

Greed Goes Beyond the Gates

“How?” Aaron thought, tracing the symbols on the chamber gate.

Behind it, he imagined rocks that glittered like sunlight. The thought tugged at him. He had followed the old map into the forest.

That morning, Aaron had found the map inside his grandfather’s dusty toolbox. Beside it lay a silver key, cold and heavy.

“Tools, map, key,” Aaron muttered. “That means treasure.”

By afternoon, he was digging. Sand filled his shoes and wind whistled past his ears. Then a glowing symbol appeared between two stones. Aaron pushed, and a path opened beneath the roots of a twisted tree.

At the end stood a gate. It was taller than a house and covered in symbols that twisted whenever he blinked.

A glowing panel flashed. Aaron typed every code he imagined.

Beep. Beep. Wrong.

“Stop,” rumbled the gate. “I do not open for greed.”

Aaron jumped. “I’m not greedy. I’m an explorer.”

“Then find my three keys,” the gate challenged, “and prove it.”

The first key was half-buried in the mud beside a pool. Aaron bent down, the water showed not his face, but piles of shining rocks.

His heart pumped.

Aaron reached. The pool shivered, and the shining rocks vanished. Only the key remained, wet and cold.

The second key hung from a branch in the forest. Aaron climbed towards it, but the branch cracked. A crow shrieked above him. He now dangled above the dark ground, his fingers burning.

His hands trembled. He wanted to let go, but he also wanted the key. Slowly, Aaron swung towards the trunk and grabbed it.

“One more,” he whispered.

Next morning, a small bird landed on a stone, holding the last key in its beak. Aaron lunged.

The bird did not move. It only stared at him.

Aaron froze. He could snatch the key, but something inside him tightened. If he took it, the gate might open. If he stole it, he wouldn't be better than the greed the gate warned about.

His fingers slowly opened.

“I won't steal it,” he whispered.

The bird opened its beak. The key dropped into his palm.

Aaron ran back to the chamber. The three keys slid into place.

Clink. Clank. Click.

The gate opened.

The Stone King on a throne of glittering stones. His crown was cracked, his hands were grey as storm clouds, his face was wrinkled like the stone walls.

The air smelled like thunder.

“You wanted treasure,” the king growled.

Aaron nodded.

“Did you earn it, or did you chase it?” the Stone King asked.

Aaron looked at the sparkling rocks, but now he remembered the glassy pool, the cracked branch and the bird’s patient eyes. Each key felt heavier.

“I chased it,” Aaron admitted.

The Stone King leaned forward. “Then why should the chamber open for you?”

Aaron’s face burned. He could have lied. He could have said he was brave or clever. Instead, he looked at the silver key in his shaking hand.

“Maybe it shouldn’t,” he said.

For the first time, the Stone King smiled.

When Aaron returned home, he left the silver key on his desk. Whenever greed came again, Aaron gripped the cold key and remembered the gate.