

# Welcome to Grimm...



Adam woke with a start, sweating. It was that dream again, with the witch and the oven. And the shoes. He could never see himself in the dream, and then in the end he saw his favorite shoes, his blue chucks, sitting in front of the oven, lost and forlorn, no feet to fill them. And that's when he realized, every time, that he couldn't see himself because he was already in the oven. He was already dead.

The recurring nightmare had started after his grandparents had given him an old book of fairy tales, with cracked pages and creepy paintings. But he didn't tell anyone about the dreams. It was just a little kid's book, after all.

Once he had gotten dressed and had his breakfast, it seemed like just another ordinary day in an ordinary week of an ordinary school year. But it wasn't. It was the most extraordinary day of Adam's life.

Adam didn't think of himself as being in any way special, unique, or worthy of much attention. In fact, he tried to be just like everyone else. Sure, he was special to his mom and dad, and to his grammy and pappy, but to everyone else he was a very normal, very unremarkable boy. Or at least, he was until today.

Adam climbed on board the bus at seven o'clock like he did every day, except for Saturday and Sunday, or

when there was snow. The bus driver, Miss Mary, was strange and fearsome, with a single tooth in her head and a tangle of orange hair that seemed to find new ways to poke out of her green hat. Adam shuddered. She reminded him of the witch, he realized suddenly. He couldn't help but feel her eyes on him, gazing in the mirror, waiting to put the bus into gear until he had found a seat. But it was crowded today. Sam was making faces at Jennifer; Morgan was reading one of her boring books, her science fair project taking up the seat next to her. Adam sat in the only space available, next to some girl whose name he couldn't remember.


She smelled funny, like cabbage and beans. She was a frightful little thing with wide eyes, made wider by overlarge glasses. She wore a plain gray dress, the same one she wore every day, the one with thin spots on the shoulders and patches on the elbows. Up until Adam sat down, she had been staring out the window. When he took his seat, her head swiveled (like a robot) and examined him, her tiny mouth pinched in disapproval and a frown forming between her bushy eyebrows.

"Hey," Adam muttered.

She said nothing. She just stared.

The bus lurched into motion, rumbling down the





neighborhood streets toward the Andrew Johnson Elementary School, a grim building with a suspicious past, but one that nobody, not even parents, would discuss. After a few minutes, the brown-bricked, two-story building situated atop a low hill in the center of town loomed into view. The girl continued to stare. Adam fidgeted. The children screamed, the driver cast warning glances in the mirror, appalling noises emerged in their flatulent glory from Nate's noisome armpit, and still the girl stared. Adam sighed and did his best to ignore her, throwing his full attention onto the floor, studying the rubber lining and the duct-taped seat peering up at him from between his legs. He pushed his head into the seat in front of him, wishing he could escape this dreadful predicament, but he knew that no matter how hard he wished, he was in the bus, next to the staring girl, on his way to crummy school.

A few minutes later, the wheels of the bus squealed in protest as it slowed. It was making the final turn into the semi-circular drive that led to the school's front doors. Many of the children started gathering their things: backpacks, lunchboxes, fistfuls of tissue, class projects, baseball bats and gloves, a special toy they were bringing to show-and-tell, and the occasional critter liberated from their homes. Adam was one of the eager kids, crazy to escape the penetrating glare of the girl beside him. He pulled his backpack up from the floor and gave the girl a small smile. She just looked at him. It was like he offended her just by being there. He didn't care. She was a nerd, a dork, a geek, a freak, a spaz, and everything in between. Why should Adam care about her stares? She probably had lice.

The bus stopped, the shriek of the doors opening brought Adam back from his thoughts, and he quickly stood, jostled by the other children as they pressed to get off the bus first. As he wormed his way into the crowd, he felt a tug on his shirt. He looked. The girl again!

"What?" he hissed.

"I know things," she said.

"Good for you. Now leggo, freak."

For the first time, she lowered her great googly eyes to the floor. Adam felt sorry for what he said, but she deserved it. She was weird!

Nate cried out, "Adam's got a girlfriend!"

Adam rolled his eyes, hung his head, and then shot Nate a look, "Yeah? You wanna pick her nose like you pick your own?"

That got laughs, because it had a kernel of truth.

After a few moments, the children were free of the yellow behemoth and marching through the old metal doors into the school. Each child went his or her own way, filing toward lockers to get books, stow lunches, and go through the rituals that children everywhere performed as they made ready for another day of school.

Today's lunch was pizza. Just like every other Tuesday, except Tuesdays during the summer. It made the otherwise terrible day not-so-terrible. Along with the greasy square slice, Adam had a Styrofoam cup of red dinosaur-shaped Jell-o, a carton of chocolate milk,

and a small basket of flaccid fries. He emerged from the kitchen line, damp plastic tray in hand, and scanned the lunchroom, looking for his friends. It was a sea of faces and colors, filled with the sounds of important discussions about cartoons, who likes who, who did what, what happened when, the answers to last period's quiz, the unfairness of grounding, or who peed in what trash-can. It didn't take long; he spied Sam and Randy right away.

Adam walked across the cracked vinyl-tiled floor, passing under the nose of the lunchroom monitor, one Mr. Dickens—whose name was ever the subject of laughter. He was a grim man who was a bit free with the paddle and had a long, sad face and watery eyes. Adam did his best not to look at him, hurrying to where his friends sat. He swung a leg over the bench as he set his tray down, finding himself in the middle of a serious discussion about whether Beamstalker could or could not kick a Starkiller Knight's butt. Sam figured that Beamstalker wins, because he can shoot the Starkiller from across a whole city. Adam weighed in sagely that a Starkiller Knight had Psion Sight, so he'd be able to sense the beams coming, and could use his sword to deflect them.

"Hey," said a voice, interrupting Adam as he was proving how a Starkiller Knight has to be the greatest swordsman from his planet in order to be inducted into the order. Sam, seated across from him, looked over Adam's shoulder, clearly grossed out. Randy snickered and played with his Jell-o.

Adam turned and saw Lizard and Sally standing behind him, along with that strange staring girl with no name. She fidgeted with her gray dress, looking down at the floor. Lizzie looked very uncomfortable; she was talking to a bunch of boys, after all. Sally, confident as ever, stood with one hand on her hip and gesticulated, as she said, "Mandy..."

"Who?" asked Adam.

"Her, idiot," Sally said, gesturing with her one free-from-hip hand to the girl with no name. "Mandy says she knows something about Mr. Trickle's."

"Good for her," Adam said and then turned back to his friends, shaking his head at the utter yuckiness of girls.


"Now, listen, 'Spasm Adam.' You were very mean to Mandy this morning. You know she's an orphan." She added the last in a serious voice as if by saying it, she justified the whole situation, even interrupting what had otherwise been a perfectly fine lunch. He got the feeling that Sally was doing this all for show.

Adam turned around. He didn't care she was an orphan. Heck, sometimes he wished he was an orphan. "So what does this have to do with me?" He looked at Mandy. She looked at the floor. Lizzie had nervously turned and started talking to another girl at the table behind her. Adam's friends giggled and made nasty jokes about eating boogers.

Sally said, "She wants to show us."

"Thanks but no thanks. I don't care and I'm not going anywhere. We have important things to talk about."





"Oh sure, toys. You and your dolls. I think Nate would be awfully interested to hear how you're scared."

Adam grumbled. If she told Nate anything, he'd never hear the end of it. Ever since Nate had overheard Adam talking about how he was scared of the big, old tree in his backyard, the bully had seen him as just another target.

"Fine. Sam, Randy? You coming?"

"Not me," said Sam.

Randy shrugged. "Nope."

Wussies. "Fine. See you in Social Studies." Adam stood and said, "Lead the way."

Lizzie was too engrossed in whispering with her friends about which boy band she liked and which lead singer she would marry, so they left her behind, too. Mandy led the way with Sally following, and Adam trailing far enough behind that maybe no one would think he was hanging out with these two. Sally was such a nosy girl, always butting in where she wasn't supposed to. It almost always got her in trouble. If everyone didn't want to be her friend so bad, she wouldn't have any friends at all.

The three children left the lunchroom and entered the quiet hall, leaving behind the noise, the laughter, and their lunches. Mandy walked with her head down, staring at the floor, her gray dress swishing as she walked. Sally was humming, some tuneless song probably by Chastity Shields. Chastity was annoying and girly. And his mom didn't like her. Sally had the pop star's smiling face on her lunch box, and sometimes dressed like her, too. Adam's mom called it "racy."

Lockers lined the hall and the fluorescents reflected off the polished vinyl floor, darkened with splotches of abandoned gum. Every so many feet, a wooden door to a classroom broke the line of lockers. Crude posters for class president hung on the walls, alongside dark pictures warning of the dangers of drugs, and bulletin boards holding event schedules and tryouts for baseball, soccer, and a variety of other activities. The children passed the library, and Adam noticed Ms. Randall in there, a weird thin woman sitting at a table, wiping her eyes, as she looked at a letter. The children whispered that she was weird—she didn't eat meat! They said she had a hundred cats and flew about on a broomstick. Adam didn't believe any of it, or at least the not eating meat part.

Mandy turned and headed down the hall toward Mr. Trickles's class room. The lights flickered overhead and there was an awful smell in the air, as if someone had just puked. It was dark and kind of scary. Adam suddenly became unsure about all this, and rushed to catch up with Sally.

"Isn't he in there?" he asked.

"Nope," said Sally. "No one knows where he went. He had first period, but wasn't there for second or third. The principal's been sitting in and having study hall."

"So what are we doing here?" he asked.

"I dunno. Mandy knows." Sally giggled, and added in a lower voice, "She's sort of weird, isn't she?"

"You're telling me!"

Mandy finally stopped in front of the door. For the first time since leaving the lunchroom, she raised her head and looked through the glass. Sally came to her side and put an arm around her shoulder. Adam walked around to the other side, bored, confused, and wanting to go back and finish his chocolate milk. Mandy still smelled like cabbage.

"We have to go in," said the strange little girl.

Adam nudged the girls out of the way and stepped forward, peering through the window into the classroom. The window had a mesh inside it, so it was hard to see. It was dark, but he could make out the student's desks in rows, and the teacher's desk in front of the blackboard. There were no windows in that room, and the walls were concrete blocks painted in boring brown. Unlike other teachers' rooms, where there were decorations, maps, posters, and stuff, the walls here were empty.

"No one's there. So, orphan girl, you gonna tell us why we're here?" Adam asked.

"Yeah, tell us," said a fourth voice from behind them.

Sally loosed a little scream. Adam jumped. It was Nate, who had sneaked up on them. Mandy hadn't reacted at all. She just turned and looked at the bully, her eyes sad and strange.

"What's goin' on, Adam? Two girlfriends? Well, well, the girls must like you. I bet it's the dolls."

"Shut up, jerk," said Adam.

"Make me," said Nate. "I owe you one for the bus."

"Both of you stop it. No one invited you, Nate. Go away," said Sally.

"Maybe I don't wanna. Tell me what you guys are doing, or I'll tell 'the Dick' that you're sneaking around in the halls."

Sally looked frightened at the idea of getting into trouble again, but Adam just muttered "Snitch," and returned Nate's stare. Some kids were afraid of Nate, but not Adam. He'd beat him once on the playground, and he'd do it again.

"We have to go inside," whispered Mandy.

"Ugh. What's with you?" asked Nate.

"Leave her alone," Sally snapped and stood in between the strange girl and the larger boy.

"Look, let's just get this over with," Adam muttered, turning to open the door.

Mandy took a step back. Sally gave Nate a nasty look and stepped into the darkened class room. Adam reached for the light switch, but Mandy stopped him. "Don't."

"Fine," he said.

Nate pushed his way in, his big clumsy body almost twice the size of Mandy and a few inches taller than Adam himself.

"So, we're here. What's the big deal? It's a dark classroom. Oooh, scary," said Nate.

"Look," pointed out Sally.

Adam followed her finger and saw muddy footprints leading past Mr. Trickles's desk and into the supply



room.

"So?" Nate shrugged, scared but covering it up by sounding annoyed. "Maybe Mr. Trickle's had muddy shoes." He boldly strutted up to look into the room. Sally followed Nate. Mandy pulled out that annoying flashlight she kept on her keychain, and started turning it on and off, on and off. She was always getting in trouble for staring into it during class. Adam plopped down at a desk, already bored by this whole affair.

"What's that?" asked Nate. Sally peaked around the bully to see what he was pointing at.

"Stairs," she said. "But there didn't used to be stairs there."

Adam got back up and wandered over to the children, finally interested. He didn't notice Mandy's moan.

It was dark inside, but the children could see wet stone steps winding down.

"Look, there's sand!" exclaimed Adam.

"In there?" asked Sally, looking to Mandy.

The mute girl nodded.

"We should tell someone," said Nate. He didn't want to go down there. It was clear on his face.

"We have to go. What if Mr. Trickle's is in trouble?" Sally asked.

"So what? I never liked him anyway," muttered Nate.

Was it darker in here? Adam rubbed his eyes as Sally and Nate argued. When he opened them, he looked around. Mandy was gone. "Wait. You guys, where's Mandy?"

Sally and Nate looked into the hole, seeing the light from her mini-light fading as she traveled down the stairs.

"We'll, I'm not waiting for you scared boys. Mandy? Mandy, wait!" Sally carefully climbed down the steps, giving Adam an imploring look before vanishing out of sight.

The light dimmed even more as Adam wrestled with the choice. Darn it! he thought, That girl's gonna get me in deep trouble. Adam found his courage and took a first step onto the wet stone, then proceeded after Sally.

"Hey, wait up," called Nate, and soon the bully was following. He was pale

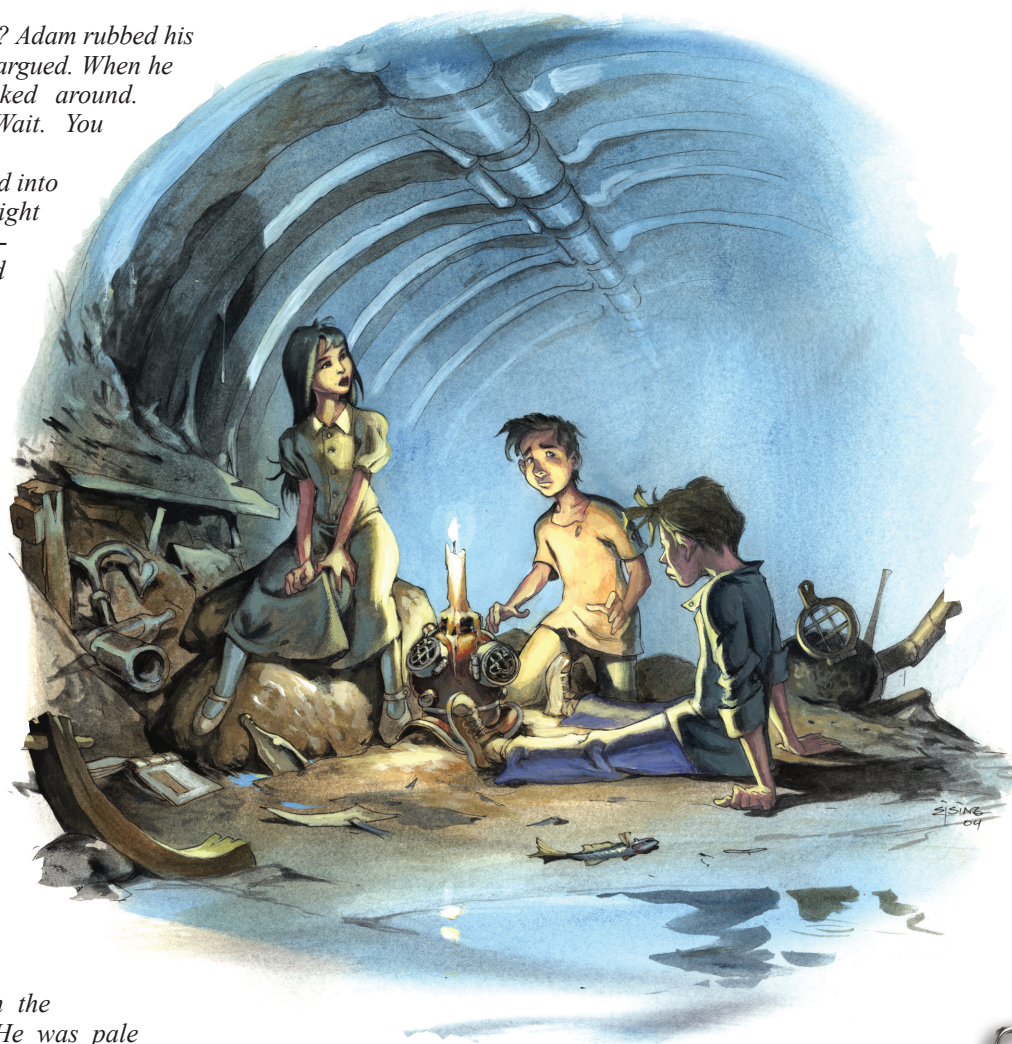
and sweating, his eyes darting around as if looking for something. Strangely, Nate acting scared put Adam at ease.

It didn't take long for the boys to catch up with Sally, and it wasn't long after that until they saw Mandy's bobbing light. The world they left behind, somewhere many feet above them, seemed distant. They walked cautiously down the spiral stairs, going around and around until they all felt a bit dizzy. Condensation on the walls and puddles of dark water and mud from those odd prints made each step slippery. Nate thought to himself that this was possibly the weirdest, coolest thing he'd ever seen. Like in a story. But it was scary, too. If he was reading about this, he'd think the kid was dumb for going down some muddy stairs beneath a school. There'd be monsters and stuff. But this wasn't a story, so...he stopped thinking about it when they made a turn and found themselves running into Mandy, who had stopped at the bottom of the stairs.

"Why did you go off like that?" scolded Sally.

Mandy looked at her shoes. Nate looked up the way they had come.

"What is this place? Like a boiler room?" Adam asked, ignoring the





girls. They were in a dank cave. Puddles, sand, and strange rusty metal bits lay scattered on the floor, which seemed almost soft, fleshy. At the bottom of the stairs, atop an old diving helmet like the kind in black-and-white movies, was a fat candle. As they stood before it, it suddenly flaired up into life.

"Wow!" said Nate.

Adam jumped. Nate was standing next to him.

"This is sort of weird," Sally said. "There aren't any caves beneath the school."

Nate rebutted, "A trap door in Mr. Trickle's room! Cool!"

Mandy whimpered.

"You know," Adam said, turning, "if you don't want to be here, then why'd you bring us down...holy crap! The stairs!"

Dread filled Adam as he ran back to where the steps had been just a moment ago.

Instead of a staircase, there was now a blank stone wall. "What!?" exclaimed Nate. That was when he noticed the ceiling. Those didn't look like normal rafters.

He decided not to think about it. "Where'd the stairs go, Adam?" asked Sally.

Mandy whimpered again.

Adam felt his face grow flushed. Nate stood, his mouth hanging open like an idiot. Adam turned, "Okay, Mandy. Where did the stairs go?" He was serious now.

"I don't know," she whispered.

"What do you mean you don't know? You brought us here!" he snarled.

"I know. But, but they didn't go anywhere when I was here last."

"I have a test in fifth period! Make the steps come back!" cried Sally, who, for the first time any of them had seen let her grownup face dissolve into childish tears.

Mandy walked up to the wall, running her hands over the stony surface. "I...he said...I...he had this heavy ball, on a chain, and he tied it to my leg, and..."

Nate started blubbing too.

"He? He? What he?" asked Adam, his voice shaking. Suddenly the big dark cave wasn't anything like Mammoth Cave. It wasn't safe, but strange, dark, and foreboding. Like in a story. And if it was like a story, that meant...

Mandy said, "The man with the parrot told me to bring my friends."

"Your friends? We're not your friends, freak girl," snarled Nate. He balled his fists and looked like he was going to smack her. Sally quickly stepped in and put her arm around Mandy. "Geeze, Nate," she said through her tears, "She didn't ask you to come, did she?"

Nate had nothing to say to this.

"Well, yelling at orphan girl isn't going to get us out of here," Adam said. He wanted to go home, but someone had to be brave, and it turned out that it wasn't going to be Sally. "Mandy, give me that flashlight."

The strange little girl handed him her light. "There's no way back up, so..." he gestured deeper into the cave.

"How do you know?" asked Nate. "We should just wait here for help. Someone will come looking for us."







"And how're they gonna find us?" Sally asked.

"Right," said Adam.

"So what, we're gonna go...in there?" Nate asked, voice shaking.

"What else are we going to do?" Adam replied.

"Look. It'll take a long time for any help to dig their way down here. I'll be grounded if I don't make it home for supper, so I don't think I want to sit here forever and wait, do you? There has to be another way out. So come on."

Adam didn't want to go deeper into the dark cave any more than Nate did, and he might have just sat down and cried if he was alone, but he wouldn't cry in front of Sally. Or Nate. Or even Mandy.

He looked around. The little girl stood there, not disappearing this time. She looked at her worn shoes, sniffing.

Adam raised the light overhead and took a step forward, pushing back the darkness, the cave yawning ahead like some tired giant just before bed. One by one, the other children cast longing looks at the darkening stone wall and then hurried to catch up with Adam.

The boys and girls walked for what felt like hours. The cave floor was broken in places, and deep, dark cracks dropped away into the darkness. They navigated each obstacle, helping each other climb over the rocks, balance on stones as they hopped across pools filled with pale fish, and wriggle through narrow fissures that felt as if they would crush the life out of them. Onwards they walked until Sally said, "Wait!"

They were very tired and dirty and scratched and sore, so they all stopped at once.

"Do you hear that?" Sally asked.

"No," Nate scowled.

"It's a whistling noise. I think it's wind!"

"Wait, yeah. I hear it to." Adam replied, looking at his companions.

Mandy was nodding. Nate shrugged, "So what. Wind. Great."

"Stupid, if there's wind, there's a way out!"

"Oh. Oh! What are we waiting for, let's go!" Nate cried and hopped to his feet.

Mandy looked hopeful. Sally smiled. Adam said, "Yeah, let's get out of here."

They moved quickly, having found they weren't as tired as they thought, what with the promise of sunshine, clouds, grass, and escape from the dark cave. They were nearly running when they heard the sounds of the ocean, waves breaking on a shore. The wind was louder, and the children were laughing, surprised by the strangeness of it all. Adam began to slow as it dawned on him how impossible it was for there to be an ocean. They weren't anywhere near the water.

"Come on, Adam, I see light ahead," Sally called, moving forward. Mandy was walking. Nate was nearly out of sight.

Adam, now nervous, followed after the other kids, but a bit more slowly, being very unsure about all of this. It was light enough to see without the flashlight, so he pocketed it. The others were out of sight, and the cave felt lonely.

"Go back..." he heard. "Run little boy, run away!"

a voice whispered. "Go home." Adam looked around, but there was no one there.

"Hello?" he called. His voice sounded mute and dull.

A scream sounded from ahead. His friends! He forgot the voice, forgot that none of those kids had been his friends when the day began, and ran forward. He stumbled out of the cave and into a wall of water. It was raining, and hard, too. He was on a rocky beach, the stones sharp and jagged, clotted with seaweed. As he looked for his friends, he spied a ship a ways from the shore. It looked like a pirate ship. Then he heard a scream again, "Adam! Run! Run away!" He saw Sally hanging like a sack over the shoulder of a big scary man. Mandy was nowhere in sight, and Nate was holding a large stick doing his best to fight off two... pirates!? Adam stepped forward to help, but one of the pirates saw him and started heading his way. The one still on Nate knocked the stick to the rocks and cuffed the boy on the head. Nate fell down. The big pirate carrying Sally turned and looked, showing his ugly face and flashing a gold-toothed smile at Adam. Sally screamed, "Run, Adam!"

He couldn't do anything for his friends, so he ran as hard as he could, away from the pirates, hopping over rocks and trying to keep his balance. A pirate was chasing him. Adam risked a look behind and saw the man was thin and dirty, his eyes big and rolling around in his head. He had a sharp knife drawn and made a stabbing motion at Adam as he closed the distance. Unfortunately, he didn't have a peg-leg to slow him down.

Adam ran harder. To his right was the sea. To his left, a great mountain, all gloomy and swirling with clouds. Lightning flashed overhead. Somehow, as he ran, he heard Mandy call for him. He turned and saw a narrow crevice in the face of the mountain. He turned and slipped in. It was pitch black. "Come on Adam, get inside." Adam tripped over a stone, falling to the ground and scraping his knee. Tears came unbidden. He rolled over to look at his leg.

Another flash of lighting outside filled the cave with white light, and Adam saw that he had cut himself. He looked up. The pirate was there. He was sliding into the cave, his knife hand forward and swishing through the air.

"Yaar, laddie, welcome thee to the Grymme Lands. Methinks ye'll be liking it here." He pushed his way inside and Adam began to cry. The pirate chuckled, laughing, and said, "Ye'll fetch a nice price from the Rotten King, ye will." He stepped forward, filthy hand extended to grab him, when there was an awful crunching noise. The man collapsed and a bloody stone rolled to the floor.

Adam looked up in surprise, wiping the tears away with the back of hand. Mandy. She was hidden in the rocks. She was pale, her black hair clinging to her face. She was crying too. She slid down from her hiding place and ran forward to hug Adam. The two children wept bitter tears, not knowing where they were, how they would get home, and what would happen to their friends. Welcome to the Grimm Lands, indeed...