

THE KEYS ^{TO} THE KINGDOM

• G A R T H N I X •

• B O O K S E V E N •

L O R D
S U N D A Y

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Chapter One

Arthur fell.

The air rushed past him, stinging his eyes and ripping at his hair and clothes. He had already fallen through the hole made by Saturday's assault ram, past the grasping roots and tendrils of the underside of the Incomparable Gardens. Now he was plummeting through the clouds, and a small part of him knew that if he didn't do something really soon he was going to smash into Saturday's tower and in all likelihood be so badly broken that even with his newly reshaped Denizen body he would die — or wish he was dead.

But Arthur didn't do anything, at least not in those first few, vital seconds. He knew it was an illusion, but it felt like the wind was holding him up, rather than rushing past. In his left hand he held the small mirror that was the Fifth Key, and in his right he clutched the quill pen that was the Sixth Key, which he had wrested from Saturday and taken with him over the edge. Because of this, Arthur felt powerful, triumphant, and not at all afraid.

He looked down at the tower below him and laughed —

a deep, sarcastic laugh that was not at all like his normal laughter. He was about to laugh again when Part Six of the Will, in its raven form, caught up with him, its claws latching on to his hair and digging into his scalp.

“Wings!” croaked the raven urgently. It hung on to his head for a second, then lost its grip and spun off, calling out, “Fly! Fly!” as it tried desperately to keep up.

Instantly, Arthur lost his sense of euphoric invincibility and came back to his senses. He properly took in the speed of his descent for the first time and saw that he was going to hit the tower very, very soon.

This is all wrong, he thought. Where are my wings?!

He frantically searched his coat, even as he remembered that his grease monkey wings were still in the rain mantle that he’d exchanged for his current disguise as a Sorcerous Supernumerary — the disguise he’d used to infiltrate the assault ram . . . too successfully, perhaps, for he’d gone with the ram when it broke through into the Incomparable Gardens. While he had then gotten close enough to Superior Saturday to claim the Sixth Key, he’d fallen back through the hole in the ceiling of the Upper House.

Now he was falling a very, very long way down.

Even starting from such a height, Arthur had fallen far faster than he’d thought possible. He was going to miss the

actual peak, he saw, and crash into the main part, some fifteen levels below.

No wings, thought Arthur. *No wings!*

His mind halted in panic, and all he could do was stare at the tower, tears streaming from his eyes because the wind was rushing by so fast. He found himself flapping his arms as if somehow that might help, and he was screaming, and then —

He crashed into a flying Internal Auditor, who screamed as well. Together they tumbled through the air, the Denizen's wings thrashing wildly. Arthur tried to rip the wings from the Auditor, but he didn't want to let go of the Fifth and Sixth Keys, so he couldn't get a proper grip. He tried to transfer the Sixth Key so as to hold both Keys in his left hand, but in that vital moment, the Denizen kicked free and dove away, his wings folded back.

Arthur fell again, but the collision had checked his speed. He had a few seconds to take action, and his brain finally got back to work on problem-solving, instead of gloating over the Sixth Key or cowering in fear. He knew there was no way to avoid colliding with the tower — unless he never actually arrived there. . . .

A hundred feet from impact, Arthur somersaulted into a swan dive. Stretching his arms out below his body, he drew several steps in the air with the Sixth Key. The pen

left glowing trails of light, which instantly took on the appearance of solid, white marble steps.

Arthur hit hard, immediately tucking himself into a ball to roll down the Improbable Stair. As he bounced and tumbled over each step, he knew he had to get his speed under control. Even when he stuck out his leg, he only tumbled sideways — and kept falling. Climbing up the Improbable Stair was bad enough, with the chance of coming out on some random Landing anywhere in time or space. Falling down it — completely out of control — was even worse.

Arthur remembered the Old One's caution, the words now echoing inside his head, in between thuds, bangs, and the jangling pain of new bruises.

It is possible to end up somewhere you particularly do not wish to be, the Old One had said. It is even likely, for that is part of the Stair's nature.

He tried again to stop, but since he was still clutching the Keys, he couldn't even grab on to the edge of a step. It was more like falling down a slide than a staircase, much more so than could be normal or natural. The Stair itself was working against him, accelerating his fall, leading him somewhere he doubted he'd want to be.

Thoughts of really terrible places in history began to flash through Arthur's mind, thoughts made more awful

because he knew that if he focused on any one place for too long, the Stair would take him there.

He tried to turn on his stomach and stop the endless slide with his elbows, but this didn't work either, though it hurt a lot. Arthur grimaced as his funny bones were repeatedly jarred. Before his transformation from a mortal boy into a Denizen or whatever he had become, he would have been screaming with pain, and his arms would have broken like sticks. But the Keys, and his use of them, had changed his bones, skin, and blood beyond anything a doctor would recognize as human.

Arthur was afraid there were other changes too, changes inside him that removed him even further away from humanity, things that went beyond his new size, strength, and durability. But this was a distant, nagging fear that was overwhelmed by his current panic.

I have to stop, he thought. I have to get off the Stair!

He rolled onto his back, gasping as the front edge of each step smacked him in the backbone. He put the Sixth Key in his mouth, so he would have a hand free. Then he raised the mirror of the Fifth Key, held it in front of his face, and tried to focus on it as he continued his juddering descent.

The mirror had been blocked by Saturday's sorcerers inside the Upper House and it might not work inside the

Stair either, but Arthur had to take any chance he could to get out. First, though, he had to find a way to hold the mirror steady and he had to keep the picture of Sir Thursday's bedroom in his head. This was very hard to do. He tried to visualize it, but he kept thinking of places he didn't want to go, like the plague-ridden London of Suzy Turquoise Blue's time, or the island in the middle of a sun where he'd found Part Two of the Will. Even as a Denizen, Arthur knew he couldn't survive if he came out of the Stair into the heart of a star.

He also wouldn't survive an emergence into Nothing. Which meant he also had to stop thinking about Doorstop Hill, or any parts of the House that he knew had already been consumed by Nothing. So much of it was gone already, as the Void spread into the House, destroying everything in its path. Arthur shivered inside as he remembered the great wave of Nothing that he had fled a moment before it destroyed Monday's Dayroom —

No! Arthur yelled to himself. Think of somewhere safe. Somewhere easy. Home. But even home might not be safe — I've got to just stop and think —

But he couldn't steady the mirror, or get his mind to focus on somewhere safe. Instead, he rolled over again and grabbed at the next step with his free hand, his

fingernails raking across the marble, down one . . . two . . . three steps. His arm almost came out of its shoulder socket as his slide was arrested, and he nearly dropped the Sixth Key when he couldn't help but groan at this new and sudden pain.

But he stopped.

Arthur sighed and dropped the Sixth Key from his mouth to his bloodied hand. He slowly stood and set his foot on the next step up. It was time to start climbing back up, while thinking hard about where to come out.

He was just about to start doing this when the Stair disappeared in a flash of bright, white light. Arthur's foot met no resistance. He fell forward into a hole full of evil-smelling mud. The Stair, as it always tried to do, had thrown him out onto some random Landing, which could be anywhere in the Secondary Realms, and could also be at any time in the past.

Arthur almost went face-first into the mud, but he recovered his balance in just enough time to stagger forward and crash into a sandbagged earth wall instead. He bounced off that, went back into the hole, and windmilled his arms desperately for a second, before ending up planted backside-first in about a foot of yellow, stinking mud.

He sat there long enough to make a face, then slowly

got back to his feet, the mud making a popping sound as he rose. There were other, stranger noises too, distant high-pitched electronic squeals that hurt his ears.

Arthur looked around. For a moment he thought he'd come out in a World War One trench, back in the history of his own Earth. But that thought only lasted for a moment. He was in a trench all right, but the mud was a lurid, unearthly yellow and stank of sulfur. The sandbags, now that he looked at them properly, were pale blue. He tapped one, and his knuckles sank in a little bit and then bounced back.

Foam, thought Arthur. *The sandbags are filled with something like packing foam.*

The zinging noises were getting closer. Arthur didn't know what was making them, and he had no intention of hanging around to find out. The only question was whether the Fifth Key would work if the Improbable Stair had dumped him off somewhere back in time, as well as into the Secondary Realms. If he couldn't use the mirror, he'd have to use the Stair, and that meant getting back onto it as quickly as possible. Theoretically, as he had two Keys, he could enter the Improbable Stair pretty much anywhere, but he knew in practice it was bound to be more difficult, and there was a very good chance that his next trip on the Stair would take him somewhere worse than this.