

PROLOGUE

THE BLOOD RED, spike-covered locomotive vented steam in angry blasts as it wound up from the very depths of the Pit. Black smoke billowed through the steam, coal smoke that was laced with deadly particles of Nothing from the deep mines far below.

For over ten thousand years, the Pit had been dug deeper and deeper into the foundations of the House. Grim Tuesday's miners sought workable deposits of Nothing, from which all things could be made. But if they found too much in one place or broke through to the endless abyss of Nothing, it would destroy them and much else besides, before the hole could be plugged and that particular shaft closed off.

There was also the constant danger of attack by Nithlings, the strange creatures that were born from Nothing. Sometimes Nithlings came as multitudes of lesser creatures, sometimes as a single, fearsome monster that would wreak enormous havoc until it was defeated, turned back, or escaped into the Secondary Realms.

Despite the danger, the Pit grew ever deeper, and the shafts and tunnels that preceded it spread wider. The train was a relatively recent addition, a mere three hundred years old as time ran in the House. The train took only four days to travel from the bottom of the Pit up to the Far Reaches. There wasn't much left of the Reaches, since the digging had eaten away much of Grim Tuesday's original domain within the House.

Very few ordinary Denizens ever rode the train. Most had to walk, a journey of at least four months, following the service road next to the railway. The train was only for the Grim himself and his favoured servants. Its locomotive and carriages were razor-spiked all over to prevent hitchhikers, and the conductors used steam-guns on anyone who tried to get on. Even an almost-immortal Denizen of the House would think twice about risking a blast of superheated steam. Recovery would take a long time and be extraordinarily painful.

Flying would be far faster than the train, but Grim Tuesday never wore wings himself and had forbidden them to everyone else. Wings attracted Nothing from all over the Pit. Sometimes they caused flying Nithlings to form. Other times, the flapping set off storms of Nothing that the Grim himself had to quell.

The train whistled seven times as it came to a screeching stop alongside the platform. Up Station had been built by Grim Tuesday himself, copied from a very grand station on some world in the Secondary Realms.

It had once been a beautiful building of vaulting arches and pale stonework. But the coal smoke from the train and the Grim's many forges and factories had stained the stones black. The pollution from Nothing had also eaten into every wall and arch, riddling the stone with tiny holes, like a worm-eaten wooden ship. The station only stayed up because Grim Tuesday constantly repaired it with the power of his Key.

Grim Tuesday held the Second Key to the Kingdom, the Key that he should have handed to a Rightful Heir ten thousand years ago, but instead chose to keep, in defiance of the Will left by the Architect who had created the House and the Secondary Realms.

Grim Tuesday rarely thought about the Will. It had been broken into seven fragments and those fragments had been hidden away across the vastness of space and the depths of time. He had hidden a fragment himself, the Second Clause of the Will, and had once been sure that no one else would ever reach it.

But now he had learned that the first part of the Will had escaped. It had found itself a Rightful Heir, and that heir had unbelievably managed to vanquish Mister Monday and assume his powers.

That meant Grim Tuesday would be next. As he stepped off the train, he scowled at the open letter he held in his gauntleted hand. The messengers who had brought this unwelcome message to the Far Reaches were waiting now, expecting a reply.

Grim Tuesday read over part of the letter again. The heir was a boy named Arthur Penhaligon, a boy from the world that was one of the most interesting of those in the Secondary Realms. A place called Earth, which had given birth to many of the artists and creators whose work Grim Tuesday copied. *Humans*, they called themselves. They were the most gifted result of all the Architect's aeons-old seedlings, the only creatures anywhere, in the House or out of it, who rivalled Her in their creativity.

The Grim scowled again and crushed the letter. He did not like to be reminded that he could only copy things. Given a good look at anything original, he could make a copy from Nothing. He could even combine existing things in interesting ways. But he could not create anything entirely new himself.

'Lord Tuesday.'

The greeting came from the taller of the two messengers. Denizens of the House, but not like the ones in the Far Reaches. They stood head and shoulders above the soot-stained, Nothing-pocked servants of Grim Tuesday who flocked to the train to unload the great bronze-bound barrels of Nothing brought up from below. These barrels of Nothing would be used to make raw materials like bronze, steel and silver, which would in turn be transformed into finished goods in Grim Tuesday's factories and foundries. Some of the Nothing would be used directly by the Grim to magically fashion the exquisite items he sold to the rest of the House.

The Grim's servants usually wore rags and badly mended leather aprons, and were hunched and slow and beaten-looking. The messengers could not look more different, standing arrogantly in their shining black frock coats over snowy-white shirts, their neckties a sombre red, a little lighter than their silken waistcoats. Their top hats were sleek and glossy, reflecting and intensifying the pallid light from the gaslights that lined the platform, so it was hard to see their faces.

Grim Tuesday snorted. He was pleased to see that he was still taller than the messengers, though they were at least seven feet tall. His servants were generally twisted and foreshortened by their exposure to Nothing, but Grim Tuesday was not. He was thin in the fashion of someone who can easily run all day or swim a mighty river. He scorned fancy clothes, preferring leather trousers and a simple leather jerkin that showed the corded muscles in his arms. His hands were hidden, encased in gold-banded gloves of flexible silver metal. Grim Tuesday always wore these gloves, whether he was working or not.

'I have read the letter,' grumbled Grim Tuesday. 'It matters not to me who rules the Lower House, or any other, for that matter. The Far Reaches are mine and so they shall remain.'

'The Will –'

'I've taken care of my part, and far better than that sloth Monday,' interrupted Grim Tuesday. 'I have no fears on that score.'

‘The writer of the letter does not think so.’

‘No?’ The Grim frowned again, and the scars where his eyebrows once were met above his nose. ‘What do you know that I do not?’

‘We know of a way that you can strike at the Lower House and this . . . Arthur Penhaligon . . . a loophole in the Agreement.’

‘Our Agreement?’ growled Tuesday. ‘I trust you are not suggesting anything that would let Wednesday or that fool Friday encroach upon my preserves?’

‘No, no. It is a loophole only you can exploit. The Agreement forbids interference between the Trustees and their properties. But what if you had a lawful claim to the Lower House and the First Key? Then it would be your property, not another’s.’

Grim Tuesday understood what the messenger was saying. If he could find a way to say this Arthur *owed* him something, then he could take the First Key as the payment. There was only one problem, which the Grim told the messenger – he had no claim against Arthur.

‘The former Mister Monday owed you for more than a gross of metal Commissionaires, did he not?’ the messenger asked in reply.

‘Aye, and many other things, both exquisites and ordinaries,’ answered Grim Tuesday. His face twisted in anger as he added, ‘None of it paid for, in coin of the House or in Denizens to work my Pit.’

‘You know that not having been paid your just debts,

you may lay claim to the holdings of the debtor. If you had already served a distraint upon the former Mister Monday, and the Court of Days had decreed that the Mastery and the Key be given up to you, then –’

The messenger’s point was clear to Grim Tuesday. If he had asked for payment from Mister Monday *before* Arthur had taken over, then Arthur would have inherited Mister Monday’s debt.

‘But I did not serve a distraint,’ Grim Tuesday pointed out. ‘And the Court could not in good faith . . .’

The taller Denizen smiled and drew a long roll of parchment from inside his waistcoat. It grew even longer as it came out, till he unrolled a scroll the size of a small carpet. It was covered with glowing gold writing, and several large round seals of gold hung from the bottom, attached with rainbow wax that changed colour every few seconds.

‘Fortunately the Court was able to hold a special sitting that was deemed to have taken place an instant before Mister Monday was deposed, and I am pleased to say that you have won your case, Grim Tuesday. You may pursue your debt in the Lower House against Monday’s successors, and special leave has been granted for you to pursue that debt in the Secondary Realms as well.’

‘They will appeal,’ grunted Tuesday, but he reached out and took the parchment.

‘They have,’ said the messenger. He drew a cheroot from a silver case and lit it with a long blue flame that came out of his forefinger. He took a deep draw and blew

out a long thread of silver smoke that wove itself through the bands of dark and ugly smoke above. 'Or rather, the Steward has. That entity that was formerly Part One of the Will and now calls itself Dame Primus. We doubt that Arthur Penhaligon has any idea about what is going on.'

'I like not these legal niceties,' grumbled Grim Tuesday. He pulled at his chin with a metal-bound hand, almost talking to himself. 'What is done once to the Lower House might be done again to me and my realm. Besides, I see the seals of only three of the Morrow Days upon this document . . .'

'You need only set your own seal there, and it will be four of seven. A majority, and the Lower House is yours.'

Grim Tuesday looked up at the tall messenger. 'I would naturally keep the First Key if I am successful in taking over . . . I mean to say, recovering what I am owed?'

'Naturally. All that, and anything you might acquire in the Secondary Realms.'

The hint of a smile flickered across Grim Tuesday's face. He could inherit the First Key and everything else that was Arthur's. 'And there will be no interference?' he asked. 'No matter what I do in the Secondary Realms?'

'As far as our . . . office . . . is concerned, you have permission to go to this world, this Earth, and do what you need to recover your debt,' said the messenger. 'It would be best to avoid any . . . shall we say . . . flamboyant looting or destruction, but I think you will be safe from prosecution otherwise.'

Grim Tuesday looked down at the parchment. He was clearly tempted, his eyes shining strangely yellow, almost as if they reflected a vision of gold. Finally he pressed one gauntleted thumb against the parchment. There was a flash of harsh yellow light, and a fourth seal materialised, clinking against the others, its rainbow ribbon sending a ripple of light across the parchment.

The two messengers applauded softly, while the mass of servants momentarily stopped unloading the train, till they were beaten on again by the Overseers. Grim Tuesday tucked the parchment into his left gauntlet. The document shrank, till it was no larger than a postage stamp and easily tucked in under his wrist.

‘There is one other matter we are charged to raise,’ said the first messenger. He seemed suddenly more cheerful and less reserved.

‘A small matter,’ said the second messenger with a smile. He had not spoken before and his unexpected speech made some of the servants jump, though his voice was mellow and smooth. ‘We believe your miners are currently capping a shaft that has broken through into Nothing?’

‘It is taken care of,’ snapped the Grim. ‘Nothing will not break into my Pit or the Far Reaches! I cannot speak for the other parts of the House, but we have Nothing well in hand here. I understand Nothing as no one else does!’

The messengers glanced at each other. The tiniest scornful glance, too fast for Grim Tuesday to catch, was

hidden in the shadows cast by the brims of their shining hats.

‘Your prowess with Nothing is well known, sir,’ said the first messenger. ‘We simply want something pushed through the sealed passage into Nothing.’

‘A little something,’ said the second messenger. He pulled out a small square of cloth. It looked clean and white, but a very close observation with a magnifying glass would show several lines of writing, done in the tiniest letters of dull silver, letters no higher than a single thread.

‘It will dissolve, be destroyed,’ said the Grim, puzzlement on his face. ‘What is the point of that?’

‘A whim of the one we serve.’

‘A notion. An experiment. A precauti –’

‘Enough! What is this cloth?’

‘It is a pocket,’ said the first messenger. ‘Or was one once. Of a shirt.’

‘Ripped untimely from a uniform. Shorn from a school chemise –’

‘Bah! Riddles and rubbish!’ exclaimed Grim Tuesday. He snatched the cloth and tucked it in his right gauntlet. ‘I will do as you ask, if only to hear no more of your blathering. Take your merriment back to where you belong!’

The two messengers bowed slightly and turned on their heels. The crowd of the Grim’s servants parted before them as they strode away towards the banks of elevator doors at the rear of the station. As always, these elevators

were guarded by Overseers, the most trusted of Grim Tuesday's servants. Clad in breastplates of dull bronze over black coats of thick leather, their faces hidden by long-snouted helmets, they carried steam-guns and broad-bladed swords called falchions, and usually terrified all who beheld them. But the Overseers shuffled away from the two messengers and bowed their heads.

Grim Tuesday watched the two Denizens enter a lift. The doors clanged shut, then a beam of bright light shot up into the air, easily visible through the smog and the decaying roof of the station, till it disappeared into the ceiling of the Far Reaches itself, more than half a mile above.

'Do we move at once, Master?' asked a short, broad-shouldered and long-bearded Denizen whose leather apron was noticeably finer and cleaner than those of the other servants. He held a large leather-bound notebook ready and had a quill pen in his hand. Another squat, heavily built servant held an open bottle of ink on his palm. Their faces were almost identical, each with a flattened, broken-looking nose separating deep sunken eyes, one blue and one green. There were five more Denizens with the same basic features, though only two were in evidence at the station.

Together they were called Grim's Grotesques, the seven top executives of Grim Tuesday. He had made them by melding the three Denizens who had once served him as Dawn, Noon, and Dusk into one that was then recast into seven.

'I must return to the works,' said Grim Tuesday. 'There is still too much Nothing leaking through South-West Down Thirteen and only I can stem it. But someone must go and get this Arthur Penhaligon to sign over his Mastery and the First Key. Not you, Yan. I need you with me. Tan is still below. So it must be you, Tethera.'

The servant holding the ink bottle nodded.

'Take Methera. Two of you should be sufficient. Work within the strictures we used before on that world, in their year 1929. Do not call me unless you must, or I shall dock the cost from your pay. Send a telegram, it's cheaper.'

Tethera nodded again.

'And if you see an opportunity to quietly expand my collection,' added Grim Tuesday with a slow smile, 'take it.'

'And this scrap of cloth, this pocket?' asked Yan. 'Shall you do as the messengers ask? It stinks of upper-floor sorcery.'

Grim Tuesday bit the knuckle of his gauntleted hand, then slowly nodded.

'I will. It is no great matter. A Raising of some kind. A Cocigrue or Spirit-eater.'

'Forbidden by law and custom,' reminded Yan.

'Bah!' snorted Grim Tuesday. 'It is not of my making, even should I care for old laws. We lose working time nattering here. Raise steam!'

The last two words were shouted back at the train. Overseers shouted in answer, slapping servants with the

flat sides of their falchions to get them to unload the last of the barrels of Nothing faster. Other servants eased themselves between the spikes on the locomotive to disconnect water pipes, while a score of the dirtiest and most malformed Denizens hurried to push the last few wheelbarrows piled with bagged coal up to the locomotive's tender.

Grim Tuesday walked back to the front carriage, followed by Yan. Tethera went the other way, towards the main entrance of the station. This was not only a vast door out into the workshops and industries of the remnant Far Reaches, but, for those who knew the spell, it could also be transformed for a short time into the Front Door of the House, which led out to all the Secondary Realms beyond.

Including the world of Arthur Penhaligon.