seals his heart. Meanwhile the Queen has reloaded her crossbow and is lining up the second bolt. Hotep-Ra panics; he knows the Queen has no idea what she is dealing with. He throws a SafeShield around the Queen – much to her disgust – but not before she has also shot Shamandrigger in the heart. The Warrior Wizard drops to the ground, but he too Seals the wound just in time.

The Wizards get to their feet, and the Queen is horrified to see they are huge – ten feet tall – and clasping the notorious Volatile Wands that Hotep-Ra has described to her. Like machines, in perfect time – *one-two, one-two* – they advance on the SafeShield. They speak one sentence between them.

"For this."

"We will."

"Kill you and."

"Your descendants."

"We will."

"Never."

"Forget."

Under the assault of the Volatile Wands, the Queen's

SafeShield begins to fail. Hotep-Ra grasps his Flyte Charm and shoots up into the air, knowing that the Wizards will follow him.

And they do.

In these ancient days, the Art of Flyte is yet to be lost. But it is still unusual enough to bring the Castle below to a standstill, especially as it involves a fight between three powerful Wizards. But soon the spectators are racing for cover as Thunderflashes are thrown and the foundations of buildings begin to shake. The Castle people become anxious. Although many remember a time when there was no Wizard Tower or ExtraOrdinary Wizard, they have grown to like Hotep-Ra. He has been a good man and no problem has been too small for his Magyk to help. As they peer nervously from their windows, they become very worried. Two Wizards against one is not fair. And it looks like Hotep-Ra is getting the worst of it.

Hotep-Ra may be old and no longer strong, but he is still clever. He lures the Darke Wizards to the golden pyramid at the top of the Wizard Tower, where he stands, delicately balanced on its very tip – a tiny silver square – concentrating all his Magykal power for one last chance.

To the Darke Wizards, Hotep-Ra looks like a wounded animal at bay. They sense victory and begin a favourite Destruction. They fly around the top of the pyramid, encircling Hotep-Ra in a blistering circle of Fyre. This, however, suits Hotep-Ra very well. He begins to chant a long and complex Illusion Incantation, the sound of which the roaring of the flames conveniently drowns.

But the circle of Fyre draws ever closer and the two Darke Wizards hover, waiting for the moment it will meet and finally

Hex Hotep-Ra. Then they will have a little fun with their enemy – with the help of a spider or two.

Hotep-Ra is reaching the end of his Incantation. The heat of the Fyre is blistering; he can smell the wool of his robes singeing and he can wait no longer. To the shock of the Darke Wizards, Hotep-Ra shoots up through the circle of Fyre, trailing flames behind him. He shouts the last words of the Illusion Incantation and becomes Invisible.

The Illusion works perfectly. Shamandrigger Saarn and Dramindonnor Naarn stare at each other in horror – in place of his friend, each sees Hotep-Ra and draws the conclusion that Hotep-Ra has killed him. From within his Invisibilty, Hotep-Ra watches as, maddened with fury and grief, the Darke Wizards chase each other across the rooftops and head out from the Castle.

Hotep-Ra would like to leave them to their fate, but he knows he must make sure they do not return. As he flies off after the Wizards, Hotep-Ra hears a tremendous crash. He looks down to see the top of the golden pyramid buried point down in the Wizard Tower Courtyard below – the circle of Fyre has cut through it like a wire through butter.

Hotep-Ra tails the Warrior Wizards to Bleak Creek, where he watches them battle for a day and a night – so evenly matched that neither can gain any advantage. Finally, in a frenzy, they circle each other faster and faster, swooping low over the water until they create a deep, dark whirlpool just outside the mouth of the creek. The force of the whirlpool is so great that it drags the Wizards down with it, shrieking with rage as they go.

Hotep-Ra follows. Using the Darke Art of Suspension

Under Water (Hotep-Ra is a Master of many Darke arts, although he usually chooses not to use them) he dives in after the Wizards to make an end of them. But at the bottom of the whirlpool he finds that the vortex has broken through the riverbed and entered a cavern in the Darke Halls, which is an ancient refuge for all things evil. Hotep-Ra drags the Wizards from the entrance to the Darke Halls; the Wizards fight him all the way but desperation lends Hotep-Ra strength. With his last remnants of energy he hauls the Wizards up to the surface and, like a cork from a bottle, he emerges from the depths, dragging the Darke Wizards with him.

The Queen's barge is waiting for him. She has followed him to Bleak Creek, and now the barge's rowers are circling while the Queen stands at the prow, staring anxiously at the vortex: she knows that Hotep-Ra is somewhere beneath the water. But when he surfaces, the Queen is horrified – all she can see are the two Darke Wizards.

Hotep-Ra is now too weak to sustain his Magyk. First his Illusion and then his Invisibility slip away. Shamandrigger Saarn and Dramindonnor Naarn see each other for the first time in twenty-four hours – and then they see Hotep-Ra floundering beside them. For a few long seconds all three Wizards stare at one another, shocked. Clutching the Flyte Charm, Hotep-Ra rises up from the water. Saarn and Naarn grab on to his robes and a tangle of Wizards lands on the Queen's barge.

The Queen knows that Hotep-Ra is too weak to win the fight. She takes off the Magykal gold ring he has given her to protect her from her enemies – a ring that may only be destroyed in pure Alchemical Fyre. "Commit them," she says, handing him the ring. "Quick!"

"It is your ring," Hotep-Ra whispers, handing the ring back to her. "You must say the Committal. You do remember?"

The Queen nods – of course she remembers. How could she forget something made especially for her? (It is, in fact, the only Magyk that the Queen does remember.)

The Queen begins to chant the Committal. The words roll over the Darke Wizards like the shadow of an eclipse; they struggle but they are too weak to fight back. Hotep-Ra listens anxiously to each word but he does not need to worry – when a Queen wishes to remember something, she remembers it. At last the Queen reaches the Keystone word, "Hathor." There is a blinding flash of purple light and the Queen throws the ring into it. Darkness falls. The Queen speaks the last seven words of her Incantation and at the last word, "Commit", Time itself is suspended. For seven long seconds the world stands still.

From within the blackness come two roars of anguish, like the sound of wounded beasts. A great howl of a hurricane descends on them, the screeching of the wind drowning out the screams of the Ring Wizards, and hurls the Queen and Hotep-Ra to the deck. The wind circles three times and then it is gone, leaving the Queen's barge in tatters, the rowers prostrate with terror, and an unearthly silence, which is broken by a delicate *plink*. A gold ring with two green faces imprisoned in it tumbles to the deck and rolls into a pool of dirty water.

When Hotep-Ra returns to the Wizard Tower his old Apprentice, Talmar Ray Bell, tells him that the fallen top of the pyramid has shrunk. She does not know why.

But Hotep-Ra knows why. He knows he has narrowly escaped a most dreaded Darke Hex. A Hex that does not

kill an opponent right away but reduces his size so that he becomes prey to the most terrifying creatures of all: insects. It is an ancient Darke pastime, to place a victim of such a Hex into a spider's web and watch the result through an Enlarging Glass. Hotep-Ra shudders. He has a fear of spiders.

The tiny top of the golden pyramid lies on the bottom of a large pyramid-shaped crater – a sparkle of gold on the red Castle earth, still shrinking. An anxious group of Wizards are guarding it. (The reputation of the Wizard Tower has spread and it now houses thirteen Ordinary Wizards.) Talmar Ray Bell clambers down into the crater, picks up the miniature golden pyramid and gives it to Hotep-Ra.

Hotep-Ra puts a Stop on the Hex. The little pyramid sits heavy in his hand, a fiery gold, glinting in the sun. Hotep-Ra smiles. "You will be the Keye," he tells the pyramid.

Once again Hotep-Ra is on the Palace landing stage, saying a sad farewell to the Queen. This time he is not alone. Talmar Ray Bell has insisted on coming with him – Hotep-Ra is so weakened by his fight with the Darke Wizards that Talmar fears he will not be able to make the journey on his own.

Hotep-Ra gives the Queen a farewell gift. It is a little book called *The Queen Rules*. It is bound in soft red leather with gold corners and an intricate clasp, and on it is embossed a drawing of the Dragon Boat. It is not his fault that a thousand or so years later the binding falls to pieces, the pages drop out and the Committal is lost. No bookbinder, not even a Magykal one, can make a book last for ever. But memories will last, if they are handed down through the generations.

Hotep-Ra takes the Queen's barge to the Port. There, a ship is waiting for him and they set sail. The sea is calm and the sun shines. Hotep-Ra spends most of his time on deck, storing up memories of the open air and sea breezes to tide him over the long enclosed times ahead in his final resting place – the House of Foryx.

Night falls and the ship approaches the Enchanted – and much feared – Isles of Syren. Hotep-Ra sees the Lights shining from the four cat-shaped lighthouses that surround the Isles. He waits until the ship is safely past and all but he have gone below to sleep. Then, by the light of the full moon, Hotep-Ra drops the Two-Faced Ring into the ocean. As it tumbles down through the water, moonlight glints on the gold and an ugly cowfish snaps it up.

And there begins the long journey of the Two-Faced Ring back to the Wizard Tower. Where it now lies. Waiting.

1
WHAT LIES BENEATH

In the Vaults of the Manuscriptorium, *The Live Plan of What Lies Beneath* was unrolled on a large table. Lit by a bright lantern that hung above the table, the large and fragile sheet of opalescent Magykal paper lay weighted down by standard Manuscriptorium paperweights – squares of lead backed with blue felt. *The Live Plan of What Lies Beneath* was a map of all the Ice Tunnels that ran below the Castle – apart from the section that travelled out to the Isles of Syren. As its name suggested, the *Live Plan* was a little more than just a plan. Magykally, it showed what was happening in the Ice Tunnels at that very moment.

Gathered around it were the new Chief Hermetic Scribe, O. Beetle Beetle; Romilly Badger, the Inspection Clerk; and Partridge, the new Scribe of Maps. If you had walked into the Vaults at that moment it would not have been clear who actually was the Chief Hermetic Scribe. Beetle's long blue-and-gold coat of office had been banished to a nearby hook because its gold-banded sleeves scratched the delicate *Live Plan* and he was wearing his comfortable old Admiral's jacket, which kept out the chill of the Vaults. With his dark hair flopping forward over his eyes, Beetle looked very much at home as he leaned over the *Live Plan*, concentrating hard.

Suddenly Romilly – a slight girl with light brown hair and what Partridge thought was a cute smile – squeaked with excitement. A faint luminous splodge was moving along a wide tunnel below the Palace.

"Well spotted," said Beetle. "Ice Wraiths are not easy to see. I reckon that's Moaning Hilda."

"There's another one!" Romilly was on a roll. "Ooh . . . and look, what's that?" Her finger stabbed at a tiny shadow near the old Great Chamber of Alchemie and Physik.

Partridge was impressed. There was a minuscule blip at the end of Romilly's finger. "Is that an Ice Wraith too?" he asked.

Beetle peered closer. "No, it's too shadowy. And slow. Look – it is hardly moving at all compared to Moaning Hilda, who is way over there now. And it is too well defined; you can see it actually has a shape."

Romilly was puzzled. "Like a person, you mean?"

"Yes," said Beetle. "Just like a – *bother*!"

"It's gone," said Romilly sadly. "That's a shame. It can't have been a person then, can it? Someone can't suddenly disappear. It must have been a ghost."

Beetle shook his head; it was too solid for a ghost. But the *Live Plan* was telling him that all the Ice Tunnel hatches remained Sealed, so there was nowhere the person could have gone. Only a ghost could disappear from the middle of an Ice Tunnel like that.

"Weird," he said. "I could have sworn that was human."

It was human – a human named Marcellus Pye.

Marcellus Pye, recently reinstated Castle Alchemist, had just dropped down through a hatch at the bottom of an unmapped

shaft, which went close enough to an Ice Tunnel to show on the *Live Plan*. As soon as he was through the hatch Marcellus knew he was safe – the *Live Plan* did not show anything lower than this level.

A pole with foot-bars led down from the hatch and Marcellus climbed down it with his eyes closed. He reached a flimsy metal platform and stood, not daring to open his eyes, not believing that after nearly five hundred years he was *back in the Chamber of Fyre*.

However, Marcellus did not need to open his eyes to know where he was. A familiar metallic sweetness that found its way to the back of his tongue told him he was home again, and brought with it a flood of memories – the tear that had run up from the base of the Cauldron, the sharp *crack* of the splitting Fyre rods and the heat of the Fyre as it spun out of control. Swarms of Drummins working ceaselessly, trying to contain the damage. The smell of burning rock as the flames spread beneath the Castle, setting the old timber houses alight. The panic, the fear as the Castle threatened to become a raging inferno. Marcellus remembered it all. He prepared himself for a scene of terrible devastation, took a deep breath and decided to open his eyes on the count of three.

One . . . two . . . three!

A jolt of surprise ran through him – *it was as if nothing had happened*. Marcellus had expected black soot to cover everything, but there was none – quite the reverse. Illuminated by the neatly placed Fyre Globes, which still burned with their everlasting flames, the metal platform shone. Marcellus picked up a Fyre Globe, cupping it in his hands. Marcellus smiled. The flame inside the ball licked against the glass where his

hands touched it, like a faithful dog welcoming its owner home. He replaced the ball beside his foot and his smile faded. He was indeed home, but he was home alone. No Drummin could have survived.

Marcellus knew that he must now look over the edge of the dizzyingly high platform on which he was standing. This was when he would know the worst. As he gingerly walked forward, he felt the whole structure perform a slight shimmy. A feeling of panic shot up through his feet – Marcellus knew exactly how far he had to fall.

Nervously he peered over the edge.

Far below lay the great Fyre Cauldron, its mouth a perfect circle of blackness ringed by a necklace of Fyre Globes. Marcellus was immensely relieved – *the Fyre Cauldron was intact*. He stared down into the depths, allowing his eyes to become accustomed to the dark.

Soon he began to make out more details. He saw the metal tracery that was embedded in the rock and covered the cavern like a huge spider's web gleaming with a dull silver shine. He saw the peppering of dark circles in the rock that marked the entrance to the hundreds, maybe thousands, of Drummin burrows. He saw the familiar patterns of Fyre Globes that marked out paths of the walkways strung across the cavern hundreds of feet below and, best of all, he could now see inside the Cauldron the graphite glitter of one hundred and thirty-nine stars – the ends of the Fyre rods that stood upright like fat little pens in an inkpot.

Marcellus shook his head in utter amazement. He had found his Fyre Chamber cleaned, repaired, neatly put in mothballs and, by the look of it, ready to go. The Drummins must have

survived much longer than he had realised. They had worked so hard and *he had never even known*. Something caught in his throat; he swallowed hard and wiped his eyes. Suddenly Marcellus experienced what he called a Time Slip – a flashback to all those years ago, when he had been standing on the very spot where he was now.

His loyal Drummins are swarming around him. Julius Pike, ExtraOrdinary Wizard and one-time friend, is on the upper platform, yelling above the roar of the flames, "Marcellus. I am closing this down!"

"Julius, please. Just a few hours more," he is begging. "We can control the Fyre. I know we can." Beside him on the platform old Duglius Drummin is saying, "ExtraOrdinary, we Drummins do guarantee it, we do."

But Julius Pike doesn't even recognise a Drummin as a living thing. He completely ignores Duglius. "You have had your chance," Julius yells. "I am Sealing the water tunnels and Freezing them. It is over, Marcellus."

He is dragged towards the hatch by a bunch of thickset Wizards. He grabs hold of Duglius, determined to save at least one Drummin. But Duglius looks him in the eye and says sternly, "Alchemist, put me down. My work is not done."

The last thing he sees as the hatch slams shut is the old Drummin sadly returning his gaze – Duglius knows this is the end.

After that, Marcellus had cared no more. He had handed Julius his Alchemie Keye; he had even helped to Seal the Great Chamber of Alchemie and done nothing more than shrug halfheartedly when Julius, smiling the kind of smile a pike would if it could, had told him that all memories of the

Chamber of Fyre would be expunged. *"For ever, Marcellus. It shall never be spoken of again. And in the future, no one will know what is here. No one. All records will be destroyed."*

Marcellus shook himself out of the memory and the distant echoes of the past faded. He told himself that all were long gone. Even the redoubtable Julius Pike was now no more than a ghost, said to have gone back to where he grew up – a farm near the Port. But he, Marcellus Pye, was still here, and he had work to do. He had the Fyre to start and the Two-Faced Ring to destroy.

Marcellus swung himself on to the metal ladder that led down from the upper platform and cautiously began the descent into the Fyre Chamber – or the Deeps, as the Drummins had called it. The ladder shook with each step as Marcellus headed doggedly downwards towards a wide platform far below from which yet more Fyre Globes winked up at him. Some ten long minutes later, he set foot on what was known as the Viewing Station, and stopped to take stock.

Marcellus was now level with the top of the Fyre Cauldron. He peered down at the star-shaped tops of the Fyre rods glistening with the dull shine that undamaged Fyre rods possessed. The last time he had seen them they were on fire, disintegrating before his eyes and now . . . Marcellus shook his head in admiration. How had the Drummins done it?

A narrow walkway known as the Inspection Circle ran around the rim of the Cauldron. It was made of metal lattice, which Marcellus could see had been repaired where it had buckled in the heat. Very carefully, he stepped down on to it, holding tight to the guardrails on either side. From his tool belt he took a small hammer, known as a drummer, and clasping it

tightly he set off. Every few paces he stopped and tapped the metal rim of the Fyre Cauldron, listening intently. To his ears it appeared to be sound, although he knew his hearing was nowhere near as acute as it needed to be for the job.

This was what the Drummins had done all day, all night, all the time. They had swarmed over the Cauldron, drum, drum, drumming with their tiny hammers, listening to the sounds of the metal, understanding everything it told them. Marcellus knew he was a poor substitute for a Drummin but he did the best he could. After walking the Inspection Circle, he returned to the Viewing Station, knowing that he could put off no longer the thing he had been dreading the most. He must go down to the floor of the Chamber of Fyre.

A flight of curved metal steps wound their way around the belly of the Cauldron down into the dimness below, which was lit by a few scattered Fyre Globes. Slowly, Marcellus descended into the depths and the smell of damp earth came up to meet him. On the bottom step, he stopped, gathering the courage to step on to the ground. Marcellus was convinced that the cavern floor must be strewn with the remains of the Drummins and he could not bear the thought of crunching their delicate little bones like eggshells underfoot.

It was some minutes before Marcellus stepped off. To his relief there was no sickening crunch. He took another step – on tiptoe – then another, and felt nothing below his feet but bare earth. Carefully, Marcellus tiptoed around the base of the Cauldron, tapping it with his hammer, listening, then moving on. Not once did he tread on anything remotely crunchy. He supposed that the delicate bones had already turned to dust.

After a circuit of the underside of the Cauldron, Marcellus knew that all was well.

It was now time to begin the Fyre.

Back on the Viewing Station, Marcellus headed off along another frighteningly flimsy walkway that was strung out across the cavern, thirty feet up. He walked cautiously, glad of the light from a corresponding line of Fyre Globes placed on the ground. At last he arrived at a chamber burrowed into the rock face at the back of the cavern and stepped inside. He was back in his old control room.

Below the coating of hundreds of years' worth of dust, Marcellus could see that the walls had been repainted white and everything shone – there was no sign of the greasy soot that had covered everything. Marcellus walked across to the far wall, where, beside a line of iron levers, there was a large brass wheel set into the rock. Taking a deep breath, Marcellus grasped the wheel. It moved easily. As he slowly turned it, Marcellus could feel the slip and slide, the *clunk* and the *thunk* of the chain of command, which reached up through the rock into the depths of the UnderFlow. Somewhere far above him a sluice gate opened. A great gurgle echoed around the sooty darkness of Alchemie Quay and the sluggish waters began to move. Marcellus felt the rumble inside the rock face of the tumbling water as it poured through ancient channels and began to fill the reservoir deep within the cavern walls.

Now Marcellus turned his attention to a bank of twenty-one small wheels further along. Once the Fyre was begun, he must have a way of getting rid of excess heat. In the old days the heat had been dispersed through what were now the Ice Tunnels and used to warm the older buildings of the Castle.

Marcellus had given the current ExtraOrdinary Wizard, Marcia Overstrand, his word that he would preserve the Ice Tunnels. This meant he needed to open up the secondary venting system – a network of pores that snaked up to the surface of the Castle.

Marcellus dared not risk discovery yet. He needed precious time to set the Fyre going, time to prove that it was not a danger to the Castle. Although Marcia had agreed that he could start up the Fyre, Marcellus knew that she assumed that the Fyre was the small furnace in the Great Chamber of Alchemie and Physik. Indeed, that was what he had led Marcia to think. Julius Pike had told Marcellus that he would make sure that no ExtraOrdinary Wizard would *ever* give permission to open up the Chamber of Fyre again – and Marcellus had believed him.

And so now Marcellus turned his attention to the little brass wheels that would open heat vents scattered throughout the Castle and wick excess heat safely away from the awakening Fyre. Marcellus had given this some thought – the trick was to open vents in places where the unusual heat could be explained away as something else. He took a rumpled piece of paper from his pocket and consulted a list. Counting carefully along, he spun nine selected wheels until they stopped. Marcellus checked his paper again, checked the wheels and stood back satisfied.

By now a red pointer on a dial was telling him that the reservoir was nearly full; Marcellus turned the wheel to close the sluice gate, rechecked his list and left the control room. Job done.

Two hours later, the water was flowing through the Cauldron and the Fyre was beginning the slow, gentle process of coming

alive once again. Wearily, Marcellus pushed his Alchemie Keye into the dip on the lower Fyre hatch. He remembered the time, when they were both growing old, that Julius had come to see him. He had given Marcellus back the Alchemie Keye because, *"I trust you, Marcellus. I know you will not use it."* And he hadn't.

Well, not until now.

Romilly and Partridge had long gone back to work, but in the Vaults, Beetle still watched the *Live Plan* – he knew that what goes down must come up. Beetle's stomach rumbled and as if on cue, Foxy, Chief Charm Scribe, poked his head around the half-open door. Beetle looked up.

Marcellus climbed through the lower Fyre hatch. Once again, he was a blip on The Live Plan of What Lies Beneath.

"Ta-da!" said Foxy. "Sausage sandwich!" He put a neatly wrapped package beside Beetle's candle. It smelled wonderful.

Marcellus closed the lower Fyre hatch and began to climb – fast.

"Thanks, Foxy," said Beetle. He looked back at the plan but his eyes, tired after so much staring, did not focus well enough to see the Marcellus blip. He glanced at the sausage sandwich longingly. He had no idea he was so hungry.

"I'll unwrap it for you," said Foxy. "You don't want sticky stuff on the *Live Plan*."

Beetle peered at the plan once more.

"Seen something?" asked Foxy.

"Yeah – I think . . ." Beetle pointed to the Marcellus blip.

Foxy leaned forward and his beaky nose cast a shadow over the blip.

Marcellus reached the upper Fyre hatch.

"Shove over, Foxy," said Beetle, irritated. "You're blocking the light."

"Oh. Sorry."

Beetle looked up. "Sorry, Foxo. Didn't mean to snap. Thanks for the sandwich."

Marcellus was through the upper Fyre hatch and off the Live Plan.

Beetle bit into his sausage sandwich.

And down in the Deeps, the Fyre began to wake.

✲ 2 ✲
A WHITE WEDDING

The Big Freeze had come in, covering the Castle in a deep blanket of snow.

On a sunny late afternoon in the breathtakingly still air, pencil-thin columns of smoke rose from a thousand chimneys up into the sky. Along Wizard Way a crowd had gathered to watch a wedding procession walk from the Great Arch to the Palace. As the procession passed by, people from the crowd dropped in behind and followed, chattering about the young couple who had just got married in the Great Hall of the Wizard Tower: Simon and Lucy Heap.

Simon Heap, with his curly straw-coloured hair neatly tied back in a ponytail, wore new blue robes – which, as the son of an Ordinary Wizard, he was entitled to do on his wedding day. The freshly dyed blue was bright and trimmed with traditional white wedding ribbons, which trailed behind him. Lucy Heap (née Gringe) was wearing a long, white, floaty woollen dress, which she had knitted herself and edged with pink fur. She had lovingly embroidered blue and pink letters "S" and "L" across the skirt. Her mother had objected to this, saying it was bad taste, and for once in matters of taste Mrs Gringe was probably right. But it was Lucy's Big Day and what Lucy

wanted to do, Lucy was going to do. *No change there, then,* her brother, Rupert, had remarked.

The wedding party progressed down Wizard Way towards the Palace, crunching through newly fallen snow. The sky was a brilliant winter blue, but a small snow cloud directly above obligingly provided a few fat snowflakes, which floated down and landed on Lucy's beribboned long brown hair, where they settled like confetti. Lucy and Simon were laughing and talking happily to each other, Lucy twirling in the snow to show off her dress and sharing a joke with her new brothers.

Next to Lucy walked her own brother, Rupert, and his girlfriend, Maggie. Simon had considerably more companions: his adoptive sister, Princess Jenna, and his six brothers, including the four Forest Heaps: Sam, twins Edd and Erik, and Jo-Jo.

Mrs Theodora Gringe, mother of the bride, walked right behind her daughter, occasionally treading on Lucy's train in her eagerness to be at the front. When they had emerged from the Great Arch, Mrs Gringe had had to be restrained from actually leading the wedding party down Wizard Way. Lucy's mother was the proudest mother of the bride that the Castle had seen for a long time. Who would have imagined, thought Theodora Gringe, that the guests at her daughter's wedding would have included the great dignitaries of the Castle? The ExtraOrdinary Wizard, the Princess and the Chief Hermetic Scribe, and even that weird Alchemist fellow: they were all here. There was no doubt about it – the Gringes were on the way up.

But it was a shame, she thought, about the Heaps. They were a disreputable-looking bunch, and there were so *many*

of them. Everywhere she looked she saw the distinctive curly straw-coloured Heap hair topping a scruffy-looking individual. The Gringes were massively outnumbered.

A shout of laughter drew Theodora Gringe's attention to a group of four noisy men who reminded her of Silas Heap and who, she supposed (correctly), were his brothers. Mrs Gringe grimaced and cast her critical eye over the Heaps she recognised. She grudgingly admitted to herself that Silas and Sarah looked smart enough in their blue and white wedding clothes – if a little eccentric with Sarah carrying that ridiculous duck-in-a-bag. Mrs. Gringe eyed up the duck: ready-plucked, perfect for a stew. Deciding to suggest that to Sarah later, she scrutinised the Heap boys with mixed feelings. The two youngest, Nicko and Septimus, weren't too bad.

Septimus in particular looked rather fine in his impressive formal Apprentice robes with the long purple ribbons dangling from his the sleeves. He was taller than Mrs Gringe remembered and she noticed that his typical Heap hair had actually been combed. She didn't approve of Nicko's sailor's braids wound through his hair, although she supposed that his sober navy-blue boatyard tunic with its rather fetching sailor's collar was acceptable.

But at the sight of the remaining Heaps, Theodora Gringe's mouth puckered in distaste. The four Forest boys were a *disgrace*. She tutted as she watched Sam, Edd, Erik and Jo-Jo straggle along beside the bridegroom like – she searched for the right words – yes, that was it, like a pack of wolverines. At least they could have had the decency to keep to the back.

(While the wedding party had been in the Wizard Tower Courtyard, Mrs Gringe had tried to push the Forest boys to

the back. A struggle had ensued and her husband, Gringe, had had to drag her off. "Let it be, Theodora," he'd hissed. "They are Lucy's brothers now." Mrs Gringe had felt quite faint at the thought. She had had to take a long look at their trophy guest, Madam Marcia Overstrand, ExtraOrdinary Wizard, to get over it – which had been a little embarrassing as Marcia had asked her, rather sharply, if there was something wrong.)

Mortified by the memory, Mrs Gringe sighed and then realised that she had been overtaken by the crowd. Happily unaware that the tall, pointy felt triangle perched on top of her hat gave onlookers the impression that a shark was cruising through the wedding party, stalking the bride, Mrs Gringe began to elbow her way back up to the front.

At last they reached the Palace Gate. The onlookers clustered around, offering congratulations, gifts and good wishes. Lucy and Simon accepted them all, laughing, exclaiming, handing the gifts to various friends and relations to carry for them.

Sarah Heap linked her arm through Silas's and smiled at him. She felt unbelievably happy. For the first time since the day Septimus had been born, she had all her boys with her. It seemed as though a heavy weight had been lifted from her shoulders – in fact, right then Sarah felt so light that she would not have been surprised if she had looked down and seen her feet floating a few inches above the pavement. She watched her gaggle of Forest boys, all young men now, laughing and joking with Simon as though he had never been away. ("Away" was the word Sarah used to describe Simon's Darke years.) She saw Septimus, confident in his Apprentice robes, talking with her little Jenna, who looked

so tall and Queenly now. But best of all, Sarah saw her oldest son's eyes – bright green once more – shining with happiness as he looked around, no longer an outcast, back where he belonged. In the Castle. With his family.

Simon could hardly believe it himself. He was stunned at all the good wishes and the feeling that people actually seemed to *like* him. Not so long ago, when he had lived below the ground in a Darke place, he'd had dreams just like this. But he would wake from them in the middle of the night, distraught when he realised they were only dreams. Now, to his amazement, they had come true.

The crowd continued to grow and it looked as if Simon and Lucy were going to be at the Palace Gate for a while yet. On the edge of the crowd, Marcia Overstrand cut an imposing figure. She was wearing ceremonial ExtraOrdinary Wizard robes of embroidered purple silk lined with the softest, highly expensive Marshmouse fur. From below the robes two pointy shoes made of purple python skin peeked out into the white snow. Marcia's dark wavy hair was held back in a formal gold ExtraOrdinary Wizard headband, which glinted impressively in the winter sunlight. Marcia looked impressive – but prickly. Her green eyes found Septimus and she beckoned irritably to her Apprentice. Septimus excused himself from Jenna and hurried over to Marcia. He had promised Sarah that he would "make sure Marcia didn't take over", and he could see the warning signs.

"Septimus, have you seen that mess?" Marcia demanded.

Septimus followed the direction of Marcia's pointing finger, although he knew exactly what she was talking about. At the end of Ceremonial Way – which led straight up from

the Palace Gate – a tall column of scaffolding covered with a brilliant blue tarpaulin reared up, garish against the snow. Around it were scattered untidy piles of bricks and a clutter of builders' equipment.

"Yes," Septimus replied – not very helpfully, in Marcia's opinion.

"It's Marcellus, isn't it? What is he doing starting already?"

Septimus shrugged. He didn't see why Marcia was asking him, especially as Marcia still hadn't set a date for him to begin his month with Marcellus. "Why don't you ask *him*?" he said.

Marcia looked a little guilty. "Well, I promised your mother when she came to see me that there would be no . . . er, arguments."

"Mum came to see you?" asked Septimus, surprised.

Marcia sighed. "Yes. She brought me the guest list and said that if there was anyone on it I didn't like, she would quite understand if I didn't come. Naturally I said that *of course* I was coming to Simon's wedding and it didn't matter at all who was there. She didn't look convinced, I must say. I ended up promising her that I would be, well – " Marcia pulled a face – "*nice* to everyone."

"Wow." Septimus glanced across at Sarah Heap with new respect.

"Apprentice! Marcia!" Marcellus Pye's voice caught their attention. Marcellus had escaped the clutches of Mrs Gringe and was desperate to talk to someone – even Marcia. "Well, well," he said jovially. "You both look very splendid."

"Not quite as splendid as you do, Marcellus," said Marcia, eyeing the Alchemist's new set of black robes, the sleeves of which were slashed to show the red velvet shirt he was wearing

underneath. Both cloak and tunic were liberally sprinkled with gold fastenings that glittered in the sunlight. Septimus could tell that Marcellus had made a big effort. His dark hair was freshly cut in a short bob and brushed forward over his forehead in the old-fashioned style that the Alchemist still favoured on special occasions, and he was wearing his favourite pair of red shoes – the ones that Septimus had given him for his birthday two years previously. Marcia noticed the shoes and tutted. They still gave her an uncomfortable twinge of jealousy of which she was not proud.

Marcia waved her arm in the direction of the tarpaulin. "I see you have already begun," she said, a little disapprovingly. She forced herself to refrain from adding that Marcellus had agreed not to begin building the chimney until the Great Chamber of Alchemie had been reopened.

Septimus saw Marcellus give a guilty start. "Goodness! What, um, makes you say that?"

"Well, I should have thought it was obvious – that rubbish at the end of Ceremonial Way."

Septimus saw a look of relief fly across Marcellus's face. "Ah. The *chimney*," he said. "I'm merely making preparations. I know you do not wish to keep the Two-Faced Ring for longer than necessary. Keeping that ring safe must be a nightmare."

As she had promised Sarah, Marcia made an effort. "Yes, it is. But at least we have it, Marcellus. Thanks to you."

Septimus looked impressed. His mother had done a remarkable job, he thought.

Marcellus felt encouraged. He decided to ask a favour. "I wonder, Marcia, if you would object to a change of name?"

Marcia was flummoxed. "I am perfectly happy with Marcia," she said.

"No, no – I mean the Ceremonial Way. In the old days when the Great Chamber was operating and we had the chimney at the end of it – as we soon will again – it used to be called Alchemie Way. I wonder if you would allow it to resume its old name?"

"Oh," said Marcia. "Well, I suppose so. It was called Alchemie Way before so it is only right that it is Alchemie Way once more."

"Thank you!" Marcellus beamed. "And soon Alchemie Way will lead to the newly built Alchemie Chimney." He sighed. "Well, it will when the builders bother to turn up." A sudden outbreak of cheering and clapping signalled that the wedding party was beginning to head off to the Palace. Marcellus slipped away before Marcia had a chance to ask any more awkward questions.

Marcia felt dismal. An evening spent with a mixture of Heaps and Gringes did not feature anywhere on her good-nights-out list – not even at the very bottom. She glanced back longingly towards the Wizard Tower, wondering if she could make a run for it.

Septimus intercepted her glance. "You can't leave *now*. That would be very rude," he told her sternly.

"Of course I'm not leaving now," Marcia said tartly. "Whatever gave you that idea?"

The wedding supper carried on late into the night. Heaps and Gringes did not always mix well and there were a few tricky moments, particularly when Mrs Gringe put the duck stew

suggestion to Sarah Heap. But nothing, not even Mrs Gringe's insistence that *it would be no trouble at all to take the duck home, and seeing as it was nice and plump it would do enough for everyone and she could bring the stew over the next day to save Sarah the bother of cooking*, could dent Sarah's happiness for long. She had all her children with her for the first time *ever*, and that was enough for her.

Marcia was surprised to find that her evening was not as bad as she had feared. After some very tedious speeches by various increasingly merry Heap uncles, a welcome distraction appeared. Through the long windows of the Ballroom, which reached to the floor and looked out across the Palace lawns down to the river, a barge ablaze with lights was seen drawing up at the Palace landing stage.

"Goodness, who can that be?" Marcia commented to Jenna, who was sitting next to her.

Jenna knew who it was. "It's my father. Late as usual."

"Oh, how nice," said Marcia. And then, hurriedly, "Not nice that he is late, of course. Nice that he has made it to the wedding."

"Just about," said Jenna.

Silas and the four Heap uncles, glad of an excuse to escape, went to inspect the barge and escort Milo back to the wedding supper. He arrived resplendent in what some people thought was the dress uniform of an Admiral of the Fleet and others were sure they had seen in the window of a fancy dress shop in the Port – but whatever it was he was wearing, Milo caused a stir. He strode up to the bride, bowed, kissed her hand and presented her with a tiny ship of gold in a crystal bottle, much to Lucy's delight. Then he congratulated Simon and took his seat next to Jenna.

It was not long before Jenna made an excuse to go and talk to the Forest Heaps at the far end of the table. Milo then took Jenna's place next to Marcia and from that moment Marcia found the evening was much improved. So much so that she stayed rather longer than she had planned.