

THE KEYS TO THE KINGDOM

• G A R T H N I X •

• B O O K T H R E E •

D R O W N E D
W E D N E S D A Y

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Chapter One

“**W**hat time is it?” Arthur asked after the nurse had left, wheeling away the drip he didn’t need anymore. His adopted mother was standing in the way of the clock. Emily had told him she’d only pop in for a minute and wouldn’t sit down, but she’d already been there fifteen minutes. Arthur knew that meant she was worried about him, even though he was already off the oxygen and his broken leg, though sore, was quite bearable.

“Four-thirty. Five minutes since you asked me last time,” Emily replied. “Why are you so concerned about the time? And what’s wrong with your own watch?”

“It’s going backwards,” said Arthur, careful not to answer Emily’s other question. He couldn’t tell her the real reason he kept asking the time. She wouldn’t — or couldn’t — believe the real reasons.

She’d think he was mad if he told her about the House, that strange building that contained vast areas and was the epicenter of the Universe as well. Even if he could take her to the House, she wouldn’t be able to see it.

Arthur knew he would be going back to the House sooner rather than later. That morning he'd found an invitation under the pillow of his hospital bed, signed Lady Wednesday. *Transportation has been arranged*, it had read. Arthur couldn't help feeling it was much more sinister than the simple word *transportation* suggested. Perhaps he was going to be taken, as a prisoner. Or transported like a mail package . . .

He'd been expecting something to happen all day. He couldn't believe it was already half past four on Wednesday afternoon and there was still no sign of weird creatures or strange events. Lady Wednesday only had dominion over her namesake day in the Secondary Realms, so whatever she planned to do to him had to happen before midnight. Seven and a half hours away . . .

Every time a nurse or a visitor came through the door, Arthur jumped, expecting it to be some dangerous servant of Wednesday's. As the hours ticked by, he'd become more and more nervous.

The suspense was worse than the pain in his broken leg. The bone was set and wrapped in one of the new ultra-tech casts, a leg sheath that looked like the armor of a space marine, extending from knee to ankle. It was super strong, super lightweight, and had what the doctor called "nanonic healing enhancers" — whatever they were.

Regardless of their name, they worked, and had already reduced the swelling. The cast was so advanced it would literally fall off his leg and turn into dust when its work was done.

His asthma was also under control, at least for the moment, though Arthur was annoyed that it had come back in the first place. He'd thought it had been almost completely cured as a side effect of wielding the First Key.

Then Dame Primus had used the Second Key to remove all the effects of the First Key upon him, reversing both his botched attempt to heal his broken leg and the Key's beneficial effect on his asthma. But Arthur had to admit it was better to have a treatable broken leg and his familiar, manageable asthma than to have a magically twisted-up, inoperable leg and no asthma.

I'm lucky to have survived at all, Arthur thought. He shivered as he remembered the descent into Grim Tuesday's Pit.

"You're trembling," said Emily. "Are you cold? Or is it the pain?"

"No, I'm fine," said Arthur hastily. "My leg's sore but it's okay, really. How's Dad?"

Emily looked at him carefully. Arthur could see her evaluating whether he was fit enough to be told the bad news. It was bound to be bad news. Arthur had defeated

Grim Tuesday, but not before the Trustee's minions had managed to interfere with the Penhaligon family finances . . . as well as causing minor economic upheaval for the world at large.

"Bob has been sorting things out all afternoon," Emily said at last. "I expect there'll be a lot more sorting to do. Right now it looks like we'll keep the house, but we'll have to rent it out and move somewhere smaller for a year or so. Bob will also have to go back on tour with the band. It's just one of those things. At least we didn't have all our money in those two banks that failed yesterday. A lot of people will be hurt by that."

"What about those signs about the shopping mall being built across the street?"

"They were gone by the time I got home last night, though Bob said he saw them too," said Emily. "It's quite strange. When I asked Mrs. Haskell in number ten about it, she said that some fast-talking real estate agent had gotten them to agree to sell their house. They signed a contract and everything. But fortunately there was a loophole and they've managed to get out of it. They didn't really want to sell. So I guess there'll be no shopping mall, even if the other neighbors who sold don't change their minds. The Haskell place is right in the middle, and of course we won't be selling either."

“And Michaeli’s course? Has the university still got no money?”

“That’s a bit more complicated. It seems they had a lot of money with one of the failed banks, which has been lost. But it’s possible the government will step in and ensure no courses are cancelled. If Michaeli’s degree is discontinued, she’ll have to go somewhere else. She was accepted by three . . . no, four other places. She’ll be okay.”

“But she’ll have to leave home.”

Arthur left another sentence unsaid.

And it’s my fault. I should have been quicker to deal with the Grotesques. . . .

“Well, I don’t think she’ll be too concerned about that. How we’ll pay for it is a different matter. But you don’t need to worry about all of this, Arthur. You always want to take too much on. It’s not your responsibility. Just concentrate on getting better. Your father and I will make sure everything will be —”

Emily was cut off by a sudden alert from the hospital pager she always wore. It jangled a few times, then a line of text ran around the rim. Emily frowned as she read the scrolling message.

“I have to go, Arthur.”

“It’s okay, Mom, you go,” said Arthur. He was used to

Emily having to deal with gigantic medical emergencies. She was one of the most important medical researchers in the country. The sudden attack and then abrupt cessation of the Sleepy Plague had given her a great deal of extra work.

Emily gave her son a hurried kiss on the cheek and a good luck rap of her knuckles on the foot of the bed. Then she was gone.

Arthur wondered if he'd ever be able to tell her that the Sleepy Plague had come from Mister Monday's Fetchers, and had been cured by the Nightsweeper, a magical intervention he'd brought back from the House. Though he had brought back the cure, he still felt responsible for the plague in the first place.

He looked at his watch. It was still going backwards.

A knock on the door made him sit up again. He was as ready as he could be. He had the Atlas in his pajama pocket, and he'd twisted numerous strands of dental floss together so he could hang the Captain's medallion around his neck. His dressing gown was on the chair next to the bed, along with his Immaterial Boots, which had disguised themselves as slippers. He could only tell what they really were because they felt slightly electric and tingly when he picked them up.

The knock was repeated. Arthur didn't answer. He

knew that Fetchers — the creatures who had pursued him on Monday — couldn't cross a threshold without permission. So he wasn't going to say a word — just in case.

He lay there silently, watching the door. It slowly opened a crack. Arthur reached across to the bedside table and picked up a paper packet of salt he'd kept from his lunch, ready to tear it open and throw it if a Fetcher peered around.

But it wasn't a dog-faced, bowler-hatted creature. It was Leaf, his friend from school, who had helped save him from a Scoucher the day before, and who had been injured herself.

“Arthur?”

“Leaf! Come in!”

Leaf closed the door behind her. She was wearing her normal clothes: boots, jeans, and a T-shirt with an obscure band logo. But her right arm was bound from elbow to wrist in white bandages.

“How's your arm?”

“Sore. But not too bad. The doctor couldn't figure out what made the cuts. I told him I never saw what the guy hit me with.”

“I guess he wouldn't believe the true story,” said Arthur, thinking about the shape-changing Scoucher and its long, razor-tendrilled arms.

“What is the true story?” asked Leaf. She sat down on the visitor’s chair and looked intently at Arthur, making him uncomfortable. “I mean, all I know is that last week you were involved in some weird stuff with dog-faced guys, and it got even weirder this week, when you suddenly appeared in my living room on Monday with a kind of history girl who had . . . wings. You ran up the bedroom stairs and vanished. Then yesterday, you came racing into my yard with a monster chasing after you, which could easily have killed me, only it got . . . destroyed . . . by one of my dad’s old silver medals. Then you had to run off again. Then today I hear you’re in the next ward with a broken leg. What’s going on?”

Arthur opened his mouth, then hesitated. It would be a great relief to tell Leaf everything. At least she could see the Denizens of the House, when no one else could. Perhaps, as she’d claimed, it was because her great-grandmother had possessed the second sight. But telling Leaf everything might also put her in danger.

“Come on, Arthur! I need to know,” urged Leaf. “What if one of those Scoucher things comes back to finish me off? Or something else. Like one of those dog-faces. I’ve got a couple of Dad’s medals for the Scouchers, but what do I do about the dog-faces?”

“Fetchers,” Arthur said slowly. He held up the paper sachet. “The dog-faces are called Fetchers. Throw salt on them.”

“That’s a good start,” said Leaf. “Fetchers. Where do they come from? What do they want?”

“They’re servants,” Arthur explained. He started to talk faster and faster. It was such a relief to tell somebody about what had happened. “Creatures made from Nothing. The ones you saw were in the service of Mister Monday. He is . . . was one of the seven Trustees of the House —”

“Hang on!” Leaf interrupted. “Slow down. Start at the beginning.”

Arthur took a deep breath, as deep as his lungs allowed, and started at the beginning. He told Leaf about his encounter with Mister Monday and Sneezer. About Monday’s Noon pursuing him through the school library with his flaming sword. He told her how he got into the House the first time, and how he met Suzy Turquoise Blue and the First Part of the Will, and the three of them together had ultimately defeated Mister Monday. How he’d brought back the Nightsweeper to cure the Sleepy Plague, and how he’d thought he would be left alone till he grew up, only to have that hope dashed by Grim Tuesday’s Grotesques, whose appearance had led to his return to the

House, his descent into the Pit, and his eventual triumph over Grim Tuesday.

Leaf occasionally asked a question, but most of the time she just sat there, taking in everything Arthur had to say. Finally, he showed her the cardboard invitation from Lady Wednesday. She took it and read it several times.

“I wish I had adventures like you do,” Leaf said as she traced her finger over the writing on the invitation.

“They didn’t feel like adventures,” said Arthur. “I was too scared most of the time to actually enjoy anything or get excited about it. Weren’t you scared by the Scoucher?”

“Sure,” Leaf said, with a glance at her bandaged arm. “But we survived, didn’t we? That makes it an adventure. If you get killed it’s a tragedy.”

“I could do without any more adventures for a while.” Arthur thought Leaf would agree with him if she’d had the same experiences. They sounded much more exciting and safer just as stories. “I really just want to be left alone!”

“They’re not going to leave you alone, though.” Leaf held up Wednesday’s invitation, then flipped it over to Arthur, who put it back in his pocket. “Are they?”

“No,” Arthur agreed, resignation all through his voice. “The Morrow Days aren’t going to leave me alone.”

“So what are you going to do to them?” said Leaf.