

GARTH NIX

← The KEYS to the Kingdom →

Sir Thursday



 SCHOLASTIC

Keys to the Kingdom

Sir Thursday

Garth Nix

Book Four

SCHOLASTIC INC.

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*To Anna, Thomas,
Edward, and all my
family and friends.
With special thanks to
David Levithan, most
patient editor.*

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Prologue

The westernmost extent of the Great Maze ended in a line of mountains. Sixteen thousand feet high, the mountain range merged into the ceiling of the House, and there was no valley or gap or crevasse that might lead through to the other side. For what lay beyond the great barrier of stone and ice was Nothing. The mountains were a wall of the House, a bulwark and buttress against both the corrosive effects of the Void and attacks by Nithlings, creatures that emerged from Nothing.

There was only one place where Nithlings could enter the House. Long ago, when the mountains had been shaped, a tunnel had also been made. An arched tunnel, seven miles long, two miles wide, and half a mile high, blocked by four enormous gates. The outermost gate, on the House side, was gilded in inch-thick gold, sealing in the metal by Immaterial forces that could not be breached easily by raw Nothing or sorcery. The next gate, a half mile farther down the tunnel, was of silver gilt. The third, another half mile in, was of bronze. The fourth and final gate, the one that led out into Nothing was called the Cleargate. It was purely Immaterial and entirely translucent, except for a shimmering that was painful even to immortal eyes.

Despite this pain, the Denizens who guarded the Cleargate looked out through it at the strange, constantly changing region that lay beyond, the transient lands where some of the House's virtue still shaped the Nothing into some semblance of solidity. It was the periphery of Nothing, but the Void itself was never far away. Sometimes Nothing almost touched the Cleargate, and sometimes it lay far distant, out of sight.

The purpose of the tunnel was to admit a controlled number of Nithlings into the Great Maze at particular times. These Nithlings would provide training and sport for the Glorious Army of the Architect, which was based in the Great Maze.

The routine for such admissions never varied. If a small number of Nithlings—only a thousand or two—was required, then the Cleargate was opened just long enough to let that number in. Then it was closed, and the Nithlings were admitted through the Bronzegate, which was closed behind them. The process was repeated for the Silvergate and the Goldgate, through which the Nithlings emerged into the House proper. It was a rule that all four gates must never be open at the same time, and only twice in the entire history of the House had three gates been opened simultaneously, to admit more than one hundred thousand Nithlings.

The gates were opened and shut by means of giant clockwork gears that were wound by subterranean rivers that coursed within the mountain walls. Each gate was operated by a single lever, and all four levers were contained within the switch room of the Boundary Fort, a complex of rooms and chambers built into the mountain above the tunnel. The fort was entered via a series of ramps that switchbacked up the mountainside, all heavily fortified with bastions and ravelins.

The Boundary Fort was defended by a detachment from either the Legion, the Horde, the Regiment, or the Moderately Honorable Artillery Company. The guard changed every century of House Time.

Currently, a little more than ten thousand years after the disappearance of the Architect, the Boundary Fort was garrisoned by a cohort of the Legion, under the command of Colonel Trabizond Nage, 13,338th in precedence within the House.

Colonel Nage was in his office, donning the ceremonial silvered cuirass and plumed helmet of his rank, when an orderly knocked on the door.

“What is it?” asked Nage. He was a little distracted, since within the hour he would be commanding the Cleargate to open and admit up to ten thousand Nithlings, the chosen amount of enemy for the Army’s 108,217th Campaign.

“Visitor from GHQ, sir,” called out the orderly. “And Lieutenant Corbie wants to make an urgent report.”

Nage frowned. Like all superior Denizens, he was very handsome and very tall, and his frown hardly altered his features. He frowned because he hadn’t received any message about a visitor from the Army’s General Headquarters, and he had received no warning from any of his friends and old comrades there.

The colonel fastened his chinstrap and picked up his copy of the 108,217th Campaign Ephemeris. It was magically tuned to his hands and would explode if anyone else so much as touched it, which was why its red leather cover was stamped with his name in three-inch-high capitals. The Ephemeris not only listed when the gates were to be opened and in what sequence, it was also a guide to the movement of the individual tiles of the Great Maze.

Apart from a few fixed locations, the Great Maze was divided into one million mile-square tiles on a grid one thousand miles a side. Each tile moved at sunset to a new location according to a plan laid down by Sir Thursday a year or more in advance. To get anywhere in the Great Maze you had to know where the mile-wide tile you were on was going to go—or not go. The Ephemeris would also tell you the terrain and other features of each tile, and where to find water and stockpiled food, ammunition, or any other special information.

After tucking his Ephemeris into a pouchlike pocket at the front of his long leather tunic, Colonel Nage picked up his savage-sword and slid it into the bronzed scabbard at his side. It was a service-issue blade, one of the standard weapons of the Legion. It looked just like a gladius, copied from the Roman legions of the world Earth in the Secondary Realms, but it had been made in the workshops of Grim Tuesday. Its blade was curdled starshine, the hilt gravity-hardened amber. A grain of ensorcelled Nothing encased in the pommel provided the sword with several useful powers, including its rotating blade.

Nage opened the door and called out to the orderly, “Send the visitor in. I’ll see Corbie in a minute or two.”

The visitor was a staff major, wearing the dress uniform of the Citadel, which housed Sir Thursday’s General Headquarters (or GHQ), and was one of the regions of the Great Maze that didn’t move. His red tunic with its gilt buttons and the black varnished hat on his head were copied from the nineteenth-century era of Earth, that favorite place that provided so many ideas and things for the Denizens of the House to imitate. He carried a short, whippy swagger-stick under his left armpit, which was probably an ensorcelled weapon of some kind.

“Hello, Colonel,” the Denizen said. He stood at attention and gave a very smart salute, which Nage returned with a clash of his right wrist-bracer on his cuirass, the armor plate that protected his chest. “I’m Major Pravuil. Carrying dispatches from GHQ. Modification to your Ephemeris.”

“Modification? That’s never happened before!”

“Change of plan for the campaign,” said Pravuil smoothly. “Sir Thursday wants to really test the lads this time. Here we are. Just sign on the bottom right, please, sir, and then lay the page on your Ephemeris.”

Nage quickly signed the paper, then took out his Ephemeris and put the sheet on top of the book. It lay there for a second, then shimmered as if a breeze had swept through the room. As the two Denizens watched, the page sank into the book, disappearing through the binding like water into a sponge.

Nage waited a few seconds, then picked up the Ephemeris and opened it to the current day. He read what was there twice, his frown returning.

“But what’s this? All four gates open? That’s against standing orders!”

“Which are overridden by direct instruction from Sir Thursday.”

“I don’t have a full garrison here, you know,” said Nage. “We’re understrength. I have only one cohort of the Legion and a troop of Borderers. What if the fort comes under attack while the gates are still open?”

“You will defend it,” said Pravuil. “It’ll just be the usual Nithling rabble. Only more of them than usual.”

“That’s just it,” Nage argued. “The Borderers have been reporting that something peculiar is going on in the transient region. There has been a solid landscape there for the last few months, and you can’t even see the Void from the Cleargate. The last report said there are columns of Nithlings marching into that region from somewhere. Organized Nithlings.”

“Organized Nithlings?” scoffed Pravuil. “The Nithlings are incapable of organization. They appear from Nothing, they fight stupidly—with one another, if they can’t get into the House proper—and they go back to Nothing when we slay them. That is how it has always been and always will be.”

“Begging your pardon, Major, that’s not how it is right now,” said a new voice from the door. A Denizen in the sand-colored tunic of a Borderer, his longbow slung across his back, stood at attention there. He bore the scars of several old Nothing-inflicted wounds on his face and hands, typical of the Denizens who patrolled the regions where the House bordered Nothing, not just in the Great Maze but also in other demesnes. “May I make my report, Colonel?”

“Yes, do, Corbie,” said Nage. He reached under his cuirass and pulled out a pocket watch, flipping open the case one-handed. “We still have forty minutes.”

Corbie stood at attention and spoke to a point somewhere slightly above Nage’s head, as if there were an audience there.

“On the seventeenth instant, I left the sally port of the Cleargate with four sergeant and six ordinary Borderers. The sifters indicated a very low level of free Nothing in the region, and the Void itself lay at least fourteen miles distant, as measured by Noneset. We could not see it, nor much else, for everything immediately in front of the Cleargate was obscured by a highly unusual haze.

“We marched straight into this haze and discovered that not only was it twenty or thirty yards wide but generated by means unknown, presumed to be sorcerous. It was emanating from bronze chimneylike columns that were set at intervals in a line a mile long, opposite the Cleargate.

“Moving through the haze, we discovered that an enormous grassy plain had formed from Nothing, with a broad river close to us. On the far side of the river were thousands of tents, all of a uniform color, arranged in rows of a hundred, with a banner at the head of each row. It was completely different from the usual rough Nithling camp, and we immediately noted that there was a very large parade ground of beaten earth beyond the tents, where a force I estimated at between two hundred thousand and three hundred thousand Nithlings was parading in battle formations.

“Parading, sir! We moved closer, and through my perspective glass I was able to make out that the Nithlings were not only wearing uniforms but had remarkably regular physical attributes, with only minor variations of shape, such as a tentacle here or there, or more elongated jaws.

“At that point, a Nithling sentry hidden in the grass sounded an alarm. I must confess we were surprised by the presence of a sentry and by the swift response, as a hidden force immediately emerged from the banks of the river. We were pursued back to the Cleargate, and only just managed to get back in through the sally port without suffering casualties.

“End of report, sir!”

~~Nage stared at him for a moment as if he couldn't believe what he was hearing. Finally he~~ blinked several times and spoke.

“This is very disturbing! And it obviously changes things. We cannot open all four gates with such a host of Nithlings waiting to attack!”

“Are you intending to disobey direct orders from Sir Thursday?” asked Pravuil lazily. He tapped the palm of his left hand with his swagger-stick, small purple sparks crawling out of the stick and spilling over his fingers. “You should know that I will have to relieve you of your command if that is the case.”

“No...no,” said Nage. He looked at his watch. “We still have time. I will call General Lepter.”

The colonel retreated to his desk and opened a drawer. There were half a dozen small lead figures inside, model soldiers, each painted in different uniforms of the Army of the Architect. Nage selected a figure wearing the longplumed helmet and gilded cuirass of a legate of the Legion, a rank equal to general in the other commands of the Glorious Army of the Architect.

Nage put this model soldier into a small ivory stand that looked like a dry inkwell. As the figure connected with the stand, its edges blurred for a second before it became a tiny duplicate of the real living, breathing legate. This little soldier looked up at Nage and spoke, her voice sharp and penetrating, as if she were in the room and life-size, not four inches tall.

“What is it, Nage?”

Nage clashed his cuirass with his bracer before speaking.

“I have received a change to my Ephemeris from GHQ, delivered by a Major Pravuil. It calls for all four gates to be opened for twelve hours. But we have sighted an organized force of disciplined Nithlings waiting in the transient region, numbering at least two hundred thousand.”

“And your question is?”

“I wish to be entirely sure that the change to my Ephemeris is authentic and not some exceptional Nithling trick.”

“Major Pravuil is known to me,” said Lepter. “He is one of a number of couriers delivering changes to all officer Ephemerides. Sir Thursday wishes to test the Army as it has not been tested for millennia.”

“In that case, I request urgent reinforcements,” said Nage. “I am not confident I can hold the fort with the current understrength garrison if the Nithling force attempts an assault.”

“Don't be ridiculous, Nage,” said Lepter. “Those Nithlings might look organized, but as soon as they're through the tunnel they'll go wild. A dozen tiles with abundant wildlife were moved last night opposite the Goldgate. The Nithlings will go hunting as they always do, and the tiles will move them away at nightfall and separate their forces. Tectonic strategy, Nage! I'll talk to you later.”

The little legate froze and was a lead figure again. Nage plucked it out of the stand and threw it back in the drawer.

“The matter seems straightforward, Colonel,” said Pravuil. “Hadn't you best issue your orders for all four gates to open?”

Nage ignored him. Going to a slender walnut-veneer cabinet that stood against the wall, he opened its glass door and slid out a shelf that had a telephone perched on it. Picking up the earpiece, he spoke into the receiver.

“Get me Thursday's Noon. Urgent military business.”

There was a crackling whisper from the phone.

“Colonel Nage at the Boundary Fort.”

There were more crackling whispers, then a booming voice filled the whole room.

~~“Marshal Noon here! Nage, is it? What do you want?”~~

Nage quickly repeated what he'd said to General Lepter. Before he could finish, Noon's strident voice cut him off.

“You have your orders, Nage! Follow them, and don't go outside your chain of command again! Put Pravuil on the line.”

Nage stepped back, letting the earpiece of the phone hang down. Pravuil slid past him and picked it up. This time, Noon's voice did not fill the room. He spoke quietly to Pravuil for a minute. Pravuil whispered back, then there was a very loud click as the major hung up the phone.

“I am to return to the Citadel at once,” said Pravuil. “You are ready to fulfill your orders, Colonel?”

“I am,” confirmed Nage. He took out his watch and looked at it again. “The Nithlings will not take long to get through the tunnel, Major. You may not get clear.”

“I have two mounts waiting,” said Pravuil. He tapped the Ephemeris in its canvas pouch at his side. “And there is a tile six miles away that will take me halfway to the Citadel at dusk.”

“Go, then,” said Nage, not attempting to hide his disdain for an officer leaving imminent battle. He waited until Pravuil had left his office, then snapped a series of commands at Lieutenant Corbie and the orderly who stepped in from outside.

“Corbie! Assemble your men and leave the fort immediately. You are to harass and skirmish with the enemy as they leave the Goldgate, and attempt to lure them out onto those wildlife-heavy tiles, away from the fort. Do you have communication figures for anyone outside the fort?”

“I only have my immediate superior, Captain Ferouk. He's at the white keep, not GHQ.”

Nage rummaged in the drawer of his desk and handed him two lead soldiers, one in a bright scarlet uniform, the other in a subdued blue. The scarlet-clad figure had a tall hat adorned with feathers, the blue-uniformed one wore a flat leather cap.

“Friends of mine. Colonel Repton of the Regiment and Major Scaratt of the Artillery. Both are at GHQ and may be able to help you if everything goes as badly as I suspect it may. Now get going!”

Corbie saluted, spun on his heel, and marched away. The orderly stepped forward as the Borderer left. He had a long trumpet by his side, a bronze instrument at least four feet long.

“Sound the general alert,” said Nage. “And officer assembly.”

The orderly raised the trumpet to his lips, pointing it at the wall. His cheeks puffed up and he blew, but no sound came from the trumpet's bell. It wasn't until a second later that its peal reached in from outside, echoing here as it echoed in all parts of the fort, no matter how distant.

The trumpeter blew two different calls twice. When the last peals faded, he lowered his instrument and stood at attention.

“How long have we served together, Hopell?” asked Nage.

“Eight thousand four hundred and twenty-six years, sir,” said Hopell. “That's time in the Legion. Not counting recruit school.”

“How many of our recruit class still live?”

“All but six, I think. Ropresh came good from that Nothing wound in the end, so he doesn't count. Light duties only, of course, with his leg melted off—”

“Do you think we will fight as well knowing that there is a much greater chance than usual that we will get killed?”

“What do you mean, sir?” asked Hopell. “We are Legionaries of the Glorious Army of the House. We are prepared to die if we must.”

“Are we?” Nage didn’t sound so sure. “We’re prepared to get hurt, certainly, but not many of us get killed—and we always win. I fear that is soon to change. When the four gates open, there will be battle for the fort, and we will be fighting organized, disciplined Nithlings for the first time. Nithling who must be led by someone...or something...intelligent.”

“We are Legionaries,” said Hopell stolidly. “We will fight to the end.”

“Yes,” said Nage, “we will. But it may not be an end we like.”

Heavy footsteps sounded outside the door, the beat of a dozen or more officers marching down the corridor, called to the colonel by the trumpet signal.

“Do not speak of my doubts,” said Nage quickly. “It was a moment of uncertainty, no more. We will fight and we will win. The Nithlings will fail before the fort, as they will be defeated elsewhere in the Great Maze by our Glorious Army.”

“Yes, sir!” shouted Hopell. He saluted as the first of the officers marched in, several others hard at their heels.

“Gather round,” said Nage quickly. “We don’t have much time, and we must organize a defense have received and confirmed an order to open all four gates—yes, all four gates. Shortly after that happens, I expect the fort to be attacked by several hundred thousand organized Nithlings. We must hold out for twelve hours, when we are ordered to shut the gates again. Whatever else happens—no matter what casualties we suffer—the switch room must be held and the gates must be closed on time.”

“Surely it’s not that bad, sir,” suggested one of the centurions, with a little giggle. He was a recent replacement who had spent the last thousand years at GHQ. His cuirass was bare of gallantry medals but had several stars awarded for efficiency in managing House paperwork. “Once they come out the Goldgate, they will have to climb up the ramps under a rain of power-spears and firewash from the engines on the bastions, get through the fort’s own gates...We’ll easily hold them. They will not stay organized anyway. Nithlings always run wild—”

“I am glad of your confidence, Centurion,” interrupted Nage. “You may have the honor of commanding the Forlorn Hope I am placing at the base of the ramp.”

The centurion’s bracer clash acknowledging this order was less strident than it should have been, quiet enough that the chime of the colonel’s watch was louder.

“Twenty minutes. I shall take five to outline my plans and then you will return to your units. I will command from the switch room myself. Our battle cry will be—” The colonel hesitated for a moment, then said, “Death and the Legion!”

His words were echoed immediately by the gathered officers, their shout making the teacups on the colonel’s sideboard rattle.

“Death and the Legion!”

Chapter One

Hurry up!” Arthur Penhaligon called out. “We have to get to the Front Door before Dame Primus shows up and tries to talk me out of going home.”

“Okay, okay,” grumbled Leaf. “I just stopped to look at the view.”

“No time,” said Arthur. He continued to lead the way up Doorstop Hill, moving as quickly as his crab-armored leg would allow him. His broken bone was still not fully healed.

Leaf started after him, with a glance over her shoulder. They’d run straight out of the elevator that had taken them down...or across...or sideways...from Port Wednesday on the flooded shores of the Border Sea. She hadn’t had any time to look at anything in the Lower House.

“There’s the Front Door!” Arthur pointed up ahead to the huge, freestanding door that stood on the crest of the hill, supported by two white stone gateposts that were about thirty feet apart and forty feet high.

“That’s a door?” asked Leaf. “Must be tough to push it open.”

“It doesn’t exactly open,” said Arthur. “You just walk in. Don’t look at the patterns on it for too long, though.”

“Why not?”

“You’ll go crazy,” said Arthur. “Or get stuck looking.”

“You know I’m going to have to look now,” said Leaf. “If you hadn’t said anything I probably wouldn’t have bothered.”

Arthur shook his head. “You can’t help it. Just don’t look too long.”

“Which side do we go to?” Leaf asked when they were only a few yards away. “And do we knock?”

“It doesn’t matter which side,” said Arthur. He tried to look away from the wrought-iron curlicues and patterns on the door but couldn’t quite manage it. After a second, the shapes shivered and began to change, each image fixing itself in his head before it morphed into something else.

Arthur shut his eyes and reached out blindly towards Leaf, planning to tug her elbow or the back of her shirt. But she was much closer than he had thought and his questing fingers poked her in the face.

“Ow! Uh...thanks.”

Arthur turned his head away from the door and opened his eyes.

“I guess I was getting hooked,” Leaf said as she rubbed her nose. She kept her eyes averted from the door, instead looking up at the high domed ceiling of silvery metal that reached its apex several hundred feet directly above them. It was night in the Lower House, the only light provided by the strange clouds of glowing purple or orange that drifted across the silver surface.

As Leaf looked up, a beam of light shot down, marking the path of an elevator from another part of the House. It was quickly followed by another two beams striking down from above.

“So do we knock?” Leaf asked again.

“Not yet,” Arthur replied. He looked across at the fading trail of the elevator beams as he spoke, acutely aware that they had probably delivered Dame Primus and her entourage, come to give him a hard time—though he had half-expected she would already be ahead of him, having used a Transfer

Plate. “We wait for the Lieutenant Keeper of the Front Door first.”

~~Dame Primus would want him to stay, or at least hand over the Third Key, which was supposed~~ needed to keep the Border Sea in check. But Arthur didn't want to part with the only weapon he had. He had finally accepted that he must go up against the Morrow Days, that avoidance was not an option. The whole gang of Sir Thursday, Lady Friday, Superior Saturday, and Lord Sunday would not leave him alone. They would interfere with destructive results in his world or any other world, they would hurt and kill whoever they wanted, they would do whatever they thought would help them retain their Keys and their authority over the House. The only way to stop the Morrow Days was to defeat them.

Arthur knew he had to fight, but he wanted to do it on his own terms. Right now, he wanted to check up on his family and make sure everything was all right back in his own world. Then he'd return to the House and do whatever had to be done to release the Fourth Part of the Will from Sir Thursday and claim the Fourth Key.

They waited in front of the Door for a few minutes, looking at the spires, towers, and roofs of the city below. When Arthur had first seen it, the city had been cloaked in fog, but there was no fog now, and he could dimly make out a few Denizens wandering about the streets. As he watched, a large group came out of one of the closer buildings, milled around for a few seconds, then headed towards the new-mown slopes of Doorstop Hill.

“Maybe we should knock,” he said. “Here comes Dame Primus and the whole crew.”

He took a step towards the Door and, still averting his eyes, rapped smartly on the strange surface. It didn't feel like wood or iron, or in fact like anything solid at all. His fist sank into it as if he'd knocked on something with the consistency of jelly, and at the same time he felt a tingling through his knuckles that traveled up into his wrist and elbow.

But it did make a knocking sound—a hollow, sustained noise that Arthur could hear echoing inside the Door with several seconds' delay, as if the sound had traveled a long way before coming back.

The knock was followed a moment later by a voice Arthur now knew quite well. The Lieutenant Keeper's speech was deep and slow and solid, but this time strangely distant.

“One moment, one moment. There is trouble at the crossroads.”

Arthur could see Dame Primus leading a pack of Denizens, already at the foot of the hill. She was hard to miss, being seven and a half feet tall and wearing a long-trained dress of pale green that fluoresced with shimmers of blue. With her were Monday's Noon (who used to be Dusk) and a black-clad Denizen he didn't recognize at first until he realized it was the new Monday's Dusk (who used to be Noon). Following them was a whole host of clerks, Commissionaire Sergeants, Midnight Visitors, and other Denizens.

“Arthur!” shouted Dame Primus as she lifted her skirts and began to climb the hill. “Wait! There is something you must know!”

“Hurry up, hurry up!” muttered Arthur to the Door. He really didn't feel like arguing with Dame Primus.

“I thought you said they were on your side,” said Leaf. “Who's the tall woman in the cool clothes?”

“They are on my side,” said Arthur. “That's Dame Primus. She's the Will. The first two parts anyway. Probably three parts by now, since the Carp has probably just caught up with her. I guess that would explain the green dress. And she *is* taller, and her eyes have gotten kind of bulbous—”

“Arthur! You should not be here!”

Arthur spun around. The Lieutenant Keeper had emerged from the Front Door. He didn't look as calm and collected as he usually did. His long white hair was a mess; his blue coat was splashed with mud and a darker blue that might be Denizen blood. Instead of his usual shiny knee boots he was wearing sodden thigh-high waders. His sword was naked in his hand, the blade shimmering with an icy, pale blue light that hurt Arthur's eyes and made Leaf look away and shield her face.

"I shouldn't be here?" protested Arthur. "I don't want to be here! Leaf and I need to get home right away."

The Lieutenant Keeper shook his head and sheathed his sword in a scabbard that appeared out of the air.

"You cannot return to your world, Arthur."

"What?!"

"You are already there. Or rather, a copy of you is. A Spirit-eater. I wondered when I felt you pass through the Door so swiftly, without a greeting. But whoever sent the Cocigrue had planned its crossing carefully, for I was distracted, both by a sudden influx from the Border Sea and by several unlawful openings."

"I don't understand," said Arthur. "A copy of me is back in my world? What did you call it?"

"A Cocigrue, or Spirit-eater."

"That doesn't sound good," said Leaf. "What does one of those things do?"

"I cannot stay to talk," said the Lieutenant Keeper. "There are still unlawful travelers within the Door. Good luck, Arthur!"

Before Arthur could protest, the Denizen had spun back into and through the Door, drawing his sword again. The outline of the sword was shaped by the ironwork decorations before it dissolved into a complex tracery of climbing roses.

Arthur pulled Leaf's arm as she was once again entranced by the patterns on the door.

"Oops! Sorry, Arthur. Guess you'll have to talk to the big tall green woman now."

"I guess I will," said Arthur grimly. "This had better not be a trick she's set up to keep me here."

He turned to look back down at Dame Primus and collided with someone who materialized just in front of him, stepping off a fine yellow-and-white-patterned china plate. Both of them fell over, and Arthur instinctively hit out before he realized that the person who'd appeared was his friend Suzy.

"Ow! Watch it!"

"Sorry," said Arthur.

"Got here as quick as I could." Suzy stood up with a clatter, revealing that the pockets of her long and grimy coat were stuffed with yellow-and-white Transfer Plates. "I nicked all the Transfer Plates for Doorstop Hill, but Old Primey's on her way, so you'd best get through quick—"

Arthur pointed silently down the hill. Suzy stopped talking and looked over her shoulder. Dame Primus and her entourage were only a dozen yards away, the personification of the Will scowling at Suzy.

"Dame Primus," called out Arthur, before the Will could start scolding Suzy or deliver a lecture. "I just want to go home for a quick visit and then I'll come straight back. But there seems to be a problem."

Dame Primus stopped before Arthur and curtsied. When she spoke, she first sounded like a normal woman. Then her voice became low and gravelly, with something of the Carp's self-satisfied booming tone in there as well.

"There is indeed a problem. There are many problems. I must ask you, Lord Arthur, to come back to Monday's Dayroom. We need to hold a council of war."

“This isn’t some sort of trick, is it?” asked Arthur suspiciously. “You haven’t put a copy of me back home yourself, have you?”

Dame Primus took in a shocked breath.

“Never! To create such a Spirit-eater is utterly forbidden. And in any case, I have neither the knowledge nor the craft to create such a thing. It is clearly the latest move of the Morrow Days against you, Arthur, and against us. One of a number of actions that we really must discuss.”

Arthur clenched and unclenched his fists.

“Can I go back through Seven Dials?”

Arthur had returned to his world once before using the sorcery contained in the strange room of grandfather clocks known as Seven Dials. He knew it was the other main portal for Denizens to leave the Lower House and enter the Secondary Realms.

“No,” said Dame Primus. “As I understand it, the Spirit-eater has sorcerously occupied the place you should have in your Secondary World. Should you also return, the interaction of yourself with the Nithling would cause an eruption of Nothing that would likely destroy you and, come to think of it, your world.”

“So this Spirit-eater is kind of like an antimatter Arthur?” asked Leaf.

Dame Primus bent her head and looked at Leaf, sniffing in disdain.

“I don’t believe we’ve been introduced, young lady.”

“This is my friend Leaf,” said Arthur. “Leaf, meet Dame Primus.”

Leaf nodded reluctantly. Dame Primus lowered her chin a quarter of an inch.

“What’s this Spirit-eater going to do?” asked Arthur. “Besides preventing me from going back?”

“This is not a good place to discuss such things,” said Dame Primus. “We should return to Monday’s Dayroom.”

“Okay,” said Arthur. He looked back at the Front Door for a moment, then away again. “Let’s go then.”

“Hang on!” Leaf interrupted. “What about me? I want to go back. No offense, Arthur, but I need some time at home to...I don’t know...just be normal.”

“Leaf can go back, can’t she?” asked Arthur wearily.

“She can and *should* return,” Dame Primus replied. “But it had best be through Seven Dials. The Lieutenant Keeper has closed the Door until he deals with the intruders. Come, let us all return to Monday’s Dayroom. That includes you, Suzanna. I trust you have not broken any of those plates.”

Suzu muttered something about a few chips and cracks never doing any harm, but not loud enough for Dame Primus to acknowledge her.

As they descended Doorstop Hill, Arthur noticed that there was an outer cordon of Metal Commissionaires and Commissionaire Sergeants around them, all looking out at the ground and the sky. Midnight Visitors—the black-clad servants of Monday’s Dusk—drifted through the air overhead as well, their long whips trailing by their sides. They too looked out, constantly turning their heads to cover all angles.

“What are they looking for?” Arthur asked Dame Primus.

“Assassins,” snapped Dame Primus. “That is one of the developments. Both the former Mister Monday and the former Grim Tuesday have been slain—by sorcery.”

Chapter Two

“Slain by sorcery?” Arthur asked as they hurried into the elevator. He wanted to make sure he’d heard properly, because it was very hard to kill Denizens. “You mean killed? Really dead?”

Dame Primus gestured at Monday’s Noon, who moved to Arthur’s side and gave a rather foreshortened and cramped bow. They were in a very large elevator, a cube sixty feet a side, but it was completely full of various guards, clerks, and hangers-on. In one corner, there was a seated string quartet, playing a soft tune Arthur almost recognized.

“Really dead,” replied Monday’s Noon, his silver tongue flashing. Apart from his tongue, he hadn’t changed much since he’d been promoted by Arthur from Dusk to Noon. Though he no longer wore black, he still seemed to Arthur to embody the quiet and failing light of the evening in his speed and measured movement. “The former Mister Monday was stabbed through the head and heart with a sorcerous blade, and was not found quickly enough to remedy the damage. The former Grim Tuesday was pushed or thrown into the Pit from the top level.”

“Are you sure he’s dead? I mean *really* sure?” asked Arthur. He was having real trouble accepting this news. “Did you find his body?”

“We found bits of it,” said Noon. “He landed in a pool of Nothing. More than a score of artisans who were working on filling in the Pit saw the impact. It is likely that he too was assaulted by some kind of sorcery before he fell, so he could not cry out or attempt to save himself.”

“Do you know who killed them?”

“We do not know,” Dame Primus said. “We can only assume that both knew something about the Morrow Days and their plans that the Morrow Days do not want us to know. It is puzzling that they should do it now, when I have already questioned both the former Trustees at length without uncovering anything of note. It is possible that it is an attempt to cover up some very disturbing news that has come to light from other quarters. We will speak of this in our council.”

“I want to know about the Spirit-eater,” said Arthur anxiously. “I mean, it’s stopping me from going home, but what else is it going to do? Will it do anything to my family?”

“I don’t know,” said Dame Primus. “We...that is, I am not a House sorcerer as such. I have called your newly appointed Wednesday’s Dusk, Dr. Scamandros, to the Dayroom to tell us about Spirit-eaters. It appears that he is now the sole Upper House-trained sorcerer to be found anywhere in the Lower House, the Far Reaches, and the Border Sea.”

A bell jangled and the quartet’s strings shivered into silence. But the elevator door didn’t open.

“Secure the Dayroom,” Dame Primus ordered Noon. He bowed and touched the door, which opened just enough to let him lead out a dozen Commissionaire Sergeants and ordinary Commissionaires. Another dozen remained around Arthur, Leaf, Suzy, and Dame Primus.

“We must be wary,” said Dame Primus. “We can’t let you be assassinated, Arthur.”

“Me?” Arthur tapped the small trident that was thrust through his belt. “Isn’t the Third Key supposed to protect me from harm?”

“It is,” agreed Dame Primus. “But whatever killed the two former Trustees was House sorcery of a very high order. Grim Tuesday, in particular, though he had lost most of his power, would not be easy to overcome. So the assassin or assassins might be able to bypass or negate the Key’s protection.”

And you mortals are very fragile.”

“Fragile.” Hearing it made Arthur think of eggshells, and then the terrible image of his own head being broken like an eggshell, smashed to pieces by a sorcerous assassin who had crept up behind him.

Arthur forced this mind picture away with an effort of will, though he couldn't help looking behind him. All he saw were his own guards but he still felt a tremor of fear flick through his stomach. Aloud, he tried to make light of the situation.

“Great,” he said. “Things just keep getting better, don't they?”

“There is more to fear,” said Dame Primus. “We will speak of it soon.”

“All clear,” Noon reported from outside, and the elevator door slid silently open to reveal the entrance hall of Monday's Dayroom. Architecturally it looked pretty much like it had the last time Arthur had seen it, after the steaming mud pits and iron platforms had been transformed into old-fashioned rooms that reminded him of a museum. But there was a major difference: Now there were thousands of bundles of paper tied up with red ribbon and stacked from floor to ceiling all along the walls of the hall. Every ten feet or so these piles would have a Denizen-sized gap, each occupied by a Commissionaire Sergeant standing at attention.

“What's with all the paper?” Leaf asked as they walked down the hall.

No one answered until Arthur repeated the question.

“The Middle and Upper House are bombarding us with paperwork,” said Dame Primus. “It is an effective effort to tie up our resources and impede our reorganization. Take the next door on the left, Arthur. Sneezzer should have everything ready for our council.”

The next door on the left was also completely surrounded by stacked bundles of paper. It looked ordinary enough, just a simple wooden door with a solid bronze doorknob. Arthur turned the knob and pushed the door open.

A vast chamber lay on the other side, a room four or five times the size of the gym at Arthur's school, with a ceiling ten times as high. The floor, walls, and ceiling were lined with white marble, veined in gold, so that Arthur's first impression was that he had walked into some kind of giant's tacky bathroom.

In the middle of this huge room sat a round table about a hundred feet in diameter. It appeared to be made of cast iron, painted deep red. It was hollow in the middle, and around the outside there were a hundred or more tall-backed chairs, also made of wrought iron, this time painted white. One chair had a much higher back, and it was either made of solid gold or gilded iron. The chair next to it was also taller, but not quite so much, and it slowly changed color from red to white to gold and back again.

Sneezzer, the butler, stood in the open center of the table, a white cloth over one arm of his now immaculate coat. His once-untidy hair was combed back, tied with a gold ribbon and powdered white. He held a silver tray with three crystal tumblers of something orange (probably juice) and a tall wineglass full of a blood-colored liquid Arthur hoped was actually wine.

There was no one sitting on the chairs, but there was a large crowd of Denizens behind the table, all standing quietly. Arthur recognized Dr. Scamandros and waved, and then he waved again as he saw Sunscorch slightly behind him, looking very fine but somewhat uncomfortable in the admiral's uniform that was his right as the new Wednesday's Noon. Soon Arthur was waving all over the place as he recognized Japeth the Thesaurus and Mathias the Supply Clerk standing together, and Monday's Dawn and Wednesday's Dawn, and others from his previous adventures—as Leaf might call them—in the House.

“Take your seats,” bellowed Dame Primus, her voice going all gravelly and low, startling Leaf. “Let this council be in session. Suzanna, you can return the Transfer Plates to the china cabinet before you join us, please.”

Suzy grimaced, gave a clattering curtsy, and ran out, pausing to stick out her tongue at Dame Primus as the Will turned and gestured at the golden chair.

“That is your throne, Lord Arthur. Everyone else is arranged in order of precedence.”

“Where do I sit, then?” asked Leaf.

“You may stand behind Arthur,” said Dame Primus coldly.

“Actually, I think Leaf had better have a chair next to me,” said Arthur firmly. “As an honored guest.”

“Very good, sir,” said Sneezer, making Arthur jump. The butler was somehow behind him now, offering him an orange juice. “I shall place a chair for Miss Leaf.”

“I have prepared an agenda for this council,” announced Dame Primus as she sat down. Her chair swirled through red, white, and gold and Arthur noticed it grew a few inches at the back, almost matching his own chair’s height.

Dame Primus tapped a large hard-bound book of at least three or four hundred pages that was sitting in front of her on the table. Arthur had a copy in front of his seat too. He sat down, dragged the book over, flipped the cover open, and read *Being an Agenda for a Council to Discuss Various Troublesome Matters Pertaining to the House, the Release of the Will of the Architect, the Assumption of the Rightful Heir, and other Diverse Matters*.

The next page had a list of items numbered from one to thirty. The page after that had thirty-one through sixty. Arthur turned to the end and saw that there were over six thousand Agenda items.

“I suggest we begin with Item One,” said Dame Primus. “And work our way through.”

Arthur looked at Item One.

Arbitration Between Demesnes, Article One: The Dispute Concerning Record Filing and Transport of Records between the Middle and Lower House.

“The Agenda is arranged alphabetically,” said Dame Primus helpfully. “All the Arbitration matters are first.”

“I haven’t got time for this,” said Arthur. He shut the agenda book with a loud clap. “What I want to know is what that Spirit-eater is, what it’s going to do to my family, and how to get rid of it. Dr. Scamandros, do you know?”

“This is quite improper,” Dame Primus complained. “I must protest, Lord Arthur. How can we properly come to conclusions and act effectively if we don’t follow our agenda?”

“Why don’t you put the Agenda in order of *importance*, and while you’re doing that, we’ll talk about the Spirit-eater,” said Arthur, not daring to look at Dame Primus as he spoke. There was something about her that made him want to quietly sit and do as he was told. She reminded him of the scariest teacher he’d ever had, who could stun a classroom into silence just by appearing in the doorway. But like that teacher, Arthur found that if he didn’t meet her gaze, she was easier to confront. “Dr. Scamandros?”

“Ah, well, I haven’t had much time to look into things,” said Scamandros with a jittery glance at Dame Primus. The tattoos of palm trees on his cheeks suddenly shook and half a dozen nervous monkeys fell out and slid down to his chin before the palm trees disappeared and were replaced by clock faces with swiftly moving hands. “I mean, I barely had time for a glass of revitalizing tonic at Port Wednesday before I was hustled here. But nevertheless, I do have some information, collected with the aid of Monday’s Noon, who while not trained in the Upper House is nevertheless a capable

sorcerer...”

He paused to bow to Monday’s Noon, who bowed back. Arthur gripped his orange juice and tried not to look too impatient. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Suzy slink back in and sit on the floor, hidden behind Monday’s Noon.

“As far as we can ascertain,” Scamandros continued, “Spirit-eaters have only been raised on a handful of occasions in the whole history of the House. A Spirit-eater is a potent and unpleasant type of Nithling created to assume the identity of someone, either Denizen or mortal. Its chief power is to cloak itself in an exact likeness of its target, and it also has the ability to extrude its mentality into those around it, whether they be mortal or Denizen—”

“What?” interrupted Arthur. “What does ‘extrude its mentality’ mean?”

“I’m not too certain...Apparently once a Spirit-eater has done it, though, it is able to control its victims’ minds and read their recent thoughts and memories. It does this in order to further its deception. Initially it will have only the usual, exterior knowledge of its target, so it seeks to learn more from the target’s confidantes and fellows.”

“You mean it’s going to mentally take over my family?” Arthur spilled his orange juice as he stood up in agitation. “How long will it take to do that?”

“Yes, that is...I suppose that is what it will do,” said Scamandros. “Though I don’t know how.”

“How much time would it need?” asked Arthur. This was the worst thing, his family being in danger. He remembered the two Grim’s Grotesques breathing their foul breath of forgetting over his father, how he had felt in that awful second as that fog had rolled over his dad. Now his whole family was threatened again, and he was stuck in the House. They would be defenseless.

I have to help them, Arthur thought desperately. *There has to be something...someone...*

“A few days, I think. But I cannot say for certain,” said Scamandros.

Arthur looked at Leaf. She met his gaze.

“I guess you’re thinking what I’m thinking,” she said. “You can’t go back or the whole world goes *kapow*. But I could go back and try and get rid of this Spirit-eater.”

“I don’t know,” said Arthur. “It sounds very dangerous. Maybe Monday’s Noon could—”

“No interference!” boomed Dame Primus. “Remember the Original Law! The mortal may return to whence she came, but no others may sully the Architect’s work.”

“I think it’s more than a bit sullied already,” said Arthur crossly. “How come it’s all right for the bad guys to do whatever they want, and whenever I want to do something it’s ‘forget about it’? What the good of being the Rightful Heir anyway? All I get is trouble!”

Nobody answered Arthur’s question, and he noticed everyone was not quite looking at him—and no one was telling him to behave himself. He felt suddenly weird, and wished that somebody would just say, “Shut up, Arthur, we’ve got work to do.”

“Is it possible?” asked Leaf. “To get rid of the Spirit-eater, I mean.”

Arthur and Leaf both looked at Scamandros. The tattoos on his face showed some anxiety, picturing shaky towers that were being built up stone by stone, only to fall down as the last course was laid.

“I think so. But it would require finding the item used to create the Spirit-eater in the first place. That will be something personal from its target, overlaid with spells. In this case, something of yours Arthur, that was close to you for quite a while. A favorite book, or a spoon, or perhaps some piece of clothing. Something of that order.”

Arthur frowned in puzzlement. What could he have lost that could be used in this way?

“When would this have happened?” he asked.

“It would have taken more than a year of House Time for the Spirit-eater to be grown from Nothing,” replied Dr. Scamandros.

“A year...How long has it been since I was given the minute hand by Mister Monday?” Arthur asked. It was only the previous week for him, but much longer in the House. “In House Time, I mean?”

“A year and a half,” replied Dame Primus stiffly. She had the Agenda open and was tapping it with a gold pencil. Every time she tapped, one of the items on the list moved up or down, or to some unseen page deeper in the volume.

“It must have been Monday’s Fetchers,” said Arthur. “Or maybe one of Grim Tuesday’s Grotesques. But I can’t think of anything really personal that I’ve missed.”

“You could enquire of the Atlas,” said Dame Primus. “You still hold the Third Key, so the Atlas will answer.”

Arthur took the Atlas out of his pocket, set it on the table, and held the small trident that was the Third Key with his right hand. But he didn’t start concentrating on a question to ask the Atlas. After a moment, he put the Third Key down, the trident’s tines pointing to the hollow center of the table.

“I have to be careful how much I use the Keys,” he said slowly. “I already used this one quite a lot back in the Border Sea, and I don’t want to turn into a Denizen. Then I could never go back home.”

“How close are you?” Leaf asked curiously. “Like, do you get to use the Key a hundred times or something and then *wham*, you’re suddenly seven feet tall and a lot better looking?”

“I don’t know,” said Arthur. “That’s part of the problem.”

Dr. Scamandros gave a slight and rather fake-sounding cough and raised his hand. Dame Primus stopped tapping her agenda for a moment and stared at him, then continued with her rearranging.

“You may care to know, Lord Arthur,” said Dr. Scamandros, “that there is a little student project of mine that could be of use to you. It measures the sorcerous contamination of things, including, of course, persons.”

Scamandros started rummaging around inside his yellow greatcoat and pulled out a peacock-feather fan, several enamelled snuff boxes, a scrimshaw letter opener, and a brass piccolo, all of which he laid distractedly on the table.

“Here somewhere,” he said, and then triumphantly pulled out a two-inch-square velvet box that was very worn around the edges. Opening it, he passed it to Sunscorch, who passed it to Leaf, who looked curiously at the item inside before she gave it to Arthur. It was a slim silver crocodile coiled into a ring, its tail in its jaws. It had bright pink diamonds for eyes, and its body was scored with lines that divided it into ten sections, each marked with a tiny engraved Roman numeral.

“Is this relevant?” asked Dame Primus impatiently. “I am ready to proceed with the reordered Agenda.”

Arthur ignored her and took the ring out of the box.

“What does this do?” he asked. “Do I put it on?”

“Yes, do put it on,” replied Dr. Scamandros. “In essence, it will tell you the degree to which you have been...ah...tainted with sorcery. It is not exact, of course, and in the case of a mortal, the calibration is uncertain. I would say that if the ring turns more than six parts gold then you will have become irretrievably transformed into a—”

“Can we move on?” snapped Dame Primus as Dr. Scamandros said, “Denizen.”

Arthur put on the ring and watched with fascination and growing horror as each silver segment of the crocodile slowly turned from silver to gold.

One...two...three—

If he was transformed into a Denizen, he could never go back home. But he needed to use the Keys and the Atlas against the Morrow Days, and that meant more sorcerous contamination.

Unless it was all too late already.

Arthur stared at the ring as the tide of gold continued on, flowing into the fourth segment without slowing at all.

Chapter Three

Arthur kept staring at the ring with dread fascination. After the fourth segment the gold suddenly stopped spreading, and then it slowly ebbed back a little.

“It’s almost up to the fourth line,” Arthur reported.

“It is not exact,” said Dr. Scamandros. “But that would concur with my previous examination. Your flesh, blood, and bone are some four-tenths contaminated with sorcery.”

“And past six-tenths I become a Denizen?”

“Irrevocably.”

“Can I get rid of the contamination?” Arthur tried to keep his voice calm. “Does it wear off?”

“It will reduce with time,” Scamandros replied. “Provided you don’t add to it. I would expect the degree of contamination to lessen in about a century.”

“A century! It might as well be permanent. But how much would using the Atlas add to the contamination?”

“Without careful experimentation and observation I should not like to say. Considerably less than the interventions to heal your ailments, or to undo misdirected application of the Keys’ power. Anything not focused on your own body will be less harmful.”

“It is not harmful to become a Denizen,” said Dame Primus. “It is to become a higher order of being. I cannot understand your reluctance to shed your mortality, Arthur. After all, you are the Rightful Heir of the Architect of Everything. Now can we please return to the Agenda?”

“I was only chosen because I was about to die and happened to be handy,” said Arthur. “I bet you’ve got a stack of Rightful Heirs noted down somewhere if something happens to me.”

There was silence in the vast room for a few seconds, until Dame Primus cleared her throat.

Before she could speak, Arthur raised his voice. “We will go back to the Agenda! After we’ve worked out what to do about the Spirit-eater. I just wish I could remember what might have been taken.”

“Try to work your way back through everything you did,” Leaf suggested. “Did you drop your inhaler on the oval? Maybe they picked that up? Or did you have something at school when they burned the library?”

Arthur shook his head. “I don’t think so...Hey, wait a second!”

He turned to look at Monday’s Dusk. He was slightly shorter than he had been as Noon and looked rather less severe, though no less handsome. He wore the night-black, undertakerlike costume of Dusk, though he’d taken off his top hat with the long black silk scarf wound around its crown.

“You sent the Fetchers when you were Noon. Did one of them bring something back, or were they banished straight into Nothing?”

“They did not return to me,” said Dusk, his once-silver tongue now a shiny ebony, and his voice much softer. “But then I did not raise them in the first place. Mister Monday assigned them to me. I presume he bought them from Grim Tuesday, for he would not have been energetic enough to create them himself. You may recall that I was forced to return to the House when the Fetchers and I cornered you at your school.”

“At the school,” Arthur said slowly, revisiting that scene in his memory. “They took the Atlas!”

I'd forgotten, because the Atlas came back here and I just picked it up again. A Fetcher ripped the pocket off my shirt, and it got the Atlas with it—"

"A pocket!" interrupted Scamandros, scattering the things he'd put on the table with an excited wave of his arms, and the tower tattoos on his cheeks grew sturdier and sprouted fancy battlements. "That must be it. That will be the source of this Spirit-eater. A scrap of material that has lain next to your heart, overlaid with charms and planted in Nothing to grow a Cocigrue! Find that and we might be able to do something about the Spirit-eater!"

"Right," said Leaf. "That sounds really easy."

"You don't have to try," said Arthur. "I...I understand if you want to stay out of all this."

"I don't think there's much choice," said Leaf. "I can't just let an evil clone of you go around taking over people's minds, can I?"

"You could," said Arthur. Though Leaf was trying to make light of the situation, he could tell she was afraid. "I know people who wouldn't do anything unless it directly affected them."

"Yeah, well, I don't want to be one of those people. And if Ed's out of quarantine, he can help... though I guess if it's still Wednesday when I get back he'll be stuck in the hospital..."

Leaf made a face at the thought of her brother, Ed, still being stuck in the hospital. Her parents, aunt, and brother had all suffered from the Sleepy Plague and been quarantined.

"Anyway, Doc, is there anything particular that I can do to this Spirit-eater, you know, like salt gets rid of Fetchers and silver dissolved that Scoucher?"

Dr. Scamandros pursed his lips, and wooden scaffolding appeared around the tower tattoos on his cheeks, propping them up.

"I don't know. A silver spear or sword would annoy it, I suspect, and like all Nithlings it would not eat salt *voluntarily*, but only the lesser Nithlings suffer much from silver or may be banished with salt."

"Does it sleep?" Leaf asked. "And will it have Arthur's pocket on it or will it keep that somewhere else?"

"Good questions, excellent questions," muttered Scamandros. "I'm afraid my sources don't say anything about it sleeping, but it is quite possible that it does. I suspect it will hide the pocket somewhere near its lair—but again, my information is sadly lacking."

"And do you have any idea where its lair will be?" Leaf continued to question. "Arthur's house?"

Two small clouds of dust on Scamandros's cheeks whirled up into miniature tornadoes that threatened a house tattooed across the bridge of his nose.

"My sources are incomplete. One of the references refers to the 'Spirit-eater's Lair' but is not more forthcoming."

"I guess if it's imitating Arthur, it will leave the house *sometime*," Leaf pointed out. "I can sneak in the back door or something. Is there a back door?"

"The best way would be through the garage," Arthur volunteered. "There's a remote switch for it under a blue rock in the driveway. I suppose it would probably be in my bedroom, up on the top floor if it's being me. But I think we'd better get more information about it before we say for sure."

He picked up the Third Key again and laid his other hand on the Atlas. Its green leather binding quivered under his hand.

"Wait a second!" said Leaf. "You don't have to—"

"I can't let you take on something like a Spirit-eater without being prepared," said Arthur. "Besides, it will be a good test to see how much more I get contaminated."

"Arthur—" Leaf started to say, but Arthur was already focusing on his questions for the Atlas.

What is a Spirit-eater? How can the one that has copied me be defeated? Where is its lair?

The questions had hardly formed in his mind before the Atlas burst open, expanding to become a much larger book, its pages fluttering like a wind-caught fan. When it reached its full size, the pages settled down and an invisible hand began to write. The first few letters were in a strange alphabet of straight lines and dots, but they shimmered as Arthur watched, turning into the stylish English characters of a fine calligrapher.

Everyone watched Arthur as he stared down at the Atlas. Even Suzy, from behind Dame Primus.

For the benefit of the others, Arthur read the entry aloud, with some difficulty because he wasn't used to reading the old-fashioned writing. Many of the words were not ones he'd used before.

“Spirit-eater” is a term often used to describe one of a type of Nithlings that are close to Denizen class, known as Near Creations, for they utilize some of the technical sorcery used by the Architect herself to create life from Nothing, while lacking Her artistry.

A Spirit-eater is always based upon one of the Architect's own creations, either directly, as in a copied Denizen, or indirectly, in the case of a copied mortal, the current end result of the Architect's ancient experiment with the evolution of life.

The purpose of a Spirit-eater, in either case, is to replace an original, usually for the purposes of espionage, treachery, or other foul deeds. In order to do so, the Spirit-eater will, to most onlookers, appear to have the physical appearance of its target. Its true face and form may be seen by gazing at it through a veil of raindrops on a sunny day, or by application of various sorceries.

Initially the Spirit-eater will have limited knowledge of its subject, no more than it has been told by its creator. However, part of the spell used to grow a Spirit-eater in Nothing also develops other powers within the Nithling. It is able to extrude its mentality into any sentient mind that it has physical contact with, by the use of a mentally conductive mold that is symbiotic with the Spirit-eater. The mold is derived from a semiintelligent life-form from a world in the Secondary Realms (House name: Avraxyn, Local Name: ꝥ kvð).*

“I can't read the local name—”

Leaf was shaking her head, but it wasn't at Arthur's inability to read the alien name.

“A mentally conductive *what*? What did you say? It grows *mold* on people?”

“That's...that's what it says here,” said Arthur, who had only just realized what he was reading. He'd been concentrating so hard on getting the words right.

“I don't like the sound of that,” said Leaf with a shudder. “How do you stop it from doing that?”

“I'll...I'll see what the Atlas says,” said Arthur. He continued reading.

The mold enters its victim through skin, scales, or hide once the Spirit-eater has provided a bridge by means of shaking hands, gripping a shoulder, or such-like. Its spores are a gray color, but they linger on the skin for only minutes, so the target is usually unaware it has been colonized. The mold travels through the blood, eventually lodging itself in the target's brain or other major sensorium. At this location it rapidly spreads, duplicating the nervous tissue until it is able to sift through the target's thoughts and memory, telepathically sharing them with the greater part of the mold that lies within the Spirit-eater's own secondary brain, usually located in its midsection. The Spirit-eater uses these memories and thoughts to better mimic the target it has replaced. It is able to control the minds of those subjects where the mold is well-established, but not with great precision.

The influence of the mold is also felt in the behavior of the Spirit-eater. In its natural state on

Avraxyn, the mold always establishes a lair where it locates its primary host safe from harm. In the Spirit-eater, the mold is subordinate and must go where the Spirit-eater wills, but it will always influence the Spirit-eater to establish a lair. This will be dark and as deep in the ground as is practical for the Spirit-eater to easily access. It will be lined with soft materials, and somewhere in it will be the original seed item from which the Spirit-eater has been grown. This is usually a bone, piece of flesh, item of clothing, treasured personal possession, or long-term pet or companion of the victim.

“That’s really foul,” said Leaf.

“I’ve known worse,” muttered a voice from somewhere under the table. Dr. Scamandros looked around, but either no one else heard Suzy’s comment or they were well-practiced at ignoring her.

“It’s writing more,” said Arthur. The page cleared, and the invisible hand wrote on.

The particular Spirit-eater that has duplicated Lord Arthur has chosen to call itself the Skinless Boy, perhaps because in its natural appearance it does not have very much skin, instead showing exposed bone. It may be defeated by taking its seed item, the pocket from Lord Arthur’s school shirt. Lord Arthur must plunge that pocket back into Nothing.

At present, 10:20 A.M. local Earth Arthur time on Thursday, the Skinless Boy has established a temporary lair in the primary linen closet of East Area Hospital on Lower Ground Three. If the Spirit-eater moves to Arthur’s home, it is most probable that it will establish its lair in the sump cavity beneath the house, which can be accessed by raising a concrete slab in the garden near the back fence.

“What was that about Thursday?” asked Leaf. “What’s Arthur time?”

Arthur read it again.

“It shouldn’t be Thursday back home! We need to get back on Wednesday afternoon! How can it be Thursday?”

“Time is malleable between the House and the Secondary Realms,” said Dr. Scamandros. “But powerful personages such as yourself, Lord Arthur, affect and govern the relative flows. I can only surmise that the Spirit-eater, having something of your quality, has taken your place for chronological purposes. In...ah...other words, you *are* back.”

“But what about Leaf? Can she go back to Wednesday?”

“I would say not,” said Dr. Scamandros. “But I am no expert in these relativities. Perhaps Sneez may know more, from the Seven Dials.”

“Without putting it to the test, sir, I cannot say,” said Sneez. “However, as a general rule, the temporal relationship between a Secondary World and the House is set by the Front Door and defies explication. It presumably thought you had returned to your Earth and did not miss Miss Leaf, if you pardon me saying so. Therefore, the earliest Miss Leaf can return is twenty minutes past ten on Thursday. If it is still that time. More orange juice?”

“But that means I’ll have been missing all night!” Leaf couldn’t believe it. “My parents will kill me!”

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