

Key and Lock

Willow Key was exhausted, but the lock taunted her. She'd done everything she could think of. After an hour of grinding and shaping keys with her dad's tools, she turned to putting the lock itself to the grinding wheel before she realized that the metal would strip the stone down to nothing. She tried every saw and chisel in the workshop, even bashing it with a hammer a few times before the head broke off. Then, she went to lock picking, but only managed to ruin six of her hairpins in the process. After an hour of bashing the lock against the concrete floor, Willow resorted to hitting her head against a book, trying to force her brain to think. All she could think about was the impact of her forehead on the antique tome.

"That's it," Willow said, dropping the book on the table and looking at the lock. "I give up. You win. I lose. Maybe some locks weren't meant to be opened!"

Willow collapsed onto the couch her dad would nap on during his lunch breaks. It was midnight and she'd had been working on the lock since she found it on her way home from school. The lock had called out to her. Or, at least, it stuck out to her when she had to dig through the mud to find her notebooks when her backpack was thrown into the riverbank. It was a large, brass-colored lock that fit in her palm. When she'd finally scraped the mud off of it, she found the seal that covered the lock hold and almost dropped it again.

The Key family history was filled with locks like this. Hundreds of years ago, warlocks had captured powerful spirits into locks. Each lock was kept in the possession of a warlock for generations, using the power of the spirits to wage war. After two hundred years of secrecy and magic, the Council of Locks declared that all the locks should be opened, but many warlocks trapped the spirits by destroying or throwing the keys away. The Key family was in charge of opening the locks using ancient magic and freeing the powerful spirits trapped within. Not every lock, unfortunately, was found.

Willow knew the insignia, even if she didn't understand the magic within it. The symbol was an ancient glyph that translated to "to keep" or "to hold" in English. Every lock was built with it to warn of the powerful energy trapped inside so that it wouldn't be mistakenly open or used temporarily. It became the sign of the key makers, so no one would forget that these were the responsibility of the Keys, to free the spirits within. Willow had seen it tattooed on her grandpa's shoulder and an identical one on her dad's upper arm. Traditionally, the techniques were only taught to the first son of the first son. With Willow's father being the youngest of four, her parents agreed to break tradition and taught her how to make keys.

That, however, was years ago. Since she started high school, Willow was rusty at making keys. Her interests had diverted elsewhere, mostly to her studies and soccer practice. The last time she'd made a key, it was on a lock that wasn't protected by magic when she was still in elementary school. Her parents were gone for the rest of the weekend and she couldn't imagine

leaving the poor spirit within trapped. Now, she'd spent the last several hours trying to break open the lock by force. The power within wasn't allowing it, but Willow had a duty as a key maker.

"OK," Willow told herself, standing and rubbing her hands together. "This is a lock. You are a Key and that means you can open locks. You've done this before."

Willow looked at the wall full of blank keys and sighed. None felt grand enough for the ornate lock. If she knew how to forge a key from scratch, she'd make one that matched the lock's grandeur. That, however, was a little beyond her current ability. Her dad had always said 'one day', but that day never came. Willow settled on the biggest and most ornate key available on the rack, big and brass colored with a wide, flat circle to hold.

"It'll do..." Willow sighed and sat at the desk. That was the easy part. Now, Willow had to make the key into something that would unlock the contraption in front of her.

"Locks want to open," her father's voice reminded her from one of their very first lessons, "they'll tell you what you need if you listen. Magical or not, a lock will always want to be free."

First, she needed to discern the nature of the lock. Grasping the device in her hands, Willow felt the rough edges of the metal, the layers of rust flaking under her fingertips. There was old, ancient iron under the rust, but beneath that, the thing hummed with magic. It was difficult to block out the vibrations, but Willow powered through. She closed her eyes as her hands approached the slim groove and her fingertips explored the locking mechanism. She didn't feel the grooves for the lock. She sensed them, gauging the springs and the tension that was already there. Without looking or touching, she could sense the height of each pin.

Willow's eyes snapped open. She could see the shape in her eye clear as day. She picked up the blank key and wrapped her hands around it. The lights flickered a little, but Willow blocked it out. There was nothing in the room beyond her and this little key. This key would bend and warp to her will because she was a Keysmith. She'd been trained for this, whether she knew it or not. Her palms warmed and she focused on the image of the key she needed. Her hands were the mold, but her will made the key take shape. There was a sharp pinch on her palms and Willow gasped. The key fell onto the workbench and rang with a clatter. Tiny particles of metal dust formed a ring around it and showered down like snow, circling the perfect key. Willow's key.

Willow picked up the key and held it up to the light. The grooves were perfectly smooth and curved how she envisioned it. Even the rounded piece at the top had changed and now matched the floral designs of the insignia of the lock. "Nice touch," Willow smiled at herself. "Now, for the real test."

Willow took the lock in her left hand and guided the key with her right. The sound of the pins scraping against her key was amplified a thousand times louder and she heard each of the metal pieces click into place. The key turned and the latch on the lock opened.