

THE KEY: Synopsis

The Key is divided into Parts and smaller Sections rather than into chapters, and is about 190,000 words in length.

Stephen Saunders and his sisters Pamela and Mary begin, independently, to dream about a time in their childhood when they travelled – or pretended to travel - to another world called “Within”. When they meet to discuss these dreams, the sisters’ three children eavesdrop on the conversation. The girl, Sarah, has been having strange dreams of her own about “whispering trees” which call out to her. An old man emerges from the darkness and leads the children through a strange tunnel which splits during a sudden battle, hurling the children towards their destinies.

Separated from the others, Sarah staggers to a place called Arnwarth, a natural fortress occupied by women learning to use mystic powers. The teachers there realise she is a ‘stranger’ and that this means something is going to happen in Within. They know that, in the past, children from another world (‘strangers’) had somehow helped the free peoples of Within defeat their enemies. During that first night, the shadow-shape of a man bends over Sarah as she sleeps. In the morning, she cannot remember her name or how she came to Arnwarth.

The boys (Philip and Michael) come to in a rocky place where, after being chased by nightmarish half-men (or *halfen*), they join a band of mercenaries on the other side of an invisible barrier and take part in several adventures. They have both also forgotten their names and their past lives.

Years pass, during which Sarah becomes known as Kaylee and works as a servant in Arnwarth. She eavesdrops on lessons illegally. The boys, now renamed Simon and Timias by the mercenaries, prove to have unnatural strength and grow to be dangerous warriors. In the meantime, the reader has learned that a giant *halfen* (The White Beast) has gained rudimentary intelligence and has found a Key that can lower the barrier to Within, releasing hordes of lesser *halfen*. A number of other characters are introduced along the way, including an ancient monster called Groat, The Envoy (the man in the black cloak), and The Sage.

After witnessing a traumatic event, Kaylee’s memory returns during a subsequent meeting with The Sage (her great-grandfather). At this time, she discovers that she can draw on an enormous reservoir of mystic power. The Sage then goes on the trail of the two boys, but they have been separated, and Timias injured, following a squabble among the mercenaries. He is finally reunited with Timias, who remembers he is Michael. Together with the mercenaries they travel to the Dark Caves, where they are reunited with Simon (Philip). Now all three strangers have regained their memories, events are set in motion over which they will have enormous influence.

With a tremendous sound echoing all round Within the White Beast uses the Key to lower the barrier and the *halfen* flood into Within and wreak horror and destruction on the free peoples. The battle is on. When one group is chased by a horde of *halfen*, Sarah uses her new-found power to rescue them. She tricks the *halfen* into the ‘whispering trees’ (which she’d dreamed about back on earth), and the trees destroy the creatures. Meanwhile the Sage and the boys do battle with an ancient witch cast out of Arnwarth centuries ago.

Outside the walls of Arnwarth, the Envoy’s secret identity and mission is revealed to the Sage, who is knocked unconscious before he can tell the others what he has learned. A conference takes place in the temporary safety of Arnwarth where it is decided that, because of their special

powers, the children (no longer youngsters) have to find the White Beast and undo what it has done with the Key. The mercenaries mount a diversion, and when the *halfen* are drawn there, Philip, Michael and Sarah slip out the other way and head for the barrier.

The book climaxes in a series of adventures during which Philip, Michael and Sarah are alternately hindered and assisted by forces both in Within and back on earth, where Saunders and his sisters have been frozen in time. Eventually the Beast is destroyed and Sarah uses the power of the Key to destroy the *halfen*. The boys are whirled back to Earth. Sarah, however, uses here new powers to resist, and stays behind.

At the start of the book Sarah's mother keeps waking from strange dreams at twenty past two in the morning. The last line of the book proper, after the boys have returned but Sarah has stayed behind, is *It was twenty past two in the morning*. A final interlude includes a section set in the future, with Sarah (now the Sage) returning to ask Joshua, her great-nephew, to come to Within – thereby setting up the possibility of a sequel.