

Skeleton Key

“She’s down there, Peter,” Liam muttered into his beer mug. “I told her I would do anything to get her back.”

The tavern only served a few people who had started drinking much earlier in the day than most people in the city. The candles on the counter were burning down to their final stubs, dark enough for Liam to have this conversation. Peter took a sip from his beer and shook his head.

“Liam, no one has walked back out of The Slab for a reason. Do you know why there are no guards at that prison? Wizards sealed that lock with ancient magic. There’s one key that the warden always has on his person—the warden who, by the way, is guarded as fiercely as the king. There are few stories of people breaking out The Slab.”

“But those stories all have one thing in common,” Liam said, looking to Peter.

“That’s dark magic.”

“She was sentenced to life in The Slab for a crime her father committed. If that’s what’s right in the world, we need a little dark magic.”

“I won’t be a part of this.”

“I need her cell number.”

“I told you, I won’t—“

“You said she was like your sister.”

“Only because you were my brother! Now, I’m not sure.”

“You work in the administration office.” Liam pleaded. “I need to know which cell to call up.”

Peter sighed and shook his head. “Six-Three-One,” Peter said. “That’s all I’m doing for you.”

“We’re square.” Liam tilted back his head and chugged the final swallow of beer. He grabbed his coat and pulled it around his bulky shoulders.

“Liam,” Peter grabbed his arm before he could turn away. “If you do get her out of The Slab, there’s a marina at the bottom of the hill. Might be a boat waiting for you. “

“I thought you said the cell number was all you were doing for me?”

“The boat’s for her,” Peter said, releasing Liam’s arm. “Good luck.”

Liam left the tavern. Peter had done more than he had expected and no one else in the city would help him. Walking through the abandoned streets, Liam went to the darkest quarter of the city. On the upper levels of town, shops offered everything from healing teas to enchanted compasses. The lower levels of the city were for more nefarious purposes.

Sister Raven was waiting for him when he passed through the strips of cloth that separated her little shop from the outside world. At a large table from a slice of a giant oak tree, the woman looked up from the polished wood surface. She was wearing dark-colored robes and some colorful rings on her fingers. A strip of white cloth covered her face with mirrored streaks of color like tears running her face. The different colors highlighted her magical mastery. Streaks for Divination, Hexes, Curses, Necromancy...and a set of grey lines for the magic that went unnamed.

“Liam...” Sister Raven said, impassive. “I’ve been waiting.”

“Are you the witch called Sister Raven?”

“I am,” Sister Raven, jerking her head sharply like her namesake. “You seek a way to save Maureen.”

“What will it cost?” Liam didn’t bother to ask how the witch knew.

“Only what you will give.” Sister Raven gestured to an open chair that Liam hadn’t seen. Liam sat and his eyes drifted to Sister Raven’s hands as they grazed the edge of a short knife in her grip. “It will not be like cutting with an ax. I will have to cut away until the bone. That will hurt, but not as much as the removal. Are you prepared?”

Liam let out a shaky breath and spread his left hand out on the table. The witch held out a piece of leather, almost half an inch thick and two inches long. Liam obliged and put the bit into his mouth. Sister Raven’s hand cold on his index finger, but it was a comforting touch. The metal was cold, but Liam could feel how fine she sharpened her blade. The first cut stung, but Sister Raven was careful as she worked. Liam struggled, but Sister Raven held him by the wrist, keeping his arm from flinging away.

The pain was excruciating and Liam could tell he was biting through the leather strap as he tasted blood in his mouth. Sister Raven worked carefully, never pausing. Setting her knife aside, Sister Raven held his finger and twisted until the digit ripped free. Liam screamed and the world faded as he tried to catch his breath. He fought not to lose consciousness in the witch’s shop and kept his wits about him. Sister Raven’s hands were careful as she bound the stump in clean, white cloth.

“Now,” Sister Raven lectured as she bound his hand, “the bone will be yours, but the rest is mine. Soak it in goat’s milk on two days, for strength. Then you will have to carve it to match the key you are trying to use.”

“I understand,” Liam whimpered through bleary eyes. The world was starting to clear up, no doubt thanks to Sister Raven’s magic.

“You will only have the night of the full moon to use it once! One time only. You must be certain at the door.”

“I have her cell number.”

“Be careful, Liam.” Sister Raven said, laying her hands over his bandaged ones. The dyed streaks of her eye cloth met his eyes. “You only have a moment. Do not waste precious time with silly emotional responses. Get her out and away from there.”

Liam nodded. His hand shaking from the pain. Sister Raven handed him a small vial filled with goat’s milk. When he tilted it to the side, Liam could see the side of the knuckle bone. It was small, but it would be big enough to match the key’s pattern. He stood but paused. “What will you do with it? My blood and flesh?”

“Do you ask the carpenter what he does with your money after you have paid him? Or the craftsman where your coin goes? It will not go to any nefarious purpose, Liam, but what I do with it is my own business. If you would like it back, I’m afraid it’s far too late for that.”

Liam nodded, not wanting to disrespect the witch any further. With a wave of her hand, Sister Raven dismissed Liam into the evening. Once he passed through the doorway of dark cloth, Liam felt like he could finally hear again as the city prepared for an evening’s rest. He wasn't sure how long he had been in the shop. Witch shops worked in strange ways and people could lose time if they weren't careful. Looking between his bandaged left hand and the small vial in his right, Liam decided his trade could have been worse. For Maureen’s life, it was a bargain.

When he reached his small room in the lighthouse, Liam set the vial of goat’s milk on his window sill. He would check it against the moon every night, the circle filling out more as each evening passed. He tried to focus on improving the mobility of his hand. Sister Raven’s bandages

peeled off in a few days and there was a sealed scar at the end of Liam's finger stump. Liam still kept it wrapped. A wound healing that quick was suspicion and there were only so many people who would accept his lies.

The day before the full moon, Liam broke open the vial and cleaned the curdling milk from the small bone. He placed the knucklebone in a vice on his workbench and took up his chisels. Making the actual shape of the key was not difficult. The warden had painted the shape of the key on the door of The Slab, taunting people to try their hand at breaking in. Anyone could make a fake key, but the spells around the lock disintegrated anyone who tried. Piles of dust remained some mornings, but guards mixed into the dirt like ashes from a campfire by the time the warden arrived.

Liam's work practiced carving on wood, rock, animal bones or any other materials available. By the time he had Sister Raven remove his knuckle bone for him, he was a master at the pattern. Still, he took his time with his one knuckle bone. He wouldn't survive if he failed. By the time the full moon rose, Liam finished his skeleton key.

The Slab stood alone on a large hill, a monolith on a peak to match the prestige of the king's castle on the port down below. The prison was a door about as wide as Liam's span with his arms stretched out and tall enough that Liam couldn't reach the top of the frame. The warden had painted an image of the key on the front, stark red and glowing in the moonlight. The door wasn't attached to any room and Liam could touch both sides.

Liam adjusted the three dials on the side of the door. He turned them with his right hand, making sure that the numbers aligned on the needles. Six. Three. One. There wasn't any flare of magic or glowing to indicate that the number was right. Liam stood in front of the lonely door

and hesitated, holding his single-use key in his right hand. No feeling in his chest that if he turned the key, Maureen would be waiting for him when he opened the door. The Slab's greatest defense was its uncertainty, squashing hope as soon as it appeared. Liam slid his skeleton key into place and turned.

The deadbolt slid open and Liam exhaled. The door creaked open a little and the key turned to ashes in his hand. With a few more breaths, Liam pushed the door open, moonlight filling the summoned cell with dim light. The room had a flat sleeping mat, a candle half-burned to the nub and a lone occupant huddled in the farthest corner.

"Liam?" Maureen rasped, crawling out her dark spot in the room. Without an answer, she rushed over and embraced Liam, holding him close and burying her face in his chest. Stepping back, Maureen grasped his hands and looked down at his left hand, startled. "What happened?"

"It doesn't matter," Liam smiled. After a moment he shook his head and took Maureen by the wrist, pulling her away. Sister Raven's advice echoed in his head as the sound of horses charging up the hill passed them. Liam led Maureen down to the docks and Peter's dinghy.