

An excerpt from *Mister Monday*

Book One in Garth Nix's new fantasy series,
The Keys to the Kingdom

A flash of light suddenly distracted Arthur from his slow, counted breaths. It hit the corner of his eye, and he swung around to see what it was. For a moment he thought he was blacking out again and was falling over and looking up at the sun. Then, through half-shut eyes, he realised that whatever the blinding light was, it was on the ground and very close.

In fact, it was moving, gliding across the grass towards him, the light losing its brilliance as it drew nearer. Arthur watched in stunned amazement as a dark outline became visible within the light. Then the light faded completely, to reveal a weirdly dressed man in a very strange sort of wheelchair being pushed across the grass by an equally odd-looking attendant.

The wheelchair was long and narrow, like a bath, and it was made of woven wicker. It had one small wheel at the front and two big ones at the back. All three wheels had metal rims, without rubber tires, or any sort of tire, so the wheelchair – or wheel-bath, or bath-chair, or whatever it was – sank heavily into the grass.

The man lying back in the bath-chair was thin and pale, his skin like tissue paper. He looked quite young, though, no more than twenty, and was very handsome, with even features and blue eyes, though these were hooded, as if he was very tired. He had an odd round hat with a tassel on his blond head and was wearing what looked to Arthur like some sort of kung fu robe, of red silk with blue dragons all over it. He had a tartan blanket over his legs, but his slippers stuck out the end. They were red silk too, and shimmered in the sun with a pattern that Arthur couldn't quite focus on.

The man who was pushing the chair was even more out of place. Or out of time. He looked somewhat like a butler from an old movie, or Nestor from the Tintin comics, though he was nowhere near as neat. He had on an oversized black coat with ridiculously long tails that almost touched the ground, and his white shirtfront was stiff and very solid, as

if it was made of plastic. He had knitted half gloves that were unravelling on his hands, and bits of loose wool hung over his fingers. Arthur noticed with distaste that his fingernails were very long and yellow, as were his teeth. He was much older than the man he pushed, his face lined and pitted with age, his white hair only growing on the back of his head, though it was very long. He had to be at least eighty, but he had no difficulty pushing the bath-chair straight towards Arthur.

The two men were talking as they approached. They seemed entirely unaware of Arthur, or uninterested in him.

'I don't know why I keep you upstairs, Sneezer,' said the man in the bath-chair. 'Or agree to your ridiculous plans.'

'Now, now, sir,' said the butler-type, who was obviously called Sneezer. Now that they were closer, Arthur noticed that his nose was rather red and had a patchwork of broken blood vessels shining under the skin. 'It's not a plan, but a precaution. We don't want to be bothered by the Will, do we?'

'I s'pose not,' grumbled the young man. He yawned widely and closed his eyes. 'You're sure that we'll find someone suitable here?'

'Sure as eggs is eggs,' replied Sneezer. 'Surer even, eggs not always being what one might expect. I set the dials myself, to find someone suitably on the edge of infinity. You give him the Key, he dies, you get it back. Another ten thousand years without trouble, and the Will can't quibble cos you *did* give up the Key to one in the line of heredity, as it were.'

'It's very annoying,' said the young man, yawning again. 'I'm quite exhausted with all this running around and answering those ridiculous inquiries from up top. How should I know how that bit of the Will got out? I'm not going to write a report, you know. I haven't the energy. In fact, I really need a nap –'

'Not now, sir, not now,' said Sneezer urgently. He shaded his eyes with one dirty, half-gloved hand and looked around. Strangely, he still seemed unable to see Arthur, though he was right in front of him. 'We're almost there.'

'We are there,' said the young man coldly. He pointed at Arthur as if the boy had suddenly appeared out of nowhere. 'Is that it?'