

THE KEYS TO THE KINGDOM

• G A R T H N I X •

• B O O K T W O •

G R I M
T U E S D A Y

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Chapter One

Arthur hurried up to his room, the incessant jangling of the old-style telephone bell getting louder and louder. The rest of his family couldn't hear it no matter how loud it got, but that didn't make him feel any better. He couldn't believe the Will was already calling him. It was less than eight hours since he'd defeated Mister Monday, assumed the Mastery of the Lower House and the powers of the First Key, and then just as quickly handed them (and the Key) over to the Will. The Will in turn had promised to be a good Steward and leave him alone for at least five or six years. Not a few hours!

It was also only fifteen minutes since Arthur had released the Nightsweeper, the cure for the Sleepy Plague that otherwise might have killed thousands, if not millions, of people. He'd saved his world, but was he going to be left alone to get some richly deserved sleep?

Obviously not. Furious, Arthur raced into his room, grabbed the red velvet box the Will had given him, and ripped off the lid. There was an ancient telephone inside, the kind with a separate earpiece. It wasn't obviously

connected to anything, but Arthur knew that didn't matter. He grabbed it, unhooked the earpiece, and listened.

"Arthur?"

He knew those gravelly, deep tones at once. The frog-voice that the Will had kept, even when it had transformed itself into a woman. Or something that looked like a woman.

"Yes! Of course it's Arthur. What do you want?"

"I fear that I bear bad news. In the six months since you left —"

"Six months!" Arthur was now confused as well as annoyed. "I've been back for less than a day! It's only just after midnight on Tuesday morning."

"Time runs true in the House, and meanders elsewhere," boomed the Will, its voice clear and loud, almost as if it were in the room. "As I was saying, I bear bad news. Grim Tuesday has found a loophole in the Agreement that forbids interference between the Trustees. With the aid of at least some of the Morrow Days, he has laid claim to the Lower House and the First Key, claiming them as payment for the various goods he delivered to Mister Monday over the last thousand years."

"What?" asked Arthur. "What goods?"

"Oh, metal Commissionaires, elevator parts, teapots, printing presses, all manner of things," replied the Will.

“Normally, payment would not be required till the next millennial settlement, some three hundred years hence. But Grim Tuesday is within his rights to demand payment earlier, as Mister Monday was always behind with his debts.”

“So why not pay him?” Arthur asked. “I mean, with . . . with what you normally use for money. So he can’t claim anything.”

“Normally payment would be made in coin of the House, of which there are seven currencies, each of which has seven denominations. The currency of the Lower House, for example, is the gold roundel, of three hundred and sixty silver pence, the intermediate coins being —”

“I don’t need to know the types of coins!” interrupted Arthur. “Why not pay Grim Tuesday in these gold roundels or whatever?”

“We don’t have any,” replied the Will. “Or very few. The accounts are in a terrible mess, but it appears that Mister Monday never signed any of the invoices that should have billed the other parts of the House for the services supplied by the Lower House. So they haven’t paid.”

Arthur shut his eyes for a moment. He couldn’t believe he was being told about an *accounting problem* in the epicenter of the universe, in the House on which the entirety of creation depended for its continuing existence.

“I’ve made you my Steward,” Arthur said. “You deal with it. I just want to be left alone like you promised. For the next six years!”

“I *am* dealing with it,” replied the Will testily. “Appeals have been lodged, loans applied for, and so on. But I can only delay the matter, and our hopes of a legal victory are slim. I called to warn you that Grim Tuesday has also gotten permission to seek repayment of the debt from you personally. And your family. Even your whole country. Maybe your entire world.”

“What!” Arthur couldn’t believe it. Why couldn’t everyone just leave him alone!

“Opinion is divided on exactly who can be claimed against, but the amount due is quite clear. With compound interest over 722 years, the sum is not insignificant. About thirteen million gold roundels, each of which is one drubuch weight of pure gold, or perhaps you would say an ounce, which is 812,500 pounds avoirdupois, or roughly 29,000 quarters, which in turn is approximately 363 tons —”

“How much would that be in dollars?” asked Arthur faintly. *Nearly four hundred tons of gold!*

“That is your money? I do not know. But Grim Tuesday would not accept any currency of the Secondary Realms. He will want gold, or perhaps great works of

art that he can copy and sell throughout the House. Do you have any great works of art?”

“Of course I don’t!” shouted Arthur. He had felt much better earlier, and had even believed he might never have an asthma attack again. But he could feel the familiar tightening, the catch in his breath. Though it was only on one side.

Calm, he told himself. *I have to stay calm.*

“What can I do?” he asked, making the words come out slowly and not too loud. “Is there any way of stopping Grim Tuesday?”

“There is one way. . . .” mused the Will. “But you have to come back to the House. Once here, you would then need to —”

A loud beep cut off the Will and a new voice spoke, accompanied by a crackling buzz.

“This is the Operator. Please insert two and six to continue your call.”

Arthur heard the Will reply, but its voice was very faint.

“I haven’t got two roundels! Put it on our bill.”

“Your credit has been revoked by order of the Court of Days. Please insert two roundels and six demi-crowns. Ten . . . nine . . . eight . . . seven . . . six . . .”

“Arthur!” called the Will, very distantly. “Come to the House!”

“Two . . . one . . . This call is terminated. Thank you.”

Arthur kept holding the earpiece, but it was silent. Even the background buzzing had stopped. All he could hear was the rasping of his own breath, struggling to get in and out of his lungs. Or, rather, struggling inside his right lung. His left side felt fine, which was weird since that was the lung that had been punctured by the Hour Key in his life-or-death battle with Mister Monday.

Three hundred and sixty-three tons of gold.

Arthur lay down while he thought about that. How would Grim Tuesday try to get him to pay? Would he send Fetchers again, or other creatures of Nothing? If he did, would they bring a new plague?

He was so tired he couldn't think of any answers. Only questions. They raced around and around inside his head.

I have to get up and do something, Arthur thought. I should look in the Compleat Atlas of the House or write down some kind of action plan. It's Tuesday already, so there's no time to waste. Grim Tuesday will only be able to do things here in my world on Tuesday, so he won't waste any time. . . . I mustn't waste any time . . . waste any . . .

Arthur woke up with a start. The sun was streaming in through his window. For a moment he couldn't work out what had happened or where he was. Then the fog of sleep began to clear. He'd flaked out completely and now it was after ten a.m.

On Tuesday morning.

Arthur jumped out of bed. After the fire and the plague of the day before, there was no chance of having to go to school. But that wasn't what worried him. Grim Tuesday could have been doing something for hours while Arthur slept. He had to find out what was going on.

When he got downstairs, everyone else was either out or still asleep. There was the very faint echo of music from the studio, which meant his adoptive father, Bob, was playing with the door open. Arthur checked the screen on the fridge and saw that his mom was still at the hospital lab. His brother Eric was practicing basketball out in back of the house and didn't want to be disturbed by anyone. There was no message from his sister Michaeli, so he figured she was still asleep.

Arthur turned on the television and found the news channel. It was still full of the "miraculous" escape from the Sleepy Plague, with the genetic structure of the virus sequenced overnight and so many sufferers coming out of their comas without going into the final, lethal stage.