

Devil's Herb

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p 7-10

Prologue

Washing hurts

Even before the door was all the way open, I smelled her herbs. It felt like I was standing out on the heath, not on the threshold of a death room.

The undertaker laid her hand on my shoulder. 'My condolences, Yara. Please call me Esther, by the way.'

I nodded and squeezed the head of my grandmother's walking stick until the wooden hare's ears pricked my palm. At least that pain was simple and clear.

'I think it's kind of you to want to wash your grandmother yourself. It'll help you to say goodbye, but don't underestimate it, Yara. Are you sure you want to do it on your own?'

I tried to sound determined. 'I'm certain.'

Esther pointed at the walking stick. 'Is that going with your grandmother?'

'She asked for it.' It was the only request in her farewell letter that I could talk about normally.

Esther patted me on the shoulder. She probably did that with all her customers, but it still felt good. 'You'll find everything you need to wash her on the trolley. I'll leave the two of you alone. Just call me if there's anything I can do.' Esther quietly closed the door behind her.

I put my grandmother's walking stick and my rucksack on the floor and leaned against the door. I looked at the table she was lying on, under a sheet. I shivered. Was the sheet moving? No, it couldn't be.

Slowly, I walked over to her. With my index finger, I touched the sheet, by her shoulder. I had been expecting cold flesh, but I was still startled by the chill. I went back to the door, opened it and peered out into the hallway. I wanted Esther to come back now, without me having to call her.

I counted to twenty, closed the door and returned to my grandmother, carrying my rucksack in front of me like a shield. I pulled the sheet down a little. Now that her green eyes were closed, her skin looked even paler, and her nose and chin seemed even more pointed.

I pushed the trolley over to her, picked up the sponge and washed Oma Tan's face. I saw her again, standing by her old-fashioned sink, for her daily lick and a promise with cold water from the pump. Once a week she scrubbed herself and her clothes in a tub of hot water. Then she tipped the dirty water over her vegetable garden. In and around her little farmyard, time had stood still, in the middle ages or, according to my mother, prehistoric times.

I fetched Oma Tan's things from my rucksack. I took hold of the antique mirror that I had inherited from her, and she from her grandmother. Oma Tan was nearly ninety-two when she died, and her grandmother had been ninety-four. I couldn't imagine that I would still be walking around seventy years from now, and that someone would inherit that mirror from me. I brought the speckled glass up to my mouth and breathed on it until it was covered with a thin mist. With my sleeve, I wiped it clean and held it above Oma Tan's lips. 'I'm not counting to one hundred. There's not a breath coming from your mouth. You can rest easy. And so can I.'

That last sentence came out louder than I had intended. I was sad and scared, but at the same time also relieved, *and* angry. The tangle of clashing emotions raced through me. I couldn't get a grip on it.

Gently, I washed Oma Tan's swollen belly. 'It's all calm in there now. No need to worry anymore that the devil's inside you.' But my hands were shaking so badly that I could hardly open the jar of ointment.

I rubbed her miracle ointment on the bruises where the wrist and ankle bands had been. The cut on her shin would never close up now. There were scratches on her arms that I had not seen before. I still could not understand how she had managed to escape from her hospital bed.

My fingers were glowing by then, but her skin remained ice-cold. My greasy hands stuffed her letter back into my pocket. I wouldn't be able to work through the whole list. I definitely wasn't going to prick her in all the most sensitive places. Because I was already wetting myself, but also because I was me: Yara, barely a quarter of Oma Tan, not a sorceress, and certainly not possessed by the devil from head to toe.

I jumped when I heard a knock on the window. I pulled the curtain aside. Was I dreaming with my eyes wide open? No, Oma Tan's black-and-white cow cat really was sitting on the windowsill, tapping her paw on the glass. Some of Oma Tan's other cats were slinking around the undertaker's carpark. So they had followed me, all the way into the village from Oma Tan's house by the heath.

I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw Toon in the carpark, standing by his Vespa. He walked up to me, nudged the cow cat off the windowsill and put his hand on the glass. I pressed my fingers to his. I wanted to open the window and to climb out and head to the heath with him, but first I needed to finish what I was doing. As soon as I was done, Toon would massage Oma Tan's bad knee one last time. She had circled that request twice. Then I would call my mother and, together, we would dress Oma Tan in her Sunday best. But there was one more thing that I wanted to do on my own.

I took the silk bag out of my rucksack and placed it between Oma Tan's arm and her left breast. I could feel the thin little bones through the silk. 'Now you're finally lying together. Theofiel is digging the grave for the two of you. It'll take him four times longer than the digger, but he'll do it with love, and in the old way, just like you asked.'

By then, I could kind of imagine what had happened. I knew about Oma Tan's dark secret. Hidden in the folds of the gossip that still went buzzing around the village, there were probably other scraps of truth to be found. I didn't know if I wanted to find out all of the details. I was already staggering under the weight of what I knew.

I laid her walking stick on the other side of her body. 'I don't think you're going to hell, but you're taking your weapon anyway. I've sharpened the blade.' I turned the hare's head until the knife appeared, felt the point with my finger and screwed the head back on.

I kissed Oma Tan's paper-thin eyelids. Those green eyes would never look into mine again. No one looked at me the way Oma Tan did. No one knew me like she did. Who I was for her would be buried along with her. And from now on she would only be a memory.

My eyes blinked – they couldn't stop blinking. The first tear was a big one, and it tasted as bitter as Oma Tan's absinthe. My thumb pressed the protective sign of the cross onto her forehead, a sign she had made so often on me. 'Farewell.'

How foolish it was to say farewell to my grandmother.

Oma Tan, Tanne, Anneke Tanneke the sorceress lived inside me.

Did that mean he did too?

p 11-15

Chapter 1

Come out of that pond!

Someone was watching me. I knew him and yet I didn't. I wanted to run, but I couldn't move. I opened my eyes wide. From my own bed in the studio in town, I couldn't see the stars that clearly, and the place did not smell as strongly of dried herbs either. So I was in Oma Tan's attic, lying on the old mattress under the window in the roof.

The penny dropped. I had cooked for her yesterday evening. We had chatted for a long time, about my work experience with Stef the forester and about my dream of becoming a shepherd out on the heath. Then Oma Tan had told one of her ghost stories, and another, and another: about the farmer's daughter who danced with the devil, about the stable hand who turned out to be a werewolf, about the murderous mother and the punishing tree. It had got quite late. When I said it was time for me to go home, she had grabbed my arm. 'Stay the night, Yara. I always enjoy your company.' She often asked me to stay, but this time her voice had cracked and her hand had squeezed my arm more urgently. This wasn't just about my company. Recently she had seemed anxious about being alone at night in that isolated house by the heath. Maybe her bad knee was playing up and she was scared of falling, or maybe my mother's threat was haunting her, that she would have to move into a nursing home before it was the only option.

Downstairs, something heavy fell over. I looked at my watch, it was three o'clock. What was my grandmother getting up to in the middle of the night?

I rolled off the mattress, crawled over to the big gap in the attic floor and peered down below. I often spied on Oma Tan when she was working with her herbs at night. My mouth fell open. I was used to the clutter in that one room, which was her place for cooking, eating, sitting and sleeping, and also her herb-drying room and laboratory. But I had never seen it in such a state. Her table had been knocked over, her mattress was bare, the floor was strewn with sheets, blankets, papers, pots and pieces of the strings of herbs that always hung drying on the ceiling.

Oma Tan had unscrewed the hare's head from her walking stick and was slashing through the air with her knife. She was probably dreaming about chasing off a burglar. I sometimes had the same dream but, as far as I knew, it had never made me sleepwalk. I had to go downstairs to wake her gently and calm her down, but I seemed to be stuck to the attic floor.

Now Oma Tan walked over to the darkest corner of the room. She hit out at it with her stick so wildly that she staggered and fell to the floor.

I raced downstairs and stumbled over the coats, hats and scarves lying around the fallen hatstand. Where was she now?

The door was open. She was heading for the herb garden. I put on a coat over my pyjamas, pulled on a pair of old boots and sneaked after her, down the brick path that divided the garden in two, past the stable, which smelled of burnt wood, and up to the old willow. Oma Tan was completely unaware. She had not noticed that I was following her. She embraced her tree. It seemed to have swallowed her, but I knew she had climbed into the hollow inside its gnarled trunk.

The willow fitted her like an old coat and appeared to have been tailored to fit her bony body. Oma Tan must have told me a hundred times how her mother, even before her child had sucked in its first milk, had staggered outside with the woman from next door to bury the placenta among the roots of the willow. And how her father had roared when he got back from his nightly foraging: 'You stupid woman! A girl needs a lime tree. Dangerous creatures live inside a willow. This is a witch's tree! What kind of creature is your child going to become?'

Oma Tan stayed in the willow for a long time. I could hear her quietly muttering. What she would not tell humans, she would tell to her tree. There was the sound of cracking, crunching, of glass breaking. She had strictly forbidden me to go inside her tree and I had promised not to, but I knew that one day I would break that promise.

Oma Tan crept out again and headed onto the heath. The willow stood on the border. That was another story she liked to tell, about how her father had raged: 'A girl's tree should be close to the house, or your daughter will spend all day and night wandering the heath!' It was old-fashioned superstition, and yet it had come true: ever since she was a child, there was nothing that Oma Tan, who was called Anneke Tanneke back then, would rather do than wander upon the heath. And even now Oma Tan only truly felt in her element when she was there. It was as if her stiff body became a little more supple out there, with every step she took.

I knew she was walking to the pond, and I could also guess what would happen next. She kicked off her clogs and waded into the pond. When she had played here as a little girl, the water had come up to her thighs. But year after year, the pond had shrunk, until all that remained was an ankle-deep puddle.

She had taught me how good it felt to wriggle your feet until the muddy bottom licked your soles and the muddy sludge pushed its way between your toes.

I looked at my watch and called out: 'Oma Tan, that's enough paddling now. Come out of that pond!'

With a shriek, she slipped. Even though the water was so shallow, she was soaked.

I waded over to her. She yelled at me when I tried to help her up. 'Yara, whatever possessed you? You gave me such a fright!'

I wrapped my dry coat around her. 'Come on, let's go home. I'd like to get a bit of sleep.'

She shook her head. 'It's full moon, the best night for picking herbs. Soon there'll be dew on the leaves and the buds, and then their power is at its strongest.'

I took her by the hand. 'Tomorrow I'll go and pick them with you. But right now we're going back to bed. I have to get up in three hours. I don't want to be late for work.'

Muttering to herself, she walked home with me, like a grumpy toddler holding her mother's hand.

Back at the house, I picked up her bedclothes off the floor. The sheets were dirty and there was a tear in her nightgown. 'I'll put it all in the washing machine tomorrow.'

Oma Tan laid out a string of herbs on the table. Even without looking, I knew what she was pulling out of it: vervain, valerian and lemon balm. Her recipe was in my veins.

I sipped at the hot tea. 'That's doing me some good.' I rested my hand on her bony wrist. 'Were you dreaming about a burglar?'

She stuck her nose in her mug.

'Or were you actually awake when you were fighting the hatstand?'

'You saw that?'

I followed her gaze. She was searching the dark corner of the room, as if expecting someone to be hiding there who might pop out at any moment.

I squeezed her hand. 'Oma Tan, you haven't ever had burglars, have you?'

'Of course not!' She squeezed back. 'Promise me you won't say anything about tonight.'

'I won't tell Mum anything. But we are worried. What if you fall when you're out on the heath at night and you can't get up because of your bad knee?'

'I know what I'm doing, and I've been doing it all my life. Nothing's happened so far. And there's nothing wrong either.'

I knew she was lying. Something was definitely wrong, but I couldn't put my finger on it.

Oma Tan pointed at her bed. 'Will you sleep downstairs tonight too? I'll try not to snore too loud.'

'All right. But no more ghost stories!'

'I know some funny ones too.'

'Not interested.'

'You're like me, Yara, more than you think!' She pressed her thumb to my forehead and made a cross. 'God bless you and keep you. May he protect you against the Evil One.'

I sighed. 'Oma Tan, be quiet and go to sleep.'

p 31-36

Chapter 5

Praying for a corpse

'Anneke Tanneke, come here,' said Siska, grabbing hold of her daughter.

She tried to pull away.

'Tanne, that's enough!'

Anneke Tanneke calmed down. When her mother called her Tanne, she knew it was serious.

'I want you to listen carefully to what I'm going to tell you. What I'm going to ask you to do now is more difficult than gathering eggs or gleaning the fields.'

She sighed. Nothing was more difficult than gleaning. She hated walking stooped behind her mother all day, picking up the remains of the harvest.

'You're not going to the fields with me today, but to Flor and Roza's farm. Flor's father died last night. Pa and I should go ourselves, but if the harvest isn't in today, it'll be ruined. They're forecasting hail and torrential rain and a north-westerly wind that will flatten everything. So we're sending you to the wake in our place. You're big enough now.'

'Shall I pick some daisies to decorate the funeral table, like I did for Grandpa?'

'You can pick some flowers on the way, but no dawdling. You're going to sit by Leo's body and pray with the others. They could do with a young voice. It will just be old people.'

Anneke Tanneke snorted. Maybe gleaning the fields would be easier after all.

Siska gave her rosary to her daughter. 'Take good care of it. It belonged to my grandmother. The beads are rosewood, to protect you. And it's been blessed with holy water.'

'I'll pray a rosary for Leo.'

'You'll pray plenty of rosaries today.'

Anneke Tanneke rolled her eyes. A rosary took so long – it was at least fifty Hail Marys and a dozen Our Fathers. She put the rosary in her apron pocket. 'How many?'

'I know you can't sit still, but today you're going to have to. It'll take hundreds of rosaries to save that sinner's soul. I'll come and replace you when the sun goes down.'

She stamped her foot. 'What? All day? Do I have to?'

Mother Siska grabbed her daughter's ear and twisted it. 'Don't you give me any cheek!' She pushed Anneke Tanneke out of the door. 'A wake for a neighbour is a sacred duty. You're going – and you will behave yourself!'

Sighing, Anneke Tanneke picked daisies on the way, and a few poppies, even though she knew their heads would be hanging by the time she was at Roza's. It was boiling hot by then.

At Flor and Roza's house, all the shutters and doors were closed. Purple ribbons hung across them.

She knocked on the kitchen door.

Roza hugged her into her black mourning dress. 'I'm glad you're here.'

'Father and Mother send their apologies.'

'I know, child. Only the crippled and the lame have any time to pray now. It's a good thing they sent you. You're a brave girl.'

Anneke Tanneke nodded hesitantly. Maybe Roza had noticed that she was a bit anxious about spending a whole day sitting beside a corpse.

Roza pushed her through the kitchen, into the best room. It took her a while to make out who was sitting there in the semi-darkness. She knew Flor, but not the others. They were all old and worn out, as were their clothes, and they wore black mourning bands around their sleeves.

Flor's father lay on the large kitchen table, surrounded by flowers and candles. The mirror on the mantelpiece was covered with a purple cloth, and the big clock was silent.

Roza pointed at its hands. 'Flor's father departed this earthly realm in the darkest hour of the night. We haven't slept a wink.' Roza pushed her towards the dead man. 'Give him a kiss.'

Anneke Tanneke whispered: 'I don't dare.' But she was picked up and had to touch the chalk-white forehead with her lips. She wiped her mouth with her handkerchief. She could not rub off the cold sweat that had beaded the waxy skin. She wanted to go out and glean the fields all day, until every bit of her body hurt. But there was no escape.

They gave her a chair, near the dead man's head. All around her, people were mumbling prayers. She took hold of her mother's rosary. She listened carefully, so that she could come in at the right moment, and then bravely prayed along with them. Five times ten Hail Marys, and an Our Father between each series. And again. And again. How could she keep it up until the evening?

The room was buzzing like a beehive. The candlelight danced. The flowers smelled sickly sweet. The scent of incense wafted from the clothes of the dead man. Sweat trickled down her back. Her head started to nod.

Anneke Tanneke shot upright, opening her eyes wide, with no idea where she was. Until she saw the dead man lying there and heard the voices mumbling. The oldest man, who was sitting next to her, was leading the prayers now. He stank of piss.

She shifted her chair a little, but bumped into her other neighbour, who did not smell too fresh either. She stared at the rosary of the old man who was leading the prayers. Every bead was a skull with two dark eyes and a line for a mouth, carved out of the wood. Some of the beads had a streak of red on them. Was it blood?

Her neighbour looked at her and made the sign of the cross. But he did everything in reverse: his left hand went down first, and then up, first to the right, and then to the left. He had hidden his thumb in his fist. Instinctively, Anneke Tanneke's right hand also made a cross, a proper cross, as she had been taught.

With a hoarse voice, the old man prayed, mumbling: 'Hoctus Boctus, the calf's tail is cracked. A beast with no tail can't protect its hole.'

Had she heard him right? Anneke Tanneke listened more closely.

'In the land where the chickens scream through their holes, and the roosters bark with their tails.'

What land was the old fool talking about? All that praying must have sent him mad.

Now he looked into her eyes, as if he were talking to her alone. She did not dare to put her hands over her ears.

'Then I arrived at hell's ditch, where there was burning sulphur, venom and pitch. And I knocked upon the gates of hell. The devil called out: "Cake for everyone!" My friend ate his fill. He grew ears like a cat and a tail on his rear, and the devil sat upon it.'

Anneke Tanneke looked at Roza with big eyes. 'What?'

Roza patted her thighs. 'Come over here, child.'

She climbed onto Roza's lap and whispered in her ear: "What's that man saying?"

'He's praying the horses' paternoster. The priest says it's not allowed, because it's a heathen prayer. But we have no choice. We have to do whatever we can to send the devil packing.' Roza pointed at the strip of white cloth tied around Flor's father's head. 'His mouth was open so wide, after that terrible fight with the devil, that we couldn't get it closed again.'

Anneke Tanneke cuddled up even closer to Roza. 'Why was the devil fighting him?'

Roza put her arms around her. 'If you knew the things my father-in-law has got up to! If you sell your soul to the devil, he keeps on tugging away at you right until the bitter end. Last night, when every brick in the chimney cracked, we knew the devil was climbing down to come and fetch the old man. We built up the fire so high that we almost choked. First, the burning mice came flying out of the fireplace. The poor souls of Purgatory trying to escape Hell. When the Evil One himself came crawling out, we threw holy water at him.'

Anneke Tanneke shivered. 'Has the devil been in here? Here? In this room?'

Roza nodded. 'As he reached out his claws to my father-in-law, he peered around, looking for a next victim to crawl into.'

'To crawl into?'

'Through the eyes, nose, mouth... Any hole will do for the devil. He'll worm his way in through even the tiniest little child's nostril.'

Anneke Tanneke clapped her hand over her nose, pressed her lips tightly shut and squeezed her knees together.

'Do you need to go to the privy?'

'Yes. Right now.' She ran to the door and rushed outside. It was already getting dark. When was her mother coming to replace her?

She was terrified of walking home in the dark, but she did not want to stay here for another minute. If she had to choose between the darkness and a house that was visited by the devil, the decision was quickly made.

She was already racing away from there, straight home. Before long, she would dive into her safe bed, snuggle up close to her brother and allow herself to be lulled to sleep by the voices of Ma and Pa, who were playing cards at the kitchen table. She ran with her right hand over her nose and mouth, pressing her left hand over her left ear. She screamed as a mosquito buzzed next to her uncovered ear.

It quickly got darker. Thick clouds sailed in front of the moon. In the woods, all the branches reached out for her, all the roots tried to trip her up. Blazes of lightning slashed the ink-black sky, followed by clattering booms of thunder.

Hearing footsteps behind her, she looked over her shoulder. Could she see fiery eyes glowing and sharp teeth gleaming? She swung her mother's rosary. 'Hoctus Boctus, a tail that's cracked.'

Before she could recall the next sentence, Anneke Tanneke found herself lying flat out on the ground. She rolled herself up into a ball and waited. But whoever had been coming after her, he was gone now.

She scrambled to her feet and walked on, praying as she went. A bit of Our Father, a scrap of the horses' paternoster. She couldn't remember it all, but enough. 'Our Father, who art in Heaven, Your kingdom come, where the roosters bark with their tails.'