

THE KEYS TO THE KINGDOM

• G A R T H N I X •

• B O O K F O U R •

S I R
T H U R S D A Y

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Chapter One

“Hurry up!” Arthur Penhaligon called out. “We have to get to the Front Door before Dame Primus shows up and tries to talk me out of going home.”

“Okay, okay,” grumbled Leaf. “I just stopped to look at the view.”

“No time,” said Arthur. He continued to lead the way up Doorstop Hill, moving as quickly as his crab-armored leg would allow him. His broken bone was still not fully healed.

Leaf started after him, with a glance over her shoulder. They’d run straight out of the elevator that had taken them down...or across...or sideways...from Port Wednesday on the flooded shores of the Border Sea. She hadn’t had any time to look at anything in the Lower House.

“There’s the Front Door!” Arthur pointed up ahead to the huge, freestanding door that stood on the crest of the hill, supported by two white stone gateposts that were about thirty feet apart and forty feet high.

“That’s a door?” asked Leaf. “Must be tough to push it open.”

“It doesn’t exactly open,” said Arthur. “You just walk in. Don’t look at the patterns on it for too long, though.”

“Why not?”

“You’ll go crazy,” said Arthur. “Or get stuck looking.”

“You know I’m going to have to look now,” said Leaf. “If you hadn’t said anything I probably wouldn’t have bothered.”

Arthur shook his head. “You can’t help it. Just don’t look too long.”

“Which side do we go to?” Leaf asked when they were only a few yards away. “And do we knock?”

“It doesn’t matter which side,” said Arthur. He tried to look away from the wrought-iron curlicues and patterns on the door but couldn’t quite manage it. After a second, the shapes shivered and began to change, each image fixing itself in his head before it morphed into something else.

Arthur shut his eyes and reached out blindly towards Leaf, planning to tug her elbow or the back of her shirt. But she was much closer than he had thought and his questing fingers poked her in the face.

“Ow! Uh... thanks.”

Arthur turned his head away from the door and opened his eyes.

“I guess I was getting hooked,” Leaf said as she rubbed her nose. She kept her eyes averted from the door, instead

looking up at the high domed ceiling of silvery metal that reached its apex several hundred feet directly above them. It was night in the Lower House, the only light provided by the strange clouds of glowing purple or orange that drifted across the silver surface.

As Leaf looked up, a beam of light shot down, marking the path of an elevator from another part of the House. It was quickly followed by another two beams striking down from above.

“So do we knock?” Leaf asked again.

“Not yet,” Arthur replied. He looked across at the fading trail of the elevator beams as he spoke, acutely aware that they had probably delivered Dame Primus and her entourage, come to give him a hard time—though he had half-expected she would already be ahead of him, having used a Transfer Plate. “We wait for the Lieutenant Keeper of the Front Door first.”

Dame Primus would want him to stay, or at least hand over the Third Key, which was supposedly needed to keep the Border Sea in check. But Arthur didn’t want to part with the only weapon he had. He had finally accepted that he must go up against the Morrow Days, that avoidance was not an option. The whole gang of Sir Thursday, Lady Friday, Superior Saturday, and Lord Sunday would not leave him alone. They would interfere with destructive results in

his world or any other world, they would hurt and kill whoever they wanted, they would do whatever they thought would help them retain their Keys and their authority over the House. The only way to stop the Morrow Days was to defeat them.

Arthur knew he had to fight, but he wanted to do it on his own terms. Right now, he wanted to check up on his family and make sure everything was all right back in his own world. Then he'd return to the House and do whatever had to be done to release the Fourth Part of the Will from Sir Thursday and claim the Fourth Key.

They waited in front of the Door for a few minutes, looking at the spires, towers, and roofs of the city below. When Arthur had first seen it, the city had been cloaked in fog, but there was no fog now, and he could dimly make out a few Denizens wandering about the streets. As he watched, a large group came out of one of the closer buildings, milled around for a few seconds, then headed towards the new-mown slopes of Doorstop Hill.

"Maybe we should knock," he said. "Here comes Dame Primus and the whole crew."

He took a step towards the Door and, still averting his eyes, rapped smartly on the strange surface. It didn't feel like wood or iron, or in fact like anything solid at all. His fist sank into it as if he'd knocked on something with the

consistency of jelly, and at the same time he felt a tingling through his knuckles that traveled up into his wrist and elbow.

But it did make a knocking sound—a hollow, sustained noise that Arthur could hear echoing inside the Door with several seconds’ delay, as if the sound had traveled a long way before coming back.

The knock was followed a moment later by a voice Arthur now knew quite well. The Lieutenant Keeper’s speech was deep and slow and solid, but this time strangely distant.

“One moment, one moment. There is trouble at the crossroads.”

Arthur could see Dame Primus leading a pack of Denizens, already at the foot of the hill. She was hard to miss, being seven and a half feet tall and wearing a long-trained dress of pale green that fluoresced with shimmers of blue. With her were Monday’s Noon (who used to be Dusk) and a black-clad Denizen he didn’t recognize at first until he realized it was the new Monday’s Dusk (who used to be Noon). Following them was a whole host of clerks, Commissionaire Sergeants, Midnight Visitors, and other Denizens.

“Arthur!” shouted Dame Primus as she lifted her skirts

and began to climb the hill. “Wait! There is something you must know!”

“Hurry up, hurry up!” muttered Arthur to the Door. He really didn’t feel like arguing with Dame Primus.

“I thought you said they were on your side,” said Leaf. “Who’s the tall woman in the cool clothes?”

“They are on my side,” said Arthur. “That’s Dame Primus. She’s the Will. The first two parts anyway. Probably three parts by now, since the Carp has probably just caught up with her. I guess that would explain the green dress. And she *is* taller, and her eyes have gotten kind of bulbous—”

“Arthur! You should not be here!”

Arthur spun around. The Lieutenant Keeper had emerged from the Front Door. He didn’t look as calm and collected as he usually did. His long white hair was a mess; his blue coat was splashed with mud and a darker blue that might be Denizen blood. Instead of his usual shiny knee boots he was wearing sodden thigh-high waders. His sword was naked in his hand, the blade shimmering with an icy, pale blue light that hurt Arthur’s eyes and made Leaf look away and shield her face.

“I shouldn’t be here?” protested Arthur. “I don’t want to be here! Leaf and I need to get home right away.”

The Lieutenant Keeper shook his head and sheathed his sword in a scabbard that appeared out of the air.

“You cannot return to your world, Arthur.”

“What?!”

“You are already there. Or rather, a copy of you is. A Spirit-eater. I wondered when I felt you pass through the Door so swiftly, without a greeting. But whoever sent the Cocigrue had planned its crossing carefully, for I was distracted, both by a sudden influx from the Border Sea and by several unlawful openings.”

“I don’t understand,” said Arthur. “A copy of me is back in my world? What did you call it?”

“A Cocigrue, or Spirit-eater.”

“That doesn’t sound good,” said Leaf. “What does one of those things do?”

“I cannot stay to talk,” said the Lieutenant Keeper. “There are still unlawful travelers within the Door. Good luck, Arthur!”

Before Arthur could protest, the Denizen had spun back into and through the Door, drawing his sword again. The outline of the sword was shaped by the ironwork decorations before it dissolved into a complex tracery of climbing roses.

Arthur pulled Leaf’s arm as she was once again entranced by the patterns on the door.