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The golden-haired adopters shook themselves free of snow and turned to face the line-up. Milou tried to ignore her deep disappointment and squeezed her cat puppet more tightly, staring down at her boots.

These weren't her parents.

'Welkom!' Gassbeek chirped, smiling like a wide-eyed marionette. 'Kindjes, this is Meneer and Mevrouw Fortuyn. Everybody say

Goedemorgen!'

'Goedemorgen,' chimed twenty-seven small voices.

Milou's tongue felt as if it were coated in cobwebs. She tugged on the collar of her baby-blanket dress, the tightness of which was now becoming suffocating. A hand reached into hers and squeezed, and Milou gave Lotta a tight smile.

'Come into the warm!' Gassbeek was cooing as she fussed round the adopters and ushered them across the marble floor. 'The *kindjes* are ever so excited to meet you.'

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‘We are ever so excited to meet *them*,’ Meneer Fortuyn said.

He was a tall man and his wife was even taller. They stood in the middle of the foyer and ran their eyes up and down the line as if they were perusing a shop-window display.

‘How delightful,’ Meneer Fortuyn said.

‘Delightful . . . indeed!’ Gassbeek grimaced, her joviality slipping for an instant. ‘As I’m sure you’ll remember from the advertisement, there is no doubt *whatsoever* that I provide the finest orphans in all of Amsterdam. Obedient, hard-working and well-mannered. And the older ones can all read and write.’

‘Oh, this is even better than buying a new handbag!’ Mevrouw Fortuyn said brightly. ‘Look, Bart, there are so many of them to choose from!’

Gassbeek’s smile took a steep climb up her powdered cheeks. Milou dug her fingers deeper into the soft cotton of her cat puppet.

‘Then by all means start your inspection,’ Gassbeek cooed. ‘We’ll begin with the smallest.’

The first orphan, a small girl with blonde ringlets and an entire constellation of freckles on her face, took a hasty step forward. The matron lowered her reading spectacles on to the tip of her nose and squinted at her clipboard.

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‘This is Janneke,’ Gassbeek squawked. ‘Aged three-ish. She can count to ten and is beginning to wield a sewing needle without drawing blood. Janneke comes with a wicker basket and a yellow cotton blanket.’

The Fortuyns beamed down at the toddler. ‘*Hallo, liefje.*’

Milou felt a tug on her sleeve. She looked at Lotta, who was studying the adopters with a thoughtful expression.

‘I bet you a holeless sock they choose Janneke,’ Lotta whispered. ‘Seven times out of eight, adopters pick the youngest one. A child with freckles increases the odds. Mathematically speaking, we’ve lost this one already.’

‘It’s probably for the best,’ Milou whispered back, eyeing the Fortuyns as they moved steadily down the line towards her. ‘They look like grave-robbers to me.’

Lotta raised her eyebrows questioningly and Milou leaned in a bit closer to her. ‘Black boots, dark cloaks. All the better for sneaking around at night, stealing corpses to sell for medical research. Perhaps they’ll choose Sem, on account of those excellent shovel-wielding arms of his.’

Sem gave them a pointed look. Milou turned her gaze back to her boots.

Her Book of Theories suddenly felt like a dead weight in her sleeve. Perhaps her parents would arrive after the worst

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of winter had passed. It made sense. Travelling was difficult at this time of year, she reminded herself. She just had to be more patient.

‘And what is your name, *liefje*?’ Meneer Fortuyn said, now only a few children away.

Milou’s stomach fluttered once more as she noticed Fenna fiddle with the hem of her apron.

‘This is Fenna,’ Gassbeek cawed, reading from her clipboard. ‘Aged twelve-ish. Fully literate with adequate handwriting. Her cooking skills are second to none. Fenna comes with a picnic hamper, but, alas, *no* blanket.’

‘What lovely red hair,’ said Mevrouw Fortuyn, gripping Fenna’s chin. ‘It reminds me of my favourite shade of lipstick. Tell me, Fenna, do you sing?’

The foyer fell suddenly silent, except for the clunking gears of the grandfather clock. Mevrouw Fortuyn cleared her throat. Fenna’s shoulders scrunched together; she squeezed her eyes closed.

‘Oh, it’s no good asking her questions,’ Gassbeek sighed. ‘She’s a mute, that one. *However* –’ the matron’s voice rose – ‘she would make a gloriously *quiet* daughter.’

‘A mute?’ Meneer Fortuyn said thoughtfully. ‘I suppose it might be good to have a silent child –’

‘Oh, absolutely not, Bart!’ his wife cried. ‘What would our friends think? I couldn’t bear the gossip. Next!’

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Fenna shuffled backwards as Egg stepped eagerly forward. He wiped a charcoal-stained hand on his trouser leg, then held it out. The Fortuyns stared at his filthy hand and made no move to take it.

‘This is Egbert,’ the matron said. ‘Aged twelve-ish, of unknown East-Asian heritage. He can name every capital city in the world and shows plentiful promise at both calligraphy *and* cartography. Egbert comes with a coal bucket and –’ she scowled down at Egg – ‘that shawl.’

‘An artist?’ Meneer Fortuyn asked, and grimaced as he pointed to the stick of charcoal that was wedged behind Egg’s left ear.

‘Egbert is, well, yes, he is *artistically inclined*,’ Gassbeek said as if she were admitting that Egg liked to eat dead frogs. ‘*However*, he’d be very useful for drawing portraits, or –’

Meneer Fortuyn held up a hand. ‘We have just redecorated our home. White silk curtains from Beijing and cream upholstery from Rome.’

‘Charcoal *stains*,’ Mevrouw Fortuyn added, nodding at Egg’s shawl in disgust. ‘As you can quite clearly see.’

The adopters moved down the line.

Sem tumbled forward as if the floor had suddenly tilted and the Fortuyns took a hasty step back. Sem managed to lock his legs rigidly and slap his arms to his sides. His nose turned bright red.

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‘This is Sem,’ Gassbeek said. ‘Aged thirteen-ish. An expert in dressmaking. Handwriting is . . . well, let’s say his handwriting has *character*. Sem comes with a wheat sack, but no basket and no blanket.’

‘I thought *girls* learned sewing?’ Meneer Fortuyn said.

His wife turned to Gassbeek. ‘Why is he not apprenticed if he’s thirteen?’

‘Clumsier than a three-legged donkey,’ Gassbeek sighed. ‘He keeps getting sent back from every job I’ve found him. *That said*, his height makes him my number-one cobweb duster. Very useful indeed. I could give you a discount on this one.’

Sem reddened in embarrassment and his smile faltered.

Mevrouw Fortuyn shook her head. ‘I don’t think so. Look at him, Bart. How would I ever find suitable outfits for such a beanpole of a boy? And don’t even get me started on that disastrous hair. No. He won’t do at all.’

Sem slunk back into line, his shoulders slumped lopsidedly. Milou let out a small growl, ignoring the sudden needle pricks on her ear tips telling her to watch herself. She shook her hair over her face. Peeking through a thin slit of ebony, she saw the adopters turn enthusiastically to Lotta. Mevrouw Fortuyn’s eye twitched slightly at the sight of Lotta’s waistcoat, but her friend’s beautiful golden pigtails, tied with emerald ribbons, seemed to reignite the woman’s interest.

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‘Lotta, aged twelve-ish,’ Gassbeek sighed, reading from her clipboard in a monotone. ‘Mastered the twelve times table by the age of four. She is familiar with concepts such as Pythagoras’ theorem and pi. Lotta comes with an empty toolbox, a pink cotton blanket and three reams of emerald-green ribbon.’

Meneer Fortuyn scoffed. ‘What use does a *girl* have for knowing about Pythagoras?’

Lotta’s fists clenched at her sides.

‘Oh, don’t worry,’ Gassbeek said quickly. ‘I assure you, she’s house-trained and docile, as a girl should be.’

Milou felt Lotta bristle beside her and the two girls shared a side-eyed look of contempt.

‘That ghastly waistcoat will have to go, and the dress will need more frills.’ Mevrouw Fortuyn bent down so that her nose was level with Lotta’s. ‘But, oh my, aren’t you a pretty little doll?’

Lotta narrowed her eyes.

‘Say *hallo*, Lotta,’ Gassbeek warned.

‘*Hallo*,’ Lotta said in a voice as sweet as syrup. She raised one hand and gave them a six-fingered wave. Then she uncurled her other hand and made it a slow, twelve-fingered wave.

There was a long pause, in which Milou could hear some mumbled counting. Then the Fortuyns sidestepped hastily and, despite the wall of ebony hair covering her

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face, Milou felt their gaze land on her. It was time for her performance.

‘This is Milou,’ Gassbeek said. The matron cleared her throat, but Milou kept her hair over her face. ‘Aged twelve-ish, she can recite the Grimm Brothers’ fairy tales and has a pleasant enough singing voice. Milou comes with a small coffin, that strange little dress she’s wearing and a puppet.’

‘But does she come with a face?’ Meneer Fortuyn asked.

‘Milou?’ The matron *clacked* her boot in warning. ‘Move your hair immediately.’

‘Mill-oo,’ Mrs Fortuyn mused. ‘What kind of a name is *Mill-oo*?’

‘Not one I would have chosen,’ Gassbeek sighed. ‘You’re more than welcome to pick a proper name for her.’ *CLACK*. ‘Move your hair, girl.’

Milou felt another prickle on her left ear, like a needle of cold air, but she ignored it. She didn’t need her Sense to tell her that she was risking the matron’s wrath.

‘Is she deaf?’ Mrs Fortuyn asked.

‘No,’ Gassbeek snarled. ‘She isn’t.’

The ear-prickling returned a mere moment before the matron seized a fistful of Milou’s hair and pulled her head up. It was all the time she needed to rearrange her expression. She scrunched her nose, bared her teeth and, with her head

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tilted away from the light, she knew her almost-black eyes would look like dark, empty pits.

The Fortuyns gasped.

Milou smiled. It was not a sweet smile. There were no dimples. It was a smile the matron herself had taught her: all teeth and no soul.

‘*Goedemorgen,*’ Milou growled, using her best werewolf voice.

The adopters’ wide eyes roamed across her face, travelled down her ill-fitting black dress, then back up again. Milou stared up at them through spider-leg lashes. The Fortuyns shared a look: crinkled noses and a not-so-subtle shake of their heads.

‘We’ll take that one,’ Mevrouw Fortuyn announced, pointing to a dark-haired boy in the middle of the line. ‘He seems ever so sweet.’

Milou’s heart did a little dance of triumph.

Gassbeek twisted her fist one more time, then let go of Milou and gave an oily smile.

‘An excellent choice!’ she cried in delight, *click-clacking* towards a side table upon which lay a huge, leather-bound tome. ‘Let me prepare the adoption certificate for you.’ Her smile vanished as she faced the orphans. ‘The rest of you, back to your . . . studies.’

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The grandfather clock *ticked* and *tocked*, rats scratched in the darkest corners of the room and the orphans moved on silent feet to attend to their back-breaking chores.

As they made their way up the stairs, Milou smiled to herself for a well-executed performance. Then she cast a sideways glance at her friends. Lotta was scowling, Sem seemed bewildered, Egg was still trying to wipe charcoal off his hands, and Fenna looked like she wanted to climb into one of the many shadows and hide. Milou's smile slid to the floor.

'She won't forget what you did,' Sem said quietly. 'It'll be worse than head-shaving and caned fingers this time.'

Milou swallowed. 'I had no other choice. I can't get adopted; you know that. Whatever the matron does to me, I can take it.'

Sem didn't look convinced, but he gave her a small smile. 'I hope it's worth it.'

Milou clutched her puppet and ran her fingers once more over the label on its foot, ignoring the tiny stab of doubt that was trying to worm its way into her heart.

She hoped it was all worth it, too.

Hope was all she had left.

Milou's Book of Theories

Lotta says all theories must be based on evidence and that the power of deduction can solve any mystery. Gassbeek insists that my parents abandoned me because I was an 'unwanted little freak', but I believe the evidence tells an entirely different story. I was abandoned with more clues than any other orphan I've ever known. My family would never leave me without good reason.



← Cat puppet made by Bram Poppenmaker.
Had a heartbeat.



← Coffin-basket, with claw marks down the left side of it.
A length of white silk thread stuck inside the wicker weaving.



← Blanket made of expensive Amsterdam velvet.
Name stitched in white silk thread.
Two drops of blood on blanket stitching.

Left on rooftop of orphanage, under a full moon.



→ My Sense, which warns me of danger.

The 'Werewolf Hunter' Theory

My parents are werewolf hunters (Sense, claw marks and full moon). They were being chased by werewolves, so they climbed to safety (rooftop). Worried that I might get hurt (babies do not make very good werewolf hunters), they decided to leave me somewhere until it was safe to return for me (orphanage). To let me know that they cared for me, they left clues to both my identity and theirs: they quickly stitched my name on to the blanket, pricking a finger in the process (thread and blood drops); and my father left me a clue to show he is Bram Poppenmaker (cat puppet). They'll return for me, no doubt, when I am old enough to train as a werewolf hunter.