

GARTH NIX

The KEYS to the Kingdom



Lady Friday

 SCHOLASTIC

Keys to the Kingdom

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Garth Nix

Book Five

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*To Anna, Thomas, Edward, and
all my family and friends;
and with particular thanks to all
the staff at Scholastic in the USA,
Allen & Unwin in Australia,
and HarperCollins UK*

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Prologue

Leaf woke with a start and sat up in bed. For a moment she was disoriented, because she wasn't in her own bed. No band poster stared back at her from the wall at the foot of the bed, because there was no wall. The bedside table was missing too, and on the other side there were no winking red eyes from her four-foot-high troll clock, the one she'd made with her brother, Ed, several years before for a school science project.

She wasn't in her normal sleeping clothes either: a band T-shirt and tracksuit pants. Instead she was wearing an ankle-length pale blue nightshirt of soft flannel, something she would never have chosen to put on herself.

The room she was in was much bigger than her bedroom, and there were eight other beds. The closer ones definitely had people asleep in them, because Leaf could see bodies under the covers and the tops of their heads. The other beds were probably occupied as well.

It looked like a hospital...

Leaf suddenly became a lot more awake. She tried to jump out of the bed, but her legs wouldn't hold her up, and it turned into more of a slither onto the floor. Clawing at the bedclothes, she got herself upright and leaned against the mattress while she tried to work out what was going on.

Slowly it all started to come back. Very slowly, as if her recent memory was broken and her brain was having trouble putting all the pieces back together.

Leaf remembered visiting her friend Arthur in the East Area Hospital. He'd told her about the House that was the epicenter of the Universe, and how he had been chosen to become the Rightful Heir to the Architect—not because he was born to be or anything like that, but because he'd been the right person at the right time. (Or the wrong person at the wrong time, depending on how you looked at it.) The Architect was apparently the creator of everything. She'd made not only the House but also the whole Universe beyond it, including the Earth.

Arthur had told Leaf about all this, and about Mister Monday and Grim Tuesday, two of the Trustees who had betrayed the missing Architect and refused to execute her Will. But before he'd finished, a huge wave had come from nowhere, washing them both into an ocean that wasn't even on Earth. Arthur had been carried away even farther out on the strange sea, but Leaf had been picked up by a ship, the *Flying Mantis*...

"The *Mantis*," whispered Leaf. Even a whisper sounded loud in the quiet room. There was no noise at all from the sleeping people in the other beds. Not even a snore. Suddenly Leaf wondered if they were actually dead rather than sleeping, and she stared at the closest bed to check. She could only see the top of the person's head, just a tuft of hair—not enough to figure out whether it was a man or woman. But after a few seconds Leaf was relieved to see the blanket rise and fall slightly. Man or woman, the person was breathing very slowly.

"I sailed on the *Mantis*," Leaf whispered to herself. It was all coming back. She had sailed the Border Sea in the House for six weeks. She'd become one of the crew...then the pirates had attacked. Her friend Albert had been killed...

Leaf shut her eyes. She didn't want to have that memory come into her head. But at least she had helped Arthur defeat the pirates, and had kicked their leader Feverfew's head into a pool of Nothing-infused mud. Then they'd gone back to Port Wednesday and caught an elevator to...

"The Front Door," said Leaf. "Doorstop Hill. The Lieutenant Keeper..."

She and Arthur had tried to get back home through the Front Door in the Lower House, but there'd been a problem. The Lieutenant Keeper wouldn't let Arthur through the Door...and then... there was the meeting with Dame Primus where they'd found out that the Skinless Boy had taken over Arthur's identity back on Earth, preventing him from going home. But there hadn't been anything to stop Leaf from going home. She'd *wanted* to go home, after what had happened, but it wasn't as easy as that.

"I volunteered to banish the Skinless Boy," Leaf muttered, in amazement at herself. "I must have been crazy."

But she *had* succeeded in finding the source of the Skinless Boy's power, and she *had* managed to deliver it to Suzy Turquoise Blue, against all odds. But along the way she had been infected with the mind-control mold that would let the Skinless Boy control her every thought and action...

Memories joined up and stitched themselves together. Leaf frowned in concentration as she tried to work out what must have happened. Suzy had obviously delivered the sorcerous pocket the Skinless Boy had been made with to Arthur, and he must have used the pocket to destroy the dangerous Nithling. If either one had failed, Leaf wouldn't be conscious now. She'd be a brain-dead slave of the Skinless Boy.

But Leaf didn't feel particularly victorious, because she'd finally remembered that this wasn't the first time she'd regained consciousness after being affected by the mind-control fungus.

"There was a tent hospital...a temporary one," Leaf said. Talking to herself helped bring back the details. "I was vomiting up the sludge left from the mold..."

Leaf groaned and pushed her knuckles into her temples as she remembered something else. The nurse had told her she'd been in a coma for a week. From Thursday afternoon to Friday morning.

But how long ago was that? she wondered. *I must have gone back into a coma, or...*

Leaf stopped knuckling her temples and let her forehead smack into the mattress. She leaned back and did it again. It was a bad habit, but she couldn't help herself. She always beat her head—against something soft—when things went wrong.

The last thing she remembered was the nurse pointing out an approaching female doctor. And then she'd said the terrible words:

"Doctor Friday, imagine that! We call her Lady Friday on the wards..."

Leaf vaguely recalled feeling an awful sensation of fear swarm up inside her as an incredibly beautiful woman had approached with a whole host of people behind her...but everything after that was blank.

Doctor Friday—who clearly had come from the House and really was the Trustee called Lady Friday—must have done something to her.

Maybe I've lost even more time, Leaf thought. *Anything could have happened. To Arthur. To my parents. To Ed. Anything.*

A noise from the end of the room startled Leaf. She froze for a moment, dropped down behind the bed, then crawled to the end to take a proper look around. Someone was pushing open the double-swing doors at one end of the room. First something slid through the gap. It took Leaf a moment to recognize it as a bucket being pushed along with a mop. The person who was doing the pushing eased through the doors and kicked them shut behind her with a practiced heel.

She looked very normal and human: a middle-aged woman with downcast eyes and sensibly tied-back hair, wearing a green smock, green overalls, and white rubber boots. Leaf was relieved by that. If the woman were six foot four and strikingly good-looking, then she would probably be a Denizen and that would mean Leaf was back in the House.

After coming through the door, the cleaner stopped for a moment to dip the mop in the bucket and then started mopping a path about six feet wide down the middle of the room. She didn't look particularly observant, but there was no way she could avoid seeing the empty bed.

Leaf looked around for something she might be able to use as a weapon, and tried to gauge whether her legs would support her if she attempted to stand up again. She felt incredibly weak, a result of being in bed for so long, but fear lent her strength. There was something about all the sleeping bodies in the beds in the rest of the ward that really freaked her out. The room just didn't feel like a normal hospital, and Leaf knew it had something to do with Lady Friday.

Her quick scan confirmed that it wasn't a normal hospital. There was none of the usual equipment on the walls or near the beds—the oxygen outlets, the call buttons, and all that kind of stuff. In fact, all there was in the whole room were the simple beds and the people sleeping their strange sleep.

She looked back at the cleaner, who unfortunately chose that exact moment to look up. They both stared for a moment, gazes locked, then the cleaner gave a suppressed shriek and dropped her mop.

Leaf staggered upright and tried to make a dash to grab the mop. Even though she could barely stay upright and didn't feel like much of a threat, the cleaner shrieked again and backed away. Leaf almost fell over the bucket but did manage to get the mop, stand up, and brandish it like a staff.

“Don't...don't do anything!” said the woman in a forced whisper. She was clearly afraid—but not of Leaf. She was looking back at the door. “You have to get back into bed. She's on her way!”

Leaf lowered the mop. “Who's on her way? What is this place?”

“Her!” said the cleaner. “Quick! Get back in bed. You have to pretend to be like the others. Just copy what they do.”

“Why?”

The cleaner shuddered.

“You have to. If you don't...she'll do something to your head. I only saw it once. Someone like you, awake when he shouldn't have been! She used that mirror of hers, and I saw...I saw...”

“What!?”

“I saw the life drained out of him,” whispered the woman. She was pale as cotton wool now, and shaking. “She shone that little mirror, and I saw...something...come out of his head. Then she tilted the mirror to her mouth and she—”

The woman stopped talking and swallowed convulsively, unable to continue.

“There must be a way out,” said Leaf fiercely. She pointed at the other door, the one opposite where the cleaner had come in. “Where does that go?”

“To the pool,” whispered the woman. “Her pool. You have to get back into bed. Please, please, I don't want to see it happen again!”

Leaf hesitated, then thrust the mop back at the cleaner, who gripped it like she might grab a lifeline. Then Leaf started to walk down toward the far door.

“No!” shrieked the cleaner. “She'll see the empty bed! It's Friday, nothing is the same here on Friday!”

Leaf tried to keep walking, but her legs gave way. She fell down on her hands and knees. Before she could get back up, the cleaner was lifting her up under the armpits and carrying her back to bed. Leaf struggled, but she was just too weak.

“Copy the sleepers,” gasped the cleaner. “It's your only chance. Follow them.”

“Where?” snapped Leaf. She was furious that her body wouldn't obey her properly.

“They go into the pool,” said the cleaner. “Only it's not the pool...I'm not supposed to have

seen. I'm only supposed to clean the floor ahead of her. But I watched once, through the louvers in the change room..."

"Do they come back?"

"I don't know," whispered the woman. "Not here. It was only twenty a month, that's all, from when I first started here. That was thirty years ago. But the whole place was filled up this week. She must be taking thousands of people this time."

"What people? Who? From the hospitals?"

"Hush!" exclaimed the woman. She dragged the covers up over Leaf and rushed back to her mop pushing the bucket almost to the next door. As she frantically dabbed at the floor, the cleaner called back over her shoulder, "She's coming!"

Leaf reluctantly lay flat but she turned her head so she could see the door through her half-closed eyes. After a minute, she heard heavy footsteps, and the door was flung open. Two very tall, very handsome men in charcoal-gray business suits and trench coats stormed through. Leaf recognized their type immediately. Superior Denizens, their coats humped at the shoulders, evidence of the wings beneath.

Behind the two Denizens came the beautiful woman Leaf had seen in the tent hospital. Lady Friday was very tall, made taller by her stiletto-heeled boots that were set with rubies. She wore a gown that shimmered as she walked, sending bright reflections dancing everywhere, and a hat studded with small pieces of colored glass, or maybe even small diamonds, which caught the golden light and intensified it, so brightly that it was very difficult to look too long upon Friday's face.

The Trustee held something small in her right hand that was brighter still, so bright it was impossible to look at. Leaf had to completely shut her eyes, but even so, the light burst through her lids and sent a stab of pain across the bridge of her nose.

With her eyes screwed shut, Leaf couldn't see what happened next. But she heard it. The soft footfall of many bare feet, strange after the *click-clack* of the Denizen's shoes and Friday's boot heel but just as loud.

Leaf waited till she was sure Friday had passed, then she looked again.

The whole room was full of sleepwalkers following Friday. A great line of people in blue nightgowns shambled along with their eyes shut, many in the classic pose with their arms outstretched ahead, others looking so relaxed they could barely stay upright and keep moving.

They were all fairly old. Most of the men were bald or had silver or gray hair, and looked to Leaf like they must be on the wrong side of seventy. It was harder to tell with the women, but they were probably on the far side of that age as well. None of them were exactly ancient, and they were all walking, but none of them could be described as even middle-aged.

Leaf watched them pass while she tried to work out what to do. Hundreds of people went by and Leaf started to think she could just let them all go, hide under the bed, and then sneak out. But then she saw two more Denizens, chivying the sleepers like sheepdogs. Several minutes and a few hundred people later, another two Denizens came by. Given that, there were bound to be even more Denizens guarding the end of the line.

Then Leaf saw something that made up her mind in an instant.

Her aunt Mango was in the line. Sound asleep and walking with a slight, sleepy smile.

Leaf jerked up, then caught herself doing it and somehow managed to lie back down just before the next two Denizens came into the room.

Aunt Mango was almost like a second mother to her and Ed. She'd lived with Leaf's family for years, as long as Leaf could remember. She was Leaf's mother's older sister, but acted more like her

younger, somewhat helpless sibling. Leaf wasn't sure about her history, but Aunt Mango had either been born with a slight intellectual disability or something had happened to her. She was kind and loving, but completely hopeless with the everyday chores of life, and her enthusiastic incompetence needed constant supervision. Sometimes she really irritated Leaf, but Aunt Mango had always been there for her, to tell her stories, to listen to her troubles, to comfort her.

Leaf watched her aunt till she went through the far door.

I have to go with them now, she thought. Aunt Mango isn't any good with big stuff; she wouldn't have a hope alone. But I've got nothing. No weapon. No way of getting in touch with anyone useful. No House sorcery...

Her hand twitched. She stopped the movement, then stealthily slid her fingers up to her neck, feeling for something that she really, really hoped was still there, because if it was, then she actually *did* have something sorcerous and potentially useful.

Leaf's fingers found the braided dental floss necklace and followed it, finally closing on the tiny carved whalebone disc that Arthur had given her. The Mariner's medallion.

It hadn't helped Arthur much in the Border Sea, because the Mariner had taken so long to come to help. But he *had* come, in the end. The medallion represented a very slim hope for some outside intervention.

Leaf lay in the bed and watched the sleepers pass. Under the blanket, she tensed and released the muscles in her legs and arms, trying to exercise them back up to speed, to remove the weakness brought on by a week's bed rest.

Finally, after what seemed like a very long time in which several thousand sleepers had passed, she saw the end of the line. Four Denizens followed the last of the humans. They were not quite as splendid as the two who'd preceded Lady Friday, but they were certainly superior Denizens who were intent on doing their job. They stopped by the door and waited, watching the sleeping patients in the beds around Leaf.

Nothing happened for a moment, then the room was suddenly suffused with a soft, golden light, as if a warm summer's afternoon sun had been let in. It disappeared almost as quickly as it came, ebbing back through the far door.

With the retreating light came a summons, direct into Leaf's mind.

"Follow!"

The voice was soft, but it resonated inside Leaf's head, as if she had spoken the word herself while blocking her ears.

The girl felt that single word pull at her, but she was able to resist it. The sleepers felt it more intensely. All around the room, the old folks suddenly sat up, climbed out of bed, and joined the last of the sleepwalkers who were passing through the door.

Leaf got up too and went after them, doing her best impersonation of a sleepwalker, with the first six sleepers and the Denizen rearguard right on her heels. Behind her slack-jawed face, her mind was working furiously, concentrating on repressing the terrible sick feeling of fear and panic that was welling up through her whole body.

Not fear for herself, but for her helpless aunt Mango.

The doors at the far end were open, but Leaf didn't dare to look up and ahead until she was shuffling through the doorway and could pretend to stumble a little in her sleep. The stumble almost turned into a real fall, but her legs were getting stronger with every step, and she managed to stay upright and take a look.

What she saw almost made her stop and give herself away. The large space ahead housed an

Olympic-size swimming pool. The pool, however, didn't have any water in it. Instead, a ramp had been built down to the bottom, and right now the last of the sleepwalkers were shambling down it. Down into a mirrored surface, which at first reflected their approach, and then just...swallowed them whole.

Leaf hesitated again at the top of the ramp. There were those four Denizens behind her, but there were also several other doors out of the pool room. If she ran now, she might be able to get through one of the exits. It might be her only chance of escape.

But her aunt had already gone beyond the mirrored bottom of the dry pool...

Leaf took a step forward and then another, looking through slitted eyes. She saw the fear in her face, staring back up as her feet disappeared from view. She could still feel her limbs, the sensation being transmitted up through her legs indicating that she was walking down a gentle slope. Leaf suddenly felt physically ill, just like when she'd been vomiting out the mold. Desperate not to throw up, she shut her eyes and plunged forward, her arms outstretched in front, as she committed herself to whatever lay beyond the reflection of Lady Friday's sleepers.

If there *was* anything beyond...

Chapter One

The Nithling soldier thrust its crackling, electrically charged spear towards Arthur's chest. At the very last moment, just as he was about to be impaled, he managed to block the thrust with his shield, the spear point scratching up and across with a horrifying shriek of metal on metal. Arthur stabbed back with his savage-sword, but the Nithling dodged aside and then leaped upon him, knocking him down as its taloned fingers ripped at his face—

Arthur sat up in bed, screaming, his hands scrabbling for a weapon. His fingers closed on a sword hilt and he picked it up and hacked at his attacker—who melted into thin air as he became fully awake. The sword in his hand transformed itself, changing from a slim rapier to a marshal's gold-wreathed ivory baton, the shape the Fourth Key appeared to prefer when Arthur was carrying it.

Arthur put the baton down and took a deep breath. His heart was still hammering as if a crazed blacksmith were at work in his chest, the fear from his nightmare only slowly fading.

Not that the waking world was all that much better. Arthur looked hopefully at the silver crocodile ring on his finger, the one that indicated just how much sorcery had seeped into his blood and bone. But it was no different than it had been the night before. Five of the ten marked segments of the ring had turned gold, indicating he was now at least half Denizen. Every time Arthur used a Key or some other sorcery he would be affected, and the ring would measure the contamination. If the gold spread across just one more segment, the process would be irreversible and he would never be able to return home. Not without negatively affecting everyone and everything he loved. Denizens had a bad effect on life in the Secondary Realms.

“Home!” said Arthur. He was really awake now and every one of his many problems clamored in his head, demanding he think about them. But foremost of them all was his desire to find out what was going on back home and to check that everyone was all right.

He slid out from under the heavy satin sheets and off the feather-stuffed mattress on its four-poster base of mahogany. Each of the posts was carved with battle scenes, which distracted him for a moment, so he found out the hard way that it was farther to the ground than he expected. He was just getting up off the floor when a discreet knock came at the door.

“Come in!” Arthur called out as he looked around. He'd been so exhausted battling to defend the Citadel against the New Nithling army that he'd hardly noticed where they'd carried him off to sleep. Clearly it was the bedroom of some very superior officer—probably Sir Thursday himself—for as well as the ornate bed there were several gilded, overstuffed armchairs; a richly woven carpet that depicted yet another battle scene, this one a vast spray of orange-red firewash over a horde of misshapen old-style Nithlings; a washstand with a solid gold washbasin and several thick fluffy towels; and an open door leading to a walk-in wardrobe absolutely stuffed full of different uniforms, boots, and accoutrements.

“Good morning, Lord Arthur. Are you ready to be shaved?”

The Denizen who came in was a Corporal wearing the scarlet tunic and black trousers of the Regiment, but he also had a white apron over his tunic, and what appeared to be a brass bowl on his head. He carried a leather case, which he deftly laid on the side table and opened to reveal several brushes and a number of very sharp-looking cutthroat razors.

“Uh, yes, but with the back of the blade, please,” said Arthur, without really thinking. He’d gotten used to “shaving” during his recruit training, even though at age twelve he had no whiskers to come off and wouldn’t need to shave for a couple of years.

The Corporal gestured to Arthur to sit, took the bowl off his head, filled it with water from the washstand’s elephant trunk spout, and began to whisk up a lather.

Arthur sat down, then stood straight back up. “I haven’t got time for this!” he said hurriedly. “I have to find out what’s going on.”

“And so you shall, sir,” said a new voice from the door. It was Marshal Dusk, looking much cleaner and tidier in his dark gray uniform than when Arthur had last seen him in the aftermath of battle. “It was Thursday’s custom to hear the morning news as he was shaved and dressed. Would you care to follow this practice?”

Arthur looked down at himself. He hadn’t realized he was wearing pajamas. Regimental pajamas of scarlet and gold, complete with fringed gold epaulettes that irritated his neck. He was sure they would have woken him if he hadn’t been too tired to notice.

“I guess I do have to get dressed...”

He sat back down and the barber instantly applied lather to his cheeks and chin. Dusk marched into the room and stood at attention opposite, while another Corporal, in a more usual cap, came in and marched past into the wardrobe.

“What are the new Nithlings doing? Has the Piper been seen?” asked Arthur. He tried not to move his mouth too much when he talked. The barber was using the back of the razor to just scrape the lather off, but it still made Arthur nervous.

The new Nithlings who served the Piper, the enigmatic second son of the Architect and the Old One, had almost won the battle against Arthur and the Army of the House the night before, coming frighteningly close to capturing the Citadel. Only the arrival of Dame Primus wielding the first Three Keys, accompanied by a large force drawn from the Lower House, the Far Reaches, and the Border Sea, had saved the day.

Arthur had to admit the treachery of the Fourth Part of the Will had also played an important part. In its snake form, it had spat acid in the Piper’s mask while he was supposed to be negotiating with Arthur. The absence of the Piper—and whatever powers he possessed, which were likely to be considerable—had quite possibly made the difference between victory and defeat. Not that Arthur approved of the Will’s treachery.

“The New Nithlings have remained within their trench lines overnight, opposite the Citadel,” reported Marshal Dusk. “Our troops elsewhere in the Great Maze also report no offensive activity. But the situation is still very serious. There are close to a million enemy soldiers in the Great Maze and we do not know what the Piper is up to or where he is.”

“Where’s Dame Primus?” Arthur asked as his face was wiped with a hot towel. He had no idea how the barber had made it hot—it just was. “And is there any word of my friends Suzy Turquoise Blue and Fred Gold?”

“Dame Primus awaits you in the operations room,” Dusk replied. “I’m afraid we have no news of the captured Piper’s children. A detachment of Scouts has been ordered to investigate tile 500/500, where the Nothing Spike was. It’s possible they may have something to report later today, via a communications figure.”

“Thanks.” Arthur stood up as the barber finished and packed away his things, then mechanically returned his salute. The other Corporal came out with a selection of uniforms and laid them on the end of the bed. Then he went in and got some more while Arthur was staring at them, his mind elsewhere.

He was thinking about Suzy and Fred, and Leaf back on Earth, and his family. There were so many people he had to think about, ~~so many enemies and troubles, not to mention the fate of the entire universe...~~

“Which uniform do you require today, sir?” asked the Corporal. “I have suitably enhanced uniforms based upon those for a General of the Regiment, a Khanmader of the Horde, a Legate of the Legion—”

“I’ll do the same as Sir Thursday,” said Arthur. “Regimental Private, with the appropriate rank badges.”

The Corporal suppressed a sigh and returned to the wardrobe, emerging seconds later with the requested clothing. He tried to help Arthur put it on, with little success, as Arthur quickly dressed himself.

Conspicuously, neither the Corporal nor Dusk attempted to hand Arthur the Fourth Key. Now that Arthur had claimed it, it might well incinerate or otherwise destroy anyone else who picked it up. He handled it quite reluctantly himself, for he knew well the temptation to use the power of the Keys to the Kingdom...even if it meant he became less human, less himself.

Arthur hesitated, then thrust the baton through the loop on his belt and made sure it was secure. He didn’t want to use the Fourth Key, but there was some comfort in its weight at his hip. Just threatening to use it might well be a great help in some situations.

“To the operations room, Lord Arthur?” asked Marshal Dusk, breaking in on Arthur’s not-too-cheerful thoughts. “Dame Primus awaits you.”

“Yes,” said Arthur. He always had a slight, nagging suspicion that Dame Primus, if left to her own devices, would pursue things that might not be in Arthur’s best interests. She could only be worse with the addition of Part Four of the Will, the treacherous and highly judgmental snake.

It turned out that the bedroom was in one of the upper levels of the Star Fort, so it was not far to go to the operations room. Arthur was a little surprised to see a whole lot of guards waiting outside his bedroom. There were eight Legionaries in full armor with shields and savage-swords who marched in front of him and eight Borderers with muscle-fiber longbows who fell in behind him as he moved along the corridor from the bedroom. He supposed it was sensible, given that at any moment the Pipe could use the Improbable Stair, or perhaps other means, to appear anywhere in the House or the Secondary Realms.

Thinking of the Stair and the guards reminded Arthur about Sir Thursday, who he hoped was still locked up, secure both from escape and from outside attackers. The three previous Trustees that Arthur had deposed had all been killed, probably because they knew something that would be helpful to Arthur and the Will.

“Is Sir Thursday safe?” Arthur asked.

“He is imprisoned and watched,” Dusk reported. “Dame Primus spoke to him in the night, but otherwise he has been held incommunicado. The guards know to look out for assassins or raids.”

“Good.” Arthur was about to ask something else, but before he could, the guards in front flung the door to the operations room open and a Sergeant-Major inside shouted, “Stand fast! Sir Arthur!”

Arthur entered the large, domed chamber as everyone inside—except Dame Primus—snapped to attention. The room looked much as it had the night before, but this time Arthur had a little more time to take in the details, since he wasn’t being viciously attacked by Sir Thursday.

The first thing he noticed, behind a solid line of officers and a few Sergeants, all still at attention, was a large square table with Dame Primus looming over it at the far end. Arthur marched towards her, then as everyone was still standing at attention, he remembered to say, “As you were, please.

Carry on.”

~~Officers and NCOs—Sergeants and Corporals—~~began to bustle around and talk again, keeping their voices low, making a steady hum in the background that made the room sound as if it were inhabited by a host of bees. Dame Primus, who was now close to eight feet tall and resplendent in a long scarlet-and-gold robe, inclined her head slightly to Arthur as he approached. He nodded back, noting that while she wore the very fancy robe it was brought in at the waist by a plain, though highly polished, leather belt. The belt supported the clock-hand sword that was the First Key, the pair of folded gauntlets that were the Second Key, and, in a special scabbard on her left hip, the small trident that was the Third Key.

Arthur felt a peculiar pang as he saw the Keys, a desire to take them back from Dame Primus. At the same time, the baton of the Fourth Key shifted on his belt, as if it too was drawn to the other Key.

To combat the feeling, which he didn't like, Arthur looked away, down at the tabletop. At first sight, it appeared to be just a boring grid of extremely small squares, with no detail whatsoever. But after a second, he suddenly felt as if he were falling into the grid. Details zoomed towards him. The squares got bigger and showed the terrain in them, and then as the zooming sensation continued, he saw tiny models representing House troops and New Nithling soldiers, many surmounted by a code like *2 hrs ago* or a simple question mark.

Arthur blinked, fought back a dizzy feeling, swallowed the faint trace of bile that had risen in his mouth, and the map was just a grid again.

“The map table shows the disposition of our forces and confirmed sighting reports of the enemy,” explained Dusk as Arthur rubbed his eyes. “It takes some practice to use it effectively, since it can make new viewers ill.”

“There are plenty of practiced map viewers here, Lord Arthur,” Dame Primus interjected. She clicked her fingers and a very thick, hardbound book fell out of thin air and landed on her hand. It was heavy enough to break the fingers of a mortal, but she caught it easily. It looked a bit familiar to Arthur, and he soon found out why. “You need not look at the map yourself. Now that you are here, we can get on with important matters of high strategy. I have organized the agenda—”

Arthur held up his hand. “Not the agenda again, please. First of all, I need to know what has happened back home. Is Leaf all right? And what did happen with the Skinless Boy? Is he...it...totally destroyed?”

Dame Primus sniffed in annoyance and dropped the agenda book. It was caught with two hands by a Corporal who dived in from behind her, the lesser Denizen grunting with the effort.

“There are more pressing matters, Lord Arthur. We are at war with the Piper and his New Nithlings, you know. Not to mention the remaining Morrow Days.”

“I do know,” said Arthur grimly. “Where are Dr. Scamandros and Sunscorch?”

“All Denizens not directly required here have reported back to their proper posts,” said Dame Primus. “As I am here with three Keys and yourself with another, we do not need excessive Denizen-power and there are many other demands upon our resources.”

“I wanted to talk to Dr. Scamandros in particular,” said Arthur. He was vaguely troubled by the absence of Scamandros and Sunscorch, who were friends as well as important allies. Even more important, Dr. Scamandros was an Upper House-trained sorcerer, the only one who did not serve Superior Saturday.

“I have sent Dr. Scamandros to the Lower House to keep an eye on the Old One, among other things,” said Dame Primus. “There have been some strange occurrences in the Lower Coal Cellar.”

“What about Monday's Noon and Dusk?” asked Arthur. “Have they gone back to the Lower

House too?”

~~Dame Primus nodded and looked down at Arthur, arching her long fingers together and looking him over her sharp nails in a rather unnerving manner.~~

“There is trouble in every demesne of the House, Lord Arthur. Nithlings of the old-fashioned sort are bubbling out of every crack and crevice in the Lower House. Our efforts to fill in the Pit in the Far Reaches have met with setbacks and there is considerable danger that some parts of it may fall into the void.

“I have not had time to force the Border Sea within its bounds, and Nothing is leaking into the Sea in many places. Needless to say, our efforts to rectify the situation are being thwarted at every turn by the faithless Trustees, notably Superior Saturday. Now we have the Piper in league with them as well.”

“I don’t think he’s in league with the Trustees,” said Arthur. “He thinks he should be the Rightful Heir, not me. He’s as much their enemy as I am.”

“Perhaps,” said Dame Primus in a doubting tone. “In any case, in due course he will be brought to judgment. What we must decide now—”

“I want to know what’s happened to Leaf and my family!” interrupted Arthur. “Then as soon as I can, I want to go home. Even if Mom and Dad don’t know I’ve been gone, I miss them! I miss everyone! And before you get started, I know I can’t stay. I’ll be back to go get the Fifth Key from Lady Friday and do whatever else has to be done, but I...I absolutely have to go home for a visit first.”

“That is not possible at the moment,” said Dame Primus airily. “As of dawn this morning, Superior Saturday has shut down all the elevators in the demesnes of the House that we control, and she has ordered the Front Door shut to us.”

“What? How can she do that?”

“She has the authority,” said Dame Primus. “Unless Lord Sunday countermands her orders, Superior Saturday controls much of the interdemesne operations of the House—including elevators and, to some extent, the Front Door. She has also attempted to shut down the telephones, without complete success, as the operators fall under the authority of the Lower House and the metaphysical wiring under the Far Reaches.”

“I could go home by the Improbable Stair,” said Arthur slowly. He was unable to stop himself from looking at the ring on his finger. He would have to use the power of the Fourth Key to walk the Stair—and every step he took along that strange way would take him farther away from humanity, even as he walked towards his home.

“I would strongly advise against that,” said Dame Primus. “You have been very fortunate to survive two perambulations on the Improbable Stair. Now let us move on to the agen—”

“Where’s Captain Drury?” interrupted Arthur. He looked away from Dame Primus and saw the telephone expert already hurrying across the room. As he approached, Drury took the old-fashioned handset out of the wickerwork suitcase that housed the body of the field telephone. The captain handed this to Arthur and started to wind the crank, as the boy said, “Get me Sneezer, in the Lower House, please, Captain.”

“As you are too busy to discuss strategic plans, Lord Arthur, I shall go interrogate the Piper’s children,” said Dame Primus, with a very haughty sniff.

“What?” asked Arthur, lowering the handset. “Which Piper’s children?”

“The ones that are serving here in the Citadel,” said Dame Primus. “The Piper has declared himself our enemy. The children were originally brought to the House by him, for his own purposes. Therefore they are now enemies too and must be judged accordingly.”

As she spoke, Dame Primus's tongue briefly forked and turned a sickly green, and her two eyeteeth grew long and pointed, exactly like the fangs of the snake-form that Part Four of the Will had taken.

Arthur stepped back and his hand instinctively went to the Fourth Key on his belt.

Dame Primus frowned and took a dainty lace handkerchief out of her sleeve and dabbed at her mouth. When she lowered the handkerchief, the forked tongue and fangs had vanished. She was once more just a very beautiful but stern-looking eight-foot-tall woman.

"Do not be alarmed, Arthur. We are still assimilating the most recent part of our self, and it is inclined to be judgmental. Now, where was I? Oh yes, Piper's children. I expect that after a quick trial we shall have no choice."

Without a moment's hesitation, Dame Primus proclaimed, "Here and everywhere else in the House where we hold sway, all Piper's children must be executed!"

Chapter Two

Arthur hung up the phone and looked at Dame Primus.

“No Piper’s children are going to be executed,” he said firmly. “Here or anywhere else. The only time the Piper controlled any of them is when he was close enough for his pipe-playing to be heard. Even then, all that happened was they just stopped moving.”

“He could undoubtedly do much more,” Dame Primus argued. “Perhaps even from outside the House. We do not know the extent of his powers. It would be best to simply get rid of the Piper’s children.”

“No!” shouted Arthur. “What’s wrong with you? They’re people! You can’t just kill hundreds or thousands of Piper’s children because the Piper might...just *might*...make some of them do something.”

“Can’t we?” asked Dame Primus. She sounded genuinely puzzled.

“No,” said Arthur. His voice grew deeper and stronger. “All Piper’s children are to be released unharmed and restored to their normal jobs and positions. They should be watched, and if...*if* they do something against us, that’s when they should be locked up—and only locked up, nothing worse!”

There was a moment’s silence, even the background buzz of talking soldiers absent. Dame Primus inclined her head a fraction of an inch.

“Very well, Lord Arthur. You are the Rightful Heir. It shall be as you wish.”

“Good,” said Arthur. “Now I’m going to call Sneezzer and get him to find out what is happening back home.”

He took the phone again from Captain Drury, who resumed his cranking. The earpiece crackled and hummed, and in the far distance Arthur could hear a stern male voice saying, “All telephones are to be cut off by order,” but that faded as another, softer voice that might be either male or female said, “Shut up.”

“I beg your pardon?” asked Arthur.

“Not you, sorry,” said the voice. “Can I help you?”

“I’d like to speak to Sneezzer in Monday’s Dayroom, please.”

“Ooh, you’re Lord Arthur, aren’t you? I could tell because you said ‘please’ again. Everyone’s saying how nice you are.”

“Uh, thanks,” said Arthur. “Could I speak to Sneezzer? It really is urgent.”

“Putting you through, Lord Arthur,” said the operator. “Even if old grizzleguts says we’re...”

The operator’s voice faded and Arthur heard a multitude of other, distant voices all speaking at once, overlaid with the stern voice once again ordering that all telephones be cut off. Then there was silence for several seconds. Arthur was about to ask Captain Drury what was going on when the familiar voice of Sneezzer sounded out in the air, not out of the phone.

“Monday’s Dayroom, Sneezzer here.”

“It does that sometimes, sir,” whispered Drury.

“It’s Arthur, Sneezzer.”

“Good day to you, Lord Arthur.”

“Sneezzer, I want you to look through the Seven Dials. I need to find out what’s happened to Lea

and my family, and the general situation back at my home. Can you do that, please?”

~~“I can, sir. Indeed, at the behest of Dr. Scamandros I have already looked through, the doctor being desirous of finding out if any Nothing residue of the Skinless Boy remained.”~~

“What did you see?” asked Arthur. “It’s still Thursday there, right?”

“No, Lord Arthur. It is Friday.”

“Friday! If the Skinless Boy was destroyed on Thursday...I’ll have been missing overnight. My parents must be freaking out!”

“To be exact, Friday a week from the Thursday on which Miss Leaf embarked on her action against the Skinless Boy.”

“A week! You mean I’ve been missing on Earth for a week?!”

“I believe that is so, sir. Dr. Scamandros has suggested that the destruction of the Skinless Boy created a minor fracture of the temporal relationship between you and the Secondary Realm in which you normally reside.”

“My parents must think...What’s happened to my mom and dad?”

“I regret to inform you, Lord Arthur, that while your father is safe—though reluctantly engaged in being driven very long distances in a bus and stopping at night to play music with an ensemble named after rodents—it appears that your mother is not currently in your own Secondary Realm—”

“What?” croaked Arthur. His throat felt suddenly choked and dry. “Where is she? Who...how...”

“There is great disturbance in your world, Lord Arthur,” said Sneezer. His voice was getting fainter. “A number of mortals have been taken elsewhere within the Secondary Realms. I think your mother is among that group, though it is possible that not all the disappearances have been effectuated by the same agency. It is not at all clear who is responsible, though the natural assumption would be Lady Friday, since the disappearances appear to have occurred on that day.”

Arthur forced himself to be calm, to try to think, not just panic. But the panic was bubbling up inside him. He wanted to just shut his eyes and fade out until someone else took care of everything. But someone else wasn’t going to take care of him, or his mother, or anything...

He took two breaths that were not as deep as he wanted them to be, though it was shock and fear affecting his lungs, not his usual asthma. He didn’t suffer from asthma in the House.

“Find out where Mom is...where they all are,” he ordered Sneezer. “Get Dr. Scamandros on it. Get anyone who can help to...to help. Oh—what about Leaf? Is she okay?”

“I believe Miss Leaf is one of the abducted mortals,” said Sneezer carefully. His voice was very faint now, as if the telephone was a long way from his mouth. “One of the main group of abductees, that is to say. Though in her case she might have chosen to go along. I couldn’t get a clear view of the proceedings; there was an opacity resulting from some opposing power. However, it appeared—”

“Get off!” said the operator suddenly, over the top of Sneezer’s voice. “No, I’m not coming down the line...Get off! Stop it! Ah! Help! It’s got my foot—pull me back, lads! Heave!”

A whole host of voices joined in then, shouting and screaming, and whatever Sneezer was saying was lost. Then there was a deafening howl, as if someone had trod on the tail of an extremely large and unfriendly wolf, and the handset crumbled into dust in Arthur’s hands, leaving him holding a single wire that let out a small and pathetic spark before he hastily dropped it.

“We have to find my mom,” said Arthur.

“Your destiny does not include a mortal family,” Dame Primus declared. “As I have said before you should shake off those minor shackles. As I understand it, your parents are not blood relations, in any case.”

“They’re my parents,” Arthur protested. He had long since gotten used to being adopted, but the

was still some sting in the Will's words. "Emily and Bob love me, and I love them. I love all my family."

"That is a mortal invention," said Dame Primus. "It is of no use in the House."

"What?" asked Arthur.

"Love," Dame Primus answered, her lips twisted in distaste. "Now, Lord Arthur, I really *must* insist that we attend to at least the most significant items of the agenda. I have reordered it as you requested."

"I requested?" Arthur's voice was vacant, since he was still in shock. He'd tried so hard to protect his family. Everything he'd done had been to keep them out of things. But it hadn't worked. Superior Saturday had threatened to use the Skinless Boy to take his place, to erase their minds so they forgot the real Arthur. Since that hadn't worked, maybe now Friday or Saturday had kidnapped his mom... Arthur's mind raced as he tried to get a grip on the situation.

"At our meeting in Monday's Dayroom," said Dame Primus. "Before you were drafted. Do pay attention, Lord Arthur."

"I'm thinking," snapped Arthur. "Captain Drury, do you have a spare phone? I have to get Sneezer on the line again. And Dr. Scamandros."

"Arthur, this is not—"

Dame Primus got no further, as two of Arthur's Legionary guards suddenly grabbed him and pulled him back, and two more jumped in front of him and locked their shields with an almighty crash. The embodiment of the Will leaped back too, and all over the room there was the sudden whin of savage-swords and the acrid, ozone smell of lightning-charged tulwars as everyone drew their weapons.

Arthur couldn't even see what his guards had reacted to, until he stood on tiptoe and looked over the locked shields to see that someone had appeared only a few feet in front of where he'd been standing.

That someone was a tall, slight female Denizen clad in a very unmilitary flowing robe made of thousands of tiny silver strips that chinked as she moved. Over that beautiful garment she wore a thick leather apron, with several pockets out of which protruded the wooden handles of weapons or perhaps tools. This strange ensemble was completed by the silver branch she held in her right hand, from which a dozen small cylindrical fruits of spun gold hung suspended, tinkling madly as half a dozen Denizens threw themselves upon her.

"I'm a messenger!" she shouted. "A herald! Not an assassin! Look, I've got an olive branch!"

"Looks more like a lemon branch," said the Legionary Decurion as he twisted it out of the Denizen's grasp. He looked over at Arthur. "Sorry, sir! We'll have her out of here in a moment!"

"I'm an emissary from Lady Friday!" shouted the silverrobed Denizen, who could hardly be seen amid the scrum of soldiers. "I insist on an audience with Lord Arthur!"

"Wait!" Arthur and Dame Primus called out at the same time.

The Legionaries stopped dragging the sudden visitor away, though they kept a very firm grip on her.

"Who are you?" demanded Dame Primus at the same time that Arthur asked, "How did you get here?"

"I'm Emelena Folio Gatherer, Second Grade, 10,218th in precedence within the House," declared the Denizen. "I have been sent as a herald to Lord Arthur, with a message from Lady Friday, who sent me here through her mirror."

"Through her mirror?" asked Arthur, as Dame Primus said, "What message?"

Arthur and Dame Primus looked at each other for a long moment. Finally the embodiment of the Will lowered her chin very slightly. Arthur turned back to Emelena.

“What mirror?”

“Lady Friday’s mirror,” said Emelena. She added hesitantly, “Am I correct in assuming that I address Lord Arthur?”

“Yes, I’m Arthur.”

Emelena mumbled something that Arthur correctly thought was about expecting him to be taller, more impressive, have lightning bolts coming out of his eyes, and so on. Ever since someone in the House had written a book about Lord Arthur, every Denizen he’d met had been disappointed by his lack of heroic stature and presence.

“Lady Friday’s mirror,” asked Arthur. “It can send you anywhere within the House and the Secondary Realms?”

“I don’t know, Lord Arthur,” replied Emelena. “I’ve never been sent anywhere before. Usually I’m a senior page collator of the Guild of Binding and Restoration in the Middle House.”

“Friday’s mirror is known to us, Lord Arthur,” said Dame Primus through pursed lips. She looked around the room, then pointed to a highly polished metal shield that was one of the trophies hung on the wall. “Someone take that shield down and put it in the dark.”

She paused to watch several Denizens dash forward to carry out her orders, then continued, “Friday’s mirror is akin to the Seven Dials in the Lower House. Powered by the Fifth Key, she can look out or send Denizens through any mirror or reflective surface, provided she has been there before herself by more usual means. Which does make us wonder when and why Lady Friday has come here before to meet with Sir Thursday. However, what is of most importance now is the message Lady Friday sends. I trust it is her unconditional and total surrender?”

“After a fashion,” said Emelena. “I think. Perhaps.”

This time, Arthur was silent, while Dame Primus drew in her breath with an all-too-snakelike hiss.

“Shall I tell you the message?” asked Emelena. “I’ve got it memorized.”

“Go ahead,” said Arthur.

Emelena took a deep breath, clasped her hands together, and without looking directly at Arthur or Dame Primus, began to speak a little too fast and without emphasizing the punctuation, though she did stop every now and then to draw breath.

greetings lord arthur from lady friday trustee of the architect and mistress of the middle house i greet you through my mouthpiece who is to deliver my words exactly as i have spoken them knowing full well that you seek the fifth key and will stop at nothing to get it as saturday and the piper will likewise do

and in the interest of a quiet life pursuing my own researches into aspects of mortality i have decided to abdicate as mistress of the fifth house and leave the key for whomsoever might find it and wield it as he or she sees fit

i ask only that i be left alone in my sanctuary which lies outside the house in the secondary realms with such servants as who choose to join me there my messengers have gone to saturday and the piper bearing this same offer

whoever of you three can find and take the key from where it lies within my scriptorium in the middle house is welcome to it the key shall accept you or saturday or the piper the fifth part of the Will I also leave in the middle house and I take no further responsibility for its incarceration but sha

not release it either lest it take the Key itself

~~*my abdication shall take place upon the moment all three of you have read this message and at that moment this act shall be recorded on the metal tablet my messenger also bears*~~

Emelena stopped, took a deep breath, and bowed. When she stood up, she added, “I have the metal tablet in an envelope here, Lord Arthur.”

She took a small but heavy buff-colored envelope out of her apron pocket and held it out to Arthur. He instinctively reached for it and his fingers had just touched the envelope when Dame Primus shouted, “No! Don’t take—”

Her warning came a fraction of a second too late, as Arthur’s fingers closed and Emelena’s let go. As he took the weight, Arthur felt a sudden surge of sorcerous energy erupt out of the package. The envelope blew apart in a shower of tiny confetti and Arthur had a fraction of a second to see that what he was now holding was a small round plate made of some highly burnished silvery metal.

Then everything around him vanished, to be replaced by a sudden rush of freezing air, the nauseous shock of disorientation, and the sudden fearful realization that he was falling...followed seconds later by his sudden impact with the ground.

Chapter Three

Arthur lay stunned for several seconds. He wasn't hurt, but was seriously shocked from the sudden shift from where he'd been to where he was now, which was flat on his back in a deep drift of snow. Looking up, all he could see were large, puffy gray clouds and some lazy, downward-spiraling snowflakes. One landed in his open mouth, prompting him to shut it.

The silvery disk of metal from Lady Friday was still in his hand. Arthur raised his head a little and looked at it. He'd never seen the metal electrum before, but this plate was certainly made of that alloy of silver and gold, which he'd learned was the traditional material of Transfer Plates. Like the one he was holding in his hand. It must have been set to transfer whoever took it from the messenger as soon as he or she touched it.

In other words, it was a trap that had instantly transported Arthur from the relative safety of the Great Maze to somewhere else. Somewhere where he would be more vulnerable...

Arthur's thinking suddenly became more organized, the momentary shock of the transfer banished by sudden adrenaline. He sat up and took a careful look around, at the same time taking a series of deep breaths. The look was to see if there were any immediate enemies approaching. The deep breaths were to see if his asthma was coming back. If it was, then that would mean he had left the House and was somewhere on Earth...or some other Secondary Realm.

His breathing was easy, unaffected by the shock and cold. Still, Arthur was puzzled. It didn't look like any part of the House that he knew. It was too naturalistic. Usually you could tell that the sky was in fact a ceiling way above, or the sun moved in a jerky, clockwork way. Here, everything felt like it would be back on Earth.

It was certainly cold and he was very wet from the snow. Arthur shivered and then shivered again. It took concentrated effort not to keep on shivering. To take his mind off it, he stood up and vigorously brushed off the snow. Not that it did much good, since the drift came up to his thighs.

"I wonder if I can freeze to death?" Arthur said aloud. Though he spoke softly, it was so quiet around him that even his own voice was a bit disturbing. So was the question. He knew that he couldn't die of hunger or thirst in the House, and that the Fourth Key would to some degree protect him from physical threats, though not from pain and suffering. But he was still mortal and he was feeling very cold indeed.

Thinking of the Fourth Key made Arthur slap his side in a sudden panic, the panic immediately replaced with relief as his hand touched the baton. It hadn't fallen out, which was a very good thing, since he'd never be able to find it under all the snow.

It also made him feel better to know that even if he had been transported into a trap, he had a weapon. Not that he planned to use the sorcerous powers of the Key, but the baton could turn into a sword and he could certainly use that, after all his training at Fort Transformation and the battle with the New Nithlings.

Arthur frowned. He hadn't wanted to remember the battle. It was bad enough having nightmares about it, without having sudden flashes of memory from that fight forcing everything else out of his head. He didn't want to relive the sights and sounds and emotions of that day.

He shivered again, as much at the memory as from the cold. He looked around again. He had to

find shelter, and quickly, and there was no obvious direction to walk in. Or *wade* in, since the snow was so deep.

“That’s as good as any,” said Arthur to himself as he looked towards where he thought the snow and low cloud cover were a little clearer than elsewhere. He tucked the transfer plate inside his coat, took four clumsy steps, then stopped and stood completely still, his heart racing.

There were dark shapes emerging out of the snow some fifty yards ahead, at the limit of visibility. Familiar, but totally unwelcome shapes. Man-sized, wearing dark, very old-fashioned suits topped with bowler hats. Arthur couldn’t see their faces, but he knew they’d be as ugly and bejeweled as a bloodhound’s—the dog-faces of Nithling servants.

“Fetchers!” whispered Arthur; without conscious thought, the Fourth Key was in his hand, an ivory baton stretching out as it transformed into a silver-bladed rapier.

There were six of the Nithlings in sight. They hadn’t seen Arthur yet, or smelled him, since there was no wind. He watched them, weighing his plan of attack. If he moved against the two on the right, he could probably get them both before the others reacted. It would only take the slightest touch from the Key to banish them back to Nothing, and then he could charge the next one along...

More Fetchers came into sight behind the first six. A long line of Fetchers, at least fifty of them. Arthur lowered his sword and looked behind him, checking his line of retreat. There were too many Fetchers. He might destroy a dozen and the rest would still pull him down. The Key might do something to protect him then, or he could use its full power to blast the Nithlings from a distance, but that was an absolute last resort. Arthur’s humanity was almost as precious to him as his life. If he became a Denizen there would be no hope of any return to his family...if he had a family to return to...

Arthur quelled these dismal thoughts and quickly stamped through the snow, away from the Fetchers. At least they were walking slowly, more impeded by the snow than he was, their squat, lumpy bodies sinking farther into the drifts.

They were also looking for something, Arthur saw when he paused to glance back. The first lot of six were an advance guard, but the line behind was a search party, with the Fetchers looking down and even rummaging in the snow every now and then.

Arthur didn’t look back again for quite a while, instead concentrating on making good speed. He was becoming quite alarmed at the complete lack of any trees, plants, or buildings—anything that might give him some shelter. As far as he could tell, he was on an endless, snow-swept plain.

He kept going, though, since there didn’t seem to be any alternative. After what might have been an hour or more, he was finally rewarded with the glimpse of something up ahead that could only be a building. He only saw it for a second before the snow and clouds swirled around and obscured it again, but it lent him hope. Arthur began to half-run, half-jump towards it.

He got another look a few yards on and instinctively slowed again to take in what he was looking at.

It was a building, he could see that, but a strange one. Through the bands of falling snow he could make out a rectangular outline that looked normal enough—a tower or something similar, perhaps nine or ten floors high, of similar dimensions to a medium-rise office block. But behind that there was something even bigger...and that something was moving.

Arthur brushed a snowflake out of his left eye, blinked away the moisture, and marched forward still intent on the building. He quickly saw that the moving thing was a giant wheel, at least a hundred and forty feet in diameter and perhaps twenty feet wide. It looked quite a lot like a Ferris wheel at an amusement park, though it was made of wood and didn’t have little cabins for people to ride in. Its

central axle was set about two-thirds of the way up the tower, which was built of dark red brick. Though the lower three floors were solid, above that level it had attractive blue-shuttered windows, a of which were shut.

The wheel was being turned by water. Water poured down through the slats and spokes as it rotated, and chunks of ice were falling from it too. In addition to the water and ice, there were also other things being lifted up by the wheel on one side, only to fall off on the downward rotation. Arthur had first thought they were larger bits of ice, but as he got closer he saw they were books and stone tablets and bundles of papers tied with ribbon.

He'd seen similar items before, down in the Lower House, and he knew what they had to be. Records. Records of people and life from the Secondary Realms.

The water that drove the wheel, or rather the propelling current, came from a very wide canal, so wide Arthur couldn't see the other side, the water and low cloud cover merging some hundred yards out. A very straight and regular shoreline extended to the left and right of the tower, continuing until too was lost in cloud and snow in both directions.

Away from the wheel, the edge of the canal was iced over, upthrust fingers of ice holding still more papers, tablets, pieces of beaten bronze, cured sheepskins burnt with symbols, and other unidentifiable objects. Even more documents were bobbing in the open water.

Arthur was more interested in the smoke he noted was rising out of the central stack of six tall chimneys that stood atop the tower. Catching sight of that hint of fire and warmth, he began to progress faster through the snow, jumping when he couldn't physically push through the drifts.

As he drew nearer, Arthur heard the creak and grind of the huge wheel, accompanied by the crunch of breaking ice and the crash of falling water, interspersed with the thud and splash of documents of all kinds falling through the wheel. It was hard to tell what the vast wheel was actually supposed to do. If it was meant to lift the records, then it was failing to do so, since they were falling through the many holes in the slats. The whole thing looked to be in a state of considerable disrepair.

Arthur reached the closest wall, but there was no visible door or other entry point on the side of the tower facing him. He hesitated for a moment, then started to walk around it to the right, choosing that direction at random. He was feeling suddenly more cheerful, with the prospect of shelter close at hand and also somewhere where he would be safe from the Fetchers. Or at least somewhere more defensible, if he had to fight them off.

Then Arthur rounded the corner and he saw two things. The first was a door, as he'd hoped. The second was a group of Fetchers who were sitting or lying in the snow in front of the door, very like a pack of dogs waiting for dinner to be brought out. There were eight of them, and as Arthur stopped, they all leaped to their feet, jowls wobbling, fierce eyes fixed upon him.

Arthur didn't hesitate. He lunged at the closest Fetcher, even as the others bounded forward. The rapier barely touched it, but the Nithling dissolved into a waft of black smoke and Arthur swung his weapon viciously to the right, the blade sweeping through another two Fetchers as if they were no more solid than the smoke they turned into at the merest touch of the Key. Arthur stamped his foot and advanced on the remaining Nithlings, who growled and circled around to try to get behind him, a of them now intensely wary of his sword. Arthur foiled that by charging up to the wall. Swiveling to place his back against the bricks, he made small thrusts at the Fetchers as they feinted attacks, none of them daring to follow through with a real assault.

Then the biggest, ugliest Fetcher with the least-dented bowler hat spoke, in a voice that was half growl, half-bark, but clear enough.

"Tell the pack, tell the boss."

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