

BOOK 1 OF THE NATURALIST

*the*  
WARLOCK  
*and the*  
WOLF



❧ *delfy hall* ❧



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*For Jack Fugate,  
missed and loved  
by many*



He heals the brokenhearted  
and binds up their wounds.  
He determines the number of the stars  
and calls them each by name.  
—Psalm 147:3-4



# PROLOGUE

*January 1, 1647*



THE MEN DRAGGED the elderly woman over the rough ground of the woods, littered with pine needles and decaying leaves. She kicked and clawed at their flesh, surprisingly strong for one so slight. They pinned her onto the forest floor, and one of the men managed to get a rope around her wrists and draw it tight.

“You think I need my hands to kill you?” asked the woman. Her skin ran cold, and the men jerked away from any contact with her body. She laughed but soon went quiet again.

“She is planning something,” one of the men said. “We must be quick about it.”

In the light of the waning half-moon, near an old tipped-over barrel and an oak tree, stood the priest, with his bible and vestments, and the book of St. John hanging around his neck. He made the sign of the cross as the men brought the woman to her feet and stood her before him.

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“Leonara Verdon, do you confess to making a pact with the evil one to derive your wicked powers from him and give you unjust domain on earth?”

The woman’s eyes, lit up by a torch held nearby, bore into the priest’s and seemed to hold him silent for a moment before he stuttered back to life. He brought a bottle of holy water to her lips and poured it against her shut mouth. Rivulets ran down her chin as he instructed her to repeat these words: “This I will drink through the bitter passion and suffering of Jesus Christ and the virgin heart of Mary the mother of God, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.”

The woman remained silent. He sprinkled her white wiry hair with drops from the bottle. “Where did you dance with your heretic sisters on the last holy day?”

Still the woman said nothing. She had closed her eyes and seemed to be concentrating on something.

The priest nodded to the men, who hoisted her onto the top of the barrel. For the first time, her blank expression gave way to panic, and she thrashed in the men’s grasp, almost slipping off the barrel. A gale blasted the old oak tree, bending its bare branches. One of the men who held her feet fell back, clutching his throat and gasping for breath.

“Quickly!” said the priest. Another man scuttled along the branch above her, and swung headfirst like a monkey to slip the noose over the woman’s head.

“Hear me, witch!” cried the priest. “Remove your spells and curses before you leave this earth and are cast down to hell.”

The woman opened her lips to speak, and in spite of their fear, the men froze and listened intently. “You destroy yourselves, and the new republic. May your god have mercy on your souls.”

Puzzled by her words, the priest hesitated in his duties. In the stillness, a tree sparrow flew into the circle of grim faces and

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perched on the woman's shoulder. She jerked as though trying to dislodge it, but the sparrow kept its balance. The woman uttered an anguished cry: "No—"

The priest nodded, and one of the men gave the barrel a swift push.



# CHAPTER 1



**M**INA BURST THROUGH the back door into the kitchen, where Martha was doing the breakfast dishes, and shed her muddy shoes into an old box put there for the purpose.

“Can I have one of these?” she asked, while taking a New Year’s donut from a pile on a plate, left over from the Molls’ breakfast. Martha glanced over her shoulder as she rinsed out the gravy pot and eyed Mina’s stocking feet.

“And where have you been so early in the mud?”

“Out observing,” Mina replied, and left the kitchen without waiting for a disapproving sniff from Martha. She climbed the stairs and found Pieter in the workroom, hunched over a collection of hawk feathers and a Drebbel’s microscope, and sketching each specimen side by side onto a sheet of paper. His thick dark hair had been brushed neatly back from his face and his wool suit

was clean and unwrinkled. She looked down at her dress, which was muddied at the hem and marked by spots and splashes.

Pieter looked up from the pencil drawing, regarded her for a few seconds, and then returned to the feathers. "You've been out, and up to no good, I see. What animal have you saved this time?"

"Just a deer."

He looked at her again.

"A few deer."

"When will you accept that hunting is a fact of life? Cats do it, birds do it, people do it. It's as natural as sleeping or reproducing. You cannot change the order of things."

She shook her head. "There's nothing natural about riding down an animal and killing it with a weapon whose mechanics you don't understand, and that someone else made."

"I'm sure your hunter understands how guns work."

She frowned. "I doubt it. And Prince William doesn't even want it for meat—he just wants the antlers."

Pieter rubbed his brow. "So you were interfering with a royal hunt again." He put down his pencil and spun away from his work to face her. "I've told you that's punishable by banishment, Mina."

"Don't worry—they didn't see me."

"Ah—then the risk you took was perfectly reasonable." His stony glare belied his sarcasm. "You realize how identifiable you are, with your dark skin?"

"It's not so dark. More of a beige color."

"Compared to your father, yes—but you have the darkest skin of any person within ten miles of The Hague. Everyone would know it was you. And the hunting party will just go back tomorrow."

She shrugged. "Maybe, but I scared off the deer for today. Another day of life for an animal—for anyone—is not trivial.

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Plus I saw a few sparrows, though there wasn't any water around. I'm sure I'll find one swimming soon—it must go into the compendium.”

Her mentor smiled. “Yes, the famous swimming sparrow, which you have heard about only from crazy old women.”

She sat down and began leafing through a book that was lying open on the table—Hoefnagel's *Four Elements*. She turned directly to her favorite illustration—a man covered in so much hair that he resembled an extremely furry ape. The usual shiver of wonder mixed with repulsion ran through her. If only she could have seen him in person—but he had died in the previous century.

Pieter caught her attention, and she closed the book. “Since you seem prepared to work on the holiday, I have a task for you.” He reached into a drawer and took out a yellow measuring tape. “Princess Amalia desires a new bed cover. You are to find a typical red fox of the north woods and take its measurements.”

She stared at him, his hand still outstretched with the yellow tape. “You're joking! She must have a hundred bed covers already, made of the finest cloth and who knows how many creatures. Why must she have another? She'll use it once and put it in a cabinet.”

He was unmoved. “It is vanity and greed. It is the human way. You must get used to it if you want to serve the stadtholder in my place someday.”

“It is a disgusting waste of life, and I will tell her so.”

“Do you want to help finish the compendium?” He gestured to a tall stack of papers, topped most recently by a colored illustration of a wolf and her cubs, Mina's favorite creature of Holland. She herself had made the sketch, after strewing some scraps in a clearing near the mother's den. Afterwards, Pieter had informed her of the terrible risk she had taken, shaking his

head as he always did upon hearing of her enthusiastic methods. But his disapproval did not dissuade her—she would do almost anything to get a good view of an animal.

“Yes, of course I do. And as long as we’re on the subject, I would like my name to be on it.”

He shook his head. “I’ve told you—it’s not customary for apprentices to be credited that way. But your role will be common knowledge among scholars, and it will add to your reputation.”

A burning sensation crept up her cheeks. She did not want to alienate her mentor—he and his wife had done so much for her since her parents had died, much more than friends could ever be expected to.

“And you are building a reputation, regardless of whether you realize it, which brings me back to my point—do you want to someday succeed me as the stadtholder’s naturalist?”

She nodded, steeling herself for the reprimand that was sure to follow.

“Then you must be impartial, Mina. A scientist does not take sides for one species of animal against another, especially against the species who is paying the bills.”

“What about my parents? They were scientists, and they took sides. People call them heroes now.”

“That was different—that was right versus wrong. They protected Holland from political corruption, and paid with their lives.”

“I’m protecting someone too.”

He sighed and blinked at her, a sure sign that he had no more to say.

“Fine,” she mumbled. She took the measuring tape and put it into her rucksack, along with a small sketchbook and pencil. “I’m going to find the biggest, fattest, furriest fox who ever lived.”

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The Molls' servant Mary, a slight young woman with cheeks reddened from the wind and cold, appeared in the doorway, wiping her hands on her apron. "Sir, if you allow it, I have a question for Miss Walraven."

"What's wrong, Mary?" Mina put the sack over her shoulder.

Without looking up from his sketching, Pieter said, "Why do you bother, Mina? It just takes time away from your work. It is not a real science, you know."

She cast an annoyed glance at him. "I think my mother would want me to."

"You would be better off looking for your swimming sparrow."

"Pay no attention to him, Mary. What do you need?"

The woman's brow furrowed, and she touched the pendant of St. Martin that hung from her necklace. "It's my mother—she is having trouble sleeping, as well as pain in her joints."

"Is she dizzy also?"

Mary nodded. "She insists it is because of the coming moon shadow."

Pieter sighed, and muttered, "Ridiculous."

Mina gave Mary a kind smile. "Please tell her it has nothing to do with eclipses. She must take a remedy for it. You should prepare some mistletoe, but only the leaves, finely cut. You can get some from my aunt—she calls it door of fire—or buy at the market. Steep one teaspoon in two cups of cold water for twelve hours. Then strain and drink it as a tea. But she should not take more than that once a week. It can be dangerous. If it doesn't help, you should come visit my aunt—she knows much more than I do. Do you know where to find us?"

"Yes—thank you, miss. Sir," she said, and curtsied in Pieter's direction.

Mina followed Mary down the stairs, and Pieter shouted after her, something about only doctors providing real medicine. He

always had to get the last word in. It was probably only natural for a teacher. But she couldn't wait for the day when she was in charge of her own research and did not have to listen to anyone but her patron—who, she hoped, would be wealthy and quiet.

She plucked her muddy shoes from the box and put them on before going outside. The cold wind rushed into the opening of her cape, and she stopped for a moment on the stoop of the backdoor to pull her hood tighter around her face.

A movement in the second-floor window of the house caught her eye. When Pieter saw her look up, he frowned down at her and pointed north. "Go," he said, the glass muffling his voice. She stuck her tongue out and started for the woods.

## CHAPTER 2



**T**HE STREETS OF the city were quiet and largely empty because of the holiday, with most people resting and feasting indoors after a night of fireworks and revelry. She walked along the bank of the long Hofvijver, where a few people lingered, throwing in coins or watching the swans, who paddled to and fro or sunned themselves on the lake's tiny island, which boasted a solitary oak tree.

She took a diagonal path through a grassy area near the Voorhout neighborhood, passed a few modest houses, and finally reached the canal on the edge of town. Near the bridge floated a seagull, dipping its head into the water every few seconds in search of food. Behind it the water broke over the rising heads of two turtles, too big to be prey for the gull. She stopped on the bridge, hoping to see more. Pond turtles were not known to travel so close together. She waited, watching.

The heads rose higher, and she gasped. It was one animal, with two heads.

She nearly flung her bag into the canal while trying to get her sketchbook out. The turtle paddled along, heading right for the gull, who was consumed with the search for food. Mina's pencil hovered above the paper as she watched the animals, too riveted to take her eyes away. One of the heads nudged the gull's white feathers, triggering an insulted squawk and the flapping of wings. She caught a glimpse of the turtle's round shell, with two back feet cycling behind it, and then the creature dived and disappeared.

Eager to catch the details of the scene before they vanished from her memory, she made a quick sketch and a few notes. Pieter might not believe her otherwise. Depending on his mood, and her argument, her discovery might make it into the compendium. She lingered for a few more minutes on the bridge, hoping to catch another glimpse of the creature, but it failed to cooperate. It was probably at the bottom of the canal, looking for a midmorning snack. Disappointed, she put away her sketchbook and walked on.

Closer to the sea, the soil had traces of sand and the smell of salt and fish lingered in the air. Red foxes were plentiful in the woods near the water and, she knew, bigger than further inland—it would take fewer of them to make a bed cover for the princess Amalia.

She made a short detour, stopping at a group of three pine trees. On the other side of them, facing the sea, lay two grave markers of flat rock. Dried crusts of bread, probably put there only a few hours before, lay scattered on one of the rocks—her mother's. Her mother's shrine received many visitors, but Mina knew them only by the traces of the offerings they brought when they asked for the wise woman's help.

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Unlike the others who came here, Mina knew her mother didn't reside on this grave site. Her mother's spirit was in the ether, or with God, if there was such a being. But she always brought an offering anyway—today it was a few apple seeds from the bottom of her pocket. She dropped them onto the rock, wondering what kind of bird would be the first to pick them up.

She was about to turn away when the yellow grass bordering the mound shuddered and was parted by the gleaming head of a ringed snake. She froze, staring at the animal, while a feeling of nausea rippled over her. She took a deep breath and willed herself to stay for a count of three. The snake spotted her and pulled back into the grass, but still peeked out, black eyes shining like a beetle's shell. It's just as scared as I am, she told herself, backing away from the pine trees until the little head was out of sight.

Once she reached the north woods, she began looking for any telltale scat or dark shady areas at the base of large trees where a den might lie. She followed a trail and found a male fox marking a bush, but he was the wrong color. His fur was grayish silver, and his eyes were pale yellow. They shifted back and forth, as though a tremor ran through them, and he raised one paw, which also trembled—usually a sign of disease. Rather than agitate him further by trying to investigate, she withdrew into the foliage, and headed in the opposite direction.

She didn't have to walk long before she found a den. She threw down a scrap of food laced with a sedative draught and retreated into the cover of a bush. Within five minutes, a large red male emerged and snapped up the morsel. He sniffed around for more. Eager to keep him from retreating into the den, she tossed out a few more pieces that hadn't been dosed.

When the hungry creature finally laid his belly on the ground with a thump and his eyelids fell closed, she crept close and grabbed the back of his neck. The fox squirmed and snarled

despite his drugged state, and scrambled at the ground with his claws. She quickly measured his width and length, and when she had finished, she released him into the safety of his den.

Her assignment completed, she could pursue her current fascination. She walked until she found a pool of water amid chestnut trees, where the sea had trickled in through the marsh and into the woods. A night-heron stalked the edge of the pool, its yellow legs moving slowly through the still water. Mina crouched behind some tall grasses and tried to stay as still as possible.

Then her subject arrived, flitting down to the branch of a dead tree lodged in the water. The tree sparrow was male, with a gray body, brown and white dappled wings, and a bandit's black mask around his eyes. He pecked the bark of the branch, cocked his head at the night-heron, who regarded him with stoic disinterest, and took a couple of playful hops toward the water.

A dark blur shot across the pool, grazing the branch where the sparrow sat. And then the branch was empty.

Mina popped up from her hiding place. A large owl, possibly an eagle owl, sailed above the trees, the sparrow dangling from its talon. She grabbed her bag and took off after the pair. She had never seen an owl take a sparrow before.

There was a screaming sound overhead, and the sparrow fell like a stone to the ground. The long wings of the owl caught a draft, buoying the animal to the west, toward the sea. As she ran through the trees over the softening soil, she spotted another sparrow, dead on the ground, and then another caught in the branches of an ash tree. She looked up at the sky—the owl was nowhere to be seen.

She tried tacking northward, and then, in a patch of blue between two birches, she saw the creature dive with something else in its mouth. She pounded over the forest floor, no longer

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concerned with the noise she made. Finally, bursting into a small clearing, she found its landing place. The owl was hunched over something. In her desperation to see the kill, Mina whistled.

The bird looked up, locked eyes with her, and screamed. The sight of its face made her fall back—it was not an owl. It was a bird with the face of a pallid, wrinkled woman, with bloodshot golden eyes, yellow fanged teeth, and pointed, fleshy ears on the sides of her head. The creature screamed again, stepped over her prey—another sparrow—and advanced on Mina, gnashing her teeth and spreading her wings. Mina raised her arms, trying to make herself look bigger, but that gesture only seemed to make the creature angrier.

Mina took a step back and collided with a tree. As she stumbled, the creature screamed in what sounded like delight. Mina covered her face and head, squeezing her eyes shut and bracing against a rush of air and the sound of beating wings. A talon ripped across her arm like a knife point, and she instinctively struck at her assailant, grabbing a fistful of oily feathers.

Then something crashed through the bushes nearby. The creature screamed again, and Mina clutched her ears, dismayed at how painful the sound was. When she opened her eyes, the owl-woman had taken flight, chased away by the most massive wolf Mina had ever seen.

With the habit of a compulsive observer, she noted his long legs and body, rippling with muscle that coiled under a thick, tawny winter coat. His ears were pointed at the tips, and his broad muzzle was splashed with white. In the quiet of the clearing, the wolf trotted back and forth while looking up at the sky, as if to make sure the owl-woman were truly gone. Seemingly satisfied, he sat down twenty feet away and gazed at Mina, his green eyes blinking once, as if to acknowledge her presence.

She was still sitting at the base of the tree where she had fallen. She didn't know which was worse—to have her face shredded by a half-woman owl monster or to be eaten by a calm, giant wolf. Yet this was not the normal behavior of a hungry predator facing his prey.

A gunshot exploded behind her position. She turned and waved her arms at the unseen assailant.

“Stop!” she shouted. She glanced back at the clearing, prepared to rush to the wolf's aid, but he was gone.

Someone came into the clearing, holding a flintlock rifle and frowning—it was Joris. She cursed him as he approached her.

“You ignorant ass! What did you do that for?”

“Did you not see that wolf? You were about to be eaten.” His pale complexion was whiter than usual, and she realized he had been genuinely afraid.

“No, I wasn't—he saved me from that awful owl creature.”

“So he could have you all to himself!”

She rolled her eyes and stomped away from the clearing, passing Joris without looking at him. He quickly followed her.

“You shouldn't be out here, Mina. I don't know why Moll lets you.”

“Because I'm his apprentice, and I'm helping him write the compendium. It's what naturalists do, Joris—they go out into nature and observe it.”

“You should at least carry a weapon.”

“I don't need one. I'm not going to kill any animals.”

“Then how will you observe them?”

“I watch them and take notes. Or at least that's what I try to do if no one's shooting at them.”

He grabbed her arm, and she turned around. He examined her bleeding wound through the hole rent in her sleeve by the creature's talon. Her cousin's almond-shaped hazel eyes were just

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like hers and her mother's. It struck her every time she saw him, which was more often than she preferred. He had a habit of following her about town when he wasn't working in his parents' butcher stall in the meat market.

"You should go home and have Aunt look at that."

"Where do you think I'm going now?"

"I'm coming with you."

"Fine. Try to keep up."



## CHAPTER 3



**W**HEN THEY REACHED the cottage, Mina went straight inside, and Joris was so close behind that he stepped on the heels of her shoes.

The room was bright and warm from the fire, and the air smelled toasted from the juniper branch her aunt had burned to cleanse the house for the new year. Aunt Hester sat at the table, amid plates of fresh baked currant loaves, tying bundles of dried herbs together with string and dropping them into giant glass jars. She looked up and smiled as Mina and Joris walked in, but her smile vanished when she saw the red stain on Mina's sleeve.

"What have you been about, Mina?" She steered Mina into a rocking chair by the fire and brought a lamp close by.

"I was out observing and got attacked by an owl. At least, it was part owl. The face looked like a crone's."

Joris stared at her. "You didn't tell me that."

Mina looked from Joris to Hester. She thought she saw a ripple of fear tug at the corners of her aunt's mouth, but then it was gone. "Maybe I was seeing things. Such a creature can't possibly exist, can it, Aunt?"

"Hush. Let me work."

While Mina waited for her aunt to gather her materials, she stared at the top of the cupboard, lined with stuffed songbirds and skeletons of squirrels, all specimens that she had found dead on her forest walks. In the cupboard itself sat rows and rows of glass jars, each labeled and filled with powder or leafy herbs, including a jar of door of fire, the herb she had told Mary about that morning. She hoped the young servant had found some mistletoe for her sick mother.

Hester rolled the shirt sleeve up Mina's arm, exposing the gash. Then she handed her a bowl from the table. "Hold that under your arm while I pour this over it." A stream of warm clear water splashed onto the wound, making Mina grimace.

"A bit of powdered calendula, and then a clean bandage." Her aunt fastened the strip of linen cloth with a pin. "How do you feel?"

"Perfectly fine. I'm ready to go back out."

"Let's see how you feel after lunch, shall we? I want you to rest. That creature may still be prowling about, hungry for another bite of you."

"And the wolf. You didn't tell her about the wolf," Joris said from his chair near the door.

Mina rolled her eyes. "I was going to."

Hester looked back and forth at Joris and Mina. "What wolf?"

"There was a wolf, Aunt—an enormous one, and Mina just sat there. She didn't even try to run. I had to scare it off with my gun."

Hester looked at her. "Is this true?"

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"The wolf saved me from the owl-woman, and then he just sat down—he was not going to attack me. I could have made some observations, but Joris scared him off."

Hester rolled Mina's sleeve back down, over the bandage. "The owl-woman, as you call her, was a strix. She could kill you with very little effort. You must stay away from her, understand?"

"But where does she come from? And how is it possible that she has a human face?" Her aunt seemed to have a secret repository of knowledge that she rarely divulged, usually about the base nature of this or that person, or a dark way in which to use an herbal remedy. Mina waited, hoping she would reveal what she knew.

"That is a mystery, I'm afraid. But if you see her again, you must run in the opposite direction."

"But she must be included in the compendium, Aunt. Pieter will insist upon it when I tell him. Her discovery is historic."

"You will say nothing to your mentor. He won't even believe in such a creature. As for the wolf, that was very brave of you to want to observe it. However, it too is dangerous, and I'm sure the compendium has all the details it needs about wolves, what with your fascination for them."

"Wolves always bode ill," Joris muttered. "Someone is bound to get sick."

Mina ignored him. "But this behavior of protecting a person—I'm sure it has never been seen before."

"Well, now it has, and you can include it. But you must take no more risks—do you understand me? I would be extremely unhappy with you if you were eaten. As for you"—she looked at Joris—"I'm afraid I must ask you not to follow your cousin anymore—she can take care of herself, and moreover, she must. Will you agree to this, Joris?"

With a reddened face, Joris looked down and muttered that he did agree. Mina felt a thrill of triumph that her aunt had taken her side.

“Good,” said Hester. “Then you can remain friends and not worry about who did what.”



Somehow her aunt, with equal parts clucking and cajoling, convinced her to get in bed for a nap. She tucked the covers around Mina like she used to do when she was a child.

“You must try to sleep. I realize you don’t feel like it, but your body needs rest in order to heal that arm. Tomorrow you can rush about in the woods.”

“I thought you said you just wanted me to wait until after lunch.”

“Did I?” Hester smiled, drawing the curtain across the window.

“Yes, you did, and I’m going to hold you to it.”

Mina closed her eyes. She did feel a little bit drowsy. Her arm was slightly sore, but not enough to prevent a nap. “Don’t let Joris in here.”

“What about Flop?” Her aunt pointed at the orange tabby curled up on the bed.

“He can stay. And will you ask Joris to stop by the Molls’ on his way back to the market and leave word of my injury? I don’t want Pieter to think I’m shirking my duties.”

Her aunt nodded, blew her a kiss, and closed the door.

Mina reached out her bandaged arm and scratched Flop’s head. The cat rolled over, purring, and gazed at her upside down with half-closed eyes.

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“Good boy. Don’t let me sleep too long.” She felt herself drifting off, thinking of the wolf and how he had watched her without moving, as though he were sitting for his portrait.



When her eyes opened, the room was dark. Sweat drenched the sheets and chilled her skin, but her face felt as though it were on fire. A pair of glowing orbs floated above her. Something was on her chest, something heavy, warm, and vibrating. She couldn’t move her arms or legs, or turn her head.

*Girl.*

Someone was talking to her.

“Joris? You’re not supposed to be in here.” A giant lump clogged her throat and prevented any speech louder than a whisper.

*You are wrong. I can go wherever I want.*

“Who is there?” Panic flooded her body. Her wounded arm seared with pain. She tried to sit up, but the only movement she could make was a flutter of her eyelids.

*Maximus Novemitus.*

Something wet touched her nose, and she almost screamed when a swath of hair butted into her lips.

*Pet me, girl. I command you.*

“Flop?”

*What is a flop?*

The blackness of the room faded slightly as her eyes adjusted to it, revealing the outline of a cat sitting like a sphinx on top of her, with his head just in front her chin. With sudden clarity she realized she was in a fever dream, hearing voices. Her wound must have gone bad.

*delfy hall*

“Hester!”

*What is a hester? Why aren't you petting me?*

“Hester!” But the house was silent—no one was coming. Her aunt couldn't hear her frenzied whisper. The cat felt like a giant sack of flour on top of her. “Get off me. I can't breathe.”

*Very well. You will pet me later.*

She closed her eyes again to shut out the glowing orbs, which now watched her from the end of the bed.

## CHAPTER 4



**A**LL WAS RIGHT with the world when Mina awoke. To her surprise, she had slept right through dinner until the next morning. The sun streamed through a gap in the meeting of the curtains and her skin was no longer clammy. Her wound had crusted over and stuck to the bandage, but it showed no sign of infection—just a faint yellow tinge from the calendula. She pulled back the covers and stretched. Hester had been right—she had needed the rest.

She stepped into a pair of slippers and shuffled into the main room. Hester was stooped in a far corner, arranging a rug over the floor with studied precision. Mina watched her, thinking about how lucky she was to have such a person to look after her, as much as she might protest her aunt's mundane cautions and reminders. Without Hester she would have ended up in the orphanage, raised by loving people, probably, but not people who

loved her specifically. Or worse, with her grim aunt Margriet, who certainly had no affection for her.

Hester placed a triangular table, which had come from Mina's parents' house, back in its usual spot over the rug, and put a vase of winter jasmine on top of the table. When she saw Mina watching her, she gave a startled gasp and put her hand on her chest. "For a moment I thought you were a ghost."

"Not a ghost—I'm alive and well, thanks to you." Mina opened the pantry door and rummaged for some jam to put on a slice of the currant bread.

"And your arm—let me see."

Mina held out her arm for examination as she stood half inside the pantry.

"Yes, it looks good." Hester took the bandage off and began preparing a clean one. Then in a casual tone, she said, "Your sighting of the strix got me a little worried yesterday. Gregor had a strix, you know."

No one had said that name to her in many years. The sound of it conjured up a face from her childhood, or more precisely the end of it—pale pockmarked cheeks, silver hair, and light eyes that flashed red, like a figure out of a nightmare.

"He did? But he's in prison."

"That is true. He wouldn't be able to communicate with his strix unless—" Hester fell silent.

"Unless what?"

"Unless Leonara died. That's the only explanation."

Mina was confused. "Who is Leonara? I have heard that name before."

"She is the witch who has held Gregor in his cell all these years. Otherwise he would have escaped long ago."

Mina stepped out of the pantry, holding a jar of jam.

*the warlock and the wolf*

"A witch? You mean the crone who lives in the stone house by the creek?"

Hester nodded. "She was a friend of your parents. I would have taken you to meet her, but your parents wanted you to have no contact with the gifted, even those who are beneficent."

"But you don't believe in such things. Do you?"

Hester sighed. "It's not a matter of belief." She wrapped the clean bandage around Mina's arm and fixed it with the pin. "Magic is a fact. You saw evidence of it when you encountered the strix. But I did not want to tell you that in front of your cousin."

Mina shook her head, stunned that her aunt thought something so foolish. Nature, no matter how strange its forms, was governed by scientific principles, not enchantment. "Are you playing a joke? You can't possibly put any stock in that idea."

"I do. Magic is as real as you or I, though I wish it were not."

"And why is that?"

"Because some, like Gregor, use it for evil ends, and people like your parents end up giving their lives to stop them."

For years, Hester had been tight-lipped about her parents' murder. Mina wasn't sure why her aunt was forthcoming now, but she wasn't going to jeopardize this opportunity.

"So my parents also believed in magic?"

"Yes." Hester sat in the rocker, and Mina sat opposite her, her breakfast forgotten.

"And what exactly did they stop Gregor from doing? I never understood that. Pieter says he was corrupted."

"He was going to kill people. That is all I can tell you."

"But why did it fall on my parents to stop him? The authorities should have been in charge of stopping a murderer."

"They were not convinced he was a threat, unfortunately. So your parents faced him alone. But he was never supposed to escape, as long as Leonara was alive." Hester wiped her eyes.

Mina leaned forward. "Aunt, what is wrong?"

"Last night Joris and I found her hanging from a tree. He is going to bury her today. If only I had known she was being threatened, I could have found someone . . . Maybe a witch to take her place." Her voice faded as she became lost in thought.

Mina was dismayed. "I still can't believe that you think witches are real. You truly believe in them?"

Hester looked at her as a mother looks at her child who has scraped her knee for the first time. "Yes, they are real, dear."

Mina felt a flicker of derision pass over her face before she could suppress it, but Hester gave no sign that she saw it. Mina decided to let her aunt's ridiculous assertions go unchallenged, for the moment. "Shouldn't we report her death to the authorities?"

Hester sighed and shook her head. "If the authorities find her house, they will find the spells that are on it. I don't want to create a panic. It's better to just to bury her quietly."

"Do we need to be worried about Gregor? He's not going to come here, is he?"

"I'm not sure. Probably not."

"That doesn't sound convincing."

Her aunt stood up and began clearing dishes from the table. Her mouth had taken on a hardness in the corners. "I can't foresee the future. If it happens, we will deal with it then, all right?"

The grandfather clock chimed eight o'clock.

Hester glanced at Mina's nightgown. "You better get moving. You'll be late."



## *the warlock and the wolf*

In her bedroom, she got undressed in a daze, still stunned by her aunt's revelation about believing in magic and witchcraft, and Gregor's possible escape. She would ask Pieter about the latter—he would know how to confirm it.

She pulled a fresh slip over her head, and then put on her everyday rough linen dress. The scarf she had been wearing lately seemed to have disappeared—it was not under the bed or hanging on the hook where it belonged. Finally she remembered that she had gone to bed the day before with it still on. She pulled back the bedclothes to discover a curled lump of orange fur.

“Good morning, Flop. Have you seen my scarf?” She felt between the sheets at the bottom of the mattress and finally pulled the scarf out with a triumphant flourish.

*I told you—my name is Maximus Novemitus.*

She fell back against the dresser, knocking a vase onto the floor. Shards of porcelain skittered under the bed. The purring voice had spoken just behind her forehead, as though it had come from her own mind.

The cat remained motionless, staring at her with languid turquoise eyes.

There was a knock on the door. “What was that noise?” asked Hester.

“Nothing. I broke a vase.”

The cat kept watching her, as though waiting for a reply. Then the fever dream came rushing back into her memory—the chills and fear, the paralysis, and the voice. The cat had talked to her.

The door opened, and Hester clucked when she saw the vase's broken pieces. “You go on, dear. I'll clean it up.”

To Mina's alarm, the cat sprang from the bed and dashed out the open door, brushing past Hester's legs.

“That's right, Flop, run along,” said Hester. “I don't want him to cut his paws on these pieces and get blood everywhere.”

Mina wrapped her scarf around her neck, keeping her face averted from her aunt's to hide her shock. "Remember—I'll be at the Molls' for dinner tonight." She hurried out of the bedroom. On her way to the cottage door, she spied the cat sitting in front of the fire, with his back to her. She hurried out before he could say anything else.



Mina hastened away from the cottage, hoping that Flop would not get outside and follow her. She wondered if the medicinal herbs her aunt had used on her arm had caused an unhealthy reaction, although she had never heard of an herb that produced auditory hallucinations. It was more likely that the strix's scratch had sent some poison into her blood that corrupted her brain. She prayed that it would go away by the end of the day and that Pieter would not notice her acting strangely.

She was nearly to the juncture with the road to town when a chipmunk darted in front of her. Her foot narrowly missed landing on him.

"Sorry," she murmured reflexively as he scampered away. Then he came back—or so she assumed. It could have been a different chipmunk. He raced ahead of her on the path and then turned to face her, standing upright with his paws together in a pleading gesture.

*Nut?*

The squeaky voice brought her up short, and her breath quickened. She looked around to make sure Flop was not nearby. Aunt Hester could have let him out after she left. But the orange cat was nowhere to be seen.

She met the chipmunk's beady gaze, her heart beating fast. "Did you say 'nut'?"

## *the warlock and the wolf*

*Yes, nut! Where are nuts?* His nose twitched and he did an impatient toddle, shifting from one foot to the other and back again.

After making sure that not a human soul was in sight, she dropped her voice to a whisper. "I don't know where the nuts are."

The chipmunk's shoulders sagged. *No nut?*

Her fear gave way to frustration, and she felt a little braver. "That's your job, isn't it?"

He squeaked and ran under a bush.

She hurried to the road, shaking with the realization that her hallucination was not limited to Flop. There was scarcely time to ponder this, however, because a robin landed on her shoulder, causing her to jump several feet and cry out in fright. The bird launched into the air, rasping Mina's cheek with one wing.

*Help! Help!*

The robin flew in a wide arc and came back, landing this time on the packed dirt of the road.

*Don't hurt me.*

Mina huffed and tried to regain her composure, even though there was only a bird watching her. "I'm not. You're the one landing on me."

The robin hopped along as Mina smoothed her hair and resumed her progress toward town.

*You talk.* The bird bounced closer, turning her head and fixing Mina with one eye.

"Yes, I talk. But you aren't really talking to me."

*I am talking.*

"No, it only seems that way. And I wish it would stop."

*Why?*

"Because it's disturbing. People can't communicate with animals. Everyone knows that."

## *delfy hall*

*You can. I heard you.*

“What, talking to the chipmunk?” She glanced behind her to make sure he wasn’t following her. What she saw made her gasp.

Two more birds, a blue jay and a starling, hopped down the middle of the road, and behind them ambled a badger and a hedgehog. They all froze when they saw her looking at them, and then started talking all at once.

*She sees me!*

*Wait, wait!*

*Too fast. Going too fast.*

Mina panicked and started running, which elicited protests from the badger and hedgehog but did not appear to distress the birds, who switched from hopping along the road to flying in circles above her.

She slowed down enough to wave her arms at them, as though warding off a swarm of flies. “Stop it!”

*What do you carry?*

*Give me some hair.*

*Sing a song.*

They flew closer to her, fanning her hair with their flapping wings.

“No! Get away!” She made a last swat with her arms and resumed her fast pace toward town. By the time she reached the bordering canal, all but one of the birds had peeled away, leaving only the robin, who kept asking about her bag and its contents.

She was concentrating so hard on ignoring the bird’s voice that Joris was almost upon her before she noticed him. He was approaching from town with a worried look on his face.

“Why were you waving at the air?”

She walked past him and he reversed direction, coming after her.

“Mina? What were you doing? You looked brainsick.”

*the warlock and the wolf*

"Nothing. Swatting away horseflies."

"In January?"

She sighed. "Remember what Hester said about not following me, Joris?"

"I wasn't—I promised Aunt I would bury that old woman. Did Aunt tell you about her?"

She wasn't sure how much her aunt wanted Joris to know. "She mentioned that someone died. What did she say about her to you?"

Joris shrugged. "Not much. I think she was just another herb woman. Aunt got a bad feeling about her last night while you were sleeping, so we wandered all over the woods and finally found her. The body was disgusting. Aunt said she probably hanged herself."

She grimaced. "Then you should go bury her."

"I don't really want to, though. It's so unsettling."

"You kill and cut up animals all day long. Burying a body should be nothing to you."

He shook his head. "It's different with people."

She was impatient to get away from him before another bird landed on her and started talking. "No, it isn't. We're all just meat. Now go. You promised Aunt. I have to get to the Molls'."

She left him standing on the outskirts of town and hurried toward the center.

The streets were bustling with activity—errand boys ran in all directions with notes clutched in their hands, while well-to-do merchants strutted past with an air of ownership, augmented by their wide-brimmed black hats. She passed a fruit and vegetable market, dodging matronly shoppers and red-faced children.

A few people on the street gave her a second look because of her unusual complexion and hair, but to many she was a familiar sight and aroused no surprise. Most would never have suspected,

however, that she was a scientist in training, and not a young housewife or kitchen maid. This thought usually gave her a sense of confidence when she walked among crowds. But her poise was still shaken by the robin's merry solicitations as the bird flew in a zig zag above her route to the Molls'. She hoped that no one but Joris would suspect her sanity.

Once she was inside the house on Veene Street, standing near the mud box, the robin's comments fell silent. She took a deep breath. Martha had finished the washing already and the kitchen was empty. She could hear Sophia somewhere in the house, talking and laughing, to either Martha or Mary, no doubt.

The clock in the parlor struck half past eight. She was thirty minutes late. She cast off her shoes and ran up the stairs to begin the day's work.

## CHAPTER 5



**B**EING INSIDE SEEMED to insulate Mina from anymore run-ins with talkative creatures, and the day went like any other. She composed entries for the compendium from her mentor's extensive notes on beetles, and reviewed his correspondence with other scientists, including a doctor named Willem Piso, who was working on a natural history of Brazil, where her father's family was from—a place she would like to see someday.

She didn't mention the strange animal voices to Pieter, who was concerned first about her wounded arm and as a close second about whether she succeeded in measuring a fox for the princess Amalia.

He scoffed at her report about the strix—no such animal existed—and didn't seem particularly concerned that an owl was killing bunches of sparrows. Then he laughed at her aunt's idea that her parents' murderer had escaped. If a criminal escaped

every time an old woman died, the city would be overrun with delinquents, he said. So she fell quiet, not wanting him to doubt her judgment, or her commitment to scientific reason.

Her last task of the day was to pick up a map for the compendium from an illustrator's shop. She hurried along Veene Street with her hood down, letting the last rays of waning sunlight warm her face. When she reached the market square, she almost collided with a town crier, who was proclaiming the latest news.

"Wigburg Weerts has been banished for defamation! Have no dealings with the defamer Wigburg Weerts, lest you run afoul of the law!" None of the people striding through the square paid much attention, except for a few little boys who followed the crier in his paces and laughed when he tried to swat them away.

Mina cleared the square and headed up Hoog Street. Behind her came the clip of little feet, closer and closer, until she whirled around. But no one was there. She kept walking, and heard the footsteps again. Just as the sound got close, she shot her hand behind her and grabbed, and came up with a little arm. A great giggling ensued.

"Hennie Moll, are you following me?" More giggling erupted, and she squeezed the little girl tight in a bear hug.

"Mama said I could tag along on your errand and then escort you back for dinner." Hennie brushed her red braids off her shoulders and beamed at Mina.

"How kind of you."

Hennie nodded. "I'm glad you're staying for dinner tonight. Mama has a special surprise for you."

"Is that so? Your mother and her surprises. This way." She pulled Hennie toward a shop door under a weathered sign.

Inside, the walls of the shop were covered floor to ceiling with cabinets, their glass doors lined with colored maps—of England, Holland, France, Germany, and every place in between. A few

### *the warlock and the wolf*

were of The Hague, from the previous century, when the city was smaller, and the surrounding woods thicker.

There was no one in the main room, and so she rang the bell on the counter. A minute later a hunched man with blackened fingertips and a shock of white hair came out of an adjoining door.

She cleared her throat and introduced herself, for she had never dealt with the old man himself—only his son, and then only a few times.

Hennie gasped as she gazed at the illustrator. “Look at your hair!” she whispered. Mina squeezed the girl’s hand in what she hoped was a disapproving way. Hendrick Hondius’s face flickered with a split second of emotion—whether good or ill Mina could not tell—and he made a quick bow.

“Please let me help you, ladies.”

“Do you have any adventure stories?” asked Hennie.

“Hennie, this is not a bookshop,” she said, a little embarrassed.

But Hendrick only laughed. “An honest mistake. Maps also make me think of adventure.”

“We don’t want to take up your time, Master Hondius. I just need to collect a map for Master Pieter Moll.”

Without a word, the old man went behind the wide wooden counter and disappeared behind some shelves. While Mina waited for the illustrator to return, Hennie stared at the maps in the cabinet doors.

He came back to the counter with a rolled-up paper in hand. “Here is the final draft,” he said, unrolling a map of Holland, done in black, blue, and green, with gold lettering. No roads were shown—only rivers, lakes, forests, and farmland.

“It looks wonderful.”

A smile played on his lips. “I’m pleased you like it. I hope Master Moll will approve.”

"I'm sure he will."

"He did a noble thing by taking you on. Of course, he is not easily frightened, like some people would be, by a man like that."

"A man like what?"

"The guilty party." He noticed the blank expression on her face. "You are the daughter of Rachel and Maerten Walraven, are you not?"

"Yes, I am, sir."

"Gregor, the man who killed them, is a warlock, you know. A tovenaar." He rolled up the map and slid it into a protective tube. "His heart is a black cavern that he fills with other people's misery."

She stared at him. "There is no—" But she thought better of her reply, wanting to be polite. "Master Moll doesn't believe in witches—or warlocks."

Hendrick snorted. "Of course he doesn't. Well, no matter. He's done a good thing. You tell him I asked after him."

"I will." She started to put the map into her sack, but then she paused. She had an urge to confide in the old man, though she had been in his presence only five minutes. Hennie was occupied and out of earshot, still mesmerized by the maps on display.

"Do you think it's possible that Gregor could have escaped?"

His gray eyes widened. "Do you have evidence of this?"

"My aunt says that someone named Leonara has died, and that this means Gregor is no longer being held in his cell."

Hendrick's gaze shifted to Hennie. "Little girl, if you like those maps, let me show you some more." He came around the counter and opened a door into private parlor, where more framed maps covered the walls. Hennie made sounds of delight and disappeared into the room, while the old man tottered back to Mina.

*the warlock and the wolf*

He spoke in a matter-of-fact tone, as though instructing a pupil. "I did not want the child to hear. If Leonara has died, then Gregor's cell is now as empty as a beggar's cup. I am sorry for you."

"Why?"

"Because you are now denied justice."

"But surely something can be done?"

He frowned. "Not much, I'm afraid, at least by the authorities. It will take someone of extraordinary powers to capture Gregor. My advice is to stay well out of the matter. He is extremely dangerous."

Her heart quickened. "Do you think my family is in danger?"

"Not if you keep out of his way." He gazed at her. "You are not thinking of pursuing him, are you?"

She shook her head. The thought had never occurred to her.

"Good." He appeared relieved.

Hennie burst out of the parlor, a look of wonder on her freckled face. "This place is magical!"

"Do you think so?" Hendrick winked at Mina while maintaining a deadpan expression.

"I know so!" Hennie clasped both hands to her face.

"Let's not be dramatic, Hennie—it's not polite," she said, trying not to laugh.

"You are welcome back anytime, ladies."

It struck her how clear and piercing Hendrick's gray eyes were—not clouded like those of many elders his age. He opened the door and bowed as they walked out.

Hennie took Mina's hands and spun her in a circle on the street. "I love that place. I want to go back tomorrow."

"Don't be silly. He is a great artist, with many demands on his time."

## *delfy hall*

"Miss Walraven!" Hendrick had come out of his shop a few feet behind them. "You have forgotten what you came for." He handed her the map and she blushed. Hennie beamed at him as though he were Sinter Klaus himself. "And the matter we discussed—I cannot recommend caution highly enough."

Before Mina could say thank you, he trotted back inside his shop.

"He really seems to like us. Probably because you're so pretty," said Hennie.

She laughed. "I don't think that was the reason."

"Mama says that if you would just make more of an effort, you would get a decent marriage proposal."

"Don't remind me. She's told me that many times."

"But you disagree?"

"Pick up the pace, Hennie. They'll be wondering where we are." She took the girl's hand and pulled her through the square, where the crier was still shouting about Wigburg.



After delivering the map to Pieter in his workroom, she came back downstairs. The Molls' little brown terrier, Dash, hopped down from his spot on a chair near a window and came prancing toward her. She eyed him warily, bracing herself for his doggy thoughts to intrude upon her mind. But he only sat on the toes of her shoes and looked up at her with beseeching eyes, his tail thumping on the floor. She smiled with relief and swooped him into her arms. The strix's poison was wearing off after all.

She knocked on one of the doors in the long hallway. It was opened by a portly red-haired woman accented with lace,

*the warlock and the wolf*

satin trim, and silk baubles. "At last, I have you all to myself," Sophia cried. Laughing gaily, she pulled Mina with Dash inside her dressing room. "There will be no talk of compendiums here, dear. Or the birds or the flowers, or whatever it is you're studying now. You must sit down and have a proper visit with me before dinner."

Sophia bustled her onto a brocaded sofa by the fire. Hennie was bent over her mother's jewelry box, putting multiple rings onto every finger. When she saw Dash, she lifted him onto her lap, but right away the little dog left her for Sophia, his favorite companion.

Mina was careful to put on a cheerful face for her mentor's wife, and tried to wipe all thoughts of Gregor and talking animals from her mind, at least for the moment.

"Darling, let me see your poor arm." Sophia reached for her hand and clucked over her bandage. "Is it hurting terribly? Pieter should not have made you come back to work so soon after your injury."

"No, I wanted to. We must finish the compendium in time to present to the stadtholder before Easter."

"And what will you do after that beastly book is completed? You cannot molder away in Pieter's workroom forever. Has your aunt not done anything about finding you a husband?"

Mina only shrugged. She refrained from telling Sophia that her aunt never mentioned the subject, which was fine with her.

"Well, we shall have to fatten you up if you have any hope of getting married. Of course, your hair is beautiful, a true asset." She stroked Mina's curls, and Mina felt herself relaxing under the woman's motherly touch.

"I had one of my dresses redone for you for tonight, and I think your first suitor will love it," Sophia said.

Mina's relaxation vanished. "Fifi! What suitor?"

"Adam Everts," she said, with a conspiratorial smile. "Pieter met him as soon as he arrived from his last post in Germany, and we are his first invitation among the entire town. So you will be ahead of all the other girls who might have their eye on him."

"I'm not ready to get married," Mina said.

"But your eighteenth birthday was three weeks ago. This is the time, my dear. What else are you going to do with your life?"

"I've told you—I want to succeed Pieter as Frederick Henry's naturalist. I must work night and day before that happens."

Sophia groaned as though in pain. "My dear, please stop this nonsense. You must get married for your own sake. Do you know how awful life is for women who are alone? Only witches and widows live alone."

"Well, I don't plan on becoming a witch, and if I don't get married I'll never be a widow—so, your fears are unfounded."

"But Papa says it's a woman's duty to get married and have children." Hennie's fingers were now completely encased in gold and silver and sparkling with diamonds, garnets, and amethysts.

"Quite right, darling," said Sophia. "And not just her duty, but her main joy in life, I might add." She took Hennie onto her lap. "Try on the dress I had taken in, and we can fix your hair. You'll look like a vision—won't she, darling?"

Hennie nodded. The tableau of mother and daughter gazing earnestly at Mina was too much to bear, and she acquiesced. She was mildly curious about the dress, and about Adam Everts, although she had no intention of becoming engaged to him, or anyone.

Sophia opened one of the room's several armoires, bursting with silks, ruffles, ribbons, and costume jewelry, much of it from her previous life in the theater, before she was redeemed by marriage to a scholar.

### *the warlock and the wolf*

She took a dark green dress out of the armoire. "Try it on, dear. It will look lovely with your skin tone." She gestured toward a screen, hung with slips, scarves, and bloomers.

Mina changed into the luxurious dress. She had never worn anything so beautiful or expensive, and she secretly hoped it might not fit, so that expectations for her meeting with the suitor would not be too high.

She came out from behind the screen and waited in silence while Sophia did up the buttons. The dress fit like a glove. Mina couldn't help laughing in wonder as she examined her reflection in the vanity mirror.

Sophia gasped. "I knew it was perfect for you."

"She's prettier than a queen." Hennie was breathless.

"Let's not get carried away." Mina sat down abruptly. "Hand me my shoes, Hennie, and I'll be ready."

"Oh, no, you won't get away so easily." Sophia turned Mina around on the bench to face the large vanity table and mirror and began brushing her hair. "So many tangles! You must use some of my walnut oil. It was your mother who first gave me some—her recipe, I believe. Now I have it made for me." She sprinkled a few drops of the oil onto Mina's light brown hair, which took on a lustrous shine. The sweet smell took Mina back to a memory of her mother, leaning over to tuck her into bed at night.

"What else can we do?" Hennie bounced with excitement.

"You will rouge her lips," said Sophia. Hennie opened the palette of rouge cream with a reverent air, and began dabbing Mina's lips with a silky brush.

All of this attention felt unnatural to Mina. She was afraid she would end up looking like a donkey with a hat on.

After decorating her with earrings, a necklace, and ribbons, mother and daughter turned her around to look in the mirror.

A heart-faced maiden stared back, stunned and unsettled. "Is that what I really look like?"

"Like an angel! How could he not fall in love immediately?" Sophia exclaimed.

"Do ministers fall in love, Mama? I thought they were supposed to be in love with God."

Mina groaned. "He's a minister? Why didn't you tell me?" She flew behind the screen and began fumbling at the buttons, trying to get out of the magnificent dress.

"Because it doesn't matter, dear!" Sophia followed her behind the screen and refastened each button Mina had undone. "Men are men no matter their occupation. He will be smitten at once, and you'll have a respectable, loving husband to do your bidding and fall at your feet in your private hours. I daresay he will have countless books in his house—these religious men usually do, and he may even let you buy your own volumes. Think of that, dear—your own private library!"

Mina rolled her eyes. "I've had a library since I could read, Fifi. That's not an inducement to marry. This plan is ridiculous."

Sophia looked as if she were about to cry. She took a scarf from the screen and threw it on the floor in a childish motion, though it merely wafted down like a feather on a breeze. Then she stumbled to a pink chair and fell onto it, making weeping noises while covering her face.

Mina kneeled and grasped her friend's hands. "I'm sorry, Fifi. Please don't be upset. I speak too directly sometimes. I know I shouldn't. Pieter tells me it will lead to trouble."

"Finally, the first sensible thing that man has said." Sophia sniffled, though her eyes were dry.

"You know I appreciate all you do for me. My mother loved you so much, and I do too. You're one of the only connections I have left to her."

*the warlock and the wolf*

Sophia squeezed her hand and smiled. "That is why I try to do these things that your mother would do, if she were here. It is not because of propriety that I push you to marry—I am hardly proper myself, with my unwholesome past, as Pieter calls it. It is because you will have no money, Mina. When Hester dies, Joris will get that house and all she owns, much as she would prefer it go to you, because he is her closest male heir. You must have a husband to survive."

"But not if I gain a position at court as a naturalist. When the compendium is published, Pieter will formally request that Frederick Henry appoint me as his eventual successor. Then I will be able to earn my living without marrying anyone, except if I wish to."

"Oh, Mina, how have you grown up so naive in the ways of the world? Have you been to court? Have you been to the legislature?"

"No, not yet."

"When you do, you will observe that every single person of power is male."

Mina was taken aback. "But that does not mean that I can't—"

"Yes, that is what it means! They see you as a girl, nothing more. An orphan who runs about in the woods and draws pictures of animals and plants. They will laugh at your request for any position."

"Pieter has never said any such thing—he is optimistic that I will be shown favor. He said that if someone as dark-skinned as my father can be admitted to the guild of alchemists, the court will accept me."

Sophia rolled her eyes. "My husband lives up in a cloud of books and scientific study, Mina. He does not see that your skin will never enter into it. It is your sex that is the problem."

*delfy hall*

“Is it not good to strive for ideals, then? To try to change society?”

“Yes, of course. But you risk so much. I do not want you to get left behind, without a family to take care of you.” Sophia began fixing Mina’s hair, which had come loose from its pins.

“My studies are everything to me. How can I give them up to wash and cook?”

“You will likely not have to do the actual washing and cooking—you will oversee it.”

“That’s nearly as boring.”

“It won’t be easy, it’s true. I missed the theater desperately after I married. And my friends . . . But life changes, and we must change with it.”

The Molls’ servant Mary appeared in the doorway.

“He’s here, madam.”

“Oh, he’s early! Come, Mina, you’re done.”

## CHAPTER 6



**T**HE YOUNG MAN standing in the foyer was strikingly handsome—blond with high cheekbones and pale blue eyes. He seemed more like a soldier than a minister, though he wore a minister's coat and collar. Mina had always thought of religious men as sickly and frail. But Adam looked as though he could chop a cord of wood in ten minutes.

Sophia descended upon him with enthusiasm, and then pushed Mina forward.

"This is my dear friend Wilhelmina Walraven," Sophia said.

Adam leaned in and kissed her cheek. He smelled like soap and something else—it could have been a flower essence that the church used.

"Enchanted to make your acquaintance, Miss Walraven," he said. Was it her imagination or was he standing a little closer to her than was proper? She moved a step back and smiled.

"Likewise," she said.

Sophia patted her shoulder. "Let's go into the parlor, and my husband will join us there."

The women sat together on the sofa, and Adam chose the armchair, where Pieter usually sat. Dash leaped onto the sofa next to Mina.

Hennie came into the parlor and scrutinized Adam. "You're in Papa's chair."

Sophia laughed. "Darling, he can sit wherever he likes. He is our guest." A note of nervousness had crept into her voice. "This is my daughter, Henriette. We call her Hennie. She is still working on her manners."

Adam smiled at Hennie. "Not to worry—you have lots of time. Some adults still have bad manners." He made a funny face at Hennie, who giggled.

"Do another one!"

Sophia intervened. "Hennie, go help Mary set the table. And don't get your clothes dirty."

A bit dejected, Hennie left the adults in the parlor.

"What a sweet child," said Adam. "She has a mild nature—I can tell. Just like her mother."

Mina repressed a snort, while Sophia blushed. "How kind of you. We are rather proud of her, probably more than is wise. Our other pride and joy is Mina. She is incredibly accomplished."

"Do tell me. I love to hear of ladies' accomplishments. They are so varied and fascinating. In Leiden I met one young lady who had invented a new form of cross-stitching. Her local tailors' guild found it very useful, and it has become quite popular."

Sophia patted Mina's hand. "Tell our guest all that you have been doing as an apprentice for Pieter." She turned back to Adam. "I don't know if he told you—my husband is a scientist."

"The stadtholder's naturalist, Fifi," said Mina.

*the warlock and the wolf*

"Yes, yes. Go on, tell him."

"I assist Master Moll in all of his studies of the natural world. I observe and gather specimens, I dissect plants and animals"—she gave an involuntary frown—"I do some drawing, and I write many of the descriptions that will form the book we are working on. It is a compendium of Holland's flora and fauna."

"A comprehensive volume? Most impressive."

Mina listened for any reluctance or irony in Adam's reaction, but he seemed equally as enthusiastic as he had been about cross-stitch.

"And tell me, to collect these specimens, you must be a skilled hunter?"

She shook her head. "I can't abide it. I won't do it."

"But you said you collect specimens."

"I was referring to plants. The animals I merely observe and make sketches of."

"But how do you get them to stand still long enough? And in that case why wouldn't you go ahead and have someone dispatch them? Then you would have a specimen of each animal you observe, which I'm sure would please the stadtholder."

"I suppose I feel too much for them to have them killed." Dash startled her by jumping onto her lap and licking her chin.

"That creature must go outside," said Sophia, reaching for Dash. He growled and bared his teeth at her, and she drew back, blinking. "What a vile animal! He has never treated me so ill before!"

Mina continued petting him, and he closed his eyes, the picture of contentment. "I guess he likes me more than I thought," she said, laughing.

"Yes, to the point of jealousy, it seems," said Adam.

Sophia was not deterred. "Come now, Mina—throw him off or your dress will be ruined."

"I am here!" Pieter called out in a deep voice from the front room.

Sophia sighed with relief. "My husband is finally done with his work. Please come to the dining room when you are ready. Adam, I'm sure you must be ravenous." She bustled out of the room, leaving Mina alone with him.

"I think you have a way with that dog," he said. "Do you know what a familiar is?"

She cocked her head. "Something to do with witchcraft?"

"They are the pets of witches that enhance their powers. Some say a familiar can take on the appearance of a person for a short time, even."

"That sounds like it would be interesting, if witchcraft were real."

Adam merely smiled at her and stood, offering her his hand. "Shall we meet the others in the dining room?"

She felt suddenly shy. She could smell his soap scent again. Dash gave her a mournful look as she emptied him from her lap and took Adam's hand in hers. His grip was smooth and warm.

He led her out of the parlor and into the dining room.

"Are we all here? Excellent," Pieter said, and pulled out his chair at the head of the table. Everyone else followed suit, and once seated, Pieter reached for the top of a soup tureen.

Adam cleared his throat. "Shall I say grace, Master Moll?"

Pieter abruptly replaced the tureen cover. "What was I thinking? Please do. And call me Pieter."

"Certainly, sir."

Pieter looked with deliberation at Mina and then bowed his head. Mina bowed hers without closing her eyes.

Adam began. "Lord, our father, bless this meal, and help make us worthy of thy love. Help us destroy your enemies and smite evildoers wherever they may show themselves. Give us courage

## *the warlock and the wolf*

to take the righteous path, the hard path, as your son Jesus Christ did all his life. In your name, Amen."

"Amen." Pieter dug out a big helping of mutton stew and plopped it into his bowl. As the serving plates and bowls were passed around the table, Adam watched Mina with curiosity.

"You take no meat?" he asked.

"No, I eat mostly grains and vegetables."

"Are you not afraid of growing sickly? Meat grows the flesh on our bones."

"Please do what you can to convince her," said Sophia. "She insists on this mad regimen since she was eight years old."

"I have too much feeling for animals to hunt or eat them, Mr. Everts."

"Then how you have such a lovely figure is a true miracle."

Mina blushed and looked down. She was not used to a man talking about her appearance, or her eating choices, in front of others. Joris sometimes paid her a clumsy compliment when they were alone.

"Oh, she is a radiant flower," said Sophia. "Her mother was beautiful also, far past her youth. Mina's beauty will endure for many years."

Mina was mortified. They were discussing her like a sow at the market. Next they would speculate on how many children she might bear.

"What about your accomplishments, Mr. Everts? I would love to hear of what brought you to our city," said Mina.

"I have recently come from Germany, where I hunted witches."

"Witches! How thrilling!" cried Sophia.

Hennie stopped chewing, her eyes as big as ducats.

"Was that a part of your religious duty?" Pieter's tone was matter-of-fact and impossible for Mina to decipher.

"The church does not endorse my efforts, but it does not stop them, either."

"You must tell us all about it," said Sophia.

Mina nodded. "Yes, please do."

Adam smiled at her, and she felt a sudden secret flutter in her chest. "The Germans have a great talent for rooting out witches, and I learned much from my parishioners, things that you will not read in any book. Witches act in threes—three people made ill, three livestock killed, three children taken, and so forth. Sometimes it is not three things alike, and so you must be watchful for that. Also, they attract pestilence, such as snakes and toads, cockroaches, flies. Wherever you see such creatures near humans, there is sure to be a witch in the mix."

Mina felt something touch her hand. A dormouse was curling up for a nap in her napkin. She covered it with the ends of the cloth. "What about mice? Are they a pestilence?" she asked.

Adam nodded. "Indeed—I've seen mice sit on the shoulders of witches as they stand trial."

Pieter looked skeptical. "Mice can be trained, like any other animal."

"What about owls? Are they drawn to witches?" Mina tried to keep her voice even, as though she had only a mild interest.

"They often serve as their familiars. But I thought you didn't believe in witchcraft, Miss Walraven."

"Please call me Mina. And I don't. Maybe you haven't heard that Holland no longer pays heed to claims of witchcraft. We have a tolerant society now. Old spinster women whom no one likes are left in peace here, not tied up and burned to death."

Sophia gave her a wide-eyed stare. But Adam seemed unperturbed by her outspokenness.

*the warlock and the wolf*

"Ah, but that is precisely why I have come back, to raise the alarm. We cannot let down our guard. And witches can also be men, called warlocks."

"Ooo, warlocks. Did you hear that, darling?" Sophia looked at her husband.

"My hearing is excellent, dear."

"Does this mean, then," asked Mina, "that you believe in witchcraft? That you believe that these women—and men—use supernatural abilities to do evil?"

"Of course. I would not be much of a witch hunter if I did not."

Sophia was enraptured. "It's all so exciting! Perhaps Mina could help you. She is adept at navigating the woods to the north. That is where witches are supposed to live, isn't it—in the woods?"

"Fifi!"

"What, dear?"

"I cannot spend my time on a wild goose chase. I have real work to do on the compendium."

"I would be most grateful for your advice about this area, Mina," said Adam. "I want to become acquainted with it as quickly as possible, so that I can begin my work."

"Perhaps he can find Gregor Franssen," Pieter said, winking at Mina.

"Pieter!" Sophia was aghast. "Do not say that name at our table. We have a child present." Her eyes made a dramatic shift to Hennie, as though Pieter would not know which child she meant.

"Hennie knows all about Gregor already. Don't you?"

Hennie smiled and nodded at her father, clearly pleased at being included in the conversation.

*delfy hall*

"It's all right, Fifi. I am the one who brought it up, earlier today. Aunt thinks he has escaped from prison."

Pieter rolled his eyes. "A ludicrous notion."

Sophia looked from her husband to Mina. "And is it true?"

"I don't know, honestly."

Adam raised his eyebrows. "And who is this person?"

"He is the man who murdered my parents, when I was eight. My aunt thinks—and other people do—that he is a warlock, as you described."

Adam nodded. "Then it is certainly possible that he has escaped. Such a feat would be child's play for a warlock."

Pieter cleared his throat. "If the man has escaped, we will find out when we go to the Binnenhof tomorrow."

Adam frowned. "But you must take steps to protect yourself in the meantime. Warlocks can be vindictive. Please allow me to walk you home after dinner, Mina."

Sophia brightened. "She would be happy to."

"Fifi, I don't need protection."

"But why take a chance? Don't you agree, Adam?"

"I do. I would also like to make my parishioners aware of this man."

"So you have a church already?" Mina asked.

"Yes—the Cloister Church." He glanced at Sophia. "I would be honored if your family attended my first sermon."

Sophia nodded. "Of course! We would be delighted." She looked at Pieter, who was examining a spot on the tablecloth with great attention.

Hennie frowned, confused. "But we don't go—"

"Don't talk with your mouth full, darling." Sophia covered the lower half of Hennie's face with her napkin.

"I hope you will be able to join us, Mina."

*the warlock and the wolf*

She was caught off guard again by Adam's smile. "I—I will have to ask my aunt first."

Sophia waved away her comment. "Hester lets you do whatever you want, Mina."

"Then I hope you will *want* to join us," Adam said.

The room fell silent, as though everyone at the table were holding their breath.

"To be honest, I have never enjoyed church."

"Mina!" Sophia's cry startled the mouse, who jumped out of Mina's lap and hit the floor with a squeak. Hennie heard it and looked under the table. "Of course you enjoy church! Please forgive her, Adam—I think her new dress is too tight. It's making her light-headed."

Adam appeared unfazed. "I assure you I am not offended. Such feelings are more common than you might think. Perhaps I can change your mind about church, Mina. What are your beliefs concerning providence?"

Mina hesitated. "I've never given it much thought."

"Really? Do you mind saying why?"

He waited for Mina to hold forth, but it was not a subject she was eager to tackle, at least not with a minister. Luckily she was saved by Sophia's trilling laughter.

"Why don't we leave the philosophy for another time? I'm afraid it might interfere with our digestion."



After putting on their coats and exchanging civilities with their hosts, Mina and Adam left the Molls'. He offered her his arm, which she declined. As they walked past the house, Hennie's face appeared in the far window, contorted into her impression of a scary monster.

*delfy hall*

"A sweet child, isn't she?" Adam asked.

"She has her moments," said Mina.

They turned the corner and walked in silence to the Hofvijver, which reflected the light from the torches of the majestic Binnenhof, and the waning moon. The lake's surface was unbroken, all the swans having nested out of sight for the evening. The only movement was the rustling of a few dead leaves that still hung on the oak tree on the lake's island.

"Is it very far?"

"Just under two miles. My aunt and I live in some woods behind the Arendsdorp farm. That's where I do many of my field observations."

A skylark landed on her shoulder with a pip and a rustle of wings. She steeled herself for a strange voice, but none came. She relaxed, taking it as final proof that the strix's poison had indeed worn off. The lark peeped as she stroked his feathery head with her finger.

"Is that one of your pets?"

"No, I've never seen him before." The bird had a plump breast and bright white edging on his feathers, visible in the light from one of the street lanterns. "He looks like he's doing well for himself."

"But why has it landed on your shoulder?"

"I have no idea."

"Do you keep bird seed in your pocket?"

"No, but Hennie could have put some in my hair. It's the kind of thing she would do." She chuckled.

"It's quite astonishing the way that animals seem to seek you out."

"It doesn't usually happen, I assure you. Usually I seek them out."

## *the warlock and the wolf*

They wound their way north from the Binnenhof and reached the bordering canal of the city. Away from the fires and steam of The Hague, the full briny smell of the sea washed over them.

"It will be good for my soul to be so near the water, and the clean air," said Adam, taking a deep breath. He followed her across the bridge over the canal and onto the small dirt road. She held up the lantern she carried so that her companion could see his new surroundings. A few evergreen trees grew in the fields on either side of the road, and the wind rustled their branches.

Without warning, the lark launched into the air. In one of the trees, a branch broke, and the cracking sound swept across the empty space.

"There is something amiss." Adam's blue eyes were wide with alarm. "I can sense it. We should turn back."

"Nothing is wrong—it was just a limb falling."

"No, there is something out here." He took the lantern from her and held it out past the edge of the road, peering into the gloom. She noticed that one of his nostrils twitched.

"I promise you, there is noth—"

Then she saw the silhouette of a wolf sitting about a hundred feet away, watching them.

Adam gasped. "My God, is that a wolf? What is it doing so close to the city?"

"I don't know. Maybe he is separated from his pack."

"He? How do you know it is a he?"

"Because of the size." She took his hand. "Come on—we're almost there." But when she tried to lead him forward, he dropped her hand.

"I think we should turn back."

"We'll be fine—he's not interested in hurting us."

"How on earth could you know that?"

"I think I've seen him before."

Adam spent another minute staring across the field at the wolf, who remained motionless.

She grew impatient. "I told you—nothing is going to happen." Still he peered into the dark, his nostril twitching. She stomped away.

"Wait! I am coming." He caught up with her and took her hand again. "You must appreciate why I'm concerned. The warlock could have sent it after you."

"I doubt it."

"And why do you dismiss this idea?"

"Because I've observed this particular wolf already. I am a scientist, you know." She neglected to mention that warlocks were not real.

"That doesn't mean you're infallible."

Her face reddened. She hadn't expected to have her faults examined on this short walk home.

"I'm sorry, Mina. That was rude of me to say."

"No—it's true. I should probably remember it more often."

Ahead of them, framed by some hemlock trees, the lights of her aunt's cottage appeared in the dark.

"See? We're almost there."

*He is weak.*

She whipped around and faced the road behind them. The wolf had disappeared.

"What is it?"

"Nothing. I thought I heard something."

"We're both as jumpy as snakes now. Let's get you inside before that wolf changes his mind."

He pressed his palm against the small of her back, urging her along the road. She realized that he was making it clear that he liked her.

*the warlock and the wolf*

*He cannot protect you.*

She looked behind them again. The fields were motionless. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Adam watching her.

*Who is there?* she asked silently.

*I will come to you after he leaves.*

"It's nothing," she said to Adam, and squeezed his hand.

The two of them left the road and took the narrow path leading to the cottage, one of its windows glowing with light from the fireplace.

Through the glass she could see Hester fast asleep in her chair in front of the fire, with a book lying across her stomach and her glasses fallen onto her chin.

"Shall I come in?" asked Adam.

"I think you should leave me here. My aunt is asleep." She handed him the lantern.

"Promise me you will tell her what happened—about the wolf."

"I promise."

He kissed the back of her glove. "It was a pleasure to make your unusual acquaintance. I will be calling on you soon."

She smiled. "Good-night, then."

She went inside and watched him through the window as he trudged back to the road, the lantern held aloft. When he was out of earshot, she eased the door open again, careful not to wake her aunt. She listened, waiting. There was only the sound of the wind, and the barking of a dog somewhere far away. Nothing stirred, or spoke.



## CHAPTER 7



**M**INA LEFT HER aunt sleeping in the cottage and crept into the hemlocks. Without a lantern, their cover was enough to pitch her into deep darkness. But she walked without any uncertainty, having learned every dip and bump surrounding the house since she was a child and first came to Hester's after her parents died.

She remembered being out here in the mornings, after breakfast, playing in the deep shade, the feel of brittle hemlock needles under her fingers. In her imaginary game, her parents were going to come for her, and she had to get ready—brushing her hair, and putting on her best clothes. They were finally going to be together again, a happy family. Her father was going to swing her into his strong embrace, and her mother was going to call her “mistletoe.”

*delfy hall*

Then Hester would open the door and call for her, breaking her out of her daydream, and she would go back to the reality of being an orphan.

She walked into the middle of the hemlocks, where the dark was deepest. She sat down cross-legged on the ground and waited. The wind picked up speed, prompting her to pull her cape tighter and cross her arms.

*You sent him away?*

She spun around. Two eyes glowed in the dark. The outline of a giant wolf was barely visible.

“Is that you talking to me?” she asked out loud.

*There is no one else here.* His voice was gruff and deep inside her mind.

She cursed under her breath.

*What is wrong, girl?*

She met the animal’s glowing gaze. “I thought my sickness had worn off. But clearly it hasn’t. I’m still hearing voices.”

*You are not sick.*

“How do you know that?”

*Because I would smell it.*

It did seem probable that wolves could smell disease. But that did not mean that the voice wasn’t an illusion coming from her own head. “But how do I know that it is really you talking to me?”

*You need proof. Here, I will lift my paw.*

The wolf blinked. She wondered if she had misheard him.

Then his massive front foot came off the ground.

So it was true—she was actually talking to this beast. The impossible was happening at this very moment. Her mind stalled, like a ship teetering on the crest of a great wave, and then plunged into motion.

*the warlock and the wolf*

"How are you able to talk—are you a witch?" she asked.

*Animals are not witches.*

"But how are you able to understand me?"

He sat down a few feet away. She noticed again the white fur shining on his muzzle and chest, and thought he must have been about three feet tall at the shoulder.

*I don't know.*

She found herself regretting her choice to sit down. The creature's jaws could be at her throat before she could stand. "Why are you following me?"

*I am not. These woods are my home.*

"You should be hunting, and finding a mate, not following a woman around, unless you plan to kill me."

*If I were going to kill you, you would be dead already.*

She believed him, although he sounded a little arrogant. "Why did you protect me from that creature—the strix?"

He yawned, showing off gleaming rows of teeth. *Because I took pity on you. You are brave but foolish. Like a cub after his first hunt.*

She felt herself bristle at this assessment. "I could have managed, somehow."

*She would have torn off your face and left you to rot.*

"Why is she so dangerous? You are the second person—I mean creature—to tell me so."

*You should listen.*

"Do you know why she was killing sparrows?"

*No. She has killed many over the last few days.*

"Can you talk to her, as you talk to me?"

The wolf blinked and sighed, as though suffering from her ignorance. *I talk only to my own kind.*

"And to me, apparently."

## delfy hall

*Perhaps because of your color. You are different from the others.*

"I don't think so. I think the strix's talons did something to me."

*It is possible.* The wolf lowered his front half to the ground and began licking the top of one of his paws.

"Does this mean that I'm now a witch?"

He didn't look up from his grooming. *No. You are a foolish girl who will get herself killed from too much kindness. I have seen you before.*

"What do you mean? When?"

*I have seen you putting a bird back into its nest.*

She frowned. "Why shouldn't I be kind, if it helps someone?"

*It is not the way of nature.*

"But you were kind to me."

He met her eyes again. *That was different. The strix serves an evil master.*

"Do you mean Gregor?"

*The wolves call him the kymaa. He has been seen near here.*

Her heart quickened. "He killed my parents." An unexpected rush of tears came to her eyes. She hadn't cried over their deaths since she was a child.

The wolf studied her while she conquered her distress.

*Then it is right I saved you, so you can avenge their deaths and protect the rest of your family.*

"What? No—I don't want to kill anyone."

*Again, too much kindness. He will take advantage of it.* The wolf lifted his broad head and sniffed the air. *I am leaving.*

"Wait, tell me how—" The words stuck in her throat as he lunged toward her. His fur brushed her cheek, and then he was gone, speeding into the heart of the forest.



Mina lay in bed, listening to the sounds of her aunt walking around her own bedroom on the other side of the wall, and then the bed creaking, and finally all was still. She had shut Flop out of the bedroom so that he couldn't wake her in the night, demanding to be petted. Occasionally she could hear him grumbling to himself from his spot near the fireplace, but eventually he must have fallen asleep, because the house was silent.

Her aunt had barred the cottage door, a rare occurrence. Would it keep Gregor out, Mina wondered, if he came here looking for—what, exactly? Revenge? Her family hadn't wronged him—quite the opposite. She should be hunting him, if she were the kind of person who sought vengeance.

The bedclothes grew too hot, and she rolled from one side of the mattress to the other, unable to sleep. Her conversation with the wolf had sparked something she didn't want to think about—the grief of losing her parents, and the buried irrational feeling that she was responsible in some way. She couldn't tamp down a rising fear of losing more of her family. Gregor had been seen nearby, the wolf said. What was he doing here? He had all of Holland to hide in—all of the world, in fact. The Hague was where he would be most recognized. So why stay here?

Animals didn't take risks without the prospect of reward, and she suspected the same was true for people. There must be something in The Hague that was worth the risk of getting caught again. If he was here to do harm, she had to stop him. She didn't want to kill him, but she wouldn't let more of her family be murdered.

*delfy hall*

The only clue she had to Gregor's behavior was the strix. According to the wolf, the strix was killing the sparrows on Gregor's orders, something she didn't think possible. Of course, a few days ago she would have said it was not possible to talk to a wolf. But now she knew differently.

The strix was the only trail she had to follow. A good scientist, she believed, followed where the evidence led.

## CHAPTER 8



**M**INA CARRIED THE box in front of her as though it held a pie, trying to buffer its precious contents from the crush of the morning crowd. In Spui Street, a man smelling of beer fell sideways into her, and she shoved him away with a thrust of her shoulder. He swayed and toppled into a nearby stack of wooden crates. Ordinarily she would not have been so ruthless, but the box she was carrying held all her hope for a future as a scientist.

Before leaving the house, she had asked Pieter again about the strix's curious hunting behavior. He gave no opinion on the matter, but said only that they must prepare for their appointment that day. Nevertheless, her mind kept turning around the question—why would a predator leave a kill untouched?

She quickened her pace and caught up to Pieter, who strode through the crowd, touching the ground every few feet with his walking stick.

“Have you ever seen an animal make a kill without eating anything? And then kill another one of the same species immediately?”

Pieter shrugged. “Perhaps the first one was ill. That would explain why she sought another one.”

“But she didn’t eat that one either. And there were other dead sparrows littering the ground. You said yourself that animals don’t expend energy without a reason. What does it mean?”

Her mentor sighed. “I don’t know, Mina. Not everything means something. Animals can behave irrationally. Here we are. Look sharp.”

They crossed a bridge over the Binnenhof’s moat and passed through the main gate. In the center of the courtyard stood the Ridderzaal, with its grand facade and twin spiked towers. Statesmen and nobles came and went from the arched doorway, while around the courtyard milled shoppers and traders, perusing the bookstalls and carts of household wares that were allowed to set up during the day.

A few minutes after stating their business to the guard at the stadtholder’s quarters in the southeast corner of the complex, a somber escort led them inside, to a small, austere room with uncomfortable benches, where they waited for about an hour. Then another dire-faced escort led them into the receiving hall, packed with courtiers and thick with perfume. Lords and ladies of the nobility swooshed by them, wrapped in satin, lace, and taffeta, their wigs piled high and makeup thick on their faces.

Mina felt as plain as a daisy among roses in her simple linen dress with white collar and cap. She could hear bits of French and English, which she could understand some of, German and Spanish, which she understood none of, plus other languages she couldn’t identify.

*the warlock and the wolf*

A court attendant shooed them into a corner and told them to wait. They would be seen before supper.

"But it's ten in the morning!" she said to Pieter, a little loudly so the attendant would hear as he walked away.

The attendant looked back, his upper lip curled. "The Prince of Orange has many demands on his time."

She peered around a column at the front of the hall. "The stadtholder's not even here, though. It's just a bunch of fancy people stuffing themselves with food."

"Keep your voice down, Mina. People are listening," said Pieter.

She studied the reveling courtiers, most of whom were already in their cups. "They don't seem to be listening to anyone but themselves."

Pieter touched her shoulder. "Mina, look at me."

She turned and locked eyes with her mentor. "When we go before the stadtholder, you must look him in the eye, but don't be threatening. Use a light touch, especially when I tell him we have surveyed the foxes for Princess Amalia."

"Use a light touch with my eyes?"

"With your expression. Don't stare at him like you do when you disagree with someone, or he will see what you think of his opinion. Remember that you need his favor, and his wife's, if you are to succeed me. Be as serious as a scientist should be, but humble and ever willing to serve."

"Are you going to tell him about the strix and all the dead sparrows?"

"Certainly not—it doesn't merit his attention. The man is trying to negotiate a peace treaty with Spain. He does not care about dead birds."

"But how do you explain it?"

## *delfy hall*

“Can you not just do what I tell you without arguing?”

“I will consider it.”

She saw no reason to sit waiting without nourishment while all those around them gorged themselves on the lavish feast. She piled a plate with fruits, nuts, and breads and brought it back to the bench, where she and Pieter ate and drank until they dozed off, leaning against the wall.

She awoke when a man jostled her arm. “It is nearly your turn to go before his highness. Follow me.”

She woke Pieter, and the two of them followed the man to the front of the hall, which was now quiet and quite devoid of merry-making. They stood behind a rope cordoning off the area just in front of the platform, where the Prince of Orange, a pallid, elderly man bedecked in furred robes, sat in a gilded chair. Frederick Henry’s face was kindly, despite the obvious discomfort brought by long months of illness. His hand clutched a handkerchief, with which he muffled his cough. Next to him sat his wife, whose neck, ears, and fingers glinted with heavy jewelry. She cast a skeptical glance at Mina, and then began whispering to her son, William, a young, pretty man with a silly mustache, who never took his eyes from his father while his mother chatted on. Mina wondered if the stadtholder ever noticed the anger that was so obvious in his son’s leveling stare.

The man currently occupying the restricted area was dismissed, and a guard gestured for Mina and Pieter to come forward.

Pieter gave a deep bow, and she did her best curtsy. A man with a dark beard and hair stepped to the front of the platform and held up a scroll of paper.

“That is Master Huygens, the stadtholder’s secretary,” Pieter whispered to her.

The man cleared his throat and assumed a ceremonial air. “Master Pieter Moll and Miss Wilhelmina Walraven! Please

*the warlock and the wolf*

report on your progress regarding the work commissioned by the stadtholder and Prince of Orange, his highness Frederick Henry.”

Mina puffed up a little at the mention of her name. Finally, someone of importance would know of her abilities.

“You have some work to show me?” The stadtholder’s voice was gravelly and deep.

“Yes, your highness.” Pieter took the box of illustrations from Mina and gave it to an attendant, who carried it up to the platform. There the box was opened and the sheets of paper handed one by one to Frederick Henry, Amalia, and finally William, who thrust them with impatience at Huygens. Mina winced as they handled the pages.

“Very pretty pictures. Ah, the wolf.” Frederick Henry gave the drawing an admiring glance and then passed it to his wife.

William frowned. “Those creatures are a nuisance and a danger to our farmers and villagers. We would be better off without them.”

“My son speaks his mind.” The stadtholder smiled at Pieter. “I have many of their pelts, so I won’t complain too much about them.”

Pieter nodded. “Your highness, the wolf does keep deer and many other creatures in check, which otherwise would devastate farmers’ crops.”

“Oh, I am sure they serve a purpose. Most things on this earth do. Except for Spaniards, perhaps.”

The audience chuckled.

“Your highness, I would like to introduce you to my apprentice.”

“Very well. Call him forward.”

“This is she—Wilhelmina Walraven.”

Mina gave another curtsy. She tried to return the prince's gaze lightly, as Pieter had instructed, but she found herself failing.

"But this is your servant girl, is it not?"

"She assists my work. She is also a skilled naturalist and scientist in her own right, and I hope, with your permission, she may succeed me as stadtholder's naturalist someday. She is co-author of your compendium and is responsible for the work on all of the species you just viewed."

"You are a proud mentor. Very well. We shall see how good her work proves to be in the finished product, which I assume I shall have by Easter, as you promised?"

"Yes, your highness. Also, we have surveyed the red foxes in the northern woods and I have the measurements that the princess requires." Pieter held up a piece of paper, which an attendant retrieved.

Mina felt her mouth turn down, though she fought to make it smile, or at least look neutral.

"I believe your apprentice wants to speak," said the princess, toying with the pendant on one of her necklaces.

"I beg your pardon, your highness, but she does not. It is only a case of nerves."

"Look at her! She is fairly bursting with opinion. Spit it out, girl scientist."

There was another round of gay laughter through the hall. Pieter stared at the floor.

Mina knew what he wanted her to do, but she could not do it. "It is the red foxes, your highness. Killing them for a bedcover is a terrible waste of life, and an affront to nature. I beg the princess to reconsider."

There was silence on the platform. Tapping her fingers on the heavy arm of her chair, the princess regarded Mina as though

*the warlock and the wolf*

she were a new type of insect. "Man is also of nature, though we would like to forget it. We are taking only what is our due, by right of being the greatest predator, like the lion killing the sheep. I have no doubt the foxes would do the same to us, had they the power."

There was a bit of careful tittering from the audience.

Frederick Henry patted his wife's hand and appeared about to speak, but Mina spoke first.

"But shall we not strive to be better than the animals in our treatment of them?"

Pieter cut her off. "My apprentice is a budding philosopher, as you can see, your highness. We have taken up too much of your time. I do apologize." He bowed, and Mina followed his lead. But she knew she must say one more thing.

Frederick Henry handed the last illustration back to Huygens. "She is young, that is all. Bring her next time, with the book."

The court attendant gestured for them to leave.

She screwed up her courage. "With permission, your highness, I must ask for your help."

Pieter looked at her with fresh astonishment, and mouthed the word "no." But she couldn't let him dissuade her.

"Yes, miss?" The stadtholder waited, blinking, appearing a little stunned by her audacity.

"Gregor Franssen has escaped his cell at Gevangenpoort, where he was imprisoned for murdering my parents. I ask for your help in apprehending him."

Behind her the crowd buzzed. Pieter put a hand on her arm, as though he were preparing to yank her off her feet. The stadtholder glanced at Huygens, who nodded.

"Yes, young lady, we are aware of his escape. I assure you that the police are doing all they can to find him."

## *delfy hall*

Pieter's grip on her arm loosened, and she took the chance of pushing further. "But the authorities' efforts are clearly not enough. He is in the area—I have heard about it."

Frederick Henry nodded and held up his hand. "If he is here, he will be caught, sooner or later. The city does not need my interference in this matter."

The crowd's murmuring grew louder, and the attendants shouted for silence while Frederick Henry covered his face with his handkerchief and coughed into it. Then, without looking at Mina, he waved at the attendant, who ushered—or rather pushed—her and Pieter away from the platform and back into the crowd.

She stole a look at Princess Amalia, expecting to receive her famed haughty stare. But a lady's maid had engaged the princess in close conversation. Instead it was William who sneered at Mina, his mustache lifting like a caterpillar over his curled lip.



As she and Pieter walked through an ornate room adjacent to the hall, on their way back to the courtyard, quick steps pursued them. She turned around, nervous that her remarks had gone beyond the pale and truly angered the stadtholder. But the tall red-bearded military man behind them smiled and removed his hat for a quick bow, the sword at his side jutting out as he did so.

Pieter bowed, and she curtsied, a little startled at the prospect of speaking with Count Johan Maurits of Nassau Siegen. But his manner seemed pleasant enough.

"Master Moll, do you have a moment?"

Her mentor straightened his shoulders and extended his hand to the man.

*the warlock and the wolf*

“Of course, your excellency. It is a pleasure to see you in the city, back from the campaigns. Can we be of some service to you?”

“Let me explain myself, Master Moll. I do not normally go running through the halls of the Binnenhof. But upon seeing Miss Walraven’s face, I was struck immediately by her resemblance to a servant of mine in Brazil. The similarities are so obvious that I had to ask whether she is some relation.”

Pieter glanced at Mina. “One side of her family did come from Brazil, sir. Her skin color may be similar to many people there who are of mixed race.”

Johan shook his head. “Not her skin color. I mean that she looks very like one particular person—a good friend, actually, named Simon Yoruba. He served me with absolute loyalty and fortitude. One of the most intelligent of his race I have ever encountered. He spoke Dutch, Portuguese, English, French, and *lingua geral*, one of the native languages.”

Pieter stammered, and Mina recognized that her tutor did not know how to respond. She jumped into the conversation without being addressed.

“That name is not familiar to me, sir. My father’s family was from Brazil, however, so I am sure many of the people there share my features. I myself speak a little bit of all of those languages.”

“That only strengthens my suspicion that you are related. How did your family come here?”

“My grandmother was brought to Zeeland on a slave ship, but she was freed a few days later because Middelburg did not allow slavery.”

The count nodded. “I have heard of that case—fascinating. But your resemblance to my friend is uncanny. If I had my illustration of him with me, I could show you.”

## *delfy hall*

Pieter looked a bit nervous. "Another time, perhaps?"

"Yes, I will see to it. Miss Walraven, I was most concerned to hear that your parents' killer has escaped. Do let me know if I can be of some assistance to you."

"You are too kind." She curtsied again, and finally the count took his leave, his boots clicking on the wooden floor as he returned to the main hall.

She noticed that her tutor's hands were shaking.

"The arrogance of that man—comparing you to a slave and speculating on your lineage, as though he were a horse trader. I would like to use that ridiculous sword to dissect his brain and see what causes his tactlessness."

"He didn't imply anything that wasn't true—I am descended from slaves." She tugged on the sleeve of his jacket. "Please, come away, before someone hears you. He didn't mean any harm."

It was nearly dinner-time, and she wanted to get home. She did not have an especially high opinion of the count, given that he had made his fortune on the backs of slaves in the sugar plantations of Brazil. But his comments did not bother her. Strangers found excuses to remark upon her skin every week, it seemed, and there was little animosity behind it—only ignorance and curiosity. And in any case, she had much greater things to worry about.

Pieter finally relented, and they hurried out of the Binnenhof.



Once they were outside the gates, Pieter put a gloved hand on her arm. "I want to escort you home in the wagon."

It was nearly dark, and the temperature was dropping. On the street, people were hurrying to and fro, carrying baskets laden with food for that night's dinner.

*the warlock and the wolf*

"But I can walk like always."

"Not tonight. I want to tell your aunt that Gregor has indeed escaped. There is probably no danger to you, but I want the two of you to stay with us for the time being. When we get back to the house, run upstairs with the drawings and I'll have the horses brought around."

"I told you, Hester already knows of his escape. She's the one who told me."

"Good. Then there won't be any surprises."

"We wouldn't need to stay with you if Gregor could be caught. Why won't the stadtholder help?"

"Be thankful that Frederick Henry treated you so well, Mina. You did exactly what I told you not to about the foxes."

"I had to! If I don't tell them it's wrong to kill animals for such a trivial purpose, who will?"

"No one! That's the point—he's the stadtholder, and he can do what he wants. You took a very big risk, and you may have destroyed your chance of succeeding me."

"I don't think so. He wants me to come back when you deliver the compendium."

Pieter grunted. "Probably so the princess can belittle you again."

"What a horrible family," she said under her breath, remembering William's parting sneer.

They had arrived at the Molls' house, but Pieter hesitated on the stoop, brooding. "I wonder how Gregor managed it."

She thought of Hendrick's claim that Gregor was a warlock, and Hester's assertion that magic was real. "I've already told you what my aunt thinks."

"You cannot let anyone hear you repeat that theory, Mina. It will damage your credibility as a scientist even to describe such fantastic beliefs."

*delfy hall*

“You’re the one who had a witch-hunting minister to your house for dinner.”

“Don’t remind me. If I had known of Adam’s hobby beforehand, I would not have permitted it.”

At the mention of Adam’s name, she reddened.

Pieter noticed her reaction. “You don’t have feelings for that crackbrain, do you?”

The door of the house opened, nearly hitting him.

“Forgive me, sir, but Madam is wondering if you’re coming in or you desire to eat your dinner on the doorstep.” Mary was trying to repress a smile.

“Tell her I’m driving Miss Walraven home, and when I return there will be two extra people for dinner.”

## CHAPTER 9



**I**N THE END, there was only one extra person for dinner, because Hester could not be convinced to leave the cottage. She said that she would not let anyone scare her out of her home. But she insisted that Mina stay with the Molls after hearing that Gregor had been seen in the area—though Mina did not confess how she knew this information.

She sat up late with Sophia, drinking hot cider by the fire in the Molls' parlor. Dash had nestled himself in her lap and snored contentedly.

Sophia clucked at her. "Of course, I'm thrilled to have you here, Mina. But I think Hester and my husband have some strange ideas. What would this criminal want with you?"

"Pieter is afraid he will try to exact revenge for my parents' pursuit of him. But Hester won't give her reason."

"It's just preposterous. He's on the run, for goodness' sake! He'll want to get away from the city as fast as possible, to evade the authorities."

Mina nodded. "That does make more sense."

"I hope Hester does not accuse him of witchcraft in public! Has she not heard of the Weerts woman's banishment for falsely accusing her neighbor?"

Mina shrugged. "She does not pay much attention to what others think."

"Well, you are welcome here anytime—you know that. Hennie loves your company, and I think she is better behaved, too. When she's by herself she gets so bored, and those seafaring adventure stories she reads only make her more excitable. She must have a calming diversion, but she won't do any needlework. She just won't. She always gets out of it somehow. Neither of us knows what to do with her."

"Perhaps I could teach her drawing? Or there are other things she could learn—dissection, taxidermy, or perhaps plant pressing."

"Dissection and taxidermy? Too morbid—take no offense, dear. But drawing would be suitable. What young man doesn't admire a girl who can draw? She could do portraits of her own family one day."

"Mama?"

Hennie stood in the doorway, wearing a white nightdress, her eyes bright and alert.

"What are you doing up?" Sophia asked.

"I can't sleep."

Sophia made a pitying face and held her arms out for Hennie, who climbed up on the sofa next to her.

Dash awoke from his slumber on Mina's lap and sniffed the air.

## *the warlock and the wolf*

*Cookies! I smell cookies!*

The dog's voice startled her—this was the first time he had spoken. She had hoped that he would be the exception to her strange ability. But she covered up her alarm by smiling at her hostess. "Do you have any cookies, Fifi?"

Hennie looked up and brushed off her mouth.

"Yes—Martha just baked some today. Hennie, run get a few for our guest."

Hennie kept staring at Mina.

"Now, darling."

The young girl hopped off the sofa and hurried out of the parlor. She soon returned with a small plate piled with ginger snaps. Dash watched as Mina ate one, and then his ears perked up.

*Someone's coming.*

She felt her heart stall. Could Gregor have come here, looking for her? She looked down at Dash's alert face.

*Are you sure?* She spoke silently, hoping he could understand her.

*Yes, sure and more sure.*

"We're not safe, Fifi."

"What?"

Dash bounced onto the floor and ran out of the room.

"Someone is coming. We must get out of the house." She took both of their hands and pulled them off the sofa. Sophia had gone white.

The little group ran down the corridor and into the kitchen.

"There's no time for a cape." Mina unbolted the back door and was pulling it open when Pieter appeared in his nightcap, looking confused at the sight of his family about to flee the house.

Dash hopped up and down in front of him. *He's here! He's here!*

*delfy hall*

"Where are you going at this hour?" Pieter saw their stocking feet and exposed arms. "Have you gone mad, going into the cold dressed like this?"

Mina eyed Dash, who was wagging his tail and panting. *Is this who you meant?*

*I told you someone's coming!*

"Mina said that someone was coming—we were in danger," said Sophia.

Mina grimaced. "I'm sorry—I thought I heard someone."

Pieter looked baffled. "Yes, you heard me getting out of bed."

They all stared at her. The ticking of the clock in the parlor was the only sound amid their silence.

"I don't know what to say—I guess I'm a little jumpy." Mina gave a nervous laugh.

"And my husband is entirely to blame for that, aren't you, darling? You've scared the poor girl out of her wits with your conjectures."

"What's a conjecture?" Hennie looked back and forth at the three adults.

"Go to bed, Hennie." Pieter shooed her out of the kitchen, and Sophia followed, giving him a disapproving glance.

"Come along, darling," she called to Mina. "You need rest, or you will become as irrational as my husband."



After saying good-night to her hosts, she moved quietly about the dark bedroom, though she knew Hennie was still awake. She hung up her robe and slipped under the covers. It felt good to finally rest. But even though her body was exhausted, her mind raced with all that she had seen and learned in the last three days.

## *the warlock and the wolf*

If she was to believe Hester and Hendrick, Gregor was a powerful warlock who could not be caught by the authorities. And then there was the wolf, Flop, Dash, and all the other creatures who had talked to her, not to mention the ones who said nothing but sought out her company. She had no explanation for how creatures could speak inside her head. Was it indeed magic, or an illness? Would it go away eventually? She now had no doubt that the strix's attack had triggered it, but whether the creature meant to do so wasn't clear.

Perhaps this new ability could work to her advantage, if Gregor came looking for her. Certainly it would be to her benefit as a naturalist—her head was spinning just thinking of the information she could gather from animals themselves. She could finally ask a sparrow if he could swim. But no one must know, especially Pieter—she would be thought either mad or a witch.

“Mina?”

She opened her eyes, surprised that Hennie was not yet asleep. “Is something wrong?”

“How did you know I had been eating cookies?”

“I didn’t.”

Against the opposite wall, Hennie sat up in the other small bed. “But then why did you ask about them?”

“I don’t know—I was hungry.”

“Nobody saw me eat them.”

“I just said I didn’t know you ate any.”

“It was a strange coincidence, though, you asking about them.”

“Yes, it was, but it doesn’t mean anything.”

Hennie sighed and slid back down under the covers. “I still think it’s odd. I’m going to keep my eye on you.”

Mina laughed. “Well, good luck doing that while you’re in school. Unless you can be in two places at once.”

"Maybe I can. Maybe I can do magic like Gregor."

"Magic isn't real, Hennie."

"But everyone's scared of him. Are we in danger? Is he coming after you?"

Mina winced, realizing that her panicked episode had scared the girl. "No, no one is coming after me. I just got spooked to-night. It was silly. There's nothing to be afraid of."

"It's fun having you stay here."

"Mmm-hmm." She could feel sleep pulling her thoughts away.

"I wish I had my own pet, one that was all mine. Dash likes Mama best. I get bored with no one to play with. Are you going to marry Adam?"

"What?" Mina opened her eyes. "No. I'm not going to marry anyone. It's time to go to sleep."

"Mama says he's your best chance for a husband, and you better not mess it up."

Mina huffed. "Be quiet now. You were supposed to be asleep two hours ago."



The next morning, Mina sauntered along the rough road away from town and toward home, glad of the sunshine and fresh cold air. The night's sleep had done her mind good and cleared away its cobwebs.

The idea of a warlock coming after her was too ridiculous for words—and she would tell Hester so, in a gentle and kind way. And when she came back into town to begin the workday, she would reassure Pieter that she did not hold with magic. He mustn't think that she was losing her scientific acumen. But she was still firm in her belief that Gregor must be caught, before he hurt someone else.

*the warlock and the wolf*

Her aunt had left the front door open. Mina sailed into the cottage, her bag swinging on her shoulder.

“Good morning, Aunt—”

A puddle of blood shone in the morning light streaming through the windows. Hester lay in the blood, her eyes half-open and her mouth pulled back in a grimace.

Mina dropped to the floor and cradled her aunt’s gray head in the crook of her arm. “Aunt?”

Hester’s eyes fluttered and then opened wide, staring at her.

“Mina . . .” She gasped for breath.

“Don’t try to talk.” There were cuts all over her aunt’s arms, and bloodied gashes in her nightdress. The darkest wound was on the right side of her chest. Her hand gripped Mina’s wrist and pulled her closer.

“Gregor is looking for the key,” she whispered.

“Hush, now. I’m going to get bandages for you.”

“You must not give it to him.” She gasped again.

Mina felt desperate. “Please save your breath.”

“Use his affliction against him.”

“Aunt—”

“Do not give him the key—” Her chest heaved and then she was quiet. Her pale blue eyes stared at Mina without seeing.

“No!” She searched Hester’s face, still warm, for a sign of life, but there was none. “Please don’t leave me,” she begged. She put her head on Hester’s stained chest, listening for a heartbeat but hearing nothing. She clutched her aunt’s shoulders and closed her eyes, hoping that when she opened them, Hester would be awake, and alive.

Then a sound came to her ear, muffled but insistent. Thump, thump, thump. It was getting louder. She opened her eyes, not daring yet to look at her aunt’s face.

“Mina!”

*delfy hall*

Joris stood over them, his face aghast. "What have you done?"

Her clothes and hands were red with blood. "I haven't done anything! She was killed, murdered by—by—"

"Who?" Joris yelled. His cheeks had flushed and his eyes bulged.

She looked up at him through her tears. "Gregor."

"But he's in prison."

"Not anymore. He escaped. They told us yesterday."

Her cousin put his hands on his head and stared at her. "And why weren't you here with her when it happened?"

"I was at the Molls' house last night. Aunt wouldn't let me stay here."

"And you didn't think to tell me that she might be in danger?" He gaped at her, incredulous.

"She refused to leave—"

"I could have stayed here and protected her. If I had been here with my gun—"

"He is a practiced murderer, Joris. Do I have to remind you that he had already killed two people before this?"

Joris kicked the leg of the table and it crashed onto the floor, spilling papers, pencils, and bowls of herbs. He crooked his finger at her. "This is your doing. You brought this criminal into her home."

She reeled. "I brought him? You are mad. He broke in on his own."

"Hester never would have been in danger if she hadn't adopted you, Mina!"

She stared at him in disbelief that he had said something so hurtful. Her voice wavered. "We have to summon the police. Will you go into town?"

He shook his head. "You go. I'm staying with Aunt."

*the warlock and the wolf*

She stood up, and Joris eyed her bloodied dress and legs, scowling. “You better change first. They will think you are the murderer.”



## CHAPTER 10



**M**INA BRACED HERSELF as she and the Molls approached the door of the Cloister Church, with its immense front windows. It had been years since she had been inside a church. She hung behind the group, hoping to delay for a few more minutes. Hennie turned and waved for her to follow them.

On the church door someone had tacked a drawing of a man with a scowling face and light hair and eyes, which she recognized as a poor likeness of Gregor. Underneath was written “Wanted by authorities—extremely dangerous.” Without warning, a throng of people pushed at her back, and she stumbled over the threshold of the church.

Hennie and Sophia sat on either side of her in the front pew, holding both of her hands. On the other side of the aisle sat Joris, her aunt Margriet, and her uncle Sybolt.

Joris's gaze found her. He smiled halfheartedly and then looked away. Her aunt and uncle didn't turn their heads, though they must have known she was there. They had always treated her—and her father—with suspicion. Now with Hester gone, they would be free to openly despise her.

Mina's insistence that her aunt did not want a church service had gone unheeded, so here they were, about to pray for the soul of a woman who never believed in prayer. Adam stepped up to the podium and grasped both sides of it. He looked out over the congregation with compassion in his eyes.

"Today we mourn the life of a good woman, a child of God, though she may not have known it. As a talented herbalist, Hester Landseer ministered to the sick and the troubled, and many of you here today received her help. She never turned away anyone for want of payment. She protected those she loved, showed her friends great kindness, and was a devoted sister and aunt.

"But perhaps her most godly act was taking in her niece Mina as her own daughter, and hence becoming a mother to a child who had been orphaned by a murderer." He paused as people murmured and then quieted again. "Hester saw evil in her last moments on this earth, for she died by its hand in the act of protecting her family."

Adam looked at Mina, and her eyes began to water. His gaze lingered a moment longer, and then he looked away.

"When we fight the evil one, our suffering and death are never in vain, for we are on God's side, working in his service, and that work will never be wasted. But we cannot fight if we do not acknowledge the enemy. He has many ways of deceiving us into complacency. At this time in our republic, he has deceived us by convincing us he no longer exists in human form.

"We call this deception enlightenment and progress, and we give the enemy safe harbor in the name of higher moral

*the warlock and the wolf*

understanding. But he does not give *us* safe harbor—no, instead he redoubles his efforts at destruction, and takes as many souls as he can carry. He sends his minions among us to corrupt, infect, and torture the strong and weak alike, and laughs as we bemoan our bad luck and simply try to work harder.

“But his minions can be recognized, for their name is witch and warlock, heks and tovenaar. We have let them run amuck too long in this land, and we pay the price in life and blood and faith. How much longer will we allow the evil one to have his way with our precious humanity? Look to your conscience and you will know the truth of my words. Rise above the quibblings of the legislators in the Ridderzaal—they will not protect your family when a witch crosses your doorstep. Look to yourselves, for God helps those who help themselves.”

She fought the urge to stand up and throw a hymn book at him. She didn’t want her aunt’s funeral turned into a diatribe against witches, no matter how much Hester might have believed in them. She sat and smoldered, thinking about what she would say to Adam when she came face-to-face with him.

But after the service, when they met outside on the church steps, the sunlight filtered through his hair and lit his blue eyes like a spring sky. Her stern resolve faded. He leaned forward and kissed her cheek, and a puff of his soap smell floated under her nose, making her a little light-headed.

“Did I upset you?” he asked.

She shook her head. “Although”—her cheeks flushed—“I wish you had not talked so much of witches.”

“I am sorry, Mina. But it seemed the perfect opportunity to warn people of the danger. We must talk soon about the tovenaar. You must tell me all you know of him so he can be found and stopped.”

*delfy hall*

"I want him brought to justice, but he is no warlock. He is just a dangerous murderer."

His brow creased. "Even after what has happened, do you still not believe in maleficium?"

She looked down, remembering what Hester had said about witches being real. "I think Gregor might believe he is a warlock, but that does not make it so. He killed my aunt by stabbing her, not with magic. And when he is caught, I want to know his reasons. Why does he hate my family so much?" Her voice choked. "My aunt didn't do anything to him."

He took her hand in both of his, and she felt her skin turn hot again. "I will help you look for the answer, but be aware that there might not be one, Mina. I can tell you that there are terrible things in the world that have no explanation."

"I must find out why. I need to know if her death was my fault. Joris says—" She spotted her cousin coming out of the church, and stopped herself from saying more. Then she felt an arm around her waist.

It was Sophia, with Hennie and Pieter close behind. "Come along, dear. We must get to the cemetery."

"May I call on you, Mina?" asked Adam.

She nodded, and let Sophia pull her away.



After the graveside service, they returned to the house on Veene Street. Hennie rushed through the front door in her eagerness to change out of her best clothes.

"You run along and change, too," Sophia said to Mina. "Martha is off today, so we'll have to get lunch on our own."

Pieter ambled toward the parlor to retrieve his smoking pipe and tobacco.

A scream pierced the quiet of the house.

*the warlock and the wolf*

Mina ran toward it, into the room she shared with Hennie. The young girl was staring open-mouthed at Mina's bed.

On top of the bedclothes lay a pile of dead sparrows. Among the jumble of soft brown feathers, several stiff, bony feet pointed in all directions, like a tangle of kindling.

She pulled Hennie out of the room and shut the door.

"What's in there?" Pieter asked.

"It's—it's—" she stuttered.

"Dead birds!" burst out Hennie, her face still stricken with horror.

"Why on earth," said Sophia, as she pushed the door back open. For a moment they all witnessed the sight of the tiny corpses, too many to count. Some of them had their eyes squeezed shut, while others had died with theirs still open, now turned into lifeless cloudy beads.

Sophia shut the door again and sent Hennie to the kitchen.

"You must get Adam, dear," she said to Pieter.

"No," said Mina. "This is not witchcraft—it is only Gregor trying to scare me."

"But why use birds? Surely he is trying to put some curse on you," said Sophia.

"No—it is not a curse." She wasn't sure what more to say without sounding foolish. Perhaps the wolf was wrong about Gregor ordering the mass killing of sparrows. But if he was right, this could be a sign that the Molls—her only friends left in the world—were in danger. "Gregor has been commanding the strix to kill sparrows. This is a message of some kind."

Pieter shook his head. "More supernatural absurdity."

"I realize it sounds preposterous, but who else could have left them?"

"A disgruntled servant? Or your cousin Joris—you said yourself that he blames you for your aunt's murder."

"Regardless of who is responsible, we must inform someone of what has happened," Sophia said.

"Then let it be the magistrate. I do not want to accuse anyone of witchcraft," replied Pieter.

Mina shook her head. "I didn't say witchcraft, just that he commands the strix."

"And talking to animals is not witchcraft?"

"No—it is something else."

Pieter's eyes widened with mock astonishment. "How fortunate that we have you to explain the subtleties of sorcery to us."

Mina ignored his jab. "The three of you must stay somewhere else—just for the next few days."

"Now I think you are overreacting, dear," said Sophia.

"Fifi, you heard what Gregor did to Hester—he is a dangerous criminal. You must go somewhere safe, and I will go back to the cottage to lure him away from this place."

Pieter frowned. "I won't let you stay there by yourself," he said.

"You won't be able to stop me."

She and Pieter stared at each other in defiance.

"Pieter!" Sophia stamped her foot, breaking their standoff. "Run and get the magistrate, darling. I'll talk some sense into Mina."

He hurried out of the house, still holding his pipe and tobacco.

Mina fetched her things from the bedroom, trying not to look at her bed. Sophia followed her. "This is unnecessary, Mina. And unsafe—you shouldn't be alone in that cottage. I forbid it!"

"You're not my parents, Fifi. No one is," she said. She felt a wave of sadness threaten to crash over her.

Sophia must have seen it coming, because she gently pried Mina's bag from her hand and embraced her. Tears came to

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Mina's eyes and she wept, clutching Sophia's small shoulders like a castaway on a raft.

"We are your family now, Mina," said Sophia. "Do not reject me, or I will be desolate." She stroked Mina's hair.

But Mina was resolute. "If you are going to stay here, at least bar the windows and doors after sunset. Do not let any strangers in."

"And you?"

"I will go to the cottage tonight and do the same. Where is Dash?" She hadn't seen the dog anywhere in the house.

"I don't know, darling. This is not the time to worry about that silly little animal."

Mina went looking for him while Sophia bustled around the house, locking every window and door.

Finally she found him under a cabinet in the parlor, trembling like a nervous sheep. She crouched on the floor and stroked his fluffy head. "What has you so frightened?"

*My fault, my fault!*

"What happened? Why is it your fault?" she whispered.

Dash blinked his giant brown eyes. *His hands burned me. I ran away.*

"Who?"

*The man with the dead things. Don't punish—I was afraid.*

"Don't worry, you won't be punished—"

"Who are you talking to?" Hennie appeared in the doorway of the parlor.

Mina hesitated. "Just talking to Dash—I found him shivering under the cabinet."

Hennie bent down and saw Dash's sad face. "What's wrong with him?"

"He's afraid—the man who broke into the house scared him."

*delfy hall*

Hennie wrinkled her forehead. "How do you know it was a man?"

"Oh—I don't, I guess. I just assumed it was Gregor."

"Why would he leave dead birds here?"

"I don't know—but I'm going to try to find out."

*His hands are fire. Stay away from him.*

"Poor Dash," said Hennie. "If only he could tell us more about it."

## CHAPTER 11



**I**NSTEAD OF GOING immediately to the cottage, Mina decided to seek out help. She spent the rest of the afternoon sitting on a silk-covered bench under crystal lamps, in a room whose walls were painted with clouds, lions, and storks clutching eels in their beaks.

She straightened the bodice of her dress, hoping no one would notice or care that she had already worn it once to the Binnenhof, when she and Pieter had visited a few days ago. It seemed like a lifetime had passed since then.

The tall doors at the opposite end of the room opened, and an attendant beckoned her through the doorway into the study beyond.

In the center of the room Princess Amalia sat in a chair, and behind her gathered a bevy of ladies-in-waiting and a lone man—the bearded Master Huygens, holding a notebook and pencil. At her side stood her daughter-in-law, Princess Mary,

pale and demure. Mina couldn't tell whether Amalia's sneer was for the benefit of her daughter-in-law particularly or just the world in general.

The attendant's voice rang out, too loud for such a modest room.

"Wilhelmina Walraven, daughter of Maerten Walraven!"

The ladies-in-waiting quieted as Mina walked before the two princesses and curtsied. Amalia's sneer relaxed into a smirk. Mary's face registered no change of expression, just as though she were a doll living behind the glass door of a cabinet.

"Your highness, I come to ask for justice in the death of my mother's sister, Hester Landseer, who was brutally murdered by Gregor Franssen three days ago in her own home."

"Are the authorities not pursuing the matter?" Amalia's voice belied her irritation, with a hint of boredom.

"Yes, but I am afraid that the task will prove too much for them. Gregor is very dangerous. My aunt believed he is a male witch—a warlock."

The ladies-in-waiting giggled, and Amalia shushed them. "Do you know that defamation is a serious crime?" she asked Mina. "The punishment is flogging or banishment."

"I do not say that it is true, your highness, only that my aunt believed it. I take it as a sign of how much she feared him. That is why I asked the stadtholder for help when Gregor broke out of prison—you may remember my request."

Amalia gave no sign of remembering anything. "If he were a witch, surely he would have escaped years ago."

"I wondered that too. My aunt explained this by saying that another witch held Gregor locked in his cell with her magic. Only when she died was he able to escape."

There was more giggling from the ladies-in-waiting, as well as a few snorts.

*the warlock and the wolf*

"Another witch, you say? Goodness, we are surrounded. But why would this Gregor person want to kill your aunt?"

"She said he is looking for something—a key."

Master Huygens's eyes flicked up from his note scribbling.

The princess cocked her head like an intrigued bird. "A key to what?"

"I don't know, your highness, but I am afraid he wants it for some nefarious purpose. And now he has threatened my friends by leaving dead sparrows at their house."

Amalia's disdain increased. "Sparrows? I hardly think dead birds constitute a threat to anyone."

While Amalia talked, Huygens leaned over to the princess Mary and whispered in her ear.

Mina tamped down her irritation and took a deep breath before speaking again. She tried to make her voice beseeching and pitiful in an effort to move the elder princess's emotions.

"Please lend your aid, your highness, for the sake of the public safety, if not justice for my aunt. I beg you to find this man."

The princess Mary piped up, her voice gentle and sweet, which drew a glare from Amalia. "You know where is key?" Her broken Dutch, spoken with an English accent, made her sound like a feeble child.

"No, your highness. But I will do my best to find out." Mina was flattered that the daughter of the king of England seemed interested in her case.

Mary started to respond, but Amalia put a hand on the girl's narrow shoulder, interrupting her. "When you do, give the information to Huygens, the stadtholder's secretary." The man stepped forward from the gaggle of ladies and bowed to Mina. "He will see it is used to greatest effect."

"Thank you, your highness."

"If I have time, I will make inquiries regarding your aunt's murder. But you must stop spreading rumors that this man is a witch. Such claims damage both parties."

Mina nodded and withdrew to the antechamber, feeling a bit humiliated. She had not expected much help, but she didn't realize she would be scolded to boot. Amalia had not even offered her condolences for Hester's death. The woman clearly thought such matters beneath her. Yet why did she agree to hear petitions if she cared so little for common folk?

Such behavior confounded Mina. If she was appointed naturalist someday—when she was appointed, she corrected herself—she would need a better understanding of people's motives. If only they were badgers or hedgehogs instead of humans, she would feel on firmer ground.

Someone touched her arm. It was Master Huygens. His eyes twinkled, and she saw that they had very little pigment—they were the color of pale citrine.

"Young lady, how brave of you to seek help here," he said in a kindly tone.

"I did not know where else to go."

"Quite so. I have something to show you. Will you come with me?"

She nodded and followed him down several corridors until they reached a vast library.

The lights were dim, and the windows shaded.

"I apologize for the lack of light, but the books are very sensitive to it." He searched along the shelves until he pulled down a slim volume and brought it to a table already scattered with books.

He urged her closer. His gentlemanly hands turned the stiff, yellowed pages, which crinkled like the outer skin of an onion.

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He paused upon a drawing of a bird, its delicate, hooked beak open in song. Below it lay a woman on her side, like a fallen chess piece, her eyes marked with x's.

Master Huygens traced a line from the woman up to the sparrow. "On the instant of death, the soul travels out of the body and into the sparrow, and bends the beak as it passes through."

He stared at her, waiting for her response, and she noticed that his eyes jittered from side to side. She thought he must be far older than he appeared. Reading in this dim light would put a damaging strain on anyone's eyesight.

"And why is it singing?" she asked.

He smiled. "It holds the soul of a person—it can suddenly feel all of human emotion instead of the base instincts of a dumb beast." He closed the book and tapped his fingers on the cover. "Have you seen any sparrows like the one in the picture?"

She shook her head. "Only those with normal beaks."

"Pity. It could help us set a trap for Gregor. He will probably keep killing the poor creatures until he finds the one he wants."

"How do you know that he wants this bird?"

"One hears many things in the Binnenhof. Not all of them true."

"Do you think this bird has something to do with my aunt's murder?"

"I highly doubt it. The sparrow he seeks is supposed to hold the soul of his true love, a woman who was unjustly killed on suspicion of witchcraft."

Her mind was going in different directions at once—Gregor, Leonara, her aunt's murder, the strix, and now this one particular sparrow. She wondered if the key her aunt mentioned was actually the sparrow itself. "So he doesn't want the bird for some evil scheme?"

Master Huygens stacked another book on top of the one they had been looking at. "I must be better about putting these away," he muttered, half to himself.

"Sir? You don't think Gregor will use the bird for something terrible?"

"What? Oh, I don't think so. It is almost certainly for sentimental purposes, nothing to do with your aunt. Would you carry these books to the shelf for me, young lady?"

"Of course." She admired the heavy volumes, one of which had a beautiful circular emblem of a snake in the center of the cover, stamped in gold and silver, and the same smaller emblem on the spine. Master Huygens directed her to an empty space in the bookcase, and she tipped the volume into it. "What a fascinating place to work," she said.

"I don't get to spend as much time here as I would like," he replied. "The stadtholder and his family send me running to and fro quite a bit."

"Do you think Princess Amalia enjoys her duties of hearing petitions and so forth?" She thought perhaps Master Huygens could give her some insight into royal politics.

"Her highness has many things on her mind—she must look after the interests of her husband and son, and any future heirs. And Frederick Henry's illness has just taken a dramatic turn. I'm sorry you did not get much assistance today. But I believe that as a naturalist, you are actually the person best suited to catch Gregor, by finding this sparrow he wants."

"I hadn't thought of that." She sighed. "If only I had been there when he confronted my aunt, things could have turned out much differently."

Master Huygens took her hand and patted it. "There was nothing you could do, my dear. Don't blame yourself."

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"I thought she was overreacting about how dangerous Gregor was. So did my friend, Sophia."

"Do you know much about witches?"

She shook her head.

"Nothing about curses, or the witches' sabbat?"

"I'm afraid not. I know mostly of science and philosophy. And I doubt the existence of witches or magic, to be honest."

"As you should. Well, I hope you will keep yourself out of danger. Do you have a safe place to stay?"

She shrugged. "I am just going back to my aunt's house. I don't want to put the Molls at risk."

"If I hear of any news, I shall send word to you at once."

She nodded and thanked him, and Master Huygens turned to leave.

"Wait—I have one last question. Do you know if Gregor has an illness? My aunt said that he has an affliction."

He stared at the ceiling for a moment, as if mentally going through his notes on the criminal. "No, I'm afraid I've never heard of such a thing."

"I suspected as much. But I thought I should check."

Master Huygens smiled and bowed, and then escorted her out of the gloom of the library. He turned around and locked the great wooden doors with a key from his pocket. Then they walked to the end of the hallway, where a guard waited to escort her outside, to the vast courtyard of the Binnenhof.



Mina hurried through the streets without a destination, walking simply to soothe her jittery nerves. She was not sure where to turn next for help. Despite her promise to "inquire," the princess Amalia had made it clear she was not interested in Mina's problems, or protecting the Molls.

As for Master Huygens, he was a kind man, but he seemed intrigued by Gregor only as an academic subject. Moreover, it was possible that he believed in witchcraft, and if he did, it would muddy his judgment. She did not want to engage the help of Adam for the same reason. And, of course, Pieter would have no patience for anything that took time away from the compendium.

As she brooded, it became evident that she must find and stop Gregor on her own, which was fine with her. She preferred to do things herself. Relying on others for help would only slow her down.

In the yard of a house she was passing in the west end of town, a kitchen maid threw corn onto the ground, and gaggle of geese descended on the yellow kernels, honking and shrieking as they fought to inhale as many as possible.

A few kernels went unnoticed, and several sparrows flitted to the windfall. They pecked at the corn, breaking it into smaller pieces. She peered at their beaks, trying to discern whether any of them were bent. Perhaps if she found the one Gregor wanted, as Master Huygens suggested, he could be lured out of hiding and caught.

All of the little birds in the yard had solid, straight beaks. Soon a goose noticed their theft of the kernels and charged them, frightening them away.

The maid went back inside and shut the door. Mina leaned on the half-wall bordering the yard.

“Goosey, goosey! Hey, goosey!”

The geese raised their white heads in unison and stared at her.

*Our corn*, said one.

*Go away*, said another.

Their heads descended back to the ground, except for one fat goose with a bit of gray on her tail feathers. She curved her neck to one side and kept watching Mina.

## *the warlock and the wolf*

*I'm looking for a sparrow,* Mina said silently, afraid someone would hear her.

The goose blinked.

*One of those little birds who steals your corn.*

The goose waddled closer to the wall. *Little birds.*

*Yes! Have you seen any with a curved beak?* She traced an imaginary curved nose coming out of her face.

*More corn.*

*I will bring you more corn if you tell me about this sparrow.*

*I will tell. Take me to corn.*

*No, I can't take you. You belong here.*

*Not enough corn. Take me to corn now.*

*Just tell me if you have seen such a bird.*

*Not telling. Go away.* The goose turned and waddled back to her compatriots.

Mina looked up and down the narrow street. No one was about. She glanced at the windows of the house. They were shuttered on the ground floor, and open on the next level, though she could see no one looking out.

*Fine—I will take you, but after the corn, I'm bringing you right back.*

The goose rushed back to the wall, her mouth open as if smiling with glee.

*Jump up here.* Mina patted the top of the wall.

The goose opened her wings and hopped about five inches off the ground, but landed back where she started.

*Oh, for heaven's sake. You call that a jump?*

The goose tried again, and fell again. She was simply too fat to go any higher.

*Can't. Help me.*

Mina sighed and reached down, but jerked her hand away when the goose's orange bill pecked her finger.

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*Hey! What are you doing?*

*Sorry. Got scared.*

*Well, do you want corn or not?*

*Yes. Help me now.*

This time she didn't stop Mina from grabbing her around the middle of her plump body. Mina grunted as she lifted the goose onto the wall.

*I have to hide you.* She threw one side of her cape over the fat animal, hoisted her onto her hip, and started down the street. The goose stayed surprisingly still. When they reached the corner, where the street met a main thoroughfare, Mina patted the lump where she thought the goose's head would be.

*Everything fine under there?*

*Waiting corn. Go faster.*

She chuckled. She hadn't expected a goose to have such a funny personality, or a personality at all. She knew that animals had desires and fears—that much was clear just by their actions. And she could accept that larger mammals, like wolves, cats, and dogs, had their own individual temperaments—but birds? They had always seemed a bit mindless, like nervous bundles of instincts.

This particular goose must be destined for the pot sometime soon—she was about as plump as a goose could get, and Fat Thursday was coming up next month. Mina didn't want to leave the goose to her fate, but if she started rescuing every animal from being eaten, where would it end? There was nowhere to hide them all, let alone money to feed them.

“Stop! Thief!”

She turned and saw a man running toward her. His face was red and frowning, and he had obviously dashed out of the house in a hurry, without a cape or hat. For a moment she was

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confused—she was not a thief, because she had intended to bring the goose back. She was only borrowing her. But this would be hard to explain to the owner, she realized.

Mina dashed into the road, just barely missing a collision with two horses leading a wagon. The goose trembled underneath the cape.

*Yes, run! Run to corn!*

Mina darted to the left, weaving through the crowd as best she could. It occurred to her that the best choice might be to drop the goose and make an all-out run for it. But the Molls' house was only a few blocks away. If she made it there, she could vanish inside without being seen. The man would run right past the windows without being any the wiser.

Something caught the back of her cape and she stumbled, losing hold of the goose, who fell to the ground, squawking and flapping.

"Let go of me!"

The red-faced man kept hold of her cape and pointed to the goose. "That's my animal you've stolen. Thief!" People slowed down and stared at her with mild revulsion. "She's a thief, this one. Don't touch that bird—she's mine," said the man, though no one had approached the goose, who pecked at the ground and seemed unconcerned with Mina's predicament.

Mina winced at the man's unmerciful grasp and cast a long look at the goose. This might be her last chance. *Tell me now. Have you seen the sparrow I want?*

The goose raised her head and blinked at her. *Corn. Corn first.*

The man hauled the fat bird under one arm in a deft motion, without easing his grip on Mina's cape. "Let's go, thief. Straight to the magistrate with you."



## CHAPTER 12



**M**INA AWOKE WHEN she toppled over onto her side, her head hitting the bench. She straightened up and studied her surroundings. The jail cell bore no sign of whether it was midnight or morning. The worn wooden bench she had slept on was covered with marks made by former occupants—initials, stars, x's, and years.

She wanted to lie down on the cell's bed, but it was home to several kinds of bugs—stinkbugs, ants, and spiders—and those were just the ones she spotted ambling across the surface of the ticking. So she continued perching on the short bench and tried to sleep again.

The goose had given her no information about the sparrow. Even as her irate owner had stormed away from the small jail at the town hall, Mina could still hear her pleading for corn, her white head bobbing up and down while he carried her.

A guard had walked her through the doors of the jail and shoved her past a row of cells containing bedraggled women. They stared at her with hollow eyes, and one of them had tears streaming down her face. The guard yelled at them to get back, and prodded Mina into an empty cell. The air stank of human waste and burned wheat chaff.

Sleep would not come. As she watched a beetle meander across the stone floor, she wondered if such a tiny creature could talk to her. But she had already made a deal with herself since being thrown in the cell: if she could just get out of this place and back to normal life, she would not use her strange ability anymore. It had brought her nothing but trouble. And if Pieter found out that she thought she could talk to animals—he would never believe it wasn't a delusion—he might stop her from working on the compendium.

Because it was best to start as you meant to go on, she was starting now.

“Wilhelmina Walraven!” A small man in spectacles and a black jacket appeared in front of her cell, accompanied by an oafish guard. “You are being released. Stand up and depart.”

She had to pinch herself as she followed the strange pair out of the bowels of the jail to the blinding daylight of the ground floor. She hadn't expected to leave this horrible place so soon.

Pieter waited just inside the main doors, his hat still on. As soon as he saw her approach, he hurried outside, and she followed him, nearly running, panicked by the thought that he was trying to get away from her.

“I won't even ask why, Mina,” he said when she had caught up to him.

“How did you get me out?”

Pieter frowned. “It wasn't easy. The man you stole from wanted you to hang. I went to see him at his house, and he kept

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ranting about you being the perfect example of the city falling into crime and degradation.”

“Then how—”

“I paid him ten times what the animal was worth and promised to find his son a job. And I told him your aunt had just been murdered and you were very distraught.”

“Thank you, sir—I’m in your debt.”

“Don’t act polite with me, Mina. Not now—it’s insincere. If you want to show some manners, start acting like a respected scientist. One who doesn’t interfere with people and behave like a lunatic, trying to save every creature you feel sorry for.”

“By interfering, you mean—”

“I mean taking what doesn’t belong to you, or getting between a man and his rightful prey.”

She realized he was referring to her pastime of scaring deer out of the path of hunters. She would swear off that too, she thought, if Pieter would not reject her.

“I promise I won’t do those things anymore,” she said. “I have an explanation for the goose, but you won’t like it.”

“I’m sure I won’t.”

“It will sound like lunacy, I’m afraid.”

He stopped his agitated progress across the market square and took her by the shoulders. “Then let’s not speak of it, shall we? You are at a crossroads, Mina. I realize that you incurred a serious loss, and you need time to grieve. But put yourself into your work, and your remaining family, I implore you. No more antics and high-flown idealism. If you disgrace me again, you will lose your position.” His face looked as hard as steel, and she knew this was her last chance.

“I will do whatever it takes—I swear it. You can count on me.” She resolved never to tell him about Master Huygens and the

*delfy hall*

soul sparrow, or her strange ability—it would push him over the edge of his faith in her.

His face softened. “I’m glad to hear it. Now let’s get back to the house. We have a lot of work to do.”



That evening, over the protests of the Molls, Mina went back to the cottage after four days away since Hester’s murder. The dried crimson stain was waiting for her. She supposed Joris thought it was her responsibility to clean the floor, as well as repair the table, which he had broken. After performing a temporary fix on it, she washed the wooden planks of the floor until the water in the bucket turned dark and the rag could only smear the blood around.

Outside, the yard was cold, and nothing stirred. A sliver of new moon hung in the sky. She dumped the dirty water onto the ground and headed for the well. She carried no light, not wanting to attract attention in case Gregor were nearby. All the windows had already been locked. Before going to bed she would bar the door.

She had put Flop outside as soon as she had arrived at the cottage that evening, without giving him the chance to speak to her. She was determined to keep her promise, even if it was only to herself. Now that Hester was gone, she had to be her own protector, and that meant safeguarding her future as a scientist, and her relationship with Pieter. One more reckless action and he would drop her completely—that much had gotten through to her.

She must stay in the real world of facts and evidence, and stay away from talking animals and anything to do with witches or sparrows who carried human souls. And she would give up any

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hope of catching Gregor. It was the authorities' responsibility, after all.

The clean water sloshed onto her shoes as she carried the bucket back toward the house, and she cursed Joris under her breath for not helping her. She hadn't realized how much Aunt Hester had improved her cousin's behavior until now.

*Girl.*

She dropped the bucket and whipped around. The wolf sat near the well, in the path her feet had just trod.

"Have you been here all this time?"

*I told you, you need not fear me.*

She grabbed the handle of the now nearly empty bucket and hurried toward the front door.

*I am sorry your kin is dead.*

She looked back at him, her curiosity getting the better of her.

The wolf let his eyes fall closed for a moment.

"How did you know that?"

*I saw them taking her body away.*

Sorrow loomed as she remembered her last conversation with Hester, when her aunt had refused to leave the cottage. "What are you doing here?"

*Did the kymaa kill her?*

"Why do you care?"

*That is the third kin of yours he has taken. Will you finally seek vengeance?*

"No—I told you I don't believe in that."

*I will help you, girl.*

She backed away. "I cannot talk to you anymore."

*The strix is still killing little birds.*

"I can't do anything about that. Gregor will keep killing them until he finds his lost love's soul."

## delfy hall

*Who told you that?*

"I saw it in a book. A person's soul can go into a sparrow when they die."

*That may be, but witches like the kymaa cannot love anyone.*

"Then why does he want this sparrow?"

*It is not known. But you are in danger, girl.*

The wolf took a few steps toward her, but he stopped when their eyes met.

"Don't lurk around the house anymore, do you hear me? I want you to leave me alone."

*You need my help.*

"No, I don't! I can protect myself."

*Like your kin protected herself?*

"Get away from the house." She picked up a pebble and threw it at the wolf. It hit him in the chest. Then she threw another one at his nose, his ear, and his broad head. He watched her as though she were a child having a tantrum. Then he spun away and trotted out of the yard.



Once inside, she finished cleaning the floor, still shaking from her encounter with the wolf. Her ability felt like a curse now. She wished she had never followed the strix and been so foolish as to provoke her. If she was lucky, the ability might fade over time. Otherwise it might be too much to bear, having to be constantly vigilant against inaudible voices. Other people would surely notice that something was wrong with her. They might even put her in the asylum, condemned as a lunatic or half-wit.

After removing as much of the blood as would come away, she tried to distract herself from her disturbing thoughts by sitting next to the waning fire and thumbing through an herbology volume, one of her aunt's few books. It showed plants in the

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shape of hands, and plants with markings that resembled eyes. The author proposed that the plants' similarity to human features indicated their efficacy as medicine—a preposterous idea, Pieter would say. After all, plants knew nothing of people or their ailments.

The knob on the unbarred cottage door creaked.

She dropped the book and flew behind the herb cabinet.

The door opened, and someone crossed the threshold with a heavy, male step. She grabbed the first pointed object she could find—a pair of scissors.

“Mina?”

She peeked around the cabinet. It was Joris, dressed in a clean white shirt and spotless knickers. He must have changed clothes just before walking out to her house.

“Have a care, Joris. I almost stabbed you in the eye.”

“I should have knocked.” He glanced at the empty table, and the book left on the rocking chair, where Hester usually sat in front of the fire. “The house feels empty.”

She nodded.

“Is it safe for you to be here? What if Gregor comes back?”

“Then I will defend myself.” She didn’t want to tell him what she had learned from Master Huygens about Gregor’s sparrow. She was afraid it might set him to killing birds—when in doubt, Joris usually went looking for something to kill. “What do you care, anyway? You wouldn’t even speak to me at the church. I’m responsible for our aunt’s death, remember?”

“I’m sorry.” He looked down at his shoes. “My mother—”

“Never mind.” She didn’t want to know what his mother thought. If Joris wanted to reconcile with her, he would have to stop making excuses.

A muffled meowing came from outside the door. “Don’t let him in,” she said, going back to her book. “He’s being a pest.”

She was sure Flop could fend for himself for another night. The winter weather had been mild, and there was no snow on the ground yet.

“Mina?”

“Hmm?” She looked up from the book and her eyes grew wide.

Joris was kneeling on the floor in front of her. His hands clasped his bent knee, and he gazed up at her with an anxious expression.

“Will you be my wife?”

She had to stop herself from laughing. She stuttered for a moment, searching for something to say.

“I don’t have a ring, but I will get one, and I promise I’ll always take care of you. We can sell this place and get quarters in town, near the market. You’ll be part of the family.”

“I’m already part of the family.”

“You know what I mean. We’ll be married, and my mother will have to accept you. You’ll have a home forever. You wouldn’t need to worry about being on your own anymore.”

Her heart sank when she realized how earnest he was. “That’s very kind of you, Joris, but . . . I don’t think of you that way. You’re my cousin, and I love you, but I could never be your wife.”

He stood up, his face reddening.

She held out her hand, but he wouldn’t take it. “Please don’t feel badly—you know I’ve never been eager to marry.”

He kept his face turned away from her. “Father said you would want to, now that Aunt Hester is gone. He said you won’t have any other choice.”

She stared at him. “So you thought to take advantage of my misfortune?”

“No, I just . . . thought it would be the right time.”

*the warlock and the wolf*

"Well, it's not. I don't want to marry anyone. I'll find my own way."

"Doing what? You don't have a trade."

"I am a scientist. I will teach, or find a patron."

Joris sniggered and shook his head.

She didn't take offense, knowing how hurt he was. "Do you want to stay for a while? I wouldn't mind the company."

"You've already said no—what would I be staying for?" He peered at her with narrowed eyes.

"For friendship and family, Joris. You're my cousin, and our loved one has just died."

He frowned. "You're on your own now—that's what you want, isn't it? My family will want to sell this place, so you should get out as soon as you can. Mother doesn't want you to stay here."

She felt a surge of anger, but she tried to remain calm, because Joris was on the verge of losing his temper as well. An argument between them could destroy the room.

"So I must either marry you or become homeless, is that it?"

"The cottage is legally mine, Mina. I am Hester's only male heir. Do you want to take the matter to court?"

She knew he was right. But she couldn't believe he could be so cruel. "What a callous brute you are. Hester would be ashamed of your behavior, Joris. The way you're treating me would have sickened her."

"What's sickening is that you got her killed. Did you do it on purpose, just so you could have her house to yourself?"

Before she had time to think better of it, she rushed at him with the scissors.

He backed up to the door, nearly falling over his feet, so stunned was he by her sudden aggression.

"Get out!" She jabbed the air with the metal points.

## *delfy hall*

He reached behind him and turned the doorknob. "You better be out of here when I come back, Mina." He stomped out of the cottage, not bothering to close the door.

She watched him leave the yard. There was no sign of anyone else, human or animal.

She barred the door and tried to go back to reading, but began weeping, her tears blotting the pages. The pain of losing Hester was now joined by the prospect of losing the only place that connected the two of them.

Even though it was the site of her aunt's violent death, the cottage had still been the center of her aunt's life, and all of Mina's memories of her. It even held memories of Mina's parents, when all three of them had come to visit Hester for dinners and picnics and cups of tea. Her mother had laughed and whispered with her aunt in that effortless way special to sisters. And now the news that the heart of her aunt's life, the heart of Mina's life, would be sold to a stranger. Joris would take everything, even her parents' furniture, which she had no way to prove was hers and not her aunt's.

She looked at the grandfather clock that had once stood in the entryway of her parents' house, and found the measured ticking strangely soothing. It brought her back to the here and now: she was not yet homeless, and Gregor was still in the wind. She certainly didn't care about keeping him from his lady's soul, and she didn't know where to find the sparrow or the key he was seeking. But if he came for her, she had to be ready.

She set aside the book and the scissors, and began to search for more objects that could wound an assailant.



She tossed from one side of the bed to the other. It was almost midnight, and she hadn't had a wink of sleep. Hennie's scared

*the warlock and the wolf*

face and the pile of dead birds paraded through her mind. She worried about whether the Molls would be safe—were they locking the doors and windows at all times, as she had told them to do?

The old cottage creaked and groaned, noisier tonight because of the winter wind that whistled through the gaps around the loose windows. She clutched a long kitchen knife under the sheet, part of her defensive plan. Under the bed lay a pitchfork and the scissors.

There was a faint rhythmic sound coming from the main room that she couldn't quite place—it was not the ticking of the clock. It stopped and then, a few minutes later, started again.

She rose from the bed and put on her robe and slippers. Carrying the knife in one hand and the scissors in the other, she went into the main room. The house was dark and quiet. She stood still for a minute, just listening to the wind. There was nothing. She lowered her impromptu weapons, feeling a bit foolish.

Rather than torture herself with more tossing and turning, she lit a lamp in the main room and took up the herbology book again. This time she read about mandrakes, roots that sometimes grew in the shapes of human bodies and could be used for rheumatic pain. The mandrake in the book had been drawn with a human face, fat and laughing, like a baby's.

There was a sound at the window nearest the door. She crept over to it and listened. Something tapped again, accompanied by a faint squeaking. She swung away one side of the window's shutters and held a lamp up to the dark window. The squeaking grew louder.

She brought her face close to the glass, trying to adjust her eyes. A face loomed out of the darkness, and Mina jerked back from the window, her heart racing. The strix grinned at her and

shrieked. In her talons was Flop, twisting back and forth, his eyes round and bulging.

She looked with horror from the cat to the strix, who drew back her lips and gnashed her pointed teeth at Mina. Mina pounded on the window, yelling, "Let him go!"

The strix made a sound like she was retching, but Mina realized it was laughter. She ran to the bedroom and grabbed the pitchfork. The strix couldn't defend herself and hold Flop at the same time—she would have to choose. Mina unbarred the door and stepped into the yard, leaving the safety of the house.

The monster had vanished.

Mina held the pitchfork at an angle and searched the darkness for any signs of movement.

Then out of the hemlock trees the strix flew toward her.

She tightened her grip on the pitchfork and lunged. The strix dodged the points of the pitchfork at the last second, releasing the cat and veering off to the left, toward the well.

Flop hit the ground with a thump and didn't stir. Mina hoped he was merely stunned and not mortally wounded. She touched his side to see if he was still breathing, but she could feel no movement.

"Flop!" She dropped the pitchfork and scooped the limp cat into her arms. His body was still warm. A strange sound made her look up—was that a man's voice?

Something slammed into the back of her head, and her face hit the ground.

## CHAPTER 13



**W**HEN MINA WOKE up it was daylight. The sun had just cleared the stand of hemlocks and the birds had finished their morning song. She pushed herself up into a sitting position and felt the back of her head. It was sore, and there was a crusted spot in the middle of the crown and an awful ache behind her eyes.

The cottage door was open. She stumbled inside and found the floor littered with books, broken jars of herbs, shattered plates, and rent sacks of flour and sugar. The bedrooms had been similarly torn apart.

She managed to find a clean cloth, and after washing her wound, she went back outside and picked up the pitchfork. Flop was gone. She hoped the strix had not carried him away. Even if he was already dead, he deserved better than being eaten by

a monster. She wanted to give him a proper burial—it was her fault that he had been outside in the first place.

Maybe the wolf had seen what happened to him.

“Wolf, are you there?” It felt a little silly to call him that, but he hadn’t told her his name, or asked for hers.

There was no answer. She wondered if he had really gone away, as she had demanded.

The strix had clearly wanted to lure her out of the house, so Gregor, or his accomplice, could get inside. But what were they looking for? Did they think that she had the sparrow, or the key?

She sighed and leaned the pitchfork against the side of the house. Her head still hurt, and she was too tired to figure anything out right now. All she wanted to do was lie down.

But on the horizon were three figures, coming down the path toward the cottage.

She went inside and changed quickly into a dress, and put a cap on her head. She stuffed the bloody cloth into a cabinet, and slipped the scissors into her pocket.

The men, dressed in plain workclothes, stepped into the yard just as she emerged. One of them hailed her—he was older than the other two and carried a book in his hand.

“Good morning, miss, and God bless you.”

“Good morning,” she replied, keeping her hands at her sides.

“May we speak with you a moment?”

She nodded. “Not long. I have work to do.”

“Of course.”

The younger men were silent. One of them had a scar across his cheek. She didn’t like the way they stared at her—as though they wanted to eat her.

The older man went on, clutching his book. “We have spoken with your cousin, Joris Opperman. He says your aunt was killed by a tovenaar—is that true?”

*the warlock and the wolf*

"Some might believe it to be true. I do not hold with witchcraft."

"No, many Calvinists do not—more's the pity. This land is being ravaged by heksen and tovenaarsen right under the people's noses."

She struggled to hide her impatience. "My aunt died a terrible death—that is all I'm certain of."

"And the man's name is Gregor Franssen?"

"That is true."

"Did you see him?"

"No—no one did. He is a fugitive. The authorities have promised to catch him, but I think he is probably too smart for them."

The older man, who, she assumed from his remarks, was Catholic, exchanged looks with the others that she could not decipher. He cleared his throat. "I wonder if we might impose on your generosity, miss, and see the place where your aunt died?"

"What's your aim?"

"Why, to catch the culprit, of course."

"But why would you risk yourselves to do that? He has not harmed your family."

"We do the work of God, miss—we don't care who else it might serve. God tells us not to suffer a witch to live. The authorities will not pursue a tovenaar, so we must do the work ourselves. Surely you want this man stopped, regardless of the reason?"

She blinked. "Are you in league with the pastor Adam Everts?"

He and his men chuckled.

"No, although we know of him. He is a good man, but still a Calvinist, and not decisive. In these matters you must show no mercy and strike sure and true. The evil one will always try to sway you with doubt." The two men nodded at his words.

"May we?" The older man glanced at the door. "It will take only a moment of your time."

She pressed her lips together, trying to decide. She probably had little to fear from religious men, except their arrogant attitudes. And if they could find Gregor, their motives were not important. "Very well."

She led the men into the cottage, their big feet tromping behind her. She opened the shutters, and the morning light streamed onto the wood floor.

"Miss?"

"Yes?" She turned around to find the men staring at her.

The scarred man touched the back of his head. "There is blood on your cap."

"I fell last night. Someone attacked me and ransacked the house."

He raised his eyebrows and started to say something, but she interrupted, pointing to the center of the room. "I found her there."

The floorboards were slightly darkened with a faint oval stain—the last of the blood. The man with the scar squatted and ran his hand over it.

The other young man wandered around the room, looking at the stuffed birds, mice and squirrel skeletons, and piles of herbs scattered on the floor. He took a pinch of herbs and brought it to his nose, and she put her hand out.

"Please don't touch anything—some of the herbs are dangerous if they're not used properly."

Inexplicably, he smiled, one side of his mouth rising higher than the other. "What are they for?"

"Curing sickness. My aunt was known for her healing skills."

She was aware that all three men were watching her. Through the window she could see the pitchfork leaning against the house.

*the warlock and the wolf*

"Was she a witch?"

"Of course not!"

The older man shrugged. "Sometimes family members are not aware of a witch's identity. Your aunt could have angered this other witch with her magic."

"That's ridiculous. I told you, she was just an herb woman."

"And do you sell cures to people as well?"

She nodded. "But only now and then. I am apprenticed to a scientist in town."

He knelt to inspect one of her stuffed bluebirds, which had toppled from its shelf. "I understand that your parents died under suspicious circumstances."

"They were also killed by Gregor."

"So your family has a long history of association with this man."

That was the last straw. She didn't like what he was implying, and she saw no reason to keep being polite. "Not by choice. I'm sorry, but I must ask you to leave." She strode to the door and held her hand out toward the yard. "Now."

The word seemed to hang in the air like a leaf borne on the wind. No one moved or spoke. She wondered if she should flee the cottage. But she doubted she could outrun the men long enough to get to the main road. Instead, she gripped the scissors in her dress pocket.

Finally, the older man rose and dusted off his cape. "Did you know that some of your neighbor's cows have fallen ill?"

"The Arendsorp farm?"

"Yes. Perhaps they could use some of your healing herbs."

"I'm afraid I don't know anything about healing cows."

He cleared his throat. "I must ask you directly, miss—has there ever been witchcraft practiced in this house?"

## *delfy hall*

She drew herself up as tall as her body would go. "No, and I'm insulted by your accusation. I have a mind to report you to the authorities."

He smirked, and stroked the book in his hand as though he were itching to open it. "That won't be necessary, miss. We have not accused you of anything." His gaze fell on the tiny mice skeletons lying under the table. "First we must find your aunt's killer." He looked at the other men. "We shall leave you now."

She held her breath as the solemn group filed through the door. The man with the crooked smile looked back as they walked away. Without the other men seeing, he drew a line across his throat with one finger.



She stormed around the cottage, muttering to herself about the foolishness of religion and the nerve of busybodies. She put the fallen objects back onto their shelves and into their cabinets and replaced dislodged drawers and toppled chairs.

The men had wedged open her fear that her ability to talk to animals meant she was in fact a witch, or at least endowed with some unnatural power that came from an evil source. As if she didn't have enough to worry about—now she would have to look over her shoulder for those thugs as well as Gregor.

Something scratched at the door, making her jump. She looked out the window, afraid that the men had come back. A bedraggled Flop gazed up at her. Her heart leaped at the sight of him alive.

He allowed her to hold him on her lap and inspect his wounds. The back of his neck was punctured and bloody, and his face had scratches. She guessed that he had been attacked by some other creature after the strix had dropped him. He began

*the warlock and the wolf*

purring while she cleaned the blood off his fur, and he let her inspect his feet, tail, and ears.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, knowing she was breaking her promise not to use her ability. But the need to apologize felt more important.

*Why did you reject me?* Flop studied her with wide hurt eyes.

"I—I was afraid of talking to you. I was scared of myself, I guess."

*That makes no sense.*

"Not for a cat, it doesn't."

*I almost died.* He kept staring at her, as though trying to pin her down with this thought.

"I'm so sorry. It was a mistake—but I won't let it happen again. I'm going to keep you safe."

*And you will pet me.*

"Yes, I will pet you."

They sat in silence for a few minutes as she stroked his head and along his back. When he had fallen asleep, she lifted him out of her lap and put him into his little bed near the fireplace.

A corner of the room was still in disarray, so she went to work on it. She righted the triangular table from her parents' house, picked up the vase of winter jasmine that had fallen from it, and took up the small rumpled rug, which had been soaked with water from the vase. She froze, seeing what was underneath.

A piece of twine, knotted at the end, grew out of the floor.

She looked around the small cottage, half-expecting to see someone watching her. But there was no one but Flop, snoozing away in his bed.

She examined the twine more closely, and saw that it came through a hole in the floorboard. She pulled on it gently, and then with more force, until she fell backwards and a piece of the

*delfy hall*

floor, swinging from the twine, barked her shins. A gaping hole lay before her.

She peered into the hole. The air coming up from it smelled of dirt and dank tree roots, and was surprisingly warm.

How had she lived here for so many years without knowing there was a cellar beneath the house? Aunt had never once referred to it. And obviously whoever ransacked the house hadn't found it.

After lighting a lantern, she could make out a dirt floor a few feet down, along with a wooden box set directly under the opening. The box was too low to reach. She would have to lower herself down into the hole to see what was inside it.

*Don't give it any food.*

Flop was awake and staring at her.

"What are you talking about?"

*The lady used to feed it. But you should give all food to me.*

"Feed what? What is down there?"

*You can't hear it?*

"Hear what?"

*Make it be quiet. I want to sleep.* Flop closed his eyes again and refused to answer any more questions.

She put a paring knife in her pocket along with the scissors and lowered her feet onto the top of the box. Once her footing felt stable, she stepped down onto the dirt floor, holding the lantern.

The earthy smell enveloped her. She was standing in a roughly round space carved out of the dirt. On one side, under the wall of the house, was a small opening to what looked like a tunnel, just a few feet of which were visible. She peered into it and listened, but heard only the dim squawking of crows from above. Whatever was down the tunnel was asleep or too far away to be heard, she decided.

The box was not locked. She flipped back its lid and held the lantern above it.

## *the warlock and the wolf*

Inside was a small envelope. Its face bore a familiar design. She looked closer, and in the light of the lantern, she recognized the image from the cover of the book she had seen in the stadtholder's library—a snake biting its tail. The flap of the envelope had been torn open, and there was nothing inside. She put it in her pocket and closed the box.

Something shuffled inside the tunnel.

"Who's there?"

She heard a lilting sound, a cross between a birdsong and a child's laugh.

"Wait!" She picked up the lantern and stepped into the narrow opening, where the scent of mushrooms traveled on the air. The cramped space forced her to walk with her knees bent deeply, like a crab. Whatever walked ahead of her would be in no danger of being caught by sheer speed.

Then she heard a voice whispering. She froze and waited for it to repeat.

"Lady," someone said. The voice was faint and froggy.

"Yes?" She held her lantern out as far as her arm would reach.

"You are not the lady."

"Do you mean my aunt?"

"Where is my plate?"

"I don't know. This is the first time I've been down here."

The voice snorted. "Then she broke her promise. No more guarding."

"What promise?"

"You know nothing. Go away. No promises for you."

"Wait, were you guarding the box? There is something missing."

"Nothing," said the voice. "Nothing for you."

She heard little feet pattering on the soft ground, going further down the tunnel, away from her. Her first instinct was to yell and

give chase, but whoever it was could surely outrun her. So she extinguished the lantern.

She took off her shoes to quiet her footsteps, and walked as fast as she could without making noise. The tunnel floor was surprisingly level and smooth, and its direction straight. Her knees, thighs, and hips burned from the unnatural posture, and it seemed as though the air grew thinner, making it harder to breathe. Still, she kept going, hoping that her progress was as silent as it seemed to her own ears—she had no idea how well the creature up ahead could hear.

Soon a brownish patch appeared in the darkness. After a confused moment, she realized that light had entered the tunnel from somewhere up ahead. She increased her pace, fearing the creature was about to get away. Her legs held just enough strength for a final burst of speed.

She tripped and fell onto something warm and wriggly.

“Ahh! Have mercy, giant!” The creature screamed and flailed under her. She managed to grab an arm and held on with both hands. In the faint light a childish form was barely visible. The head seemed gigantic until it became obvious that the creature wore a hat and sported a bushy beard. The face was round and fleshy, and she caught the glint of two small angry eyes. The creature flopped and thrashed like a fish on a hook.

“Just calm down. Tell me what you were guarding.”

The little person—for he did seem human, if unnaturally small—huffed and sighed. “The box. But the lady broke her promise, so I took her key.”

“She was killed,” she said. “Will you please give me the key? I can keep her promise to you. Did she bring you food?”

“It’s gone, it’s gone. I burned it under the pot.”

“You burned a key?”

“A paper key, the lady’s word.”

### *the warlock and the wolf*

She started to lose patience and shook his tiny arm. "What did the paper say?"

"Lady's word. I took the lady's word!"

She held onto the creature for a few more minutes, but that was all he would say. He was stuck on the idea of her aunt breaking her promise. Finally he started sobbing and crumpled into a heap on the dirt, and she could get nothing intelligible out of him. So she let go of his arm, and quick and quiet as a minnow he zipped toward the light and was gone.



On her way into town, Mina gazed into the distance without seeing, and twice she stumbled on the path because of her distraction. She could hardly believe what had just taken place beneath the cottage.

Old peasant women often blamed mishaps on gnomes who lived in or near their houses. She had always thought it was an eccentric way of scolding their children or husbands for bad housekeeping. But apparently this belief was based in fact, and her aunt had been appeasing this little being with food for years without Mina knowing about it, possibly in return for guarding a box. The creature had given no sign of magical abilities, though it was surprisingly fast and quiet—so quiet that she had never heard it moving under the house.

There were extremely small people in Africa—she had read about them in a book in Pieter's library. But if such people existed here in Holland, wouldn't they have been dragged into the open and studied? Their physical and cultural habits could fill volumes. It was the kind of discovery that great scientific names were built on. Except that everyone of serious intellect knew that gnomes were only an old wives' tale. Claiming to have seen one

was just another thing that would jeopardize her reputation as a scientist, especially with Pieter.

Why was she seeing and hearing all of these things that weren't supposed to exist? First the strix, then the voices of animals, and now a gnome. It was as if the world had seen her dream of becoming an eminent scientist and then sent these creatures to ruin it. No one would believe in her mental soundness if she came forward with what she had seen. And yet as a scientist, she had to take her observations seriously.

She resolved to focus on a tangible piece of evidence—in this case, the image on the envelope, of the snake biting its tail. Her father had often told her of myths at bedtime, and one of them was about Fenrir, a giant wolf who was captured by men and put in chains.

Fenrir had a brother, a sea serpent called the Midgaardslang, who battled Donar, the god of thunder. Donar had banished him to the underworld. The Midgaardslang was supposed to be so large that he could wrap around the earth and bite his own tail, like the snake on the envelope. She shivered at the thought of such a fearsome beast. The earthly ones were terrifying enough.

The snake on the envelope looked identical to the one on the book she had reshelfed for Master Huygens. If a key had been in the envelope, then the key must have something to do with that book. She kicked herself for not opening the book when she had a chance.

The gnome had called the envelope's missing contents the "paper key." Surely it was not just a drawing of a key. If so, it was lost forever in the fire where the creature had burned it.

When her aunt had told Mina not to let Gregor have the key, this must be what she meant—not the sparrow. Well, now nobody would have it. But she had to find out why it was so important—why her aunt might have died for it.

She would have to look inside that book.

## CHAPTER 14



**B**Y MIDAFTERNOON Pieter agreed to let her leave early, as she had made great progress on the final section—about insects—of the compendium. She had told him nothing about the Catholic witch hunters, for he would insist on her staying in town, which would only put the Molls in danger and impinge on her investigation of the envelope and its snake symbol.

The guards at the entrance to the stadtholder's quarters in the Binnenhof let her pass after hearing Pieter's name and that she had business with the stadtholder's secretary. Her escort led her to the door of the library, which was ajar. A forceful knock from the escort pushed the door open, to reveal an empty room.

The escort looked up and down the corridor, but there was no sign of the secretary. He sighed. "He was just here. Please wait inside, miss. I will find him. Don't touch anything." He gave her an irritated stare, as though it were her fault that the secretary

was absent. She stepped into the gloom of the library and the escort hurried away.

It certainly did not look as though anyone were using the room for reading. The solitary table had been cleared and the chairs pushed in.

She glanced at the shelf where she remembered putting the book away for the secretary.

"Huygens?" The door of the library creaked open. Prince William appeared at the threshold, his pale face luminous in the gloom. They stared at each other, both seemingly too startled by the other for words.

Somewhere down the corridor a voice called out, drawing the prince's attention away from her. He disappeared from the doorway, and she moved out of sight, feeling like she had been caught, though he had not seen her do anything wrong.

From her position behind the door, she could hear the prince talking to someone.

"You promised me! Why isn't it done? I gave you what you wanted."

"I have kept my promise—he will be gone in a few days—a week at the most." It was Master Huygens speaking.

"But when, exactly? Why can't you tell me?"

"Because I don't know, your highness. These things are an art, not a science. But it will happen. There is no going back."

"I don't want to go back—what is that, under your nose? Is that blood? Disgusting."

There was a shuffle, and then footsteps clipped away from the library. She heard Master Huygens mutter to himself, and then he, too, went down the corridor.

Guessing she had only a few minutes before he returned, she searched the rows of books for the circling snake.

## *the warlock and the wolf*

She finally found it on a shelf just above her eye level. She held the envelope next to the spine. The snakes were identical. But the title was indecipherable—it was just a jumble of letters, three nonsense words. She grasped the heavy book with one hand and flipped it open. The pages were blank—all of them.

She tucked it inside her cape, under one arm, and left the library.



She tried to hurry as she headed away from the Binnenhof, but the bulk and weight of the book made it feel as though she carried a giant stone under her cape. It seemed like everyone could see that she had stolen something and cast doubtful glances at her as she walked past. But she knew it was only in her mind.

There was only one person she thought might be able to help her. She took a right on Hoog Street and headed for the illustrator's shop.

The bell rang as she pushed the door open. Hendrick's son stood behind the counter, going over some papers with a studious expression.

"Yes?" He seemed reluctant to speak to her.

"Is Master Hondius here?"

"He's busy. Can I help you, miss?"

"He's the only one who can help me. Could you please get him?"

He looked her up and down, scowling. "Very well."

He disappeared into the back of the shop. She heard a deep voice, and finally Hendrick appeared, looking like he had just woken up. His white hair floated high above his head as though trying to escape it.

"Mina, is it?"

She smiled and nodded, and his expression turned sorrowful. "You have my greatest sympathy for the death of your aunt. I did not know her well, but she had a sterling reputation as a healer."

“Thank you, sir. I am trying to find out why she died. She told me that Gregor is looking for a key, which she said he must not get, though I don’t understand why.” Then she told him about the pile of sparrows. “The stadtholder’s secretary claims that Gregor is searching for a particular sparrow, with a curved beak, that contains the soul of his true love, a woman falsely accused of witchcraft.”

Hendrick put a hand to his forehead and closed his eyes.

“What is it, sir?”

“I just realized. Leonara is dead.”

“Yes—but you knew that. Gregor probably arranged for her to be killed in order to escape his prison cell.”

“That was not the only reason—he no doubt also had her murdered to get a sparrow to take her soul.”

She was confused. “So Leonara was his true love? That doesn’t make any sense.”

“No, my dear. She was never his love. She was an obstacle, and a resource—the soul of a witch, when it has gone into a sparrow, is a powerful tool, and can wield powerful magic. Gregor must have a plan for it.”

“So it is not for sentimental reasons that he seeks it, as Master Huygens said?”

He shook his head. “I’m afraid not.”

“How can I find the bird before he does?”

“Soul sparrows go to their soul’s place of birth. If Gregor can’t find it here, it means Leonara was born somewhere else—not The Hague. But I don’t know where, unfortunately.”

She cleared her throat. “I was wondering, sir, if I may ask how you came to know so much about witches and their habits.” She did not want to come right out and state her skepticism, for fear of offending him. But she wanted to find out whether he considered himself vested with magic powers.

## *the warlock and the wolf*

"I am not usually so open with people, but given your family's history with Gregor, I feel that I can trust you." He waited for her to answer his unspoken question.

"Yes, of course."

"I was close to a witch, a beneficent one, for many years—my wife. I have no magic myself, but there are magical items that can be used by an ungifted person. However, I keep these things from my son. They would only disturb his peace of mind. Can I rely on you not to say anything to him?"

She nodded, feeling relieved that the old man did not think himself a warlock. One such person in the city was enough to worry about. "I have something that might tell us more about Gregor's plans." She took out her stolen item and placed it on the counter. "But the pages are blank."

Hendrick eyed the book's decorative cover but did not touch it. "The ouroboros."

"What is that?"

"It is the symbol for birth and death, creation and destruction."

"The title is the same on the cover and the spine, but I can't figure out what language it is."

"It is not a language—it is code. Open the book, please," he said.

She complied, flipping through the pages while he looked on. Then she took the envelope out of her pocket. "And I found this underneath my aunt's cottage. It was in a box guarded by a gnome"—she glanced at his face for any hint of skepticism, but saw none—"and I think he destroyed whatever was inside it. It may have been what Gregor is looking for—he searched my house for something last night." She pointed to the design on the envelope. "The mark is the same as the mark on the cover of the book."

Hendrick grunted, dismissed the envelope, and gave the book a feathery tap of his finger, as though testing a pot to see whether it would burn him. Then he bent his head over the book, inhaled quickly, leaned back, and closed his eyes. Finally, he brought one ear close to the book and listened.

"This is a gated book." He turned to the second page, the center of which bore a straight horizontal line a few inches long. "When the gate-key is written on this line, the text of the book will appear."

She frowned. "That must be the key my aunt spoke of. How can I find out what it is? The gnome said he burned a paper key."

"It will be a single word. It is hard to say what kind of word, because we don't know who designed the gate-lock. It could have been done centuries ago."

"But the cover and pages look new."

Hendrick waved that idea away. "That is an effect of the magic."

She bit her lip, trying to hide her doubt.

Hendrick continued. "All gate-locks are a combination of magic and encryption. A key will permit the decryption of the text—but one does not have to perform it manually. The spell will do it for you. But we must have the key."

She sighed and shook her head. "Then there's no hope. Whatever was in this envelope is lost."

"Perhaps your aunt wrote it down somewhere else. Or she could have told you the key without making it obvious. Often a key will have significance to the one who chooses it."

"So my aunt might have locked the book?"

"Not directly—she was not a witch, if I'm not mistaken. But someone else could have done it for her, like Leonara. Or she could have been keeping the gate-key for someone. Perhaps your parents?"

*the warlock and the wolf*

"If that was the case, I never knew about it."

"And was the book also underneath the cottage?"

She hesitated, not wanting to lie to Hendrick, but not wanting to implicate him in her theft, either. "Not exactly. Thank you for your help. I will bring it back if I can figure out the key."

Hendrick held up his hand. "I don't recommend keeping this in your home. You should leave it here, with me."

"But it could be dangerous for you." She imagined the stadtholder's guards coming to arrest the old man for possessing stolen property.

"I assure you that I will be in much less danger than you would be, my dear. But you must not tell a soul about this endeavor. I assume you borrowed it from the owner without consent?"

"I guess you could say that."

The slightest of smiles crossed his face. "Then it will be our secret." He ducked beneath the counter and returned with a black cloth bag, into which he placed the book. "While you look for the key, I will try a few ideas of my own. I may enlist the help of a friend, young Christiaan Huygens."

"You don't mean the stadtholder's secretary?"

"No—his son, who is home from school in Leiden. He has a knack for ciphers, and this one may interest him."

She tarried at the counter, wondering whether it was wise to involve the son of the man from whom she had stolen the book in the effort to decipher it. The very idea of involving anyone, including Hendrick, in her search for answers made her want to forget the whole thing. She preferred to work alone—that way she was responsible for herself only. What if she got someone hurt, or even killed? Too many people in her life had died already.

But apart from Hendrick, there were few other options. She certainly wasn't going to show the book or the envelope to Pieter.

## *delfy hall*

She would just have to hope that the secretary's son would not recognize the volume as belonging in the stadtholder's library.

Hendrick noticed the worry on her face. "I will send word to you as soon as I have something to report. But I can't promise any results. You must find the key. And Mina—" His wild white eyebrows knitted together.

"Yes?"

"Extreme caution is still the order of the day."



A few hours later, the cottage looked as if someone had ransacked it again. Every single book to be found in the little house lay on the table, floor, and the seats of the chairs. All boxes had been opened and emptied, and the contents of every drawer were turned out into piles throughout the main room, including a bundle of her parents' papers. She could find nothing that could be the gate-key.

She noticed Flop, snoring softly in his fireside bed. He had spent days upon days with Hester while Mina was away at the Molls. He might know what the key was, though he might not realize it was called the key. But she had promised herself that she would no longer talk to animals, for the sake of her future as a scientist. She sighed. Now it looked as if she might not have a future as anything if Gregor and his strix kept attacking her.

She decided she would go back on her promise, but she resolved to use her ability more wisely. She must think before she acted.

But when questioned, Flop claimed to know nothing of Hester's affairs beyond the fact that she fed and petted him too little.

"This is bigger than you and your selfish concerns," she said. "This key could unlock vital information about capturing Gregor. Or it could show the way to some treasure that he wants."

*the warlock and the wolf*

*Which? Capturing or treasure?*

"I won't know until I read the book, will I? Now try to help me figure out another place where Aunt could have written down this key. You were here every day with her while I was at the Molls'. What did you see her do?"

*She put plants in jars. Cooked. Brought in wood. Slept.*

"Yes—what else?"

*Went to another house.*

"Whose house?"

*The witch.*

"You mean Leonara?"

Flop blinked. *I don't know what you call her.*

"It must be Leonara. Why didn't I think of her sooner?"

*Where are you going?*

"I won't be long."

Flop grumbled to himself and circled in his bed, while she bundled on her cape and hurried out of the cottage.



## CHAPTER 15



**T**HE SUN HAD gone down an hour before, and the forest was dark. Mina traipsed north into the heart of it, alert for any unusual sounds that might mean the strix or a witch hunter was nearby.

The way to the stone house was familiar, though she had never been inside. She and Joris had lurked around Leonara's cottage as children do when they want to scare themselves about what might be taking place inside a stranger's house. They would spy on the old woman with long white hair while she puttered about in her herb garden or collected firewood, and whenever she caught sight of them, they would run off, giggling. As an adult, Mina had largely forgotten about her.

The stone house lay surrounded by birch trees. It looked benign enough—one would never have thought that a witch had lived there. The shutters were painted a cheerful yellow, and the windows were clean and glowing with candlelight.

Mina thought she heard someone singing, and she paused behind a particularly thick tree trunk. But the more she strained to hear, the quieter the singing became. Finally, she approached the cottage with hesitant steps, and peered into the open door.

A woman sat at a table in the center of the room, studying a pile of something—spools of thread and buttons, it looked like. Thin strands of black hair clung to her gray scalp as though they had been glued there, and her chapped, dry lips worked continuously at some barely audible song. When she stopped singing, her head snapped to the side and she saw Mina standing in the doorway.

“Can I help you, dearie?”

Mina suppressed her revulsion at the woman’s appearance. “I’m sorry to disturb you. Are you a relative of Leonara’s?”

The woman smiled, revealing stained teeth. “A friend, dearie. And you are?”

Mina paused, wondering how to explain herself. Finally she said, “My aunt knew Leonara.”

“Come in, won’t you?” The question sounded more like a dare than an invitation.

Normally Mina would have exercised more caution, but something that she couldn’t quite explain was pulling her toward this woman.

When she stepped over the threshold of the cottage, the woman’s smile became maniacal.

“So you were a true friend to the deceased,” she purred.

“Not at all—she knew my parents, and my aunt, as I said. But she’s dead now, too.”

“My condolences,” said the woman, still looking delighted. “Leonara obviously thought well of you. She would not have given you entrance to her home otherwise.”

“What do you mean?”

*the warlock and the wolf*

"Only the gifted can enter another's home without permission. And you are not gifted. She made an exception in your case."

"I didn't know anything about it."

The woman took her hand and guided her to a chair by the fireplace, where flames curled and crackled. Mina hadn't noticed the fire when she first looked into the room. The woman kept ahold of her hand, and a warm, delicious wave rippled up her arm and filled her body, melting away her apprehension.

"Tell me about your aunt and Leonara. Did they grow up together?"

"I don't think so. Well, I don't know how they met, actually. Leonara knew my parents, and she supposedly kept the man who murdered them from escaping his prison cell—although I don't really believe it. I don't believe in magic." She fought the urge to close her eyes as a surge of drowsiness made the room fade.

"Keep your eyes open, dearie." The woman squeezed her hand. "Concentrate on my voice. Where was Leonara born? Did your aunt tell you?"

She shook her head, unable to speak through the fog of sleepiness that had dropped over her. She felt the woman shake her hand. "You will not sleep—not yet. Tell me why you are here."

"The key—" She felt her head hit the back of the chair.

"The key to what?" The woman stood over her, strands of her lank hair falling onto Mina's cheek.

"The book. The key to the book," Mina whispered. She closed her eyes and felt herself falling toward slumber.

"And which book would that be—"

*Girl! Wake up!*

Mina's eyes flipped open.

The old woman fell back, clawing the air with gnarled hands. She landed with a heavy thud on the cottage floor.

*delfy hall*

A wolf—her wolf—crouched over the woman, his snarling muzzle poised above her bare throat.

“Stop!” Mina cried.

The wolf gave no sign of hearing her. He growled with such hatred that Mina felt the skin on the back of her neck tingle.

“Please don’t kill her—I beg you.”

The wolf’s green eyes flicked up to look at Mina, and in that instant the woman vanished, accompanied by a rush of air, like a tightly sealed jar had just been opened.

A jolt hit Mina, making her shudder. It felt like a bolt of lightning, though such a thing could not happen indoors. She stared at the floor where the witch had been.

The wolf stopped snarling and licked his lips, looking a bit embarrassed.

*You should not have distracted me.*

“Where did she go?”

*Off to do more evil, wherever that may be.*

“But she was right here! It’s not possible to just disappear.”

*Clearly it is.* The wolf walked around the small room and sniffed the legs of the furniture, unaffected by her dismay.

She dropped to the spot where the woman had lain and felt the wooden boards for a hidden opening. They were solid and worn—no cracks or splits.

The wolf stopped his investigation of the cottage and watched her.

*The witch is gone, girl. Tell me why you were here.*

She stared at the planks, trying to make sense of what had just happened. Was she simply looking through the woman? Or perhaps this was a dream—strange things happened in dreams. She stood up and looked around the room. The fireplace was cold, filled only with ashes. Smoke and grease fogged the windows. On the table lay a heap of buttons, spools of thread, and

*the warlock and the wolf*

scraps of fabric. She picked up one of the buttons—it was black and round, and certainly felt real. But that was typical of dreams.

Why had she been sitting in the chair by the fireplace? She couldn't remember what the woman had said—only her bedraggled face and look of horror as she lay under the wolf's grimacing snout. Mina pressed a hand to her forehead—it felt as though her mind were leaking out, and if she didn't stop up the hole she would be left with nothing.

*Are you unwell, girl?*

The wolf's green eyes seemed as bright as the sun, and his voice had a threatening edge. Could he be ready to tear her throat out, as he almost did to that woman? She must be mad to be standing next to a wolf. Had he cast some sort of spell on her?

She backed toward the door, feeling dizzy and disoriented, and more afraid than she'd ever been, in a dream or otherwise.

*You must rest now. I will watch over you.* He stood up, looming larger than the house itself.

She bolted into the woods, running as though an army pursued her.



## CHAPTER 16



**M**INA DIDN'T STOP running until she got to the sandy woods. She slowed to a walk, taking big breaths of the cool sea air. She tried to convince herself that what had just happened was a dream, or a nightmare. The old woman was there one second and gone the next—how was that possible? Magic wasn't real, she knew that. And yet the woman had disappeared. Where did she go? And how had she convinced Mina to sit down with her? She must have put her into some kind of trance.

She didn't want to go home yet. She wished she could talk to Hester about all that had happened, and being in the empty house would only remind her that she could never talk to her aunt again. She walked further toward the sea.

A high-pitched cry broke out nearby. Cautious that the old woman might have found her and was trying to lure her again, she crept toward the noise with a watchful eye.

## *delfy hall*

Near an ash tree was a pile of fur, not moving but emitting a pathetic whine. When she got close, she saw the pile was a silver fox, the same one she had seen on New Year's Day, when she first encountered the strix.

She cringed upon seeing his predicament. The fox's belly was crushed in the steel jaws of a trap, and his pale eyes rolled up and down.

He yelped when she cranked open the trap and the metal teeth pulled out of his belly. Blood oozed out of the holes. She scooped him up, drawing part of her cape over him to keep him warm. She hated to jostle him and cause him more pain, but time was of the essence. She ran as fast as she could.

She banged open the door of Hester's cottage and lay the fox on the table. When she brought the lamp close to him, he began crying piteously, his eyes shut tight against the light, which seemed to cause him as much pain as his wound. After she withdrew the lamp and turned it down, he was quiet again.

By now a pool of blood had collected under the creature. She grabbed some rags and pressed them onto his abdomen. The wounds had to be closed up, and the sewing box was in her aunt's bedroom. She raced into Hester's room, yanked open a dresser drawer, found the box, and ran back to the table.

The fox watched her while she threaded the needle.

"Don't worry, little one. I'm going to fix this."

The fox didn't answer, but kept staring at her, his pale eyes glinting red in the soft light of the lantern. A trickle of blood ran from his nose. She took the rag from his stomach, and the cloth was soaked with blood—too much, she thought. But she pressed together the flesh around one of the gaping holes, and pierced the layers with the needle. The fox didn't flinch.

*the warlock and the wolf*

She looked at his face. His eyes were turned to the ceiling, and they no longer flicked back and forth. She held a small mirror above his nose—there was no breath coming out. He had gone.

“No,” she murmured. She shook his small body gently, hoping to get a reaction, but he lay limp and lifeless on the table. “Please come back,” she whispered.

She gripped the table edge and bent her head as sobs began to shake her body. She cursed the princess Amalia for her vanity and selfishness. She cursed the entire family. Let them die a horrible death as this creature has, she thought.

She stayed bent over the fox’s body even after her crying faded, feeling paralyzed.

But she soon had the creeping feeling that someone was watching her.

She cracked the shutters and peered out. The wolf’s green eyes blinked at her, no longer blindingly bright. The fear she had felt of him at Leonara’s cottage was gone—for better or worse, she wasn’t sure.

“Why did you follow me?”

*To see if you are well.*

She leaned her forehead against the shutter, suddenly stymied by a flash of the witch’s haggard face. For a little while, she had forgotten about her.

*Girl?*

“Yes.”

*Let me in.*

“Why?”

*To protect you. The witch can find you here.*

Too tired to argue or protest, she opened the door. The wolf padded into the cottage.

*delfy hall*

*You brought a dead thing inside?*

"I was trying to save him." Her voice was weak and wearied. A horrible thought occurred to her. "You're not going to eat him, are you?"

*I have eaten already tonight.*

"Fine," she muttered.

*Why do you trouble yourself about this little creature?* The wolf, whose chin cleared the top of the table, sniffed the fox's tail. *He was already sick. He would have died soon anyway.*

"Because he died for nothing—for someone's vanity. It wasn't right."

*And do you not eat meat and wear animals' skins?*

"I don't. I do wear leather shoes because I can't find any others."

He lay down near her, and gave a great sigh.

"I know you think I'm foolish. You don't have to say anything."

*Then I won't.*

She heard a familiar cry outside the cottage, and she forced herself to get up and open the door.

The wolf looked up. *Don't—*

Flop hissed and arched his back when he saw the wolf lying in the center of the room. He tried to run, but she closed the door before he could dash back outside. Instead he leaped on top of the nearby cupboard, his eyes blazing.

*Kill it! I command you to kill it!*

"Just calm down. He's not going to hurt you. Right?" She turned to the wolf for confirmation.

The predator blinked. *If he is special to you, I will not harm him.*

"He is special—he is my family."

*That is impossible.*

*Why are you talking to it? Kill it now!*

## *the warlock and the wolf*

She cast an annoyed glance at Flop, whose eyes looked like they might burst out of their sockets. "Quiet, Maximus. He's not going to do anything to you. You're safe with him."

*Help! Somebody, help me!* The cat began emitting terrible moans of distress.

The wolf's ears flattened. *How aggravating your family is.*

"Just ignore him. He'll quit soon enough."

She fetched blankets and pillows from her room, and spread them out in front of the fire. While she was putting out the lamp and barring the door, the wolf settled himself onto the blankets.

"That is my spot."

*You are small enough. We can share.*

"Fine. But if you wake up hungry, please don't eat me."

*I won't be hungry again until well after sunrise.*

She curled on her side with her back to the wolf, facing the fire. Despite her exhaustion, she lay awake, worrying about the key and where she could find it. She felt the wolf move closer to her until his long side warmed her back. His rhythmic breathing reminded her of the nights when, years ago, her mother lay next to her and stroked her hair, calling her "mistletoe" and singing her to sleep with a sweet half-whispered song. She hadn't thought about those nights for a long time. To her surprise, the memory was relaxing, and soon sleep overtook her.

During the night, she dreamed of a giant pond of blood. Her parents and Aunt Hester lay lifeless, floating facedown, while the silver fox paddled, straining to reach her at the edge of the pond, his head sinking lower and lower under the blood. She had to get to him before he went under, but he was so far away, and her legs felt like rooted tree trunks. The fox's nose disappeared. She heard an agonized, haunting cry. She looked around for its source—perhaps one of her parents or Aunt Hester was alive?

*delfy hall*

Then she realized the sound was coming from her own mouth. She woke, crying, and felt a warm rasping tongue licking her cheek.

*It is only a dream, girl. Go back to sleep.*

She pulled the covers tighter, and her breathing quieted.



They were woken by the violent sound of someone banging on the door.

“Mina, I know you’re in there!”

The wolf stood up on the blanket, and the fur on his back rose. He emitted a low growl.

“Shhh! You have to hide.”

*I’m not afraid of that boy.*

“Well, I am. He might try to shoot you again.” She went to the corner of the room and lifted up the rug. “You must hide under the house.”

The banging was joined by kicking. “Mina!”

*If he hurts you, I will put my teeth in his neck.*

“You’ll do no such thing.” She lifted the floor piece and beckoned the wolf over. He sniffed the air inside the opening, and then jumped into the space below.

After replacing the piece of floor and the rug, she opened the front shutter and peered out. Joris glared back at her. His butcher’s apron was smeared with blood.

She unbarred the door and he barreled inside.

“It’s time for you to go,” he said, thrusting out his jaw.

“I have nowhere else.”

“I don’t care. Mother says you have to get out.”

“Have mercy, Joris. I am your cousin. Do you want me to sleep in the woods?”

“Go to your friend the actress.”

## *the warlock and the wolf*

She shook her head. "I can't stay there without putting them in danger."

"I don't care," he yelled. The veins on his neck had swelled. She backed away, toward the fireplace. Joris followed her.

"What is that?" He pointed at the fox's carcass.

"He was caught in a trap. I tried to save him."

Joris grabbed the fox by the tail and held it up. A few drops of blood rolled onto the floor. "Were you doing a spell on my family?"

"What?"

"If you have cursed this house, I will kill you." He grabbed the sleeve of her dress and knotted it in his fist, drawing her close to his reddened face.

"Let go of me!" She tried to push him away, but he tightened his grip, pinching the cloth around her arm.

Something slammed into the wall of the cottage, near the door. Joris let go of her sleeve.

"What was that?"

While his attention was distracted, she grabbed the paring knife that was lying on the table.

The cottage was hit again. Joris drew back his shoulders and strode to the door.

"Who's there?"

He swung open the door and went out, carrying the fox. She slammed it shut and pulled the bar down.

"Mina! Open up!" The bar shook back and forth as Joris rattled the handle. "This is my house!" He cursed loudly. "I will give you three more days, Mina. You better not be here when I get back."

All was quiet, but she dared not go outside, in case he was waiting for her. She went around to all the windows, making sure the shutters were latched.

*delfy hall*

*Girl, are you hurt?*

She realized that the wolf was somewhere outside.

"No, I'm fine. Was that you?"

*Yes.*

"You didn't hurt him, did you?"

*I wanted to.*

"He is my family."

There was only silence. "Wolf?"

*My name is not wolf.*

"What is it, then?"

*Basa.*

"I need your help with something, Basa."

*Very well. Will you let me in?*

"I'm worried that Joris might be watching. Will you come in the way you went out?"

There was no answer. She thought about unbarring the door and looking out, but she was afraid that Joris was still lurking nearby.

She dipped a rag into some water and began mopping up the fox's blood from the table. His death was the second one to happen in the house. Perhaps she should find another place to live, as Joris wanted.

A scratching sound came from the corner of the room.

She lifted up the rug and then the piece of floor, and the wolf bounded out, along with a rush of dank, humid air. He shook himself, sending a light sprinkling of dirt onto the floor.

"Is he gone?"

*Yes.*

"Did you have any trouble getting through?"

He sat on the blankets near the fireplace and gave the thick fur on his back a desultory tongue swipe. *That tunnel smells of gnome. Now, tell me your plan.*

## CHAPTER 17



**M**INA COULD HEAR the soft crunch of the wolf's footsteps behind her as she headed for the sandy woods, a shovel balanced on her shoulder. The morning was unseasonably warm, and the birds flitted and sang to each other in the treetops.

*I still don't see the point of this plan.*

"If you don't want to help me, just go."

*How will this gain vengeance for your dead family?*

"Because the princess Amalia refused to help me after Aunt was killed."

*Good. I agree with this plan then.*

"That's not the main reason we're doing it, though."

*Speak for yourself, girl.*

"I have a name, too. It's Mina."

*I know. But it is not necessary. You are the only human I talk to.*

*delfy hall*

She found the bloody trap right where she had left it the night before. The tree next to it was marked with a swathe of yellow paint at eye level. There was no telling how many traps there were in the forest—she would have to walk at least a mile in all directions, looking for yellow paint. What she had in mind could take hours, even days.

Then she noticed the wolf pressing his nostrils to one of the hinges and inhaling deeply. He performed this investigation at a few more points on the trap, and then trotted away.

“Hey, don’t run off.” She wondered if the smell of blood had triggered his hunger. The sight of another animal meeting its death would be too much for her this morning. She hoped he would eat his breakfast out of sight.

Then she spotted him again, further inland.

*There’s one here.*

“Where?”

*By this tree with the low branch.*

She caught up with the wolf, who was standing near an oak daubed with yellow, his black nose pointing at some vines at its base. She poked at the vines with the shovel and nearly jumped out of her skin when a trap snapped shut with a loud clang. The rope tethering it to the tree proved easy to sever, and she lifted the trap out of its hiding place. She let it fall to the ground a few feet away.

“This is as good a spot as any.”

She was not much of a digger, but she liked to think she was persistent. Yet after several minutes of wielding the shovel, the hole was only about a foot deep and a couple of feet wide.

*You are terrible at this.*

“See if you can do any better, then.”

*Move aside, girl.*

## *the warlock and the wolf*

She backed away and the wolf stepped into the hole, keeping his back end crouched on the ground above. His front paws began whirring like a spinning wheel, and a great volley of sandy earth sprayed into the air behind him. He maintained an unflinching rhythm and soon had carved out a wide gash about four feet deep.

Her spirits lifted as he hopped out of the hole and shook himself off. She was used to having to do things alone, especially clandestine things.

*Now we can fill it up. That is what you had in mind?*

"Yes." She beamed at him.

*What is wrong?*

"Nothing—I'm just happy." She tossed the trap into the hole and it landed with a thud.

*Do you want me to dig more?*

"No—let's go."

They walked back and forth through the forest, staying close to the sea. As the wolf found each trap, she would spring it closed and drag it from its hiding place. After smearing the patch of yellow paint with beetroot, staining it red, she carried the trap to the hole and dumped it.

Their search took them near the pond where she had seen the strix, and she kept an eye out for her, though she was sure Basa would see or smell the creature before she did.

She had just wrested free another trap when she caught a movement in some vines near the water. She quietly set down the trap and crept closer. Then the vine leaves rustled again, and she caught sight of what was moving among them—another two-headed turtle, like the one she had seen in the town canal.

Which held the greater odds, she wondered—two such abnormal creatures within a short distance of each other, or only one such creature seen in two places?

Then it dawned on her: the turtle must have used a hidden stream of water, of unknown size, from the canal bordering the city to the pond, like a tiny underground submarine.

*Is something wrong?* Basa had stopped his search for traps and was watching her from several feet away.

"No—it's fine! I'm coming." Now that she knew where to look for the creature, she could come back later with her sketch book.

She hurried back to the discarded trap and carried it to the hole. The wolf sat nearby, taking the opportunity to clean his sandy paws.

"I thought you might go off to make a kill this morning."

*I will wait until I leave you. You don't want to see such things.*

She squinted at him and shaded her face from the morning sun rising behind him. "Do you think I'm weak?"

*You trust too easily. And you cannot dig or catch prey. But you are not weak.*

"Shouldn't you have a pack? Where is your family?"

*I had to leave them to start my own pack.*

"But you don't have one yet?"

*No. Are you ready? There are more traps to the north.*

She nodded and picked up her shovel, and they continued their search. After a few hours the hole was filled almost to the top with traps, all of them tripped shut, including the one that had killed the silver fox. She filled in the displaced dirt and scattered leaves and other debris on top to hide the bare earth and keep the pit from being discovered.

Finally done, she sank to the ground and leaned against a young oak tree. The wolf lay down a few feet away and began licking his paws and wiping them over his face and snout. She could hear the waves crashing on the beach, and the plaintive cries of the seagulls, looking for food.

*the warlock and the wolf*

Her thoughts kept going back to the gruesome face of the witch in Leonara's cottage. She remembered the prickly feeling on the back of her neck as she stepped across the door's threshold, and then the jolt that ran through her body when the woman disappeared. Every inch of her skin had buzzed with a sickening ripple, as though the flesh were trying to leave her bones. She was left with the certainty ringing in her mind that something very wrong had happened.

"That woman in the cottage . . ."

*The witch.*

"Have you seen magic like that before?"

*A few times. Do not go looking for such persons, girl.*

"And Gregor, is he capable of such magic?"

*I have heard that all the witches fear him. Why—do you have a plan for him?*

"Not yet. I don't know if I should even try to find him if he has such strange powers."

*You should not. He is too strong for you.*

"I thought you said I must seek vengeance."

*Yes, but that was before.*

"Before what?"

*You cannot face the kymaa unless you are willing to die.*

She snapped a twig and threw it into the grass. "Then what am I supposed to do?"

*Find a pack. Make a family.*

"And you?"

*I will find a pack too. It is time.*

"Will you still come to talk to me?"

*As you wish. But you belong with your own kind.*

She shook her head. "I don't think I could be happy as a wife, staying at home with children."

*delfy hall*

The wolf's ears stiffened, and he stopped his grooming to listen to the forest. *I must leave you.* He stood up and shook himself, and then fixed her with his green eyes.

"What is it?"

*Stay away from the kymaa, girl. He will be your death.*

He loped off before she could reply.

She remained at the base of the tree, her eyes closed against the sun.

Somewhere nearby a small animal gave a strangled cry and then was silent.

## CHAPTER 18



**M**INA LAY IN bed, angry that she could not make them leave. The Molls had knocked on her door on the second day that she had stayed home after sending word she was sick. When Sophia saw that Mina was healthy but still in her nightdress in the middle of the day, she bustled her into the bedroom, picked out a clean dress for her to wear, and watched while Mina splashed her face with water and pulled a comb through her hair.

Hennie played on the floor with Flop, and Pieter chopped wood and got a rousing fire going. Sophia found enough staples and scraps to boil up a pot of vegetable soup, and she served it to everyone with some of the bread she had brought from home. Mina ate a few spoonfuls before rising and drifting away from the table. She heard the Molls murmuring as she went into her bedroom, but she didn't care. She just wanted to sleep, and hide from the world.

After the wolf had left her that morning, it finally dawned on her how truly alone she was. She felt the loss of Hester like a gaping wound. Now all of her family was murdered or turned against her. Her only friends were endangered by being near her. And her dreams of being appointed to the court were foolish at best, self-delusional at worst, which left only the option of becoming a housewife.

And now there was true magic to contend with, as she had seen at Leonara's cottage. How could a scientist believe in such things? And yet what she had seen was real—she was sure of it.

She didn't know where to turn, or what to do next. She wondered if everyone would be better off if she just disappeared. She could go somewhere far away, where no one knew her past or its tragedies, and Gregor could not find her.

Perhaps there was a country in which women could be scientists, or where animals were not killed for human pleasure, where she wouldn't be a constant anomaly. She doubted it. Yet she could not muster the courage for the alternative—to do away with herself. And so she languished, veering between sleeping like the dead and shuffling around the empty house like a ghost.

"Dear, please don't go to bed. It's the middle of the day."

She pulled the covers over her head and tried to block out Sophia's voice. Soon her footsteps clipped out of the room, and Mina sighed with relief. She did not have the strength to put on a brave face.

When she woke up, a lamp was burning, and someone was in the room, creaking back and forth in the rocking chair by her bed. She blinked and looked again. It was Adam, his blond head bent over a book.

"What are you doing here?"

He looked up. "You're awake. How do you feel?"

*the warlock and the wolf*

"Just tired, and useless."

"It is hard to be useful when you spend most of your time in bed."

"I don't know what else to do. Why are you here?"

"The Molls thought you could use a friend."

"They can't stay here—it's too dangerous for them. Gregor might come back." She stared at the ceiling and the lamplight flickering on it.

"When people care about you, they will take risks."

"Well, it's not a good idea. Look at what happened to my aunt."

"True. People can get hurt. I have put a bag of asafetida under the threshold of the cottage door. Perhaps that will keep Gregor away for a while."

She frowned. "It will only make the house smell bad."

"We'll see."

"What are you reading?"

"Matthew, chapter six, verse twenty-six. Would you like to hear it?"

"If I must."

"Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?"

"And what does that mean? I'm certainly not better than a bird."

"It means that God is with you, and he takes care of you."

"I'm not sure I believe that about him."

"That does not make it less true. God watches over you, Mina."

She wondered if the wolf was outside, somewhere nearby. "Then why didn't he protect my family and the Molls from Gregor?"

"He cannot give us perfectly safe lives. But he does aid us in unseen ways."

"I can't accept that without evidence." She was too tired and despondent to try to take care of Adam's feelings. If she shocked him, so be it.

He held out his hand, and she took it. His skin was warm, but there was no thrilling shiver like she had felt before.

"Tell me what's troubling you."

"I—there was a woman who . . ." She trailed off.

"Yes?"

"She is a witch, I'm certain of it. I saw her disappear in front of me." She shook her head. "I ran away into the woods, and I found . . . Never mind. There is no place for me here. I cannot be a scientist and believe in such things. What I wanted for my life is probably impossible, and I—I think should just leave. I will only put my friends in danger."

"Discovering the truth of magic can throw anyone into turmoil. I went into deep confusion and sadness when I found this out. I spent many hours praying to God for guidance. And he answered me. I knew then that rooting out the heksen was my purpose."

"Don't you ever wonder why you became a minister but a heks became what she is? It seems like such blind chance that we become what we are. Don't you ever wonder whether you were supposed to be something else?"

He shook his head. "It is part of the divine plan. Any mistakes are human mistakes, not God's. Follow the purpose he has shown you."

She wanted to ask Adam why he gave his god all of the credit and none of the blame. But she thought it might be going too far, even for her. And she still felt a spark of attraction toward

*the warlock and the wolf*

him, even in her depressed state. She did not want to drive him away completely.

“He is all we need—nothing more, nothing less. No other special being is coming to rescue you, Mina. There is only God.”

She wondered what Adam would say about the wolf helping her bury the traps.

“He is waiting for you to accept him into your heart.”

She let go of his hand, and smiled faintly. Then she rolled over, away from him.

The rocking chair creaked as he rose and the lantern went out. “I’ll be near the fire if you need me.”



She awoke to a soft tapping.

“Go away,” she said, thinking Adam or Sophia wanted to get her up for some energetic activity early in the morning, which doubtless they thought good for her state of mind.

There it was again, a little louder. She sat up. The room was still dark, and no light seeped in through the curtains. She got out of bed and listened. The tapping grew more insistent. It was coming from the window.

She drew aside one of the curtains and looked out, steeling herself for another visit from the strix. But it was only the bearded face of Master Huygens, grinning apologetically at her, lit like a spirit by the faint half-moon. She rubbed her eyes. “How—what are you doing out there?”

“Open the window, my dear. I must talk with you.” He wiped his brow with a white handkerchief, and his pale eyes shifted back and forth.

She wondered if he had discovered her theft of the book. But he looked too desperate to be there for accusations. Something

was terribly wrong if he was sweating so heavily outside in the dead of winter.

"Come around to the front door," she whispered, not wanting to wake the rest of the house.

"No, you must open the window." His knuckles hit the glass a little too hard, but to her relief it did not break. He is in a state, she thought.

She undid the latch. For a second his tremor stopped and their eyes met. His pupils seemed to harden and swell, and she had the eerie feeling that they were reaching out to her. The hairs on the back of her neck lifted.

Before she could close the latch, he pushed open the window and launched through it headfirst, like a rabbit into a warren. He landed on his feet between her and the bedroom door.

Her breath caught in her throat when he turned around to face her. He was not Master Huygens anymore. "It's you—"

He had the silver hair and pockmarked face of the man from her memories, with light, soulless eyes that glinted red.

"You recognize me—good. Less explaining to be done."

She tried to run past him to the door, but he caught her arm. His hand threw a shock into her flesh, making her gasp.

"What do you want?" She realized there was no weapon in the room. She could call out for the others, but she didn't want Gregor to hurt anyone but her.

"I want you to help me, Mina."

"I won't help my family's murderer."

"Yes, your aunt's death was regrettable. I did not want to involve her, or you, but I am running out of time."

"And my parents? Were their deaths regrettable?" She spat the last word.

"That is why you will help me. Your parents are alive."

"Liar. They are dead, and you killed them."

*the warlock and the wolf*

He smiled wryly. "I was put in prison because everyone believed I killed them. But I assure you that they still live."

In spite of her fear, she studied his face, trying to discern if he was telling the truth. "Where are they, then?"

"If you bring me the sparrow, the book—which you have stolen—and its key, I will tell you where they are. But you must bring me those three things. I have heard that you have a way with animals—the sparrow will be an easy task for you."

"I don't know where it is."

He squeezed her arm. "Then try harder. Or I will pay a visit to the family that you love so much. The red-haired little girl?" His fingers dug into her arm like claws. "I believe they are here in this very house with you."

"Stay away from them."

As if to make her point, a snarl sounded from the open window. Basa peered into the room, his white teeth glinting in the moonlight.

"Call off your beast, girlie."

"Or what? He will not let you kill my friends—or me."

"Or you will never see your parents alive."

The wolf kept growling, the saliva clicking in his throat. She looked at him and shook her head.

"Let him pass. He knows where my parents are."

The wolf remained, his gaze fixed on the warlock. *He will only come back to hurt you later.*

Even in the dark room, she could see that the color had drained from Gregor's face. He kept his eyes on the wolf.

"For now we must trust him."

*Tell him to let go of you first.*

She looked at Gregor. "He says to let go of me. Then he will let you leave."

## *delfy hall*

Gregor's fingers tightened around her arm, making her cry out. "So it is true—my strix has turned you into a beast binder. There must be some gifted blood in you."

The wolf's growl rose to a wild rumble, and his claws gripped the window ledge as though he were preparing to leap over it. Gregor took a step back and let go of her arm. It dawned on her that the warlock was truly frightened of the wolf, though doubtless he could disappear from the room at any time, like the witch at Leonara's cottage.

Basa pushed away from the window ledge and vanished beneath it. She suspected he was waiting only inches away.

Gregor wrapped his black cape around him. "Now you must hurry and find that sparrow. I have others looking for it, and if they find it before you do, then I will tell you nothing of your parents. It would be a shame for them to languish because of your inept—"

The door to the bedroom swung open, and Adam burst into the room.

She did not have to look behind her—the unnerving jolt that passed through her meant that Gregor had just disappeared.

"What was that?" Adam went to the window and looked out. "It sounded like an animal was in the house."

All was quiet, except for the creaking of the bed as she sat on its edge, lighting a lantern and trying to compose herself.

She flushed, seeing that the collar of Adam's nightshirt hung open past his breastbone.

"Mina, why is the window open?"

"It was Gregor. He promised that if I bring him the sparrow that he's looking for, he will tell me where my parents are. He says they're still alive." She thought it best to omit any mention of the key, and the stolen book. Adam would probably want to destroy it.

*the warlock and the wolf*

"And you believe him? He is a warlock and a murderer, Mina. He is trying to manipulate you."

"Maybe. But what if he's telling the truth—what if they are alive?"

"They are not, Mina. Don't play into his hands."

A groggy and alarmed Sophia padded into the bedroom. "What is all the commotion?"

"Go back to sleep, madam. I believe we have it taken care of," said Adam.

Sophia raised an eyebrow at Mina.

"I'll tell you in the morning, Fifi."

The older woman shuffled off.

Adam's brow knitted. "Mina, what was that ferocious sound I heard? I thought someone was about to be torn limb from limb."

"I—I can't say."

"You can't, or you won't?"

"Adam, just leave it for now. I promise you, it is the least of our worries."

He knelt in front of her and took her hand. "You must not take any risks with your life. The Molls could not stand it if you were hurt, or worse. And neither could I."

His blue eyes searched her face. Before tonight, such an amorous gaze might have tempted her to fall into his arms, and hide away from the world and its dangers. But Gregor's claim that her parents were alive had awoken a courage she didn't know she had.

"The Molls and you must leave at first light," she told him. "You must not come back here, for your own sake." She let go of his hand. "Do you understand?"

"Mina, do not do this. I can give you protection in the church. He will not look for you there."

"I must find my parents, and stop Gregor from hurting anyone else."

"Then let me help you." He touched her hair, and then her cheek. "I feel deeply about you, Mina. You are always in my thoughts." He bent his head close to her lap. She felt a yearning to pull him close to her.

"I can't." She slipped away and went to the wardrobe. She was conscious of him watching her as she searched for a clean dress.

"Are you promised to someone else?" he asked softly.

She shook her head. "I can't think about this right now. There is too much danger. Please take care of the Molls for me."

Still he knelt, gazing at her, worry etched on his handsome face. "But who will help you? You can't do this on your own."

"I won't be alone. But I can't tell you who is helping me."

"Mina, there is little you could say that would shock me. I minister to sinners every day. I assure you, I have heard it all."

She doubted he had heard of someone who conversed with animals. Though if he truly cared about her, perhaps it would not matter. "Maybe I can tell you later, when I have had a chance to think. Right now I just need the Molls to be safe. I will be in touch soon, I promise."

Disappointed, he left the bedroom.

She took a deep breath and turned back to the wardrobe. She could not let proclamations of love distract her from what she must do.

## CHAPTER 19



THE FOREST WAS lit in patches through the trees by the half-moon. It cast enough light to walk by, if one knew the way, as Mina did. The sun would be up in a few hours. She carried an unlit lantern and a tinder box.

Adam had not tried to stop her from leaving the cottage, but his expression while watching her go was baleful. She knew that if she had given him the merest of looks, he would have been on his feet and following her out the door. Somehow that thought gave her more courage to carry on alone.

But she was not alone for long. She heard his voice before any noise of his approach.

*It's not safe to be out here, girl.*

*"It's not safe indoors, either."*

*Where are you going?*

*delfy hall*

"To Leonara's. I have to find something that will tell me where the sparrow is." She told him of Gregor's promise in exchange for her help.

*You should find out what he will do with those things first.*

"My parents' lives are at stake."

*Your parents are probably long dead. Why would he have spared them?*

"Maybe they got away. You don't know."

*If they are alive, they could be past saving. Some fates are worse than death.*

Her face was grim. "Then I will find them and put them out of their misery."

The dark stone cottage waited, squat and silent on the forest floor like a sleeping animal. She shivered, remembering the witch's haggard face looming over her by the fireplace. She stopped several feet from the door, and spoke silently to Basa.

*Do you think there is anyone inside?*

He sniffed the air. *Not right now.*

After lighting the lantern, she slipped the paring knife out of her pocket and held it at the ready, while with her other hand she tried the door handle. The door squeaked open.

The inside of the house was cold and empty. The buttons and other bric-a-brac that had lain on the table were gone. The small bed in the corner had been stripped down to the mattress. It was strange to imagine that witches slept on a bed, like any other person. But perhaps that was true only of the "beneficent" ones, as Hester had called Leonara.

She set the lantern on the table and pushed the door shut behind Basa. The house was quite snug and solid, and roomy enough for one person.

"This may be my new home, seeing as how Joris will kick me out of my current one."

## *the warlock and the wolf*

*You must remove the entry spell if you want other humans to visit you.*

“I think I like it the way it is for now.”

Someone had ransacked the drawers and cabinets for things that could be sold or used. There were no cooking pots or utensils, clothes or other linens, books, or foodstuffs. Even the fireplace poker was missing. She could find no personal items, like letters, that would hint at Leonara’s birthplace.

“There must be something left. Every house has a hiding place.”

*I know nothing of houses.*

“No, I suppose you don’t. But you could try to sniff something out, like you did with the traps.”

*It smells only of witch.*

She felt the undersides of the dresser drawers and table, and then searched the cracks on the inside of the chimney—that was where her aunt had liked to squirrel away coins and other treasures. But she found only dust and ash.

Short of taking up the floorboards, there were not any other places to explore. Basa sat near the door and watched her, his stare taking on a bored glaze.

She rubbed her eyes and blinked, trying to see the cottage as its resident might have. “She lived here for at least twenty years, and she knew that no one but witches could come in. And she must have known that when she was gone they would take nearly everything except what they couldn’t carry—the dresser, table, bedframe, and mattress.” She paused. “The mattress.”

It proved heavier than it looked, and Basa gripped it with his teeth to help her pull it off the bedframe and onto the floor with a thud. She cut through the casing with her paring knife. Inside was densely packed straw, and the handful she removed burst into a fluffy pile. Going through the entire mattress would

be a long and messy undertaking, which made it a less than ideal place to hide anything.

"I don't think she would have hidden something here, not if she wanted to get to it very often."

*Then where?*

"Whatever it was, I think it's gone now."

She gazed at the bedframe, plain wood except for a row of large decorative beads set into the railing at the top. She spun them around on their spindles as she stared at the slats of the bed, and was startled when one of them spun out, hit the floor nearby, and rolled over to Basa, who extended his neck and sniffed the white orb. He sneezed.

*That button is not a button.*

"You're right—it's a bead."

*It is not. It's a tool for something.*

"What?" She picked it up and peered at it. It looked just like the other beads, but it was uncannily warm to the touch.

*It has a heks smell.*

"We are in a heks's house."

*Never mind. Are you done here?*

She sighed and slipped the bead into her pocket. After all of this was over, she would try to put it back onto the headboard and repair the mattress, since she might end up living in the house.

"I wish I could ask Leonara, or even just remember more about her. I can hardly remember what she looked like. Maybe I could get a clue from what she wore—her clothes or her jewelry. Now she's under the ground and it's too late."

Basa stood up. *She is not under the ground. Her body is not far from here.*

"Joris said he would bury her."

*He never did.*

*the warlock and the wolf*

“Why didn’t you tell me this before?”

*I am not a mind reader, girl. Come—I will take you to her.*



The corpse hung from an oak tree. Its face, spongy and gray, had begun to cave in on itself, like a piece of rotting fruit. It must have frozen and thawed several times over the last couple of weeks. Mina stood underneath it, looking up at the witch’s clouded eyes.

“She looks angry.”

*Most humans do.*

She laughed but quickly stopped, aware that they stood in the presence of tragedy. “You only think that because people don’t like wolves.”

The oak was easy enough to climb. The bough holding the noose creaked as she leaned out over it to saw on the rope with her paring knife.

*You should leave her where she is, girl.*

“She might have something in her pockets that tells us where she was born.”

*She could come back to life. They do that.*

Mina’s eyes widened and she stopped sawing. “Why didn’t you tell me—”

The rope broke and the body crashed to the ground.

The corpse landed in a sitting position, legs splayed and head fallen forward like a rag doll.

Mina stared at the heap of clothes, limbs, and hair. Nothing moved.

Basa stood up and shook himself. *Come down and see your dead thing.*

After descending the tree, she pinched a fold of the witch’s dress and pulled it out from the body, revealing the slit of a

pocket. She thrust her hand inside, half-expecting to grab a toad or mouse, but found only a ball of lint. The pocket on the other side of the dress held only a bit of string.

She glanced at Basa, whose ears went forward.

"Do you hear something?" A breeze lifted a strand of the witch's white hair and blew it into her face. Deep purple lines marked the back of her neck, strangled by the noose.

*Nothing that concerns you.*

She took a deep breath and grasped the witch's slight shoulders. The flesh underneath the dress chilled her hands. If she had not been used to dissecting small animals, her next task might have proved too daunting.

The head and hair flipped back as she brought the witch into a prone position on the ground. This close to the body, she finally smelled the decay that must have been like a riot to Basa's nose.

"Forgive me, madam," she said in a whisper.

*Do not talk to it, girl. Are you trying to bring her to life?*

"I just feel sorry for her. It's so awful to die like this."

She swept the white locks out of the witch's mouth, but some of the strands were caught in the noose, under her chin. "This isn't right, Basa."

*She was old.*

"She protected the city, and no one but my aunt and Hendrick knew it. She deserves better."

The noose would not loosen, so Mina sat with her feet tucked under her and worked at the rough rope with her knife, breathing through her mouth and trying not to look at the misshapen face.

*I thought you wanted to find something.*

"I do, but this rope must come off before we can bury her."

Basa did not reply. She stopped cutting and looked at him with pleading eyes. The feat of burying a body at a proper depth would be beyond her.

*the warlock and the wolf*

*Fine, girl. I will do it. Just hurry.*

She finished cutting and peeled the noose away from the skin of the neck.

A moan came out of the witch's mouth.

Mina shrieked and jumped back, brandishing the paring knife.

"Is she alive?"

Basa's head was lowered, and he was making a huffing sound.

"What are you—are you laughing?"

He huffed a little more, and then stopped and licked his muzzle. *That was funny.*

"It was not. It scared me to death. So she's not alive?"

*No. When she is, you will know.*

"That's a comfort." She gathered up the rope and threw it away from the body. There were more purple marks on the front of the witch's neck, and also something shiny. She brought the lantern close. It was a thin silver chain.

Bracing herself against the chill touch of dead skin, she undid the clasp and lifted the necklace away from the witch. A charm dangled from it.

"It's the patron saint of lost things. Saint Machuut."

*Is he her kin?*

"No—her birthplace. I know where to look for the sparrow now."



When she returned to her aunt's cottage at sunup, Sophia and Hennie had not emerged from the bedroom, but Pieter was awake and sitting at the table. Adam still slept on a pile of blankets near the fire. If he awoke and saw her, he would try to find out her plan, and what she had been doing during the night. She did not want to lie to him. But she could not let him stop her.

Speaking in a whisper, she told Pieter she had been out for a morning walk, and asked him to take a trunk containing her things, including a few keepsakes from her parents and Hester, back to their house, as well as Flop, who would have to travel in a sack. She told her mentor only that Joris had become forceful about her leaving, and that she had some business of her aunt's to settle early that morning. She could not wait for them to start for town. The mysterious business might take all day.

He agreed with the readiness of someone just awoken in a strange place, thinking only of his breakfast and how soon it might appear.

Before leaving, she scooped up Flop, kissed his orange head, and told him to be good, aware that Pieter could hear her talking to the cat.

*Be good at what? I am already superior in every way.*

"Be nice to the little girl. You will be living at her house."

*I detest children.*

"You love anyone who will pet you."

*That is false.*

She put him down near Pieter and looked around the cottage. From this moment on, if she ever came back here, she would be only a visitor.

Pieter reached for Flop. "Don't worry, little fellow. We'll set you to work on the mice in the woodpile—ow!"

Flop scratched Pieter's hand and made a mad dash for Mina. *Don't leave me again.*

Adam stirred under his blanket. She held the cat away with her foot as she slipped through the door. She pulled it shut and heard Flop wail. "I'll be back," she whispered. "Be good."



*the warlock and the wolf*

She went straight to Hendrick's shop, and found him sitting behind the counter, drinking his morning tea, his hair still rumpled from his pillow.

"I found something in Leonara's house." She pulled out the bead. "My friend says it smells of heks."

Hendrick nodded at the sight of the small white orb. "It is a healing stone. You touch it to the person or creature who is injured, and it transfers energy from you to them, healing them."

"So it is magic?"

"Yes. But it cannot be used without cost. The person doing the healing will lose vitality for a brief period. And you cannot use it on yourself."

She nodded and slipped the stone back into her pocket.

He watched her over his teacup. "Who is this friend with such a discerning nose?"

"Just an acquaintance."

"He must know something about magic."

She shrugged. "Not really." She was not ready to divulge her strange ability to Hendrick, although he among all others would probably most understand it. "I wanted to get the book back from you."

"And why is that?"

She told him of Gregor's appearance, his disguise as Constantijn Huygens, and his offer to save her parents. By the time she finished, Hendrick's brow had furrowed so deeply that he looked as though he had suffered an injury.

"I must tell Christiaan at once. This means his father has been missing for several days, unbeknownst to his family." He put a gentle hand on her shoulder. "But first, are you well? Gregor did not harm you, did he?"

She shook her head. "He just scared me."

"Good. At least he has not become totally reckless. But he is becoming more desperate, which shows us that there is something at stake with the book."

"Yes, there is—my parents' lives. That is why you must return it to me."

Hendrick gave her a wry smile before shuffling over to his desk. She waited for him to speak, but he had become engrossed in writing something.

"Hendrick, did you hear me? I need it."

He did not look up. "You need food and water—you do not need that book."

She thrust her chin forward and marched behind the counter to his desk. "My parents will die if I don't give Gregor what he wants."

He sighed and regarded her over his reading glasses. "First of all, it is unlikely that your parents are alive. If they were, don't you think they would have contacted you long ago? And more importantly, we don't know what he wants the book for, Mina. Knowing Gregor, he will use it to harm someone. Are you ready to trade some innocent person's life for the lives of your parents?"

"Yes, I am. These are my parents, Hendrick. What would you give to have your parents back?"

"I would give a great deal, but not if it harms others."

"Then I will tell Gregor where he can find the book, and he will get it himself."

Hendrick's hand shot out, quicker than she ever suspected he could move, and grabbed her wrist. "If you put Christiaan in the path of the tovenaar, I will make your life very unpleasant." His gray eyes sparked with fury. "Is that clear?"

Her defiance vanished and she nodded. "Yes, sir."

*the warlock and the wolf*

He released his grip, his face softening. "I am sorry to be so harsh with you. But I can't let you do something so foolish."

"Then how am I supposed to help my parents?"

"I do not know, my dear. Right now I must help my friend Constantijn." He rang the bell that sat on his desk, and seconds later a door opened and a servant stepped inside the room.

"Bram, please take this note to Hofwijck, for young Master Huygens."

"Right away, sir."

After Bram had gone, Hendrick stood up and plucked his cloak from its hook on the wall.

"Where are you going?"

"To the Binnenhof, to warn the court that the stadtholder's secretary has been kidnapped and impersonated. Would you like to accompany me?"

"I have something else to do. Could I use your wagon?"

He squinted at her, as though trying to see her intentions. "Does this have something to do with the bargain Gregor offered you?"

"It might." She could not bring herself to lie outright to the old man. There was something authoritative yet endearing about him that demanded honesty.

"I'm afraid I can't let my wagon be implicated in whatever Gregor has planned. I hope you will apply similar standards to yourself."

"You don't understand, Hendrick."

He raised his eyebrows at her, waiting for her to elaborate, but every argument that sprang to her mind died under his skeptical gaze. Unable to say anything convincing, she gave an exasperated cry and stormed out of the shop.



## CHAPTER 20



**I**T WAS NOT hard to convince Adam to help her. He disapproved of her plan, but once he realized that she would go ahead without him, he acquiesced.

They set off in the church wagon in the late afternoon, heading south on the narrow road to the small town of Monster, whose patron saint was pictured on the charm she had taken from Leonara. The day was overcast, and the melancholy of the clouds seemed to seep into her mind. What if the sparrow couldn't be found? What if she had nothing to offer Gregor in return for the lives of her parents? She dared not voice these worries to Adam. He would only take the opportunity to encourage her doubts, in order to keep her out of harm's way.

The horses pulled them past quilted squares of farmland on the left side, the short brown stalks of wheat cut close to the ground. To the right of them, the sea's waves sloshed rhythmically. Soon the farms gave way to sandy forest. She was glad of the

cover it would give Basa, who had promised to follow the wagon at a short distance, unbeknownst to Adam.

Just as the sun met the sea, they reached a collection of brick houses. A woman stood in a yard that bordered on the road, hanging dripping shirts onto a line, her hands whitened from the cold and wet. Adam stopped the horses opposite the yard, and Mina jumped down from the wagon.

“Good afternoon, madam.”

The woman wiped her hands on her apron and came to the edge of the yard. She squinted at Mina, and then at Adam, wearing his minister’s collar. Mina held her breath—she was never sure how people might react to her skin color. But the woman’s lined face remained open and cheery. “Good afternoon to you. Do you come down from The Hague?”

“We do, madam. Do you know where we might find the Verdon house?”

The woman’s cheeriness evaporated, replaced by a guarded neutrality, as though she were afraid words might slip from her lips without her permission. “I haven’t heard that name in many years. Are you family to the Verdons? The house has been sold a long time now.”

“No—a family friend.”

“Ah.” The woman appeared skeptical that the Verdon family had ever made many friends. “If you want to see the old homeplace, I will tell you the way. But the people there might not welcome you.”



Following the woman’s directions, they drove the horses south and east around the town, on an overgrown path through a large growth of aspen trees. At the far end of the woody area stood a run-down cottage. No lights were burning. In the glow of the

*the warlock and the wolf*

half-moon they could see a wheelbarrow and handtools lying near the porch.

Adam stopped the horses, who snorted and reached for the grass at their feet. "Should we knock on the door?"

"No—it's better not to let anyone know we're here."

"But how are we going to find this bird in the dark, and without making any noise?"

"Don't worry, I will find a way. Stay in the wagon. I shouldn't be long."

"But—"

She ignored him and jumped to the ground. Nothing stirred as she crept through the worn-out yard and onto the porch, where she peered through a window. She could see only the outlines of a table and chairs.

*Basa? Are you here?*

The night air was silent. Then came the reply.

*I am here, girl.*

She stepped off the porch and went around the side of the house, out of sight of Adam, who hadn't moved.

A pair of eyes and a white-patched muzzle glinted in the moonlight. Basa turned and trotted away from her, hugging the wall of the cottage.

"Do we need to get inside? Where will the sparrow be?" Her voice was a whisper.

*She should be nearby.*

They walked around the back and the other side of the house, whose window frames were broken and walls dirty.

Finding nothing, they returned to the backyard. Behind the house was a small fenced area attached to a broken-down shed. It was terrible to think of anyone growing up in such a shabby place.

"I can't see anything, much less the bent beak of a bird."

*delfy hall*

Basa sniffed the air. *Just wait. Let's see what happens.*

"Adam won't wait much longer before he comes to find me."

*Why did you bring that man?*

"That was the only way I could use the wagon. He insisted on coming with me."

*I don't like him.*

"Yes, you've made that clear."

The sound of an owl hooting made them both jump.

*Try to talk to him.*

"Who, the owl?"

*Yes.*

She gazed up at the aspen tree. "Hello? Can you help us? We're looking for a sparrow."

There was no reply.

"He's not saying anything, Basa."

*Try again.*

"I don't think—"

*Help me.* The voice was small and light, like a little girl's.

"Wait, who was that?"

Basa stared into the trees where the owl's call had come from, his nose twitching.

*Please. They're going to kill me.* The voice was on the edge of tears.

"Basa, do you hear that?"

*I can understand only my own kind, girl. I heard nothing.*

The fenced area attached to the shed was dark and empty, save for a few buckets and a large haphazard rack made of metal, whose purpose wasn't clear.

Then she saw it—a light patch near the shed's door. It moved, and she realized it was the massive head of an animal. The eyes were the size of pebbles, set into a fleshy, hairless face.

"Was that you?"

*the warlock and the wolf*

The animal came forward—a large pink sow. She walked with a careful step, as though trying to make no noise.

*Please let me out. The man will kill me tomorrow morning.*

“How do you know that?”

*He was sharpening his knife today.* The pig lowered her head, as though the very words were too heavy to bear. Even her giant ears drooped.

“Maybe we can help each other. I’m looking for a sparrow—a little brown bird.”

The sow looked up. *There are many little birds that fly around here.*

“This one has a bent beak. Have you seen it?”

*I haven’t noticed any. Does that mean you won’t help me?*

Mina hadn’t realized how like a human’s a pig’s eyes were. She could see the desperation in them. “Not necessarily. How do I let you out?”

The pig trotted to the front of the fence and nosed a latch on the gate. *Just undo this part here. No one will hear. Nobody stirred when the witches were here earlier.*

“Witches?” She stepped back from the gate. “When?”

*Just after dark. They made a lot of noise and then disappeared.*

Mina looked at Basa.

*If witches were here, the sparrow has been taken, girl.*

“Did they have a small bird with them?”

*I didn’t see them—only smelled and heard them. They smelled terrible.*

“We can’t let them give the sparrow to Gregor, Basa. Then the offer he made me will not be honored.”

*Then there is no time to waste chatting with pigs.*

Mina looked again at the sow, whose forlorn eyes pleaded for mercy. If someone caught her releasing livestock, it would be

*delfy hall*

considered the same as stealing. They could put her in prison for months, maybe years.

*Now, girl. We have to go.*

She undid the latch and pushed the gate open.

"Watch out!" shouted a deep panicked voice behind them. It was Adam.

The giant pink pig galloped out of the pen, and then she saw Adam and swerved into the cover of the trees.

His face stricken with fear, Adam looked at Basa and then back at Mina. "There is a wolf behind you. A giant one. Move slowly toward me. I will try to distract it."

She put her hands up. "He's a friend, I promise."

"A friend?"

There was an angry cry behind him. "Who the hell—" A man in ragged pajamas came around the corner of the house with a rifle braced against his shoulder. "Wolf!" He aimed for Basa.

The bullet exploded out of the gun.

Basa fled toward the front yard, his tail tucked. She and Adam ran after him.

"Run, Basa!"

*Go home, girl. There is no time to lose.*

The farmer chased the wolf into the aspen woods, while Adam scrambled into the wagon.

"Mina! We have to go!"

Another shot blasted through the air. She cast one last look after the fleeing pair, but could make out nothing in the darkness of the trees.

"Now!"

She hopped into the wagon, and it jolted forward behind the horses, over the rutted path that led back to the tiny town. Behind them came the cry of the farmer, who must have given up pursuit of Basa and instead come after them.

*the warlock and the wolf*

His angry yells grew fainter, and eventually the wagon turned onto the main road, the creak of its wheels the only sound in the quiet hamlet. The woman was gone from her yard, where the white shirts hung on the line, reflecting the moonlight.

Mina relaxed and glanced at Adam. His face was set in a scowl, and after a few minutes it became apparent that he did not want to look at her.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you. Basa is my friend. He's no threat to you or me."

"That makes no sense, Mina. How can a dangerous creature like that be your friend?"

"He's not dangerous—not to most people. He will defend me, though." She thought of the witch in Leonara's cottage.

"So it has hurt someone, then."

"He didn't get a chance, actually. She . . . got away first."

"Wonderful—it's attacking women."

"I tried to tell him not to—" She stopped, realizing what she had just admitted. "She was a heks. She had cast some kind of spell on me."

Adam jerked on the reins, bringing the horses to a standstill. His head fell forward as he murmured what sounded like a prayer.

Finally he raised his head, and she was stunned to see that his face was calm, drained of all emotion, as though regarding only an empty space on the bench beside him. She wondered if he was about to leave her on the side of the road.

"So this wolf is your familiar. You talk to him, and he does your bidding. Is that correct?"

"No—it's not like that. I'm not a witch, and he does whatever he wants. We're equals."

"And how do you communicate with him?"

*delfy hall*

She sighed and looked away. "I don't know how it works. But I hear his voice in my head, and he hears mine. I don't think that makes me a witch. At least, Basa says that I'm not one."

Alarm flashed in his eyes. "How can a person talk to animals without the aid of dark forces?"

She racked her mind for something that would reassure him. "Nothing about it is evil. If anything, I'm trying to be of help."

He shook his head and turned back to the road, picking up the reins. "Now I understand Gregor's pursuit of you. Birds of a feather."

Panic flooded her. "I'm not like Gregor!" Adam winced, and she immediately regretted shouting. She resolved to appear calm. "Believe me, this ability—it's not something I chose. It started after the strix—Gregor's creature—attacked me. She must have some kind of poison in her." Her voice hitched, and then the tears came. It was unbearable that he thought she was something she wasn't.

Apparently unmoved by her distress, he lashed the reins, starting the horses. She waited in misery for him to say something, but he would not even look at her. Even his hands looked set against her.

*Basa, are you there?*

*I am here, girl.*

She watched the trees going past, but could not see any wolf shapes in them. Still, she knew he must be nearby.

*He has found out about me. He knows I talk to you. And now he hates me.*

*I told you he was weak.*

*I can't bear it.*

*Yes, you can. You do not need him.*

*What do you mean?*

*I know where to look next.*

## CHAPTER 21



**A**DAM DROPPED HER off in front of the Molls' house before sunrise and left without ceremony. She doubted he would ever speak to her again. She managed to enter the house and tuck herself into bed without waking anyone, even Hennie, who made agitated noises as Mina's bed creaked but kept sleeping.

The next morning, she yawned all through her work, and around noon, Pieter agreed that she could take a walk to refresh her spirits. He cast her a sympathetic look when she confessed to not sleeping well and admonished her for coming in so late the night before.

As she walked down Veene Street, she thought over the events of the previous evening and scolded herself for taking Adam into her confidence. It was another lesson not to trust anyone who wasn't family, or like family. Now he apparently thought her a witch.

## *delfy hall*

She wondered what Adam had done with the witches he had apprehended in Germany. She imagined him watching as women were stuffed into grain sacks and thrown into the nearest river. But Holland no longer prosecuted citizens for witchcraft. What then?

Perhaps he would come to capture her himself.



That night, though her bed was warm and cozy, and she was tired from the lack of sleep the night before, she forced herself to stay awake. She didn't want to miss her chance to find the sparrow.

Around eleven, she rose and dressed in the dark, careful not to wake Hennie, whose regular, deep breaths rose and fell under the wool covers in the bed across from hers.

The window squeaked as she pushed it open, and a burst of cold air rushed into the warm room. She stepped onto the low table she had positioned under the window and put one foot out of the house. Getting her body through the opening would be an awkward task, one that she should have practiced beforehand.

"Mina! Where are you going?"

She looked up from her contortions. Hennie was sitting up in bed, loose red hair framing her tiny pale face.

"I'm going to meet someone. But it has to stay a secret. Can you keep a secret?"

Hennie nodded. "But where are you going?"

"It's not far, I promise. I'll be back before you even wake up in the morning."

"I want to come with you."

"No, I need you to stay here. You have to take care of Flop."

"But he's asleep." She pointed at the ball of orange fur lying on Mina's bed.

*the warlock and the wolf*

"Yes, but if he wakes up and finds no one here he'll get upset."

Hennie thought about it for a moment. Since coming to live with them, Flop had become her foremost concern, after Mina.

"Can I count on you to take care of him?"

Hennie nodded.

"Good." She blew Hennie a kiss. "Go back to sleep. I'll see you in the morning."

The girl watched her exit the window, and waved to her before she hurried down the street.



Mina and Basa waited in the cover of the trees while the witches gathered in the nearby field around a fire. They were only a half a mile from Leonara's house, northwest of it. The witches kept arriving, one and two at a time. Their hair hung loose down their backs—blond, brown, and gray tresses—and they wore brightly colored skirts with black shawls and capes. A few young men had appeared also, laughing and smiling at the women, who took their hands and led them near the fire.

Mina hadn't expected to see men with the witches. She turned to Basa. *Are those men warlocks?*

*No. They have no magic.*

*Why are they here, then?*

*They come to mingle with the witches. I recognize a boy who hunts in the woods.*

One of the men disrobed and began fondling a woman over her clothes. The woman pulled away, laughing, and the man gave chase. The two ran out of sight, into the darkness of the surrounding forest.

A few of the women started dancing around the fire, chanting words that Mina could not make out. Other women unbuttoned the shirts of the men and stripped them away.

## delfy hall

*When do we make our move, Basa?*

*When we see that they have the bird.*

She could see no sign of the sparrow.

*What if they don't have it? Do you have any other ideas?*

*One idea at a time, girl.*

One of the couples lay down on the ground, laughing and moaning. Mina felt a surge of revulsion as she realized they were copulating in front of the others, who appeared unperturbed. One of the women sprinkled something over the couple as they writhed.

A humpbacked woman approached the group from the northeast. She was carrying a heavy pack on her back, and from one of her hands dangled a bird cage. Inside was a sparrow.

*Basa!*

*I see her. But there are too many.*

*So what—we just give up?*

*We should find some creatures to create a distraction.*

*The sparrow could be gone by then. Or they might kill it. We don't know what they have planned.*

The woman reached the group and held the cage up for the others to admire. One witch tried to reach her hand in. The humpbacked woman caught her across the face with a claw-like hand, and then withdrew a few feet from the group, where she set the cage down in the grass.

*We can't afford to wait. I'm going now.*

*Stop, girl—*

She burst out of the bushes and ran to the cage. She was shocked by how heavy it was. Her muscles straining, she stumbled but held fast to the handle, retreating toward Basa's position.

A gurgled cry went up from the humpbacked woman, and Mina heard a stampede behind her. Then a woman jumped in front of her from somewhere up above, like a squirrel from a tree,

*the warlock and the wolf*

and put her hand out. Mina felt the smack of an invisible wall, and she fell back, dropping the cage.

The witches descended on her, laughing and chattering.

"Mina!" cried a high-pitched voice.

One of the women darted away. Mina tried to scramble to her feet, but was pushed back down on the grass.

They grabbed her by the wrists and dragged her to the fire, where the chanting had begun again.

"Let me go!"

"What are you doing here, dearie? You're of no use to us except for your parts."

Another woman shushed her. "Maybe Gregor would want her too."

"Then he will have to pay for her."

The humpbacked woman burst into the firelight, dragging someone behind her.

"Hennie!"

The girl was spitting and kicking, but the woman held on. Another witch took a cloth out of her pocket and put it to Hennie's face. The girl slumped to the ground, but her eyes remained open, staring at the fire.

Mina lunged toward the girl, but the women holding her wrists jerked her back. "What have you done to her?" She had never suspected that Hennie might follow her.

A snarl erupted near the fire. Basa had come out of his hiding place, his head lowered like a bull's.

"Oh, you brought a friend!" The humpback woman laughed.

A witch called out, "Angus!" There was a rustling in the bushes nearby. "Come take care of him, will you?"

A long creature slinked into view. It had pointed ears and a patterned coat, and was half the size of Basa. The muscles on its shoulders and hind quarters rippled with each step.

"What is that?" Mina whispered.

"That's Angus, Edda's cat."

"That's not a cat." It looked like a lynx, but they hadn't been seen in Holland for hundreds of years.

The creature saw Basa and froze. All of the fur on its back stood up, making it appear twice as large. Basa sidestepped away from the fire, into a clear line of sight with the animal, growling louder.

*Basa, what are you doing?*

*Getting rid of it.*

*No—just get us out of here.*

Basa lifted one paw a few inches and held it there. The lynx crouched, gathering force into its legs like a wound spring.

*Stop, Basa. It's too strong.*

A panicked voice cried out, and the lynx took his eyes off of Basa.

In that moment the wolf leaped with jaws open. But no one paid attention—all eyes were on the east side of the fire, where a thundering sound of hoofbeats and shouting men split the air.

The women began screeching, whether in delight or terror Mina couldn't be sure. She heard the murmuring of spells all around the fire as a party of whinnying horses surrounded the clearing. The young shirtless men, who seconds before had been aroused by lust, threw themselves into the cover of the trees. A few witches dashed between the horses, and the men mounted on them swung at the women with clubs and lit torches. In the melee, she heard Adam's voice, crying, "Repent!"

Someone pressed a foul-smelling cloth over her face. She gasped for breath but got only the vapor of the cloth. Determined to escape, she jabbed her elbow into the woman holding her and ran toward Hennie, but fell down, her limbs suddenly

*the warlock and the wolf*

numb and heavy. As she reached to catch herself, her left hand slid into the fire.

She knew she should take her hand out, but her muscles wouldn't respond, though the flames seared her skin. Move, she thought. You must move. But she did not. She lay still, watching the fire cook her hand like a piece of meat.



## CHAPTER 22



**M**INA HEARD A soft, rhythmic clinking nearby, and a slurping. Then the sound of voices in a comforting, soothing tone. She opened her eyes, and immediately a rush of pain hit her. Her hand was bandaged into a mitt, and her fingers ached and burned underneath the cloth.

“Water,” she said. Then louder, “I need water.”

A cheery woman appeared at the end of the bed. “You’re awake! Would you like something to eat?”

“My hand is on fire. Please bring some water. I have to put it in the water.” Mina wondered if she was making any sense. She hoped the woman would understand.

“Your hand is hurting, I’m sure. We can give you more medicine, but you’ll go to sleep again.”

Mina struggled to get out of bed. The nurse put a hand on her shoulder, but Mina pushed past her. The room was long, with a

high ceiling. Down each side ran a row of beds, each separated by a screen, with patients lying under the covers. She stumbled toward a wash basin set against the wall.

"Please come back to bed, miss," she heard the nurse say behind her. Mina ignored her and plunged her bandaged hand into the wash basin. A wave of relief flooded over her as the pain abated.

"Miss, please." The nurse gently pulled her away. Her hand dripped water over the floor as she allowed herself to be walked past the other patients, back to her bed.

"We will bring you some water. Just lie down first."

Mina was out of breath from the pain, and the burning was coming back. "Please hurry."

"Take this." The nurse handed her a cup.

The liquid smelled sweet. Mina's throat was dry, but she didn't want to take medicine, not if it kept her from staying awake. She gave it back to the nurse, who sighed.

"I will be back soon. Try to rest."

Mina propped her wounded hand on top of the blanket, and tried not to think about it. The morning light streamed down through the windows set high in the walls. She craned her neck, looking for Hennie among the rows of beds, but could not find her. Had Basa escaped or been pursued by the lynx? She hoped he had not been struck or shot by one of the men on horseback.

"Knock, knock," said a male voice. Adam peeked around the edge of the screen, worry wrinkling his brow. "Nurse Pels said you were up. Are you in terrible pain?"

She nodded, embarrassed to be seen in such a pitiful state. She remembered hearing him at the witches' fire, and the word he shouted at them—repent. He could just as easily have been talking to her, she realized.

*the warlock and the wolf*

"You are lucky to be alive, Mina. They gave you some kind of paralytic. You could have been hurt far worse, or taken by those women. Who knows what they would do to you."

"They said I was only good for parts."

He shut his eyes and shook his head.

"How did you find me?"

His voice was soft. "I thought about our conversation, and I realized that you would keep looking for that bird. So I made some inquiries about places to look for heksen, in case that's where you were going next."

He seemed as though he wanted to trust her. Her heart quickened at the thought that she might be able to redeem his opinion of her.

"But you were so angry with me. Why did you want to help?"

His face flushed. "I am sorry I let my emotions get the better of me. When I got back to the church that night, I came to see that you were in over your head and you needed my help. As for my accusations"—he looked at her shyly—"I think I rushed to judgment. Will you forgive me?"

She felt her chest flutter when his eyes met hers. Surprised by her sudden feeling for him, she merely nodded, afraid if she spoke that her voice would betray her.

His smile soon faded. "They took Hennie. We don't know where, but I have promised her parents that I will find her."

She tried to sit up, but he pressed her back onto the pillow.

"You cannot leave until your hand has healed somewhat."

"Never mind that—I must go. I have to find her."

He laughed. "You are wincing with pain even in your sleep. I won't allow you to go anywhere."

"But I must." She knew her wound was serious, but she didn't care. She would fight through the pain in order to find Hennie.

*delfy hall*

The girl was gone because of her—because of her impatience, and greed to find her parents. Hendrick was right—finding her parents wasn't worth an innocent life.

And Basa was out there somewhere, though whether he was wounded or whole she couldn't know. The thought that he might need her help rattled at her mind. He had been ready to give his life for hers. She couldn't abandon him.

Then she remembered the healing stone. Hendrick had said she couldn't use it on herself. But maybe she could convince him to use it on her, so she would have the strength to find Hennie. But how would she explain her sudden recovery to Adam?

She tried to sit up again, but Adam put his arm across her shoulders, keeping her in the bed. A sudden shyness at his touch overtook her, and she lay back, blinking.

He removed his arm. "What were you doing at the witches' sabbat, Mina?"

"Basa took me there. He said those women—the witches—would have the sparrow."

At the mention of Basa, his eyes narrowed, but he kept listening.

"He warned me to wait until we could create a distraction, but I didn't listen. I tried to take the bird, and they caught me. Then I saw that Hennie had followed me there." She remembered Hennie's terrified expression, and she choked back a sob. "I led her right to those people. If she dies, I'll never forgive myself."

He took her good hand in his and leaned closer. "It was a mistake, Mina. God will forgive you."

She shook her head. "It's much worse than that. I was ready to take any risk to find my parents, and I ended up hurting one of the people I love most."

"And you hurt yourself as well." His brow knitted. "I know you don't like being told what to do, so please just take this as

*the warlock and the wolf*

a suggestion. Let others pursue these women and find Hennie, and leave Gregor to the authorities. When a good soldier falls in battle, he knows when to let others take up the fight in his place.”

“But what if I’m the only one who can find her?”

“There are people who are just as capable as you are, Mina. Will you let pride blind you to this fact?”

Nurse Pels came around the curtain just then, saving Mina from having to answer. She carried a bowl of water, which she set on a stool next to the bed. Then she gently placed Mina’s hand into the bowl. The cool balm of the water eased the tension in her body. The nurse patted Mina’s shoulder and left them alone again.

“Mina, will you let the hospital take care of you until you can go home to the Molls?”

The healing stone would be with her clothes, wherever they were. If Adam gave word to Hendrick to come to the hospital, then the illustrator could use the stone to heal her. But what then? What if she found Hennie but made the situation even worse, as she had at the sabbat? And would she lead Basa to his death, or to his capture by witches, to be used for his parts?

Perhaps, as Adam had said, she needed to let others help.

“Mina?”

She nodded. “Yes, I will stay for a while. But please find her.”



For a day now, she had been out of the hospital, enduring Sophia’s ministrations to her wound according to Nurse Pels’s instructions—wrapping and unwrapping, cleaning and fresh aloe and St. John’s wort. It did seem to be healing, but slowly. The flames had burned mostly the back of her hand, and the red,

blistered skin screamed with pain every time she moved a finger. She held her arm bent near her waist, immobile, as she roamed about the house.

Her dilemma was this: to remain in constant pain, and be left with an unsightly scar, but not arouse the suspicions of Sophia and Pieter, or use the healing stone to take away her injury and risk frightening and alienating her friends, possibly risking her future as a scientist. If only there was some way to use the stone without her friends knowing—to maintain the fiction of her wound healing on its own.

Every night as she tried to fall asleep, she pondered these choices, but neither one nor the other seemed a better option. Luckily Hennie was not there to hear her moaning, the pain made worse as Mina tortured herself for the girl's disappearance.

Her friends did not blame her, though once they found out why she was at the witches' sabbat, they wholly disapproved of how foolish she had been to believe in Gregor's offer. Sophia praised Adam to the rafters—his bravery in rescuing her, and his wisdom in convincing her to stay out of the matter once and for all.

"You must have feelings for him, Mina. Otherwise you would not have been convinced by him. I know you. You're more stubborn with people you do not care for."

The three of them sat at the table, finishing dinner. Meals were a bleak affair without Hennie. Sometimes it was just Mina and Sophia, if Pieter was out looking with the search party.

"He had a good argument, and I was leaning in that direction already. Everything I've done lately seems to get someone hurt, or upset."

"Nonsense. It's just a streak of bad luck. Pieter, will you tell Adam that I want him to stop by and visit?"

*the warlock and the wolf*

Pieter wiped his mouth and pushed his bowl away. "I will, but he has little time for socializing. He is out most of the day and night. The man hardly sleeps."

"And neither do you, dear. Will you come to bed at a reasonable hour tonight?"

"Yes, if I find Hennie before then." He left the table and went to the kitchen, where Mina presumed he was changing into his rough boots before rejoining the search. For the hundredth time, she wished she were helping him.

"I recognize that look, Mina. Don't you dare leave me here alone in this house." She dabbed at her eyes with her napkin. "I couldn't bear it."

"I'm not going anywhere, Fifi." She held up her bandaged hand. "I'm wounded, remember?"

They cleared the table, bringing the dishes back to the kitchen, where Martha was putting away the uneaten food. None of them had much of an appetite.

Pieter did up the buttons on his coat, kissed Sophia, and nodded at Mina. "Don't wait up, ladies."

As soon as the back door was closed after him, Sophia broke into sobs. Mina and Martha sat her down and held her until her crying subsided.

"Master Moll will find her, madam, sure as the sun and the moon."

"Thank you, Martha. I hope you're right."

Mina wished she could say something as reassuring, but her guilt prevented her from uttering anything she didn't believe, no matter how innocent.

"Why don't you go to bed, Fifi? I can look after myself."

Sophia nodded, and Martha bustled to the stove to make her a cup of calming tea.

## *delfy hall*

The three women went upstairs to Sophia's room. Mina waited while Martha helped Sophia, hanging her dress up and putting away her jewelry. Once Sophia was safely ensconced in bed, Mina sat nearby until her friend fell asleep.



That night, she lay in bed, listening to the silence of the room, missing the sound of Hennie breathing softly in and out. She tossed and turned, thinking about Adam in the hospital and how he'd looked at her. He did seem to care about her. Perhaps, even, he had forgiven her. Or he had realized that he had been wrong about her. In any case, he was willing to give her another chance.

Just as she was drifting off to sleep, she heard a familiar voice.

*Girl, are you awake?*

She flung away the covers, ran to the window, and opened it, the wood frame making a faint squeaking sound. Then she saw him. His green eyes were points of light.

"Basa! I was so worried about you. Are you all right?"

*Yes, girl.*

*What about the lynx?*

*It was barely grown, still a cub. It ran away as soon as the horses came.*

"I'm so glad you weren't hurt. The witches gave me something that paralyzed me. My hand got burned in the fire." She held up her bandage. "I would've come to look for you, but . . ."

*There was no need. But what is your plan now?*

"The witches took Hennie. Adam told me when I was in the hospital. I can't keep doing things like this, Basa. I'm getting people hurt. You could have been hurt too."

*There will always be danger. That is a fact.*

*the warlock and the wolf*

"I know. But Adam convinced me to let others try to find Hennie. And to deal with Gregor."

*They will never find her. Humans know nothing of witches.*

"But Adam calls himself a witch hunter. He has hunted many witches in Germany."

*Maybe so. But not these witches.*

"What do you mean?"

He blinked. *They are working together, as a pack. Perhaps for the kymaa. Will you go after the child?*

"I don't think I am strong enough. They captured me right away."

*Because you didn't listen. You must outsmart them.*

"I don't know, Basa. Everything I do gets somebody hurt, or makes them angry. If I want to live a normal life, and become a respected scientist, then I must stop doing these outlandish things."

*If you say so. But that child will soon be dead.*

"I promised Adam that I would let the others take care of it. What do I do—go back on my promise?"

There were sounds of footsteps down the street. The wolf's pointed ears swiveled toward the noise. Someone was nearby.

"You have to go, Basa. It is too dangerous for you to be in the city."

*Very well. I will wait for you near the house of the dead witch.*

He trotted into the shadows.

Worried about whether he would get through the city without being seen, she lay awake, staring at the ceiling and petting Flop, who was curled beside her on top of the blankets.

What were the witches planning with Gregor? Perhaps Hendrick would know. It probably had something to do with the book and the key. But how could she stop him? She did not

*delfy hall*

have any special powers, aside from talking to animals, which had proven to be more of a nuisance.

Still, Basa's words echoed in her mind. *That child will soon be dead.* What if they didn't find Hennie until it was too late? She could never live with herself if that happened and she had stayed here, doing nothing.

## CHAPTER 23



**M**INA ROSE LATE in the morning, having spent most of the night awake, and dressed as though going into the field for observation. The healing stone was safely tucked away in her dress pocket. First she would get Hendrick to heal her hand, and then she would search the woods for any sign of Hennie.

No one was in the dining room or kitchen. She finally found her friends in the parlor. Sophia sat next to the dark fireplace, her eyes red from crying. Pieter's arm was around her.

"Why has no one set the fire? It is freezing in here."

Sophia shook her head and pulled her shawl tighter around her shoulders. "I don't want to have a fire while Hennie is missing. It doesn't seem right to be warm while she is cold and scared, God knows where."

"That's irrational—it won't help Hennie for you to suffer." Mina glanced at Pieter, who shrugged and looked exasperated.

"I've tried to tell her, but she becomes hysterical when I try to light a fire."

She put her arm around Sophia, who was shivering. "This is my fault—I'm sorry I led Hennie to such a dangerous place."

"We've been over this, dear. You didn't know she was following you."

"No, but I could have guessed—she's always bored, and desperate for adventure."

Pieter frowned. "Nonsense. It is not your fault. Hennie should never have gone off on her own. She has always been so strong-willed."

"Like her mother," Sophia added.

"I made up my mind—I'm going to find her," said Mina.

"No!" Sophia became agitated. "You must stay indoors, where it's safe."

"I can't, Fifi. I have to find Hennie. I can't live with myself if I don't."

Sophia started wailing. She grasped Mina's dress and would not let go. Pieter had to pry her fingers away.

He and Mina left Sophia in the parlor and he walked Mina to the door, where she put on her cape.

"Wait. I have something for you."

He disappeared and then came back with a note. "Master Hondius brought this for you early this morning."

The small rectangle of paper unfolded like an accordion. It read, "Mina: Christiaan has deciphered the title of the book: Door of Fire. We must talk. —H.H."

She stifled a gasp, not wanting to alarm Pieter. The same phrase, door of fire, was stenciled on the label of one of her aunt's herb jars. Only her aunt had ever used that name for that herb. And now she knew why—it was her aunt's way of teaching her the key to the book.

*the warlock and the wolf*

"You don't have to dissemble, Mina—I read the note."

"Then you know I can't ignore it."

"I know no such thing. This sounds like more magic drivel, Mina. If you don't reject this foolishness, I must end your apprenticeship." He looked weary but resolute, and she knew that he had reached the end of his patience with her.

"You must choose. Science or this trumpery?"

"It's not that simple."

He sighed. "Just tell me, Mina. Do you think that magic is real?"

"Yes, I do. I have seen it."

"Then you have no place as my apprentice. I am sorry."

Before she could respond, he put on his coat and went out the door, leaving her alone with the sound of Sophia quietly crying in the parlor.



Mina burst through the door of Hendrick's shop, which was empty, and she shouted for him. She knew it would disturb his family, but she didn't have any time to waste with courtesies. No one answered. She shouted again. Nothing.

She went behind the counter to Hendrick's desk, where she found a small piece of paper and a pencil. Leaning over the desk, and trying not to look at the other papers there, which felt like an invasion of the old man's privacy, she scribbled a note for Hendrick, with one word: mistletoe.

A noise near the stairs made her jump. Hendrick's servant, Bram, gave her a beseeching smile.

"Can I help you, young lady?"

She stammered, trying to explain why she had dared to walk behind the counter and write at Hendrick's desk. But the servant seemed to find nothing wrong with her actions. He jerked his

head in a little bow and asked again if he could do anything for her.

“Do you know where Master Hondius is?”

“I do not, my lady.”

“Well, when he comes in, it is imperative that he see my note. Can you make sure he gets it?”

He jerked his head again. “Of course, my lady.” His pale hand took the note and he held it in front of him like a gift. His gaze upon her felt a bit too familiar, and she wondered if he fancied her.

“Are you quite well, my lady?” He looked at her bandaged hand.

“Yes, thank you.” She wondered how much Bram knew of magic—after all, he was Hendrick’s servant. He must have seen some things. Perhaps he would agree to use the stone on her. “Bram, I wonder if”—she found the stone in her pocket—“you could help me with something else.”

“I am at your service.”

She clenched the stone in her fist. Once the lid was taken off this secret, it would be impossible to put back on.

Bram looked down at the floor, waiting. The skin on his hands was pallid and dry, and they trembled slightly. She wondered if he was ill. If he was, then using the stone might put him in the hospital, or at the very least incapacitate him. How would he explain this predicament to Hendrick’s son, if he couldn’t perform his duties? Her—and Hendrick’s—secret would be out.

She dropped the stone back in her pocket. “I must go. Remember, as soon as he comes in.”

He nodded, and she hurried out of the shop.



Out on Hoog Street, she hesitated, not quite sure if she should go looking for Hendrick. He could be anywhere—inside a shop, or even at the Binnenhof. She didn't know where the old man spent his leisure hours.

She walked to the market near the Great Church, which was bustling with shoppers and tradesmen, getting their last-minute buying done before the sun disappeared. She browsed the windows of a bookseller, and then a china shop, before ambling the rest of the way down the street. Then she stopped in her tracks. There, on the right, coming out of a stationer's, was Hendrick's son. He thrust his purchase at Bram, who nodded and followed his employer, coming back toward Mina. Doubtless they were returning to the shop on Hoog Street.

"Master Hondius!" She hurried toward him, elated to have found someone who could tell her where Hendrick was.

He frowned when he caught sight of her, and looked as though he wanted to turn around and run in the opposite direction. But instead he sighed and waited for her to catch up to him.

"Yes, miss. What is it?"

"I'm looking for Hen—your father. Can you tell me where he is?"

"He is at Hofwijck, visiting Christiaan Huygens. But he will not want to be disturbed." He scowled at her.

"Very well." She looked at Bram. "The note I gave you is extremely important. He is waiting for the information. Do you mind delivering it to him now?"

Bram furrowed his brow. "What note, miss?"

"The one I just gave you, not an hour ago."

Bram glanced at Hendrick's son, confused. "I am sorry, miss. You have not given me any such note. I have been here assisting my employer for the last hour." He held up several shopping bags. "We have had a long list of things to purchase."

*delfy hall*

Her mouth fell open, and it took a concerted effort to shut it.  
“I don’t understand.”

Hendrick’s son smiled, cheerful for the first time in her presence. “No, you don’t. Come along, Bram.”

## CHAPTER 24



**M**INA REALIZED THAT there was not much time—in fact, it might be too late to warn Hendrick. But she had to try. Only vaguely aware of where Hofwijck was, she veered into School Street and ran south as fast as her legs would go, despite the aching of her hand. After a jog to the left, Wagen Street took her directly to the edge of town. There she crossed the canal and kept running southeast.

On the left side of the well-worn road was the main canal bringing boats to the city, and on the right, farmland. Behind her, to the west, the sun neared the sea. It would be dark soon, and more dangerous for her to be on the road alone. She had to hurry.

But after a few minutes of forceful running, she was forced to slow down. She gasped for breath. Her hand was burning under its bandage. A family rolled by in a wagon and the wife smirked

at the state of her hair, which had fallen out of its pins after she had ripped her cap off in a fit of frustration. The children giggled and waved at her from their spot in the back of the wagon.

The road seemed to go on endlessly. Far into the distance she could see only trees and more farmland. But she knew Hofwijck was down this road—it was just further than she had imagined. She kept walking, breaking into a run every few minutes and then slowing when her hand grew too hot to bear.

Finally she reached the Geest Bridge, which allowed her to cross the canal, and she picked up another road running directly east. As the sun was setting, the neat, proud house came into view. It sat in a pond, connected to the land by a bridge on a jetty. Two lanterns lit the door and the white murals on either side, painted to create the illusion of statues set into alcoves.

She crossed the bridge and pounded on the door. She had never been here before, but she knew this was where the secretary and his family lived. Everybody knew it.

A frightened and tear-stained maid appeared at the entrance. Mina pushed her way past the woman, into the grand foyer.

“Where is Master Hondius?”

The maid pointed to a doorway, and Mina ran to the room, catching sight of a few drops of blood on the floor. The scene inside confirmed her fears.

Hendrick sat on a rug, clutching his arm, and a young man of seventeen or eighteen sat at the desk, shuffling through papers and cursing to himself.

“Calm down, Christiaan,” said Hendrick. “It is done now.”

They both heard her at the door and looked up.

“I have it! I have it—the key.”

“It is too late, dear.” Hendrick shook his head. “Gregor has been here and he has taken the book.”

## *the warlock and the wolf*

She dropped to his side. "I feared as much. I gave the key to your servant, Bram. But it was Gregor in disguise. I feel like such a fool."

"You could not have known," said Hendrick. He winced and pressed his hand on the bloodied spot on his shirt sleeve.

"What happened?" she asked.

His wound was shallow, the blood making it look worse than it was. "Gregor came into the house, struck me down, and took the book. He was gone before either of us could stop him." He looked at her, sadness in his eyes. "It is over, dear girl."

She shook her head. "No, I won't believe that. Hennie's life is at stake. She hasn't been found yet."

"Neither has my father." Christiaan swept a glass off the desk, and it tumbled onto the carpet. The young man's heavily lidded eyes sparked with anger. "I can't take any more of this. That criminal must be dealt with now." He reached into a cabinet and pulled out a box, from which he took a gleaming pistol.

"Put that away," Hendrick said. "You will only hurt someone or yourself."

"That is the idea. We must do something." He began loading the gun.

She showed the healing stone to Hendrick. "I'm going to use this on you."

He pushed her hand away. "Do not waste the stone on me."

"What are you talking about? We must heal you."

"A healing stone only has so many uses. You must save them for when they are truly necessary." He found a handkerchief in his pocket and pressed it onto the wound. "It is my own fault I was hurt. I should have protected myself."

"With what? He is a powerful warlock, as you keep insisting."

"I have my methods. If you want to use the stone, we will heal your hand. Otherwise, put it away."

With reluctance, she put the stone back in her pocket. Asking Hendrick to use it on her now, when he himself was injured, was out of the question. And it did not seem right to ask Christiaan, not when he was mad with worry about his father. The young man paced back and forth, his delicate features contorted with frustration and fury. She could hardly believe that such a tender youth could have deciphered the book's title.

"The title, door of fire, what does it refer to?"

Hendrick looked up from his wound. "The legend says it is the door to the land of demons. All manner of deadly and evil creatures can come through it into our world."

"But where is it?"

Hendrick shrugged. "I have never known its location—it must be contained in the book. I did not think it existed, truthfully."

"Gregor must have the sparrow by now—we saw it at the witches' gathering. What use would he have for it?"

"There are many. It can be used to revive the dead, or to bring down the timbers of a house, charm a moss maiden, or any number of creatures—even a wolf, I suspect."

"A moss maiden—you mean the spirits who are supposed to live in trees?"

He nodded. "Exactly. Perhaps the door of fire is in the forest?"

"But where? There are thousands of trees. We can't check them all for a moss maiden."

Hendrick looked glum. "I'm sorry, my girl. If I knew any more about soul sparrows or the door of fire, I have forgotten it. If my wife were alive, she could tell us."

"It must be what Gregor wants to do—open the door. How can we stop him?"

"With this." Christiaan held up the revolver.

"No, my boy. That will not stop a powerful warlock."

*the warlock and the wolf*

"There must be something we can do," she said.

"Christiaan should put away his gun and promise me he will not go looking for trouble." Hendrick gave the young man a stern look. "Then we must find his father, and make sure he is well."

"And Hennie—do you think Gregor will use her for something?"

Hendrick sighed. "Possibly—he is certainly capable of hurting a child."

"Then I will find her," she said, more to reassure herself than to inform Hendrick.

"With your friend who understands magic?" Hendrick raised his eyebrows.

She nodded. She did not want to tell Hendrick anything about Basa—not yet. Though from the look on his face, he already seemed to know that her friend was somehow different.

"And I will find my father," Christiaan said. He put the revolver back in its box.

Hendrick let her help him to his feet. "And I will go back to my shop. I am sure my son is wondering what has become of me."



After she had seen Hendrick safely back home, she headed for Leonara's cottage, the only place she felt she could stay without endangering others. As soon as she entered the woods, Basa appeared and trotted alongside her. Although she always had her guard up when walking at night, she relaxed somewhat, knowing her friend would fight for her.

"I think he's going to throw Hennie through a door of fire."

*You have decided to search for her. Good.*

*delfy hall*

"Yes, but I made another mistake, Basa. I gave Gregor the key without meaning to. Now he has everything he wants. I'm terrified of what he will do."

They walked the rest of the way in silence at a fast pace, aided by the eerie light of the nearly full moon, which streamed through the leafless branches of oak and aspen trees.

The cottage was cold and dark when they arrived. She lit the lantern on the table and set to work assembling wood in the fireplace. Basa nosed the door shut and sat in front of it, watching her.

*Where is this door of fire?*

"I don't know. Not even Hendrick knows."

*Who would know?*

"Leonara, probably. If we could find the soul sparrow, I could ask her. So I must find Gregor."

*You should not go alone.*

A noise outside the door startled him. He sniffed the threshold and a low growl rose in his throat.

She stood and took the paring knife out of her pocket. "Who is there?"

There was no answer.

Basa stared at her, blocking her path to the door.

*It is the boy. I will take care of him.*

She shook her head. "There is no need for that. The house is protected."

Basa blinked. *Very well.*

She swung open the door to find Joris standing on the edge of the threshold with clenched fists.

"What are you doing here, Joris? How did you find me?"

"I heard you, Mina—I heard you talking to that creature." He glared at Basa, who had puffed up his coat and risen to his full standing height, looking like a beast out of a fairy tale. "I will not

*the warlock and the wolf*

suffer a witch in my family, Mina. You must leave here at first light, and never come back—not to the city, not even to Holland. Do you hear me?”

A surge of defiant pride overtook her. “This is my house, Joris, and you can’t kick me out of it. I can do anything I want here. I will let in wolves if I want to. I will have pigs over for tea!”

Joris swore and took a step toward her. But he was thrown back, and landed with a thud on the dirt.

Basa made a huffing sound. She shushed him and stepped out of the cottage to help her cousin.

But Joris pushed her away and scrambled to his feet, bewildered and disgusted. “This is truly a witch’s house, then.”

“It used to be Leonara’s. But it is mine now, even though I am no witch.”

He studied her in the moonlight, scowling. “You killed Hester, didn’t you? You killed my aunt so you could try to take her house, and live with your animal—” He grabbed her shoulders and shook her, making her head wobble like a doll’s.

Basa launched himself at Joris, peeling him from Mina without touching her, and the two fell together. Her cousin rolled away from the wolf, who snapped and caught the back of his shirt. Joris, his face wild with fear, looked back at Mina.

“Let him go, Basa.”

*He will hurt you.*

“He won’t. You won’t hurt me again, will you, Joris?”

Basa snarled and shook his mouthful of shirt.

Joris cringed. “No, I promise I won’t.”

“See? He said it. Let him go.”

Basa released the shirt and backed away, his fur still ruffled.

Joris stood up slowly, looking from Basa to Mina. Then he ran.

“Wait!” she cried.

*delfy hall*

Joris soon disappeared, going in the direction of The Hague.

*We should stop him. He will tell people you talk to wolves. Then they will come for you.*

"He won't do anything—he has a bad temper, but he cares for me. I grew up with him."

*Humans are dangerous when they are afraid.*

"Perhaps. But I don't want to harm him. I've lost too many people already. He is the only family I have left."



The sun rose behind the forest as she and Basa left the cottage and headed to the main road. She wanted to check on Hendrick and get his advice before looking for Gregor. Basa would have to wait outside town for her return. He didn't like it, but she didn't give him any choice in the matter.

A wagon came over the rise, proceeding toward them at a leisurely rate. Basa fell back.

*I will meet you later, girl. Don't do anything foolish.*

"Hail, good woman!"

A man stood at the front of the wagon. She recognized him as the man with the scar who had come to her house. In the back were three more men—the one with the crooked smile, the older man who had questioned her, and the last was Joris, fuming. He jumped out of the wagon, carrying a rifle. She darted away from the road, but he chased her into the field and caught her.

The older man got out of the wagon and threw off his cape, revealing the vestments of a Catholic priest.

"Joris, let me go." She tried to squirm out of his grip, and her bandage came off her hand. But he held onto her.

He grinned when he saw Basa running out of the woods toward him. "I came prepared this time."

*the warlock and the wolf*

He threw her to the ground and aimed his rifle. The shot rang out over the fields.

Basa fell.

"No!" She got to her feet but he knocked her down again, and put his foot on her back, pushing her face against the dirt.

"Is it dead?" she heard one of the men ask.

"Looks that way," said another.

"Put it in the wagon. We will burn the body after we deal with the witch." She recognized the priest's voice.

"No—I want it," said Joris.

"It is an abomination—a tool of Satan, boy. What can you possibly want with it?"

"I want to cut it up—to make sure it is really dead."

"Then we will burn it—that is the way of destroying these creatures."

"I don't care—it is mine. I'm the one who found it. I'm taking it back to the meat hall."

"No, don't let him take him," she said. "Please."

"Very well. Hans, you carry the witch. Joris will take the creature in the wagon back to town. We will walk from here."

Joris removed his foot and one of the other men grabbed her around the middle. Then he hoisted her over his shoulder, her face against his back, which smelled of wet wool.

*Basa!* She craned her neck, watching Joris carry the wolf to the wagon and dump him onto the bed.

*Answer me, Basa. Please.*

The other man came at her with a piece of rope, and she jerked her wrists away and held them against her chest.

She heard Joris lashing the reins of the horses and the wagon making a wide turn on the road, heading back to town. If Basa was not already dead, he would be soon, when Joris got him on the chopping block.

Thinking there might be somebody nearby on the road or in the fields, she screamed for help.

Someone grabbed her hair, pulling up her head. It was the priest. He regarded her with cold curiosity, and gestured to the man who had tried to tie her up. "Go ahead, Lars. I will protect you."

While the priest held up her head, Lars tied a cloth around her mouth so she could no longer scream. Then he wrested her hands from her chest and bound her wrists.

The priest smiled at her. "In just a little while you will have a chance to redeem yourself."

## CHAPTER 25



**M**INA COULD FEEL Hans's hot, humid breath on her neck as the priest droned on, reading some passage from the book he held. It was not the bible, but some book specifically about witches. He had been reading for the past half hour, and she was attempting to keep her face expressionless, to give them no cause to hurt her. But she was growing impatient.

They had positioned her under an oak tree at the edge of the sandy woods, near the area where she and Basa had collected traps. A rope with a noose on the end dangled from the tree's strongest branch. Doubtless they were planning to hang her as soon as the priest finished his reading.

Hans stood behind her, holding her arms, though they were already tied, and his grip was starting to cut off the blood flow to her hands. She knew she had to act soon, but she was uncertain what to do. Should she try to strike Hans and get away? One

thing was certain—she couldn't go anywhere with the lug hanging onto her.

The priest snapped the book shut, bringing her out of her thoughts of escape. "Where is Joris? He should have arrived by now."

"He must still be dealing with the creature, Father."

The priest frowned. "He told me in no uncertain terms that he did not want to miss her hanging."

Her chest shuddered with grief and horror at this news. She looked up, searching the vast and empty overcast sky, and repeated the plea she had been making since they tied up the noose and she realized they would hang her. *Is anyone there? I need help. They are about to kill me.*

"But we can wait no longer. Wilhelmina Walraven, do you confess to making a pact with the evil one to derive your wicked powers from him and give you unjust domain on earth?"

She ignored the priest. *I will bring you food if you help me now. But you must do it now. I can't bring you food if I am killed.*

"I will give you a chance to save your soul. God will receive you into his arms if you renounce your life and its misdeeds. Tell us whom you have cursed with your spells. How did you cause the death of your aunt?" The priest directed Hans to remove her gag.

She thrust out her chin. "Gregor killed my aunt, not I."

"Are you in league with this male witch? Tell us where he can be found. Let this be your one good act."

"I am not in league with him. I am trying to stop him and rescue a child."

"Do not lie, witch. This is your last chance for salvation."

"I tell the truth."

She searched the surrounding trees for movement. All was still. It seemed there would be no rescue coming.

*the warlock and the wolf*

Then she saw the yellow paint, unmarred by beetroot—a missed trap.

The priest flicked a finger at Lars, who stepped forward with the noose.

She locked eyes with the priest. “Wait, there is something.”

“Ah, the yoke of death has jerked you awake,” said the priest, smiling. “What is it?”

“I have hidden my most dangerous instrument against that aspen tree.” She nodded at a tree to the priest’s right, its bark daubed faintly with yellow. “I will trade it to you for my life.”

Lars started for the aspen, but the priest grabbed his arm, and moved forward in his place, holding his crucifix in front of him for protection.

“Where? I see nothing.”

“It is under the vines that grow at the base. You can pick it up without harm, I promise.”

“A witch’s promise is only a gust of wind,” said the priest. “But I will risk myself to save others.”

She could hear him rustling the leaves of the vines. “Yes, I see something.”

Then the priest screamed and collapsed.

Hans loosened his grip on her, and she tore out of his hands and ran.

Her heart pounded in her ears as she hurtled between the trees. Cries of “The witch!” and “Get her!” went up behind her. She pushed herself to run faster.

Her toe tripped on a root and she went flying. A scraggly bush partially broke her fall and her head narrowly missed landing on a rock. She got up and looked behind her. Lars and Hans were a short distance away, closing in.

She bolted in the direction of town. If she could make it to open ground, someone might notice her and be able to help.

## *delfy hall*

But her tied hands hampered her speed, and she could hear the men gaining ground behind her. She needed someplace to hide. Her mind was too panicked to think straight. She felt like a rat in a box, about to meet its end.

Overhead a throng of crows screamed, flying past her toward the men.

*We are here*, one of them said.

She kept running, hearing squawks and screeches behind her as the birds attacked Lars and Hans.

"She has sent them!"

"Take cover!"

The open field was only a few minutes away. She heard a gunshot, and then another. If the men managed to kill one of the birds, the others would probably give up. She drove herself without mercy toward the field.

There was a shout close behind her. The men had caught sight of her. They would be on her before she could reach the field.

"Lady! Over here!"

Ahead and to the right, a bearded face wearing a hat leaned out from behind a bush. A tiny hand waved at her. Then the creature disappeared.

She veered toward the bush, the men shouting as she changed direction. Then her foot hit air, and she fell out of the forest.



The breath whooshed out of her body when she landed with a thump on moist soil. The little man with a hat grabbed her hands and cut away the ropes, freeing her wrists. Then, grunting, he pushed her, as though trying to topple a tree.

"Move, lady! No time!"

*the warlock and the wolf*

She got to her knees, which was as much as the space would allow, and moved down a dark and musty tunnel, similar to the one beneath her aunt's house.

The gnome whistled. She turned around to see what he was doing, and to her astonishment a large boulder was rolling toward them, lit by the faint light coming through the hole in the forest floor. It stopped just under the hole, blocking out the light, and the tunnel was cast into total darkness.

"Quiet," whispered the gnome.

Above them came the muffled pounding of footsteps, and the men's voices.

"Where is she?"

"She was right here. You've lost her, you dolt."

"Me? You were in the lead."

"Well, she's gone now. Vanished with her magic."

"We should stay here, in case she comes back."

"You stay here. I'm going back to the father."

The gnome poked her in the arm. "Walk, lady."

This time she got to her feet with her knees in a deep bend, and scuttled along the tunnel as best she could. The air was dank and smelled of roots and grasses. There was no sound behind her of the gnome, but when she stopped walking, he tapped her on the shoulder blades and whispered, "Lady! Lady!" until she started walking again.

Her hips and thighs burned with the strain of crouching, and finally she could go no longer. The gnome seemed to accept her decision, for he said nothing, but she felt him sit down beside her. After a couple of minutes of silence, broken only by a squawk of a bird aboveground, she wondered if he was asleep. She jostled his arm.

He jumped away. "Lady! Not nice!" His voice was still a whisper.

"I'm sorry. I thought you might be asleep."

"Not sleeping. Resting."

"Where are we going?"

"Where you want to go?"

She wanted to go to Joris's butcher stall, but she doubted the gnome had a tunnel that would take her there. "I need to get to town, without being seen by those men."

The gnome grunted. "Too weak. You cannot go so far down below." He poked her leg. "Weak legs."

He was right. The thought of walking in a crouch all the way to town sounded like torture. "Then take me toward town but away from the road, where the men will be." She would have to cut across the fields to get to town, hopefully without being seen.

He pushed her arm so that she nearly toppled sideways.

"Hey, stop pushing! I'm not a cow. You can just ask politely."

"Move, lady."

"I got it. I'm moving. Why don't you lead the way?"

"You first. Move!"

She tried to think of other things to take her mind off the pain in her legs—what to do about Joris, for instance. If she accused him of attempted murder, what would be his punishment? It might be prison, or death. She wasn't sure she wanted to go that far. But she didn't want him trying to have her killed again. If only he could be made to believe that she wasn't a witch.

It was unnerving to walk in the pitch dark. She couldn't even see her hand in front of her face. She kept her arms outstretched to keep from running into something, or someone.

"I have to stop." She collapsed against the dirt wall. For a terrible moment, she wondered if she would ever get out of the

*the warlock and the wolf*

tunnel. She was completely at the mercy of this creature. Could he be planning something malicious?

“Why are you helping me?”

He grunted.

“You are helping, right?”

“Yes, lady. I am helping. I am wrong.”

“Wrong how?”

“I took the lady’s word. Not right.” His voice broke a little. “Apology.”

“Don’t worry. I found the word another way.”

Now he could be heard distinctly sobbing—little sniffs and snorts.

“Oh, don’t cry!” She put a hand out, trying to find his shoulder.

“Aaah!” There was a thump, and then the stamping of little feet. “Lady, don’t do that!”

“I’m sorry—I was only trying to comfort you.”

A tiny finger poked the side of her face, and then her arm. “Move, move, move.”

“Fine—I’m moving.”

She got to her feet again and trudged along. Time seemed to slow down, or speed up—she couldn’t tell which. For a moment she thought she might be dreaming it all, and would soon wake up in her own bed. She dug her nails into her palms, thinking that if she were dreaming, her burned hand would not hurt so badly.

“Wait, lady!”

The creature grabbed the back of her dress and pulled her back. Then he slipped by her and was gone. Seconds later a shaft of light pierced the tunnel, revealing the tiny figure of her helper, who was pushing away another boulder, his little hands splayed

*delfy hall*

like starfish against the rock. He grabbed some vines that dangled from above and hoisted himself out of the tunnel.

She crept to the opening and looked up. The light was blinding. Then the gnome's grumpy fat face appeared.

"Up, lady!"

## CHAPTER 26



ON HER WAY through the fields, Mina encountered no one, not even a curious animal. She came into the town center on Spui Street, trying to hurry without looking conspicuous. If the priest and his men were searching for her, they would start with the Molls' house, so she avoided Veene Street and took a roundabout way to the meat hall.

Once inside the large building, she found the back entrance of Opperman's stall and headed straight for the butchering area, which she remembered from years ago, though she had tried to forget it. The stench of blood and bone choked her throat, forcing her to breathe through her mouth.

The door to the butchering area was unlocked. On the marble block lay the furred body of Basa, motionless. Blood lay pooled under him, and his eyes were closed. The air was chilled by the ice in the box in one corner, and the lack of fire. A clean knife lay

near him on the table. There was no telling how soon someone would be coming back.

His ribcage felt warm, and it rose slightly with each faint breath. But his eyes wouldn't open.

"Basa, I'm here." There was no reaction. She blinked back a rush of tears.

She searched through his fur until she found the bullet hole, crusted with blood. She placed the healing stone on top of it with her good hand and closed her eyes.

Her hand buzzed and trembled as the energy seeped from it into the stone. Then, though her eyes were closed, she saw a flash, and for a moment the room went white and her hand felt as though it were on fire. Freezing air filled her chest, and it became harder to breathe. She lifted the stone and saw that the bullet hole had closed.

There was still no sign of consciousness on Basa's face.

The sound of voices echoed outside the room. Someone was coming.

Finally Basa lifted his head and saw her.

*You are in danger here.*

"We have to hurry," she whispered. She slipped an arm underneath his body and pulled him to the edge of the table.

*You cannot carry me.*

His weight overwhelmed her and they both fell to the floor, smacking the stone tiles, Basa's head cushioned by her shoulder.

The voices outside the room grew louder. Basa scrambled to his feet, and she was a second behind, her legs weak and wobbling.

The door opened. Joris stood on the threshold, her uncle Sybolt behind him, scowling.

"What is she doing here, son?" Then he saw Basa. "My God." His face blanched. "Joris, close the door."

## *the warlock and the wolf*

Joris still stared in disbelief at her. She realized he must have thought her dead already.

“How did you—”

“Joris!” Sybolt pulled him out of the room and the door slammed shut, leaving her and Basa alone.

“This way,” she said, bolting for the back door of the stall.

The back area of the meat hall was empty—at the height of the shopping hour, all proprietors were busy manning their stalls. The door to the street was only a few feet away. They had to get out of sight, but it was too risky for Basa to walk among people.

Then she spied a wheelbarrow outside one of the stall doors. “Get in,” she told Basa. He hopped into the wheelbarrow and she threw her cape over him. They could hear shouts of “Wolf!” coming from somewhere nearby.

Her arms and legs shook as she lifted the wheelbarrow and then pushed it into the busy street, filled with shoppers and tradesmen who were too busy to notice a weak, pallid girl straining under a heavy load. She picked a door in the row of houses that faced the meat hall and tried it. It was unlocked. She pushed the wheelbarrow inside and found a large, empty parlor.

“Quick—get out.” Basa leaped down and she snatched up her cape before putting the wheelbarrow back outside, a few feet from the door. They went down a hallway and up two flights of narrow servants’ stairs at the back of the house, being as quiet as they could.

On the top floor of the house near the stairwell was a tiny room. A pile of dust-covered toys lay in the corner, next to a small bed with no linens.

*What is this place?*

“It looks like it used to be a child’s room. Let’s hide in here. I don’t think anyone is home.”

*But they will come back.*

She lay down on the mattress and closed her eyes. Outside, men shouted to each other.

Then someone banged on the door of the house. Her heart jumped and she sat up.

"Open up!" a man shouted. "We are looking for a girl and a wolf!"

Basa positioned himself with his back to the bed, facing the door. The fur between his shoulders rose, and his ears were pricked, listening for someone inside the house to answer.

The man knocked again. She wasn't sure that she had the strength to run or to fight if someone discovered them. If they were caught, all of her efforts to find Hennie would be for nothing. And who knew what they would do to Basa.

But the house remained silent. The knocking moved to someone else's door, further down the street.

Basa looked back at her. *Well?*

She sighed and fell back onto the mattress, the muscles in her legs and arms giving out. "We won't be here long. Just until dark."



When her eyes opened, she started for a second, not knowing where she was. The room had taken on a ghostly light as the glow of the moon seeped through the dirty window pane. From the floor below came sounds of people talking and striding back and forth. Her wounded hand ached and burned.

Beside her lay Basa, with his head next to hers, his long back to her. She shook the flat of his shoulder blade.

"Wake up. Someone's home," she whispered.

He lifted his head and listened. Somewhere in the house a child laughed.

"We must go. This house is in the same block as Hendrick's, so we will go through the back garden and avoid the street."

## *the warlock and the wolf*

*They could see us leave.*

"We have to get out before someone comes into this room—then they will definitely see us."

They crept from the room and into the stairwell. She peered down the staircase, which was lit only faintly by a light coming from the first floor.

"It's clear. We must be fast but quiet. Don't stop for anything."

*I'm not the slow one, girl.*

She took the lead and descended the stairs. Halfway to the second floor, the wood on one of the steps creaked, and the noise from downstairs stopped.

She looked at Basa. *Hurry.*

Her feet hardly touched the steps the rest of the way down. She hit the floor just after Basa and opened the door to the backyard. They sped out of the house without looking behind them.



The back room of Hendrick's shop was dark, and they stumbled into bookshelves, boxes, and cabinets before finding Hendrick's desk, piled with papers.

"There's no one here," she whispered to Basa. "They are probably upstairs. You should hide behind these shelves while I try to rouse Hendrick."

She tiptoed back the way they had come, looking for the stairs.

A figure leaped out at her, swinging a staff. She ducked and the weapon crashed into a pile of boxes.

"Hendrick!"

"Who is it?"

"It's Mina."

The old man dropped the staff and put out his hand, which she took. "I apologize, my dear."

He fumbled with a lantern on a shelf. "I am rather jumpy lately, for reasons you can understand." The flame caught and grew inside the glass, flooding the room with a warm light.

Then he saw that she was not alone—but his smile remained. "And this is your friend who knows about magic, no doubt."

"Yes, this is Basa," she said.

Basa blinked at Hendrick and sat down, which she took as a sign that he felt at ease with the old man.

If Hendrick was surprised by the sight of a large wolf in his storage area, he didn't show it. "I assume you can communicate with each other?"

She nodded. "If you want to tell him anything, I will speak for you."

"Fascinating. I haven't met a beast binder in many years." He ushered both of them to his desk. She took a seat facing him, and Basa lay down on a nearby rug.

"So you have met someone with my ability before?"

"A long time ago. I'm sorry I don't have any tea ready to offer—"

"Father?" someone called out from the staircase. Basa's ears pricked up.

Hendrick was quick to get out of his chair to prevent his son from catching a glimpse of his guests. "It's nothing to worry about," Mina heard him say. "Go back upstairs. I'll be up soon."

After the sound of ascending footsteps had passed away, Hendrick sighed. "My son knows nothing of my activities, or his mother's, and I intend to keep it that way."

"But don't you think he would want to know?" If her mother had had supernatural powers, she would have wanted to know.

Hendrick poured water into a cup for her and a bowl for Basa. "He is an intelligent and diligent craftsman. But he cannot fathom the complications of good and evil. The secret part of his parents' lives would only scare him." He returned to his chair.

*the warlock and the wolf*

"Now, tell me what trouble you have been up to. You look terribly tired, and that's something coming from an old man of seventy-four."

Her face colored as she remembered Joris pushing her into the dirt with his foot. "My cousin betrayed me to witch hunters, and I was nearly hanged, and Basa shot. Basa would be dead if I hadn't escaped and used the stone on him."

"So now you know the price the stone exacts."

"It was worth it." She looked at Basa, whose head rested on the rug, his eyes closed. "It was my fault he was shot."

She heard a soft tapping coming from the storage area. "Hendrick, what is that sound?"

They all listened, and it came again. Someone was knocking on the back door.

"I almost forgot—Christiaan said he would stop by and tell me of his progress." He headed for the back door.

"Should we conceal Basa?"

But Hendrick didn't answer. She stayed seated, with one eye on Basa and one on the shadows near the door.

"Try not to look too threatening," she whispered.

*How does one do that?*

"Try to look smaller."

*My kind does not do such things.*

Before she had a chance to argue, Hendrick came back into the light of the lantern, leading Christiaan behind him.

Christiaan took off his hat. "Good evening, Mina—good lord!" He stopped in his tracks and stared at Basa. "I have never seen a dog of that size."

"That's because he is actually—"

Hendrick broke in. "Basa is Mina's protector." He winked at her. "And a loyal friend."

Christiaan nodded, still gazing in wonder at the wolf.

"Sit, my boy. Tell us, is there any news of your father?"

He pulled a chair close to the group. "I'm afraid not. No one has seen him at all—not even the stadtholder or his family, so I have to conclude that Gregor is no longer impersonating him." He frowned as though he were trying to hold back tears. "It makes me wonder if he is still alive."

Hendrick put a hand on his shoulder. "Let's assume that he is until we discover evidence to the contrary."

Mina's eyes widened. "Wait—I have just remembered something." She looked from Hendrick to Christiaan. "I heard your father talking to Prince William about some bargain they had made. The prince was angry, saying that your father hadn't kept his promise, and the prince said he had given him something—something he wanted."

"And what day was this?"

She counted the days that had passed. "I think it was the ninth."

"My father started acting strangely a few days after the new year. So it must have been Gregor talking to the prince."

"How can we see the prince at this hour, Hendrick?"

"I haven't the least clue. But I don't advise it."

"But we must find a way to talk to William," said Mina.

"They know me at the Binnenhof," said Christiaan. "They will let us pass."

"Are you sure?" She gave him a chance to change his mind.

He looked at Hendrick, and then nodded. "Yes. If we get information about Gregor, we may find my father, and your friends' daughter."

Hendrick shook his head. "It is much too risky, Christiaan. If the prince is involved, how will you get him to talk? He is a hotheaded young man."

"Good," Christiaan said. "Then we will understand each other."

## CHAPTER 27



**M**INA AND CHRISTIAAN stole through Buitenhof Square, dark and deserted at this hour, making their way toward the Binnenhof. They crossed the moat and reached the main gate, patrolled since sunset by one of the stadtholder's guards, outfitted in full armor.

Christiaan doffed his hat at the man. "Sir, the stadtholder's secretary, Master Huygens, is my father. As you may know, he has been missing since the new year. I have information to give Prince William about him, and I must see him at once. Can you escort me to the prince's quarters?"

The guard looked from Christiaan to Mina, and then up and down the moat. "I cannot leave my post. But I will let you pass. Report to the sentry guard on duty in the courtyard."

Christiaan murmured his thanks and hurried past, bringing Mina with him. Once in the courtyard, they spied the sentry,

talking to a footman who sat atop a grand carriage, harnessed to four coal-black horses.

“Whose carriage is that?” she whispered.

“Someone important, probably visiting the stadtholder. We are lucky they are distracting the sentry. We must be quick.”

They chose the closest door, went up a flight of stairs, and ran through a series of hallways to the southeast end of the Binnenhof, until they came to a corridor lined with marble and lit with scrolling torches. Doors painted gold and cream led off of the hallway.

“Which one?” she whispered.

“We will have to try them and see.”

She grasped the handle of the nearest door and was about to turn it when someone approached on the stairs. She and Christiaan retreated into an alcove and waited.

A footman hurried past, carrying a tray of dishes. They watched as he knocked and then entered one of the rooms in the center of the hallway.

“At least we know someone is in that room,” she said. They waited until the footman had come out and gone back down the stairs.

While Christiaan hung back to stand watch in the corridor, she opened the door to the room the footman had left.

The antechamber was lit only by a small lantern, and the room beyond it was dark.

“Gottfried?” a male voice called out from the main bedroom.

She found her way to the edge of a vast, canopied bed. A bit of moonlight came through the meeting of the heavy curtains and illuminated a pale mustachioed face at the head of the bed, just above the covers. It was William.

“Who are you?” The prince’s eyes were wide with alarm.

*the warlock and the wolf*

"I'm assistant to the stadtholder's naturalist. My name is Mina Walraven."

"And why are you in my bedchamber, Miss Walraven?"

"I've come to ask you a question. I know that you have been in contact with Gregor, the warlock who killed my aunt and my parents."

"I'm sure I have not been in contact with any such person. I do not consort with murderers."

"He disguised himself as your father's secretary, Master Huygens."

The prince's eyes narrowed. "And what of him? He disappeared from the Binnenhof a few days ago."

"Have you made some bargain with him?"

"How dare you! Get out at once." He reached for a tasseled rope hanging above the headboard.

"I will tell the stadtholder that you have intrigued with his staff—think about that before you call for anyone."

His hand hesitated. "He will never believe you."

"Perhaps not, but the court is already skeptical of you. Surely rumors would not help." She had no idea whether this were true, but it seemed like the thing a prince might be afraid of.

"What do you want?" he hissed.

"I want to know what you gave him, and what you got in return."

"Nothing! I gave him nothing."

"Not is true that." The small voice speaking broken Dutch came from the pile of covers next to William.

"Be quiet, Mary."

A pale face came out of the bedclothes, golden brown hair falling over her shoulders.

"Not is right," Mary said. Her eyes were angry and intense. Mina had never suspected that the meek princess could speak with so much passion.

"I am warning you, Mary," William said.

She lifted her chin. "He hates father—that is reason. And it will bite him."

"And what has he done?" Mina asked.

"He give man blood."

William smacked the princess, and she fell back into the bed with a muffled cry. He turned back to Mina. "Who are you?" He reached out and ripped her hood down, exposing her hair. "Wait—I know you. Where have I seen you before?"

"I appeared before your father with my mentor."

"No—in the forest. That's where I saw you—your hair. You were at the hunt. You scared off the deer! Guards!" he called loudly. "Guards! Come quickly!" He grabbed for her but she darted through the antechamber and into the corridor, where an alarmed Christiaan waited.

"What happened?"

"We have to go." She pulled at his sleeve and ran for a set of nearby stairs.

A guard appeared at the top of it, leveling his spear at them. They turned and ran in the opposite direction. Another guard popped out from an alcove and grabbed her arm. She tried to shake him off but his grip was like iron.

"I have her!" he shouted.

She took the paring knife out of her cape pocket and stabbed his arm. The man screamed and let go of her. She bolted to catch up with Christiaan. More guards were tromping up the steps at the west end of the corridor behind them.

"Stop!" one of them called. She looked back. The guard leveled his spear. "Stop, in the name of the Prince of Orange!"

*the warlock and the wolf*

She and Christiaan kept running, going past doors and window alcoves. A footman dressed in green livery and holding a bedpan appeared in their path.

“Move!” she shouted. The footman’s mouth dropped open, and then he leaped to one side of the corridor, dropping the bedpan and its contents.

They raced down a set of servants’ stairs to the ground floor, and came out into a staging area, with shelves of clean linen and tea sets.

Christiaan opened a door to a closet. A row of green livery uniforms hung from the rack, and on the shelf above black hats were stacked. He pulled her inside and, before closing the door, positioned a tea cart in front of it.

She held her breath as the guards shouted from the top of the stairwell. Christiaan found her hand and gripped it. Outside the guards thundered down the steps, and the china on the teacart rattled as they ran past the closet.

After a few minutes of listening for footsteps but hearing none, Christiaan opened the closet. He looked at her. “I have an idea.” He took out a coat, breeches, and a hat, and gestured for her to turn around.

“What did William tell you?” he asked.

She could hear clothes dropping onto the floor. “Mary said that he gave your father—Gregor, I mean—his blood. And that he hates his father.”

“That’s not exactly a secret. But the blood is very strange. I’m ready.”

She turned around. He was fully dressed as a footman. “Should I put something else on too?” she asked.

“Just hide your hair.”

She pulled up her hood and stuffed her curls into it while following him down a hallway and through a dark modest room

with a long table and chairs—most likely where the serving staff ate their meals. Then they came to an exterior door.

“Wait here,” Christiaan said, pushing her out of sight behind a cabinet.

“But—”

He was gone. She watched him through a window.

Several feet away, in the courtyard, stood the grand carriage with black horses. Christiaan strode over to it and spoke to the footman, who appeared surprised and then concerned. Christiaan waited while the man descended from his perch, and the two of them walked together toward the door near her hiding spot.

As they came in, the footman’s voice was high and anxious. “This is highly unusual, man. Are you sure?”

“Yes, he wants you to attend him immediately. Go through the dining room, up the stairs, down the hallway, turn a corner, down another hallway and you’ll find him. He’s waiting, so be quick about it.”

The footman nodded and rushed off.

Christiaan beckoned to her, and she followed him back into the courtyard. The sentry was nowhere to be seen—he had probably been recruited in the search for them.

“Get into the carriage and don’t let yourself be seen.”

He opened the heavy gilded door and she climbed in. “Christiaan, this is mad—”

The door shut, and she heard him walking away. Then the carriage squeaked, shimmied, and finally rolled forward behind the clapping of the horses. With a panicked start, she realized that Christiaan would try to drive the carriage out of the Binnenhof.

The compartment was dark, its curtains blocking out the torchlight of the courtyard. She felt around the velvet seats for

something to hide under, but found only a forgotten snuffbox and wadded handkerchief. The compartment itself smelled of gentlemen's perfume mixed with pipe smoke. She lay facedown on the floor and tucked her feet and hands out of sight under her cape, trying not to think about dirt and other unsavory debris the nobleman must have trekked into the carriage. If anyone looked in, they would see a lumpy floor covered with a black cloth.

A guard barked for them to stop, and the carriage slowed to a halt. She could feel her heart pounding. By now, the word would have gone all around the Binnenhof to watch out for her and Christiaan.

The guard's voice was stern but polite. "Leaving so soon?"

"He is still inside. He wants me to give the horses a trot. He thinks they need exercise."

There was a pause, and she heard Christiaan clear his throat. She tried to flatten herself even further, to become a very part of the foul-smelling floor.

The guard gave a deep, forceful guffaw, and she heard Christiaan's boyish chuckle join in. When their laughter faded, the guard said, "But you can't go through."

"Why's that?"

Sweat broke out on her forehead as she waited for the reply. She wondered if they should have just surrendered when William called the guards. Now they were fugitives about to be caught.

"This is the stadtholder's gate, man. You need to use the main gate."

"Ah, sorry about that."

She felt the carriage roll backwards.

"Wait!" called the guard. The carriage jerked to a halt. "You're here now. Just go on through, this once."

The wheels rattled under her as the horses pulled the carriage over the bridge. She looked out the window and saw they were

passing the ornamental gardens and entering Buitenhof Square. Then they turned a corner into a small, dark street.

The carriage stopped. There was a rap on the door, and it opened. Christiaan, smiling, bowed with a flourish of his borrowed hat. "My lady." She couldn't help laughing as he helped her step down to the deserted street. But she soon sobered.

"Christiaan, that was incredibly—"

"Brave? Why, thank you. I thought so too."

"No, I was going to say foolish."

"But it worked." He looked a bit hurt.

"Now I know how other people feel when I rush into harm's way. It's quite unnerving." She shook out her cape and smoothed back her hair. "I think we got lucky this time."

"The guards will probably come into town and look for us. I think we should split up. Can you go somewhere safe? I will go back to the shop and tell Hendrick about William."

"I agree. Tell Hendrick I will be at Leonara's house." Her hand felt as though it were on fire again, and she longed to plunge it into cold water. "But wait, what about the horses?"

He looked taken aback. "Someone will find them in the morning."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes—this carriage is impossible to miss."

"Hold on. I just want to reassure them." She patted the silky neck of one of the leading pair. "Go to sleep, now. Someone will feed and water you when the sun comes up," she murmured.

The horse blew a quiet snort, his nostrils flaring.

Christiaan shook his head. "Damned sentimental, you women are. He can't understand you, you know."



*the warlock and the wolf*

The safest path, she decided, would be south, through an archway that led into Veene Street, past the Molls' house, and then down to the intersection with Spui Street, where Veene turned into Wagen. Her goal was to make a wide arc through the south of the city, staying well clear of the Binnenhof, and come out of The Hague on the east side and finally make her way to the woods.

As she walked she thought over what the princess Mary had said. If William had given Gregor his blood, Gregor must have done something valuable in return. She remembered the imposter Huygens telling the prince that it would "take time," that it was an art, not a science. She wondered what nefarious thing that William desired would be done slowly. Everyone knew that he did not support the treaty that his father was negotiating with Spain. Was he trying to derail the negotiations?

And a transaction involving blood sounded distinctly witchy. She hoped that Hendrick would have some idea what the prince's blood would be used for. It would not be something beneficent, she was sure.

She crossed a canal and turned left a block later into a narrow street, making her way east.

All of the houses on the street were dark and quiet save for one. Raucous laughter floated out of the front entrance of a tavern as the patrons came and went. She pulled her hood as low as it would go and hurried past, keeping her eyes straight ahead.

Then she saw him—the man with a scar on his face. It was Hans, the man who had held her under the noose. He was twenty paces away, coming toward her. His eyes widened as he recognized her, too.

She darted into the tavern, hoping to lose him in the crowd, noisy with chatter and the clattering of plates and cups. The patrons were mostly men, drinking large mugs of beer and talking

animatedly. Here and there were a few women, their bosoms spilling out of gay, brightly colored dresses. One of them played a lute and warbled a song about a woman looking for her lost love. Two men leered at Mina as she elbowed her way past them.

In the kitchen, a sweating woman worked over a small stove, stirring the bubbling contents of pots and adding handfuls of spices. She looked up when Mina came into the kitchen.

"Is there a back door?" Mina asked.

The woman jerked her thumb behind her. Mina turned a corner, but saw a man coming in the exit, and reversed direction, hurrying back out of the kitchen, and up a flight of stairs.

At the end of a long hallway sat an old woman, her head bent over some needlework that was just barely illuminated by a single candle.

Male voices rose from the floor below. Afraid that Hans was close behind, she slipped through a door, closed it, and turned the key in the lock.

She turned around and was greeted by a comical scene. Two heads regarded her from a bed—one, a woman, was at the foot and the other, a man, at the top. The man grinned.

"Why, look what the matron has sent me. Another dish to savor."

Mina ignored him and concentrated on the door lock. She hoped it would hold.

The man slid out from under the covers, naked as the day he was born. He put his hands on his hips and beamed at Mina.

"Come on in, girl. The water's fine."

"Stay away from me," Mina whispered.

Footsteps pounded up the stairs and into the hallway.

"No, no, no," the matron could be heard saying. "You must not disturb my clients."

"We are looking for a girl," said Hans.

*the warlock and the wolf*

"We have plenty of girls here, but you will have to pay for them. No one goes in these rooms for free."

Someone rattled a doorknob to another room.

"Stop it, or I will call somebody to deal with you."

"Relax, biddy. We're not here for fun. A girl came up here, dark skin," said Hans.

Another man joined in, and she recognized Lars's voice. "She is dangerous, woman. Now don't mess about anymore. Start opening these doors."

There was a slap, and an injured cry from the matron, and a few seconds later, Mina heard one of the doors open and the sound of angry voices.

The naked man heard them too, and looked none too happy. He rummaged in a heap of clothing lying near the bed.

The woman sat up. "Where you going?"

"Don't worry, love. I'm not done with you yet." He drew a long knife from the pile of clothes and flicked it at Mina. "Get away from the door, lass."

Just then a key clicked in the lock and the doorknob turned. The man threw himself against the door, allowing it to open only a few inches and brandishing the knife through the gap.

"I'm here to have a good time, and if you interfere with that, I'll make life miserable for you indeed," he said.

"Is she in there? A dusky girl?"

"There's only pink pale skin in my bed," the man said. "Now get away from the door." He slammed it shut and turned the key.

Grinning, he seized Mina by the waist and pressed his wet lips onto her neck, making a sucking sound. She put a hand in his face and pushed him off.

He laughed. "What a tender piece of flesh they have sent me. Take off those rags, lass." He dropped the knife on the pile of

clothes and rejoined the woman in the bed, who giggled as he grabbed her.

Mina wiped the spit off her neck, listening to the yells of surprise as the men entered the other rooms. Moans and slurping sounds came from the bed, and she tried to ignore them, pressing her ear against the door to hear what was happening outside. Soon the angry voices died away, and the men retreated down the stairs to the chatter of the tavern below.

The men would almost certainly stand guard outside the front and back of the tavern, waiting for her to come out. She thought about the layout of the building—it stood on a corner. The windows of the room she was in were on the side of the building, with no doors below.

The bolts on the window frame were old and rusted. She got her thumbs around them and pulled until they popped loose. The man and woman watched her in astonishment as she stepped onto a chair and slid out of the room.

She landed with a thud on some barrels below and then crashed to the ground, pulling one of the barrels down on top of her. The sound echoed in the empty street. If the men were nearby, they would surely have heard it. She ran as fast as she could to a pile of nets and buried herself underneath them, wincing from the smell of rotting fish and the slime of the canal water.

Someone pelted into the street.

“Do you see her?” she heard Hans say.

She held her breath, trying not to gag on the wretched smell.

“It looks like she jumped from that window, landed on those barrels. She must have gone north. Otherwise we would have seen her.”

“Right, let’s go, then.”

*the warlock and the wolf*

“Wait, is this one worth chasing after? The biddy we caught today said there was another one on a boat at Spui, a male witch. Shall we go after him instead? At least we know where to find him.”

“No—this young one’s trail is hot, and she wounded the priest. We must go after her while we can.”

Two pairs of feet ran by her, leaving the street empty and silent. She could scarcely believe her luck. A male witch was at the port, only a block away.



## CHAPTER 28



**A**T THIS HOUR, there were not many people lingering near the Spui port, and with her hood pulled over her head against the wind, the solitary pedestrians who did pass Mina did not get a good look at her face.

The port was dark save for a few lanterns hanging from the prows of river boats. Most of the small craft were used to bring people or goods to and from the city. The nearly full moon shone in a cloudless sky, and the canal water lapped against the wharves. The silent night air was broken only occasionally by a laugh coming from inside a boat that was further down the pier.

She stopped behind a stack of wooden crates, and then hunkered down, taking stock of the situation. There were at least twenty-five boats. If Gregor was in one of them, she had no idea how to find out, short of knocking on the cabin door of each and asking for him.

*delfy hall*

A man came around the corner and walked toward the crates. She stayed out of sight, and as he passed by she recognized him. It was Johan Maurits.

He whistled to himself, and soon boarded the boat with the laughing crew, where she lost sight of him. The cries of happy men escalated and then faded away. She guessed he had greeted some friends, and would be drinking with them for the night. So she could safely rule out that particular boat. That left only twenty-four to check.

She had just made up her mind to board the nearest boat when she heard a rustling sound behind her.

*What is your plan, girl?*

The wolf had snuck up on her position behind the crates.

"What are you doing here?" she whispered. "There are too many people around."

Basa blinked. *I am here now. Do you want my help or no?*

She sighed. "Are you any good with boats? Gregor is on one of them. I heard one of the witch hunters talking about it."

*He is on that one.* Basa looked at a ship with red trim. It sat low in the water, broken boards on its hull and a collection of junk on the deck.

"How do you know that?"

*I can smell him.*

She started forward, but Basa nipped the edge of her cape.

"What?"

*Remember the witches' fire? You rushed in and were hurt?*

"I won't try to capture him. I just want to see what he is doing on that ship. If I can't see anything, I'll come back. And we can figure out a new plan."

He released her cape. *And if the kymaa sees you?*

"Run to Hendrick if something happens."

*the warlock and the wolf*

She looked up and down the port, making sure nobody was in sight. Then she shot to the edge of the pier where the boat was moored. For a moment, she hesitated, wondering if she was being too rash. But the thought that Hennie might be inside, suffering and scared, drove her forward. She scurried onto the deck.

The windows of the cabin were curtained and glowing with candlelight, and she could make out nothing of what lay inside. But she heard voices—a deep whisper, possibly a man’s voice. And then a groan. Could that be Hennie? There was more whispering, but she couldn’t make out any words. She thought she might hear better on the other side of the cabin.

As luck would have it, a window on the other side was open a crack, and though she could not see anything, she could clearly hear someone talking.

He was saying a prayer. “God, take me back to my family. I have never asked you for anything before. But release me from this madman, and I will do your will—”

Someone grabbed the back of her neck.

She opened her mouth to scream, but a hand clamped over it. She was dragged over the boards of the deck while her feet scrabbled for purchase.

“If you scream, I will break your neck,” said a graveled voice that she recognized as Gregor’s.

*Basa, get help.*

Gregor laughed, and she wondered if he could read her mind. “Your friends cannot help you now.”

She kicked and lifted her body into the air, trying to brace her feet against the door frame of the cabin, but he forced her inside and swung the door shut after them. He took his hand from her mouth, and she thought to scream, but her lips would not part.

"Your mouth has been closed until I can trust you to stay quiet." She thrashed, trying to escape from his hold. Her elbow jabbed into his face, knocking him back, and she leaped for the door. But he grabbed her cape and pulled, whisking her off her feet. She hit the floor facedown, and he pinned her with his knees. He managed to bind her hands and feet with twine, and then dragged her over to the wall and propped her up.

She looked at the other person slouched against the wall. It was Constantijn Huygens, the stadtholder's secretary—the man who had knocked on her bedroom window. Only this was the actual man himself, not an imposter.

His torso was wrapped round and round with heavy rope, and his feet were bound as well. He stared at her with watery eyes, his face sallow and sagging.

"Who have you brought into your lair, monster?"

Gregor smiled. "I caught her outside. A pretty companion for you, no?"

"What do you want with her?" Constantijn's face shook, as though imagining the torture that Gregor could put another human being through.

Gregor laughed. "I had asked three things of her, but she gave me only one. So our deal is off."

Constantijn stared at her, alarmed. "You had a deal with this madman?"

Gregor smirked as he watched her struggle to open her mouth. "Shall I let you talk? I think I shall." He grabbed her by the chin and swiped his thumb across her lips.

Her jaw unlocked. She looked at Constantijn. "He offered me a deal, but I didn't take it. I only wanted to find out what he is planning."

Gregor laughed again. "Something magnificent! It will surpass anything the human race has seen. I will introduce them

*the warlock and the wolf*

to the underworld. And I will no longer have to hide, like a cowering animal. I am no criminal—I have great talents, which should be put to use.” He looked at her, cocking his head. “What should I do with you? You do have a rare ability, one that I might need. Perhaps I should give you a second chance and offer you another deal.”

She shook her head. “I won’t help you with anything that hurts someone. Especially Hennie. What have you done with her?”

“You mean the little girl?” He shrugged. “She is safe for now. She will serve an important purpose. That reminds me, I doubt you are here alone.” He pulled aside one of the curtains and peered out the window, humming to himself. “I will have to go out and find that creature. I am sure he is nearby.” His pale eyes flicked back and forth, just as they had in the stadtholder’s library, when she had first talked to him, while he impersonated the secretary. It appeared that some parts of him could not be disguised.

Then, almost as an afterthought, he brushed her throat with his fingers and she felt a light shock. “You may talk, but nothing above a whisper.” He slipped out of the cabin and closed the door. His footsteps faded away over the deck.

She looked at Constantijn, whose face was stricken with exhausted terror. “Quick, tell me what you know of his plans.”

“Who are you? Why has he brought you here?”

“He killed my family, and I’ve been trying to stop him and rescue my friends’ daughter. Your son has been helping me. We have been trying to find you.”

“You know my son Christiaan?”

“I met him a few days ago through Hendrick Hondius, the illustrator. I am apprenticed to a scientist who works for the stadtholder. I saw Gregor at the Binnenhof, impersonating

you. But he has stopped, and now the court knows that you are missing.”

“How is my son?”

“He is very distraught. Master Hondius is looking after him. He will be overjoyed when he hears that I have found you.”

“And how will you get away in order to relay this news?”

She sighed. “I haven’t figured that out yet. Now tell me, what has Gregor said about his plans?”

“He is going to do something tomorrow night, during the eclipse. From what I gather it is his only opportunity. He asked me about the guards around the Binnenhof. Perhaps he will kill the stadtholder?”

She shook her head. “I don’t think so. He had plenty of chances to do that when he was impersonating you. Master Hondius and I believe he is trying to open the door of fire, a portal to the underworld. He has stolen a book connected to it.” She looked around the small room, but could see no book left out in plain sight. “He must have it hidden in here somewhere.”

The door creaked open, and Gregor slipped back through. He glanced at each of them and then retired to the other side of the room. She wanted to ask if he had seen Basa, but she was afraid of the answer. So she said nothing, not even daring to speak silently to the wolf, for fear that Gregor could hear her. She didn’t want to take any chances.

She looked over at Constantijn, and saw that he was crying, tears coming down his cheeks but without reaction, as though they were merely raindrops.

“We will get out of here. I promise,” she whispered.

From the back of the room came a low laugh.

## CHAPTER 29



**G**IRL, ARE YOU awake?

Mina heard the voice and opened her eyes. She had a feeling that the wolf had been trying to wake her for some time. Gregor had given her something to drink against her will, sickly and sweet. The drug had sent her off into a dreamless stupor.

She collected her wits enough to speak silently. *Don't talk. He might be able to hear you.*

There was no answer.

She glanced at Constantijn. His head leaned back against the wall and his mouth was slightly open, but she could not detect any breathing. Afraid he had died of despair during the night, she reached over with her feet and prodded his leg. His head fell forward. She tried again, and then he snorted and looked up. His face registered confusion, followed by fear.

"Where is he?" he whispered.

At the back of the room she could see a long box. Last night, after he had drugged her, she had seen him get into the box and close the lid. The box was still closed. She watched it for a few seconds to see if Constantijn's whisper had roused the warlock. But nothing moved.

"He is still in that box."

The man's questioning stare made her realize that he couldn't see the box from his position. "He sleeps in a box, like a vampire?"

"Yes, but I don't think that's what he is." She caught herself thinking that there were no such things as vampires, but a week ago she would have said the same about gnomes or witches.

The door to the cabin creaked. She and Constantijn both looked up, but saw no one.

"We need to find a way out of here," she whispered to him.

He closed his eyes and shook his head. "I wish you luck, but what you want is impossible." In a barely audible voice he said, "That man is a demon."

Something wet touched her arm, and she nearly screamed. It was Basa.

He had somehow slunk in without them seeing and now lay with his head tucked behind her, chewing on the rope around her wrists.

Constantijn's eyes opened wide and his mouth gaped open. She shook her head and shushed him without making a sound. Then she looked dramatically at the back of the room and back to Constantijn, as if to say, *the slightest noise could wake him up*. Constantijn kept his eyes riveted on Basa, or at least on what he could see of him, for the wolf's front end was tucked behind her.

She tried to devise a stratagem while waiting for Basa to finish with the ropes. Should she run out the door immediately, and run for help, leaving Constantijn behind? That might be more prudent than trying to free him from his bonds, and taking the

risk that Gregor would wake up before they could get away. She hated to leave the man here, as frightened as he was and weary from all he had been through. But it might represent the best chance of rescuing him.

Basa bit the last strand, and her hands came free. She undid the binds around her ankles, and scrambled to stand up, her legs half-asleep and trembling. To his credit Constantijn said nothing as he watched her bounding to the door without him. Perhaps he understood implicitly what she had in mind.

But the door would not open—it was stuck on something. Frantic, she searched for the lock or whatever barrier was blocking her escape. Then Basa growled.

She looked up and saw Gregor standing in his box, smiling as though watching the beginning of a promising theater show.

“I see your friend has joined us again. I’m so glad. I have never tasted wolf meat, so this will be a rare opportunity.”

She backed away from the door and from Gregor, trying to keep Basa behind her. But the wolf would not cooperate, and he crept closer to the warlock, growling and snapping the air.

Gregor stopped smiling and blanched, as though his fear had gotten the better of him. “There is no need to be rude, unless you have bad manners and know no better.”

With enough force to knock down a young tree, Basa leaped into the air.

The warlock reached out one hand, as if to test the direction of a summer breeze. She heard a snap, and Basa hit the floor, unconscious.

She rushed to him and fell to her knees.

His body still felt warm. She searched his back leg for a pulse.

Gregor stepped out of the box and dusted off his tunic. “That is not necessary. He is still alive, only stunned. Now, help me put

him in this box. I have much to do, and I don't want to worry about an angry wolf leaping for my throat."

He grabbed the scruff of Basa's neck and hoisted his front half into the air. "Come on, girlie. I don't have all day."

She picked up the other end of her friend and followed Gregor to the box, where they placed the wolf inside. Basa's eyes were half-open. She reached over and brushed them all the way shut.

"I told you—there's no need. He's not dead. Not yet."

He closed the latch on the box and turned the pin so it would stay shut. Then he gave her a gentlemanly wave of his hand. "Shall we?"

She considered charging him, but after seeing what he had done to Basa, she knew she must escape some other way. For now, she would bide her time and cooperate.

He followed her back to her spot against the wall, where he tied her up once more with the remains of the chewed bindings.

"I beseech you not to try screaming," he told her. "With the spell I have used, you will only damage yourself." He sighed, as though this particular sad accident had happened before. "And if anyone is going to damage you, I want it to be me."

She kicked at him with her bound feet, which he easily dodged. Out of sheer frustration she growled, but it came out as only a rasping wheeze, and sent a cutting pain across her throat, just as Gregor had predicted.

He checked Constantijn's ropes and nodded with approval. "Now, lady and gentleman, I must run an errand, though I do not like to go out when it is so bright." He looked out one of the cabin's windows, frowning to himself. The morning sky was overcast, gray and gloomy as a headstone. "Still, it is not too bad out. Perhaps we shall get some rain."

## *the warlock and the wolf*

She watched Gregor shroud himself in a cape, with the hood pulled low over his face and a scarf wrapped about his chin. No one would see much more than his eyes.

“I’ll be back soon. Not to worry.”

The door opened and shut, and she and her fellow prisoner were alone.



After a couple of minutes, she figured that Gregor was far enough away that he couldn’t hear her speak to Basa.

*Are you awake? Please answer me.*

There was no response. Constantijn had closed his eyes, whether in sleep or despair she couldn’t know.

So Basa was still unconscious. Even when he did wake up, he would be stuck in that box, unable to help them.

And what was that threat about wolf meat from Gregor? Was he planning to eat his prisoners? Is that what he wanted to do with Hennie? Perhaps he was just trying to scare her. But to hear Hendrick tell it, warlocks were capable of anything.

They had to get off that boat.

Outside she could hear a bell ringing, and some deep voices far off.

She managed to stand up and hop over to the door. With her back to it, she tried the door knob, but it would not budge. In case there was someone walking nearby, she threw herself against the door, shaking the door frame. She listened, but heard no footsteps or shouts. She tried again, slamming the door three times in a row and bruising her shoulder. Then she lay down in front of the door and pounded it with the soles of her shoes.

No one came.

delfy hall

Constantijn watched her, his eyes sad and hopeless.

Then she heard it. The cry of a seagull. They were not alone, she realized—animals were all around them.

*Hey! Can you hear me out there?*

She listened for a voice, any voice.

*I'm inside this boat. I need help.*

*Who?*

The voice was high-pitched and reedy. She sat up, trying to ascertain its position.

*I'm inside the boat with the red trim. I'm a person.*

*Give me.*

*I will give you something if you help me. Please, come over here.*

Something tapped at the closest window.

*Yes. You found me. Go get help.*

*What!*

*Get help. Find a person, get their attention, and get them to come to this boat.*

It tapped again on the window. *No food? No fish? Want fish.*

*I will get you fish. I promise. But first you have to help me.*

*No fish.* There was a flapping of wings.

*No! Come back!*

Panic overwhelmed her, and she took several quick breaths, feeling like she couldn't get enough air. She closed her eyes, and wondered what Gregor was doing at that very moment. Perhaps he was with Hennie. If it were just her life, she thought, she could give up. But she couldn't, because of Hennie, and Basa, and even Constantijn, who had clearly already given up.

*Please, if you can hear me, I am trapped in a boat by Gregor, the kymaa. He is planning something terrible. Please help me escape before he comes back. He will surely kill me. I am in the boat with the red trim. Anybody, I need your help.*

*the warlock and the wolf*

She waited, her heart beating fast. Where were the creatures when she needed them? Were they only interested in food? Her plan for escape would work only if there was at least one good Samaritan like Basa lurking around the port.

*What should I do?*

The voice was clear and clean, and streamed like water through her mind.

She gasped. *Please, don't leave. I need your help. Where are you?*

*I am in the water. Near your boat.*

*Can you get somebody's attention? A human?*

*What is wrong? I will help you myself.*

*I'm trapped inside a boat. A man named Gregor has tied me up, and another man.*

*The kymaa?*

*Yes—you know him?*

*I do not want to say.*

*Please help me. When he comes back he may kill me.*

There was silence. She wasn't sure what kind of creature was on the other end. Surely not a fish—she didn't think fish could communicate such complex thoughts.

*Are you there?*

*I am still here. I will go look for somebody.*

Then there was nothing. Several minutes passed. She began to despair that whoever it was had thought better of it, and simply swum away. She could not blame them. If they knew anything of Gregor, they would know to be afraid.

In the meantime she managed to get to her feet, and she hopped around as best she could, looking among the few shelves and cabinets for the stolen book. But all she found was a stale loaf of bread and bits of rope and twine.

The door rattled. Then a man's voice boomed outside.

"Is somebody in there?"

"Yes!" She spoke as loudly as the spell on her throat would allow, and thumped the door with her shoulder. Constantijn, awake now, stomped on the floor.

"I hear you," the man said. "Get well away from the door." Something hard struck it, and the cabin shuddered. The man on the other side cursed, and then the door was hit again. This time the blade of an ax broke through the center of the door and wedged open a small hole. An eye appeared at the opening. "I see you, miss. Be patient—I must cut through the wood."

A barrage of chopping blows ensued as the man beat a large hole in the door. When it was big enough, he stepped through.

Brandishing the ax in one hand as though on guard for an attacker, Johan Maurits looked at her and then at Constantijn.

"Master Huygens!" Johan seemed astonished by the sight of the secretary, trussed like a pheasant about to be cooked.

"Thank God you are here, your excellency. I had given up hope." Constantijn sounded as if he were on the verge of tears.

Johan quickly came to her aid, helping her up and undoing her binds.

"You are the girl I saw at court, Master Moll's apprentice."

She nodded. "What made you come to the boat?"

"It was the damnedest thing. A porpoise got my attention by leaping out of the water. He kept chirping and carrying on until I followed him over here."

The poor secretary began sobbing as he was untied by their rescuer.

"There, there, man. You are out of danger now." Johan gave Constantijn an awkward pat on the shoulder, and looked at Mina. "What on earth are you and the secretary doing tied up on this dismal little boat?"

*the warlock and the wolf*

"This ship belongs to my parents' killer, Gregor Franssen. I found him here, and I was going to alert the authorities, but he caught me. He has been holding Master Huygens here for several days, and has been impersonating him at the Binnenhof."

Johan glanced around the tiny cabin. "And where is he now?"

"He said he had to go on an errand." She looked at the long box containing Basa, and realized it would be impossible to free him without Johan knowing, for the count was not likely to leave their side anytime soon.

"Then I shall have a man posted here, waiting to apprehend him when he comes back."

She shook her head. "That is not a good idea. Gregor would hurt or kill him."

"Several men, then."

"No, you don't understand. He is not a normal man."

"He is a tovenaar." Constantijn gave Johan a dour look.

Johan laughed. "Master Huygens, surely you do not believe in such things?"

"What I have seen in this room has changed me forever," Constantijn replied. "That man should be caught and burned at the stake. That is the only way our city, our entire country, will be safe from him."

She turned the latch on the box and looked at Johan. "We must free one more before we go." She lifted the lid. Basa lay inside, his eyes still closed. But she could see movement underneath his furred eyelids.

"My God, look at the size of that thing." Johan put a hand on the hilt of his sword. "It is a fine trophy."

*Are you awake?* she asked Basa.

*Yes.*

She shook her head at Johan. "He is not a trophy. He is still alive."

Johan flexed his jaw and squared his shoulders. "Stand back," he said, drawing his sword. "I will slay the creature."

She shielded the box with her body. "You will do no such thing. He is my friend, and he is coming with us."

Johan stared at her. "I don't understand—is he your pet?"

"In a sense. He will not hurt you if I say not to."

He looked at the secretary. "Is this true?"

Constantijn nodded. "She does seem to command him."

"Very well." Johan sheathed his sword. "I have seen stranger things. But I think I know how you got yourself into this situation, young lady." He gave her a stern look. "Anyone with a wolf for a pet is someone who courts disaster."

"I can attest to that," said the secretary. "But without her, I would have died here."

"It's not too late for that," she said. "Gregor could come back at any moment." She gently shook the scruff of the wolf's neck. *It's now or never, Basa.*

He lifted his tawny head and gave Johan a wary glance.

"Make room, please," she said to the count. "I don't want you to spook him. He's dangerous if he gets spooked."

## CHAPTER 30



**M**INA CONVINCED CONSTANTIJN to come with them to Hendrick's shop before going home to Hofwijck, so that the illustrator could talk to him in person about Gregor, and what the secretary had seen and heard while his prisoner. The three of them got into a wagon that Johan conscripted from the port, while Basa lay in the back, covered by a tarpaulin.

Once they arrived, Johan helped her and Constantijn down to the street. The count seemed quite in awe of her power over Basa. If before, at the Binnenhof, he had treated her with bemused politeness, he now acted deferential, as though they were equals, and he held her in high esteem. He lifted Basa, still concealed, down from the wagon, and into the shop.

A cry went up from behind the counter. Christiaan ran to his father, embracing him so long and fiercely that she thought the older Huygens might have the wind squeezed out of him. He

finally pulled away from his son, taking his face in both hands and giving him a long, sad look.

"I feared I would never see you again. It is only because of this young woman here that I am safe."

Christiaan took her hand and kissed the back of it. "My conspirator. I will do anything I can for you, Miss Walraven."

"Count Maurits was the one who rescued us," she said, her voice normal once again. Gregor's spell had lost its effect.

Johan put down the wriggling tarpaulin and gave Christiaan a gallant bow, and the men shook hands.

Mina was surprised at how glad she was to see Christiaan again. Though the youth was a bit awkward and not especially handsome, his burning curiosity and quick mind made her feel as though they were kindred spirits. And the fact that he had gotten her out of the Binnenhof unharmed certainly worked in his favor. She wondered if Adam would have carried out something so clever or daring.

Hendrick had tottered out from behind the counter, his eyebrows fairly leaping with excitement and impatience. When he saw Basa's black nose peek out from under the tarpaulin, he ushered them all, wolf included, into the private parlor, called for his son to mind the shop, and closed the door behind him.

Mina uncovered Basa and asked him to lie behind one of the armchairs, out of sight of Constantijn. Though the secretary knew Basa was in the room, Mina worried that the animal's green-eyed gaze might be too much for his frayed nerves.

Hendrick turned to her. "I can guess that you must have had contact with Gregor, if you were able to rescue our good secretary. What can you tell us of the warlock?"

She took a deep breath and looked at the waiting men. A crumpled Constantijn sat with Christiaan on a sofa, while Johan stood near them, tall and imposing, looking ready to fight escaped

*the warlock and the wolf*

criminals wherever they appeared. "He is more dangerous than I thought, and I'm not sure how we will stop him from whatever he has planned. He has a power in his hands that shocks the skin. We brought Master Huygens here first so he could tell you all that he heard from Gregor while he was his prisoner."

They all looked at Constantijn, who appeared ready to drop from exhaustion. But he rallied, sat up straight, and spoke with authority.

"The madman, as I think of him, wanted to find out all I knew of eclipses, which isn't much. My son could tell you more than I could. But Gregor insisted that one will occur tonight, and that it would bring about the culmination of all his ambitions. He kept saying, 'They will know my strength,' although who exactly he meant, and how, I never understood."

Hendrick nodded, his brow furrowed, but he kept silent.

Mina jumped in. "And, as Christiaan has probably told you, Prince William has given Gregor some of his blood—in exchange for what, we don't know."

"If he wants blood, it is for a potion or some other spell," said Hendrick. "We must assume it will involve the book, and opening the door of fire."

Johan, confused, looked at the others. "And what is the door of fire? What does it lead to?"

"It is not so much what is beyond, as what will come through it," said Hendrick. "It is supposed to be a portal to another world of demons. But I say supposed to, for no one knows. Truthfully, it has always been thought only a legend. But I think Gregor has found the real thing. If only we had had time to read the book. As it is, we must simply guess what his next move is."

"What do we know of the eclipse—do we know what time it will occur?"

All of them looked at Christiaan, who said, "It is a partial eclipse—a shadow will pass over part of the moon, starting about quarter past nine tonight, and lasting a couple of hours."

"And what is its significance to Gregor?" asked Johan.

"Eclipses grant power," Hendrick said. "They usually enable a spell, or enhance an ability."

"They also change the quality of the moonlight," Christiaan said. "Could it be that Gregor needs the eclipse to show him where the door of fire is?"

Hendrick shook his head. "I believe the book must have told him the location already."

"But at least now, because of the eclipse, we know when he will be carrying out his plan," she said.

Constantijn cleared his throat. "I don't know what I can say to help—but I should warn you that this man is a maniac. And he must derive his powers from some unearthly place. I saw him change his form. He looked exactly like me." Stricken, he looked up at Hendrick. "What kind of a man can do that? I don't think he is a man. He is a devil."

Hendrick nodded. "You may be right, sir. That is why we should not think of recapturing him—it would be much too dangerous. He must be killed."

The group passed a solemn moment in silence.

"Did you ever see a bird in his possession?" Hendrick asked Constantijn. "A common sparrow, probably held in a cage."

The secretary shook his head. "No, I can't say that I did. But I did not always have my eyes open."

"And what shall be our plan now?" Johan asked. "What about sending the city's protectors to apprehend him at the boat? Miss Walraven tells me this is not a good idea. Is she correct?"

Hendrick shrugged. "I don't believe it will accomplish anything but injuries and deaths. You are, of course, free to alert

*the warlock and the wolf*

the men of St. Sebastian. But I don't think it will be difficult for Gregor to elude them. They are not known for their discretion."

"I think we must do it ourselves," she said. "My friend will help—"

"The wolf?" Constantijn interjected, his gaze flicking to the armchair behind which Basa lay.

All eyes were upon her. "Yes, Basa."

Christiaan appeared alarmed. "What—?" he sputtered. "That creature behind the chair is a wolf?"

The secretary looked at Hendrick, avoiding Mina's gaze. "Does this not make her a witch?"

Hendrick shook his head. "No, she is not a witch—just invested with a special ability. It will work to our advantage, I'm sure."

She broke the men's amazed silence. "One of us should follow Gregor from the boat to see where he goes," she said. "I will volunteer."

Johan frowned. "He will recognize you. And I could not let you step into harm's way like that. I will send a man, perhaps a couple of men, to track him."

She sighed, wondering if the count would try to keep her from doing anything useful, like Adam and Sophia.

Hendrick spied her frustration. "Let everyone do as much as they are willing. Make no mistake—we could all be maimed or killed in this endeavor. No one is forcing us. Each person is accountable only for the risks he—or she—takes."

"I'm not sure whether I will help," said Christiaan. He glanced at his father's worried face. "I will have to discuss it with my family."

"Of course, dear boy," said Hendrick. "All of us understand that."

Johan appeared a bit chastised. "I did not mean to command you, Miss Walraven. Only to say that I am concerned for your safety. You are, of course, free to do as you wish."

She smiled. "Thank you. But you are right—Gregor would recognize me easily. Instead I will go seek someone out. I think it is time to enlist his help."

"Another animal friend?" Johan asked.

"No—a human one. Although when he hears what I have been about, he may retract his friendship."

## CHAPTER 31



**M**INA PUSHED OPEN the heavy door of Cloister Church. What she was about to do was a gamble, but she and the others needed all the help they could get. As the door swung slowly shut, she felt something slip past her.

“Basa, you shouldn’t come in here—it will only scare people.”

*I will stay out of sight. But I don’t trust that man.*

“And how do you know who I’m looking for?”

*I have a nose, girl.*

“Just don’t scare him off. We need his help.”

The inside of the church was quiet, and the pews empty. The last of the day’s light streamed through the thousands of tiny panes of glass that made up the church’s three tall windows. She could see no one near the spartan altar. The soles of her shoes tapped across the wood floor as she headed for the study, near the back of the church.

She was about to knock on the door when she heard a voice behind her.

"Mina, what are you doing here? You shouldn't be out after dark by yourself."

Adam wore his ministerial robe, and his arms were full of stacks of bibles.

"I wanted to talk to you. I need your help with something."

Looking pleased to be sought out by her, he put down the bibles in a pew and beckoned her to sit down.

She took a deep breath. "We have found Gregor. He is going to do something terrible tonight, during the eclipse, probably involving Hennie. Will you help us stop him?"

He frowned. "I thought we agreed that you would let others handle this."

"Yes, but I changed my mind. I can't just turn my back on Hennie, or leave it to others to stop Gregor. And I have something to offer that is special. No one else can do what I do. At least, that is what my friend has said."

His face reddened. "You are special, and you need to be protected. Who is this person telling you that you must put yourself in harm's way?"

She opened her mouth to answer, but he didn't give her a chance. "Whoever he is, he is no friend of yours. He will not tell you the hard news: you will surely be hurt or worse."

"Do not blame him—he has warned me of the risks. It is my decision. And I'm asking for your help. This is your life's work, after all. Stopping witches and warlocks."

He got up without warning and hurried to the front of the church. He took something out of his pocket.

She followed him, and soon saw that he was locking the front door.

"What are you doing? You can't keep me in here."

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He pocketed the key and took her arm. "Come sit down in the study. I will make you a cup of tea, and we can talk. I'm sure that you'll come to agree with me."

She took her arm away. "No, I won't. You must let me out right now."

"I cannot knowingly let you throw yourself into danger." He stepped close to her and took her shoulders. The warmth of him would have been inviting, if she were not about to lose her temper. "I love you, Mina."

She closed her eyes and took a breath, trying to stave off her confusion. Then she put her hands on his chest and pushed him away. "That may be, but you can't keep me a prisoner here in the church. Even I know that's not what the church was made for. Now let me out."

"I will let you out in the morning. There is a bed in the study where you can sleep." He turned, clearly expecting her to follow him. Then he froze.

Basa had emerged from his hiding place, the fur rippling on his back. His muzzle lifted in a snarl. Adam took a step back and Basa took a step forward, his growl becoming louder.

"Mina, call off this creature."

She swallowed, not wanting to threaten Adam, but her choices were limited. "Not until you give me the key to the door."

"I would give my life to keep you safe. That is how much I love you."

"If you give your life now, then I will still get the key. So you will have given your life for nothing. Think carefully about what you do next."

Adam looked at her, his face anguished.

"Very well." He lifted both hands, showing his palms to Basa. Then he put one of them into his pocket, and withdrew a key. He held it out to her.

*delfy hall*

She took it. "Leave him be, Basa."

The wolf stopped growling and licked his lips. His fur relaxed and he sidestepped away from Adam, who watched him, fascinated. "He understands your words. I still can't quite believe it."

She opened the door of the church a few inches and looked out. She could see no one passing by.

"Do not follow us, unless you want to help. You won't try to stop me again, will you?"

"I won't promise anything, Mina. I serve God. He will tell me what to do."



Night had fallen while she and Basa were in the church, and a clear, full moon shone on the empty street. The residents of the few nearby houses had all gone inside for dinner and warm fires. Even so, Basa hugged the edges of the street, staying in the shadows.

*You see? He cannot be trusted.*

"He means well. He's just frightened. And you didn't help matters, with your growling and snarling."

*I did help. You are free.*

"But you scared him. And I was about to talk him into letting me go."

*There is no time for such talk.*

She sighed. "You are right about that, actually. We have to hurry." She glanced at the full moon. If her sense of time was correct, the eclipse would start in about three hours. "Let's go back to Hen—"

She heard a shout to her left, and then running footsteps, growing louder. Between some nearby trees, she caught a glimpse of stadtholder guards jostling down the street, their armor clanking.

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"It looks like William is still trying to find me," she said to Basa. "We must separate." Without a word he broke off north, his tail vanishing between two houses. She went east, keeping just outside the tree-lined Voorhout promenade. She crossed it at an angle and wove her way through the fields behind a set of grand homes, giving the Binnenhof and the center of town a wide berth. She crossed Hout Street and went farther east, to Schouwburg Street, where the homes became more modest and sparsely built.

Along the street ran a canal, with a few small dinghies tied up along the banks. She decided to follow the canal's choppy path south and west through the city, until it arrived at Wagen Street, which she could then take straight as a shot north to Hendrick's shop, to see if there was news of Gregor. She was skeptical that Johan's men would turn up anything, but at least she and Hendrick would be in communication. Afterwards there might be time to get to the cottage and make contact with Basa.

She felt a presence behind her a split second before the bag went over her head.

Someone caught her wrists in an icy grip.

"You have been up to a spot of trouble, I see," a familiar voice said. It was the same witch who had lured her into Leonara's cottage and then disappeared before her very eyes.

"Let go!" Mina yelled. She thrashed against her captor, but the woman was too strong.

"Let's get you out of sight, dearie. What I have for you should not be done in public."

Mina gave a shriek and kicked at the woman, lashing out where she thought her legs might be. Her foot glanced off a bony limb, making the witch lose her balance. She grabbed Mina to prevent herself from falling.

"Now just behave yourself. Or I will do something you don't like at all."

Just as at Leonora's house, Mina felt herself growing sleepy, and her limbs felt heavy, but not so heavy that she couldn't walk.

"Keep marching, girl."

The witch's sleep spell slowed her struggle into a dance, so that she moved like a festive sleepwalker. Through her mental fog, she decided that if she could get the witch down on the ground, then she could hold her there—after that she had no idea what to do. But perhaps the witch would disappear, just as she had when she lay on the floor of the house.

Mina's muddled mind persisted in this strange logic. She heaved herself against the witch, whose thick torso was hard as a tree trunk. The witch grunted, bracing against the blow. Summoning all of her strength, Mina lunged and twisted so that the two of them fell.

They hit not the ground but the canal, the cold, stinking water shocking her out of the sleep spell. The black cloth clung to her face like a cobweb, and when she broke the surface again she tore it off her head and gasped for breath. Then she swam for the side.

*Help!*

She looked behind her and saw a creature's whiskered face and tiny paws flailing on the surface of the canal. It swam a few feet to a floating plank of wood, where it climbed out of the water, revealing the wet furred body and long naked tail of a rat.

Mina treaded water, keeping one eye out for the witch. "Where did you come from?"

*To the water. We must get to the water.*

She decided that falling into the canal had addled the rat's brain. "We are in the water."

Like a spirit rising from a grave, a bony hand shot up nearby and grabbed the collar of her cape. A second later Mina was

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underwater, dragged down by the witch. She tried to rise but the woman was wrapped around her like an octopus. As the seconds passed, her lungs ached for air. In a short time she would drown.

She grabbed the witch's long stringy hair, curled her knees to her chest as tight as she could, and then jammed her feet with all her strength into the woman's face. There was a muffled smack and the burbling of bubbles as the soles of her shoes made contact with the witch's head.

Mina came to the surface, still clutching a handful of the witch's hair. She swam for the ladder at the bank, and when her fingers wrapped around it she resolved that nothing should tear her from it.

She climbed onto the bank, water pouring from her clothes. The surface of the canal was black and smooth, and after several minutes passed without any movement, she concluded that the witch had sunk to the bottom. Whether she was dead Mina did not know, but she would not wait to find out.

The rat still floated on the plank, like a sailor out to sea.

*What have you done with her?*

"She is gone. It was her or me."

*I must get to the water. That is where the door will open.*

"What water? What are you talking about?"

*Nothing. It's not for you. You should be dead.*

"Listen, if you tell me where the water is and the door, I will get you out of there."

The rat surveyed the large expanse he was floating in, as though measuring his chances of survival on his own. *I should not tell you.*

"Fine, have it your way." She gathered up her skirt and twisted it, sending a deluge of water onto the street.

*You will get me out of here?*

*delfy hall*

“Yes, but you must promise not to bite me. I know that your mistress wanted to kill me.”

*She was cruel to me too. Not enough food.*

“Well?”

*We are going to the lake. The lake in the middle of things.*

“You mean the Hofvijver? In front of the Binnenhof?”

*I will know when we see it.*

It took several throws of a rope before she was able to lasso the plank and bring it to the side of the canal. She offered her hand to the rat, but he declined and ran up the rope instead. Then he promptly bit her on the ankle and bolted for the alley.

“Hey! You promised—” She broke off when she saw an old man walking by. He gave her a pitying look, as though she were brainsick. She huffed and pressed the hem of her skirt onto the wound, holding it there while blood seeped into the fabric. The puncture was not deep, and the blood flow soon stopped. She did one last wring of her sopping dress, and began running for Hendrick’s.

## CHAPTER 32



**M**INA HAD JUST entered Hoog Street, south of the shop, when she ran into Hendrick.

“Mina! I was coming to look for you. Your beast came to the shop without you, and I knew something was wrong.”

“Where is he now?”

“I do not know. He left when he saw you were not there. What has happened?” He looked at her drenched clothing, his nose wrinkling from the smell. “You will soon freeze in those clothes.”

“There is no time to change. Gregor is at the Hofvijver. The lake itself is the door of fire.”

“The Hofvijver? That explains why he wants the sparrow. He will have to send away the moss maiden who guards the oak tree and the lake.”

“How will the sparrow do that?”

"With the soul of a witch inside, she can do a great many things." He looked up at the sky. The moon was shining like a silver plate. "We still have time. Come quickly to the shop. We will find something warm and dry."

He ushered her into the shop and up the stairs to the family's quarters. At the end of the hallway children laughed and dishes clattered.

"Father?" The voice sounded like Hendrick's son.

"I have forgotten something," Hendrick called back to him. "Don't get up." He tapped her shoulder and pointed to a closed door. "In here," he whispered.

They hurried into the room, which was unlit and crowded with cupboards, trunks, and wardrobes. "The children are not allowed in this room. It houses my collection."

He opened a wardrobe, full of dresses. "Any of these will suffice." From a trunk he took a cape. "Then put this on."

"Whose are—"

But he had already left the room.

She peeled off her wet clothes and slipped on a dark dress, thinking that it would be good to blend into the night as much as possible. The woolen fabric felt rough on her damp skin without a shift underneath, but it was better than her soaked clothes. Then she draped the cape around her shoulders and fastened the buttons in the front. It felt light and flexible, like a spring cloak, but she supposed it was the best Hendrick could do on such short notice.

Hendrick nodded as she emerged from the room, and looked with approval at her attire. "Much better. We must be off. I have left word for Maurits to come to the lake." He took up a staff that was propped against a wall inside the room.

They hurried down the stairs, leaving Hendrick's laughing family, who were oblivious to the dangers they raced to.



The area around the Hofvijver was quiet, permeated only by the sound of an owl hooting. A few vagrants sat in the shadows, where the light of the moon and the torches of the Binnenhof did not reach. Near the water was a bent-over woman, holding onto a smaller figure. As they drew closer, the moonlight struck the figure's hair, glinting red, and Mina saw that it was Hennie, in the clutches of a haggard grinning crone. Then the girl spotted Mina, and the anguish on her little face turned to hope.

But Hendrick pulled Mina away, steering her into a copse of oak trees. "We must wait a little longer for reinforcements. Maurits and his men should be here soon, and Hennie will not come to harm in the meantime."

Keeping her eye on Hennie and the witch, Mina silently decided she would rush to the girl's aid if it looked as though she were about to be hurt, no matter what Hendrick said.

A crowd of women came out of the shadows of a building near the lake and joined the witch who held Hennie. Their faces were familiar to her—the witches from the fire.

The torchlight on the Binnenhof flickered, and the owl gave a loud screech.

At the far end of the lake, a dark figure appeared, carrying something.

The figure walked down the long bank, coming closer and closer to their hiding spot among the oaks, and the corner where the witches congregated.

Mina recognized the figure's silver hair and quick, light step. It was Gregor.

He set the sparrow's cage down on the edge of the lake's bank. Leaning over, he opened the little door.

The sparrow cheeped when he grabbed her and brought her out of the cage.

"She knows what she's supposed to do, don't you, little one?"

Mina whispered to Hendrick, "Where is Maurits, with his men? We are out of time."

Hendrick's eyes flicked from the sparrow to the witches, and all around the lake, and back to Gregor. "We will wait for him to let her go. We owe that much to Leonara."

She watched, cringing, as Gregor flung the bird into the air. She flapped her wings and hovered over the water, erupting into a lilting song. Gregor laughed and clapped his hands like a little boy at a fair. "That's it, Leonara! Sing to her!"

The sparrow warbled as she flew, and finally lighted on the oak tree on the island.

Hendrick gripped his staff with both hands, and rose from their hiding place. The old man drew back his shoulders and said, "Do not follow me." Then he launched himself at Gregor.

The warlock noticed the old man charging him as though noticing a fly coming through the window. He stepped to the side, narrowly missing the point of the staff, and swiped Hendrick across the scalp with his fingers.

Hendrick dropped like a stone, his staff thumping on the ground beside him. Mina stifled a gasp.

Gregor looked back at the island. The lowest branches on the oak tree waved, though there was no wind. Then a foot dangled into sight, tiny and shoeless, and then another, followed by the rest of a miniature woman not even as tall as Hennie, wearing a flowing green gown—the moss maiden.

Her hair was speckled with autumn leaves, and her skin was pale as a root. The sparrow dipped near her, still singing, and the maiden gazed at her in adoration. She walked to the edge of the island as the sparrow hovered over the water, beckoning her further.

"Don't!" yelled Mina. "It's a trap!"

*the warlock and the wolf*

“She can’t hear you,” said Gregor, without looking at Mina. He seemed as riveted by the scene as she was.

The maiden took a step toward the water. She seemed so transfixed by the bird that Mina had no doubt she would drown without even knowing it.

Then what happened Mina could scarcely believe. As the moss maiden walked, her feet skimmed the surface of the water, and she walked on top of the lake as though it were a carpet. She followed the bird to the bank, and stepped from the lake onto the ground.

“Now lead her away, Leonara,” said Gregor.

The moss maiden trailed after the bird, who flew past the civic guard house and into the tree-lined street beyond, north of the lake.

From a large bag Gregor drew out a pouch, as well as a book.

Thinking that Gregor seemed so unconcerned with her presence that creeping closer would not pose a danger, Mina emerged from her hiding place among the trees so she could get a better look.

He took out a vial out of the pouch. It had to be William’s blood—for a potion, Hendrick had said. And there was a giant cauldron right in front of him—the lake.

He smiled to himself and grasped the stopper of the vial.

She couldn’t let him carry out his blood spell. It was now or never. She rushed him, intending to knock him off his feet, and bracing herself for impact.

He raised his hand and, in that split second, she felt a fool for acting so rashly. His fingers hit the front of her throat and she fell, gasping for air as a shock ran through her.

“Miss Walraven, you keep popping up, like a bad smell. You do your parents credit. A pity you will never see them again.”

She strained to move, but could only blink her eyes. Above her the moon had acquired a shadow on its edge. The eclipse had begun.

A few feet away, Gregor, reading from the book, chanted in a strange language, and the witches babbled and laughed.

Soon the pain in her throat eased, and she was able to move her fingers. Gregor must have delivered only a glancing blow—otherwise she would be fully unconscious, like Hendrick. In a few minutes she might be able to stand up.

“Bring the child!”

“No,” she tried to shout, but it came out as a moan. With herculean effort she flopped onto her side, facing the lake, and saw the witches push Hennie close to the water. Her face had gone slack. Mina wondered if they had drugged her. The witch cackled, pinching her cheeks, and crept away, leaving the child alone with the warlock.

Gregor dabbed Hennie’s forehead with blood from the vial, and poured the rest of the blood into the lake. A murmur of approval went up from the witches.

Flames roared to life on the surface of the lake, lighting up the facade of the Binnenhof and the admiring faces of the witches. Gregor turned away, shading his eyes from the light. The heat from the flames was oppressive. “The door of fire,” Mina murmured, finally understanding.

Gregor threw the empty vial into the fire and resumed chanting from the book.

Someone yelled on the far side of the lake. Hennie shrieked as well, rousing the women.

“Beware! The wolf!”

With a cat’s eye view from her position on the ground, she spied Basa running toward them. Then Gregor flicked his fingers, and the strix, screaming, bore down upon the wolf. She struck his

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back with her talons. He whirled and snapped, but grabbed only a few feathers. She dove again, striking him so hard that he fell to the ground. Shaking his head to regain his balance, he got up and faced Gregor, growling all the while.

*Basa! Stop! She will kill you!*

Basa snarled, and then fell silent, looking at the burning lake. All of his fur stood on end.

A few men came out of the civic guard house, astonished by the fire, but nobody paid any attention to them.

Gregor and the gaggle of women watched the leaping flames. The fire parted, and the head of a giant creature appeared.

Its eyes glittered like polished onyx, and a forked tongue darted from its mouth. Behind its head spread a pair of giant fins.

Hennie stood frozen, her gaze fixed on the gargantuan serpent, like a sailor facing a maelstrom.

“Hennie! Run!” Mina shouted.

“She cannot move—she has been chosen,” Gregor replied. He stepped closer to the snake, who paused on the brink of the fire, as though deciding whether to enter this new world. “Jormungand, your first meal.” He swept his arm toward Hennie and bowed.

The snake’s massive head came forward and its nostrils dilated. Then it descended the lake’s barrier, slithering onto the cobblestones. Mina watched in dismay as its scaly body followed like a pulsing rope, at least as high as a man, and headed west, through the grassy plaza, toward Hoog Street. A cry went up from the civic guards, whose number had increased.

“Wait, master. How can I serve you?” Gregor hurried after the serpent.

A witch pulled Hennie away, and they vanished with the other women back into the shadows.

*delfy hall*

Dozens of civic guards thundered past, brandishing their firearms. "To the snake!" they yelled.

"Basa!" she cried, her voice recovered. "Go after Hennie!"

*I won't leave you, girl. You are hurt.*

"But I will get my strength back soon. Is there anyone here who can help?"

The wolf cast his watchful gaze around the lake's edge. *There is no one left but us and the old man. And he is not long for this world.*

## CHAPTER 33



**M**INA FELT HER strength returning. She planted her hands on the ground, and pushed herself up into a sitting position. The Hofvijver was deserted, save for her, Basa, and Hendrick, who lay on the ground like a discarded sack. But his eyes were open, his eyelids fluttering. She was able to crawl over to him.

“Hendrick! Can you hear me?”

He put a hand to his head. “Please, dear, not so loud. I feel as though I have drunk a barrel of beer.”

“We failed, and the door was opened. A great snake has come out.”

“And where is Gregor?”

She looked in the direction the warlock had run. “He has run after it, into Hoog Street.” Then she saw it. Lying near Hendrick, cast aside in the commotion, was the book. It lay open, its pages showing a fine writing.

She pulled it to her and began reading. "It talks in here of the Midgaardslang. Hendrick, is that what the snake is? The mythical creature who can encircle the world?"

"I have no doubt."

She continued reading. "It says that the creature will bring about the destruction of the world, if unleashed by the one who has the strength to command it."

"If anyone has the strength to do that, it would be Gregor. We must put that creature back through the door."

She read as fast as she could, looking for some instruction about how to return the animal to the flames. But she could find nothing. "It says here only that the door of fire can stay open as long as the eclipse lasts."

"Then we must drive it through the door before the eclipse ends." He gazed at the moon. It was nearly a quarter in shadow, and the shadow was gaining. Then he brought out his pocket watch. "Christiaan said that the eclipse will end about a quarter past eleven tonight. You must go after Gregor and the snake. You and Basa."

Upon hearing his name, the wolf's ears flicked toward Hendrick.

"And how will we do that?" asked Mina. "You have seen how Gregor can stun someone just by touching them."

"The cloak I have given you has special properties. Gregor's powers cannot reach you through the cloak. You must use this to your advantage. But the parts of you not covered by the cloak are not protected."

She fastened every button she could find on the cloak. If she put up the hood, she would be protected from the knees up, excluding her face and hands.

"The witches have taken Hennie, Hendrick. We must get her back."

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"Yes—I will see to it." With great effort the illustrator sat up, breathing audibly.

"Hendrick, you can hardly move. Let me use the stone to heal you." She took out the white healing stone from her pocket.

He held up his hand. "No, put that away. It will only weaken you. And you will need all your strength to pursue Gregor and the Midgaardslang."

"This plan seems foolish, even to me. How on earth can Basa and I stop the warlock and this giant serpent?"

"I'm afraid we have no other choice. There is no one else to call on. Your witch hunter has not shown up, has he?"

"He does not approve of my involvement."

"Then you are on your own. I wish you well, for all our sakes."

She offered her hand to Hendrick, and pulled him to his feet. He staggered a few steps and then righted himself, leaning on his staff. They could hear screams coming from the west part of town. Hendrick picked up the book and tucked it under his arm. "You must get the snake back here before the shadow leaves the moon."



She ran as fast as she could to Hoog Street, Basa loping along beside her. Once there, she nearly tripped over broken cobblestones, which had been smashed as though by a giant boulder falling from the sky. The smashed places repeated every few feet, and it finally dawned on her that the giant serpent was crushing the street with the lash of its tail. Barrels of wine and beer lay overturned, gushing their contents. Windows on both sides of the street had been smashed.

She followed the sound of the terror the creature was leaving in its wake. She finally caught up to the tail on Oud Mol Street. The end of the creature was crusted and black like the point

of a giant fire poker, which increased in size until its top edge was above Mina's head and covered in a black and gold curling pattern of scales.

The tail lashed without warning, and she saw that she would have to stay a distance behind it, or get some distance ahead of the lash, and do this only by risking the blow of the tail as she ran past. Basa attempted this first, and got squeezed between the tail and the front of a tavern. He escaped by leaping onto a closed-up fruit cart and then down again, racing to stay ahead of the tail.

As she ran, she watched the tail whip back and forth. Finally she felt she understood the rhythm of it. As it lashed to the right she jiggled to the left and put all her strength into her legs. But she had not foreseen what the tail might do besides lash.

Up ahead cracked the shot of a rifle and without warning the tail lifted, like a boat coming out of the dock, arching over the street. Then it descended on her position.

At the last moment she careened to the right, and felt the rush of the tail coming down on her left, crashing onto the ground and sending cobblestones flying into the air. One of them caught her on the shoulder, but she kept running, surging ahead of the tail.

By now the creature had wound its way into a major thoroughfare. The few people who were in the street fell back against the sides of buildings in shock and horror. Disbelieving faces appeared at the open windows of houses and shops. She could see no one keeping pace with the animal as she and Basa were doing, at least not at the tail end.

There were more shots ahead. She thought she could hear Gregor shouting as well. The great body of the snake coiled and slithered, knocking down or flattening everything in its path. The streets were so short compared to the body of the snake that

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she could not get a glimpse of its head—just the massive rope of its body, ahead of and behind her.

As they turned a corner, she realized they were nearing the entrance of Cloister Church. The three tall windows came into view, and with a shock she saw that the giant double doors were open. The serpent was slithering through them.

When she reached the entrance, she flattened herself against the church wall as the train of scales moved past. The long blackened tail disappeared into the doorway. On the other side of the doorway stood Gregor, and when he saw her he glowered and reached for her. She darted into the church.

Gregor grabbed her cloak, one hand reaching into the church and the rest of him staying outside. He snarled, frustrated, and she realized that he could not come past the threshold. She ripped her cloak out of his grasp.

“Come back here, girlie! That is my creature. He belongs to me.”

Basa pelted through the doorway, past the warlock, and she followed him to the nave. Guards stood at the rear of the nave, their rifles trained on the scene unfolding in the nave’s center, where the transept crossed it.

A washerwoman, a rag still in her hand, gaped in frozen horror as the serpent moved up the center aisle, bearing down on her. A volley of gunfire pelted the snake. As the bullets hit, the gold and black scales merely flinched, as though trying to dislodge a fly.

“Move!” Mina shouted. But the woman didn’t budge. The great serpent’s mouth opened like a drawbridge, its fangs glistening with saliva. Then its jaws closed over the entire body of the woman, and she was gone, rag and all, as though she had never existed.

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The snake slid to the chancel and up to the altar, knocking aside the table, candles, and the chalice as well as the brass cross that sat in the center. When it reached the back wall of the church, it put the underside of its chin against it, as though looking upwards for a sign from the heavenly father. Then it curved back again, facing the pews, like a minister facing the congregation.

Shouts came from the entrance of the church. A large group of men had come in, and Mina thought she recognized Lars and Hans among them.

“Reverend!” someone shouted.

Adam appeared in the chancel, carrying a large bottle. He poured from the bottle into a cup, and threw the water in the direction of the serpent, but none of it reached the creature. He fell to his knees and murmured some prayer in Latin.

“Adam!” she shouted. All the men swiveled to look at her. “You are too close!”

The snake rested its head on one of its coils, its black eyes shining and alert.

Adam ignored her and kept praying.

“There!” Hans had seen her, and was pointing her out to the others. “That is the witch. She is commanding it.”

One of the civic guards shouted back, “Witches can’t come into the church.”

“Then how is the snake in here?” asked Lars.

“I am not commanding it,” she said. “It is Gregor’s creature. Did you not see him outside the church door?”

“There was no one there, witch. You are all alone in your evil.”

The men looked again at the snake, whose eyes had narrowed.

“What is it doing?”

“Perhaps it is going to sleep.”

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Adam still murmured in Latin over his empty bottle.

"What if it builds its nest in here?" asked one of the witch hunters.

"We have to flush it out," said Hans.

"And how do you propose to do that?" asked one of the civic guards.

Hans looked at her. "We will use the witch." He brought his gun up to his shoulder and aimed at her. "Move toward the snake, witch. Or I will shoot you."

"Stop!" shouted Adam. "She is no heks."

She darted behind one of the columns in the transept and drew up her hood.

A shot ricocheted off the column and into the wall beyond.

She heard a scuffle and wondered if Adam was trying to stop Hans.

"A fine witch hunter you are, Reverend," Lars said.

"Come around on her other side," Hans said to one of his compatriots.

*Stay out of sight, Basa. They will shoot you.*

Basa hunkered under one of the pews, growling. *I will distract them while you run for the door.*

*No, we will find another way. Stay where you are.*

A low hissing sound came from the altar.

"It's working," shouted a man. "The beast is getting agitated."

She heard footsteps approaching the column. If she was shot, she thought to herself, perhaps whoever found her could heal her with the stone. She clutched it inside her pocket.

A man wearing a chain mail tunic appeared in front of her, his rifle aimed at her chest. "Move toward the snake, witch."

She shook her head. "I am not a witch. I am just a person, like you."

*delfy hall*

"I said move!"

The door was ten, maybe fifteen strides away. She launched herself from the column.

*Run, Basa!*

A shot cracked the air and she was thrown to the ground.

"Mina!"

She heard the wooden pews shuddering and saw the snake come hurtling down the aisle toward the doors.

One of the men cried out, "Run! It's on the move."

She stood up, testing her legs. She was sure that she had been shot. But there was no mark on her, save for a black smudge on the cloak. The man who had fired his gun stared at her in disbelief, and then he ran out of the church, following the other men pursuing the snake.

Adam reached her and grasped her shoulders, checking her up and down for an injury. "It is incredible—you are unharmed."

She nodded. "Thanks to Hendrick. We have to follow the snake. It must go back through the door of fire." She gently took his hands away from her shoulders. "Please don't try to stop me."

He cast a wary glance at Basa, who stared back. "I won't—but what can I do to help?"

"Go to the Hofvijver and help Hendrick find Hennie. The witches are holding her near the lake."

## CHAPTER 34



**M**INA AND BASA caught up with the snake just in time to see its tail disappear around a corner. Her pace faltered because of the pain in her hand, and Basa pulled ahead of her. But she kept running, determined not to give up.

Soon Basa turned the corner as well, leaving her running by herself.

The wolf's voice came to her over the distance. *It has gone into the water.*

*I am coming. Don't let them see you.*

She turned the corner and heard horses whinnying and stamping inside a nearby stable. They and every other creature in the neighborhood had probably smelled the serpent as he had slithered past.

When she reached the canal bordering the city, the men were gathered at the edge of it and standing on the bridge. They were

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looking at the spot where she had seen the two-headed turtle on New Year's Day, throwing rocks and occasionally firing a bullet into the water. From their cursing, it seemed as though they had lost the creature.

She hung back, not wanting to be seen. After the bullet had bounced off her in the church, they would be more certain than ever that she was a witch.

Gregor was nowhere in sight.

*Basa, we have to go.*

The wolf looked at her. *Should we search for the kymaa? He is the one commanding the serpent.*

*I don't think so. I don't think anyone is commanding it.*

She retreated the way she had come, with Basa at her heels.

*I know where we have to go, but I will need a horse. We are running out of time.*

She found the stable she had passed, reeking of straw and manure. The horses snorted and kicked their stall doors, still unsettled by the commotion and now frightened by the scent of the wolf.

"Who wants out and is willing to carry me?" She paused. "I need someone fast."

*I will go.* A bay horse with a black mane shook his head. *Release me.*

She opened the door to his stall. A saddle hung on the wall behind him, but there was no time to put it on. She used a stool to climb on his back. *There will be a wolf running with us.* She grasped his mane and hugged his body tight with her legs. *Go.*

The horse pelted out of the stable.



While the men would run along the canal, she would waste no time getting to the snake's destination. She urged the horse as

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fast as he could go safely over the cobblestones, not wanting him to falter, but not wanting to lose time either.

*Where are we going?*

"To the sandy woods, a pond surrounded by chestnut trees. Do you know it?"

*I know the sandy woods.*

"I must warn you that we are going into danger. But you may leave as soon as we arrive."

*I may leave whenever I want.*

They approached the border canal at a quiet crossing well north of the men hunting the snake. Once over the bridge, the horse picked up speed on the dirt road leading away from town. She looked behind for Basa.

Within a few seconds, he had caught up to them, and the horse's eyes widened when he saw the running wolf.

*I do not like this creature beside us.*

"He won't hurt you. We are going after the same thing." The fields on either side of the road were dark and empty. She caught a glimpse of the moon overhead. The shadow had moved past its zenith and was now shrinking. There was not much time left.

"Faster!"

She felt the horse react, and she held on for all she was worth. Basa dropped behind, outpaced.

They reached the chestnut trees, and the horse was forced to slow to a trot as he passed between them.

When they were almost to the pond, he reared up, and she nearly fell off.

*I am not going in there.* He started to back away, taking her with him.

"Just wait. Let me get down."

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He held still for a few seconds as she slid to the ground. Then he bolted, racing back to town.

Basa had caught up to her. The fur on the back of his neck rippled like tall grass as he sniffed the air.

*It is in there. What will you do, girl?*

“I will get it to come out.”



She sought anxiously among the trees for something that would aid her.

*What are you doing? This is no time to be hunting plants.*

*I am hunting a certain plant. It usually grows here.* Then she saw it—a pathetic specimen, but it would have to do. She gathered the entire mugwort plant into her fists, and yanked it out of the cold ground. *Now I am ready.*

She strode through the chestnuts to the edge of the pool. There, half out of the water, lay the hulking Midgaardslang. Its scales glistened in the moonlight, and the surface of its body vibrated, as though it were humming a tune. She swallowed hard, fighting the instinct to run.

“I have found you. It won’t be long until the others show up,” she said to the snake.

The vibrating of the scales halted, and the sinuous body began to move. She felt a shudder run through her, but she forced herself to stand her ground. A coil of the snake came closer, bringing the head with it. The black shining eyes found her, and she felt a strange tingling and then a numbness on her skin. This must be what the others had felt when they faced the snake, she thought.

She looked away from the eyes, to a point just above its head, and the tingling on her skin subsided. But her mind buzzed, invaded by an alien chaos that grew louder and bigger, pressing

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against her skull from within. It felt as though it might burst out through her forehead.

"You cannot stay here," she said.

The pain inside her head increased, but she gave no sign that she felt it. She did not want to show the snake any weakness.

*How dare you address me. Do you wish to die?* The black tongue dashed out, causing her to jump back and brandish the mugwort.

The snake's nostrils opened, taking in the bitter scent of the plant. His head pulled back a few feet and stopped, his eyes still on her.

*Why does such a small human challenge me? Are you kin to Donar? Tell me where he is, so that I may destroy him.*

With a start, she realized that the serpent did not know how much time had passed since he had gone into the underworld.

"I am here to help you. This world has changed since you left. Men are much stronger. They have invented many things that could hurt you or even kill you."

The voice was like a needle in her mind. *I don't believe you—where is Donar, and Odin? I have outlived them all. This world will be mine now.*

"The gods are gone. But there are new ones in their place."

The snake's head tilted, and he gazed at Basa, who stood in the shadows.

*I once had a brother who looked like you. But the gods chained him and made him desperate and weak.*

She realized the snake was talking about his wolf brother. "You mean Fenrir."

For the first time, the creature's eyes closed. When they opened again, their brittle anger had softened.

"This is his son." She pointed to Basa.

*No, girl.* Basa backed further into the shadows. *That is a bad thing to tell it.*

*delfy hall*

The snake's gaze seemed to brighten. *Are you sure? Why is he so small?*

"Men found a way to shrink him so that he no longer posed a threat. He must spend all his time looking for food now—it is hard to catch because he is so weak."

*Can he understand me?*

"No, his brain is weak, too. I give him food sometimes because I feel sorry for him."

*How can this be? His father once drove people before him, screaming in terror. He consumed their children, and tore the strongest men apart limb by limb.*

She shrugged. "Much has happened since you left. Humans found a way to see the hidden parts of life—what cannot be seen with the naked eye. We have mastered the stars. We have sailed around the world."

The snake emitted a low hiss, like wind through a crack in a window. *Can you touch your own tail with your mouth as you do so?*

"That feat belongs only to you." She bowed to the snake as if in awe of his power. "You could conquer this world for a while. But I must warn you that it would not last."

*And how do you know this? Do you tell the future?*

"I know this because I see the fate of Fenrir's son. Watch how I make him dance."

She raised her hand as though commanding an orchestra. *Stand up on your hind legs.*

The wolf blinked. *This is part of your plan?*

*Yes—do as I say.*

With a grunt he raised his front half off the ground and hopped a few inches on his back feet, slowly turning until he had completed a full circle.

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"See? He will do whatever I tell him. He is a plaything, a toy. That is what we have done to the great wolf's son. Do you wish to suffer the same fate?"

The snake's head inched forward and his nostrils widened. *And why would you help me?*

"Because I love the world, and everything in it. I do not want you to destroy it in anger. But neither do I want your glorious power to be whittled into a toy, a thing for amusement." She looked up at the moon. There was only a sliver of shadow left on its edge. "You still have time. You must go back through the door of fire—the place you came from."

*And what if I shall eat you right here? And go on about my business?*

"Listen—do you hear the shouting? Those are the men coming for you. They come to turn you into a pet."

*You could be lying, to save yourself. No humans are trustworthy.*

"But you can trust me—I swear it. This world is cold and lonely, and there are none like you left. You will never be able to sleep. You will always have to fight. I am offering you a way out."

A cry went up nearby. "Load your rifles! Aim for the eyes!"

*What are they saying?*

"That they will kill you, and me for trying to help you."

The snake's head moved closer to her.

She backed away, holding the mugwort in front of her.

*I will not harm you. Get on my back and hold onto my fins.*

The snake positioned his head near a tree with low branches, which she used to climb up near the top of him. Her proximity to the serpent sent a wave of nausea rolling through her. Fighting her fear, she grasped the closest fin. It was tough and scaly, and frilled along the edges. She felt it tug against her hand.

"Am I hurting you?"

*That is not possible.*

She threw one leg over the snake and sat on the wide plane of gold and black scales. The body underneath her was dry, and colder than her own skin.

The shouting of the men grew louder.

"We have to hurry." She grabbed the other fin and gripped the snake with her feet. "Do you know the way?"

Without answering, the snake rocketed out of the pond. Her feet lost their grip and flew back, her body flapping like a flag. It took all her strength to hang onto the fins as they sped through the fields. Somewhere behind them, Basa followed.

They crossed a bridge over the city's bordering canal. As the snake's body trailed behind his head, she could hear the bridge snapping and crashing into the water under the creature's massive weight.

The few people outside on the street screamed and ran or leaped out of the way when they saw the serpent coming. The twists and turns of the city slowed down the serpent's pace, and Mina was able to brace her feet and lift her head to see where they were going.

The serpent was taking a direct route back to the Hofvijver. She glanced up at the moon, still marred by a small shadow. Then she saw something that took her breath away.

Ahead of them, in the middle of Casuarie Street, stood a small boy in a cloak and cap. He stared at them, his mouth open in wonder.

"Out of the way!" she shouted.

The boy remained, awestruck.

She pulled on the fins. "Don't hit him!"

*I must.*

"Stop!"

But the serpent ploughed ahead, bearing down on the boy.

She closed her eyes, unable to watch.

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The snake rose under her and went back down with a thump.

She looked behind them, and saw a curve rippling all the way through the snake's body like a wave, creating an archway over the boy as it went. The child was spared.

They reached the lake, still roaring with flames. A few civic guards had formed a bucket line, trying to quench the fire. The splashes of water they delivered were like tears falling into a smithy's forge. When the guards saw the snake, they dropped their buckets and ran for their rifles.

She heard Basa cry, *Jump, girl!*

Letting go of the fins, she leaped off the scaly back and hit the ground hard. The snake's head dove over the embankment and into the fire. The long body followed, its muscles rippling. Then the blackened tail zipped into the flames. The snake was gone.

Someone seized her by the collar. "If you love this snake so much, you will go with it." Gregor gripped her arm through the cloak, which protected her from his lethal touch but not from his strength. He dragged her to the edge of the lake.

She dug in her heels and pushed back, her free hand at his throat. Flames licked at her cloak. He grabbed her arm, trying to lessen the pressure on his neck, and jammed his other hand against her sternum, pushing her closer to the fire. All the while, he kept his head down, as though he could not look at her, or at the fire he was about to throw her into.

Eyes wild, she searched the banks for Basa and spotted him nearby. He had one paw lifted and was ready to strike, but not at Gregor. He was facing the lynx from the witches' sabbat.

Pushing against Gregor's shoulder, she managed to turn him and herself sideways to the fire. But she felt herself losing ground. The warlock was slowly overpowering her.

He lifted his head to smile at her, his eyes glinting red in the light of the fire and jiggling back and forth—just like the eyes of the dying fox she had pulled out of the trap. In that split second, she remembered the poor creature's fear of the lantern light as it lay bleeding on the cottage table. There might be one way left to save herself.

She jammed one hand in her pocket and brought out the healing stone.

"Your witch's trinket will not help you now." Gregor bared his teeth like an animal preparing to deliver the killing bite.

Focusing all her energy on the small stone, she pressed it to his cheek. The two of them teetered on the fire's edge.

A blinding light flashed from the stone.

Gregor screamed and covered his eyes, releasing her. She watched him fall toward the fire, his feet jerking and kicking the air. The flames seemed to eat him, bubbling away at his skin, and then he was gone. The fire fizzled and shrank as the shadow left the moon. The lake was full of water once more.

She stumbled away from the bank, disoriented by the light of the healing stone. Gregor's screams still rang in her ears. "Basa," she whispered.

*Over here, girl.*

His face was bloodied, and his ribcage heaving, but he was victorious. At his feet lay the lynx, motionless, his throat torn and bloody. She felt a pang of sorrow, knowing she would never see such an extraordinary animal alive again. But her friend had survived.

A screech pierced the air above them. The strix circled the lake, now her master's grave, and then angled north, flying toward the woods.

A crowd had formed nearby, made up of civic guards and some of the witch hunters who had followed the serpent back to

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town. She saw Hans and Lars among them. The man who had shot her in the church sneered as he broke off from the crowd and strode toward her.

"You have made our task much easier, witch." He held his rifle up to his shoulder. Behind her Basa growled. She had no strength left to fight.

A sword flashed between her and the witch hunter.

"Step back, man. She is no witch. She has saved this city, including you, from the depths of hell itself. You will not touch a hair on her head." Johan, looking larger than life in his general's uniform, stood his ground until the witch hunter backed away.

The count addressed the crowd with the force and authority of a cavalry commander. "Let all who value their lives let her pass unharmed." He pointed to Basa. "And the wolf as well. No one is to hunt this animal."

He gestured for one of his men to assist, a burly smooth-cheeked fellow, who rushed to her aid, scooping her off the ground as though she weighed no more than a bed pillow.

"Make way," Johan shouted. He led the man carrying her, Basa, and the rest of his armed men toward the crowd, which had them surrounded. He came to a halt just inches from the line of dubious and fearful faces.

The witch hunters and civic guards stared back at him, their eyes flicking with suspicion to Mina and the wolf. Some of them still clutched their rifles, or kept their hands on the hilts of knives or swords. A small group of stadtholder's guards had joined the crowd as well, glaring at Mina.

"She is wanted for trespassing by Prince William," called out one of the stadtholder's guards.

Johan shook his head. "She is under my protection. I will speak with the prince. Now make way."

*delfy hall*

The stadtholder's guards kept glaring at her. A fight could break out in an instant, and Johan's side was vastly outnumbered.

*Basa, get ready to run.*

*Not without you, girl.*

She held her breath, prepared for the worst.

One of the stadtholder's guards bowed his head and stepped back, and the rest followed suit. The crowd had parted, and they were free to go.

## CHAPTER 35



**T**HE NURSES STARED as Mina carried the box into the hospital. Word of her actions the night before had spread quickly through the city.

Ignoring the nurses' whispers, she strode past the row of white beds until she found the patient she sought.

A small face under a mop of red hair greeted her with a big smile. Sophia leaped up from her chair beside the bed and hugged Mina, keeping her in a strong embrace even after Mina tried to let go.

"Words fail me, dear. I simply can't believe what you have done. I am very proud. But you must promise me never to put yourself in harm's way like that ever again."

"I cannot promise you that, Fifi. But I will try to avoid warlocks from now on. Is Pieter here?" She looked around the vast long room. Nurses and attendants with armfuls of dishes,

blankets, and cups of medicine hurried up and down the aisle, while others ministered to patients.

"He has gone home to work. But he wants very much to talk with you. He feels so badly about how he left things with you."

Mina went to the other side of the bed, leaned down, and kissed the beaming Hennie's forehead. "Hennie, will you forgive me? It is my fault that you were captured. I should never have gone to that field."

Hennie beamed at her. "It was a great adventure!" But then her face turned somber. "I have to admit, it was very frightening at times. I even cried. But in the end everything turned out fine, right, Mother?"

Sophia nodded. "But it was not a great adventure for your father and me. We were in agony, darling."

Hennie looked down, appearing a bit ashamed of herself. Then she gave Mina a sideways glance. "Master Hondius and Adam came to rescue me, Mina. You should have seen them. They had guns. It was so thrilling."

She took Hennie's hand. "I wish that I had been there with them. I should have been the one to save you."

"Nonsense," said Sophia. "You had other things to do, like save us from that wicked man and his giant serpent." She shuddered. "Did you know—the whole city is alive with the rumor that you can command animals!"

"I did hear that."

Hennie's eyes widened. "Is it true?"

Mina did not mind this rumor—it seemed preferable to the truth. For most people, actually conversing with creatures would smack too strongly of witchcraft, or something equally frightening. It was more innocuous to be thought a gifted type of animal trainer.

## *the warlock and the wolf*

"The animals and I do have a special understanding." She winked at Hennie. "Every now and then I can convince them to do something."

She leaned over and opened the box that she had brought in. After looking up and down the long room to make sure nobody was watching, she reached inside and brought out her secret delivery.

Flop wriggled and squirmed in Mina's grasp, but when she placed him on the bed next to Hennie, he lay down and purred.

*Finally, the one who always pets.*

Hennie gave a cry of delight and bent forward to plant a kiss between his ears. Flop cringed a little, squeezing his eyes shut, but he stayed put by her side. Hennie began stroking the top of his head.

*Only she gives enough attention. Why have you kept her from me?*

*It was not on purpose, Maximus. Someone took her away.*

*Who?* Flop cast his turquoise glare around the bed and saw Sophia. *This fussy woman here? Get rid of her then.*

*No, not her. But can I rely on you to protect Hennie?*

*I will pounce on whoever tries to take her from me.*

"I've missed him so much," said Hennie, cradling him in her arms. "I want to have more adventures, but I don't want to leave Flop."

"You won't have to," replied Mina. "There will be plenty of adventures at home."



"Open those curtains, Miss Walraven, if I may impose upon you."

Mina rose from her chair and parted the heavy silk drapes. The sunshine streamed into the ornate room and onto the

stadtholder's bed, where Frederick Henry lay, his skin ashen but with a hint of pink spreading through his cheeks.

"That's better. My doctors insist on keeping this room as dark as a tomb, and I fear that's what it will become."

"Did not Master Hondius visit you and administer a . . . treatment?" She was not sure how the stadtholder would react to talk of magic.

"If you mean whether he shone a bright light into my face, then yes. But it has not restored me to full health. I fear nothing can do that ever again."

She felt a wave of compassion for the old man, who was obviously suffering. "Is there some way I can help?"

He waved his hand. "You have done more than humanly possible for our new republic. I am ashamed that we failed you so greatly, letting Gregor escape in the first place. But we have tried to make amends—your cousin and his conspirators are in custody, awaiting trial for attempted murder."

For a moment, her heart twinged with sadness for Joris, though she knew he had brought his fate upon himself.

Frederick Henry, seeming to sense her grief, reached for her hand and held it lightly. "I have something to offer you." He closed his eyes and took a few moments to regain his breath. "I would like to give you the position of stadtholder's naturalist, as the successor to Master Moll, after he retires."

She blinked. "Are you sure? Does he approve?"

"It is entirely within my power to make you his successor. All I need to know is, do you accept?"

"With all my heart." She thought her smile would overtake her face, and she struggled to contain it. It did not feel right to be overly joyful at the bedside of an ill head of state.

But her joy seemed to do him good. He sat up a little taller against the pillow, and took a sip of the tea that waited on the

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bedside table. "Excellent. Although I have to warn you, my son may not honor your appointment, if it comes due during his stadtholdership."

She was taken aback. "Your highness, I do not want to be rude, but surely you will not allow your son to take your place, given what he—I mean, that it was discovered—"

"That he made a deal with that villain for my life?" He sighed and rested his teacup on his stomach. "Only a very few know this. Can you keep it in confidence?"

She nodded. "Of course, your highness."

"You should know that I harbor no illusions about my son. I see that he is desperate to take my place, and angry that I have lived so long and that I now make peace with our enemies. In a strange way, I can understand his actions against me. I was young once, and eager to make my mark. Call it an old man's weakness, but I cannot take his inheritance away from him. He is my only son, and I would do anything for my family. I am sure you understand that."

She thought about what a stadtholder like William, eager for war and power, would mean for Holland. But to her own surprise, she held her tongue.

Frederick Henry's attention drifted away from her to the window, as though he were gazing into the future. After a long moment of silence, he came back from his thoughts, and gave her a kind smile. "I can see that you don't approve. And because you have saved us from destruction, I will give the decision more consideration on your account. Now, will you ring the bell for the valet? Your visit has strengthened me, and I wish to dress and begin the day."



### *delfy hall*

Mina adjusted her cap, making sure it was straight, before knocking on the ornate door of the Sugar House. A servant answered, dressed in black velvet. Mina gave her name, and the woman ushered her into the grand foyer.

The floors and staircase were of dark polished wood, and the walls boasted brightly colored murals, depicting tropical birds and black bare-chested men and women. She followed the servant down the hallway and through an open door into a vast study.

In one corner stood a globe, and in another a cabinet of curiosities, filled with shells, stuffed birds, eggs, and carved statuettes. At the center of the room lay an intricate oriental rug and a sprawling mahogany desk, behind which sat Johan Maurits. He smiled when he saw her.

“And how is the new savior of the city?”

“If I ever meet such a person, I will find out.”

He laughed. “Like it or not, your name has become famous. Wilhelmina Walraven is now synonymous with defeating magic and commanding the will of monsters.”

She frowned, remembering her conversation with the Midgaardslang. “I don’t believe the serpent was a monster—just an animal.”

“An animal who lives in the underworld. But no matter. I have something to show you, pertaining to our very first conversation, about my friend in Brazil.”

He beckoned her to a table near a window, and selected one of several large drawings from a stack. It depicted a scene at a harbor: A dark-skinned man, dressed in a servant’s livery, held a writing pad in one hand and a quill in the other. He watched the face of another man, a white Dutch nobleman, as though he were listening and transcribing his words. She felt a shock of recognition course through her.

*the warlock and the wolf*

"Does this man not look like you?" asked Johan.

"He does look like my father. But my father's family came from Brazil, so the man could be a distant relative."

"Perhaps. But I understand from Master Hondius that your parents may be alive after all this time."

She nodded. "That is what Gregor claimed. But I would not trust the word of a warlock. I believe he was only trying to manipulate me."

Johan frowned in contemplation as he looked from the drawing to her face and back again. "For an orphan, finding another family member, no matter how removed, would be a joyous thing. You agree?"

"Of course. But Brazil is a long way away. I suppose I could send a letter."

"I believe you can do much more than that. I have a proposal for you." He returned the drawing to the stack.

Her heart quickened. For a moment she worried that he was going to ask her something untoward.

"Have you heard of Willem Piso and his work on a natural history of Brazil?"

"Yes—he has been in contact with my mentor."

"When I was governor of the Brazilian colony, I funded his research there. He is nearly ready to publish, but since his return to Holland he has learned of a few creatures that his partner, Marcgrave, failed to observe. Piso insists that he must include them, and I have promised to help. But he is a doctor, not a naturalist, and Marcgrave died a few years ago in Africa. So we need to find a scientist to go into the field and make observations. I thought immediately of you—with your training, and your family origin."

She was taken aback. Going to the New World had long been a dream of hers, but she had never expected an opportunity.

"I will have to consult with my mentor first. I have already accepted the stadtholder's offer to succeed Master Moll without his approval."

Johan seemed a bit puzzled. "I understand that he has rejected you. Surely you need not ask him for anything, given your circumstances with him."

She considered her next words carefully. "That is true—we have not been on speaking terms lately. But I feel I should consult with him nevertheless. He has taught me all that I know. I would not even have received such an offer if it weren't for his training."

"And if he refuses and tells you not to go?"

She sighed. "I put his daughter in great jeopardy by acting irrationally, and without consulting others. So I think I would respect his judgment if that's what he says. I have spent most of my life not listening to others. I long to change that."

"With respect, Miss Walraven, it was through your own ideas and actions that you defeated Gregor Franssen and saved Holland from the Midgaardslang. So I would think carefully about letting others dictate what you do."

She looked down, feeling self-conscious, and a bit overwhelmed. No one had ever given her such blatant encouragement. "Thank you, sir. When do I need to give you an answer?"

"As soon as you can. The ship sails a week from today. I must have a naturalist on it, be it you or somebody else."



Mina sat in the parlor, on the sofa she had spent many evenings on while chatting with Fifi and laughing at Hennie's antics. But today she was in the company only of Dash, who had

established himself on her lap within seconds of sitting down. He said nothing, content to receive her ministrations while she waited for a conversation that might go badly.

Finally Pieter appeared at the threshold, his suit as neat as a pin and his hair brushed perfectly, as was his habit. With a formality strange to see in a man entering his own parlor, he sat down in the armchair opposite her, clasping his hands in front of him.

She sat up straight and cleared her throat. "Sir, I was in the wrong—"

"No, it was I who was wrong. I should never have cast you aside. I have realized something over these last few days." He paused, and their eyes met. "I may help you train your mind, but it is not *my* mind. I cannot control what you think, no matter how much I may disagree with what I see as your errors. If you had not made your own decisions, things might have turned out very badly, for Hennie and for the rest of us. You did what you thought was right. And that is all that I could ever ask of you, or anyone."

She felt tears come to her eyes. "But what happened to Hennie—I feel I can never forgive myself for it."

"You have my forgiveness, and Sophia's. I'm afraid I cannot give you your own forgiveness. That is a battle you must win by yourself. Of course, your religious admirer could probably help you with that." He gave her a mischievous wink.

She blushed. "I am fond of Adam, but we have great differences. I am certainly not about to become a pious churchgoer."

"That reminds me—do you know that you are being hailed as the hand of God, who saved the city from evil?"

Her face turned even redder. "That is just idle chitchat, by people who love excitement and grandeur."

“Do not fully discount it. That idle chitchat got the attention of Frederick Henry. I heard that you were received by him yesterday. Did he tell you the good news?”

She nodded. “I hope that you approve of his decision.”

“Indeed I do. Although I hope it will not be carried out for several more years.” He grinned.

“Do not worry. I am not your rival, only your successor, which reminds me—there’s something I need to ask you.”

## CHAPTER 36



THE TRUNKS HAD been delivered that afternoon to the stone cottage, and Mina was nearly done packing them. Or really packing just one, for she did not have enough clothing to fill them all, which was just as well. She would need space for specimens, notes, and other things she would bring back from her trip.

A fire was crackling in the fireplace, and Basa lay on a rug in front of it, watching her every movement.

*And who will protect you in the strange place?*

"I will travel with a party, and there will be people to carry our luggage and assist us."

*But will they protect you?*

"I don't know, Basa. I may have to protect myself."

*I will go with you.*

She laughed.

## *delfy hall*

*What is so amusing?* He fixed her with his green eyes, looking as serious as a wolf could look.

She tried to straighten her face. "That is a very kind offer, but I can't bring a wolf onto a ship. What would you eat? How would I explain you to the other people?"

*Say that I am your pet. And I can eat whatever you eat.*

"You will be eating bread and vegetables then." She thought she saw a glimmer of disgust cross his face. "You would not be happy."

*My happiness is immaterial. Your safety is at stake.*

"And what happened to finding a mate and starting a pack?"

*There is time. Perhaps I can find one in Brazil, as you call it. There could be wolves there.*

"There could be, but they might not like you. In any case you cannot go. And I will be back within a few months. You will not have to wait long."

*And who says I will be waiting for you? I may go someplace else.*

She stopped folding clothes and looked at him. "Don't be hurt. I must go on this journey. It is an important chance for me to make my name, and look for my relatives."

He sighed. *Very well. You are right to find your family. Still I will worry.*

"You must work on forgetting me for the next few months. Then when I finally come back, it will be as if I had never left." She smiled at him.

He laid his head down between his paws and closed his eyes, as though her absurd ideas made him tired.

*Foolish girl. A wolf's mind does not work that way.*



*the warlock and the wolf*

The late afternoon sun warmed the small clearing in a copse of ash trees, where the little grave lay. The air was filled with the trilling of birds and the rustling of small animals as creatures prepared for nightfall.

Mina laid the bunch of yellow winter jasmine that she had gathered on a walk onto the grave, which was marked by a pile of stones. Though a cross would have been a fitting symbol to mark the martyred witch's death, she doubted that Leonora had ever been a believer.

As she was about to turn away and head back to the stone cottage, a sparrow alighted on the stones. The bird gave several quick chirps and blinked her curious eyes. Her beak was straight and true.

The sparrow looked like the soul sparrow, but despite being a practiced observer, Mina was not certain. "Is it you? Are you the one?"

The pert bird dipped her head in a bow. *I am the one.*

"Are you still carrying her soul?"

The sparrow twittered, as though the idea were amusing to her. *I am not. I carried her to her birthplace.*

"But why did you come back here?"

The bird cocked her head, blinking. *This is my home.*

She bowed once more and fixed Mina in her stare, as though making her point. Then, without warning, she launched into the air.

"Wait!"

She ran after the bird, who flew to an elm tree on the edge of the clearing.

*What do you want?* The tiny creature sounded impatient.

"I need to know something. Do you—have you ever swum in the water?"

*Perhaps.*

“Could I see you do that?” It would be a coup to put a drawing of a swimming sparrow into the compendium as her final contribution to it. Even Pieter would have to be amazed.

*I am not a thing.*

Mina was taken aback. “I don’t understand.”

The bird drew herself up as tall as her tiny body would go and puffed out her chest. *The witch told me. I am not a thing. I am a person.*

She stared at Mina, defiant.

“But—”

After a flutter of wings, the sparrow was gone.



The sun was high overhead when she and the Molls finally reached the port at Vlaardingen, where seagoing vessels docked. After spending six hours in the wagon, making their way south from The Hague, she was already weary of traveling. But her spirits and energy soared when she saw the Dutch West India Company’s *fluyt*, resplendent in full sails and flying the red, white, and blue Dutch flag.

She followed the porter as he wheeled her trunks on board. They went into a hallway and down a row of doors to her cabin, which he opened with the key from his pocket.

The tiny room held an impeccably made bed, a dresser and closet built into the wall, and a mirror over a shelf bounded by brass railings, which she assumed would prevent items from flying around the room in stormy weather.

There was one small round window, and through it she could see the other passengers arriving at the port and walking up the gangway. She tipped the porter, who touched the brim of his

hat and left her alone in the room, with her trunks set up on a luggage rack.

She sat down on the bed and wondered what to do with herself. Her luggage had taken so much care to pack that it seemed a shame to unpack it all so soon. But before she could decide, the Moll family blew into the cabin, which when filled with four people was cramped at best.

"How thrilling, Mina—your own room, on such a grand ship. Isn't it marvelous, dear?" Sophia said, turning to her husband.

Pieter grunted in reply, occupied with inspecting all of the built-in features of the cabin.

Hennie went to the window and looked out. "Is this the only view you will have for weeks and weeks?"

Mina laughed. "I will be allowed to leave my room, I hope, and go up on deck. And perhaps there will be some other passengers I can socialize with."

Sophia sat down on the bed next to her. "We saw Count Maurits in the port. You didn't tell me he would be sailing with you."

Mina shook her head. "He probably just wants to see me off, and make sure one last time that I know my mission."

"I saw some military men boarding. Handsome too. Perhaps you will make new friends." Sophia winked.

"Don't encourage distractions from her work," Pieter said.

"Speaking of work, dear, is now the right time for your gift to Mina?"

Pieter nodded and reached inside his cape.

"What is it, Papa?" Hennie bounced up and down.

"You will see." He drew out a scroll, undid the ribbon, and unrolled the paper, presenting it to Mina.

"It's the frontispiece of the compendium!" She smiled, admiring the storks and lions that framed the title. "It's beautiful."

"Examine it more closely, please."

She looked again. There was her name, below her mentor's. "With the assistance of Wilhelmina Walraven—oh, thank you!"

He nodded his approval. "You earned it." He rolled the paper back up and handed it to her. "This is a copy for you to take on your journey, to prove your credentials, should you need to. Though I doubt the jaguars and monkeys will care about your training."

At the mention of jungle animals, Hennie threw herself onto the bed as though she were begging for her life. "Please take me with you!"

"Oh, Hennie, I can't. It will be too dangerous for a little girl."

"But all I have ever wanted is to go on a real seafaring adventure."

"I will write to you and tell you all about it, I promise."

Sophia peeled the despondent Hennie off the bed. "Yes, you must write us, Mina, because I insist on knowing whether you are safe and happy." She glanced at Mina's scarred hand, finally free of its bandage. "Are you quite well, dear?"

"Of course, Fifi. I could not go on this trip otherwise."

Someone stopped in the doorway. Adam, carrying a bag on his shoulder, gave them a shy smile.

"Mr. Everts! Are you going to Brazil?" Sophia asked gaily, pleased with her joke.

"Yes, in fact. I have been assigned to accompany Mina on her journey, and to minister to the local people of Mauritsstaad when we arrive."

Sophia's mouth fell open. She swiveled to look at Mina, who stared at Adam as though he had spoken in gibberish.

"Is this true?" Sophia asked.

Mina stuttered. "I don't know. No one told me of it."

Adam pulled back his shoulders. "I assure you, it is true."

*the warlock and the wolf*

The jocular face of Johan appeared next to him in the doorway. "Ah, I see you have found each other. Wonderful! You know, it wasn't easy finding a religious man willing to go on this voyage on such short notice. I must have asked five ministers before I found one who said yes." He clapped a hand on Adam's shoulder. "Have you introduced yourself?"

"We know each other already." She hoped nobody would notice her face turning pink.

"Wonderful! There is that taken care of. Well, Mina, you have your instructions. The governor's man will meet you at the dock. Any questions?"

All eyes were on her.

"No, not at all."

"Well, if you think of something, write me at once." Johan nodded good-bye to everyone.

Sophia stood up to leave as well. Mina's good-bye to the Moll family was tearful on both sides. Even Pieter got something in his eye, and had to leave the cabin in a hurry.

That left Adam and her looking at each other as he lingered in the doorway.

"I am sorry, Mina. I should have asked you first. He needed an answer right away, and I didn't want to lose my chance—"

She smiled. "I am not upset. It is a great opportunity for you. To see a new part of the world and spread your message there."

His eyes traced the contours of her face. Then he cleared his throat and hoisted his bag back onto his shoulder. "I hope to see you on deck."

She nodded and closed the door after him. She didn't know quite how she felt about Adam traveling with her—her mind was a jumble of excitement and fear about the trip itself and the things she had to accomplish. To add a man as handsome and exasperating as Adam to the journey would make it more

interesting, certainly. But his presence could complicate it in ways she was unprepared for.

Somewhere on the ship a bell clanged, and she went to the window to watch their departure. Deckhands ran up the gangway and pulled it on board after them. Onshore, men uncoiled ropes from the pier and threw them up to the ship. They were finally leaving Holland, the only place she had ever known.

One of the men on shore pointed to something near the back of the fluyt. She looked in that direction and saw a porpoise leaping out of the water and diving back in, his skin gleaming in the winter sun like polished silver. After his tail vanished, the water was still. Then he popped out again for another leap, making her laugh. Though she was tempted to speak to him, it didn't seem right to interrupt his fun.

Nevertheless, she could have sworn his merry eye caught hers. Then his mouth opened in a smile, as if to say, *is there anything better than being free?*



It wasn't until they were a few miles out of the harbor, when she opened one of her trunks to unpack her clothes, that she found the letter from Hendrick, attached to a small pouch. Somehow he had placed them there unseen, or perhaps someone had done it for him. It read:

*Dearest Mina,*

*By now you have begun your ocean voyage to the New World. I am sorry I did not come to see you off. My son has turned overly protective, and he seems to think I should not exert myself beyond the lifting of the tea kettle.*

## *the warlock and the wolf*

*He also declares you to be a conspiratorial and corrupting influence, though I have tried to make him see that I was cheerfully and willingly corrupted long before you were born. He will not be convinced, and for the time being, I will let him think himself in charge of his doddering old father.*

*I have enclosed the healing stone. I doubt there is any power left in it, after using it on Frederick Henry, as you insisted I do. I still think it would have been better spent on your hand. But perhaps we can find another means to help your injury when you return.*

*Now for a confession. I have held something back from you, for fear of falsely raising your hopes, which is a cruel thing to do to any person. But in light of what Count Maurits tells me—that while in Brazil you will search out a man with a likeness to your father—it is best that the truth comes out.*

*The bodies of your parents were never found. Only a large amount of blood, and your mother's bloodied cape, which the authorities took as proof of their murders. This was not common knowledge. If your aunt knew these facts, I assume she hid them from you for your own peace of mind. Please forgive her, and me, for keeping this secret.*

*Now that you know, I wonder, will you search for the truth of what befell them?*

*I would not think less of you if you did not. Life is full of dangers, and there is no shame in staying safe on the*

*delfy hall*

*well-worn road. The dark woods will always be there,  
waiting, if and when you become ready.*

*Your corrupted conspirator,*

*Hendrick*

She placed the letter back into its envelope, which she propped on the shelf against the cabin's mirror, along with the stone. There was no need to reread the letter or ponder Hendrick's cautions.

She was ready.

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