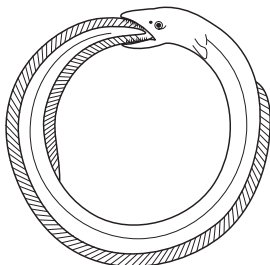


THE
WELL BETWEEN
THE WORLDS



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SAM LLEWELLYN

 SCHOLASTIC

First published in 2009 by Scholastic Children's Books
An imprint of Scholastic Ltd
Euston House, 24 Eversholt Street
London, NW1 1DB, UK
Registered office: Westfield Road, Southam, Warwickshire, CV47 0RA
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ISBN 978 1407 10240 5

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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For Innis, my mother
and Teona and Alexandra,
my cousins

Lyonnesse





I

The darkgardens were deepest green shading into black, fed with the richest blood. Darkness was the loveliest thing: coloured darkness, with little red flecks swimming in patterns, glowing, always the same in this world that always changed.

The woman's mind cruised the dark, speaking with the giant Helpers. Her body lay in the tower high above the land; but deep in the dark, she rested and made her plans. The time was drawing near when the worlds would become one, and beautiful darkness would cover the earth.

Brightness was weakness. Darkness was power.

She rose from the darkgardens to look at her kingdom.

Up raced her mind through the dark water, up the rock shaft until rock became builded stone, up, up the chimney of the Well, through the secret tunnels into her chamber in the highest tower of the Mount. The body drew a breath. The fluids of life gurgled in their tubes. The woman rose, and went to her window, and opened her shutters, and turned her night-black eyes down upon the bright world of Lyonesse.

It was dawn.

Below the Mount the land sank into a valley still untouched by the day. The lake lay at its bottom, with the walled city rising at its head. Night-fog hung in the walls and buildings like beast guts on a slaughter rail. The city was

crowded with buildings: hovels and cottages by the lakeside, and further back heavier blocks and ranges, blackened and lofty.

A chimney spat chemical smoke. Through the air came the thump of a machine.

The eyes crawled beyond the valley, over long leagues of hills to the oak forest of the Shipwright's Garden, where the River Fal ran through green meadows to the ship-basins and wharves of the Southgate. They scorched over a barer land with standing stones and shadow-filled vales, far, far, to a thin black line that dammed the grey downs. The line was the Wall. Beyond the Wall the sea shifted, stretching away for ever, bright, weak, hostile.

The eyes closed. A bronze shutter wheezed to. Inside the tower, night fell again. The woman lay down on the black stone bed. The chest stilled. The mind plunged back through the twisted tunnels into the deep. The time of darkness would be very soon.

But far away under the Wall, in a town brilliant with morning light, something was beginning that would turn her wicked dreams to nightmares.

Listen.

One

The town is Westgate. And bursting out of the school into the warm afternoon sun, here comes Idris Limpet, eleven years old at this time, swinging a rope of books round his head, mad with joy at being released. They had been doing the Treaty in school. They were always doing the Treaty, and they were sick of it, Spignold and Erys and Mawga and Cayo and everyone. “Books on the roof!” cried Spignold.

Up on the thatch of the net shed the children slung their books, the ropes hanging down so they could pull them off later. That was the idea, anyway. But Spignold obviously threw his too hard, so the rope was out of reach, which he would eventually blame someone else for. And Mawga threw hers too softly, so they slid down again. Idris took the time to dust off Mawga’s books the glittering powder of mica sand and fish scales that floored the narrow streets of the Westgate, and tossed them neatly on to the roof. Mawga sniffed at him and ran on.

Idris paid no attention because he was leaping in the sun, saying good afternoon to his pet gull, Kek. He knew that Master Omnium, the teacher, would be watching in his dusty black robe. And with Master Omnium that day was a man with a thick red tunic bearing the silver device of an eel devouring its tail, and a dark face, and a nose ring of heavy gold. Master Omnium and the man with the nose ring were staring at Idris. The nose-ring man had a tablet in his hands, on which he was scribing in squid ink. Master Omnium said something. Nose Ring raised surprised eyebrows and wrote again. Idris's joy quailed before an uneasy sense that they were talking about him.

“Oi!” cried Spignold.

And off they went, running, hands out for balance, up the cracked and sea-pink-tufted steps to the top of the Wall. And there was the Westgate spread out behind and below them. There was the crumbling Wall, the high harbour, the Seagate with its chain to keep out wicked murdering sea-roving slavers and Ægypt corsairs, its turrets, once proud and fierce, now glassless and blind, battlegrounds for gulls and owls at the hinges of the day. And ahead, the surprise of the sea, huge, blue and shifting, battering the Wall with the creamy edges of its waves.

The sea was higher than the land. Much, much higher, the height of nine tall men standing on one

another's heads. It had always been thus, though if you listened to old people it was rising steadily. Spignold laughed at this; life was good, the old people were idiots. Idris was not so sure. He was a respectful boy, and he did listen, even if he did not in the end agree.

“To the fort!” cried Spignold.

To the fort they ran, along the wall, up the steps, into a spiral stone staircase that smelt of rotten seaweed and up a tower at whose top was a chamber like a huge stone lantern, a round room with an all-round view and a ceiling partly fallen in on a copper boss in the centre of its floor – a tower built by a merchant to watch for his ships, perhaps, in the distant days of the Westgate's prosperity.

On the inland side, the empty window-sockets gave a view over the Westgate and the hills beyond. Once, the town had been a great port city. But the sea currents had blocked the channels with sand, and now it lay half-ruined. The castle still stood on its hill, a grim drum of black stone over which flew the red-fist flag of the Town Captain. But the grand houses on the hill below it, once home to purple-cloaked merchants, now stood empty and rotten, their roofs sway-backed, their windows blinded by white crowds of gulls. The people, Idris's parents among them, now lived in the narrow, cosy streets that ran back from the harbour.

Behind the castle the road ran up a long valley,

shrank with distance, and vanished among the rounded summits of the Downs. Apparently if you followed the road for a week you would come to the Wellvale, far to the east, where the Captains lived in splendour. Once the road had been full of traffic. Now there were weeds in the paving and few travelled it. . .

Idris frowned. For as long as he could remember, the road had been part of what he saw every day. But now he found himself thinking: what would it be like to travel along it? He felt uneasy. The thought was an odd one, mixed up in some way with the nose-ring man who had been talking to Master Omnium. And a stupid one. People did not leave the Westgate.

“Idris,” said Mawga’s rather whiny voice, “*Idris!*”

Idris turned. It looked like they were playing Kingdom. It was a good game.

Spignold sat on a throne of stone lumps in the middle. Mawga sat at his side with a gull’s feather in her hair. Spignold’s pug nose was high, Mawga’s eyes cross and narrow. They were the King and Queen, as usual. Kek the gull sat on the parapet, watching.

“Repel corsairs!” cried Spignold.

Everyone ran around, half-mad with excitement, boiling imaginary oil and firing imaginary crossbows at invading slave ships. Spignold was shockingly wounded but cured by Mawga’s keen nursing. Erys and everyone else were less badly wounded, except for little Cayo,

who took a poisoned arrow in the shoulder and expired horribly, twice, because nobody had been watching the first time.

“Corsairs repelled!” cried Spignold.

“Oh,” said Mawga, put out, because she liked being Queen almost as much as pudgy, mean Spignold liked being King. “What now, then?”

“The Plank.”

“What’s the Plank?”

“New game,” said Spignold.

Idris felt a return of his uneasiness. There was an odd look in Spignold’s eye, half excited, half frightened. Idris noticed things like that. Nobody else seemed to. “Meaning?” said Idris.

Spignold walked over to a pile of rubble in the corner and hauled out a long board of reddish wood. “We stick one end out of the window,” he said. “Someone sits on the inside end. Someone sits on the outside end. We rock. Like a seesaw. But better.”

Idris looked out of the window. A long way below, a blue tongue of sea licked up the wall. Whoever was on the outside end of the seesaw would be in some danger. Plenty of danger, actually. You could bet it would not be Spignold.

“I’ll go on the outside,” said Cayo, always ready to make up for his lack of size with wild boldness.

BONG, said the great bell in the town. The air

shivered. The children stopped looking at Cayo. They stood with their feet together, heads bowed. It was the Hour of Thanks. “The Well,” said Spignold, taking over as usual.

“The Well,” said the other children. Idris watched an ant walking over his bare brown toe. He tried to feel solemn, but the ant was more interesting. The Hour of Thanks was just a muddle of words about towers and Wells and a lot of other things that did not make much sense. He had said them ever since he could remember. They had long ago stopped meaning anything.

“Thanks to the Well and the waters therein,” said Spignold. His father was the Town Captain, hander-down of justice in the name of the Mount. “For they bring forth monsters that we may live free. And thanks to our Captains, who show the monsters the glory of day who else would know only night.”

“Thanks to the Well,” said the children. The noises of the day had stopped. The words rose in a murmur from all over the town.

Idris’s mind moved from the ant to Spignold. He did not actually like Spignold very much. He did not like the way he automatically took control, or the way he deliberately set people against people, or the way he thought that just because his father was the Captain he was some sort of Captain too.

BONG, said the great bell again. Far below on the

street, voices started to gossip again, tin pots to bang on stoves and cart wheels to grind the sandy cobbles.

“Right!” cried Spignold. “Cayo! The plank!”

Idris looked across at Cayo. The small boy had not been concentrating either. He had been using the quiet time to feel sorry he had ever volunteered. Now his eyes were too wide and he was munching his lips from the inside, and his knees were shuddering faintly beneath his school kilt.

“Or maybe,” said Spignold, with a mean, narrow look, “you are chicken.”

All eyes were already on Cayo. All eyebrows were up, and all lips pursed. It made Idris uncomfortable. Cayo turned pink. He opened his mouth to say that he was certainly not chicken, no way. But even as he did it his lips wobbled. At this point, Idris was certain about two things. One, if Cayo went bouncing around on planks he would fall in the sea and drown, for nobody in Lyonesse was permitted to learn to swim, on pain of death. Any swimmer might be a Cross, child of human and monster, and it was the law that no Cross could be allowed to live. And two, it was unfair, and everyone knew it was, but nobody would say anything, for fear of Spignold. Except Idris, who disliked bullying and could hardly ever stop himself saying what was in his mind.

“Kek,” said Kek the gull, standing on the parapet.

“Cayo,” said Idris, “would you mind if I had the first go?”

He saw Cayo’s face turn bright red with relief, then assume a tough though tiny scowl. “Werl,” said Cayo. “I dunno. If you really really want to—”

“Hey!” said Spignold, looking sulky.

“Plank out, then,” said Idris, before anyone could object. “Grab the other end, Mawga.”

Normally, Mawga would no more have got her hands dirty than walk across the sea to the Outer Banks. But Idris could feel a thing in him that he had felt before; a sort of energy that spread to other people and made them do what he wanted them to do. Spignold had it too, in a way. Spignold managed it by being big and mean. Idris was not big and not mean. But sometimes he seemed to be able to tell exactly what other people were thinking.

“Look,” he said. “If you do this seesaw thing it’s not going to work.” He took possession of the plank, shoved its end out of the glassless window and jammed its inside end under a great lump of stone, once part of the roof. Kek flapped into the air and hung on the breeze, watching. The plank now stuck out over the sea like a long, narrow diving board. “Watch!” said Idris.

He stepped on to the board and walked out of the window. Now he was outside the tower, the sun shone hot on his head. Behind him was the kind of silence

that comes from your classmates when their mouths are hanging open. A hundred feet below, the sea boomed hollow on the Wall of Lyonesse. He felt happy, because he could tell that Cayo was thinking that if it had been him he would have got the knee wobbles and drowned. Idris was light, and free, and he had done good.

He flexed his knees. The plank flexed too. This was good, but frightening. He flexed again, with more power this time, and gave a little jump. The plank sprang under his feet. The fear faded. He did the next jump, a little bigger. Up he went into the warm breeze, arms straight out from his shoulders, weightless for a brilliant second, no fear at all now. Then down again, feeling the comfortable bend of the plank, the pressure in his knees as it shot him upwards, the lightness in his stomach at the top of his leap. *Woo*, said the children in the fort. "You and me, Kek," he said to Kek. Then he was down again, bounce, up again. As he went down through the joyful air he thought he heard a clatter of wood, and someone shout. He cast his eyes downward, looking for the plank under his feet.

The plank was not there.

There was a confused shouting from the fort. He fell past it straight as an arrow, hands by his side. He glimpsed the white lines of surf on the Outer Banks, a drift of gulls, blue sky, sun high. He was astonished. His

mouth was open. He knew he should have been frightened, but he was not. Instead he thought: I will never see Mum again, nor Dad, nor the Boys, nor the Precious Stones. And he felt very, very sad.

But only for the blink of an eye. Then the water bashed the soles of his feet, a huge, stinging blow, and he was in cold, salty water, drowning.

Drowning was not at all what he had expected. He had assumed that when you fell into water you would sink, and the air in your chest would keep you going for a bit, but only until you got that panicky feeling you get when you hold your breath for too long in a breath-holding contest, after which you would take a gasp, which would not be of air but of water, so you would sort of strangle. Then the horrible bit would start, with your life passing before your eyes and a very nasty struggle, the kind a caught mackerel makes in the basket.

There was the smash of the water. There was the panicky feeling. And a question: *Why don't we learn to swim, like the seals or the fish?*

And an answer: *Because what swims is beast, monster or Cross.*

Then there was the struggle. Silent screams, blood thundering in ears, panic, real, horrible. But no past-life stuff. Just a stopping of panic. And a shrinking of the mind. And a feeling of floating in deep green darkness,

with little red flecks around him, glowing, perfectly beautiful. . .

Something was battering at his chest. He gave a huge cough, very painful, because what he was coughing out was not air but water. Strong light jabbed his eyes. He rolled away from the battering and curled into a ball.

“Stone me,” said a voice. “It lives.”

Idris opened his eyes. The light was still like knives, so he shut them. “Oi,” said the voice. “Come back.”

Idris recognized the voice. It belonged to Daft Alb, a fisherman when he felt like it, the rest of the time the laziest man in the Westgate.

“Silly bleeder,” said Alb. “Lucky for you I was passing by. In fact,” said Alb, a note of puzzlement entering his voice, “lucky for you I was a-dreaming of a man with a nose ring, me telling him tide’s wrong for fishing, him saying give it a whirl anyway, and me doing it. Then having come out of the Seagate I goes not straight ahead for the Banks but turns hard a-starboard along the Wall like I never do, just in time to see you come a-thundering out of the sky like a gannet. Down you did go,” said Alb, “and I made sure you was mullet bait. But then up you did come, so I grabbed you. I wonder,” said Alb, “if I am in for a reward.”

Idris was not in a position to answer this question, as he was being sick over the side.

“Better out than in,” said Alb. “Whyn’t you give me a hand to row this thing home?”

Down the Wall they rowed, between the towers of the Seagate and into the great stone basin built for the trading ships that had made the Westgate’s fortune before the sand banks had blocked the channels. The quays were empty, except for a handful of fishing boats, a couple of gigs and the *Pride of Westgate*, a big corsair-chaser tied up to the Guardian Dock. Idris began to feel better. His head cleared. He had the energy to wonder about Alb’s dream. And as he wondered, something odd struck him.

He frowned. He said, “A man with a nose ring appeared to you?”

Alb puffed, rowing. “Yep.”

“What did he look like?”

“Told you. Nose ring.”

Nose rings were uncommon in the Westgate. A nose ring had been discussing him with Master Omnium. And now a nose ring had saved him.

Odd.

But plenty of things were odd, thought Idris, always practical. The main thing was that he had not drowned. The boat was sliding alongside the quay steps, green weed waving below.

A small figure was waiting on the cracked marble paving, looking miserable. Idris felt sorry for him.

“Cayo,” he said, taking the mooring line up the steps. “You all right?”

Cayo did not lift his eyes from his feet.

“What happened?”

Cayo avoided Idris’s eye. “It was Spignold.”

“It was Spignold what?”

“He was angry that everyone was looking at you. He sort of bumped into the plank. He can’t have meant to. Then he said he would save everyone a lot of trouble.”

“Trouble?” Idris felt a chill. “What trouble?”

“You know what bighead rubbish he talks. I expect he’s very sorry.”

“Yes.” A niggles of worry started in Idris. Sudden death was common in Lyonesse, and the Westgate was a hard place. Games were dangerous and played for keeps. It was good practice (some people said, particularly the Captains) for later life. But what was this about saving trouble?

Idris started along the quay, sore in throat and chest. Beside him, Cayo had cheered up, and was singing:

*“Out of the sky he plummeted
but much to Spignold’s pain
though blue sea closed over his head
he plummeted up again.”*

Idris laughed, which hurt his chest. As he turned his head to tell Cayo the song was rubbish, he noticed two men were watching them: Master Omnium in his long black gown, and the man with the nose ring. As Idris caught Nose Ring's eye, Nose Ring inclined his head in a small, knowing bow. Idris thought of Alb's dream. The hair prickled on his neck.

Suddenly he wanted home and warmth. He trotted down the fifty steps from the top of the quay to Wet Street. Thank the Well, it was nearly time for zupper.

The Limpets' house was not very big, but what it lacked in size it made up for in tidiness. "I'm back," called Idris to his mum, who was battering tin pots at the clay stove.

"Dinner in a whale's dive," she said. "Wash."

He dumped his books in the bedroom he shared with the Boys, his large blond brothers, Ed and Cadmon. He washed in water from the rain tank, rinsed the salt out of his school kilt and put on clean breeches. He was trying not to worry about the man with the nose ring. The ring suggested he came from the Wellvale. He wondered what happened to him when he had a cold. Snot everywhere, probably—

His mother was calling him. Harpoon Limpet was tall and blonde, like her elder sons. The corners of her eyes and her arms bore the luck tattoos of the guild of

Fishers. Idris ran downstairs and started to bang the shell bowls round the driftwood table, his worries vanishing with the prospect of zupper. “Here’s your dad,” said Harpoon.

Ector Limpet was a small, upright man, with the sea-blue eyes of those whose duty it was to patrol the Wall of Lyonesse. He was wearing the dark-blue uniform of a Gateguard Wallwatcher, and a slight frown. The frown deepened when he saw Idris, but the eyes looked more worried than annoyed. Idris felt his stomach sink, and ran over in his mind the things he ought not to have done that day. “Where are they all?” said Ector.

“The Boys are out till the five bell,” said Harpoon. “And the Stones are at their friend Wilda’s.” The Stones were the Precious Stones, Emerald and Ruby, Idris’s little blonde sisters, who seemed to spend months on end in their friends’ houses, except when their friends were at the Limpets’.

“Good,” said Ector. “Siddown, then.”

Idris sat down. Harpoon sloshed a pinkish stew into three shell bowls. It smelt deliciously of crab, and of garlics from the garden path at the back of the house. Ector ate for a while, silent except for slurping noises. Then he looked at Idris with those sea-blue eyes. “And you,” he said. “How’s it been?”

“Same old stuff,” said Idris, uneasy under his father’s

gaze. He did not want to tell his parents about the fall into the sea, and the odd stares of Nose Ring and Omnium. What was done was done, and it would only worry them.

But Ector was not a Gateguard for nothing. “There was something, though,” he said. “In that fort of yours.”

“Let him eat,” said Harpoon, to Idris’s relief. “Took some catching, those crabs did, then some boiling, then some picking—”

“And very nice too,” said Ector, forging on. “But I bumped into Cayo’s mum on the way home, and she told me a tale about Cayo.” The eyes drilled into Idris’s. “She said you’d done him a good turn. Very happy about that, she was.”

“Ah,” said Idris, not wanting to explain. “Yes.”

“And?”

“Very good, this, Ma,” said Idris, eating.

“All right,” said Ector. “That there dratted Spignold was throwing his weight around, and you thought you’d stop him. Is that it?”

Idris put down his spoon. This might get complicated; Captains like Spignold’s dad were far above Gateguards like Ector. Perhaps his dad would get into trouble. But there was no getting out of it now. He held his father’s eye. “What would you have done?” he said.

Ector ducked his head. “Very good,” he said.

“Just the same.” He was a kind man, simple and straightforward and strong-minded.

Idris felt a moment’s relief. Then he saw his father catch Harpoon’s eye and look away too quickly, as if there was something they were hiding from him, and he felt that chill again. “What is it?” he said.

“Eat,” said Harpoon. “It’ll get cold.”

Idris laid down his spoon. He hated it when they hid things from him. “Please.”

If the Boys or the Stones had done this, Ector would have ignored them. But Idris had a knack of making people feel the same way he felt.

“Tell him,” said Harpoon.

Ector shrugged, and prodded a bit of crab in his bowl. “That Spignold said something,” he said. “Nonsense, of course—”

“Tell me,” said Idris.

“You fell in the sea,” said Ector. “You went under for a good bit. Then Alb fished you out, and Alb still doesn’t properly know why he was in the right place to do it at that moment, except for some dream he said he had, silly fool. They reckon . . . that is, Spignold is saying . . . you swam, and you made Alb rescue you by talking in his mind.” He fell silent. The terrible words hung in the air between them. Monsters could swim. Monsters talked in people’s minds.

Idris’s heart had started hammering. “So according

to Spignold,” he said, “I am a Cross or some such horror?”

“We know what’s true,” said Ector, his face grim but embarrassed too. “But you know Captain Ironhorse. He’ll listen.”

Watching his father, Idris saw the awful danger in his face. In his mind the words of the Treaty marched with a steady, doleful tread. *Men may catch Monsters for the benefit they give to Men. And Men will keep open the Wells from which the Monsters rise, that the Monsters may enjoy the bright plunge of day into their world. The one is a fair exchange for the other.*

But Man is Man, and Monster Monster. The Treaty permits no abomination. The chief abomination is a Cross. For there are Monsters that present themselves in mortal guise, yea, even in the guise of young Men and Women, that mortal Women and Men may be deceived by them and bring forth Crosses, a Cross being a creature gotten by Men of Monsters, yea, even if it be of the thirtieth generation. And the way ye shall know your Cross is if your Cross can swim in the waters on the face of the earth; so any Man that swims shall be called Cross, and must surely perish.

The Treaty was something you learned at school. It was words, that was all. Monsters lived in Wells and were useful in some way that nobody told you. But if monsters got loose they were bad and frightening and wanted to breed with humans and conquer Lyonesse.

But somewhere far away. Not in the sunny little half-ruined Westgate. It was ridiculous.

“I *sank*,” he said, slowly, so they would understand and tell everyone what was true. “I went on that plank because Spignold was bullying Cayo and I wanted to help. And Spignold moved the plank and I missed it and fell and sank, and Alb pulled me out just before I went down for the third time—”

“I know,” said Harpoon, smoothing his hair with a hand hardened by nets and lines. “Spignold’s father is a fat fool, and the boy’s as bad. You mustn’t worry. We’ll sort it out. Now. I can hear your throat is all scratchy. Time you were in bed.”

“Things will be all right,” said Ector. “I’ll see to it.”

Idris noticed that his father’s eyes met his mother’s as if things were not all right, were indeed a long way from being all right. But he was very, very tired, too tired to be unhappy about things he did not understand. He dragged himself upstairs and into his bed. Dimly he heard the clatter of the Boys coming in, and the squeak and titter of the Stones. Then he went to sleep.

Two

Idris woke once in the night. He could hear his parents in the kitchen, the rumble of his father's voice, the sharp note of his mother's as she said, "No!" Then his father started talking again and then he was back asleep, falling through green darkness among glowing-red fishes. . .

He awoke. It was morning, and from below there came the bright smell of grasswater and smokefish. He was late for breakfast. He rolled out of bed and scroffed his hair tidy and hauled on his school kilt and tunic. Someone had brought back his books and put them on the work desk in his room. Yesterday was hazy, like a dream. This was a day like any other, except that he was even later for school than usual, and he had a strange, uneasy feeling in the back of his mind.

The weedwater was lukewarm, and the Boys had eaten the fillets of the smokefish, leaving only a couple of backbones to gnaw. Harpoon was out fishing, and

Ector was on the Wall. A squid-inked shell on the table read COME HOME FOR NUNCHEON. Idris trotted through the sandy lanes to school. The sun banished his unease, and he dribbled a cheery knob of dried donkey dung for the last couple of hundred yards, Kek gliding overhead. He was last into the hall, but the morning readings had not yet started. Boys and girls looked at him as he took his place; a strange look, admiring but nervous, probably because of yesterday. The only person who did not look at him was Spignold, who was staring reverently at Master Omnium, lips pursed. The sight of Spignold brought back the uneasiness, and with it a small, anxious knot in his stomach.

The children listened to the Readings of the Day. They sang Wellsongs in the four-part harmonies that came naturally to the children of Lyonesse. Then they went to their classes. This morning, it was first the Manner, then the Nature of the Land. The Manner taught you how to treat other people so the person you met could tell your name and rank and place, and there would be no possibility for rudeness or offence. The Nature of the Land was boring, because Idris was beginning to realize that he knew as much about it as his teacher did.

“The nature of the land is to sink,” said Mother Arthrax, who was incredibly old and incredibly dull. She mumbled away about the Wall, the pumps powered

by monsters that kept the land dry. Inside Idris's head, the thoughts hummed busily by. It was silly to be worried. Nothing had happened after yesterday's fright. He would get on with his studies and forget about Spignold and Nose Ring and Omnium. He did not intend to spend the rest of his life patrolling the crumbling Wall against corsairs that nowadays cruised miles away, far to the south of the Outer Banks. When he grew up he would make things happen. Not the way the Captains did, pompous and moneyish and self-important. He would know the stars, talk to birds, become expert in the placing of standing stones. He would make things happen without spoiling other things in the process.

A fly landed on his desk and sat washing its face with its front legs. *Fly, fly*, thought Idris.

The fly flew.

Idris watched it go. *Come back, fly*, he thought.

The fly came back.

Fly.

It flew.

Back.

Back it came.

Fly upside down, thought Idris, so surprised he could hardly breathe.

The fly turned upside down, got confused and crashed to the ground. Mawga put her foot on it.

By the Well, thought Idris, his heart hammering.
What was *that*?

“Idris!” cried Mother Arthrax. “Name me the marks of the Approach from the Sea!”

“Um,” said Idris, his mind still full of biddable fly. “You got your North Sundeeeps Bank, your Outer Banks, your Outer Inner Gobbard—”

“You got?” said Mother Arthrax. “Exactly whom do you think you are addressing?”

There was a general giggle in the class. Schools in Lyonesse were formal places. Mother Arthrax did not like the giggle, and decided to blame Idris. “If you want a whipping you may have one!” she shrieked. “Come to the high seat at day’s end, and we shall see who talks disrespect and casualness!”

Idris bowed, gloomy again. It seemed just about impossible to keep out of trouble. Spignold was reciting the marks in a smarmy sing-song, getting them all right, of course. Idris found another fly and tried to make it fly. But the doom waiting at day’s end interfered with his concentration, and the fly paid no attention. Perhaps he had imagined the first one. Idris’s gloom deepened. All he could do was wait, and hope it was soon over.

After a couple of hundred years the Nature of the Land lesson ended, and the pupils rose for seal’s milk. The day being bright, there was a general stampede for

the yard, on whose walls were marked the circles that were the goals in the game of War. War was a good, violent game, and it was a relief for Idris to run and barge and get Mother Arthrax out of his mind. He saw Rarpa pick up the ball and start to run. Idris launched himself into the air, got Rarpa round the neck and pulled him down with a crash on to the sandy paving, shouting, “Mark!”

Suddenly Idris had the impression that the sun had gone behind a cloud. He looked up. There was no cloud, but a tall man in a brown cloak. A Town Guardian. What was he doing on the War field?

He found out.

Hard hands grabbed him by the upper arm. He was lifted from the ground. He thought, panicky, Is that what you get for not thinking about the way you talk to Mother Arthrax? Then he saw two things.

He saw the face of Spignold, watching him, lips pursed, shaking his head.

And he saw staring down at him from a little carved-stone window the face of Master Omnium: a face that often watched him. Normally it was closed and confident. This morning it was white and worried.

“What have I done?” said Idris, helpless as his heels dragged across the sand of the yard.

“Shut, Cross,” said the Guardian.

Cross? thought Idris, frozen with shock.

The school gates slammed. Big hands threw him into a closed mule-wagon bearing the red fist of Captaincy. The wheels began to grind.

Cross.

Fear dried Idris's mouth and loosened his guts. He sat on the low bench and clamped his teeth together and told himself that this was a mistake. Soon they would realize he was only eleven and send him back to his parents. To distract himself, he kept count of the turnings. The cart rolled away from the school, turned right up Burnt Frog Hill, and right again up a road through the ruined town that was either the Lower Inner Rampart or (by the steepness of it) Castle Gates. Here the fear tried to come back. Very few people who entered the castle in closed carts bearing the red fist of Captaincy –

A long squeal of gate-hinges. A winding of gears, as of a portcullis being raised. The wheels turning hollow on a drawbridge.

– ever came out again. Not even if they were eleven-year-olds with mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers waiting for them.

The cart stopped. The back doors opened. "Out," said a voice.

Idris got out.

The cart was in a small cobbled yard. Blank walls rose on all sides. The sky was a small blue square far above. The horse stamped and snorted, as if it could

smell something it did not like. Idris screwed up his courage. "Why am I here?" he said.

"Shut. March," said the Guardian, and pushed him towards a door.

Idris marched, on wobbly knees. There was a passage and a narrow flight of stone steps. Another door, iron-strapped and nailed. The door swung open, apparently by magic. Inside was a table, a stuffed narwhal, small lamps of seal oil flickering before sooty mica reflectors. A man stood behind the table, not very old but completely without hair. Idris recognized him as Leech Derek the surgeon, and made himself say a polite "Good afternoon", forcing his jaw not to tremble. Leech Derek looked at him with his cold, poached-looking eyes. "Strip," he said. Idris took off his school tunic and stepped out of his school kilt.

"On the table," said Leech Derek. The door slammed, the fifth door, cutting Idris off from the world.

"What—"

"Go, or be put," said the Guardian.

Idris put himself on the table. Leech Derek examined him, crown to soles. "No outward trace," he said to the Guardian.

"Of what?" said Idris. This must be a terrible dream. But it was real.

The Guardian ignored the question. "Nasty deceiving reptile," he said. "Dress."

Idris dressed, doing the buckles with shaking fingers. The Guardian pushed him down a corridor with another door at its end. “Go in,” said the Guardian.

The door opened. A hand pushed Idris through a narrow tunnel. The tunnel ended in a round stone enclosure. The walls of the enclosure came up to his chin, and were armed with rusty iron spikes. Beyond the spikes, far below him, was an enormous room. At the far end of the room were three big chairs, the middle one higher than the other two. The middle chair was empty. In the chair to the left sat an old scribe with a dried inksquid and a great sheet of sealskin on which he was making notes with a seagull quill. I must be dreaming, thought Idris. But he knew he was not. For in the right-hand chair, wearing the Triple Crown of Captaincy – tin, copper, gold – sat Captain Ironhorse.

Idris summoned up his courage. “Good morning,” he said through the spikes, keeping his voice steady, but only just. He knew where he was now. He had been here on a school trip. This was the Hall of Justice.

And the spiked enclosure was the dock.

“Silence!” cried a voice from below. Idris stood on tiptoe. On the floor of the enormous room, half a dozen people were sitting. He recognized a fish merchant, a shipowner, a couple of brown-tunicked Guardians, and a man who might be a clerk. The Captain’s people, in fact. The kind Dad called fat bloodsuckers.

“The court is here,” intoned Ironhorse. “The court will do its duty. However disagreeable.” He smiled vastly. “What is the case?”

“Suspected Cross,” said a voice Idris recognized as belonging to the Guardian who had brought him.

Idris’s heart gave a great bang, then seemed to stop beating. Everyone knew Crosses existed, and that they were taken away and destroyed. But there were no Crosses at Westgate School. He was a boy, not a Cross.

“Has he been examined?” said the Captain.

“Aye,” said Leech Derek.

“Does he bear signs?”

“None evident,” said Leech Derek, his brow greasy with sweat. “A very perfect specimen of a man boy, indeed.”

“Perhaps too perfect?” said the Captain knowingly.

Leech Derek gave an equally knowing wag of the head. “I have known it so, with Crosses.”

“There is other evidence,” said Ironhorse pompously. “It comes from a man of the Wellvale skilled in recognizing Crosses.” Into Idris’s head came the dark face of the man with the nose ring, murmuring to Master Omnium. He looked at his feet, bowed down by an awful sense of powerlessness.

“See, he hangs his head,” said Ironhorse. “My brave son Spignold has long had suspicions of his own.” Dirty

bully, thought Idris, with a sharp stab of anger. “And there is yet other evidence,” said the Captain. “Yesterday, the creature Idris Limpet did fall by the ingenuity of my brave son from a tower, and was seen to swim. There is a witness. Scribe?”

“I have here a paper from Alb Fishbee, known as Daft,” said the scribe with the squid and the sealskin. “It goes like this. ‘He come down like a gannet, splat into the water, very neat, and I made sure he was a gone goner. But after maybe ten breaths, up he comes. And I grabs him. Is there a reward?’”

“Virtue is its own reward,” said Captain Ironhorse, sniffing fatly. “I have also heard from this person’s classmates –”

“Your fat lying son!” said Idris, losing his temper.

“– that the accused was seen to swim. Scribe, read the law on swimming.”

“It is written,” said the scribe, “that what swims is a Cross, and shall not be suffered to live –”

“Wait!” cried Idris.

“– and shall not be heard,” said the scribe. “For lo, the monster speaks sweetly, and bends men’s minds. Better a man die in mistake than a monster live.”

“Very well,” said Ironhorse. “Let it be done.”

Idris’s lips were numb with horror. “Let what be done?”

“A thing suspected Cross shall be drowned, and if he

yet live and be verily monster, be crushed,” said the Captain. “Let it be written.”

“I want my parents!” said Idris, in a nightmare. “My dad’s a Gateguard! My brothers—”

“Put him away,” said Ironhorse. “Next case.”

“There is no next case,” said the scribe. And he might have gone on, but Idris did not hear it. For the floor had dropped away under his feet and he was falling. A yell of horror tore his throat. For he knew where he was falling to.

Some Westgate mothers scared their children with tales of the Drowning Cell, connected with the dock of the Hall of Justice by Hell’s Throat. Harpoon had not been one of those mothers. Harpoon had been sweet and kind and huge and gentle, and now he would never see her again. Because Hell’s Throat had swallowed him.

So he fell. Then he was not falling but slithering, down a long chute of slimy stone. A smell of old mould and rot came up at him. It was dark. He put out his hand to slow himself, but the walls hurtled by, smooth as glass. Down he rushed, down and along, shooting under the roots of the town. Perhaps he was shouting; probably not, because the terror and regret were gone, and what remained was the knowledge that this was not fair. He was an ordinary boy. But this Nose Ring had singled him out as a Cross. And Spignold had lied about him

to please Ironhorse, who doted on his podgy son. And Ironhorse had condemned him without question, the way you would swat a blackbeetle on the seal cheese.

Idris turned a somersault and came down with a bang on his shoulder, upside down, out of control, like the fly in the classroom—

The fly.

Something burst in Idris's head. It was as if an extra pair of eyes had opened, a pair he had never noticed before—

Bump went something under him, a seam in the rock, perhaps. Over he tumbled, and put his hands out to save himself. The heels of his palms crashed painfully against stone. Over he went again.

The new eyes in his head saw a town.

They saw the line of a sea wall, blue sea beyond, towers, spires, the blind sockets of windows. The town was the Westgate, the wall the Wall. *He was seeing through Kek's eyes.*

For a moment his mind filled with wild thoughts of escape, taking wing away from all these horrors. Then over he tumbled again, and he knew he was not the gull, but only seeing with the gull's eyes. He slid flat on his belly. His knee hit an edge of stone, hurt. He was slowing down, the slope growing less, the floor wetter now, flattening out. And finally he coasted to a halt in pitch-darkness, sitting in cold water.

Behind him, something went *click*.

He tried to stand up. When he was half up his head hit stone. He started to crawl backwards, the way he had come. The stones were horribly slippery. The floor started to slope upwards. His hands and knees found no grip, so he crept on his belly, the cloth of kilt and tunic providing just enough friction for him to make his way, his hands out in front of him, until he was out of the water.

His hands hit stone.

He felt up and around. Then he laid his forehead on his arms and closed his eyes.

He was in a stone pipe, perhaps a clothyard in diameter. The click he had heard was a balanced stone that had risen behind him to block him in. In front of him would be another wall, only this one would have vents at its base to admit the sea and drown him.

Idris knew that he was dead. The problem was that he could not make himself believe it.

His mind went inward. It went to the first things he could remember, when he had been tiny. Family things: Harpoon his mother, the smell of her, warm and kind and tinged with fish-smoke. The hands of Ector his father, carving him a little corsair boat out of a bit of driftwood, the fingers sunburnt and clever, the eyes watching him as if in a sort of wonder at what he saw. The ragtag of the Boys and him, playing like puppies

under the table. The Precious Stones, tiny, smiling at him with the perfect happiness and trust of babies who had not yet learned that the world was not a happy place and could certainly not be trusted. And now all that warmth and kindness had gone because of lies that Spignold and Nose Ring had told. Gone for ever. Because his family would be alive, and he would be dead.

No, thought Idris. This cannot happen.

He jumped. Cold water had sloshed against his foot.

The tide was coming in.

It was happening.

His heart was hammering. He made himself breathe slowly.

The new eyes opened.

The town from above again, the Wall, the castle. A street, Eel Alley, winding through houses. And down the street two men running. Even from above, Idris recognized his father. A lump came into his throat, and tears stung his eyes, but did not dim them, because he was looking through Kek, and gulls do not cry. The other man was dressed in a dark-red cloak. He looked up, straight at the gull. Idris felt a chill of horror. It was the man with the nose ring, the Crosshunter. What did he want now? Ector bent and seemed to pull at something on the ground: a stone with a ring in the middle.

Somewhere in the solid ground far above Idris's head, stone grated on stone.

Suddenly he was seeing through his own eyes, and the world was pitch-dark, and his heart was hammering again, and he was terrified enough to whimper. Whimpering was no good. Think. He stood up, got into a sort of crouch, and banged his head on the roof. The water was at his knees, rising fast. Thinking was no good either. The panic rose again. He shouted, "Dad!"

Nothing. Only the slosh of water. Water rising to his thighs, now, as he crouched, nose uppermost, jammed into the arch of the tunnel top. Above the gurgle and slosh he thought he heard more grinding, a hammering, perhaps. But the water was at his collarbones now, and a ring of cold was rising up his neck.

"Dad!"

That was the last shout. The water covered his mouth. He took a last quick breath through his nose, and the water covered it, and he vowed not to give Ironhorse and Spignold and Nose Ring even in his death the satisfaction of terror. *Honour is a thing that is inside you*, he heard Ector say.

All that remained was an honourable death.

No air. Green darkness, shot with little red gleams. . .

The death struggle.

There was light. A yellow blur in the water. Arms and legs flailing, he thrashed towards it. Something grabbed him by the collar of his tunic and pulled him upwards. He had to breathe. Breathed. Air, not water.

He was in a little stone room, leaning against a wet wall that flickered orange in torchlight. His father was bending over the trapdoor in the floor through which he had pulled Idris. Embossed on the door was the fist of Captaincy. His father was battering bronze wedges into hasps, securing the trapdoor. Water was welling up from its sides.

“It would seem,” said another voice, “that you were not born to be drowned.” It was a cold voice, on the edge of sarcasm. It belonged to the man with the nose ring.

Idris stared at him for a moment in horror. Then he pulled the short bronze sword from Ector’s scabbard and hurled himself at the man, wanting to kill, stab, destroy. He heard Ector shout, “Idris!” But Ector did not understand what this man had done.

A cloak muffled his face. A hard hand gripped his sword-wrist. Another lifted him from the ground by his collar. Nose Ring’s voice said, “I am here to save you, idiot child.”

“But you had me taken up and put down Hell’s Throat and nearly drowned—”

“Hush now,” said Ector. “I know this man. Now be

quiet and greet him in the Manner and do what he says.”

Idris’s fingers opened. The sword clattered to the stones. He felt himself lowered to the floor.

“Offer him thanks,” said Ector.

“Never,” said Idris, between clenched teeth.

Nose Ring laughed, infuriatingly superior. “One day you will change your mind.”

“The Manner,” hissed Ector.

Idris did not see why his good father should abase himself before this man. But a father was a father; that was in the Manner too. So he took a deep breath, and managed to bow respectfully, as was expected on meeting a stranger. He said, through clenched teeth, “Revered father and honoured sir, I thank you for coming.”

“Up we go, then,” said Nose Ring, sounding bored. “You first.”

Above the little room was a shaft with bronze rungs up its side. Ector looked at Idris. He winked, patted him on the shoulder and started to climb.

“Very touching,” said Nose Ring. “Go on, then.” He boosted Idris up so he could catch the first rung. Idris began to climb. Nose Ring came behind him, talking. “This is the shaft they haul the bodies up,” he said. “They’ve got a windlass at the top. Nasty place, nasty people.” Pause, with climbing. “Still, you won’t be seeing them again.”

The muddled thoughts stopped. Suddenly, Idris's head was clear and cold. He said, "What do you mean?"

"Get a move on," said Nose Ring. "I hope you said goodbye to everyone this morning."

"What are you talking about?" said Idris, guessing what he meant but not wanting it to be true.

"Your mother and all the rest of that lot," said Nose Ring. "You won't be seeing them for a while. If ever. Use your brains. Obviously you can't stay here. So I'm taking you away. Before someone finds you and drowns you. Properly, next time. And your family with you."

Idris had an awful vision of the Boys and the Stones and Ector and Harpoon behind the iron spikes. He saw the floor give way, heard the screams. "Oh," he said, in a small, small voice.

"Climb."

Light was pouring down the shaft now; the bright, golden light of a Westgate evening. Idris scrambled out of a hole in the pavement. They were among the ruined and uninhabited houses of Gone West Street. Four horses were standing in the street, two with packs, two with saddlecloths. Kek was standing on the ridge of a stone-tiled porch, and the western sky was a blaze of purple and orange.

Nose Ring looked up and down the street. "All right," he said. "Off we go."

"Go on, boy," said Ector. Idris was horrified to see a