

EXTRACT FROM *LADY FRIDAY*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What mirror?"

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

"Yes, I'm Arthur."

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

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

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

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

She paused to watch several Denizens dash forward to carry out her orders, then continued, "Friday's mirror is akin to the Seven Dials in the Lower House. Powered by the Fifth Key, she can look out or send Denizens through any mirror or reflective surface,

provided she has been there before herself by more usual means. Which does make us wonder when and why Lady Friday has come here before to meet with Sir Thursday. However, what is of most importance now is the message Lady Friday sends. I trust it is her unconditional and total surrender?"

"After a fashion," said Emelena. "I think. Perhaps."

This time, Arthur was silent, while Dame Primus drew in her breath with an all-too-snakelike hiss. "Shall I tell you the message?" asked Emelena. "I've got it memorized."

"Go ahead," said Arthur.

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

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

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

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

whoever of you three can find and take the key from where it lies within my scriptorium in the middle house is welcome to it the key shall accept you or saturday or the piper the fifth part of the Will I also leave in the middle house and I take no further responsibility for its incarceration but shall not release it either lest it take the Key itself

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

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

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

Her warning came a fraction of a second too late, as Arthur's fingers closed and Emelena's let go. As he took the weight, Arthur felt a sudden surge of sorcerous energy erupt out of the package. The envelope blew apart in a shower of tiny confetti and Arthur had a fraction of a second to see that what he was now holding was a small round plate made of some highly burnished silvery metal. Then everything around him vanished, to be replaced by a sudden rush of freezing air, the nauseous shock of disorientation, and the sudden fearful realization that he was falling . . . followed seconds later by his sudden impact with the ground.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Arthur frowned. He hadn't wanted to remember the battle. It was bad enough having nightmares about it, without having sudden fl ashes of memory from that fight forcing everything else out of his head. He didn't want to relive the sights and sounds and emotions of that day. He shivered again, as much at the memory as from the cold. He looked around again. He had to find shelter, and quickly, and there was no obvious direction to walk in. Or *wade* in, since the snow was so deep.

"That's as good as any," said Arthur to himself as he looked towards where he thought the snow and low cloud cover were a little clearer than elsewhere. He tucked the

transfer plate inside his coat, took four clumsy steps, then stopped and stood completely still, his heart racing.

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

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

There were six of the Nithlings in sight. They hadn't seen Arthur yet, or smelled him, since there was no wind.

He watched them, weighing his plan of attack. If he moved against the two on the right, he could probably get them both before the others reacted. It would only take the slightest touch from the Key to banish them back to Nothing, and then he could charge the next one along . . .

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

way up the tower, which was built of dark red brick. Though the lower three floors were solid, above that level it had attractive blue-shuttered windows, all of which were shut.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Tell the pack, tell the boss."