

THE KEYS TO THE KINGDOM

• G A R T H N I X •

• B O O K S I X •

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S A T U R D A Y

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Chapter One

It was dark outside the small private hospital, the streetlights out and the houses across the road shut up tight. Only the faintest glowing lines around some windows indicated that there were probably people inside, and that the city still had power. There were other lights in the sky, but these were the navigation lights of helicopters, tiny pinprick red dots circling high above. Occasionally a searchlight flickered down from one of the helicopters, closely followed by the harsh clatter of machine-gun fire.

Inside the hospital, a flash of light suddenly lit up the empty swimming pool, accompanied by a thunderclap that rattled every window and drowned the distant sounds of the choppers and gunfire. As the light from the flash slowly faded, a slow, regular drumbeat echoed through the halls.

In the front office, a tired woman clad in a crumpled blue hospital uniform looked away from the videoscreen that was carrying the latest very bad news and jumped up to flick on the corridor lights. Then she grabbed her mop and bucket and ran. The thunderclap and drumming announced the arrival of Doctor Friday, and Doctor Friday

always wanted the floors cleaned ahead of her, so she could see her reflection in the glossy surface of the freshly washed linoleum.

The cleaner ran through the wards, turning on lights as she passed. Just before the pool room, she glanced at her watch. It was 11:15 on Friday night. Doctor Friday had never come so late before, but her servants sometimes did. In any case, the cleaner was not allowed to leave until the day was completely done. Not that there was anywhere to go, with the new quarantine in force and helicopters shooting anyone who ventured out onto the streets. The news was now also full of talk of a “last-resort solution” to the “plague nexus” that existed in the city.

Outside the pool room, the cleaner stopped to take a deep breath. Then she bent her head, dipped her mop, and pushed it and the bucket through the doors, reaching up to flick the light switch without looking, as she had done so many times, on so many Fridays past. She had learned long ago not to look up, because then she might meet Friday’s gaze, or be dazzled by her mirror.

But it wasn’t Friday or her minions who were emerging from the dark portal in the empty swimming pool and climbing up the ramp.

The cleaner stared at their bare feet and the blue

hospital nightgowns. She dropped her mop, looked up, and screamed.

“They’re coming back! But they never come back!”

The sleepers that she had seen enter the pool only that morning, led by Doctor Friday herself, were shambling their way up, arms outstretched in front of them in the classic pose of sleepwalkers seen so often in films and television.

But this time Doctor Friday wasn’t there, and neither were any of her ridiculously tall and good-looking assistants.

Then the cleaner saw the girl, the one who had been awake that morning. She was shepherding the very first sleeper, a woman at the head of the line, steering her to the center of the ramp. The sleepers weren’t as obedient as they had been going out, or as deeply asleep.

“Hi!” called the girl. “Remember me?”

The cleaner nodded dumbly.

“My name’s Leaf. What’s yours?”

“Vess,” whispered the cleaner.

“Give us a hand, then, Vess! We’ve got to get everyone into bed, at least for tonight.”

“What . . . what about Doctor Friday?”

“She’s gone,” said Leaf. “Defeated by Arthur!”

She gestured behind her, and the cleaner saw a handsome young boy of a similar age to Leaf. His skin was almost glowing with good health, his hair was shiny, and his teeth were very white. But that was not the most striking thing about him. He held a light in his hand, a brilliant star that the cleaner recognized as Friday's mirror.

"Sir!" said the cleaner, and she went down on one knee and bent her head. Leaf frowned and looked back at Arthur, and in that moment saw him anew.

"What?" asked Arthur. "Hey, keep them walking or we'll get a pileup back here."

"Sorry," said Leaf. She hastily pulled the leading sleeper — her own aunt Mango — out of the line and held on to her arm. "It's . . . well, I just realized you look . . . you don't look the same as you used to."

Arthur looked down at himself and then up again, his face showing puzzlement.

"You used to be a bit shorter than me," said Leaf. "You've grown at least three or four inches and gotten . . . um . . . better looking."

"Have I?" muttered Arthur. Only a few weeks ago he would have been delighted to hear he was getting taller. Now it sent an unpleasant shiver through him. He glanced at the crocodile ring on his finger, the one that indicated

just how far his blood and bone had been contaminated by sorcery. But before he could gauge how much of the ring had turned from silver to gold, he forced himself to look away. He didn't want to confirm right then and there if his transformation into a Denizen had gone beyond the point of no return. In his heart, he knew the answer without even looking at the ring.

"Never mind that now," continued Arthur. "We'd better get everyone settled down. What's your name again? Vess, we'll need your help getting all these sleepers back into bed, please. There's about two thousand of them, and we've only got Martine and Harrison to help."

"Martine and Harrison?" yelled Vess. "I haven't seen them in . . . I thought they were dead!"

"Martine and Harrison have been . . . looking after sleepers at Lady Friday's retreat," Arthur reported. "Hey! Leaf, they're running into the door!"

Leaf gently spun her aunt around to face the wall and sprinted ahead to guide the leading sleepers through the door, pressing down the stopper to keep it open. Then she took a small silver cone from her belt and held it to her mouth. The cone was one of the tools Friday's servants used to direct the sleepers. It amplified and changed Leaf's speech, and Vess shivered as she caught the echo of Lady Friday's voice.

“Walk to an empty bed and stand next to it,” ordered Leaf. “Walk to an empty bed and stand next to it.”

The sleepers obeyed, though they tended to bunch at a bed and bump against one another before one firmly established himself or herself next to the bedhead. Only then would the others shamble off. Leaf ran back to her aunt, who was turning in circles trying to obey the command to find a bed.

Arthur stayed back at the pool, repeating Leaf’s instruction to the sleepers as they came through. He didn’t need a silver cone to be obeyed, probably because he held the Fifth Key, or because the sleepers responded to the power in his voice, feeling the authority of his position as the Rightful Heir of the Architect.

In outward appearance he looked just like a boy, but Arthur had wrested five Keys from five of the faithless Trustees. Now he ruled over the majority of the House, the epicenter of the Universe. In the process he felt he had grown much older, even if little time had actually passed. He also knew that he was becoming less human.

The sleepers kept coming through, emerging out of the dark floor of the pool that was in fact a passage to another Secondary Realm, the secret retreat of Lady Friday, where she had been stealing humans’ memories, leaving them as mindless husks. The sleepers who were being returned had

narrowly avoided that fate. They would wake in due course, knowing nothing of their ordeal.

Martine, one of Lady Friday's human staff, emerged and nodded at Arthur before starting up the ramp. She had an expression on her face that Arthur guessed was equal parts fear and excitement. Martine had been forced to stay and work in Friday's retreat for more than thirty years.

She would find the contemporary world a very strange place, Arthur thought. A world that was getting stranger by the day — not least because the appearance of Denizens and Nithlings from the House had a bad effect upon the Secondary Realms like Earth, disrupting the environment on many different levels, including the spontaneous generation of new and deadly viruses.

Arthur thought about that as he watched the sleepers march, occasionally intervening to keep them moving. His presence now with the Fifth Key would undoubtedly destabilize something on Earth, maybe even create something really bad like the Sleepy Plague. He would not be able to linger, and perhaps should not even stay long enough to go home and check up on his family. But he desperately wanted to see if his sister Michaeli and brother Eric were all right, and also to find some clue to where his mother, Emily, might be, or who might have taken her, if Sneezer was correct and she was no longer on Earth at all.

A ringing phone interrupted his thoughts. It got louder and louder, closer and closer. Arthur scowled. He didn't have a cell phone, but the old-fashioned ring tone was coming from the pocket of his paper suit. . . .

He sighed, put the Fifth Key in his pocket, and rummaged around to see what else was in there. When his fingers closed on a small, cold tube he knew hadn't been there before, he pulled it out and found a full-size, antique candlestick-style phone with a separate earpiece that could neither have fitted into his pocket in the first place or come out of it if it had. It was, in other words, a perfectly normal manifestation of a House telephone, behaving according to its own magical rules.

“Yes?” said Arthur.

“Stand by,” said a voice that sounded much more like a human telephone operator than a Denizen. “Thru-connecting now, sir.”

“Who's that?” asked someone else. A familiar, masculine voice — again not a Denizen.

“Erazmuz!?” asked Arthur in surprise. Erazmuz was his oldest brother, a major in the army. How could he be calling on a House telephone?

“Arthur? How come the screen's off? Never mind. Is Emily home?”

“Uh, no,” said Arthur. “I'm not —”

“Eric? Michaeli?”

Erazmuz was talking really fast, not letting Arthur get a word in, so he couldn't tell him that he wasn't home, even if it was the number that Erazmuz had dialed.

“No, they're not —”

“That's . . .”

Erazmus's voice trailed away for a second, then he came back, talking faster than ever.

“Okay . . . you've got to grab any bottled water and food like cans or packaged stuff and an opener, get warm clothes, and head down to the cellar as soon as you can, but no more than ten minutes from now, ten minutes maximum, okay? Shut it up tight and stay down there. Do you know where Emily and the others are?”

“No! What's going on?”

“General Pravuil has just flown in, and he's ordered the launch of four micronukes at what's left of East Area Hospital at 12:01. If you get to the cellar, you should be okay, just don't come out till I get there. I'll be with the cleanup —”

“What!” exclaimed Arthur. “Nukes! I can't believe you — the army — is going to nuke part of the city! There must be thousands of people —”

“Arthur! I shouldn't even be talking to you! Don't waste time!”

There was a clear sound of desperation in Erazmuz's voice.

"We can't stop it, the general's got every clearance — the hospital's been declared a viral plague nexus under the Creighton Act. Get water and food and some blankets and get down to the cellar *now!*"

The line went dead. The phone started to fade in Arthur's hand, becoming insubstantial, its sharp edges turning foggy and cold.

"Hold on," ordered Arthur. He tightened his grip. "I want to make a call."

The telephone solidified again. There was a sound like a distant choir singing, followed by some indistinct shouting. Then a light, silvery voice said, "Oh, get off, do. This is our exchange — we don't care what Saturday says. Operator here."

"This is Lord Arthur. I need to speak to Doctor Scamandros urgently, please. I'm not sure where he is — probably the Lower House."

"Ooh, Lord Arthur. It's a bit tricky right now. I'll do my best. Please hold."

Arthur lowered the phone for a second and looked around. He couldn't see a clock, and he had no idea what time of day it was. Nor did he know how close this private hospital was to the big East Area Hospital — it could be

next door for all he knew. Leaf, Martine, and Vess were in the other rooms, settling down sleepers, so there wasn't anyone to ask. Many more of the old folk continued to shamble past.

Arthur ran up the ramp, narrowly missing slowly swinging elbows and widely planted feet. He kept the ear-piece to his head, but he couldn't hear anything now, not even the shouting in the background.

"Leaf! Leaf! What time is it?" he shouted in the general direction of the door. Then he raised the telephone and, hardly lowering his voice, insisted, "I *must* speak to Doctor Scamandros! Quickly, please!"