



# TROLLHEIM

## Secret of Castle Crow

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## Prologue

Adam picked up the phone.

‘Hello?’ he said.

‘Adam, you’re not really moving, are you?’

‘Yup. Mum’s got a job in some place called Trollheim. We need to move before school starts back.’

‘Are you changing schools?’

‘Yeah, I have to. It’s a long way from Oslo.’

‘That sucks. I’m gonna miss you.’

‘Thanks, same here.’

‘Whoa! I just googled Trollheim. Have you read anything about it?’

‘No. Mum says it’s a quiet place with lots of nature.’

‘Quiet? Ha! More kids have gone missing there than anywhere else in Norway!’

‘What?’

‘That’s what it says here. Sixty-three children vanished without a trace!’

‘No way! Since when?’

‘Since 1795! The first was a little girl called Sara Gran.’

‘Does it say what happened to her?’

‘She went out into the garden to pick some apples but never returned. Apparently her dad went completely bonkers. Said she was taken by *monsters*.’

‘Wow, what a place to be moving!’

‘Good luck!’

‘Er, thanks ...’

## Chapter 1

### New Friends

Adam filled his lungs with fresh air. It smelled better here than in Oslo. It was quiet, too. All he could hear was the rustling of the leaves in the wind. Trollheim seemed like a peaceful place.

The summer holidays were over, and Adam and his mum were waiting at a bus stop at the edge of the woods. He thought about the phone call from the week before and shivered.

Maybe his friend had only been trying to scare him. After all, how could so many children have just disappeared into thin air? What could possibly have happened to them in a place like *this*?

Of course, Mum had just laughed at him. ‘Load of tosh,’ she’d said. ‘You can’t trust anything you read online’, and ‘Trollheim’s a peaceful place’.

Adam hoped she was right.

She didn’t look particularly nervous. She stood leaning against the bus stop with a cigarette hanging from her lips, gazing at the treetops through the smoke. Fresh air wasn’t her thing.

Adam, on the other hand, was really nervous. New school, new class, and no friends.

He sighed. What if no one in his new class wanted to be friends with him?

He’d meet one of them quite soon. A boy who lived nearby, who Adam was supposed to walk to school with.

Mum had arranged it over the phone and said it would be a good way for him to get to know someone, but what if the boy was a real jerk? A big bully who’d beat him up and leave him lying in a puddle with a mouthful of broken teeth and his pencil case stuffed God knows where?

‘Where are they?’ Adam’s mum sighed, checking the time. ‘My bus will be here any minute!’

‘I think I see them now,’ Adam said.

A big woman wearing a skirt and knitted jumper was walking towards them, waving enthusiastically.

‘Yoohoo!’ she trilled. ‘Here comes Tobias!’

A chubby little boy with big round glasses was walking next to her, staring at the ground. He seemed shy and didn’t look at all like a bully.

Adam's mum gave him a nudge. *'Say hello!'* she whispered.

He held out his hand and smiled.

'Hi! I'm Adam. Nice to meet you!'

The boy took his hand and shook it hesitantly.

'I-I'm Tobias.'

He still seemed shy, or was he embarrassed?

What did it say on his chest? 'I have the best ...'

Adam had to smile. Tobias had good reason to be embarrassed in that jumper. It was bright green and had 'I have the best mum in the world!' stitched into it in big red letters.

Tobias had to be tough as nails to go to school wearing that. Or dumb as a rock. He might as well have knitted a target on his chest with the words 'Bully me!'

Tobias' mum was wearing the exact same jumper, except hers said: 'I have the best son in the world!'

Was it just a family thing? Or maybe everyone in Trollheim was a bit odd and wore jumpers like that to school. If so, Adam would stick out like a sore thumb in his dark blue hoodie and ripped jeans.

He'd never seen anyone more different to him than this boy.

Adam was tall and slim, while Tobias was short and so round that he was in danger of rolling away if he tripped and fell.

Adam had short, dark hair, while Tobias' hair was a shock of blond curls.

Adam's skin was golden brown, while Tobias was so pale he couldn't even poke a toe out the door if it was hot outside.

They were like night and day.

## Chapter 2

# Surprise Attack

The bus arrived, so Adam's mum flicked her cigarette into the bushes and waved goodbye.

Tobias' mum gave her son a hug and kissed him on the forehead before sending him on his way.

Adam and Tobias walked side by side along the road without speaking.

Not exactly the best way to get to know someone, but Adam couldn't think of anything to talk about.

Tobias was the first to break the silence.

'There's a shortcut here,' he said, pulling back a few low branches at the side of the road. Adam could see a small path leading into the woods.

'I always go this way,' Tobias said, starting down the path. 'It's still a good walk, but it's better than taking the road.' Adam followed.

The woods were a nice mix of coniferous and deciduous trees, with dense bushes, ferns and blueberries growing on either side of the path.

It was quiet in the woods, apart from the sound of squirrels scurrying around in the trees, a babbling brook and birds chirping.

Once they'd made it a good way into the woods, Tobias peeled off his jumper, stuffed it in a bag, then hid the bag between some loose rocks next to the path.

'*That* was a birthday present from Mum,' he said. 'If you say so much as a word about it in class, I'll beat you black and blue!' Tobias waved his fist menacingly at Adam.

'I won't say anything,' Adam said. 'Your secret's safe with me.' He tried not to smile.

Adam was big and strong for a twelve-year-old, and he'd handled himself well in every fight at his previous school, so he wasn't the least bit scared of this chubby little curlyhead.

But his smile faded when he remembered something similar that had happened a few years ago.

Babcia had asked whether he'd worn his pink jacket to school, the one she'd sent him from Poland for his birthday. He'd said no, that it was a horrible girly colour, and then she'd got really sad.

Babcia had tried to be nice and he'd ruined it. Sometimes he could be such an idiot! He wished he could do it all over again and think up a clever plan like Tobias.

Apparently the little curlyhead wasn't so stupid after all.

'I'll put it on again on the way home from school,' Tobias said. 'Keeps me from getting bullied, and keeps Mum happy at the same time. That way everyone wins!'

'BOO!' Something leapt out of the bushes at them.

Tobias screamed, tripped over backwards and fell on his rear end. Standing on the path before them was a girl, laughing so hard she was crying.

'You're so easy to scare, Tobias!' she said. 'Who are you? I haven't seen you before.' The girl pointed at Adam.

Her skin was darker than his, and she had two long plaits of purple hair tied with pink scrunchies. She looked like some of the girls from Adam's old class. Where were they from? India? Or was it Sri Lanka?

'I just moved here,' Adam said, helping Tobias back to his feet. 'I'm Adam. I'm joining Tobias' class. Who are you?'

'That's Tara,' Tobias said, brushing the dirt off his trousers. 'She's a real pain in the neck! Never leaves me alone.'

'I couldn't help myself,' Tara laughed. 'It gets funnier every time! Think of it as a favour from a friend. Every time you get scared and survive, you're a little braver the next time. Let's call it ... fright training! I'm training you to be a proper tough guy so one day you'll rescue me from a burning building, or something like that.'

She studied Adam closely. 'But you don't scare so easily.' Tara prodded him and gave him a sly wink. 'Maybe *you* 'll be my knight in shining armour.'

'Let's go, Adam! Ignore her, we have to get to school,' Tobias said.

'What was that you hid between the rocks back there?' Tara asked.

'Wow! Would you look at the time,' Tobias said, desperately tugging at Adam's arm. 'We'd better hurry or we'll be late for school!'

## Chapter 3

### Castle Crow

After they'd walked along the path for a while, they passed a large house. It was on the other side of a stone wall, surrounded by an overgrown garden.

A padlock hung from a rusty gate in the wall.

Adam stopped and peered between the bars.

'Wow, does someone live here, in the middle of the woods?'

'That's the one and only Castle Crow,' Tara told him. 'No one's lived there in hundreds of years.'

Tara gave an impish smile. 'No one apart from crows, rats and *ghosts*.' She glanced over at Tobias. 'Right, Tobias?'

Tobias had picked up the pace. 'Y-yes. Can't you walk any faster?'

Adam didn't believe in ghosts, but the house looked really creepy.

It looked to be three storeys. Some of the windows were broken, and long creepers had grown up the crumbling stone walls.

The woods had long since forced their way into the garden, and trees had grown amid the tall grass and brambles.

A huge oak had grown so close to the house that it almost seemed to be hugging it, with a tangle of branches that reached across the roof and walls. Some had even made their way into the house through the broken windows.

There was a nest of twigs on the roof next to a crooked chimney. Crows cawed loudly as they circled overhead. Maybe they were fighting over the nest, or stealing eggs.

There were no signs of life, and it didn't look like there had been for a long time. It was without a doubt the creepiest place Adam had ever seen.

'I have an idea!' Tara said. 'Tobias! Come here for a minute.'

Tobias stopped and turned. 'But what about school?'

'We've got plenty of time,' Tara said. 'It'll only take a few seconds. Please?'

He sighed and slunk back over.

Tara smiled mischievously. 'This is the perfect place to do some fright training! I bet you're not brave enough to go knock on that door.'



‘S-stop messing around, Tara.’ All the colour had drained from Tobias’ face. ‘No one dares go anywhere near Castle Crow. People say the place is cursed! Children have gone missing in these woods, and loads of people think they were taken by something really horrible. Some evil lurking in that house, just waiting for children stupid enough to get close.’

‘Bah! You’re just a coward. Watch this!’ Tara scrambled over the stone wall and hopped down into the jungle of a garden.

‘Last one to the door’s a fraidy-cat!’ she said, starting to push her way through the tangle of tall grass and brambles.

‘Tara, come back!’ Tobias shouted.

Adam was surprised by how scared Tobias sounded. Surely it was just an old house?

Tobias clenched his fists and bit his lip before shouting again. ‘Tara! We’re going to be late for school!’

Tara clambered over a rotten old tree stump and waded through patches of grass, mushrooms and undergrowth before finally arriving at the mouldering old door of Castle Crow.

She didn’t knock. Instead, she carefully brought a hand to the doorknob.

The hinges screeched as she gave the door a shove.

She turned and shouted. ‘The door’s open! It wasn’t locked! Anyone brave enough to go in?’

Adam stared back, not saying a word. He didn’t know quite what to say.

Tobias just shook his head.

‘Oh, honestly!’ Tara said, rolling her eyes. ‘You boys are hopeless. Watch how it’s done!’ She opened the door and went inside.

Adam watched her disappear into the dark house. Silence descended.

He stood waiting with Tobias. Surely she’d be back soon?

A minute passed.

Two minutes passed.

Adam checked his watch. ‘It’s quarter past eight.’

‘Argh! Typical Tara!’ Tobias said. ‘She’s *always* making me late for school. Always pulling stuff like this. She’s just messing with us. She’s probably hiding in there, just waiting for a chance to scare me again. Jump out of a cupboard or something.’

‘We need to go,’ Adam said. ‘I don’t want to be late on the first day of school. Just leave her to sit in there with the spiders and the rats. Wait until she has to explain herself to the teacher.’

They headed off.

Tobias chewed his nails and kept looking back.

‘Adam, do you really think there are rats in there?’

## Chapter 4

### Where's Tara?

Adam's first day at his new school didn't get off to the best of starts.

'It's your *first* day, and you're already five minutes late!'

The teacher shook his head and scribbled something in the register.

'Mind you don't get like Tobias here, which reminds me Tobias, you've been late one too many times. I'll have to ring your mum today! And don't try blaming Tara again. You're your own keeper.'

The teacher scanned the room. 'Where is Tara, anyway? Has anyone seen her today?'

Tobias slowly raised his hand.

'Yes?'

'Adam and I ran into her on the way to school. She went into the old house in the woods but never came out.'

'Castle Crow?' the teacher said, frowning. 'The things you kids get up to these days! Just wait until Tara's parents hear she decided to explore an old house instead of going to school. That should put an end to all this tomfoolery!'

The teacher turned to face the board.

'Take out your maths books!' he said, then started to write.

Someone threw a ball of paper at Tobias' head.

'*Tattletale*,' someone whispered behind him. A few students sniggered.

Tobias sighed and buried his face in his hands.

Tara's desk was still empty when school finished that day.

'Does Tara often skip school?' Adam asked.

'No,' Tobias said. 'Not that I've noticed.'

'Do you want to walk home together?' Adam asked.

'Sure.'

They followed the road to the woods and took the same path as before. They soon arrived back at Castle Crow.

Adam stopped by the gate and looked through the bars.

Castle Crow looked even more sinister than it had that morning now that the sun had disappeared behind some dark rainclouds. The woods were darker, and the wind had picked up.

The sky flashed a couple of times above the swaying treetops. Was that lightning? A moment later, Adam heard thunder, too.

‘Sounds like a storm’s coming,’ he said.

‘Yeah, we’d better get going,’ Tobias said. ‘Don’t want to get drenched.’

The door Tara had opened was still ajar and let out a screech every time the wind caught it.

‘You don’t think Tara’s still in there, do you?’ Adam asked.

‘She’s probably home by now,’ Tobias said.

‘Maybe, but what if something happened to her in there?’

‘G-g-g-ghosts?’ Tobias trembled.

Adam shook his head in exasperation.

‘Tosh,’ he scoffed. ‘But what if she tripped over an old nail and banged her head? What if she’s lying on the floor unconscious, slowly bleeding to death at this very moment!’

‘M-m-maybe rats are swarming her body, closing in for a feast!’ Tobias stammered.

‘Stop that!’ Adam said. ‘We were only joking about the rats, but what if something bad has happened to her?’

‘We’d better hurry home and tell our parents!’ Tobias said, already walking briskly down the path.

‘But what if she really is unconscious on the floor, bleeding to death at this very moment!’ Adam said. ‘It could be too late by the time we get home. I think we should go in and look for her. Right now.’

Tobias’ eyes went glassy. ‘But ... but ... *Castle Crow!*’

Adam smiled at him. ‘Oh, come on! It’s just an old house. You’ve seen too many films, you scaredy-cat.’ Adam gave him a playful shove.

‘Don’t call me a scaredy-cat,’ Tobias said, shoving him back, but then the colour drained from his face, and he pointed up at the sky.

Adam turned around and looked up at where Tobias was pointing. He could just make out a thin plume of smoke rising from the crooked old chimney.

‘Th-that can’t be right,’ Tobias said. ‘No one lives in *there*.’

‘Come on!’ Adam put down his backpack, grabbed the top of the stone wall, pulled himself up and swung his legs over. He landed nimbly on both feet in the wild garden.

‘That fire didn’t light itself,’ he said. ‘Maybe it was Tara, or maybe it was someone else, but either way, I want to find out what happened this morning, and why she wasn’t at school.’

‘Wait! I’m coming,’ Tobias said and put down his bag. He crawled, kicked and rolled his way over the wall until he tumbled onto the soft grass next to Adam.

They picked their way through the thick undergrowth and brambles until they were finally standing in front of the same door that Tara had disappeared through.

Adam gathered his courage and knocked.

Since the door was already open, the knocking made it swing inwards with a loud groan. Tobias gave a start and jumped behind Adam.

‘This is a b-b-bad idea,’ he whispered.

‘Hello?’ Adam shouted, peering into the dark room. He pushed the creaky door all the way open. ‘Tara! Are you in there?’

‘Shhh,’ Tobias said. ‘Do you have to shout so loudly?’

Some light shone through the open door, and there, in the middle of the room, lay a pink scrunchie.

Tobias let out a gasp and raced past Adam. He knelt down next to the scrunchie and scooped it up.

‘Adam, this is Tara’s! I’m sure of it!’

## Chapter 5

### The Nooks and Crannies of Castle Crow

Adam stepped inside and looked around a big, dark room with a small window and a couple of doors. An old wardrobe and a threadbare rug were the only furnishings.

He opened the wardrobe in the futile hope that Tara had been hiding inside the whole time. The only thing in there was an old, moth-eaten coat.

‘Doesn’t look like anyone’s lived here for years,’ Adam said.

‘So why’s there smoke coming from the chimney? There’s no way Tara would have gone anywhere without her scrunchie, and it wasn’t exactly hard to spot! Adam, do you think she might have left it there on purpose? As a clue?’

‘I don’t know,’ Adam said, shaking his head. ‘But we’ll have to search this house from top to bottom, because now I’m really starting to think something might have happened to her.’

They started to look around.

One of the rooms on the ground floor was a large library with hundreds of old books about Vikings, Norse mythology and Norwegian folk tales.

‘The people who used to live here must have been really into their books,’ Adam said.

‘I wish I could have a closer look at some of them,’ Tobias said, running a finger along their dusty spines. ‘I love books. Especially books with gods and old stories, like most of these.’

‘Later. First we need to find Tara,’ Adam said firmly.

They continued their search on the first floor, where they discovered a big painting was missing from the wall. The hook was there, and the pictures on either side were still there.

‘That’s strange,’ Adam said. ‘It looks like someone’s stolen a picture from the wall.’

‘Maybe it was valuable,’ Tobias suggested. ‘Old pictures can be worth a fortune.’

‘But isn’t it strange that nothing else has been touched?’ Adam said. ‘There are loads of valuable things lying around under all the dust and cobwebs. Candlesticks, books, mirrors. Some of that must be worth something. Why are they still here?’

‘Because Castle Crow is *c-c-cursed*,’ Tobias said. ‘Besides Tara, we’re the only ones crazy enough to set foot in here!’

‘Do you really believe that?’

‘Maybe *you* can explain what’s happened to Tara?’

‘There has to be an explanation!’ Adam exclaimed. ‘We just need to keep looking.’ But he was starting to get nervous, too. He thought back to the phone call with his friend. Trollheim ... where more kids have gone missing than anywhere else ...

Adam climbed the stairs to the second floor with Tobias on his heels.

They worked their way from room to room, until finally they were opening the last door to the last room. It looked like a child’s bedroom. Old toys lay on the floor under dust and cobwebs, including a rocking horse and a doll’s house.

A painting of a little girl hung on the wall. She was much younger than Adam. *Sara* was written underneath.

‘Sara, but no Tara,’ Adam sighed as he looked at the old painting. ‘Can you believe a child used to live in this scary old house?’

Tobias patted the rocking horse on the head, stirring up some dust, which made him cough.

‘We’ve looked everywhere,’ Adam said. ‘Can we really just give up?’

‘We have no choice,’ Tobias said. ‘We’ll have to go home and tell our parents. We’ve already spent way too much time here. They’ll be wondering where we are!’

‘Hold on! Something’s not right here,’ Adam said. Then he snapped his fingers. ‘The smoke! There’s smoke coming from the chimney, but we’ve been through every room in this house, and one thing just doesn’t add up!’

They looked at each other.

‘There was no fire in the grate,’ Tobias whispered.

‘Exactly!’ Adam said. ‘There was a fireplace in the dining room on the ground floor, but no fire. There wasn’t even any wood. So there has to be some secret place in this house we haven’t found yet.’

‘Why light a fire at all?’ Tobias asked. ‘It’s at least twenty degrees outside. I know because I checked when my mum forced me into that stupid knitted jumper. Not that it did much good. There’s a cold breeze, she said! Cold breeze my foot ...’

‘Tobias!’ Adam interrupted, staring at the floor. ‘Have you noticed how much dust there is in here? I can see our footprints in it, which means we should be able to see Tara’s as well. That is if we haven’t erased them with our own. We need to check by the front door!’

They ran back downstairs, to the big dark room just inside the entrance. It only had a small window, but along with the open door, there was enough light. Adam bent down and studied the dust closely.

‘Look, these are my footprints, and those are yours. Luckily we only walked through here once before searching the rest of the house. But look there!’ Adam pointed. ‘Those small footprints must belong to Tara!’

Adam followed the footprints over to where they’d found the scrunchie.

‘What in the world?’ he said. ‘Her footprints stop here, in the middle of the room, like she grew wings and flew away ... and what’s that?’

Adam pointed at where the footprints stopped.

It was clear to see that the dust had been disturbed near the old rug, and there, right next to it, was a big footprint. Left by a huge, bare foot at least twice as big as that of a grown man ...



## Chapter 6

# Secret of the Rug

‘I-I’m going home now,’ Tobias said, turning to leave.

Then Adam heard something that sent a chill down his spine.

The old rug slid across the floor, all by itself!

Where the rug had lain was a big trapdoor. A loud creak warned Adam that it was opening.

‘Tobias,’ he whispered. ‘Get in the wardrobe! Quick!’

But Tobias was frozen to the spot, mouth wide open, gaping at the trapdoor as it slowly opened.

Adam dragged him into the old wardrobe with him.

‘Shh! Not a word,’ Adam whispered, holding his finger to his lips. Tobias nodded, shut his eyes and sunk down onto the floor of the wardrobe.

Adam opened the door a crack to see what was emerging from the trapdoor.

At first he only saw a wild mane of twigs and moss, then two eery, glowing eyes, a huge nose and a long beard.

Its body was massive, at least twice the size of a grown man, wearing what looked like animal skins.

Two large, muscular arms shut the trapdoor and pulled the rug back into place, while a gigantic nose scented the air.

Adam could hardly believe his eyes. Hanging from the seat of its trousers was a long tail!

The giant went over to the open door and ducked under the doorframe. It stood there for a brief moment, sniffed the air again, then disappeared outside, shutting the door behind it.

The room was plunged into darkness.

It was some time before Adam worked up the courage to move.

Tobias still lay motionless on the floor of the wardrobe. Had he passed out from shock?

Adam peeked out the wardrobe door again. His eyes had adjusted to the dark, and the tiny amount of light coming in through the window was now enough to confirm that the room was still empty.

‘I think it’s gone,’ Adam said, finally breaking the suffocating silence. Tobias gave a start and bumped Adam’s leg. So he hadn’t passed out after all.

‘What do you think is gone?’ Tobias whispered from the floor of the wardrobe.

‘I’m not entirely sure. I’ve never seen anything like it. It looked like a giant man, but with twigs and moss for hair, and a tail! Basically it looked like a troll.’

‘A TROLL!’ Tobias shrieked, before clamping a hand over his mouth. ‘A *troll*,’ he whispered through trembling fingers. ‘I told you this place was cursed.’

‘But that’s impossible,’ Adam said. ‘Trolls only exist in fairy tales.’

He considered it for a moment before continuing: ‘It did have really weird eyes. Black pupils like we have, but with orange around them instead of white. Like the eyes of a fox or an owl.’

‘*Night vision*,’ Tobias whispered. ‘Foxes and owls are really good at seeing in the dark. That means it’s bound to spot us if we sneak out. Nope. Nuh-uh.’ He shook his head, then paused. ‘Do you think it could outrun us? I want to go home.’

‘We can’t sneak out just yet,’ Adam said.

‘What! Were you planning on sleeping in here? And waking up in the belly of that beast?’

‘Have you forgotten about Tara?’ Adam asked. ‘The troll must be keeping her down there, under the rug. Now that it’s gone, we can try to get her out. If we abandon her now, anything could have happened to her by the time we get help.’

‘I was afraid you’d say that,’ Tobias sighed. ‘But if the troll comes back while we’re down there, we’ll be trapped! It’ll be blocking the way out.’

‘I’m not so sure,’ Adam said. ‘Think about all the dust up here. The only footprints we found by the door were our own. I bet the troll has another way out of the cellar. An exit where there’s less chance of someone seeing its comings and goings from the path.’

‘Then why did it go out that way just now?’ Tobias asked.

‘Maybe to make sure the door was shut after what happened earlier, or maybe it heard us. These old floorboards creak a lot, and we did walk back and forth a lot looking for Tara.’

‘Oh no!’ Tobias groaned, ‘If it heard, it’ll be looking for us!’

‘Maybe, but that gives us a chance. We have to move now! We’ve already wasted enough time.’

Adam pushed open the wardrobe door and carefully stepped down onto the dusty floor. ‘Tobias, can you keep watch by the window while I figure out how to open the trapdoor?’

Tobias nodded and went over to the window.

‘Hard to see if it’s coming,’ he whispered. ‘It’s got darker outside, and the window is filthy.’

He went over to the door and pressed his ear against it. ‘Maybe I’ll be able to *hear* it coming?’

Adam pulled the rug aside and discovered a cord attached to it, which disappeared through a hole in the floor. ‘I think I know how the troll moved the rug without touching it. It must have pulled on this cord when it was standing under the trapdoor.’

The trapdoor itself had a big iron ring built into it. Adam grabbed hold and pulled with all his might, but it was too heavy.

‘You’ll need to help me,’ he said.

Tobias backed away from the door and came over.

Together they managed to wrestle the trapdoor onto its edge. They found a stick that they used to prop it open.

Beneath the trapdoor they discovered stairs leading down into pitch darkness.

## Chapter 7

# The Journal of Fredrik Gran

‘Trolls might be able to see in the dark, but we can’t,’ Adam sighed.

‘There were lots of candlesticks when we were searching the house,’ Tobias said. ‘Some of them even had candles, and where there are candles, there might also be matches.’

‘Go look,’ Adam said. ‘I’ll keep watch at the door and shout if I see the troll. Worst case scenario, we can smash a window with a chair and get out that way.’

Tobias ran through a couple of rooms before coming to the one he remembered from earlier. It was the room with the fireplace.

There was still no fire in the grate, but when he looked more closely, he noticed some smoke rising from a hole at the very back and up into the chimney. There had to be a fire down there ... in the cellar.

Tobias leaned into the fireplace to see whether he could peer through the hole, but the smoke stung his eyes and made him cough, so he straightened back up.

There was a long table in the middle of the room, covered with a grey tablecloth. Or was it dust? A three-armed candelabra stood in the centre of the table. Maybe he could use that?

Large windows along one wall revealed a big, dark apple orchard at the back of the house.

The storm had eased, but it was still overcast. The clouds glowed red, which meant the sun had to be setting, and in a patch of clear sky, the moon hung fat and round. It threw a ghostly gleam in through the windows.

Tobias suddenly realised how late it was, and how worried his mum would be right now. What if she was out there looking for him? Out there ... with the troll!

Tobias tried to push away the scary thoughts. Focus! Save Tara! Find matches!

There were lots of drawers and cupboards on either side of the fireplace. Tobias started to rummage through them, hunting for matches.

He found all sorts of strange things. Old coffee cups, glasses, plates, bowls, cutlery, stacks of paper, well-thumbed notebooks, writing materials and what looked like an old journal, bound in brown leather.

He blew off the dust.

The journal had a lock, so he couldn't open it, but the cover made him curious. Tobias loved books, and most of the ones he had at home were from an old collection he'd inherited from his great grandfather. He recognised the strange letters on the cover as old, Gothic script. His dad had taught him to read Gothic script, so he knew that it said *Journal of Fredrik Gran, 1799*. Could it really be over two hundred years old?

Next to the book was a pile of sketches on old, yellowed paper. They had been drawn in charcoal.

What caught Tobias' attention was a sketch of a sad little troll in a huge cage, tears running down its cheeks. Tobias picked up the sketches and flipped through them. There were several of the same troll, and the last was a strange drawing of a man that looked like something a five-year-old might make. The man was smiling and had his arms outstretched.

Tobias put the sketches down. This wasn't the time to be curious. He had to find matches!

Tobias resumed his rummaging.

In the last drawer, he finally found a box of old matches. As he held it aloft in triumph, he saw a huge shadow slide across the wall.

Tobias quickly crouched down behind the long table. He could hear twigs snapping in the garden as something big moved past the windows.

He peered around the tablecloth and saw the troll's legs right outside. Had it seen him?

His blood seemed to freeze in his veins, and suddenly it was difficult to breathe. But he had to know!

Cautiously, Tobias crept a little closer so he could see more from his hiding place. Then he saw the troll reach out to pluck an apple from a nearby tree.

It was horrifyingly big and ugly, with orange eyes that glowed in the semi-darkness, but if it was busy scrumping, it couldn't possibly have spotted him.

Tobias crawled on all fours into the next room. There, he leapt to his feet, grabbed the candelabra and ran as fast as he could through the house.

'Adam!' he shouted. 'We need to save Tara, right now! The troll's in the garden picking apples! It could come at any moment!'

## Chapter 8

# No Way Back

Tobias tried to light the candles, but his hands were shaking so much that the match went out.

‘Let me try,’ Adam said, grabbing the box. He struck another match and lit the three candles.

The candlelight enveloped them and dispersed the encroaching darkness. Light and shadow danced in the warm glow.

Adam gripped the candelabra firmly, held it up in front of them and descended the creaky old stairs.

Tobias followed, removing the stick holding the trapdoor in place as he went.

*BANG!*

Adam jumped and nearly dropped the candelabra.

‘Why’d you do that?’ he asked, heart in his mouth.

‘S-s-sorry,’ Tobias stuttered, equally shaken. ‘I suddenly remembered that the troll closed the trapdoor behind it and wondered what would happen if it returned and found it open. Don’t you think it would get suspicious? And you did say there had to be another way out!’

‘I *think* there’s another way out, but I wouldn’t bet my life on it! What if the troll heard the crash?’

‘Humph, didn’t think of that,’ Tobias said.

‘Forget it,’ Adam said. ‘Maybe it wasn’t such a stupid idea after all. If the troll is still around the back of the house, I don’t think it could have heard the noise.’

They continued down the stairs in silence. Adam lit the way, and Tobias followed. The stairs spiralled down into the darkness.

Tobias ran his hand along the wall. They weren’t made of brick down here, but of solid rock, as if they had stumbled into a cave carved out of a mountain.

‘I can’t believe we’re doing this for Tara,’ Tobias said. ‘You barely know her. You only met her today. The only thing you know about her is that she enjoys teasing me.’

‘She’s in danger,’ Adam said. ‘How would it look if the first thing the new guy did was let down a classmate in need? Anyway, I think you like her. A lot. Because even though you were scared, you ran into the house without a second thought the moment you spotted her scrunchie.’

Tobias felt himself blushing. Adam was right. He wouldn't have run into Castle Crow for just anyone.

'Yes, I like her,' Tobias said. 'She's not like everyone else. She may tease me, and she can be a bit of a pain, but I know she doesn't mean anything by it. And it's nothing compared to what the other kids do.'

Tobias' eyes glistened. 'They act like I don't even exist. Or they whisper behind my back, just loud enough that I can hear it, stuff like there goes fatty four eyes – and then they laugh. Tara's the only person at school who actually talks to me.'

Tobias wiped some tears away with the sleeve of his shirt.

'Tobias,' Adam said. 'I won't be like them. Like the other kids at school, I mean. They sound like a bunch of idiots. We can be friends, okay?'

'Okay,' Tobias sniffed, before taking a sharp breath and pointing past Adam.

'Look down there! It's her other scrunchie!'

On the very bottom step was a pink scrunchie, identical to the one they'd found upstairs.

'We're on the right track,' Adam said, hurrying down the last few steps. 'She must have dropped it after she got caught, to let us know she's down here.'

## Chapter 9

### In the Troll's Cave

Adam led the way down into a big cave.

The candles cast a flickering light over sturdy old furniture at least twice the size of what they had at home.

A battered old table stood in the middle of the cave with a couple of stools on either side, and in a corner next to an old chest was a rocking chair.

The air felt close and stale, and there was a faint smell of smoke, as if from a fire.

Dry grass, leaves and twigs were heaped on the ground along one wall, a tattered old blanket spread across them.

'Maybe this is where the troll sleeps,' Adam suggested.

'There's light coming from that opening over there,' Tobias said, pointing.

They crept towards it and along a tunnel leading to another, slightly smaller cave.

Inside, a pot simmered away, hanging in a big, brick fireplace.

A table stood next to the pot, scraps of various vegetables and mushrooms scattered across it. Firewood was stacked along one wall, and a huge axe was embedded in a chopping block. Most of the smoke disappeared up through an opening in the ceiling.

'That explains the smoke we saw coming out of the chimney,' Adam said.

Tobias walked over to the pot and peered pale-faced down into the bubbling, brown broth. 'Do you think this could be what's left of Tara?' He poked at a piece of meat floating on the surface.

'It could be rat,' Adam said, pointing at a pile of rat pelts on the table next to a long, sharp knife. 'Maybe that's what the troll usually eats. It can't be eating kids all the time. That many missing kids would lead the police here eventually. The troll would have been discovered ages ago.'

'Come on,' Adam said. 'Tara isn't here.'

Tobias nodded.

They went back into the bigger cave.

Adam could see two other tunnels. He chose one of them.

They followed the tunnel a short way and entered yet another cave. This time with a big, dark hole in the middle surrounded by a stone wall about a metre high.



Next to it sat a large bucket with a rope tied to the handle.

‘Must be a well,’ Tobias said. ‘Somewhere the troll can get water.’

Adam picked up a small stone and dropped it into the hole. A few seconds later, there was a splash.

‘Sounds like you’re right,’ Adam said.

‘What if the troll threw Tara into the well and left her to drown?’ Tobias asked. ‘To cover its tracks?’

‘I doubt it,’ Adam said. ‘That would spoil the water. The troll wouldn’t have survived this long if it didn’t understand the importance of clean drinking water.’

‘But what’s this?’ Adam held the candles out towards the back wall, where a large stone lay on the ground in front of a huge painting almost as tall as he was.

The painting was propped against the wall. It was old, damaged by damp and covered in black spots, perhaps some sort of mould.

It was a portrait of a grim older man with long, curly hair. The painting looked old, like something you might see in a museum.

There was a name at the bottom of the painting. Fredrik Gran.

‘I’ve seen that name before!’ Tobias said. ‘I found his journal when I was looking for matches. He must have lived here before the house was abandoned. Odd that the painting’s down here. The moisture in the air will destroy it. It should be on one of the walls upstairs.’

‘Maybe it’s the one that’s missing from the first floor,’ Adam suggested.

‘Yeah,’ Tobias said. ‘Maybe the troll brought it down here, but why?’

He crouched down and looked at the big stone in front of the painting. The word *Papa* was carved into it, and a bunch of wildflowers lay next to it.

‘This looks like a grave marker,’ Tobias said. ‘And the flowers look fresh.’

‘Do you think the troll buried its father down here?’ Adam wondered.

‘Would that mean its mother is buried down here, too? Or is she hiding somewhere in the dark?’

‘Do trolls even have mothers? Have you ever heard of a female troll?’

‘Of course I’ve heard of female trolls! Have you never heard of a hulder? Or the lady troll who wanted to eat Buttercup? Or the troll mother and her eleven baby trolls?’

‘Wait, so there could be ten more of them?’

‘Shh, don’t even joke about things like that.’

‘Let’s try the last tunnel,’ Adam said, starting back towards the main cave.

‘Wait!’ Tobias whispered. ‘Do you hear something?’ They both fell silent.

Adam thought he could hear what sounded like faint sobs.

‘That’s Tara!’ they shouted in unison.

‘But where’s it coming from?’ Adam asked.

Tobias circled the well and examined the walls. He knocked on them here and there.

‘Just smooth, hard rock,’ he said.

Adam stepped closer and leaned over the well. He strained to hear but shook his head: ‘It’s not coming from the well’. Tobias stopped next to the grave marker, crouched down by the painting, cocked his head and listened.

He shoved the big painting to one side.

There was a secret passageway in the rock wall behind it. The moment the opening was revealed, the crying got louder.

Tobias smiled. ‘We’ve found her!’

Adam lit the way as they hurried down the small tunnel. They emerged in another, smaller cave, where they found a large cage with thick iron bars. Tara sat crying inside.

‘Tobias!’ she shouted through tears. ‘Get me out! Get me out! Get me out!’ She shook the bars with both hands.

They rushed forwards but stopped at the door to the cage.

Hanging from it was a huge padlock!

## Chapter 10

### Find That Phone!

Adam grabbed hold of the padlock and gave it a good tug. 'It's no good! It's locked! Tara, do you know where the key is?'

Tara shook her head, tears running down her cheeks. She let go of the bars and sunk down onto the bottom of the cage.

Tobias knelt down next to her and reached through the bars to hold her hand.

'Tara, try to relax,' he said. 'We'll get you out of here. I promise! Just breathe and try to remember what happened when the troll locked the cage. Did it go straight out? Did it reach into its pockets?'

Tara shut her eyes and took a deep breath. After a few seconds, she opened them again.

'I think it put the keys in its pocket and went straight out,' she said.

Adam shook his head in despair. 'I don't think there's much more we can do, then. We should probably go home and get help from our parents or call the police,' he said.

'No! Please don't leave me!' Tara pleaded, squeezing Tobias' hand.

'Of course not,' Tobias said. 'I'll stay with you. Adam, hurry home and call the police!'

'Um, are you sure?' Adam asked. 'What'll you do when the troll comes back?'

'Wait a sec,' Tara said. 'My phone's in my bag, switched off, and it was still in there when the troll got me. It tore my bag off my back in the big cave, right after it carried me down the stairs. Maybe it's still on the floor?'

'Right, I'll go and look while you stay here,' Adam said. 'Er, I'm going to need to take the light with me.'

'Think you could leave us a candle?' Tobias suggested. 'Tara has been sitting here in the dark all day.'

Adam removed one of the candles and passed it through the bars to Tara. She took it without letting go of Tobias for even a second.

'Thanks,' she said. 'The passcode for my phone is 1-2-0-5. And be careful! The troll is twice the size of a grown man, and considering how easily it lugged me around, at least ten times as strong!'

Adam put on his bravest smile, turned and walked back through the secret passageway to the cave with the well. He considered for a moment whether he should move the painting back into place but decided against it. Probably best for Tobias to have a clear path out of there.

He found his way back to the main cave.

The network of caves wasn't actually that big, but it seemed huge now that the light was so faint he could only make out one wall at a time. The rest of the cave was enveloped in darkness.

He went over to the only opening they'd yet to explore. Could Tara's bag be through there? The candles flickered briefly, and he felt a slight draft coming from the opening. This tunnel must lead out!

Adam smiled to himself. He'd been right! Now he didn't have to worry about how they were going to open the trapdoor. All he had to do was find the bag, call the police and get out of there!

What was the number for the police again? Shoot! He couldn't remember. The others would probably know. He seemed to recall it only had three digits, so at least it wouldn't be too difficult to figure out.

He shone the light around, looking for where the troll might have hidden the bag.

Adam tried to think back to when they'd first come down and looked around. Had there been a bag?

There'd been a table, some stools, a chest and a rocking chair.

Suddenly it was so obvious. A chest! Could the bag be in there? He held the light out towards the corner with the rocking chair in it. Wasn't that where he'd seen it? Adam took off towards the corner, but in his haste, he forgot to mind his step.

Out of nowhere, he tripped, and the candelabra flew out of his hand. It clattered to the ground and both candles were snuffed out.

Everything went black.

## Chapter 11

# Groping in the Dark

It was so dark Adam couldn't see his own two hands.

How was he supposed to find Tara's bag or the way home, or even his way back to Tobias and Tara? Was this how it would all end? What if the troll came now?

His eyes prickled with tears. How could he be so clumsy! Just when he'd started to think everything would be okay.

It had to be night-time by now, and he still hadn't got home from school. How angry would Mum be? He'd promised this would never happen again. After that time he'd run away from home.

He'd said and done so many horrible things in the years since Dad left. Shouting, arguing and slamming doors at home. Fighting and constantly getting into trouble at school.

But Trollheim was supposed to be a fresh start. Would Mum think he'd run away again? Would this be the final straw? Would she even bother calling the police this time? She might just let him stay gone. It wasn't her fault he was a loser, like his dad. She'd said that once. And he hadn't forgotten it, even though she'd said sorry.

Adam tried to shake off the bad thoughts. No, he *had* made a fresh start! It wasn't his fault this time!

He felt around on the floor. What was that he'd tripped over? There! His hand found something soft and smooth. The bag! Thank goodness.

Adam rummaged in the bag until he found the phone. He switched it on. It was a smartphone. Which meant it would have a torch. Wow, Tara's parents had to be rolling in it. He wouldn't get his own phone until he was at least fifteen. Mum didn't seem to realise how embarrassing it was that his friends had to call her to talk to him.

Adam sighed. It wasn't her fault phones were so expensive, and there was no law saying kids had to have a phone ... yet.

He got up and tried to remember the passcode for the phone but drew a total blank. What had Tara said? Twelve something?

Blast! He'd always had trouble remembering numbers.

He couldn't just guess, either. Some phones only gave you three tries before locking you out, and then they could only be unlocked with another, more complicated code.

No passcode, no torch, and no way of calling home.

He'd have to find his way back to Tobias and Tara. Then she could unlock the phone to call home or the police.

Adam looked around in the dark and finally spotted the faint light from the fire in the cooking cave. He tiptoed over to the opening. The light was a little brighter in the tunnel, and in a few quick strides he entered the cave with the simmering pot.

The fire had almost gone out, but a few strong puffs soon got it going, the flames licking the base of the pot again.

He pulled out a small log from the fire. It was long and narrow and only burning at one end. When he held it up, it gave much better light than the candles had.

Feeling pleased with himself, he trotted back to the main cave, flaming torch in one hand and phone in the other.

There, he ground to a halt.

Two glowing, orange eyes stared at him from the darkness.

Chapter 12  
Tobias ♥ Tara

‘So no one knows you’re here?’ Tara asked.

‘No,’ Tobias replied. ‘We came here straight after school. We thought you might have fallen and hit your head or something. We didn’t expect to find a troll had you locked in an iron cage!’

‘Me either,’ Tara said. ‘But I have to admit, you were right. I should never have come in here. I can’t thank you enough. I’m so embarrassed thinking about what I said to you before. Sorry for calling you a scaredy-cat or whatever. You’re a lot braver than I thought.’

‘Don’t mention it ... I actually think you’re the bravest of us all. If I’d been captured by a huge troll, hauled down into a mysterious cave and thrown into a cage, my heart would have leapt out of my chest ages ago. All you’d have found was a lifeless body and a ghost scared out of its wits.’

Tara sniggered.

‘Or you’d have found a happy troll with a full belly,’ he continued. ‘Using my collarbone as a toothpick!’

Tara stopped laughing. ‘Not funny,’ she said. ‘That could still happen to me!’

‘Don’t be scared,’ Tobias said. ‘I promise I’ll get you out of here. Everything’s going to be all right.’

‘And I promise I’ll stop scaring you if we get out of here,’ Tara said. ‘You’ve proven yourself worthy. No more fright training required.’

‘You mean *when* we get out of here,’ Tobias said. ‘When Adam comes back with your phone, we’ll call 112 and notify the police. They’ll pump that troll full of lead and then bang boom, we live happily ever after.’

The blood rushed to Tobias’ cheeks. What a stupid thing to say! Had he said too much? About how he felt? Tara was really pretty, and he was about as handsome as a chubby little troll. He tried to think of something he could say to smooth things over, but his brain was like porridge. He took off his glasses and pretended he had something in his eye. That way she wouldn’t notice his blushing.

‘Tobias,’ Tara said shyly. ‘You’re actually really cute without your glasses.’

A monstrous roar resounded from the tunnel behind Tobias.

Tobias felt his heart turn to ice in his chest, but Tara's warm words were enough to melt away his crippling fear.

'That must have been the troll,' he whispered to Tara. 'It must have come back, and I think it's found Adam.'

Tobias strained his ears. It sounded like fighting. Was Adam taking on the troll?

He leapt to his feet and raced out of the cave.

'Tobias! Don't leave me! Tobias!'

Tara's desperate shouts were like daggers in his back as Tobias ran down the secret passageway.



## Chapter 13

# Open That Lock!

It was pitch black, but Tobias used the commotion of the fight in the main cave to find his way there. He reached the opening and tried to see what was going on.

He quickly spotted Adam, illuminated by a flaming torch he was waving at the troll.

The troll let out a roar every time Adam struck its hand or foot with the burning log. Sparks flew.

Sweat was pouring down Adam's face.

He looked terrified!

The troll grabbed Adam's shirt and lifted him off the ground with one hand. It used the other to try and grab the torch.

Adam swung the torch at the troll like a club, hitting it right in the forehead!

The troll roared again and threw Adam across the cave.

He crashed into the old rocking chair, smashing it into pieces that the torch, now lying on the ground, immediately ignited. The flames reared up, making the cave even brighter.

Tobias watched as Adam clambered to his feet, grabbed one of the sharp pieces of wood and threw himself at the troll again. Was he trying to *impale* it?

The troll easily batted him aside.

This time Adam hit his head against the hard rock and lay motionless. The troll grabbed him by the leg and dragged his lifeless body across the ground in the direction of the cooking cave.

Tobias turned. He had an idea.

*The grave marker.*

He felt his way back into the darkness until his hands found the big, heavy stone. Tobias could only just lift it.

Luckily, he could still hear Tara shouting and crying, so he found his way back through the secret passageway. Tobias took a run-up and threw the big stone with all his might, hitting the padlock with enormous force. The stone shattered the lock, and Tara stared in shock at Tobias as he opened the now lockless door.

'I ... I thought you'd left me,' she sobbed, hugging him tight.

'I promised I'd get you out of here,' Tobias said. 'And I keep my promises.'

Tobias wished they could stay like that forever, but this was neither the time nor the place.

‘We need to go,’ he whispered in her ear, and Tara reluctantly stepped back.

She picked up the lone candle Adam had given her and led the way back through the secret passageway.

‘The troll’s got Adam,’ Tobias said. ‘I don’t think we can do anything to help. It’s horribly big and strong. He tried to fight it off, but he didn’t stand a chance. It knocked him unconscious.’

‘He was trying to save me,’ Tara said. ‘We can’t just leave him!’

‘Let me see,’ Tobias said. ‘According to the old folk tales, while trolls are big and strong, they’re also quite stupid. Maybe we can set a trap, or trick it?’

‘What about the well?’ Tara asked, holding the candle out towards it once they were out of the passageway. ‘Could we push it in there? I don’t think it could get out again.’

‘I think it would be too big and heavy for us to knock over, even if we caught it off guard,’ Tobias said. ‘And how would we lure it to the edge of the well? Trolls might be stupid, but I doubt they’re *that* stupid.’

‘How did they deal with the trolls in the folk tales?’ Tara asked.

‘Well, we could chop off its head with a sword ... if we were tall enough and strong enough. And if we had a sword.’

‘Next idea,’ Tara said.

‘In some stories, trolls turn to stone when sunlight hits them. It’s August, so the sun comes up super early, before six. We could make it chase us, run out into the sun, watch it turn to stone, and then it’s high fives all round! But ...’

‘But what?’

‘First, we don’t know what time it is. What if the moon and the stars are the last thing we see before the troll beats us senseless? Next, we don’t know the way out, and the troll knows this place like the back of its hand. Finally, we don’t know for sure whether trolls even turn to stone, so blue skies might be the last thing we see before the troll bashes our brains in.’

Tara sighed.

## Chapter 14

### A Plan Full of Holes

Tobias followed Tara until they reached the main cave.

The broken rocking chair was still burning, so there was enough light to quickly confirm that no one was there.

A pile of apples lay on the ground next to a battered basket.

Tara picked one up and started to eat it.

‘Hungry,’ she said. ‘Haven’t had anything since breakfast.’

‘The troll dragged Adam in there, to the cooking cave,’ Tobias said.

Tobias pointed at the tunnel where the light was coming from.

‘What do you mean, *cooking cave*?’ Tara exclaimed.

‘There’s a pot of something simmering over a fire in there,’ Tobias replied. ‘It has vegetables, meat, mushrooms ... That must be where the troll does its cooking.’

‘And now the troll’s dragged Adam in there?’ Tara said. ‘What if he’s making a meal out of him? That’s awful! We have to stop it!’

Tobias went over to the bed by the wall and tore a strip of cloth from the tattered old blanket. He picked up one of the burning pieces of wood from the broken rocking chair and wound the cloth around the smouldering end. His improvised torch gave off far more light than the candle.

‘Look, my bag!’ Tara said. She dug around inside it. ‘Crap, my phone’s gone! Mum’s going to be furious.’

‘You’ve got worse things to worry about,’ Tobias said.

‘Fair point.’ Tara dropped the bag and took another bite of the apple.

‘There are three tunnels down here, plus the stairs leading up to the house,’ Tobias said. ‘I’m not sure the two of us will be able to lift the trapdoor at the top of the stairs. It was super heavy!’

‘But we have to,’ Tara said. ‘It’s the only way out.’

‘Maybe not,’ Tobias said. ‘Adam thought the troll must have another way out down here, so it could come and go without being discovered. It has to be the third tunnel that leads out, the only one Adam and I didn’t get a chance to explore.’

Tobias headed for the final tunnel. ‘Come on. We can’t help Adam until we know whether there’s an escape route.’

The torch flickered, and Tobias smiled.

‘There’s fresh air coming in from here. I think we’re on the right track!’

They continued through the tunnel and reached the exit in no time. They emerged in an apple orchard around the back of the house and found that it was still night-time. The clouds were gone, and after hours in total darkness, the light from the full moon and the stars was a welcome sight.

‘Ah, the sweet smell of freedom!’ Tara said.

Tobias filled his lungs with the fresh night air. Outside at last!

‘We can run home from here!’ Tara said. ‘I can be home in twenty minutes. I can bang on the door and windows. My dad and brothers can help us free Adam. My big brother Agash does weight training. I’m sure he can go a round or two with the troll!’

‘It would probably take me at least half an hour to run home to Mum,’ Tobias said. ‘I’m not as fit as you, and I won’t get much help from her or my dad. They’re pretty old and not exactly quick on their feet, though they could call the police.’

‘Wait! Let me think,’ Tara said. ‘Twenty minutes there, maybe fifteen minutes to wake them up, explain everything and get dressed, grab a baseball bat, a hammer and some knives, twenty minutes back.’ Tara shook her head. ‘Even if everything goes to plan, it would take at least an hour. I don’t think Adam has that much time left. Tobias, it’s up to me and you! We have to save him now!’

‘I was afraid you’d say that,’ Tobias sighed, an echo from earlier that evening. ‘But what chance do the two of us have against that huge troll?’

While Tara thought it over, Tobias noticed that some of the grass was frozen solid. Strange, Tobias thought. It’s still summer, and the air is warm.

‘Okay, here’s the plan,’ Tara said, interrupting Tobias’ thoughts. ‘We go back to the big cave. You hide under that old blanket in there. I go into the cooking cave with the torch. The troll sees me and attacks. Last time, I was taken by surprise, but this time I’ll be prepared.’

Tara clenched her fists and locked eyes with Tobias. ‘I can run like the wind! I’ll throw the torch at him! That’ll give me just the head start I need. I’ll run out of the cave with the troll hot on my heels. Give it a proper workout!’

Tara smiled slyly. ‘Then you tear off the blanket and run into the cooking cave. There should be enough light from that burning rocking chair and from the fireplace in there. You’ll

have to find Adam quickly. If he's still unconscious, drag him out here. The grass is quite tall, so you should be able to hide him somewhere in the garden. Cover him with leaves or something. Then run home.'

Tobias stared ashen-faced at Tara. 'There are a hundred things that could go wrong with that plan,' he said.

'Do you have a better one?' Tara asked.

Tobias wrung his hands nervously, trying desperately to think of something.

'That's what I thought. Come on!' Tara said and dragged Tobias back into the troll's cave.

Right before he was pulled into the tunnel, Tobias thought he saw two blazing eyes staring at him from the bushes in the garden. Or had he just imagined it? Surely it couldn't have been the troll? Probably just a cat.

## Chapter 15

### Kark

Tara tiptoed over to the tunnel leading into the cooking cave, while Tobias hid under the blanket.

She ran in, roared at the top of her lungs and readied herself to launch the torch at the troll.

Much to her surprise, Adam was sitting on a stool with a plaster on his forehead and a bowl of stew on his lap. He was so startled by her roar that the stew splattered everywhere and he slipped sideways off the stool.

The huge troll lifted its hands slowly into the air and spoke calmly in a deep, rumbling voice.

‘Wait,’ it said. ‘Kark friend. Not bad!’

Tara stood frozen to the spot.

Adam slowly pulled himself up from the floor, wiping the stew off his clothes. ‘Tara, wait! I know this seems odd, but he’s actually really nice. I must have lost consciousness for a few minutes after banging my head. I came around when the troll was putting a plaster on my forehead. He even gave me some food. We were sitting here chatting until you burst in with your war cry.’

Tara continued to hold the torch out in front of her uncertainly, like a shield.

‘But ... it’s a *troll*.’

‘Yes, that’s what we were talking about before you interrupted. He was just telling me that he’s lived here alone for almost two hundred years, ever since his father died. According to Kark – that’s his name, apparently – a couple thousand years ago there was a war between the Vikings and the last of the trolls. The Vikings, led by the mighty Odin, Thor and Freyja, were winning. The trolls, or the jotuns, as Kark calls them, were led by Loki. Half man, half troll, and a powerful warlock. The final battle was fought here, in Trollheim. Loki lost and took the last of his people deep underground, to a place called Helheim.’

‘What does that have to do with the troll?’ Tara asked, bewildered.

‘The gate to Helheim is in Castle Crow’s garden. Over two hundred years ago, a man called Fredrik Gran lived here. He was the father of a six-year-old girl who suddenly

disappeared one day. He thought trolls had taken her, so he opened the gate and went deep underground to find her.’

‘A girl kidnapped by trolls?’ Tara said. ‘*That* I can believe!’ She glowered at the huge troll.

‘He never found his daughter,’ Adam continued. ‘But one day he found something else entirely. He found a dead troll with a baby troll sitting next to her, crying and trying to wake its mother. Maybe Fredrik Gran felt sorry for the baby, or maybe he was curious, but either way he took it home. Kark grew up in the cage we found you in.’

‘Why in the cage?’ Tara asked.

‘I suppose Fredrik Gran was scared to let him out at first in case he turned out to be as vicious as the rest of his kind, or in case he ran away. He taught him to speak and eventually did let him out. Fredrik Gran became like a father to Kark, and they lived together, here in Castle Crow, until the day Gran died. That was as far as Kark got before you arrived. Pretty cool, huh?’

‘If any of it’s true,’ Tara said sceptically. ‘If the troll’s so nice, why did it knock you out?’

‘Oh, that was my fault,’ Adam said. ‘As soon as I spotted him, I started attacking him with my torch. Kark was only defending himself.’

‘I see,’ Tara said. ‘Then why did it catch me and lock me in the cage? It can’t possibly have an explanation for *that*. Don’t trust it, Adam! We need to get out of here!’

Adam turned to the troll. ‘Hey, hold on, why did you lock Tara up?’

The troll gave a deep sigh. ‘Kark scared. Girl surprise Kark. Danger in woods at night. Safe in cage. Till morning.’

‘Rubbish!’ Tara said. ‘That makes no sense. There was nothing dangerous in those woods until *you* turned up!’

‘They come tonight. All three come!’ the troll boomed.

‘Who’s coming?’ Adam asked.

‘Loki’s children. Kill Kark. Take key. Open gate. War start again. Ragnarok.’

Chapter 16

## Supper at Castle Crow

‘Ragnarok?’ Tara asked uncertainly. Hadn’t she heard that word before?

The troll looked sad. It picked up the cracked bowl that Adam had dropped and examined it closely before flinging it away with a sigh.

‘We go up,’ Kark said. ‘Everyone eat. Explain more.’

It grabbed the big pot of stew and lumbered off towards the stairs.

‘Tara,’ Adam said. ‘I think we should give the troll a chance to explain before we take off. I’m sure Tobias will have got his mum to call the police by now, so they’ll probably have the house surrounded soon. In which case it’ll be good for us to be up there, ready for them.’

‘Shit! I completely forgot about him,’ Tara said and ran back to the main cave.

She tiptoed over to the tattered blanket, which was doing a poor job of hiding the trembling body beneath it. She got down on all fours, and as she lowered her hand onto the blanket, she boomed in her deepest voice: ‘BOO!’

Tobias yelled and sprang up, ready to run, until he spotted Tara, grinning from ear to ear.

‘Are you out of your mind!’ he shouted. ‘The troll will hear us!’

‘Relax. Turns out it’s not that dangerous. It’s even invited us for supper.’

‘What?’

Tara quickly explained what had happened, and Tobias scowled at her.

‘You promised,’ he said. ‘You *promised* you’d stop scaring me!’

‘Yes, if we get out of this alive, but we’re not out of the woods yet!’

Adam approached with a big smile.

‘So you’re lying around taking it easy while Tara rescues me from the troll?’

‘But ...’ Tobias spluttered.

‘Just messing with you,’ Adam said, jabbing him in the side. ‘Come on, let’s go upstairs and eat. The troll’s stew smells amazing!’

‘Tobias?’ Tara asked as they climbed the stairs.

‘Yeah?’

‘You know loads of strange words from all your reading, right?’

‘I know a fair few, but far from all of them.’



‘Have you ever heard of Ragnarok?’

‘Of course,’ Tobias said. ‘The Vikings used that word.’

‘What does it mean?’

‘The final battle between the gods and jotuns.’

‘So it’s just the name of a battle?’ Tara asked.

‘Not just any battle. The *final* battle. Ragnarok was the name of the end of days, the end of everything!’

Tara shuddered.

She followed Kark up to Castle Crow, Adam and Tobias trailing behind.

The troll thumped the big pot of stew down on the long table in the dining room.

‘This is where I found the matches,’ Tobias said. ‘And where I saw the troll picking apples.’

Tara went over to the big windows along the wall and looked out. The garden around the back of the house was a chaos of apple trees, bushes, brambles and grass. It looked more like a jungle than a garden.

Tara returned to the table and ran a finger over the tablecloth. It wasn’t grey, as she’d initially thought, but white and covered in dust.

The troll opened one of the cupboards and pointed out some bowls and cutlery.

‘I guess we help ourselves,’ Adam said, grabbing three bowls and three spoons and putting them on the table. Using the troll’s ladle, he filled the bowls with stew.

Tara sat down by one of the bowls and grabbed a spoon. She was ravenous!

The troll went back down into the cave as they started to eat.

Tara ate to her heart’s content. The apple from the cave had done little to stave off her hunger from missing lunch and dinner.

Adam was also eating away, while Tobias just stared, pale-faced, at the mixture of meat, vegetables and broth.

‘Something wrong?’ Tara asked.

‘Yeah,’ Tobias said. ‘Adam, do you remember all those rat pelts down in the cooking cave?’

‘Sure.’

‘Does that mean we’re eating rat?’

Tara hacked and hawked a few times before finally managing to spit the food back into the bowl.

‘Did you say *rat*?’

Adam took another spoonful, chewed slowly for a moment, then smacked his lips. ‘It would seem so, but it’s not bad. Tastes like chicken.’

Tara pushed her bowl away. She felt nauseous.

The troll returned, dragging the chest they’d seen in the cave, and humped it onto the table.

Tara stared at it. Why had the troll brought *that* up?

## Chapter 17

# Gods and Monsters

Adam pushed his bowl away. He was full and tired. It had to be getting really late.

They should have left by now, but the troll had said something down in the cave that was bothering him.

Something bad.

‘Kark, what did you mean when you said someone’s coming to kill you?’

‘Kark catch spy in garden. From underworld. Tell Kark everything. So now Kark know. Loki want open gate to Helheim. But Kark have key.’

The troll smiled and took out a bunch of keys.

He pointed at a shiny white key. Its top was shaped like a skull.

‘Papa give Kark important job. Kark guard gate. Keep watch. No one come up!’

The troll sighed, and his smile faded. ‘But hard now. Loki send children. Come tonight. Kark must stop.’

‘That small key,’ Tobias said, pointing at one of the other keys in the bunch. ‘Is that ...’

Tobias got up, walked over to the wall unit and opened a drawer.

He pulled out a book and some papers. He put everything on the table.

‘I saw this old journal earlier when I was looking for matches. Uh, Kark, could I borrow that key?’ he asked, pointing at a small, golden key. The troll nodded and removed it from the bunch. Tobias took it and turned the key in the lock on the book. ‘Just as I thought,’ he said, opening the book. He turned to the final pages and started reading quietly.

‘Wow, look at all these drawings,’ Adam said, pointing at the papers Tobias had put on the table.

He turned to Kark.

‘These must be drawings of you when you were little.’

‘Papa draw Kark,’ the troll replied. ‘First in cage. Then outside cage.’

‘And this?’ Tara asked, pointing at a somewhat clumsy drawing of a man with outstretched arms and a smile.

The troll smiled. ‘Kark draw. Present for Papa. Day Papa let Kark out of cage. Kark only child then. Kark old now. Papa dead many years. Kark alone long time.’

‘Aw, that’s so sad,’ Adam said.

‘Hey! Listen to this,’ Tobias said, still reading the old journal. ‘There’s loads here about that gate to the underground place. And about Loki’s children. Three horrible monsters! Fenrir, a giant wolf that can breathe fire! The Midgard Serpent, a huge venomous snake! And Hel, the worst of them all, the queen of the underworld, a witch with magical powers! Everything she touches turns to ice. These are stories from Norse mythology. Tales about gods and monsters that the Vikings believed in, but that no one has believed in since.’

‘Hold on now,’ Tara said. ‘Is this troll trying to tell us that three monsters straight out of the storybooks are coming here? Now? Tonight?’

‘Yes,’ the troll sighed.

‘Does it say anything about why they want to open the gate?’ Adam asked. He was feeling more and more uneasy.

‘Yes,’ Tobias replied. ‘It says here that a day will come when Loki has rebuilt his army. An army of giants and trolls, of ice dragons and demons, of mammoths with towers and archers on their backs, of snakes and serpents, of wolves and polar bears. It says a day may come where he breaks out of Helheim, the realm of the dead, to enslave mankind and rule over us. Not just as a king, but as a god!’

Tobias closed the book. ‘If this is true ...’ The colour had drained from his face. ‘Magic and monsters against all our modern weapons. Could we win? Could *they* win? Or would the whole world be wiped out in an eternal war ... the end of the world ... Ragnarok?’

‘If the gate is closed,’ Adam said, ‘how can these monsters get here?’

‘From many place,’ the troll replied. ‘Deep caves and holes. On land and in water. Not possible for big army. But possible for Loki’s children.’

‘So why are we sitting here instead of running to the police?’ Tara asked. ‘What’s wrong with us?’

‘You can’t leave,’ the troll said.

‘What?’ they all shouted at once.

‘Three reasons. One. No one else must find gate. Humans nosy. And stupid. They open it. Explore. Release Loki and his army. Then nothing stop him. Two. Not enough time. They come tonight. Wolf here already. Kark smell wolf when Kark pick apples. Kark give apples to girl. Show Kark nice.’

‘Oh yeah, real nice!’ Tara said. ‘What’s a cage when you’ve got an apple?’

The troll gave a deep sigh. ‘Sorry. Kark dumb. But look.’ The troll pointed out the big windows. ‘You go, you die.’

Out in the orchard, Adam could see two malevolent eyes blazing in the semi-darkness, and a deep, dark shadow cast by a body half hidden by bushes and trees. The evil eyes stared intently at them. Full of hate.

‘He wait for other two,’ the troll said.

‘Hey, wait, what was the third reason?’ Tara asked.

‘Kark need help. Kark big and strong once, but old now. Kark can beat one. Maybe two. But never three.’

‘Forget it!’ Tobias said. ‘What can three kids do against creatures like that?’

‘World once full of magic,’ Kark said. ‘When Vikings fight trolls. Now magic almost gone. But some left. Papa collect.’ The troll patted the chest he’d brought up from the cave. ‘And now we use.’

## Chapter 18

### The Gifts

Kark lifted the lid of the chest and took out a shield and a sword.

He gave the sword to Adam. It had a golden hilt in the shape of a dragon. The razor-sharp blade glowed red and extended from the dragon's mouth.

'Sword called Gram,' Kark said. 'Blade slice through rock like water.'

'Thanks!' Adam said in amazement, accepting the beautiful sword.

'Shield good too,' the troll said, handing it to Adam. 'Stop everything. Never break.'

The shield was mostly made of solid wood. It was round, bright yellow and had a handle on the back. A red dragon was painted on the front, curled around a metal plate in the middle. It also had metal all around the edge.

The troll pulled out a green bow and a quiver full of arrows. He gave them to Tara.

'Girl very brave. Punch and kick Kark when Kark catch her. Deserve good weapon. This bow and arrow of Freyja. Great warrior.'

Tara accepted the elegant bow, which had beautiful drawings of colourful flowers on its green wood.

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

'Not problem,' the troll said. 'Magic. Put bow on string. Pull string. Let loose. Arrow hit what girl look at. Always.'

Tobias came over, rubbing his hands together. 'So what have you got for me? Thor's hammer? Odin's spear?'

'Chest empty,' the troll said, closing the lid.

'What! Then what am I supposed to do when the monsters come?'

'Stand behind Kark. Kark protect.'

'No way!'

'Hm ...' the troll rumbled. 'Papa say book have magic. Boy read good. Maybe find magic in book?'

Tobias scowled at the troll before going over to the old journal.

He flipped through a few pages.

'There's something here about ancient Norse sorcery. But it looks quite difficult. Strange incantations and even stranger ingredients. Here's something requiring owl feathers

and silver dust. Something else needing dragon teeth and mistletoe. We don't have any of this! Hold on a minute ... rat tails? Kark, can you fetch all the rat pelts from the cooking cave? And a pair of scissors?'

'Eww,' Tara said a little later, watching the troll chop off all the rat tails with his axe.

Tobias stood ready with a small leather pouch he'd found in one of the drawers and dropped all but two of the tails inside.

'So, we take a couple tails and do this,' he said, tying them together in a big knot. 'According to the book, now I just throw it,' he continued, throwing the knot in the air, 'focus on it, and shout something like: Eldir brenna knútr!'

The knotted tails instantly exploded.

Sparks and flames rained down on the floor, which immediately caught fire.

'Whoa,' Tobias said.

The troll yanked the tablecloth off the table, sending the pot and the bowls flying, and threw it on the blaze. Everyone stomped furiously on the dusty tablecloth until the last of the flames were smothered.

'Are you – ' *cough!* ' – out of your mind!' Tara shouted, giving Tobias a shove. 'You could have – ' *cough!* ' – set the whole place on fire!'

'But ...' Tobias said in a small voice. 'I didn't think it would actually work, and if it did work, I thought it would be more like a little firecracker.'

'Quiet!' the troll said firmly. 'Loki's children here now! All three outside.'

He pointed his axe at the windows, and outside in the garden, Adam could see three pairs of spiteful eyes staring back.

## Chapter 19

### Loki's Children Attack!

Adam gave a start and stepped away from the windows. His heart was pounding in his chest. He felt like he'd landed in a horror film!

Fenrir, big as a horse, bared his sharp teeth and growled so loudly that Adam could hear it through the thin glass. The wolf's eyes were fiery pits in the darkness, and his coal-black fur was indistinguishable from the shadows between the apple trees.

The Midgard Serpent came slithering across the ground. A thick, dark snake whose body was so long it seemed to have no end. Yellow-green reptilian eyes stared coldly at Adam as a forked tongue darted in and out of its mouth, as if it were licking its chops.

Behind those two, Adam could see a beautiful young woman with long, white hair and pale skin that shone in the moonlight. One eye glittered blue like a sapphire, but when she turned her head, he saw her *other* side, as ugly as the first side was beautiful. Her other eye glowed red like a ruby, and her skin was disgustingly withered and black, like that of an old corpse.

The tall grass and plants turned to ice wherever her hands brushed.

'*Kark!*' said a voice as cold as ice.

It was like a whisper in Adam's head. He knew it was coming from Hel even though she hadn't opened her mouth. It was as if her voice didn't need to travel through the air to enter his mind.

'Hel!' Kark spat.

A chill ran down Adam's spine as he heard the frosty whisper in his head again.

'*Dear, sweet Kark, come to Hel ... else I shall send you to hell!*'

She came over to one of the windows and placed her hand against it. Tendrils of frost spread across the glass from where her hand rested.

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

Adam followed Kark and the others as fast as he could as they took off towards the trapdoor.

The last thing he heard and felt before his feet hit the stairs was the sound of glass breaking and a cold wind on his neck.

Kark slammed the trapdoor shut and pulled the cord to move the rug over it.



Adam stood ready, glowing sword in one hand and shield in the other. It hadn't struck him until that very moment that this would be a battle of life and death!

It was as if their time down in the cave and in the house had been only a dream, a nightmare he now desperately wanted to wake up from.

'We need a plan,' Tara said once they were all down the stairs. 'Can we barricade ourselves in?'

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

'The stairs are narrow,' Adam said. 'Too narrow for the wolf, I think. He'll probably use the entrance from the garden.'

'Maybe they'll all go that way?' Tobias suggested.

'Maybe,' Adam replied. 'But they might try both ways at once, surround us, maybe attack from the rear. We need to defend both entrances!'

He took a deep breath and reluctantly volunteered.

'I'll defend the stairs. After all, I have a shield and a sword. You defend the other entrance. That's bigger, so you'll need Kark. He's the only one strong enough to take on the wolf.'

They all nodded. Kark, Tara and Tobias ran into the tunnel leading to the garden, leaving Adam all alone.

## Chapter 20

### Adam's Battle

Sweat ran down Adam's forehead. He wiped it off with the back of his hand, making sure to keep hold of Gram. The red glow of the magic sword cut through the darkness and lit up the stairs, helping him find the way.

Holding the shield out in front of him with his other hand, he slowly went back up the stairs.

He stopped when he neared the trapdoor. Luckily it was still shut. Minutes ticked away without anything happening.

He was such an idiot! What a stupid plan! What was he supposed to do if the monsters smashed open the trapdoor? Would he drop his weapons and run screaming back to the others, or would he stand his ground and defend the stairs? Fend off the beasts with all the might and courage he could muster?

*Die like a man.* Wasn't that what people said? Fight bravely to the end, even when you're up against a superior force? But he was still just a child. No one had taught him how to fight or defend himself. Wasn't that what fathers were meant to teach their sons? But what did he know? He barely remembered his dad.

Mum had said he was from Morocco and that his name was Omar. She'd also said he was a loser, and that it was a good thing he left. Not exactly a nice thing to say, and not at all how Adam remembered him.

Dad used to say that the most important thing in life was never giving up, always trying your best. A loser couldn't have said those words. It was good advice.

Adam had been the worst football player at school, always tripping over the ball. But he'd always get straight back up again and keep at it, until one day he dribbled past the best kid in the class.

He had to remember that now. Don't give up! Try your best!

Adam looked up at the trapdoor and gripped the sword tighter. No bloody way anyone was getting past him!

A huge crash from the trapdoor interrupted Adam's thoughts. They'd found it! And now they were trying to get in!

A huge pair of long, curved fangs pierced the wood.

Splinters and dust from the two holes rained down on Adam, who used the shield as an umbrella.

With tremendous force, the trapdoor was torn off its hinges and flung away from the opening.

Adam stared into a pair of hideous reptilian eyes the size of manhole covers. The Midgard Serpent!

He held up the shield and started to back away from the terrifying beast. Maybe the opening would be too narrow for it?

The gigantic serpent squeezed through the opening and slowly slithered down the stairs.

The passage fit its sinewy body like a glove!

It opened its jaws, and Adam could see green venom dripping from its razor-sharp fangs.

He retreated further down the stairs. That wasn't the plan, but what else could he do? Suddenly he stumbled and fell backwards. Sword and shield tumbled with him.

The enormous serpent hissed and slithered after him.

Adam landed heavily on the stone floor at the bottom of the stairs. All the wind was knocked out of him as the sword clattered across the floor, out of his reach. Terrified, he felt the smooth body of the serpent slither over his leg, so heavy that he was pinned to the ground.

He reached for the sword, but it was too far away.

A forked tongue caressed his cheek, and Adam stared into the serpent's hypnotic eyes, now right in front of his own. All that was left to do was scream at the top of his lungs.

'HELLLLP!'

## Chapter 21

### Kark's Battle

Kark pricked up his ears as he stood by the garden exit with Tara and Tobias.

‘Boy shout help,’ he said.

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

Kark threw one last look at the garden. None of them had come that way yet. ‘Kark help boy. Girl shoot when wolf come. Fat boy shout help, and Kark come back.’

‘Yeah, yeah, we’ll both shout if something comes,’ Tobias said. ‘But right now you have to help Adam!’

Kark bounded back into the cave, axe at the ready.

His night vision made it easy to spot Adam, trapped in the coils of the terrible serpent. He looked like a helpless mouse about to have his neck punctured by the sharp fangs.

Kark roared and hurled the axe across the cave.

The shaft slammed into the serpent’s head before it could sink its teeth into the boy.

The Midgard Serpent hissed and turned towards Kark.

Kark raced over and threw himself at the giant snake. He wrapped both arms around its neck, sending them both rolling across the ground.

The muscles in Kark’s arms bulged as he squeezed the monster’s neck. He had to keep those venomous fangs away! One bite from them would spell the end! Was he strong enough to squeeze the life out of it?

The Midgard Serpent hissed again and let go of Adam, writhing and twisting until it was coiled around Kark instead.

Then it started to squeeze back. Kark groaned as the air was forced out of him.

He could hear cries for help in the distance. The wolf must have reached the garden entrance. *Kids scared. Kark help! Where axe?*

Kark looked around while the serpent hissed and squeezed.

There! Kark spotted the axe lying on the ground and let go with one hand to grab it, allowing the serpent to wriggle free enough to sink its fangs into Kark’s arm.

He howled in pain as the venom entered his bloodstream. He crumpled to the cave floor, his strength slowly draining from him. Was he dying?

‘The game isss won!’ the serpent hissed. ‘Victory isss our—!’

*Whoosh!*

Kark couldn't believe his eyes when the head of the Midgard Serpent suddenly flew off its body.

Standing behind the headless snake was Adam.

In one trembling hand he held Gram, the magical sword, now stained black with serpent's blood.

Gram had sliced clean through the serpent's neck like a knife through butter.

'Thanks,' Kark said weakly after the rest of the serpent had collapsed to the ground.

Adam wiped the blood from the sword on his trousers and held it aloft.

The red glow lit up Kark's punctured arm.

'It bit you!' Adam shouted.

The skin around the bite had already turned black.

'No worry about Kark. Boy shout. Wolf come. Go! Help!'

Adam took one last look at Kark before turning heel and running.

Kark was exhausted, and his arm hurt, but could he still help? He tried to get up but collapsed again.

Kark sighed. Tired. So tired ...

## Chapter 22

### Fenrir Attacks!

Tobias stood with Tara in the tunnel by the garden exit, staring nervously into the dark cave behind them. They could hear fighting inside.

‘Maybe we should have stayed with Kark,’ Tara suggested.

‘Probably too late now,’ Tobias said. ‘And why even try? We don’t stand a chance against these monsters! If they’re too much for Kark, they’re too much for us.’

‘Oh, Tobias!’ Tara said. ‘I’m scared.’

‘Not half as scared as I am,’ Tobias said. ‘Do you think we could make a run for it? This might be our last chance!’

‘Shh! Listen!’ Tara whispered.

Tobias stood completely still.

Something was moving through the undergrowth. He turned towards the sound and peered into the dark, overgrown garden.

Something was headed straight for them!

A gigantic wolf burst through the thick undergrowth. Apple trees bowed to one side before snapping like matchsticks. Bushes and shrubs were flattened.

‘It-it’s Fenrir!’ Tobias said, trembling all over.

He shook off the crippling fear, turned and shouted to Kark as loud as he could: ‘Kark! Help! The wolf is here!’

Tara notched a bow and pulled the string back as far as she could.

Tobias took a step back, reaching into the small pouch of rat tails.

Tara took a step forward and sent the arrow sailing through the moonlight.

The wolf twisted away but was struck in the shoulder. It let out a loud snort and continued towards them as if nothing had happened.

‘Keep trying,’ Tobias said, as he threw one of his knots.

‘Eldir brenna knútr!’ he shouted.

Some bushes near the wolf burst into flames.

‘Oh, man! I’m so bad at throwing,’ Tobias moaned.

Tara fired another arrow, aiming it at the wolf with her gaze. It slammed into the monster's chest, but the arrows didn't seem to have any effect. The big beast just continued towards them at a furious pace! It spread its jaws wide, revealing a set of razor-sharp teeth.

'This is the end!' Tobias said, tears in his eyes. 'Tara, there's something I need to tell you. I love –'

'Tobias!' Tara interrupted. 'I've got an idea! Chuck one of those rat knots in the air. Quick!'

'But –'

'Just do it! Now!' she shouted.

Tobias rooted in the bag of rat tails until he found a big knot and threw it into the air, as high as he could.

Tara notched another bow, letting it fly as she stared at the clump of tails sailing through the air. As soon as the arrow hit the knot, she turned her gaze on the wolf. The arrow changed direction, and the small bundle of rat tails flew straight between Fenrir's gaping jaws.

The wolf skidded to a halt, hacking and hawking.

'Eldir brenna knútr,' Tobias whispered and, to his amazement, the wolf's head exploded in an inferno of flames.

The wolf's body collapsed into the tall grass.

Just then, Adam came racing over carrying the sword and shield.

'Wow, not bad,' he puffed. 'Doesn't look like you need much help here.'

Then Tobias heard Hel's icy whisper inside his head.

*'Miserable children, what did you do! My heart is broken, now cold and blue! Fenrir was my brother, my friend! But I shall make him whole again! You I shall ruin with ice and snow! Watch you die to avenge my own! To many pieces you I shall crush! Frozen scraps turned to slush! Served to the serpent on a plate! That, my dears, shall be your fate!'*

Magic coursed out of Hel's fingertips and struck a tree near Tobias. It was immediately transformed into an ice sculpture.

## The Ice Queen from Helheim

‘Take cover!’ Adam shouted, crouching down behind the shield a split second before a magical shard of ice shot through where his head had been. Several more shards slammed into the shield.

Tobias overturned an old wheelbarrow and ducked down behind it.

Tara fired an arrow at Hel before rolling behind a big oak tree.

Adam peeked out and saw Hel conjure a shield of ice that hung in the air. Tara’s arrow pinged off it.

Hel looked furious and fired off round after round of concentrated ice magic. The garden was soon transformed into a frozen winterscape. The plants and grass were blanketed by a layer of ice and snow that glittered and shone in the moonlight.

‘If I can just get close enough,’ Adam yelled, ‘I can try to get her with the sword!’ But icy wind and frost continued to batter his shield, which was rapidly getting too cold to hold onto. The chill bit at his hand.

‘My arrows are useless,’ Tara shouted back. ‘She keeps magicking ice shields out of thin air, and they just bounce off.’

‘Let me try!’ Tobias shouted. He lobbed a ball of rat tails over the wheelbarrow and bellowed the magic words.

It exploded just short of Hel.

She shrieked with laughter. *‘You’ll have to aim truer than that, if you’re to defeat me in mortal combat.’*

Hel conjured a long icicle and launched it over the wheelbarrow like a spear. The jagged point whizzed past Tobias’ ear and thudded into the ground behind him.

‘Let kids go!’

Adam turned towards the voice.

The troll came stumbling out of the cave. He leaned against a frozen apple tree, clearly affected by the venom coursing through his veins.

‘Kark has key,’ he said. ‘Come take! If you can. But let kids go.’

*‘Ah! So much have I heard of this troll, who up to the humans stole. Your brothers in Helheim with laughter roar, at the troll I see, stood at death’s door!’*



‘Human is brother to Kark now. Helheim still laugh when Kark kill nasty witch?’

‘*A truly fine speech from one so full of deceit!*’ Hel hissed. ‘*But recalling your mother it is no surprise, her betrayal I saw with my own two eyes. She was kind like you, and so away she flew. To a quieter place, her past erased.*’

‘Mama ...’ Kark said. ‘Kind ... like me.’ He smiled.

Hel smiled, too. Wickedly.

‘*I caught her escaping and froze her heart! Left child beside her, world falling apart.*’

‘Witch destroy Kark’s life! Alone for two hundred years! No Mama! No Papa!’

Hel threw her head back and let her laughter ring out in the cold night air.

‘*I am the destroyer! None escape my hold! I freeze all life, let it grow cold!*’

Adam could see a tear in the corner of Kark’s eye, but then his sad face turned stony, and he roared at Hel. ‘REVENGE!’

Kark charged at the witch.

Hel threw an icy wind at Kark, but he took it without slowing at all. Hair, skin and clothing stiffened and froze before he slammed into Hel. They tumbled into the snow.

Tara ran out from behind the oak and plucked an arrow from the quiver.

Adam let go of the icy shield, grabbing the sword with both hands.

Was this his chance? He started towards Hel.

The witch leapt up, brushed snow off her clothes and turned towards the children. She flung a hand out towards Tara and froze the arrow to the bowstring before she could fire.

Hel gave an evil smile and swung her other hand out towards Adam. Magic shot out of her fingertips and froze his feet to the ground. He was stuck fast only a few metres from her.

‘*Children, don’t you know who you see? An army is needed to stand against meeeeeeeeeee!*’

Hel screamed as an icicle exploded out of her chest. Tobias was right behind her! He’d circled around and plunged the icicle through her back.

Hel turned towards Tobias, sunk to her knees and stared at him. ‘*Hel, bringer of pain to the soul, defeated by ... a fat little troll!*’

She sighed and slumped into the snow. The beautiful half of her body withered and became just as old, ugly and black as the other half. All the light left her eyes.

## Chapter 24

### Last Words

Adam used Gram to free himself from the ice, walked over to Kark, dropped the sword and sat down next to him.

Tara and Tobias followed suit.

The troll lay on the ground, breathing heavily. He tried to stand but slumped back against a frozen apple tree.

‘Poison in blood,’ he said. ‘Frost in lungs.’ Kark coughed and spluttered. ‘Kark done.’

‘Isn’t there anything we can do?’ Adam asked.

‘No. Strength all gone,’ Kark said. ‘But thank you, Kark friends. Thank you for Kark revenge! Thank you for gate safe.’

Kark fished around in his pocket and pulled out the bunch of keys.

‘Here magic key to gate. Remember Loki powerful warlock! Loki always know where key. Drop in ocean, he find. Put on mountaintop, he find. Magic key stand everything. Not possible destroy. Must guard!’

Kark pointed at a small hill where the garden ended and the woods began. An enormous stone gate was hidden there, covered with vines, bushes and branches, though visible if you looked close enough.

‘There gate. Take key. Guard gate good. Not let Loki open. Very important! Papa’s last words. Kark job done. Now rest. See sun come up first time.’

Kark held the bunch of keys out in his cupped palm. The sun rose above the horizon, filling the frozen garden with light. ‘Pretty,’ Kark said as the sunlight hit him.

‘Maybe ... meet Mama and Papa again, in next life.’ Kark managed a smile before his lips turned to stone and the last drop of life left him.

Tears ran down Tara’s cheeks. She shook her head.

‘Why am I crying?’ she said. ‘I hated him! I wanted him to die when he locked me in that cage, but now I just feel sorry for him. Why?’

‘We can’t know what lies in the hearts of strangers,’ Tobias said. ‘Not until we get to know them better. But when we see they have a good heart, and I think Kark had a good heart, they deserve a few tears from us when they go.’

‘I forgive him,’ Tara sniffled. ‘But I wish I’d told him that while he was still alive.’

She turned to Tobias and gave him a big hug. ‘Thank you for saving us! I can’t believe you snuck up behind that wicked witch with an icicle! You must be the bravest twelve-year-old ever!’

Tobias’ cheeks blazed, but he smiled and hugged her back.

Adam reached for Kark and took the bunch of keys from his now petrified hand.

He felt sad.

‘Poor Kark,’ he said. ‘He sacrificed himself to protect us and to stop Loki from getting this key. That task now falls to us. It’s up to us now. We are the new guardians of the gate.’

The sun shone on the icy winter garden and started to clear the traces of Hel’s magic. The frost in the troll’s hair melted and ran down his arm, the water collecting in his outstretched hand.

A couple of small birds landed on his stone fingers and started to drink the melted water.

Adam could feel a peace settling in. His weary body begged for rest and sleep. He lay down on the frozen grass.

‘Wow,’ he said. ‘I can’t believe we did it. We survived!’

‘Hooray,’ Tobias said. ‘One more hour to enjoy before Mum kills me.’ He sat down on a snowless patch of grass.

‘Yeah, this is not going to be easy to explain,’ Tara said, lying down in the snow.

They lay there for a while.

Adam yawned, sat up and looked at the others.

Tobias was picking blueberries, throwing them into the air and trying to catch them in his mouth. Tara was making a snow angel.

‘Time to head home, I guess,’ Adam sighed. ‘I could sleep for a week!’

‘I need a hot shower,’ Tara said and sneezed.

‘Humph, what am I going to tell Mum?’ Tobias said. ‘I’m going to be grounded for a year!’

‘We’re just going to have to take whatever they throw at us,’ Adam said. ‘We can’t say anything about what actually happened here tonight. Remember what the troll said about stupid, nosy humans.’

‘Isn’t it strange,’ Tara asked, ‘how this house has stood here in these woods for centuries without any grown-ups using it or even poking around inside?’

‘Maybe there’s magic here that keeps the grown-ups out but doesn’t work on children,’ Tobias said. ‘A spell Fredrik Gran put on the place before he died. I remember walking past

here one time with Mum and Dad, and they started to feel unwell, both of them. But as soon as we were away from it again, they felt better. That might explain why no one's cleared the place out.'

'A big house that makes grown-ups unwell, and that children are terrified of,' Adam said.

'With good reason!' Tobias added.

'It is the perfect hiding place!' Adam continued. 'We can use it as a clubhouse! Somewhere we can meet and hang out. Just the three of us? I'm new here, and you're the only people I know!'

'Deal!' Tara said. 'We'll all be friends from now on. Clean this place up. Maybe we'll make even more exciting discoveries!'

'I've had more than enough excitement,' Tobias said, standing up. 'But I have to admit, I'm curious to find out what else I can learn from that old journal, and I'll have plenty of time to study it while I'm grounded!'

'I'm more likely to get kicked out of the house than grounded,' Adam said. 'But I could always move in here,' he said and smiled.

'Time to find out!' Tobias sighed and helped Tara to her feet.

Adam smiled and got up. He'd found two new friends, good friends, and he was alive. Trollheim wasn't so bad after all.

The End