

The Twistrose Key

By Tone Almhjell

The grandfather clocks struck the half hour, one by one and out of rhythm. The third-floor bedroom one first, the upstairs bathroom one second, and the hallway one last as always, after a grudging effort of whispers and clicks.

Lin's hands trembled as she held the parcel under the brown silk lampshade. She had thought the letters would shift in the light, that her eyes would adjust and the mistake would be corrected. Yet no matter how hard she stared at the scratched word, it did not change.

The parcel felt heavier than it looked. When she shook it, something jangly slid from side to side within. She paused to listen. In the kitchen, the violins had resumed their yammering, and from the second floor came the faint din of a TV audience that meant her father had stopped writing to call out the answers to a quiz show.

She ripped the paper and emptied the parcel into her hand.

Out tumbled two keys. One was grimy and had an orange plastic tag that said cellar. The other was large, as large as the length of her hand, and blackened, as if it had grown from ashes and dirt. Its head was fashioned as a petal, and the stem was that of a rose, with three curved, sharp thorns. Engraved across the petal,

there it was again: twistrose.

In the troll hunt, they always used code names. For years Niklas had been Summerknight and Lin had been Nettle, because of her special nettle brew. But for the Oldtown hunt, she had taken a new one, inspired by the rosebush over Rufus's grave.

One day, she had noticed how it hooked its thorns into the paint of the facade, stretching its branches toward the sky. It reminded her of the junipers that clung to the Trollheim Mountains with their twisted roots; they never let go no matter how cruel the wind blew. And that's when she had thought of it—the perfect code name for a troll hunter who was exiled for the moment, but not forever: Twistrose.

Lin had wanted to wait till their next game to share it with Niklas, so she hadn't said a thing about it. Not to Niklas, not to anyone.

"So, Miss Rosenquist, what have you got there?"

Lin whipped around, shoving both the folded paper and the keys in her pockets. How very like her father to know about the squeaky steps. He had his quizzical face on, the lifted-chin one he wore when his curiosity had set in, and she knew she wouldn't get away with lying. "A parcel," she said. "But it's for me."

He tilted his head. "From a friend?"

Which was of course an excellent question. With the troll-hunter signal, whoever had delivered the parcel had made sure Lin would be the one to find it. And the name Twistrose could only mean that it was for her, and her alone. But for what purpose? Shrugging as casually as she could, Lin said, "I don't know yet."

The quizzical face softened. "A little mystery. I see. Miss Rosenquist, you may carry on." He patted the arm of her still-dripping coat before he started back up the stairs. "But if your mystery takes you out into the storm, I know I can trust you to dress for the part."

Only when she heard him shout "What is the Arctic Circle!" from the living room, dared Lin bring the keys out from hiding. Moving deeper into the hallway, she ignored her coat, because she had no intention of going outside of the house. She was going under it.

The cellar door at the end of the hallway had remained locked since they moved in, despite her father's attempts at wringing the key out of Mrs. Ichalar. All sorts of trouble could be brewing down there, he had argued, fires and floods and rodent invasions. Mrs. Ichalar had claimed that she couldn't find the key, and that she needed the storage space for her little hobby, now that she lived in a retirement home. "What sort of hobby?" her father had asked, but for once, his questions got him nowhere. Lin smiled. If Harald Rosenquist knew that his daughter's "little mystery" involved the cellar key, there would be no stopping him. But he didn't know.

She turned the cellar key in its lock and opened the door slowly. Dank air oozed up from below, thick with rot and chemicals. All she could make out was a dented flashlight on the wall, and three tapering steps dissolving into black. She picked the flashlight off its peg, turned it on, and closed the door behind her, muffling the violins. Below, she could hear the river mumbling by, gusting chilly air up the stairwell. The draft was so cold that Lin's breath made frost clouds. With a shudder she followed the dust-speckled beam down the stairs. At the landing, the light fell on an animal skull on the banister. It had cracked teeth and large, tilted eye sockets. Lin hesitated for a moment. What sort of old lady would nail skulls to her banisters? But she pressed on, and when she reached the final step and learned the truth about their landlady's "little hobby," it all made sense.

She was watched by a hundred eyes.

Among the usual clutter of boxes and crates, there were animals everywhere. Cats curled up on barrels, ferrets peeking out between mildewed coats, and falcons strung up under the crossbeams of the ceiling. They were all positioned to glower at Lin with their glass bead eyes, and they were all dead.

Mrs. Ichalar was a taxidermist.

The old woman's workbench stood right next to the stairs, cluttered with hooks and scoops and bone cutters, and several bottles of a clear liquid that might explain the chemical smell. Lin took a deep, icy breath, annoyed at how hard she was shivering. A troll hunter did not back away at a little creepiness! Taxidermied

animals looked grisly, but they couldn't hurt her. "Calm down," she whispered to herself. "And bring your brain to the party!"

That's what her father always said if she got impatient with a riddle, and he was right. She would not solve the mystery if she didn't keep her head clear.

With both hands on the flashlight, she looked again, more carefully, letting the beam rove around the room. There had to be a reason why the two keys had arrived together. One to unlock the cellar door, and the other . . . The flashlight beam found the back of the cellar. It was overgrown with pale, wet, ghostly roots. They had broken through near the ceiling and crawled down the wall in a tangled mass, crumbling the mortar and splitting the bricks. In the center of the wall, the roots shied away to make an open circle, and in that naked patch, two fissures met and formed an oddly shaped crack. Lin could swear it resembled a keyhole.

She had of course expected to find the keyhole in a door, or a cupboard, or a painted chest. But gold didn't always mean gold. At least the strange crack deserved a closer look. She crossed the rough floorboards, where the river showed through between the gaps. All the boxes that had been stacked in the back lay toppled on the floor, pushed away by the roots. Lin shoved them aside so she could see the entire shrub.

The roots were not pale and wet after all, they were coated in rime. Lin frowned up at the holes, to where the roots had broken through the bricks. If her mapping skills did not deceive her, this wall lay directly beneath the front door—and the

rosebush outside. For the first time that evening, it occurred to Lin to wonder why Mrs. Ichalar's flower bed was covered with frost.

The cold seemed to radiate from the bare, circular patch. Lin leaned forward to study it. Yes. Her first impression had been right: The oddly shaped crack definitely looked like a large, ragged keyhole. One point to Miss Rosenquist! She lifted the Twistrose key for measure.

The roots stirred.

Lin gave a cry and lurched backward, stumbling over a crate, pricking her finger on the thorns of the key. A single bead of blood pushed out. She sucked at it, staring hard at the wall. Roots couldn't stir, could they? It may have seemed like they had reached for her, but there had to be some other explanation. Maybe the storm? Maybe it rattled the rosebush hard enough for the tremors to reach all the way belowground? She got to her feet and raised the key again, waving it back and forth in front of the shrub from a safe distance. Nothing.

She cast a look behind her, toward the mounted animals and the banister with its sad skull. If she wanted, she could walk back up the stairs. She could tell her father about the cellar key and Mrs. Ichalar's hobby and the curious rose infestation. But then the key would be confiscated and the mystery—the whole adventure—would be over.

A faint snatch of music murmured in her ear. It must have come from the kitchen above, except it wasn't the usual hoarse violins, but a sweet, soft humming that

made her think of Summerhill, and deep woods, and secret maps. Lin's throat clenched. She did not want the adventure to end, not yet. Before she had time to reconsider, she pressed her lips together, stepped forward, and thrust the Twistrose key into the wall.

It fit perfectly in the crack. As she turned it, there was no click, but she felt something slide into place in there. No. Dislocate was a better word, like something had been pried apart that was never meant to be separated. Freezing air poured against her fingers, along with a flicker of blue, shimmering light.

Whatever lay on the other side of this wall, it was not the riverbank.

Fear came crashing into her body with painful thumps. She wanted to turn and run, but all of a sudden, the spindly roots shot out and grasped her, winding hard around her arms, wresting the flashlight from her hand. The bricks split apart with a tremendous crack. A torrent of icy air rushed out to meet her. The roots tightened, pulling her toward the opening, but Lin was too astounded by the sight beyond the wall to put up much of a fight.

There was no cellar, and no riverbank, either. Instead she looked out on a desolate, frozen mountain valley, where winter twilight painted the snow blue, and stern peaks rose into the sky. A creature crouched in the snow before her, facing away, but so close that she could smell it: a musky scent. Now it turned toward her. Lin watched helplessly as an elongated face came into view. Two needlelike teeth glinted in its mouth, and a pair of liquid, black eyes stared back at

her.

Then the creature darted forward. With a fast, clawed grip it pulled Lin free of the roots and into its pungent embrace.