

THE KEYS  TO  
THE  
KINGDOM

SUPERIOR  
SATURDAY

  
ALLEN & UNWIN

# 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 Dr Friday, and Dr 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. Dr 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 Dr 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 Dr 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 centre 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 Dr 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 recognised 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 pile-up 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 realised 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 got ... 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?' yelped 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 shamle 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 epicentre 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 destabilise 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 mobile phone, but the old-fashioned ringtone 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 nor 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. ‘Through-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 dialled.

‘No, they’re not—’

‘That’s . . .’

Erazmuz’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 earpiece 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!'

# Two

LEAF CAME RUNNING back as Arthur ran forward, and the two nearly collided at the door. In recovering, they turned several sleepers around. It took a moment to get them sorted out, with Arthur still trying to hold the phone.

‘What time is it?’ Arthur asked again.

‘Time? I wouldn’t have a clue,’ puffed Leaf. ‘It’s nighttime outside.’

‘Ask Vess, quickly. The army is going to nuke East Area Hospital at 12:01 Saturday morning!’

‘What!?’ shrieked Leaf.

‘I can probably do something,’ said Arthur hastily. ‘I have to check with Doctor Scamandros. Find out how close to East Area we are!’

Leaf turned and ran. Arthur pressed his ear harder against the phone, thinking he heard something. But the only sound was the shuffle of the sleepers as they slowly passed by him. The telephone itself was silent.

‘Come on, come on,’ whispered Arthur anxiously, half



into the telephone, half out into the air. He had an idea about something he could do, but he needed to check with Scamandros about exactly how to do it and what could go wrong.

No answer came from the phone, but Leaf came running back.

‘It’s ten minutes to midnight on Friday night!’ she shouted. ‘We’re less than half a mile away from East Area. This even used to be part of the big hospital years ago!’

She skidded to a halt next to Arthur and gulped down several panicked breaths.

‘What are you going to do? We’ve only got ten minutes!’

‘Hello!’ Arthur shouted into the telephone. ‘Hello! I have to speak to Doctor Scamandros *now*!’

There was no answer. Arthur gripped the phone even tighter, willing it to connect, but that didn’t help.

‘Probably nine minutes, now,’ said Leaf. ‘You’ve got to do something, Arthur!’

Arthur glanced at the crocodile ring very quickly. Leaf saw him look.

‘Maybe Scamandros is wrong about the sorcerous contamination,’ she said. ‘Or the ring doesn’t measure very well.’

‘It’s okay, Leaf,’ said Arthur slowly. ‘I’ve been thinking about all that anyway. You know why the Will chose me to be the Rightful Heir, how it tricked Mister Monday? I was going to die . . . but getting the First Key saved me—’



‘Sure, I remember,’ said Leaf hastily. ‘Now we’re all going to die unless you do something!’

‘I am going to do something,’ said Arthur. ‘That’s what I’m explaining to you. I’ve worked out that I was going to die anyway, so everything I’ve done – everything I do from now on – is a kind of bonus anyway. Even if I turn into a Denizen, I’ll still be alive and at least I can help other people—’

‘Arthur, I understand!’ Leaf interrupted. ‘Just do something, please! We can talk afterwards!’

‘Okay,’ said Arthur. He dropped the telephone. As it fell, it turned into a shower of tiny motes of light that faded and were gone before they hit the floor.

Arthur took a deep breath, and for a moment marvelled at just how deeply he could breathe now, his asthma gone with his old human self, all earthly frailties being left behind in his transition to a new, immortal form. Then he took the mirror that was the Fifth Key out of his pocket and held it up in front of his face. An intense light shone around it in a fierce corona, but Arthur looked directly at the mirror without difficulty, seeing only the reflection of his own changing face, his more regular nose, his whiter teeth, and his silkier hair.

Leaf shielded her eyes with her arm, and even the sleepwalkers turned their heads away and screwed their eyes shut tighter as they kept shuffling forward.

*I really hope this works,* thought Arthur. *It has to work.*



*Only I wish I could have checked with Dr Scamandros, because I don't really know what . . .*

Arthur grimaced, banished his fearful inner voice, and focussed on what he wanted the Fifth Key to do. Because it seemed easier and somehow made it sound more like it would happen, he spoke aloud to the Key.

'Fifth Key of the Architect! I, Arthur Penhaligon, Rightful Heir of the Architect, um . . . I desire you to shield this city inside a bubble that keeps it separate from Earth, a bubble that will protect the city and keep everyone in it safe from all harm, and . . . well . . . that's it . . . thanks.'

The mirror flashed and this time Arthur did have to blink. When he opened his eyes, he felt momentarily unsteady on his feet and had to raise his arms like a tightrope-walker to regain his balance. In that instant, he saw that everyone else had stopped moving. Leaf and the line of sleepers were still, as if they had been snap-frozen. Many of the sleepers had one foot slightly off the ground, a position that no one could possibly keep up in normal circumstances.

It was also newly quiet. Arthur couldn't hear the helicopters or gunfire or any other noise. It was like being in a waxwork museum after closing time, surrounded by posed statues.

Arthur slipped the mirror into his pocket and ran his fingers through his hair – which had grown considerably longer than he cared for, though it somehow stayed out of his face.



‘Leaf?’ he said tentatively, walking over to tap his friend lightly on the shoulder. ‘Leaf? Are you okay?’

Leaf didn’t move. Arthur looked at her face. Her eyes were open but her pupils didn’t move when he waved his finger back and forth. He couldn’t even tell if she was breathing.

Arthur felt a sudden panic rise in him.


*I’ve killed them, he thought. I was trying to save them, but I killed them . . .*

He touched Leaf on the shoulder again, and though a faint nimbus of red light sprang up around his fingers, she still didn’t move or react in any way.

Arthur stepped back and looked around. There was a faint red glow around each of the sleepers too, and when he walked over and touched them, this light also grew momentarily brighter. Arthur didn’t know what the glow meant, but he found it slightly comforting, as it suggested some sorcerous effect was active and he hadn’t just killed everyone.

*But I don’t even know if I have protected us from the nukes, Arthur thought. What time is it?*

He turned and ran down the hall, through the next two wards, and out into the lobby. From there it took him a minute to find the office and a clock. It had stopped at exactly 11:57, the second hand quivering on the twelve. The clock also had a faint red sheen, and there were ghostly scarlet shadows behind the second and hour hands.



Arthur ran outside. The front doors slammed shut behind him with a sound all too like the trump of doom. He slid to a halt just before he fell down the wheelchair ramp, because everywhere he looked was tinted red. It was like looking at the world through red sunglasses on an overcast day, because the night sky had been replaced by a solid red that was buzzing and shifting and hard to look at, like a traffic light viewed far too close.

‘I guess I’ve done *something*,’ Arthur said to himself. ‘I just don’t know exactly what ...’

He walked a little farther, out into the car park. Something caught his eye, up in the sky, a small silhouette. He peered at it for a few seconds before he worked out that it was a helicopter gunship. But it wasn’t moving. It was like a model stuck on a piece of wire in a diorama, just hanging there in the red-washed sky.

Stuck in a moment of time.

*That’s why everyone is frozen in place, Arthur thought. I’ve stopped time . . . that’s how the Key is keeping everyone in the city safe . . .*

If time was only frozen or slowed inside a bubble around the city, it could start again, or be started again by some other power. Which meant that the nuclear strike on East Area Hospital would still happen. He hadn’t saved the city from the attack. He’d just postponed it ...

‘If it isn’t one thing, it’s another,’ whispered Arthur. He looked along the empty street, all strange and red-hued,



and wondered if he should run over to his home and see if his family was all right. Maybe he could carry them down into the cellar ... but if he did that, he might be wasting time better spent learning how to protect everyone else. He couldn't carry everyone in danger to safety.

He'd gained a breathing space for the city, and he could extend it by going back to the House. If he left now, he should be able to return to almost exactly the same time, even if he spent days or even weeks in the House.

*Should is not the same as definitely*, thought Arthur grimly. *I wish I understood the time relativities better. I wish I knew more about how to use the Keys. I wish I'd never, ever got involved in all –*

Arthur stopped himself.

'If I wasn't involved, I'd be dead,' he said aloud. 'I just have to get on with it.'

Getting on with it, Arthur thought, included facing up to things. He held his hand up close to his face and looked at the crocodile ring. Even in the weird red light, he could see it clearly. The diamond eyes of the crocodile looked baleful, as dark as dried black blood rather than their usual pink. The ten marked sections of its body, each inscribed with a Roman numeral, recorded the degree of sorcerous contamination in his blood and bone. If more than six sections had turned from silver to gold, Arthur would be permanently tainted with sorcery and irretrievably destined to become a Denizen.



Arthur slowly turned the ring around, to see how far the gold transformation had progressed, counting in his head. One, two, three, four, five . . . he knew it had gone that far already. He turned the ring again, and saw the gold had completely filled the fifth segment, and had flooded over, almost completely across the sixth segment.

*I am . . . I am going to be a Denizen.*

Arthur took a deep, shuddering breath and looked again, but there was no change in the ring. It was six parts gold. He was sixty per cent immortal.

‘No turning back now,’ said Arthur to the red world around him. ‘Time to get back to work.’

He looked away from the ring and lowered his hand. Bending his head for a moment, he drew out the Fifth Key from his pocket and raised it high. According to Dame Primus, the mirror of Lady Friday could take him to anywhere he had previously seen within the House, if there was a reflective surface there.

Arthur pictured the throne room in the Lower House, the big audience chamber where he had met with Dame Primus and everyone before he was drafted into the Army of the Architect. It was the place he could most easily visualise in Monday’s Dayroom, because it didn’t have much detail and was so over the top in decoration – including floors of reflective marble.

‘Fifth Key, take me to the throne room in Monday’s Dayroom.’



The Fifth Key shivered in Arthur's hand and a beam of white light sprang from it, banishing the red. The light formed a perfect, upright rectangle, exactly like a door.

Arthur walked into the rectangle of light and disappeared from his own city, from his Earth, perhaps never to return.