

TOLLHEIM BY ARNE LINDMO

A highly illustrated, page turning, new book series in colors for middle grade children.

This is the story of three children having to face mythological creatures and old Norse legends to save the world from ancient darkness.

It's the first day of school after the summer holidays, and Adam is the new kid in class. He walks to school through the forest with his new neighbor, Tobias, a short and chubby boy without many friends. On their way they run into Tara, a girl in their class, who decides to enter an abandoned, old house. When Tara doesn't turn up for school, the boys go looking for her. They search through the house without any luck, until they suddenly see a rug moving across the floor.

THE BEGINNING OF A FRIENDSHIP

"Hi! I'm Tobias." Adam grasped the outstretched hand and gently greeted the stranger. Tobias was a short, thick-faced, cheerful boy with wild, curly, blond hair and huge glasses. He was wearing a green sweater where "I love my mom!" was knitted in big red letters.

Their mothers were standing next to them chatting. It was the first day after the summer holidays, and their parents had agreed that the boys could walk together to school, as they now were neighbors. Adam had recently moved to the small village of Trollheim and was very anxious about how the first day of school would be. He was happy he got the chance to get to know someone up front, as he was mainly nervous about meeting all the new pupils at once. He almost felt sick thinking about all the kids who knew each other, but where no one knew him, and all he could do was to long for the old apartment, the old school, and his old friends. Would he ever get to see them again?

After Adam's mother had waved goodbye, and Tobias' mother had hugged, cuddled, and kissed her son on the forehead and the cheeks, the boys started to walk in the school's direction along a small trail in the forest. They were quiet for a long time, and a bit unsure of what to say to each other. But the moment they had passed some trees, and their mothers no longer could see them, Tobias tore of his sweater, shoved it into a plastic bag, and pushed the bag in between some loose rocks next to the trail.

"*That* was a birthday present from mom. If you as much as say *one* word about this to the others in our class, I'll beat you black and blue!" Tobias showed Adam a threatening fist and tried to look as threatening and dangerous as possible.

"Your secret is safe with me," Adam said, and wasn't quite able to hide a smile. Adam was rather big and strong to be eleven, so he wasn't particularly afraid of this small, thick, curly locks. But his smile disappeared when he was reminded of something similar that happened six months earlier.

It was the day his grandmother asked him if he wanted to wear the pink jacket to school, the one she had given him for Christmas. He had refused, said it was an ugly girl color, and his grandmother had become very sad. He wished he had been given a second chance and had been just as clever as Tobias.

"I'm changing back on my way home from school," Tobias said. "Then I won't be bullied at school, and mom will be happy. A solution benefiting all!"

"BOO!" Out from the bushes something jumped towards them. Tobias screamed, stumbled backwards, and fell on his bum while a girl stood on the trail and laughed her heart out. "You're so easily scared, Tobias!" she said. "But who are *you*? I haven't seen you before." The girl pointed at

Adam. Her skin was brown, and her hair was black, divided in two and tied with pink hair ties into two long pigtails, which laid down her shoulders on both sides of the smiling face.

"I just moved here from Oslo and am going to start in Tobias' class," Adam said while he was helping Tobias back on his feet. "My name is Adam. Who are you?"

"That is Tara," Tobias said while he brushed away the dust from his pants. "She is a real tormentor! She never leaves me alone."

"I simply *have* to scare you," Tara said. "It's just as fun every time! Think of it as a friendly favor. Every time you're scared by something and survive, you'll be a bit braver next time. Let's call it fright training! I'm training you to become a real tough guy so you one day can save me from a burning building or something like that." She studied Adam with her eyes. "But the new guy doesn't scare easily." Tara nudged Adam and gave him a sly wink. "Maybe *you* can become my brave knight in shining armor."

"Come, Adam! Forget her, we have to go to school," Tobias said a bit grumpy.

"But what were you hiding between the rocks over there?" Tara asked.

"Wow! Look at the time," Tobias said, and pulled Adam's arm desperately. "I think we have to hurry to school before we get there too late."

THE RAMBLING OLD HOUSE

After a while, the three children passed a large house next to the trail.

"Wow, is someone living here in the middle of the forest?" Adam said.

"That's the rambling old house itself," Tara said. "No one has lived there for several hundred years."

The enormous house was located in a huge overgrown garden, surrounded by a low stone wall. Some of the windows were broken, the black paint was peeling in many places, and long creepers had grown up the walls. Adam couldn't see light in any of the windows, and the place looked completely abandoned. It was a rusty gate with a padlock in the wall.

Tara smiled slyly and pointed at the house. "This is a brilliant place for Tobias, to train his courage! I bet he doesn't dare to walk through the garden and knock on that door."

"Stop joking, Tara." Tobias suddenly looked completely pale. "No one dares to enter the garden of the rambling old house. Some say that the place is bewitched! A long time ago, some children disappeared here in the woods, and many believe they were kidnapped by something terribly mean. Something vicious hiding in the house and just waiting for children to be stupid enough to enter."

"Nah! You're just a coward. Look at me!" Tara elegantly jumped over the small stone wall and landed in the overgrown garden. "The last one to the door is a chicken!" She began to swim through the myriad of tall grass, bushes, and thorn thickets.

"Tara, come back!" Tobias yelled. Adam was surprised by how scared Tobias sounded. Wasn't it after all just an old house? Tobias clenched his fists and bit his lip. "Tara! We'll be late for school!"

Tara struggled across an old, rotten tree trunk, wading through large tufts of dandelions, and finally stood in front of the old, decayed door of the rambling old house. She didn't knock, but gently touched the doorknob. She turned triumphantly and shouted: "The door is open! Who dares to enter?"

Adam and Tobias stared back at her. Tobias just shook his head. Adam didn't quite know what to say.

"Oh! I can't believe it! How are the two of you supposed to become men? This is how you do it!" Tara rolled her eyes, opened the door, and walked in.

Adam and Tobias saw her body disappear into the dark hallway. Then it became completely silent. They were standing and waiting for her to come out again. One minute passed. Two minutes passed.

Adam looked at his wristwatch. "Almost half past eight. We'll be late for school!"

"Oh! Typical Tara!" Tobias said. "She always makes me late for school. She always comes up with some nonsense! Now she's just teasing us. She probably hid in there and is delighted over a new chance to scare me. Jumping out of a closet, or something like that."

"We really have to go," Adam said. "I don't want to be late for my first day of school. Let her just sit there with the spiders and rats! She won't rejoice when she has to explain herself to the teacher." The two boys started to walk. Tobias looked worried at Adam. "Do you really think there are rats in there?"

WHERE IS TARA?

The first class came and went. The teacher noted Tara as absent. Adam and Tobias said they had seen her on their way to school and told what had happened. "Hmm, the rambling old house?" said the teacher, and frowned. "All the things you kids come up with nowadays! Just wait until her parents hear that Tara wanted to explore old houses today, instead of going to school. Then this kind of nonsense will come to an end!" Adam and Tobias looked worried at each other.

Tara's desk remained empty the entire school day.

On their way home, Adam and Tobias stopped again in front of the rambling old house in the forest.

"What if something happened to her!" Tobias said while he stared at the old door that now was ajar after Tara had opened it. "What if she stumbled on an old nail and knocked herself out. What if she lies there on the floor and slowly bleeds to death as we speak!" Tobias felt cold throughout his body. "Maybe the rats have gathered around her for a feast!"

"Stop it!" Adam said. "The part with the rats were just nonsense. But you're right that something might have happened to her."

"We'd better hurry home and tell our moms!" Tobias said, and started to walk with a high pace on the trail.

"But what if she actually lies unconscious on the floor inside the house and bleeds to death as we speak!" Adam said. "Then it can be too late if we go home first. I think we have to go inside and look for her. Right now."

Tobias got misty-eyed. "But...but...the rambling old house!"

Adam smiled at him. "Oh, come on! It's just an old house. You've seen too many movies, chicken." Adam nudged him.

"Don't call me a chicken," Tobias said and nudged him back, but suddenly his face became completely white. He pointed at the sky and whined something like "it can't be true!"

Adam turned around and looked up where Tobias was pointing. Up from the old, crooked chimney on the roof, he could barely see a small strip of smoke.

"It can't be true," Tobias repeated. "No one lives here."

"Come!" Adam sat his backpack on the ground, grabbed the stone wall, and swung over.

"Wait!" Tobias also put down his backpack, and kicked, crawled, and rolled over the wall until he tumbled down into the soft grass next to Adam.

Together they began to fight their way through tall grass, thickets, and bushes, until they finally were standing in front of the same door that Tara had disappeared behind. Adam braced himself and knocked the door.

As it already was ajar, the knock made the door go inwards and revealed a large, dark room. The only light was the light from the open door, and there, on the middle of the floor, was a pink hair tie.

THE HUNT FOR TARA

Tobias forgot how scared he was and ran into the room. He kneeled next to the hair tie and picked it up. "Adam, this belongs to Tara. I'm sure of it!"

Adam looked around in the large, dark room. It was nothing there, except from an old closet, a couple of doors, a small window, and a ragged, old rug. He opened the closet with a small hope that Tara had been hiding there all this time. It was nothing there except an old, moth-eaten coat.

"This looks like a place where no one has lived for many, many years," Adam said.

"So why was smoke coming out of the chimney?" Tobias asked. "I'm sure Tara wouldn't have gone home, or anywhere else, without her hair tie. It's not like it was hard to find! Adam, do you think she could have left it here on purpose? Like a clue for us?"

"I don't know," Adam said and shook his head. "But we have to search through the house from top to bottom, because now I really think something could have happened to her." Adam and Tobias started looking. They opened the doors and searched through every room in the house. They neither found Tara or anyone else.

"We don't have any choice. We have to go home and tell our parents," Tobias said.

"Wait, there's one thing here that isn't right." Adam snapped his fingers. "The smoke! There's smoke coming from the chimney, but now we've searched through every room in both ground, first, and second floor, and there's one thing that simply doesn't add up!"

The boys looked at each other, and Tobias whispered: "No fireplace, no wood stove." Adam looked down on the floor and snapped with his fingers one more time. "Have you noticed how much dust there's here? I can actually see our footprints here in the dust, and that mean we should be able to find Tara's footprints too. If only we haven't messed it up with our own prints. We have to check the floor next to the entrance."

Adam and Tobias went back to the large, dark room by the front door. The room only had one small window, but the open door gave enough light. Adam bent down, thoroughly inspecting the dust. "Here are my footprints, and there are yours. Luckily, we only walked past this place once before we examined the rest of the house. But look!" Adam pointed. "These small footprints have to belong to Tara!"

Adam and Tobias followed the footprints to the place where they found the hair tie. "But what in heaven's name!" Adam said. "Her footprints disappear here, in the middle of the floor, like she grew wings and flew away, and what has happened here?" Adam pointed to the side where the prints disappeared. The boys could clearly see a mess in the dust, next to the old rug, and there, in the middle of all the mess, a huge footprint! An imprint of a giant, bare foot. At least twice as large as from an adult male!

THE RUG'S SECRET

"Now I'm going home," Tobias said, turning around to go towards the exit door.

Suddenly, they both heard a sound from the floor that caused a chill down their backs. They saw the old rug move across the floor, all by itself! At the place where the rug had been, they could see something resembling a hatch in the floor, a trapdoor. A loud squeak warned the boys that the trapdoor was about to open.

Tobias could not move. He was scared stiff! But Adam grabbed him and dragged him into the old closet.

"Hush! Not a word," Adam whispered, holding his index finger in front of his mouth. Tobias nodded, closed his eyes, and sank together at the bottom of the closet. Adam pushed the closet door slightly ajar and glanced at what came out from the floor.

It was getting late, and the sun just went down behind the treetops outside the open front door, but it was just enough light, so Adam managed to see an enormous figure coming up from the trapdoor. First, a wild, disheveled hair of small branches and moss. Then two creepy, orange eyes and a huge nose with a small mushroom growing on the tip.

The clothes seemed to be sewn from animal skins. Two enormous, muscular arms closed the trapdoor and pulled the rug back into place as it smelled the air with its giant nose. It made a deep murmur sound as it walked over to the open door. Then it went outside and closed the door behind it.

Neither of the two boys dared to move until it an exceedingly long time had passed, maybe as much as an hour. It had become almost completely dark outside.

"I think it's gone," Adam said, finally breaking the crushing silence.

"You think what is gone?" whispered Tobias from the bottom of the closet.

"I'm not quite sure. I've never seen anything like it. It looked like a monstrous man, but with branches and moss in his hair. It basically looked like a troll."

"A TROLL!" Tobias screamed. Before he slapped one of his hands over his mouth. "A troll," he whispered between his trembling fingers.

"But it can't be true," Adam said. "After all, trolls only exist in fairy tales." He thought for a moment before continuing: "By the way, it had very weird eyes. Black pupils like us, but with orange all around it, and nothing white. Just like the eyes of a wolf, or an owl."

"Night vision," Tobias whispered. "Wolves and owls are particularly good at seeing in the dark. Then it can easily see us when we sneak out. Do you think it can run faster than us? I want to go home now."

"We can't sneak out just yet," Adam said.

"Huh!" Tobias said. "Maybe you intend to sleep in this closet? And wake up in the belly of that monster?"

"Have you forgotten Tara! She must be trapped down there, under the rug. Now when the troll is gone, we have the chance to free her. If we leave her now, anything can happen to her before we manage to get help."

"I was worried you were going to say that," Tobias sighed. "But if it comes back while we're down there then we're trapped! The troll will stand between us and the exit door."

"I don't think so," Adam said. "Think of all the dust up here and remember that the only footsteps we found by the door were our own. I am absolutely certain that the troll has another exit leading out of the basement. An exit where there is less chance that someone sees it arriving and leaving from the trail. He probably used this exit this time to make sure that the door was closed after what happened earlier or because he heard us. The old wooden floor here squeaks, and we went a lot back and forth when we were looking for Tara."

"Oh no!" Tobias said. "If he heard us, then it's us he's looking for now!"

"Maybe, but that gives us an opportunity. Now we need to get started! We've already waited too long."

Adam pushed the closet door open and gently stepped onto the dusty floor. It was very dark in the room, but some light came in through the window. "Tobias, can you keep guard at the door while I figure out how to open the trapdoor?"

Tobias nodded and sneaked to the door but didn't dare open it. Instead, he laid one ear against it. "Maybe I can hear it when it comes?" he said with hope.

Adam pushed away the rug and discovered two threads attached to it, which disappeared into two separate holes in the floor. "I think I know how the troll moved the rug without touching it," Adam said. "He probably pulls this thread when he stands under the trapdoor."

In the trapdoor itself, a large iron ring was attached. Adam grabbed it and pulled all he could, but it was too heavy. "Tobias, you will have to help me," he said.

Tobias left the door and walked over to help. Together they managed to pull the ring hard enough that the trapdoor opened. There was a stick there that they used to hold the trapdoor open. Under the trapdoor, they discovered a staircase that disappeared into a pitch-black darkness.

THE MATCHES

"Trolls may be able to see in the dark, but we cannot," Adam sighed.

"I saw several candleholders as I looked through the house," Tobias said. "I think there were candles in some of them, and where there are candles there should also be matches. Maybe we can find a box?"

"Go see!" Adam said. "I'll watch the door in the meantime, and yell if the troll comes. If all goes wrong, we can break a window with a chair and get out that way."

Tobias ran through a couple of rooms before arriving at the one he remembered from earlier. The room resembled a dining room with a long table in the middle that was decorated with a gray tablecloth. A large three-armed candleholder stood in the center of the table. One of the walls was filled with large windows that showed the other side of the house, apparently an apple orchard. The sun had set, but the moon was bold and round on the sky and threw a ghostly lens of light through the windows. Tobias thought for the first time of how late it was and on how worried his mother had to be for him right now. She probably got home from work hours ago. Maybe she was out there looking for him right now? Out... along with the troll!

Tobias let go of the thought and tried to focus. Have to save Tara first! Have to find matches!

On the opposite wall stood a bookcase with countless drawers and cabinet doors. Tobias began to rummage through them in search of matches.

He found all kinds of things. Old coffee cups, glasses, plates, bowls, cutlery, paper piles, ragged notebooks, stationery, and something resembling an old diary, bound in brown leather.

The diary had a lock, so he could not open it, but the front piqued his curiosity. Tobias loved books, and most of the books at home were old, antique books from the book collection they had inherited from great-grandfather. He therefore recognized the strange letters on the cover as old, Gothic handwriting. His father had helped him to decipher the scriptures, and he could therefore read that it was written "Fredrik Gran's Diary, 1699" on the cover. Could the diary really be more than three hundred years old?

Next to the book laid a lot of sketches on old, yellowed paper. They had been drawn with charcoal sticks. What caught the attention of Tobias was a sketch of a little troll, sitting in a huge cage, with tears down one cheek. Tobias picked up the sketches, and quickly looked through some of them. There were several sketches of the same troll, and the last was a strange line drawing of a man, as if a five-year-old had drawn it. The man smiled and had his arms outstretched. Tobias put the sketches down. He didn't have time to be curious now. He had to find matches! He kept rummaging through the rest of the drawers.

In the last drawer, he finally found a box of matches. As he held the matchbox triumphantly in the air, he saw a huge shadow gliding across the wall.

Tobias crouched down quickly behind the long table. He could hear twigs cracking from the garden as something big moved past the windows. He cautiously glanced below the tablecloth on the table and saw the legs of the troll outside. Had it seen him? It felt as if the blood froze to ice in his

veins, and it became difficult to breathe. But he had to know! Tobias carefully sneaked a bit closer, so he could see more from his hiding place under the table. Then he could see the troll stretching out a hand to pick an apple from the nearest tree. It was terribly big and ugly, with eyes glowing in the dark, but if it was busy with apple picking then it would probably not have spotted him yet.

Tobias crawled on all fours over to the next room. There he stood up, grabbed a three-armed candleholder with candles and ran as fast as he could through the following rooms.

THE STAIRCASE

“Adam! We must save Tara, now right away! The troll stands in the garden picking apples! It will likely come soon!”

Tobias tried to light the candles with a match, but his hands trembled so much that the flame extinguished. “Let me try,” Adam said, taking the matchbox. He quickly lit a new match and managed to light the three wicks. The light from the candles surrounded them and chased away the immediate darkness. A warm, cozy glow decomposed the room into strips of light and shadows. Adam took a firm grip of the candleholder, held it in front of him, and went down the creaky stairs. Tobias followed suit as he snatched the stick that made the trapdoor fall behind them with a bang!

Adam recoiled and almost lost the candleholder down the stairs. “Why did you do that?” he said.

“S-s-s-sorry,” Tobias stuttered, also shuddered by the loud sound. “I suddenly came to remember that the troll closed the trapdoor behind him and thought about what would happen if it came back and found it open. Don't you think it would have become a bit suspicious? And you said there had to be another exit!”

“I *think* there is another exit, but I wouldn't bet my life on it! What if the troll heard the bang?”

“Ouch, I didn't think about that,” Tobias said.

“Forget it,” Adam said. “Maybe it wasn't a bad idea. If the troll is still standing on the other side of the house, I don't think it could have heard the sound.”

They walked further down the stairs quietly. It turned downward into darkness like a spiral. Tobias stroked a hand along the wall. The walls were no longer made of wood or cement, but of solid stone, as if they had found their way into a cave.

“I can't believe we're doing all this for Tara,” Tobias said. “You just met her today and almost don't know her. The only thing you know about her is that she likes to tease me.”

“She's in danger,” Adam said. “What would it look like if the first thing the new boy in class did was to fail a classmate in need. Anyways, I think you really like her.” Adam turned around just in time to see Tobias' face turn completely red. “Because despite how scared you were, you ran inside without thinking, just from seeing her hair tie.”

Tobias got misty-eyed. “You're right. She is not like the others. Maybe she teases me and can be a little bothersome, but I know it's not malevolent. And it's far better than what the other kids do. They pretend that I don't exist. Or they whisper behind my back, just loud enough so I can hear it, there's fatty four eyes—and then they laugh. Tara is actually the only one who will talk to me when I'm at school.”

Adam looked away as Tobias wiped away a few tears with the sleeve of his shirt. “Hey, Tobias,” Adam said. “I won't be like that. Like the others at school, I mean. They sound like a bunch of idiots. But we can be friends. Okay?”

“Okay,” Tobias whispered before quickly inhaling and pointing past Adam. “Look at that!”

THE CAVE

"It's the other hair tie!" Tobias said and pointed at the last stairstep. There was a pink hair tie, just like the one they had found upstairs. "She must have thrown it after she was caught to show us that she's down here. We have to find her!"

They walked down into a huge cave. The candles casted flickering lights over old but monstrous and solid wooden furniture. A massive oak table was placed in the middle of the room. A couple of stools stood on each side, and in one corner, next to an old chest, stood a rocking chair. Otherwise, they could see something resembling a bed rest along one wall, a place used for sleeping, full of dry grass, leaves and twigs. A ragged blanket was also laying there. The air felt heavy and dusty, with a hint of smoke.

"I think there's some light coming from that opening over there," Adam said.

Adam walked over to the opening, which led on via a tunnel, to another, slightly smaller cave. There was a simmering pot there. It hung over a fire that was burning inside a large, walled fireplace. Firewood was stacked along one wall and a massive axe stood planted in a chopping block. Most of the smoke disappeared up through an opening in the roof.

"There is the explanation for the smoke we saw coming from the chimney," Adam said.

Tobias walked over to the pot and looked bleakly down into the simmering, brown stew. "Do you think these are the remains of Tara?" He poked a piece of meat that was floating on the surface. There was a workbench next to the pot with the leftovers of various vegetables and mushrooms.

"It could be rat meat," Adam said, pointing at a bunch of rat furs lying on the table, next to a long, sharp knife. "Maybe this is what the troll normally eats. It can't eat children all the time. All the missing children would have alarmed the police a long time ago."

"Let's keep looking," Tobias said. They went back to the largest cave and saw that there were two other openings there. They went into one of them, followed the tunnel a bit, and arrived at a small cave with a well. The well consisted of a three-foot-tall stone circle with a large dark hole in the center. Next to it was a large bucket with a rope attached to the handle. Adam picked up a small stone and let it fall down in the well. After a few seconds they heard a splash.

"What if the troll has thrown her into the well and let her drown there?" Tobias asked. "To hide its tracks?"

"I highly doubt that," Adam said. "That would have poisoned the water. The troll would probably not have survived until our time if it didn't understand how important it is with clean drinking water."

"But what is this?" Adam shone with the candleholder against the innermost wall where a large stone laid on the ground, in front of a huge painting, as tall as themselves. The painting was not hung, but stood propped against the wall, behind the stone. It was old, water damaged, and severely attacked by dry rot, but they could still see that it was supposed to be a portrait of an elderly man, serious, and with a long, curly wig. It was a portrait from the old days, of the kind one can find at the museum. At the bottom of the painting a name was written: "Fredrik Gran".

"I've seen that name before," Tobias said. "I found his diary while I was looking for matches. He has to have lived here before the house was abandoned. It's weird that the picture is down here. After all, it will be destroyed by the humidity down here. It should have hung on one of the walls upstairs."

Tobias crouched down and looked at the large stone in front of the picture. On the stone the word "daddy" was written with charcoal, and a bouquet of dandelions laid in front of it.

"This looks like a gravestone," Tobias said. "And the bouquet of dandelions looks freshly picked."

"Maybe the troll buried his father here?" Adam suggested.

"So where is the mother?" Tobias asked uneasy.

"Maybe trolls don't have mothers. Have you ever heard of female trolls?" Adam said.

“Of course I've heard of female trolls! What about huldra? The troll hag who wanted to eat Buttercup? The troll mother who puts her eleven small trolls to bed?”

“So, this troll can have ten siblings?” Adam said.

“Hush, don't say things like that. Not even as a joke,” Tobias said anxiously and looked around nervously. Adam began to follow the tunnel back, but as Tobias was about to follow suit, he froze.

“Wait! Do you hear something?” whispered Tobias. They both remained completely silent.

They could hear a distant crying sound. “It has to be Tara!” they said aloud in unison.

“But where does the sound come from?” Adam asked.

Tobias walked around the well and examined its walls. The smooth stones didn't reveal anything. Adam walked over to the edge of the well and leaned over the stone circle. He strained his ears to the limit but shook his head: “It doesn't come from the well.”

Tobias stopped at the gravestone, crouched next to the painting, tilted his head, and listened intently. Then he pushed the large painting to the side and revealed a secret passage! The moment the opening was uncovered, the crying sound became louder.

Adam shone the way as they hurried into the small tunnel. It led into a small cave in which a huge cage with thick iron bars stood. In the cage, Tara sat and cried.

“Tobias!” she cried with a weeping voice. “Get me out! Get me out! Get me out!” she kept crying, while she shook the bars with her hands.

Adam and Tobias stopped at the door of the cage. It was locked with a huge padlock!

THE HUNT FOR THE BACKPACK

Adam grabbed the padlock and jiggled it desperately. “It is really stuck! Tara, do you know where the key is?”

Tara shook her head as tears flowed down her cheeks. She let go of the bars and sank discouraged down at the bottom of the cage. Tobias fell to his knees beside her and grabbed one of her hands through the bars. “Tara, just relax,” he said. “We're going to get you out of here. I promise! Breathe calmly and think hard. Think about what happened when the troll locked the cage. Did it go straight outside? Did it fumble with its pockets? Did it go to another place in this room?”

Tara closed her eyes and took a deep breath. A few seconds passed by, then she opened her eyes again. “I think it put the bunch of keys in a pocket and walked straight out of here.”

Adam shook his head sadly: “Then I don't think we will get any further. We probably have to go home and get some adults or call the police.”

“Please! Don't leave me,” Tara said, taking a firmer grip of Tobias' hand. She looked pleadingly at him.

“Okay,” Tobias said. “I will stay here, along with Tara. Adam, can you hurry home and call the police?”

“Are you sure? What are you going to do when the troll returns?” Adam asked.

“Wait a minute,” Tara said. “I have a cellphone turned off in my backpack, and I still had it on me when I was caught. The troll tore off the backpack in the largest cave, right after it carried me down the stairs, but I don't know where it is now.”

“Okay, I'll go to look for it while you stay here,” Adam said. “Unfortunately, I have to take the candleholder with me.”

“Maybe you can leave one candle behind?” Tobias suggested. “After all, Tara has been sitting here in the dark for the whole day.”

Adam took out one of the three candles and gave it to Tara through the bars. Tara took it with one hand but continued to hold Tobias with the other.

“Thank you,” she said. “The code of the phone is 1205 and be careful! The troll is twice as big as an adult man, and considering how easily it carried me, at least ten times as strong.”

Adam smiled as bravely as he could, turned around, and walked back through the secret hallway until he came out into the cave with the well. He wondered if he should push the painting back but let go of the idea. It was probably better if Tobias had free path out from there.

He easily found his way to the largest cave. The cave complex wasn't really that big, but it seemed gigantic because the light now was burning so dimly that he rarely saw more than one wall at a time. The rest of the cave was bathed in complete darkness. He walked over to the last opening, the one they had not yet explored. Could the backpack be in there? The candles flickered, and he could feel a slight draft coming from the opening. This tunnel had to lead outside! Adam smiled to himself. He had been right! Then he no longer had to worry about how to open the trapdoor. Now he just had to find the backpack, call the police, and jut off. But what exactly was the number to the police? He had completely forgotten it. But the others may know it? He felt quite sure that there were only three low digits, so it shouldn't be that hard to call the correct number by chance.

He shone around with the candleholder, looking for places where the troll could have hidden the backpack. It may lie on the floor somewhere, but then they might would have stumbled across it already.

Adam tried to think back to when they first came down and looked around. They had seen a table, stools, a bed rest, and a rocking chair. Suddenly it hit him. A chest! Maybe the backpack was in it? He aimed the light in the direction of the bed rest of dry grass, leaves, and twigs. It must have been over there. Adam became so eager that he forgot to watch where he stepped. Suddenly he tripped, and the candleholder flew out of his hand. It slammed on to the floor and all the candles were blown out. Everything turned black!

FUMBLING IN THE DARK

It was so dark that Adam couldn't even see his own hands. How was he now supposed to find the backpack or the way home, or just the way back to Tobias and Tara? Is this the end? Will the troll come now? He felt the tears building up. How could he be so clumsy! Just in the moment where he began to think that it was going to be fine.

It had to be in the middle of the night now and he never came home after school today. How angry is mom now? He had promised that it would never happen again. All the times he had ran away from home. All the fights at school. All the awful things he had said to her after dad left. They were going to get a fresh start, here in Trollheim. Now she probably thought that he had ran away again. Maybe this is the time she just gives up? Doesn't bother calling the police anymore. Just lets him be gone. Not her fault that he was a loser, just like his father. Yes, that's what she said that time. And he hadn't forgotten it even though she had said sorry. Adam tried to shake off his heavy thoughts. No, he had started over! It wasn't his fault this time.

He groped around on the floor. What was it he had tripped over? There! His hand found something soft and smooth. The backpack! Thank goodness.

Adam groped around in the backpack and fished up the phone. He turned it on. It was a smartphone! It must have flashlight function. Wow, Tara's parents must be rich! He himself could just forget to get his own cellphone before he was at least fifteen.

He stood up and tried to remember the code of the phone, but it was completely gone. What was it Tara had said? Something with twelve? He had always had trouble remembering numbers. He did not dare to try either. Some phones only give you three attempts before it locks, and then it can only be opened with a different and much more difficult code. No code, no flashlight, and no option to

call home on your own. He has to find his way back to Tobias and Tara! Then she can use the phone to call home or to the police. If he just had had some light!

Adam looked around in the darkness and finally caught sight of the dim light that came from the fire in food cave. He tip-toed to the opening. The light was a little stronger inside the tunnel and after a few quick steps he entered the cave with the pattering pot. The fire had almost extinguished, but after a little strenuous blowing he got pep in it again, and the flames flared up once more. He picked out a firewood branch that was appropriately long and narrow, and that only burned at one end. When he lifted it up like a torch, it gave far better light than what the candles had been giving.

Satisfied with himself, he jogged back to the big cave with the torch in one hand and the phone in the other.

There he stopped abruptly in the opening. In the middle of the dark room, he could clearly see two, glowing, orange eyes staring at him.

TOBIAS AND TARA

"So, no one knows you guys are here?" Tara asked.

"No," Tobias replied. "We just walked straight in on our way home from school. We thought you might have fallen and knocked yourself out, or something like that. We didn't expect to find trolls and locked iron cages."

"No, me neither," Tara said. "But after all, you were right. I should never have walked in here. I can't thank you enough and I get totally embarrassed when I think about what I said to you earlier. I'm sorry I called you a coward and things like that. You are far braver than what I thought."

"Don't worry about it," Tobias said. "But I really think you're the bravest of us. Had I been caught by a huge troll, towed down into a cave, and thrown into a cage, my heart would have stopped from horror a long time ago. You would have found nothing but a lifeless body and a terrified ghost."

Tara giggled.

"Or you had found a satisfied and happy troll," he continued. "Just about to use my collarbone as a toothpick."

Tara stopped giggling. "Not funny," she said. "That can still happen to me!"

"Don't be afraid," Tobias said. "I promise I'll get you out of here. Everything is going to be fine."

"And I promise I'll stop scaring you, if we get out of here," Tara said. "You have passed the bravery test now. More training won't be necessary."

"You mean *when* we get out of here," Tobias said. "We call 112 with your phone and the police will come running. They're going to shoot the troll full of lead and then we live happily ever after." Tobias suddenly turned completely red in the face. That was so lame! Had he said too much? About what he felt? Tara was a beautiful girl, and he was as handsome as a thick, small troll. He tried to think of something more to say, to smooth it all over, but his brain felt like porridge. He took off his glasses and pretended as if he was rubbing away a debris from his eye. Then she couldn't see his blush.

"Tobias," Tara said gently. "You're actually pretty cute without glasses."

An inhuman roar reverberated between the walls and Tobias felt the fingers of fear grope coldly around his heart. But the warm words of Tara gave him strength to hit the paralyzing horror away. "The troll has returned," he whispered quickly to Tara. "And I think it has discovered Adam." He jumped up and ran out of the cave.

"Tobias! Don't leave me! Tobias!" The desperate calls from Tara stabbed him like knives in the back as Tobias ran away from her through the secret hallway.

THE LOCK

It was pitch-black, but Tobias found his way through the hallway by following the sound of the noise of the battle in the large cave. He came to the opening and tried to see what was going on.

He spotted Adam, lit by a torch that he fenced against the troll. The troll grabbed Adam by the arm and threw him across the room. His body hit the old rocking chair with a bump and splintered it into several pieces. The dry wood immediately caught fire from the torch that now was lying on the floor. The new flames casted more light around the room and Tobias could clearly see how Adam got himself back on his feet, grabbed one of the burning pieces of wood, and threw himself against the troll in another attempt to impale it, but the troll swept him easily aside. This time Adam hit his head on the hard stone floor and stayed down without moving. The troll grabbed one of his legs and pulled the lifeless body over the floor in the direction of the food cave.

Tobias turned around. He got an idea. The gravestone in the cave with the well was large and heavy. He fumbled back into the darkness until his hands met the big, round stone. Tobias could barely lift it. Fortunately, he could still hear calls and cries from Tara, so he found his way back through the secret hallway. Tobias took a swing and threw the big stone with all his power and hit the padlock with tremendous force. The stone shattered the lock, and Tara stared shocked at Tobias as he opened the now unlocked door.

"I thought you left me," she sobbed and hugged him hard against her.

"I promised I'd get you out of here," Tobias said. "And I keep what I promise."

Tobias wished they could stand like this forever, but this was neither the right time nor place. "We must go," he whispered in her ear and Tara let go.

She still held the candle in one hand, which she now used to shine her way as they walked together back through the secret hallway.

"The troll has caught Adam," Tobias said. "I don't think there's anything we can do to help him. It is terribly big and strong. He tried to fight it, but he didn't have a chance and was knocked unconscious."

"He was trying to save me," Tara said. "We can't just leave him?"

"Let's see," Tobias said. "According to the ancient fairytales, trolls are albeit large and strong, but also quite stupid. Maybe we can make a trap or trick it?"

"What about this well," Tara said, pointing with the candle as they emerged from the small tunnel. "Can we push it down there? I don't think it will get back up."

"The troll is probably too big and heavy for us to manage to budge it, even if I used a running start," Tobias said. "And how would we get it over to the edge of the well? It may be stupid, but probably not completely lost."

"How are trolls defeated in fairytales?" Tara asked.

"Well, we can cut off its head with a sword," Tobias replied. "If we were tall enough, strong enough and had a sword."

"Next suggestion," Tara said.

"In some fairytales, trolls can turn into stone when the rays of sunlight hit them. That's maybe not a bad idea. It's august so the sun rises a little after five o'clock. We can let it chase us, run out into the sun, watch it turn into stone and give each other high five. Just three small problems."

"Which are?"

"First of all, that we don't know what time it is. It wouldn't be good if the moon and a starry sky were the last things we saw before the troll beat the crap out of us. Secondly, that we don't know the way out while the troll knows this place like his own pockets. Thirdly, that we don't know for sure if the troll turns into stone at all, so maybe the sun and a blue sky became the last things we saw before the troll beat the crap out of us."

Tara sighed.

THE PLAN

Tara and Tobias followed the tunnel from the cage with the well until they entered the largest cave. The broken rocking chair was still burning, so they had enough light to quickly determine that the room was empty.

"The troll dragged Adam with him into the food cave," Tobias said.

"What do you mean by food cave," Tara asked horrified.

"There is a puttering pot in there, over a fire," Tobias replied. "We saw vegetables and mushrooms. It must be where the troll is cooking."

"And now the troll has dragged Adam in there?" Tara said. "What if he's about to cook him? That's awful! We have to stop him!"

Tobias went to the bed rest, where the troll probably slept during the day, and tore off a piece from the old, ragged blanket lying there. He picked up one of the burning sticks from the broken rocking chair and lashed the rags around where it burned. The new torch gave far better light than the old candle.

"There are three openings here, plus the stairs," Tobias said. "I don't think the two of us will manage to lift the trapdoor on top of the stairs. It was incredibly heavy! But Adam believed that the troll had to have an exit down here, to be able to come and go without being discovered. It must be the third opening; the one Adam and I didn't have time to explore. We can't help Adam until we know if we have an escape route." Tobias entered the opening. The torch flickered, and Tobias smiled. "It's coming fresh air here. I think we are on the right track."

They continued to walk through the tunnel and reached the exit quite fast. They came out on the other side of the house, in the apple orchard, and discovered that it was still in the middle of the night. After several hours in complete darkness, the light from the full moon and the stars was a welcome sight. Tara filled her lungs with the fresh night air. It smelled of freedom!

"Here is the open road home," Tara said. "If I run, I can be at home in 20 minutes. I can hammer on the front door and windows. Dad and my brothers can help us free Adam. My big brother, Agash, is weightlifting. He can probably go a round or two with the troll!"

"It will probably take me at least half an hour to run home to mom," Tobias said. "I'm not as fast as you, nor is there much help in her or my father. They are quite old and have weak legs. They can call the police of course."

"Wait! Let me think," Tara said. "20 minutes there, maybe 15 minutes to wake them up, explain and put on clothes, pick up the bat and knives, 20 minutes to return." Tara shook her head. "Even if everything goes perfectly, it will take us at least an hour. I don't think Adam has that long. Tobias, it's up to us! We must save him now!"

"I was afraid you were going to say that," Tobias sighed as an echo of a memory from earlier in the evening. "But what chances do we really have, two children against a huge troll?"

As Tara stood and pondered, Tobias noticed that some of the grass where they stood was frozen to ice. That's weird, Tobias thought. After all, it's still summer, and the air is warm.

"Okay, here's the plan," Tara said, interrupting the thoughts of Tobias. "We go back to the largest cave. You hide under the ragged blanket lying there. I enter the food cave with the torch. The troll sees me and comes running after me. The last time he surprised me, but this time I'm going to be prepared." Tara clenched her fists and stared at Tobias with a determined look in her eyes. "I can run like the wind! I throw the torch at him! It will give me exactly the head start I need. I run out of the cave with the troll after me. He's going to get quite a workout!" Tara smiled slyly. "You throw off the blanket and run into the food cave. There should be enough light from the burning rocking chair and from the fire where you said the troll is cooking. You need to find Adam quickly. If he is still unconscious, then drag him out of the cave. The grass is very tall out here, so it should be possible to

hide him somewhere out here in the garden. Sprinkle some leaves over him or something like that. Then you can run home.”

Tobias was pale and stared at Tara. “There are a hundred of things that can go wrong with that plan,” he said.

“Do you have a better plan?” Tara asked. Tobias nervously rubbed his hands, desperately trying to think of something.

“That’s what I thought. Let’s go!” Tara said and pulled Tobias with her back into the troll’s cave.

Just before he was pulled back into the tunnel Tobias thought he saw two glowing, orange eyes staring hatefully at him from the bushes in the garden. Maybe he was just imagining it? After all, it could not be the troll? Probably just an owl.

KARK

Tobias hid under the blanket and Tara tip-toed to the tunnel that led into the food cave. She ran in, roared all she could and got ready to throw the torch at the troll.

To her great surprise she saw Adam sitting on a stool with a bandage on his forehead and a bowl of stew in his lap. He was so frightened by her roar that the stew splashed all over the wall as he fell sideways off the stool.

The big troll stood there and slowly raised its arms as it spoke soothingly with a deep, rumbling voice. “Wait,” it said. “Kark be friend. Not mean!”

Tara stood as frozen to the ground. Adam slowly got up from the floor as he brushed away the stew from his clothes.

“Tara! I know it seems weird, but he’s actually kind,” Adam said. “I must have lost consciousness a few minutes after I bumped my head into the ground. I came to myself as he put a bandage on my forehead and gave me a bowl of food. We actually sat and chatted quietly together until you came exploding in with your battle cry.”

Tara still held the torch timid in front of her like a shield. “But it’s a troll!”

“Yeah, that’s exactly what we talked about before you interrupted us,” Adam said. “He told me he has lived here by himself for several hundred years, ever since his father died. According to Kark, that’s apparently his name, a couple of thousand years ago it was a war between the last underground creatures and the Vikings. The Vikings were about to win, led by the mighty warriors Odin, Thor, and Freyja. The underground creatures were led by Loki, half human, half troll, and a powerful sorcerer. The last battle was here, in Trollheim. Loki lost and took the last of his people with him, deep into the bowels of the earth, to a place called Helheim.”

“What does that have to do with this troll,” Tara asked confusedly.

“The gate down to that place is here, in the garden of the rambling old house. More than three hundred years ago there lived a man here named Fredrik Gran. He opened the gate and went to explore the halls deep down underground. There he found a dead female troll and next to the troll was a crying baby troll, who vainly tried to wake his mother. Gran perhaps felt sorry for it, or was curious, and brought it home with him. There, the Kark grew up in that cage where you sat. Gran was probably afraid to let it walk around freely in case it should be just as vicious as the rest of the family, or in case it should run off. He taught it to talk and eventually let it out of the cage. Fredrik Gran became like a father for Kark, and they lived together, here in the rambling old house, until the day Gran died.”

“Okay,” Tara said skeptically. “But if the troll is somehow kind, why did it knock you to the ground?” Tara asked skeptically.

“It was probably my fault,” Adam said. “In the moment I spotted the troll, I attacked it with my torch. It just defended itself.”

"Okay," Tara said. "But why did it catch me and lock me into a cage? It can't possibly have a good explanation for that. Don't trust it, Adam! We need to get out of here."

Adam timidly turned to the troll. "Yes, why exactly did you take Tara captive?"

The troll sighed heavily. "Kark scared. Girl suddenly there. Dangerous forest tonight. Safe in cage. Until tomorrow."

"What?" Tara said. "That makes no sense. There was nothing dangerous here in the forest before you appeared!"

"They come tonight. They come all three," rumbled the troll.

"Who's coming," Adam asked.

"Loki's children. Kill Kark. Open gate."

SUPPER

Adam and Tara stared at the troll. It looked sad. The troll picked up the now broken bowl that Adam had dropped on the ground and studied it more closely. He threw it away.

"We go up. Eat there all together. Explain more," the troll said. It grabbed the large pot with stew and dawdled in the direction stairs.

"Tara," Adam said. "I think we can give it a chance to explain before we run off. Tobias probably got his mother to call the police by now, so they will probably surround the house soon. Then it would be good if we are sitting upstairs ready."

"Wow! I totally forgot," Tara said, and ran back to the large cave. There she snuck up to the ragged blanket that covered a badly hidden, trembling body. She laid down by the blanket and said with her deepest voice: "BOO!" while she slapped one hand down on the blanket.

Tobias howled and jumped up, ready to run, until he caught sight of Tara smiling from ear to ear.

"Are you crazy!" he howled. "The troll is coming!"

"Relax," Tara said. "It's apparently not that dangerous. It actually invited us for supper."

"Huh?" Tobias said startled.

Tara explained what had happened and Tobias stared sullen at her.

"You promised," he said. "You promised you were going to stop scaring me!"

"Yes, if we get out of here, but we're not out yet!" Tara teased.

Adam came smiling over to Tobias. "So, you're lying here relaxing while Tara goes into battle with the troll to save me?"

"But..." Tobias sobbed.

"I'm just kidding," said Adam and nudged him. "Come, let's go upstairs and eat. The troll makes lovely stew!"

Everyone went upstairs. The troll brought them into the large dining room where Tobias had found the matches earlier in the evening. He clearly remembered the bookcase with all the cabinet doors and drawers on one side, and the wall with the large windows on the other. The windows provided nice views towards the orchard at the back of the house, where he had seen the troll picking apples earlier. After dragging a finger on top of the long table in the middle, he understood that the tablecloth was not gray at all, as he had initially thought, but white, just covered with dust. The troll placed the pot on the table with a thud and went to open one of the creaking cabinet doors. He pointed at some bowls and cutlery.

"We may well supply ourselves," Adam said, fishing out three bowls that he put on the table. Then they each took a spoon.

The troll went down into the cave again while the three started eating. That is, Adam and Tara ate to their heart's content while Tobias looked uneasy at the mixture of meat, vegetables, and brown sauce. "Adam, do you remember all the rat furs we saw downstairs in the food cave?"

"Sure," Adam replied carefree.

"Doesn't that mean this has to be rat meat?" Tobias asked.

Tara coughed and harked until she finally managed to spit the food back into the bowl and turned completely green in her face. "What did you say!"

Adam carefully chewed on a piece of meat and thought carefully. "Sure, you're probably right, but it's not that bad. Tastes like chicken."

GODS AND MONSTERS

The troll returned hoicking the chest they had seen downstairs in the cave. He placed it next to the dining table.

"Kark, what did you really mean by someone coming to kill you?" Adam asked.

"Kark catch spy in garden," the troll said. "An underground creature. Tell all if Kark let go. So now Kark know. Loki will open gate to Helheim. But Kark has key." The troll brought out a bunch of keys. He pointed at a shiny white key where the outermost part of the handle was shaped like a skull. "Dad give Kark important job. Kark guard gate. Watch. No one has to come up. But difficult now. Loki send children. Come tonight. Kark must stop them."

"The small key..." Tobias said, pointing to one of the other keys in the bunch. He walked over to the bookcase and opened a drawer. There he fished out a book and a few pieces of paper. He put everything on the table. "I saw this old diary earlier when I was looking for matches. Can I borrow that key?" he asked and pointed to a small golden key that hung on the key chain. The troll nodded. Tobias took the key and twisted it in the lock of the book. "As I thought," he said pleased and opened the book. He flipped over to the last pages and began reading for himself.

"Wow, look at these drawings," Adam said, pointing to the pieces of paper that Tobias had placed on the table. He turned to face the troll. "That have to be drawings of you, when you were little."

"Dad draw Kark," the troll replied. "First in cage. Then outside cage."

"And this one?" Tara asked, pointing to the slightly childish line drawing of a man with outstretched arms and a smile.

The troll smiled sadly. "Kark draw that. Gift for dad. Day when dad let Kark out of the cage. Kark just child then. Kark old now. Dad be dead many years. Kark alone a long time."

"Oh, how sad," Tara said.

"Wow! Listen to this," Tobias said, who still were reading in the old diary. "There is plenty here about the gate down to the underground creatures. It talks about Loki's children too. There are three terrible monsters! Fenrir, a wolf big as a horse with a breath of fire! The World Serpent, an enormous poisonous snake. And Hel, the worst of them all, Queen of the realm of death, a witch with magical powers! Everything she strokes her fingers over, turns into ice. These are stories from ancient Norse mythology. Tales of Gods and monsters, which the Vikings believed in, but which no one has heard of since."

"Now wait a minute," Tara said, looking nervously at Adam and Tobias. "Is this troll trying to tell us that three monsters, straight out of the fairytale books, are heading over here. Now? Tonight?"

"Yes," the troll sighed.

"Does it say why they want to open that gate?" Adam asked.

"Yes," Tobias replied. "It says here that a day will come where Loki has rebuilt his army. An army of jötnar and trolls, of ice dragons and demons, of mammoths with towers and archers on their backs,

of snakes and worms, of wolves and polar bears. It says that a day will come where he will break out of Helheim, the realm of the dead, to enslave the people, and rule over us. Not just as king, but as God!"

"If the gate is closed," Tara asked, "how can these monsters get here?"

"In many places," the troll replied. "Deep caves and holes. On land and in water. Not possible for large army. But possible for Loki's children."

"So why are we sitting here instead of running off to get the police? Have we completely lost it?" Tara asked.

"You can't go," the troll said.

"What!" Adam, Tobias, and Tara shouted in unison.

"Three reasons. One. No one else has to find gate. People curious. And stupid. They open it. Explore it. Unleash Loki and his army. Then nothing stops him. Two. Not enough time. They come tonight. Wolf here already. Kark see wolf when Kark pick apples. Should give apples to girl. Show Kark kind."

"No way!" Tara said grumpy. "What is an apple against a padlock?"

The troll sighed heavily. "Sorry. Kark stupid. But see for yourself." The troll pointed at one of the large, wall-covering windows in the dining room. "You go. You die." Outside in the apple orchard, they could see two glowing, orange eyes in the semi-darkness and a massive shadow of a body, halfway hidden behind bushes and trees. The cold eyes stared intensely at them. Full of hatred.

"He waits for the two others," the troll said.

"What's the third reason," Tara asked.

"You have to help Kark," sighed the troll. "Kark big and strong once, but old now. Kark can win over one. Maybe two. But never three."

"Forget it," Tobias said. "What could three children do against something like that?"

"The world once full of magic," the troll said. "Then Viking fight against trolls. Now magic gone. But some remains. Dad collect remains." He patted the chest that he had carried up from the cave. "And now come in handy."

THE GIFTS

The troll opened the lid of the chest and took out a shield and a sword. It gave the sword to Adam. The sword had a handle made of gold, shaped like the body of a dragon. The razor-sharp blade glowed red and stretched out of the mouth of the dragon. "This sword name Gram," the troll said. "Blade cut through stone like water."

"Thank you very much," Adam said astonished, taking the beautiful sword.

"Shield also good," the troll said, giving it to Adam. The shield was mostly of hard wood, round, painted bright yellow and with a handle on the back. A red dragon was painted on the front side, that swam around the disc of metal in the middle. The shield was also reinforced with metal all the way around the edge.

The troll took out a green bow and a quiver full of arrows. It gave the weapon to Tara. "Girl very brave. Punch and kick Kark when Kark take prisoner. Deserve good weapon. This bow and arrow of Freya. Great warrior."

Tara took the elegant bow with beautiful drawings of small, colorful flowers along the green shaft.

"But... I can't shoot with bow and arrow," Tara said.

"No problem," the troll said. "Magical. Put arrow on string. Pull string. Release. Arrow hit what girl looks at. Always."

Tobias stepped forward excited, rubbing his hands. "What do I get? Thor's hammer? Odin spear?"

"Chest empty," the troll said and closed the lid.

"What! What am I supposed to do when the monsters come?" Tobias objected.

"Stand behind Kark. Kark protect," Kark said.

"No thanks," Tobias said grumpy.

Hm..." the troll grumbled. "Dad say book have magic. Boy read well. Maybe find magic in book?"

Tobias skeptically stared at the troll before he walked over to the old diary. He browsed through it. "It looks like it says something about old, Norse sorcery. But it looks very difficult. Weird spells and even weirder ingredients. Here is one that needs owl feathers and silver dust. Another that needs dragon teeth and mistletoe. We don't have anything of this! Wait a moment! Rat tails? Kark, can you get all the rat tails from the food cave? And a pair of scissors?"

READY FOR BATTLE

"Ick," Tara said a bit later, while the troll chopped off all the rat tails with his axe.

"Then we take two tails like this!" Tobias said and tied them together in a thick knot. "According to the book, I will now throw it," he continued before throwing the knot through the room, "thinking about it and saying something like: fir bryne cnotta."

The intertwined tails exploded with a bang and sparks and flames rained down on the floor, which instantly began to burn.

"Oh-oh," Tobias flinched.

The troll tore the tablecloth off the large table, so the pot flipped over, and the bowls flew. It threw the cloth on the inferno, which eventually extinguished after a little strenuous trampling and stamping on the dusty tablecloth by all of them.

"Are you completely bonkers!" Tara exclaimed and gave Tobias a push. "You could have set the whole house on fire!"

"But..." Tobias sobbed. "I didn't really believe it, and if it actually worked then I thought it would be more like a small firecracker."

"Loki's children here now," the troll said. "All three outside." He pointed with his axe out the window, and they could see three pairs of vicious eyes staring back at them.

Fenrir, big as a horse, stained his sharp teeth and growled so loudly that they could hear it behind the thin glass. The eyes glowed yellow in the dark and the coal-black fur fanned with the shadows between the apple trees.

Along the ground came the World Serpent creeping. A long, thick snake that stretched through the garden as far as they could see. The cold reptile eyes gazed at them coldly while the forked tongue flickered in and out, as if it licked itself around the mouth.

Behind the two, they could see a beautiful woman with long, white hair and pale skin shining light blue in the semi-darkness. The tall grass and plants froze to ice where she stroked her hands. They could suddenly hear her voice like a whisper in the head, without her needing to open her mouth. It was as if her voice did not have to travel through the air and window to reach them. Adam felt a chill down his spine when he heard the frozen, whispering voice inside his head.

"Dear Kark, come to Hel, otherwise I will kill you with my spell," she said.

"Come! We go down," the troll said. "All three in the same place at the same time. Not good!"

They hurried towards the trapdoor. The last thing Adam heard and felt, before he jumped down the stairs, was the sound of broken glass and a cold wind blowing in his neck. Kark levered the trapdoor and pulled the cord that made the rug cover it.

Adam discovered that he was standing with the glowing sword in one hand and the shield in the other. It suddenly dawned on him that they were about to fight a battle of life and death. It was as if the time down in the cave had only been a dream. A dream that he now desperately wanted to wake

up from. However, he began to feel tired. He could not remember that he had ever felt tired in a dream before.

"We must have a plan," Tara said. "Can we barricade ourselves in this cave?"

"Two ways in," the troll replied. "Stairs. Garden."

"The stairwell is narrow," Adam said. "Too narrow for the wolf, I think. He will probably run to the cave entrance in the garden."

"Maybe they all go there?" Tobias suggested.

"Maybe," Adam replied. "But they might want to try both ways at the same time, encircle us, maybe trap us in the back. We must defend both entrances!"

He inhaled and volunteered with a sigh. "I can defend the stairs. After all, I have shield and sword. You can defend the other entrance. It's bigger so Kark has to be there. Only he is strong enough to do anything with that wolf."

Everyone nodded. Kark, Tara, and Tobias ran to the exit in the garden while Adam was left alone in the stairs.

ADAM'S BATTLE

It felt like the minutes ticked off without anything happening. Adam felt the sweat running down his forehead. He wiped away the drops with the back of his hand, without letting go of the sword. Gram glowed red in the dark and lit up the stairs so he could easily see.

What an idiot he was! What a stupid plan! What was he supposed to do if one or two of those monsters smashed the trapdoor over his head? Would he throw away his sword and shield and run screaming back to the others, or would he stand firm and defend the stairs, beating the beasts with all he could gather of courage and strength? Didn't they say "die like a man" if one fought bravely to the end, even in the encounter with superior strength? He was not a man yet though, but still just a child. No one had taught him anything at all about combat or self-defense. Was that things that fathers normally teach their sons? What did he know about it, he who hardly remembered his own father.

His mother had told once that his father was from Morocco and was named Omar. She had also said that his father was a loser and that it was good he was gone. Should mothers really say such a thing? That's not how Adam remembered him. He remembered that they had played football together and that his father used to read to him when it was bedtime. But what he remembered best was how the world fell apart the day he left.

Why did she actually hate him? He had, of course, asked many times, but his mother never answered, just got mad and threw things after him. Maybe it was not true, but something she said in order for him not to miss his father, or because he was not there to help her raise a difficult son? What would he tell his father if they would once meet?

A loud bang from the trapdoor shook Adam out of the gloomy thoughts. They had found the door! And now someone tried to get down!

A pair of long fangs shot down through the wood like a pair of powerful hooks. Chips and wood dust from the small holes rained down over Adam who used the shield as an umbrella. With tremendous force, the trapdoor was torn off the hinges and thrown away from the opening.

Adam stared into a pair of giant reptile eyes. It was the World Serpent! He held the shield up in front of him and began to back away from the giant beast. Maybe the opening was too tight for it to come down?

The giant snake pushed its way down through the opening and came slowly sliding down the steps. The thick body fit like a glove. The snake opened its maw, and Adam could see drops of poison dripping from the razor-sharp fangs.

He backed further down the stairs. That wasn't the plan, but what was he supposed to do? Suddenly he stumbled on one of the steps and fell backwards. Sword and shield tumbled downward along with him. The giant snake hissed and increased the speed after him.

Adam landed heavily on the hard stone floor at the bottom of the stairs and got the wind knocked out of him. The sword swept over the floor, a good distance away from him. Horrified he felt the smooth snake body sliding over his legs, so heavy that he was locked firmly to the floor. He stretched out a hand, but the sword was too far away.

The forked snake tongue stroked one of his cheeks, and Adam stared into the snake's hypnotic eyes, now right in front of his. He could do nothing but scream from the top of his lungs: "HELP!"

KARK'S BATTLE

Kark was all ears where he stood at the exit to the garden along with Tara and Tobias.

"Boy shout help," he said.

"Oh no! Adam!" Tobias exclaimed. "You have to help him!"

Kark glanced a final time into the garden. They hadn't seen anyone come in this direction yet. "Kark help boy. Wolf comes. Girl shoots. Thick boy shout help. Kark come back."

"Yeah, yeah, we're both going to yell when it comes," Tobias said impatiently. "But now you have to help Adam!"

Kark ran into the cave with his ax ready in his hands. With his razor-sharp night vision, he soon caught sight of Adam, circumvented by the giant snake that was about to bite his fangs into his throat.

Kark threw the ax through the cave and barely managed to avoid the snake biting Adam, since it had to squinch. Kark ran and threw himself towards the snake. He got both arms around its neck and they rolled together around on the floor.

The massive muscles of Kark's arms strutted with full force as he squeezed the neck of the snake. It hissed and let go of Adam to take up the fight with the new enemy.

Kark could hear Tobias and Tara shouting far away. The wolf must have arrived at the garden entrance! Poor children. Kark must help! Where is ax? Kark glanced around him as the snake wriggled and waded to get loose from the mighty grip.

There! Kark saw the ax lying on the floor and let go of the snake with one hand to grab it. The snake then twisted itself loose enough that it could stab its fangs in Kark's arm. The troll roared of pain as the deadly poison flowed into the blood vessels. Kark fell down on the stone floor and felt how his power slowly disappeared.

"Game over!" the snake hissed. "The victory isss ou...!"

Kark didn't believe his own eyes when the head of the snake suddenly flew off the body. Adam had swung the magic sword and Gram had carved through the snake's body like a knife through butter.

"Thank you," Kark said meekly as the rest of the snake fell to the ground.

"You're bitten!" Adam cried worried.

"Do not think about Kark. Girl and boy shout. Wolf comes. Go! Help!"

Adam glanced one last time on the dying troll and turned around to run to Tara and Tobias. Fingers crossed he wasn't too late!

FENRIR

Tobias and Tara stood at the opening in the garden and gazed anxiously into the dark cave behind them. They heard sounds of battle in there.

"Maybe we should have joined Kark," Tara said.

"It's probably too late now and what difference can we really make?" Tobias said. "This might be our best opportunity to run home? After all, we do not stand a chance against these monsters."

"Hush! Listen," Tara whispered.

An apple tree bowed to one side and snapped like a toothpick as the giant Fenrir plowed his way towards them.

"It's the wolf!" Tobias shouted and turned to call for Kark down through the tunnel.

Tara placed an arrow on the string and pulled it backwards as hard as she could. She looked the wolf in the eyes and let the arrow fly through the moonlight. The wolf turned to the side but was hit in one shoulder. It snorted loudly and kept coming towards them as if nothing had happened.

"Try again," Tobias shouted while throwing one of his rat tail knots. "Fír bryne cotta!" he shouted. An explosion of flames set a couple of bushes on fire a short distance from the wolf. "Oh no! I'm a really bad thrower," Tobias whined.

Tara released a new arrow that she led towards the wolf with her gaze. It slammed into the chest of the beast, but it didn't look like the arrows had any effect. It kept coming towards them in high speed!

"This is the end," Tobias said with tears in his eyes. "Tara, there's something I have to tell you. I love..."

"Tobias!" Tara interrupted. "I have an idea! Throw one of those knots with rat tails in the air. Fast!"

"But..." Tobias began.

"Just do it! Now!" she shouted.

Tobias groped around in the little bag he had put rat tails in. He found a big one and threw it high into the air.

Tara placed a new arrow on the string and let it fly as she stared at the little lump that flew through the air. As the arrow hit the knot, she moved her gaze back toward the wolf. The arrow shifted direction and pulled the small bundle of rat tails straight into the open maw of Fenrir. The wolf stopped confused and started coughing.

"Fír bryne cotta," Tobias whispered and saw to his astonishment the head of the wolf explode in an inferno of flames. The wolf body collapsed and fell into the tall grass.

In that moment Adam came running with sword and shield. "Wow, not bad," he panted. He was still out of breath after running through the tunnel. "It looks like you don't need my help at all."

Then they all heard the icy, whispering voice of Hel in their heads.

"Miserable children, what did you do! Broke my heart cold and blue! Fenrir was my brother, my friend! But I can make him whole again! While you will be filled with snow and ice! I'll see you die with my two eyes! To bits and pieces, you will be crushed! Frozen bits that will be slushed! Give it to the snake! Served on a plate! Snake food is your fate!"

Magical energy flew out of the fingertips of Hel and smashed into a tree next to Tobias. It was instantly transformed into an ice sculpture.

HEL

"Take cover!" Tara shouted as she fired off an arrow toward Hel and rolled behind a massive oak tree. Tobias flipped an old wheelbarrow around and laid down behind it. Adam crouched down and hid behind the shield. Hel conjured up a separate shield of ice that hung in the air, and which the arrow harmlessly crashed into.

Hel was furious and fired off charge after charge with concentrated ice magic. The garden quickly turned into a frozen winter landscape. The plants and grass were covered with a layer of ice and snow that sparkled and shone in the moonlight.

"If I just get close enough," Adam shouted, "then I can try to hit her with the sword!" But icy wind and frost whizzed past his shield, which only got colder and colder to hold on to. The cold bit his hand.

"My arrows have no effect," Tara shouted back. "She conjures up small shields of ice in the air, which they crash into."

"I can try!" Tobias shouted. He had picked up a knot of rat tails from the bag. He lobbed it over the wheelbarrow, muttered the words of the conjurer, and heard a bang.

They could hear the witch laugh out loud. "You have to aim better than that, if you don't want the fight to fall flat." Hel conjured up a long icicle that she held in one hand and threw it like a spear over the wheelbarrow. The razor-sharp tip whizzed past the ear of Tobias and drilled into the ground right behind him.

Out of the cave opening the troll came stumbling. It relied against an apple tree, clearly marked by the poison that ravaged his veins.

"Let the children go," Kark said. "Kark has key. Come and take! If you can."

"Ah! I've heard so much about the troll of fame, that up to the humans came. Your brothers in Helheim laugh, of the troll I see, that is weak and daft!"

"Human be the brother of Kark now," the troll said. "Will Helheim still laugh when Kark kill the bad witch?"

"Big speech," hissed Hel, "from a brother of deceit! But when I think of your mother it's no surprise, her betrayal I saw with my own eyes. She was also kind like you, and away from me she flew. She said she would find a better place, start over, in peace and quiet and her past erase."

"Witch stop mom?" Kark asked meekly.

"I found her on her way up here and froze her heart! Let baby stay by frozen corpse, and cry as his world fell apart."

"Witch ruin Kark's life!" the troll said. "Alone for three hundred years! No mom! No dad!"

Hel threw her head back and let the laughter run into the cold night air. "Hel destroys all! I let life freeze, let it get cold!"

Adam could see a tear in the corner of the troll's eye, but the sad face hardened, and Kark roared with anger. "REVENGE!" the troll screamed and rushed off toward the witch.

Hel threw a wind of frost against him, but the troll let her hit him without slowing down. Hair, skin, bones, and muscles stiffened and froze as he crashed into Hel. They fell down in the snow.

Adam and Tara rushed over when they saw the opportunity, but the witch rose quickly, brushed annoyed away snow from the cloak, and turned to the children.

Hel threw out one hand against Tara and froze the arrow to the bowstring as she tried to shoot. The other hand swung out toward Adam and froze his legs firmly to the ground. He got standing fixed to the ground.

"Children, don't you know who you see here under the moon? To defeat Hel, you need a platoon! AAAAAAaaaaahhhhhh!!!!!!!" Hel screamed out of pain as an icicle shot out of her chest. Tobias stood behind her. He had used a running start and stabbed the icicle right through her back.

Hel fell down on her knees, turned around, and looked at Tobias. "Hel! The queen with violence and pain in her control, defeated by ... a thick little troll!" She sighed her last sigh and fell dead to the ground.

FINAL WORDS

The troll laid on the ground and had a hard time breathing. The poison was rushing in his veins and his lungs were frozen. It tried to get up but sank back together with its back against a small, frozen apple tree. "Power gone now," Kark said. "But thank you, friends. Thanks for let Kark get revenge!

Thanks for gate is safe." It coughed and harked, put one hand in its pocket, and fished out the bunch of keys. "Here magic key to gate. Remember Loki powerful wizard! Loki always know where key be. Throw in the sea, snake find. Place on mountain, dragon find. Not possible destroy. Not possible hide. Must be guarded."

The troll pointed towards a large mound, on the edge between the garden and the forest. An enormous gate of stone stood halfway hidden inside the mound, covered in creepers, bushes and branches from trees, but still visible, if one just looked closely.

"There is gate. Take key. Guard gate well. Do not let Loki open. Very important! It is dad's final words. Kark managed job. Now Kark rest. See the sun rise first time." Kark stretched out his hand, shaped like a saucer, with the bunch of keys lying in the palm of his hand. The sun's rays shone above the horizon and the frozen troll skin solidified to stone. Kark smiled as last remnant of life left him. "Maybe meet mom and dad again," he said.

Tara did not know why she felt tears in her eyes. She had hated this troll so intensely when it caught her, but now she couldn't help feeling sorry for it. She turned to Tobias and gave him a hug. "Thank you for saving us! You have to be the bravest ten-year-old who has ever lived."

Tobias tried to think of something wise to say, but fearing it was going to be something stupid, he just held around Tara and tried to burn the memory of her heat, and the kind words, stuck in his head, forever locked down in a mental treasure chest.

Adam cut loose his fixed legs with Gram, came forward, released the sword, and wrapped his arms around Tara and Tobias. "We actually did it," he said. "I really didn't think it was possible." He reached over to Kark and lifted the bunch of keys away from the now petrified hand. "It's up to us now," he said.

The sun's rays shone on the glittering winter garden and started the process of whisking away the traces of the magic of Hel. The frost in the hair of the troll melted and flowed down his arm before the water gathered in the saucer-shaped, outstretched hand. A couple of small birds sat down on the petrified edge and began to drink from the meltwater. The song from other morning birds filled the air, and the three friends felt how the peace subsided, and how their tired bodies screamed for sleep and rest. They laid down in the grass and stayed for a while.

"Time to go home," Tara finally said. "I can sleep for a week!"

"Oof, what am I going to say to my mom?" Tobias said. "I'm going to get grounded for a year! So, any suggestions are received with thanks..."

"We'll let them yell!" Adam said. "We can't say anything about what really happened last night. Remember what the troll said about curious and stupid people."

"Isn't it weird how this house has been standing here in the woods for hundreds of years without any adults using it, or at least exploring it?" Tara asked.

"I think there might be sorcery here that keeps adults away, but it doesn't work on children," Tobias said. "Something the last one who lived here, Fredrik Gran, must have laid over the house. I remember I once walked past on the trail, along with my mom and dad, and they started feeling nauseous, both of them. But as soon as we came a bit further, they immediately felt better."

"A big house that adults get sick of, and which children are terrified of," Adam said.

"For a good reason!" Tobias noted.

"It's the perfect hiding place!" Adam continued. "We can use it as a clubhouse! A place where we can meet and be together. If you guys want to hang with me that is? After all, I'm new here, and you guys are the only ones I've gotten to know."

"Deal," Tara said. "Let's be friends from now on and redecorate this place. Maybe we'll find something else exciting here?"

“Enough excitement for me,” Tobias said and got up. “But I have to admit I'm curious about what else I can learn from the old diary, and there will be plenty of time for studies with the grounding I'm going to get!”

“Greater chance of me being evicted from home than getting grounded,” Adam said. “But then I can at least move in here,” he added and smiled.

“Time to find out!” Tobias sighed and helped Tara get up.

Adam also got up, and together the three friends started on the way home.

The end