

THE KEYS ^{TO} THE KINGDOM

• G A R T H N I X •

• B O O K F I V E •

L A D Y
F R I D A Y

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Under the blanket, she tensed and released the muscles in her legs and arms, trying to exercise them back up to speed, to remove the weakness brought on by a week's bed rest.

Finally, after what seemed like a very long time in which several thousand sleepers had passed, she saw the end of the line. Four Denizens followed the last of the humans. They were not quite as splendid as the two who'd preceded Lady Friday, but they were certainly superior Denizens who were intent on doing their job. They stopped by the door and waited, watching the sleeping patients in the beds around Leaf.

Nothing happened for a moment, then the room was suddenly suffused with a soft, golden light, as if a warm summer's afternoon sun had been let in. It disappeared almost as quickly as it came, ebbing back through the far door.

With the retreating light came a summons, direct into Leaf's mind.

"Follow!"

The voice was soft, but it resonated inside Leaf's head, as if she had spoken the word herself while blocking her ears.

The girl felt that single word pull at her, but she was able to resist it. The sleepers felt it more intensely. All around the room, the old folks suddenly sat up, climbed

out of bed, and joined the last of the sleepwalkers who were passing through the door.

Leaf got up too and went after them, doing her best impersonation of a sleepwalker, with the final six sleepers and the Denizen rearguard right on her heels. Behind her slack-jawed face, her mind was working furiously, concentrating on repressing the terrible sick feeling of fear and panic that was welling up through her whole body.

Not fear for herself, but for her helpless aunt Mango.

The doors at the far end were open, but Leaf didn't dare to look up and ahead until she was shuffling through the doorway and could pretend to stumble a little in her sleep. The stumble almost turned into a real fall, but her legs were getting stronger with every step, and she managed to stay upright and take a look.

What she saw almost made her stop and give herself away. The large space ahead housed an Olympic-size swimming pool. The pool, however, didn't have any water in it. Instead, a ramp had been built down to the bottom, and right now the last of the sleepwalkers were shambling down it. Down into a mirrored surface, which at first reflected their approach, and then just . . . swallowed them whole.

Leaf hesitated again at the top of the ramp. There were those four Denizens behind her, but there were also several

other doors out of the pool room. If she ran now, she might be able to get through one of the exits. It might be her only chance of escape.

But her aunt had already gone beyond the mirrored bottom of the dry pool. . . .

Leaf took a step forward and then another, looking through slitted eyes. She saw the fear in her face, staring back up as her feet disappeared from view. She could still feel her limbs, the sensation being transmitted up through her legs indicating that she was walking down a gentle slope. Leaf suddenly felt physically ill, just like when she'd been vomiting out the mold. Desperate not to throw up, she shut her eyes and plunged forward, her arms outstretched in front, as she committed herself to whatever lay beyond the reflection of Lady Friday's sleepers.

If there *was* anything beyond. . . .

Chapter One

The Nithling soldier thrust its crackling, electrically charged spear towards Arthur's chest. At the very last moment, just as he was about to be impaled, he managed to block the thrust with his shield, the spear point scratching up and across with a horrifying shriek of metal on metal. Arthur stabbed back with his savage-sword, but the Nithling dodged aside and then leaped upon him, knocking him down as its taloned fingers ripped at his face —

Arthur sat up in bed, screaming, his hands scrabbling for a weapon. His fingers closed on a sword hilt and he picked it up and hacked at his attacker — who melted into thin air as he became fully awake. The sword in his hand transformed itself, changing from a slim rapier to a marshal's gold-wreathed ivory baton, the shape the Fourth Key appeared to prefer when Arthur was carrying it.

Arthur put the baton down and took a deep breath. His heart was still hammering as if a crazed blacksmith were at work in his chest, the fear from his nightmare only slowly fading.

Not that the waking world was all that much better. Arthur looked hopefully at the silver crocodile ring on his finger, the one that indicated just how much sorcery had seeped into his blood and bone. But it was no different than it had been the night before. Five of the ten marked segments of the ring had turned gold, indicating he was now at least half Denizen. Every time Arthur used a Key or some other sorcery he would be affected, and the ring would measure the contamination. If the gold spread across just one more segment, the process would be irreversible and he would never be able to return home. Not without negatively affecting everyone and everything he loved. Denizens had a bad effect on life in the Secondary Realms.

“Home!” said Arthur. He was really awake now and every one of his many problems clamored in his head, demanding he think about them. But foremost of them all was his desire to find out what was going on back home and to check that everyone was all right.

He slid out from under the heavy satin sheets and off the feather-stuffed mattress on its four-poster base of mahogany. Each of the posts was carved with battle scenes, which distracted him for a moment, so he found out the hard way that it was farther to the ground than he expected.

He was just getting up off the floor when a discreet knock came at the door.

“Come in!” Arthur called out as he looked around. He’d been so exhausted battling to defend the Citadel against the New Nithling army that he’d hardly noticed where they’d carried him off to sleep. Clearly it was the bedroom of some very superior officer — probably Sir Thursday himself — for as well as the ornate bed there were several gilded, overstuffed armchairs; a richly woven carpet that depicted yet another battle scene, this one a vast spray of orange-red firewash over a horde of misshapen old-style Nithlings; a washstand with a solid gold washbasin and several thick fluffy towels; and an open door leading to a walk-in wardrobe absolutely stuffed full of different uniforms, boots, and accoutrements.

“Good morning, Lord Arthur. Are you ready to be shaved?”

The Denizen who came in was a Corporal wearing the scarlet tunic and black trousers of the Regiment, but he also had a white apron over his tunic, and what appeared to be a brass bowl on his head. He carried a leather case, which he deftly laid on the side table and opened to reveal several brushes and a number of very sharp-looking cut-throat razors.

“Uh, yes, but with the back of the blade, please,” said Arthur, without really thinking. He’d gotten used to “shaving” during his recruit training, even though at age twelve he had no whiskers to come off and wouldn’t need to shave for a couple of years.

The Corporal gestured to Arthur to sit, took the bowl off his head, filled it with water from the washstand’s elephant trunk spout, and began to whisk up a lather.

Arthur sat down, then stood straight back up. “I haven’t got time for this!” he said hurriedly. “I have to find out what’s going on.”

“And so you shall, sir,” said a new voice from the door. It was Marshal Dusk, looking much cleaner and tidier in his dark gray uniform than when Arthur had last seen him in the aftermath of battle. “It was Thursday’s custom to hear the morning news as he was shaved and dressed. Would you care to follow this practice?”

Arthur looked down at himself. He hadn’t realized he was wearing pajamas. Regimental pajamas of scarlet and gold, complete with fringed gold epaulettes that irritated his neck. He was sure they would have woken him if he hadn’t been too tired to notice.

“I guess I do have to get dressed. . . .”

He sat back down and the barber instantly applied lather to his cheeks and chin. Dusk marched into the room

and stood at attention opposite, while another Corporal, in a more usual cap, came in and marched past into the wardrobe.

“What are the new Nithlings doing? Has the Piper been seen?” asked Arthur. He tried not to move his mouth too much when he talked. The barber was using the back of the razor to just scrape the lather off, but it still made Arthur nervous.

The new Nithlings who served the Piper, the enigmatic second son of the Architect and the Old One, had almost won the battle against Arthur and the Army of the House the night before, coming frighteningly close to capturing the Citadel. Only the arrival of Dame Primus wielding the first Three Keys, accompanied by a large force drawn from the Lower House, the Far Reaches, and the Border Sea, had saved the day.

Arthur had to admit the treachery of the Fourth Part of the Will had also played an important part. In its snake form, it had spat acid in the Piper’s mask while he was supposed to be negotiating with Arthur. The absence of the Piper — and whatever powers he possessed, which were likely to be considerable — had quite possibly made the difference between victory and defeat. Not that Arthur approved of the Will’s treachery.

“The New Nithlings have remained within their trench

lines overnight, opposite the Citadel,” reported Marshal Dusk. “Our troops elsewhere in the Great Maze also report no offensive activity. But the situation is still very serious. There are close to a million enemy soldiers in the Great Maze and we do not know what the Piper is up to or where he is.”

“Where’s Dame Primus?” Arthur asked as his face was wiped with a hot towel. He had no idea how the barber had made it hot — it just was. “And is there any word of my friends Suzy Turquoise Blue and Fred Gold?”

“Dame Primus awaits you in the operations room,” Dusk replied. “I’m afraid we have no news of the captured Piper’s children. A detachment of Scouts has been ordered to investigate tile 500/500, where the Nothing Spike was. It’s possible they may have something to report later today, via a communications figure.”

“Thanks.” Arthur stood up as the barber finished and packed away his things, then mechanically returned his salute. The other Corporal came out with a selection of uniforms and laid them on the end of the bed. Then he went in and got some more while Arthur was staring at them, his mind elsewhere. He was thinking about Suzy and Fred, and Leaf back on Earth, and his family. There were so many people he had to think about, so many enemies

and troubles, not to mention the fate of the entire universe. . . .

“Which uniform do you require today, sir?” asked the Corporal. “I have suitably enhanced uniforms based upon those for a General of the Regiment, a Khanmader of the Horde, a Legate of the Legion —”

“I’ll do the same as Sir Thursday,” said Arthur. “Regimental Private, with the appropriate rank badges.”

The Corporal suppressed a sigh and returned to the wardrobe, emerging seconds later with the requested clothing. He tried to help Arthur put it on, with little success, as Arthur quickly dressed himself.

Conspicuously, neither the Corporal nor Dusk attempted to hand Arthur the Fourth Key. Now that Arthur had claimed it, it might well incinerate or otherwise destroy anyone else who picked it up. He handled it quite reluctantly himself, for he knew well the temptation to use the power of the Keys to the Kingdom . . . even if it meant he became less human, less himself.

Arthur hesitated, then thrust the baton through the loop on his belt and made sure it was secure. He didn’t want to use the Fourth Key, but there was some comfort in its weight at his hip. Just threatening to use it might well be a great help in some situations.

“To the operations room, Lord Arthur?” asked Marshal Dusk, breaking in on Arthur’s not-too-cheerful thoughts. “Dame Primus awaits you.”

“Yes,” said Arthur. He always had a slight, nagging suspicion that Dame Primus, if left to her own devices, would pursue things that might not be in Arthur’s best interests. She could only be worse with the addition of Part Four of the Will, the treacherous and highly judgmental snake.

It turned out that the bedroom was in one of the upper levels of the Star Fort, so it was not far to go to the operations room. Arthur was a little surprised to see a whole lot of guards waiting outside his bedroom. There were eight Legionaries in full armor with shields and savage-swords who marched in front of him and eight Borderers with muscle-fiber longbows who fell in behind him as he moved along the corridor from the bedroom. He supposed it was sensible, given that at any moment the Piper could use the Improbable Stair, or perhaps other means, to appear anywhere in the House or the Secondary Realms.

Thinking of the Stair and the guards reminded Arthur about Sir Thursday, who he hoped was still locked up, secure both from escape and from outside attackers. The three previous Trustees that Arthur had deposed had all

been killed, probably because they knew something that would be helpful to Arthur and the Will.

“Is Sir Thursday safe?” Arthur asked.

“He is imprisoned and watched,” Dusk reported. “Dame Primus spoke to him in the night, but otherwise he has been held incommunicado. The guards know to look out for assassins or raids.”

“Good.” Arthur was about to ask something else, but before he could, the guards in front flung the door to the operations room open and a Sergeant-Major inside shouted, “Stand fast! Sir Arthur!”

Arthur entered the large, domed chamber as everyone inside — except Dame Primus — snapped to attention. The room looked much as it had the night before, but this time Arthur had a little more time to take in the details, since he wasn’t being viciously attacked by Sir Thursday.

The first thing he noticed, behind a solid line of officers and a few Sergeants, all still at attention, was a large square table with Dame Primus looming over it at the far end. Arthur marched towards her, then as everyone was still standing at attention, he remembered to say, “As you were, please. Carry on.”

Officers and NCOs — Sergeants and Corporals — began to bustle around and talk again, keeping their voices

low, making a steady hum in the background that made the room sound as if it were inhabited by a host of bees. Dame Primus, who was now close to eight feet tall and resplendent in a long scarlet-and-gold robe, inclined her head slightly to Arthur as he approached. He nodded back, noting that while she wore the very fancy robe it was brought in at the waist by a plain, though highly polished, leather belt. The belt supported the clock-hand sword that was the First Key, the pair of folded gauntlets that were the Second Key, and, in a special scabbard on her left hip, the small trident that was the Third Key.

Arthur felt a peculiar pang as he saw the Keys, a desire to take them back from Dame Primus. At the same time, the baton of the Fourth Key shifted on his belt, as if it too was drawn to the other Keys.

To combat the feeling, which he didn't like, Arthur looked away, down at the tabletop. At first sight, it appeared to be just a boring grid of extremely small squares, with no detail whatsoever. But after a second, he suddenly felt as if he were falling into the grid. Details zoomed towards him. The squares got bigger and showed the terrain in them, and then as the zooming sensation continued, he saw tiny models representing House troops and New Nithling soldiers, many surmounted by a code like *2 hrs ago* or a simple question mark.