

Sir Thursday

Garth Nix

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 Honourable 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 Ephemeric 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 Ephemeric 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 favourite 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 armour plate that protected his chest. ‘I’m Major Pravuil. Carrying dispatches from GHQ. Modification to your Ephemeric.’

‘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 Ephemeric.’

Nage quickly signed the paper, then took out his Ephemeric and put the sheet on top of the book. It lay there for a second, then shivered 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 Ephemeric 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 Pravuul. ‘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. Organised Nithlings.’

‘Organised Nithlings?’ scoffed Pravuul. ‘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-coloured 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 colour, 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 long-plumed 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 organised 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 organised, 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 fulfil 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 a battle for the fort, and we will be fighting organised,

disciplined Nithlings for the first time. Nithlings 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 organise a defense. I 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 organised 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 organised anyway. Nithlings always run wild —'

'I am glad of your confidence, Centurion,' interrupted Nage. 'You may have the honour 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!'