

Darkest Desire

Chapter One

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I THINK of more than children. I have higher thoughts, like anyone else. I wonder who made me, why I am here; I am subject to the usual range of pointless speculation. I am not an utter beast, no matter the lies that are spread against me.

But hush now. What's that twitching in the grass? Do you hear? The rustle of one blade against another, the beating of a tiny heart. Easy, easy. Not a sound! Its whiskers trail in the dirt. Fleas dance on its hide. What sound escapes me, except that of the moonlight's fall on the forest floor? And if I were to apply all my senses, perhaps I could hear that as well.

There again. The thing is up on its haunches, sniffing at the warm air. What perfume! On nights such as these I am nearly delirious. My snout fills with the scent of pine from the edge of the glade. From further off comes the sharp bouquet of birch. And then from beside the stream rises the odor of sodden rot. Who could dream on such a night that winter ever comes?

Look now, the rodent's bald tail sweeps the trail he has trod. Where is the sport if he walks into my mouth? Who is to blame for his pitiful end? Him or me? Is he a victim or is he guilty himself?

At any rate, it is only a mouse. Somewhere there is a family of sorts, I suppose. But a family of mice. The heavens do not open up in grief when they die. The wood is full of them.

Then again, the wood is full of children. They scamper here and there, off on their little errands. Their colorful cloaks trail behind them. Their tasseled hoods bounce atop their golden heads. What their parents are thinking I cannot imagine. Here, take this jug of wine and loaf of bread to grandmother, they say. Don't dally along the way. Ha! Might as well tell a bird not to sing.

Children are made of dalliance. Who knows that better than I? Though we do not speak each other's language, still they seem to understand me. Take a moment to smell the flowers along the path, I suggest. Why dash hither and thither, and never savor the finer things of this life?

Believe it or not, I long for them to enjoy the forest as I do. The cool, damp track beneath one's feet, the columns of sunlight that fall through the trees, the solemnity of it all: to say I enjoy it is to trivialize. I am worshipful.

I love children no less. Go ahead, throw this back in my face. Nonetheless it is true. I love them! "Then why do you...?" I know, I know. Suspend for a moment your disbelief. Try to see things my way. Trust me. I do love them. Their innocence, their trusting nature, their ridiculous questions, their ignorant bravado, the awkward fit of their various parts, the freshness of their breath, their harmless, pearlsh teeth, the soft convolutions of their tiny ears, their wide-eyed gaze. Or, to rephrase: *What small teeth they have. What small ears they have. What big eyes they have.* Too bad for them, the forest being what it is.

What happened to that mouse? He was all but in my mouth just a second ago. Lately I fear I have lost my edge. The bounce is gone from my step. My mind wanders. A thought seizes me and my face is distorted by odd tics and grimaces. I make noises that have no meaning, strange little grunts and groans. I am an outcast. It takes a toll.

My fellows do not understand me. They slaughter a fawn or a rabbit and think themselves superior because their tastes are more limited than mine. They celebrate their lack of imagination, hold it up as proof of normalcy. Normal: What is that? A narrow cart on an iron rail, dragged past the same scene time and again.

Aha, he's crept into the ferns spread between those birches. How to play it? Wander out after him, or plant myself beside his burrow? The latter, surely. What is the rush on such a night? Let him go about his miserable errands while I rest myself.

Yes, yes, just so. My belly and nether parts pressed against the cool grass. The moon shining down upon me. I feel an urge to howl.

It is worse than pointless, I admit, since any living creature within hearing will take to ground and stay there for the remainder of the night. Shakes their bones, I know it does. Makes the hair stand on their napes. And what do I accomplish by it? Worse than nothing. My fellows learn where I am, the better to avoid me. And still I long for a decent howl.

Excuse me. Let me reposition myself. I might relax if the moon were not to shine directly in my eyes. There, that's better. Or tolerable, I should say. To howl my lungs out at the top of a hill, surrounded by my brothers, now *that* would be better. What ejaculatory joy! Filling the world with all that is within oneself, leaving every living creature below quaking at the sound: Unless you have done the same you cannot imagine the spine-tingling pleasure. Then, following a good howl, to dash through the wood madly with one's comrades, the branches tearing at one's face, eyes bulging, tongue lolling, headed nowhere in particular, simply running, running, running, yapping, growling, snapping at the others, perhaps scaring up a hare or a doe or a drunken peasant stumbling through the woods, then falling upon the hapless creature, whatever it may be, tearing wildly, the night air filled with the scent of blood, the solid note of tooth on bone, one's muzzle wet and stinking.

Yes.

But where is that mouse?

The day-to-day of any creature's life is no less ridiculous than mine, I imagine. When will the baby be born? When will the grain ripen? When will the kits stumble out of their dens, or the fledglings take their first flight? When will that child return from grandmother's house? Where is that mouse?

Pardon my fixation. But I am hungry and I cannot help but wonder what that rodent is doing out in the wood. Nasty little things, really. More fur than meat. The bones have a way of getting wedged between one's teeth. You can eat a dozen of them and they hardly make a snack. Except that one must eat, I would not bother with them.

Given a choice, of course, I would...

Who goes there now?

Along the road, beside the stream. The sound of a horse's hoof, is it not? But at this hour? What foolishness. A lone traveler along this dark stretch could be lost to the world in an instant. The highwaymen leap from the brush, their knives bared. They do not stop to negotiate, oh no. They slash, stab, strangle, bludgeon, whatever the job demands. And

in a flash it is over, except for the snorting of the horses and the last, low moans of the soon-to-be dead. These are devilish times I live in, cruel and heartless. One becomes so oneself, merely to survive.

Look at them. Not one but two, both on horseback. A comical pair. One with a nose like the beak of an osprey, his beady eyes scanning the dim path. The other narrow-shouldered, wide bottomed, bookish, pale. "Jacob," the latter calls. "This is still the road to Bremen, you think?"

"Bremen?" the other replies. "A road choked with thieves and brutish musicians, Wilhelm. Better for us if we've strayed from that path."

"I am in no mood for joking now."

"You would rather fret, brother? Place your affairs in order? Prepare your neck for the blade?"

"We should have stopped at the inn."

"You said that."

"I was right."

"So you were."

Educated men, their diction faultless. One encounters their like so rarely in the wood. It is huntsmen here, or peasants, or gangs of cutthroats. One could live and die without hearing a well-spoken word.

"Jacob, let us stop for a minute," calls the wide-bottomed scholar.

"Stop? What? To take in the scene?" He laughs at the thought, a high-pitched little cackle. The saddle leather creaks beneath him.

"I must empty my bladder," the other sniffs.

"Ahhh." The horses snort. Wilhelm throws Jacob the reins to his beast and lowers himself to the ground. Jacob climbs down as well.

He ties the horses firmly about the trunk of a small elm. They walk to the edge of the path together and relieve themselves, their streams splashing noisily, the smell of their urine overwhelming all else. It *is* a curse to be born with a sensitive nose. I might as well have my nose stuck in the bladder of one or the other.

Which is of course a possibility. I might rip out their innards and disappear into the brush before either could mutter the first word of a prayer. I rise and stretch silently, then take a half dozen careful steps to a spot just a pounce removed from their stooped shoulders. They shake themselves, button their trousers, look up together toward the night sky.

"How long until daylight?" asks Wilhelm. This is less a question than an accusation.

"Three hours? Four? The stars are invisible in this damned wood. The tree tops choke everything off."

"Let us stop, Jacob."

"What, and sleep here?"

"Better that than to blunder through the forest. We could build a fire at least."

"Keep the gnomes and trolls at bay, is that it?"

"Do not mock me, brother."

"I take the tales to heart myself. Devils, witches, wolves; they lurk in every shadow." And he laughs, as if that were preposterous.

The other joins him, both laughing too loudly now, desperate to drown their fear. "Gather wood, then, and build a fire," says Jacob, picking up a branch and snapping it

with his big foot. They crash about along the path, snatching up fallen branches and breaking them into firewood. Soon they have built a pile of wood in the clearing that I recently occupied. Doubtless the ground is still warm from my body, not that either of these two would notice.

Eventually flames climb through the dry wood, casting a rich orange glow to the clearing's edge. I settle back to my haunches, lower jaw pressed against my paws, ears pricked heavenward, tail extended and still. The mouse is long gone by now. My stomach still growls. But there is time enough to eat. Later on, after the fire has died, once the scholars' weariness has overcome their fear, I might stroll over to where they sleep, examine them both and choose the one that seems most tender. From there it is a quick, simple business: Sink one's teeth in the neck below each ear and give the slightest tug. In moments they are limp, empty of blood. Chickens put up more fuss, assuming you do it right.

One hears about the frenzy of the kill, blood lust, feeding frenzies, so on and so forth. I go on about it myself. All the tearing and growling, the blood spewing this way and that. It is a messy business that sets the world against my type. But truth be told, I also find a note of sadness in it. Who can deny life would be better if we all gathered nuts and berries? One feels defiled after a kill, licking the caked, sticky blood from one's fur. The smell lingers for days, a constant reminder. These were one's fellow creatures, with no less right to walk upon the earth. They had aspirations, feelings, mates. And then in an instant they are transformed into meat. How can one justify it, except to say that someday the same or worse might happen to oneself?

Each of the scholars now is perched on a rock, staring into the fire. The smoke drifts this way and that. They take turns squinting, coughing, fanning their faces. "Did you bring the brandy, Wilhelm?" asks the bird-beaked brother.

"Excellent idea," says the other. "Splendid."

"Never would have thought of it yourself?"

"Never. Never," Wilhelm answers, chuckling. He rises slowly, stretches his back and walks stiffly toward the horses. From the pile of tack scattered on the ground he removes a saddlebag. This he flings over his shoulder, then returns to his crude bench near the fire. He pulls out a sausage, some cheese, a loaf of bread, and a silver flask. Jacob pushes back his coat and removes a knife with a curved, gleaming blade. And at once I doubt whether my assessment of these two has been correct. What a deadly tool for a peaceful Herr Professor! Perhaps there is more blood in these two than I guessed.

They pass their flask back and forth. They settle on the ground, their backs leaned against the rocks, their heads tilted up toward the canopy of leaves. Their talk is of minutiae: printers' schedules, university appointments, academic politics. Dreary business that puts me in a mind to devour them both and end their misery.

Then the beakish brother, Jacob, floats a half-drunken question into the night. "Have I told you the latest tale I gathered?"

"Not another urchin-turned-queen story, I hope. I am tired of those."

"Well, you understand the impulse. A squalid life overturned in an instant."

"I understand. But eventually one gets the point."

Jacob shrugs. "Yes, well... Anyway, this one starts with a minstrel in the forest. You know the type, dressed in ragged harlequin. A little goatee, certainly."

"Not a gnome, please."

"Not at all. A normal person. A gypsy, I think. Wandering through the dark wood upon a footpath. He becomes lonely for company."

"And let me guess, a beautiful maiden appears."

"No, no, not at all. So he stops in a clearing. Much like this one, I would imagine." Jacob stops to look around himself, then opens the flask and takes another drink. He sighs, contented. "And he sits himself upon a fallen tree. He takes a lute from the leather bag he carries and plays a melody that stops the very birds from singing."

"It always does, now, doesn't it?"

Jacob grunts. "Let me just say that we're attempting to *preserve* the traditions...."

"At least when we are not creating them."

They laugh, amused for their own reasons.

"In any case," says Jacob, "the minstrel knows that the melody will intoxicate any creature nearby, drawing them to him."

"Of course." Wilhelm yawns.

"I do not have to go on, you know."

"It has been a long day. Try not to be so prickly."

"And so what should appear in the clearing but a wolf?"

"A wolf?"

A wolf? Fascinating turn. A wolf who loves music; this is more credit than we are commonly given. I cannot say how many nights I have crept up to one cottage window or another, hoping to fill the long nights by listening to the humans within. When they recite to their children a nighttime story, the portrait drawn of my kin is, without exception, unsettling. We devour the stupid swine, we huff and puff, we dress in absurd costumes. Sheep's wool, grandma's bonnet; the list goes on and on.

I myself love music, not that one hears much that can fairly bear the name. A woodsman's tone-deaf yodeling perhaps, or a milkmaid's awful humming. On a good night the wind might carry the highwaymen's baying, the lot of them stone-drunk as they split their booty. There are no chamber quartets here. To hear a virtuoso pluck a decent instrument, this would draw me to a clearing, too.

I creep forward a few feet, the better to hear the tale.

"What sort of wolf?" asks Wilhelm. "A vile, muscular brute? A skulking, conniving thief? A half-starved rogue?"

Jacob gives the matter some thought. "A decent sort of fellow, surely," says Jacob. "Slender but not skeletal. An intelligent face. Clear eyes. Thick, luxurious fur."

My tail twitches expectantly. A low, happy rumble escapes from within me.

"Go on," says Wilhelm, caught up now in the story himself. Who does not love a handsome hero?

"The minstrel looks at the wolf and thinks, well, this is not at all the type of company I wanted. So he plays for a while longer, the further to intoxicate the animal. The wolf says to him, 'Ah, how I would love to play like that.'"

How true! To while away the hours so pleasantly, imagining a melody and then producing the very notes, filling the forest with music, expressing one's emotions on a scale that allowed for subtle touches. For there is not so much subtlety in our howling, or pouncing, or procreation. Our flute has only a few holes and the notes are not always so beautiful.

Jacob continues. "And so the minstrel says to the wolf, 'Well, you might easily learn to play if only you put your paws like this.' And he places his own hands in the crook of a tree. The wolf says, 'Oh minstrel, I'll obey you as a student obeys his teacher.' He studies the minstrel's hands. Then, after the minstrel has freed himself, the wolf carefully places his paws in the same position. No sooner has the wolf done so than the minstrel picks up a rock and with a single blow wedges the beast's paws into the crook so tightly that he is held prisoner. 'Wait here until I return,' says the minstrel."

What kind of tale is this? I growl again, a deep rumble that comes unbidden from my innards.

"What is that?" Wilhelm shrieks.

Jacob too is alarmed. He jumps to his feet, peers with his feeble eyes into the night, sees nothing. "I do not know," he whispers.

"Human?"

"I think not."

Their fear excites me, awakens the brute in my bones. I spring into the clearing, teeth bared, hackles stiff, ready for what I do not know. I am beyond thought.

"A wolf," shrieks Wilhelm, dropping onto his prodigious bottom and scuttling backward in the dirt. The sight is so ridiculous that I stop in my tracks. I feel Jacob's eyes on me. I turn toward him. His long blade is drawn. He takes my measure carefully, just as I take his. Then he sheaths the blade and calls softly to Wilhelm, "I think we might reason with the creature, brother. I see a sensitive eye."

"Save yourself," Wilhelm croaks, flailing without effect at a tree.

Apparently his plan is to climb it. He gasps, breathless.

"No need," declares his brother. He approaches me slowly, his hand extended, intending that I should sniff it and judge him a friend. In an instant I must decide: Rip off his arm or perform the ceremony he expects?

I press my nose against his hand, even lick it for good measure.

I am not sure why, except that I have never before encountered such calculating calm. He scratches behind my ears. I press my muzzle against his thigh.

"Wilhelm," he calls, "come and meet our friend."

"Friend?" replies Wilhelm dubiously.

"Come, he won't harm you. Will you, sir?" he says to me.

And to my surprise — though not, I think, to his — I answer in a pleasing baritone, "Surely not. You might both relax. Your safety is assured."

These, then, are the first words I share with the Brothers Grimm.

WILHELM slumps against a tree, struggling to breathe. "Excitement sets him off," his brother explains. "He cannot catch his breath."

Wilhelm nods, anxious that I should not judge him weak. In fact, his pitiful state provokes feelings other than compassion. Looking upon him I think, *There is one ripe for the plucking.*

Wilhelm, eyes bulging, turns quickly from me to his brother.

"He is joking, Wilhelm."

"Did I say something?"

Jacob looks at me curiously. "Indeed you did, sir. Something about ripe fruit."

"Oh, yes." Unaccustomed as I am to speech, my thoughts too easily become words. I must build a door between my mind and my tongue. "There are apple trees nearby," I say.

"I am sure that is so, sir," Jacob replies. "You must know every corner of this wood." I tip my head. "You flatter me."

"Not at all. This is your domain, is it not? Are you not lord of the forest? Who preys upon the wolf?"

"The woodsmen," I reply. "They hate my kind, as you must know."

"But what match are they for you?"

"They have traps, sir, and guns. And knives," I add, noticing again the bulge beneath his coat.

"Ah, yes," says Jacob, drawing back his coat to expose the knife's hilt. "And what do they count against your cunning and strength?"

I lift my brow and smile slightly. "I am living, it is true, and there are woodsmen who are not."

"There you have it," says Jacob. Wilhelm shudders between wheezes.

"You must have a bite to eat with us," Jacob announces. "We shall share a drink as well," he adds. "But first, we must introduce ourselves. I am Jacob Grimm and this is my brother, Wilhelm. And you, sir?"

"I am..." And I realize I have no name. Never before has there been a need. We know each other by smell or sight. Names are nothing among us. And to those we stalk, our names matter even less. In those instances our teeth are the relevant fact. "I am..."

"Yes?" says Jacob.

"I am embarrassed."

"There is no such thing among friends."

"Sir, I have no name." A pitiful yelp escapes from me.

"There, there, friend," says Jacob, embracing me.

"I cannot say why it affects me so. My parents did not name us."

"Your childhood was unhappy, then?"

"Not at all."

"Your parents survived to raise you?"

"Admirably."

"But they neglected to give you names?"

"Wolves have no names, Herr Grimm."

"Call me Jacob, please. We must give you a name, then. We will call you... We will call you Wolf. How many others are we likely to know? What opportunity for confusion is apt to present itself?"

"Excellent," I say, though I feel somewhat belittled. The name Wolf might be grand if set upon a human. But applied to an actual wolf? I am an individual, with my own thoughts and preferences. Would Jacob or Wilhelm be content were I to name either Man?

Slowly Wilhelm rises to his feet and joins us at the fire. The flames separate me from him. He looks ghoulish in this light, like one of those specters I sometimes see wandering frightened through the wood. "You must relax now, Wilhelm," says his brother.

"Please," I add, "there is nothing to fear." For the moment, in any case.

Jacob reaches for the sausage, cheese, and loaf of bread. "You will share our supper, will you not?"

"Delighted," I say. "Such delicacies are rare for creatures of the wood."

"But surely you have had a bite of cheese or sausage now and then?"

"Here and there. Not often enough." The last time was who knows when, cleaning up after the highwaymen left a family slaughtered and rotting on the forest trail. There were six of them; mother, father, two boys, and two girls. Their lunch was still set tidily on a scrap of cloth in the grass. I shooed away the flies, most of them at any rate, and devoured the meal. There was even wine left in a goblet, which I lapped clean. Then I toddled slowly off, crawled under the branches of a low-hanging pine beside a stream, and slept away the day.

"And some brandy, Wolf? Will you share some of this?" Jacob raises the silver flask.

"Is that wise?" whispers Wilhelm.

I wonder the same.

"Where is the harm in a drink among friends?" Jacob replies.

He takes a small bowl, fills it half full and sets it before me. I sniff it warily. I have smelled brandy in the air after the highwaymen have come and gone. But never has it crossed my lips. I touch the tip of my tongue to the brandy and gag. Jacob chuckles softly. "You get used to it," he says.

"It burns the tongue," I reply.

"True enough. But also loosens it. Go on, try again."

I dip my tongue in the bowl. As I lap up the brandy my fur stands on end.

"Look, Jacob," Wilhelm says nervously.

"It is nothing, brother, nothing."

A contented growl sounds in my throat. "Superb," I say. "Superb."

"A simple pleasure."

"For your sort," I declare.

He shrugs.

My head reels. My tongue feels thick, my legs turn rubbery. This is a perilous state of weakness, I recognize dimly. Yet I am content.

"Tell me," says Jacob, "of a wolf's simple pleasures. Tell me something of your life."

"What of it would interest you?" I answer. "We eat, sleep, procreate; there is little more to it than that."

"You are too modest, Wolf."

"I believe not."

"My brother and I are scholars. There is precious little that does not interest us."

"Every tree has a few small nuts that the Herr Professors deign to crack. Is that it?"

"Wolf, you do us an injustice."

"I am not so sure."

"Tell us then simply why you are here. Why did you spring into the clearing as you did?"

I scarcely remember, so sluggish are my thoughts. "Because of the cruelty, the cruelty to the wolf."

"It was just a story, friend."

"Yes, but they are always the same, now aren't they? Tell me, does the wolf get his revenge upon the minstrel? The wolf never seems to be deserving of justice in tales such as these."

"Every tale is not the same, you know."

"Tell me in this particular, does the wolf get justice?"

"Well ... "

"The answer is no, I assume."

"He does attempt to avenge himself."

"And what does he get for his trouble?"

"I am afraid a woodsman comes to the minstrel's aid. He drives off the wolf and his companions."

"With a gun or an ax?"

"An ax, I believe."

"Now there is a new twist," I say.

"Please, Wolf, there is no need for sarcasm. We try to be honest craftsmen. We relate the tales. Their creation is the work of others, in nearly every case."

"These tales are created each time they are retold. You cannot escape responsibility. Each word is a matter of choice."

"A professor in wolf's clothing," says Wilhelm.

Jacob laughs. "I fear we are getting off on the wrong foot, Wolf. Let us change the subject, for the moment at least."

I arch a brow and nod in agreement.

"Care for a piece of bread?" Jacob asks, drawing his knife and cutting a thick slice that he hands to me. He continues. "Educate us then to the ways of the wolf. No doubt we do you wrong. But it is ignorance that is to blame, not malice. Please, Wolf, instruct us on a simple point: What is it that you and your fellows love most of all?"

"This is a simple point?" I reply. "We do not all march in lockstep. One differs from the others, just as it is with you."

"Then tell us of your own perceptions," Wilhelm suggests. "Of all the moments in your life, which do you believe the finest?"

Do they expect an honest answer?

"What does *finest* mean, exactly?" I ask. "How would you answer this question yourself?"

"My finest moment?" replies Wilhelm. He thinks for a moment. He screws up his face, twists his chin. "When I open the door to my children's room at night and look upon them, sleeping. It breaks one's heart, Wolf." He pauses. "You have children of your own?"

"One cannot always be certain," I answer quickly.

"The same, then, as it is for humans," Jacob interjects.

"Too bleak, brother," says Wilhelm.

"Perhaps."

"Answer the same question," I say to Jacob. "Life's greatest pleasure... Answer quickly. Do not stop to think."

"Work. Accomplishment." The words fly from him. "Proving that one is as deserving as the next man."

"More deserving, Wolf. Jacob truly longs to prove that he is more deserving."

"How so? Why is that?"

"Our father died young, sir. We were thrown into poverty," says Wilhelm. "What others were handed, we struggled to possess. A home, an education, the respect of one's peers."

"But you have prospered, have you not? You are scholars. And the scholars Grimm suffer no dark yearnings? Life's deepest pleasures, or so you say, are your children, your work, the admiration of your peers?"

"Is this so surprising, Wolf?" asks Jacob. "Is it otherwise for you?"

I am silent.

"You can tell us," says Jacob. The words all but drip from his mouth, so concerned for me does he seem.

Oh, but I cannot tell them. I know the answer without pausing for a breath. The children, as I have said. The children, without question. Which moment is most sublime? Is it when I first spy them through the leaves and branches, tripping happily down the forest path? Or even earlier perhaps, when the first of their chirping notes reaches me in my lair, and my ears prick greedily? Ah, they sing, they babble nonsense to themselves. Their tiny feet scruff upon the path. They whack the branches beside them, making noise for the sake of noise, lost in their little worlds.

Or am I most thrilled by the first scent? What intoxication, that. The sweetness of their skin and breath; the dribbles of food dried on their collars; the aromatic leavings on their underthings: Just the thought of it can set me howling.

And still what pleasures remain. Falling in behind them on the path, padding along silently, drawing closer and closer, pressing my muzzle against their backs, watching their shock turn to curiosity as they stare. I cock my head, lick their cheeks, try to make them understand. Look at the flowers, I suggest. Look at the trees, so green and inviting. Set down your basket and relax. What is your hurry? We are all children of nature, made from the rot beneath the trees, living for our allotted time and returning to rot. And then the trees grow around us, from us, through our bones. There is no need to struggle. Why fight that which is most natural?

Afterward I take them to a quiet place, far from the path. I make a bed of moss or leaves for them. They look as if they have fallen asleep. I never touch their innocent faces. I leave them with one last, long look, then make a point to avoid the spot.

"Wolf," asks Jacob, setting a hand on my shoulder. "Tell us, please, what is wrong."

"Wrong?"

"Your snout, sir, and your lips, they twitch frightfully. I feared your eyes would roll back in your head. You seemed on the verge of a seizure."

"My head is light, Jacob. The brandy, I suspect."

"I warned you," Wilhelm hisses at his brother.

"I think otherwise," Jacob says to me. "What haunts you, Wolf?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing? Your nose is dry, your eyes bloodshot."

I bare my teeth without thinking. "I am not obliged to answer to you."

"I suggest nothing of the kind," Jacob replies. He slowly removes his hand from me. "I offer you understanding. We are scholars, Wolf, not ministers. We are in no rush to judge. All creatures have their ways, each according to their nature. The lion is not guilty when he makes the wildebeest his supper. The wolf is innocent when he does that which he must."

"Well said, brother," Wilhelm allows.

"Easier said than believed, however," I observe.

"What does that mean?" Wilhelm replies.

"Think for a moment, friends. When the wolf drags off a sheep in the night, does the shepherd say, 'Well, that is wolf's nature'? No indeed. He loads his sling and lets fly, eager to shatter the poor wolf's skull!"

"That is the shepherd's nature, as immutable as that of the wolf," says Jacob. "One is not right and the other wrong. Both are what they are."

"I am what I am," I say.

"Of course you are," says Jacob, all sympathy again.

"I am drunk."

"A bit."

"My soul is heavy."

"There is no reason."

I pause and try to control my breath. I pant now uncontrollably. My tongue hangs heavily from my mouth, a spout for the drool that puddles at my feet. "Children," I say.

"What of them?" asks Wilhelm.

"Children," I repeat.

The fire crackles. Glowing cinders rise into the night. Mice scamper at the edge of the clearing, drawn by the promise of crumbs.

"Your deepest pleasure?" Jacob says finally.

Wilhelm rises. "Children!" says he.

"Brother, remember your calling!" Jacob warns. He pushes Wilhelm back against his log.