



Locks and Keys

It was nearly midnight on Monday when Goldilocks went sneaking down the twisty stairs from her dorm room in Ruby Tower. She was on her way to find the magical Grimmstone Library. Since it constantly changed its location within Grimm Academy, you always had to hunt for it.

She searched the entire fourth floor of the Pink Castle, then took the grand staircase down to the third floor. There, Goldie quickly spotted the unmarked doorknob — the one without the GA logo that stood for Grimm Academy. It was on the wall right next to Ms. Blue Fairygodmother’s Bspellings and Enchantments classroom.

“There you are!” she murmured gleefully. She reached out and gave the knob a twist.

Honk! It immediately morphed into a goose head. Perhaps because the hour was so late, it was wearing a nightcap — a polka-dot one with a long pointy top that had a fluffy ball at the end of it.

Goldie couldn't help giggling. "That cap of yours is hilarious!" she told the goos knob.

"Well, how rude of you to say so!" the knob replied, all in a snit. "It gets cold in these halls at night, you know. Ask any metal doorknob about that." Its eyes lowered to the floor. "And at least I'm not wearing ginormous furry slippers."

Goldie glanced down at her feet, surprised to see that she was wearing her big fluffy bear-head slippers. She'd worn her dress to bed tonight on purpose, but her feet had gotten cold, so she'd put on these slippers, too. Once the alarm she'd set had gone off, she'd hopped out of bed and been in such a rush to sneak down here and locate the library that she'd forgotten to change to regular shoes.

Argh! She hoped she didn't run into any teachers out here in the halls. Not only would she get in trouble for breaking curfew, she'd also be horribly grimbarrassed to be caught in these childish-looking slippers. Although she was petite and did look a little younger than most students her age, she was twelve years old — not two!

"Sorry," she told the goos knob. "I can't help it. I say what I think."

The knob wasn't soothed. "A habit that doesn't win you a lot of friends, I imagine," it replied tartly.

Too true, thought Goldie. She'd been going to school here for three months already, but had yet to make many friends. And that hurt.

Like everyone at Grimm Academy, she was a character from literature. However, while most GA students were connected with a series of tales written by the academy's founders, named Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm, her tale had been popularized by an English author named Robert Southey.

That difference had nothing to do with the reason she didn't have many friends, though. No, there were other characters here whose stories weren't written by the Grimm brothers. And there were nursery rhyme characters, too. The brothers Grimm had brought all of them to the magical realm of Grimmlandia to keep them safe from dastardly forces that could harm them. Sad to say, that safety was now being threatened — from outside Grimmlandia *and* within.

Goldie looked around the dark hall, suddenly a little creeped out by her own thoughts. She had taken a risk by coming down here tonight. But she wasn't sorry. If she succeeded in her mission, maybe other students would take notice and realize that she was a person worth befriending. A hero, in fact!

"Hey, any day now," said the goose head, interrupting

her thoughts. “Pay attention, will you? I asked you a riddle!”

“Oh, sorry,” said Goldie, focusing her attention on the knob again. “Could you repeat it, please?” Students always had to correctly answer a riddle before they were allowed into the library.

The gooseknob clacked its beak in annoyance, which made the fluffy ball at the end of its polka-dot nightcap bounce up and down. “All right, but listen this time,” it huffed. Then it repeated the riddle. “What has eighty-eight keys, yet cannot unlock a door?”

Goldie twisted one of her curly golden locks around a finger while she considered the riddle. “Hmm. Let’s see. My aunt — the one who raised me, I mean — has this truly massive ring of keys that her housekeeper always carries around. There are keys on it for the drawing room, the kitchen, the pantry, the fourteen bedrooms, the eight bathrooms, the schoolroom where I was homeschooled, the library, and lots of other rooms, including the gardener’s shed and the pool house outside.”

She frowned. “But although my aunt’s estate is the biggest one back in our village, I don’t think even her key ring has eighty-eight keys. That’s a lot!” Her blue eyes sparkled as she added, “And I’m pretty sure not a single one of her keys could *unlock* the answer to your riddle!”

It seemed that the doorknob had no sense of humor whatsoever, for it just yawned at her little joke. Then it said in a bored voice, "Hurry it up, will you? I'd like to get back to snoozing sometime in the next century."

Just then, Goldie heard the door at the end of the hall open. She darted a nervous glance in that direction, but it was too dark to see anything. "I don't have time for this," she whispered as sudden urgency filled her. "Can't you just let me in?"

Honk! "Wrong answer!" said the gooseknob, its feathers definitely ruffled by now.

"Shh!" she scolded. "Someone might hear you!"

Growing frantic, she pulled a long silver hairpin from her golden locks. At its head, white and pink pearls formed the shape of a cute flower. Holding the flower end, she poked the sharp end of the pin into the keyhole just below the gooseknob's beak. Then she moved the pin around inside the hole, feeling for the exact, precisely right spot to press so the lock would spring open.

Realizing what she was up to, the goose head cried out in a panicky voice. "Wait just a honking minute! No one gets into the library without answering a riddle." By now, it was going cross-eyed trying to see her fingers fiddling with its lock. *Honk! Honk! Honk!* "Intruder alert! Intruder alert!"

Click! At last! The lock was sprung. Instantly, the gooseknob morphed back into a silent, plain brass knob. *Ha!* She'd never yet met a lock she couldn't defeat. In fact, sometimes she just picked them for fun!

Footsteps sounded at the far end of the hallway. It was too dim to see who was coming. Which meant they couldn't see her, either. But they were getting closer.

"Hurry, hurry," she hissed under her breath, bouncing a little with impatience. It seemed to take forever, but it was probably only a few seconds later when a huge rectangle, taller and wider than she was, drew itself on the wall around the knob. A door.

She didn't take time to admire the low-relief carvings of nursery rhyme characters that decorated it, such as Little Bo Peep and her sheep and Little Boy Blue under his haystack. Instead, she yanked her hairpin out of the lock and shoved it back in her hair. Breathlessly, and taking care to not make a sound, she slipped through the door and into the library. Safe!

Once inside, Goldie looked around. The library had no windows, but a few of the chandeliers were lit with candles. Good thing, or it would've been totally dark. *Still, it's kind of eerie here at night,* she thought with a shiver. Wavery shadows loomed, cast by rows and rows of shelves housing books and all kinds of artifacts. She moved toward them.

She was breaking many rules by being here. *New* rules, mostly. Ms. Wicked's rules. Principal Rumpelstiltskin, whom most students called Principal R since using his real name caused him to throw a doozy of a temper tantrum, had mysteriously disappeared recently. He had therefore been relieved of his duties.

And for some wacky reason, the School Board had decided it would be a fine idea to put Ms. Wicked in charge of the Academy. She was also Goldie's fourth-period Scrying teacher and a real stickler for rules and security. First thing she had done was institute a curfew and install locks outside all the dorms on the fifth and sixth floors to lock students in every night at ten o'clock sharp.

Ms. Wicked had claimed it was for their own safety and that she wanted only to *protect* them. But Goldie wasn't convinced. Though she couldn't say exactly why, she didn't quite trust Ms. Wicked. Maybe it had something to do with her name. It pretty much fit her perfectly!

Bam! Her heart practically jumped out of her chest just then when the library door banged open so hard it must've hit the wall. Footsteps — more than one pair by the sounds of things — stomped inside. She got a fleeting look at figures in uniforms before she dove behind the tall checkout desk just past the entryway. *Security guards?* It was

rumored that Ms. Wicked had hired some, but no one had seen them yet.

As the footsteps came toward the checkout desk, Goldie shucked off her fuzzy slippers. They had hard soles that might clack against the floor when she ran. Clutching the slippers to her chest and crouching low, she raced soundlessly down a random aisle in her stocking feet. A short distance away she pressed her back against a shelf.

“I don’t see anything amiss,” she heard a deep voice say as she tried to quiet her panting breath. “Let’s report back to the captain for new orders.” The footsteps receded and then the library door closed and quiet fell.

Captain? They’d been security guards for sure. Not very effective ones, though. They hadn’t noticed her escape. And just look how easily they’d given up searching for her!

After stepping back into her slippers, she clacked her way down the aisles of shelving. She was heading for the *G* section, which also happened to be her *G* for *goal* tonight.

Another magical thing about the Grimmstone Library was that it could vary in size from enormous to tiny, depending on its mood. Or maybe on the mood of the librarian, Ms. Goose? Tonight it was not too large and not too small, but just right, in Goldie’s opinion. Which meant that it was about the size of three or four classrooms put together.

As she passed through Section *B*, she saw shelves filled with *B* things like bowling pins, bats, bells, boxes of balls . . . and a banjo! She couldn't resist picking up the banjo and strumming her fingers across its strings.

Her aunt had disapproved of most types of "entertainments and amusements" (as she called them), which basically meant anything fun. So until Goldie had come to GA she'd never played any board games or cards, and had been forbidden to dance, play, or even *listen* to music. Inside her aunt's huge mansion, there certainly hadn't been any banjos, guitars, pianos, or . . .

"*Piano!*" she exclaimed aloud. "That's the answer to the gooseknob's riddle!" She'd never been close enough to count them, but what else besides a piano would have eighty-eight keys that didn't unlock doors? Carefully, she set the banjo back on its shelf and moved on.

"Too bad you weren't able to come up with that answer before," she scolded herself. Then she gave a light laugh. "That's just like me, though. Always coming up with what I *should* have said after it's too late."

It was pretty normal for her to have conversations with herself, so she thought nothing of doing this as she scurried along. After all, she'd been left alone a lot at her aunt's and had taken to talking to herself out loud just to hear someone's voice.

She fell silent as she reached Section *G*. Here, most of the books of Grimm fairy tales were shelved. Along with other *G* items, such as various games, toy giraffes and goats, gag gifts, gadgets, gizmos, gloves, and gardening supplies.

She began to browse through the fairy-tale books. “Now, where is that Rumpelstilt . . . I mean the tale about Principal R,” she said aloud as she searched for the story in book after book. Earlier that evening, she’d overheard a conversation between Malorette and Odette, two sisters who shared the dorm room right next to hers in Ruby Tower. They’d been talking and laughing about *changes* to the Rumpelstiltskin fairy tale that had “sealed the principal’s fate.”

Goldie figured that if she could study the tale closely, it might give her a clue about where to find him. Unlike Malorette and Odette, most everyone at GA preferred Principal R to Ms. Wicked and really wanted him back as head of the school. Including her!

She picked up a little stuffed toy giraffe and told it, “And if I can find him and bring him back . . . well . . . it might just be the *key* to becoming popular! Don’t you think?” She wiggled the toy’s head back and forth so it appeared to be nodding in agreement, then she set it back on its shelf.

Unfortunately, though she continued searching through every single book on the shelf, the Rumpelstiltskin tale was nowhere to be found. Not in the *G* section, anyway. “Could it have been moved to another place in the library? Or did someone check it out?” she wondered aloud.

Maybe she should just come back to the library tomorrow afternoon and ask Ms. Goose. Only she didn’t really want the librarian or anyone to know what she was up to for fear someone else would get the same idea to look for Principal R and beat her to the punch. *She* wanted to be the one to find him!

She smiled to herself, imagining how students would react when she brought him back to the Academy. “Oh, Goldie,” they’d say. “You’re our hero! We’re so grateful to you for finding him!” And, “We’ve never met anyone as clever as you are!” Then they’d beg her to go do stuff with them and she’d get a flood of invitations to picnics and parties and the like. “I’ll have to check my schedule first to see if I can fit that in,” she’d say.

Bam! Just then, the door to the library slammed open again. More footsteps. Instinctively, Goldie dropped to a crouch. “*Grrreat gobs of gopher guts!*” a deep, voice growled. “*I smell somebody.*”

Oh, no! More guards! she thought. But — *smelled somebody?* Did she need to take a shower?

Then another voice, this one kind of high-pitched and squeaky, asked, "Is it us?"

"Don't be ridiculous," said a medium-pitched, lady-like voice. "Of course it's not us! Bears always smell good. It's just the smell of GA students. It's all over the Academy."

Bears? thought Goldie. What were these guards talking about?

"I'll do a sweep of Sections *A* to *I*. You take *J* to *Q*," the deep-voiced guard said gruffly to one of the others. Goldie didn't know which one because she couldn't see them. And she didn't think she'd better risk peeking out to *try*.

"Guess that leaves me with *R* to *Z*," grumbled the squeaky-voiced guard, who sounded younger than the other two.

"*Grrreat!*" the deep voice of the growly guard said with enthusiasm. "Let's go!"

Goldie looked around the *G* section wildly. Where oh where could she hide? She didn't know what the penalty for breaking curfew was, but Ms. Wicked had implied during her daily announcements this morning that it would be something really awful. Scrubbing the dungeon floors, perhaps? Cleaning out the huge hot baking ovens in the kitchen for Mistress Hagscorch, the Academy's scary Head Cook?

Or maybe Ms. Wicked would make sure that students who were caught out after curfew would simply mysteriously disappear, just as Principal R had! Goldie's heart beat faster as footsteps came closer. Her plan to come here had been full of holes. And she had a hole in her head to even *think* it could have succeeded.