

Sara K Joiner

After
the
Ashes



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New York

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Summary: In 1883 thirteen-year-old Katrien Courtlandt is more interested in science and exploring the Javanese jungle for beetles with her native friend than in becoming a young lady like her despised cousin Brigitta—but when Krakatoa erupts, the tsunami hits, and their families are swept away, the two cousins must struggle to survive together.

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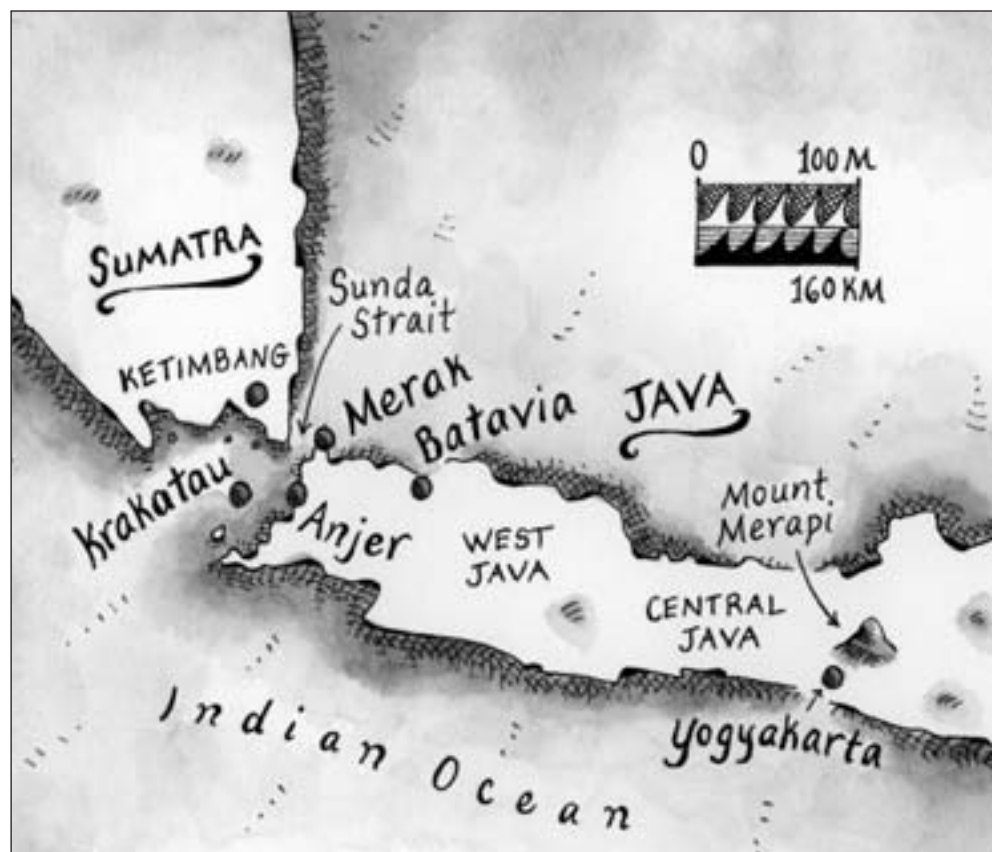
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*To Daddy and Papaw because I promised myself
the first one would be dedicated to you.*

*To Nana because she said I could do anything
I set my mind to.*

To #1 Mom because she is #1.



JAVA

and Surrounding Islands
CIRCA 1880



Anjer, Java, Dutch East Indies

3 NOVEMBER 1880

Dear Mr. Charles Darwin,

I recently finished reading *On the Origin of Species*, and it has opened my eyes to the world. Vader—that's my father—let me read it when I asked why the Asian paradise-flycatcher and the racket-tailed treepie both had long tails but didn't look alike.

Now I know they both evolved differently.

I see lots of beautiful birds and animals here. We live on the west coast of Java with the ocean near our front door and the jungle almost in our backyard.

I love the jungle. I explore it almost every day because I plan to prove your theory of natural selection. Did you know there are people who don't believe it's true? I'm going to do what you did and collect specimens—hundreds of them, maybe even thousands—to show how one species changes over time into a new species.

Lots of times my friend Slamet explores with me. He tells me about the plants and flowers in the jungle because I'm not very good with vegetation. I prefer animals. Slamet is native and knows all about plants. His mother is our housekeeper, but we've been friends forever. Do you think that's strange?

Some of the girls in my school think it's funny that my closest friend is a native boy, but I don't think so.

Those girls usually call us names when we go to the beach together. Slamet and I ignore them. On the beach we can see all the way to Sumatra and even the volcano on Krakatau.

Have you ever been to Krakatau? It's an island. No one lives there, but I'm sure some animals do. Birds could fly there without any trouble; it's only forty kilometers from Anjer. I long to visit, but neither Vader nor my aunt will let me. My aunt says it's too dangerous since it's a volcano. Vader said it's extinct, but he still won't let me go. It can't be that dangerous if it's extinct, can it?

Perhaps you could visit Java someday, and we could explore Krakatau together. I could be your assistant. No one could object then because you are an important scientist.

Thank you for writing *On the Origin of Species*. I loved it, and I hope one day to meet you.

Yours in admiration,
Katrien Courtlandt

A decorative border with scrollwork framing the text.

Part One

JUNE 1883

Anjer, Java, Dutch East Indies



Chapter 1

I knelt down beside the giant strangler fig and reached within its latticelike trunk. There, hiding on the dying tree that was being suffocated by the surrounding fig, was a stag beetle—*Hexarthrius rhinoceros rhinoceros*.

“Careful,” Slamet said. “Do not scare it.”

“I won’t. I’ve done this before,” I reminded him. With gentle fingers, I plucked the insect off the trunk. It filled the palm of my hand. The enormous mandibles stretched out from its head. Some people thought they were horns. “Isn’t it beautiful?”

Slamet shook his head. “I do not know why you like this.”

“I’m proving a theory.” I pushed up my spectacles. “‘*We see the same great law in the construction of the mouths of insects.*’ ”

His face went blank, and I knew he didn’t understand what I said. Dutch was not his first language, and Javanese wasn’t mine. How could I explain about Mr. Charles Darwin and his theory of natural selection? I had read his book *On the Origin of Species* four times, but Slamet couldn’t read at all.

“Never mind,” I said.

He held out the funnel net, and I dropped the beetle in it with the other two I had already found, tying off the top of the net with string.

“*Dank u,*” I said, standing up. As I did, my heel caught on my skirt and I plopped down in the mud.

“Aah!” I yelled.

With Slamet’s help, I managed to get on my feet, though the brown muck stained the fabric. “My aunt won’t be pleased.” I tried to wipe off the filth, but it didn’t do any good.

“She will punish?” Slamet asked.

“She won’t be happy, but I doubt she’ll do anything to me.” I took the net from him.

We walked beside each other out of the jungle and toward Anjer. “You know what, Slamet?” I asked. “The capital is nothing like here.” My aunt Greet, Vader and I had just returned from a three-week trip to Batavia visiting my uncle Maarten, and I was still in awe at all there was to see and do in the Dutch East Indies’ capital city.

“It is far,” Slamet said.

“*Ja*, but it’s an easy trip by boat.” Slamet had never been farther than Merak, twenty kilometers north of here.

“What do you do?”

“In Batavia?”

He nodded.

I pushed my spectacles up. “We did lots of things. We went to the zoo. I think Oom Maarten enjoyed that even more than I did. Lots of the animals there are ones I’ve seen here in the jungle. Though they did have some animals from Africa—a lion and a zebra.”

“Zee-bruh?” He furrowed his brow.

“It’s like a horse, and it has black and white stripes. Quite beautiful.”

“You like Batavia?”

I thought about that for a minute. Like Anjer, Batavia was on the ocean, but the capital was much larger than my town. I couldn’t hear the waves from Oom Maarten’s little house. He lived miles away from the docks, which pleased Tante Greet. “There are undesirables at the docks, Katrien,” she said to me. I wasn’t sure what she meant by that. I only knew that not being able to hear the waves meant I didn’t sleep very well.

“No,” I said in answer to Slamet’s question. “I don’t really like Batavia. It’s too . . . organized. Too contained.”

He gave me that blank look again, and I tried to make myself more clear.

“The jungle has been beaten back. It’s nowhere to be seen.” We passed by some of the kampongs—the tiny thatched cottages of the natives—on the outskirts of town. “My favorite parts of the trip were walking Oom Maarten’s dog. Torben gets so excited when he goes for a walk, and he barks and barks at anything—people, other dogs, the crocodiles in the canals.”

We shuffled along in silence. The sounds of horses clopping through town and barking dogs intermingled with the croaking frogs and buzzing insects of the jungle. I took a deep breath in anticipation of telling Slamet the most interesting part of my trip.

“There’s something else, Slamet. The strangest earthquake hit while we were there!”

Slamet was not impressed. “Earthquake is not strange.”

He was right. Earthquakes hit Java all the time. “I know, but this one was. It lasted for about an hour.”

His head whipped around to face me. “Hour?”

I nodded. “It was terrifying. Tante Greet and I took cover in a doorway, but the ground just kept shaking. Poor Torben sank to his belly and whimpered. Everything went quiet. Even the air seemed to vibrate. I’ve never experienced anything like it.”

We paused while a young native boy ran across our path, followed by a white girl. They hurried to one of the kampongs, reminding me of Slamet and myself when we were that little.

“Strange thing also happens here,” Slamet said, his brow creased. “While you are not here.”

“What happened?”

“Ash rains down.”

“What do you mean?”

“Ash falls from sky.” He moved his fingers like falling rain. “Strange.”

“When exactly did this happen while I was away?” I pushed my spectacles up.

He thought before saying, “Two weeks.”

I gasped. “That’s the same time we had that strange earthquake in Batavia!”

“What does it mean?” he asked.

“I don’t know.” It was certainly intriguing. Was it possible the two events were connected?



Chapter 2

Slamet and I hadn't gone much farther when more little children—native and white—ran past us. They were all heading to the same crowded kampong. I shook myself out of my reverie about earthquakes and ash and we followed them. Inside the kampong, a storyteller was beginning to spin a wondrous tale in the same deep, gravelly voice he'd been using since the days when Slamet and I would sneak here to escape our chores. The storyteller didn't speak Dutch, but he was so gifted that I could understand the tales anyway.

As the storyteller spoke, Slamet cocked his head and smiled at me. "It is *Butho Ijo*."

I smiled back. "I know."

Butho Ijo was one of my favorite Javanese stories. It was about a green giant who tells a woman how to have a child, then tricks her into giving up her daughter for him to eat. Fortunately, the daughter manages to destroy him with help from a hermit and a bag of magical objects.

The storyteller warmed to his tale. He made me jump as he raised his arms high above his head and deepened his voice for the giant. He hunched over when he played the hermit and fluttered his eyelashes when he acted out the daughter. I clapped along with the children when he finished the story and bowed.

At that point, Slamet poked my shoulder. “I go. Ibu needs me.”

I nodded as he left to help his mother, and slowly I rose to leave, too. I wished I could stay all day and listen to the stories with the other children. I missed being that young, when my mother was still alive and I could run around and play with anyone. But I was thirteen now, and Tante Greet lived with us, trying to turn me into a lady. Girls I used to play with now thought I was odd because of my friendship with Slamet and my insect collection.

My aunt wanted me to be friends with those girls, but I found I had less and less in common with them. They talked about boys and bustles and babies. I wanted to talk about animals and science and natural selection. They giggled a lot, and always seemed to be looking at me when they did. I felt like a zoo animal on display in their presence.

Still, my aunt kept singing their praises. “Brigitta Burkart is a wonderful girl,” she often said pointedly. “She’s polite and kind and respectful.”

But Brigitta Burkart was the worst of them all, and I hated her. Truly hated her. My aunt knew this perfectly well, and it infuriated me that she ignored my feelings and spoke so admiringly of someone I despised.

There was a time, not so very long ago, when I would have agreed with my aunt’s opinion. Brigitta and I had been friendly once, thanks in part to our fathers. We were introduced years ago, as small girls, when Vader began working as the controller for Anjer and Brigitta’s father assumed the higher-ranking government position of assistant resident. Vader explained all this very carefully to me one day when I asked him about his job. He sat me down at a table and sketched a simple, but accurate, map.

“You see, Katrien, the Dutch East Indies are divided into provinces, like so, then divisions, and then departments,” he said, making each section smaller and smaller. “Assistant residents, like Mr. Burkart, are in charge of divisions.” He pointed to an area that included Anjer and a few other towns. “Part of the job of an assistant

resident is to oversee the regions' controllers. My responsibility as Anjer's controller is to carry out the administration of the department, which includes overseeing the police and collecting taxes."

I understood this to mean that Mr. Burkart was Vader's supervisor, and I was glad of it. Now that our families had begun visiting with each other, I had found Brigitta to be a fun playmate. For several years, the two of us passed those visits playing happily while the adults talked about grown-up things like the fighting in Aceh or other news they read about in the *Java Messenger*. Once we started attending school, Brigitta and I spent even more time together.

But all that changed on the day of Brigitta's tenth birthday party. Every girl in our class had been invited to celebrate at the Burkart family's fine brick mansion on the water. I knew already from my playdates with Brigitta that a small army of native workers was responsible for keeping the home immaculate and the grounds well manicured, but as I stepped onto the Burkart property that day, everything seemed to look even more spectacular than usual. Even the Dutch flag that always flew tall and proud from the pole on the luxurious lawn seemed to be flapping extra hard for Brigitta, and the assistant resident's boat that Mr. Burkart kept tied to his private dock bobbed merrily in the waves. I hoped he would take us all for a ride. What a birthday treat that would make!

I began to feel shy as I approached the house and a housekeeper ushered me inside, but in no time at all, I was on top of the world. Brigitta greeted me with a warm smile and soon made it clear that she was singling me out as special. She insisted I sit beside her at the table. She seemed to prefer the gift I brought her over all the others. And when we went outside to play windmills, Brigitta honored me again. She was the berger, the head of the game, and she picked Rika and me to be team leaders. All went well as we selected teams, but when the time came to begin, I happened to spot a stag beetle climbing on the side of the house. I could not believe my good fortune. In a way, the discovery felt like a present for *me* on Brigitta's special day. I plucked it off the wall and ran to show my friend.

“This is the fourth one for my collection,” I said breathlessly, waving my prize under her nose. Brigitta’s eyes grew wide in shock. She screamed and rushed into the house. Everyone else came over to see what the commotion was about, and when I held out the insect for them to see, they all backed away in horror. Rika even started to cry, and I started to get angry. I tried to make them understand there was nothing to fear, but their shouting drowned out my words.

Brigitta’s father came onto the porch with Brigitta trembling beside him. She pointed at me and cried, “Katrien has ruined my party with that disgusting creature! She’s disgusting, too! I never want her here again!” The other girls gathered around her in support.

Moments later Mr. Burkart was escorting me home. I cradled the precious beetle in my hands the entire way, all the while wondering how everything had gone so very wrong.

To this day I didn’t know why my beetle collecting disturbed Brigitta so, but one thing was certain: our friendship ended the day she turned ten. And from that moment on, I would have given anything—maybe even my now-sizable beetle collection—to never see Brigitta again.

But of course, I couldn’t possibly avoid her. I still had to face her in school every day, and worse, our families continued to see each other socially. Brigitta’s and my relationship may have turned frosty, but the adults’ was as warm as ever—which is why I was still subjected to monthly Courtlandt-Burkart dinners at the Hotel Anjer. How I dreaded those gatherings! I would rather spend an hour in a pit full of poisonous blue kraits than dine with the Burkarts. But, like so much else in my life, I had no say in the matter.

All these thoughts of Brigitta Burkart were making my head ache. Rubbing my eyes, I forced myself to think about more pleasant things. Today was a lovely day, after all. I had three stag beetles in my net, which increased my collection size to three hundred five, and I needed to prepare them for mounting. With a little hop, I hurried toward home.

But my eagerness vanished when I heard familiar laughter in

the air. Within moments, whom should I see up ahead but Brigitta, Rika and two of their friends, Maud and Inge, sitting on Inge's porch eating ginger buns. Rika was tearing bits of the bread and tossing them to the ground several meters away. A long-tailed macaque sat nearby and scurried over to grab the food.

Inge pointed. "Look how long his tail is."

"It is, however, possible that the long tail of this monkey may be of more service to it as a balancing organ in making its prodigious leaps, than as a prehensile organ," I thought.

"It's a good thing you're tossing those scraps so far," Brigitta said, patting her perfectly styled blond hair. "I wouldn't want him coming any closer to us."

"He wouldn't hurt us, would he?" Rika asked, her eyes wide.

I shook my head. This was ludicrous. Why was she giving her ginger bun to a monkey? "You shouldn't be feeding him at all," I said, walking up to the steps.

Brigitta turned her catlike eyes on me with a scornful glare. "You're one to talk, Katrien. Don't your neighbors feed the monkeys?"

Our neighbors, the De Groots, were an older couple who danced outside under the full moon. They also mashed bananas and smeared the paste onto sticks. Then they placed the sticks in their tamarind tree and encouraged the long-tailed macaques to enjoy a free meal. I loved the De Groots. They were eccentric, but kind and wonderful neighbors. "They feed them what they eat in the wild," I said. "Not ginger buns."

"But he likes the buns," Rika said, pointing to the monkey. He had run under a nearby tree and was clutching the bread tightly in his hand.

I shook my head. Poor thing. Of course he liked the buns. He would probably start raiding people's compost piles and trash now. Vader always said not to feed wild animals. He even tried to get the De Groots to stop, but they refused.

"When he has to be killed after he invades someone's kitchen looking for scraps, you'll only have yourselves to blame," I said.

Brigitta stomped halfway down the front steps and looked down her nose at me. “For goodness’ sake, Katrien, he’s only had a few bites. Don’t take it so seriously.”

“It is serious!”

She rolled her eyes. “You’re so melodramatic! Not everything is about you.”

Flummoxed, I stammered, “M-me? I’m not making this about me.”

“If you say so.” She crossed her arms and raised her eyebrows.

My arms tingled as if worms were crawling on me, but I couldn’t move. All I could do was stare back at Brigitta and wonder how I had ended up in this situation. Tante Greet would not consider accusing people of indirectly killing monkeys a strong foundation to renew a friendship. But I didn’t want to be friends with these girls. I only felt sorry for the macaque.

“Why are you even here?” Brigitta asked.

“I’m on my way home.” I jiggled my net full of giant stag beetles in her face. “I have work to do.”

She let out a little cry and jumped back, tripping over her skirt and landing with a thud on the dirty step. Dusting herself off, she glared and said through clenched teeth, “If you keep playing with bugs, Katrien, you might turn into one.”

I responded by dangling the net until it touched her hair. She screamed, and Maud, Rika and Inge tossed their ginger buns aside to drag Brigitta away from me. The macaque dashed over and stole the sweet treats.

Safely back on the porch, Brigitta huffed and shuddered. “Are any of them on me?”

Her friends shook their heads, and I counted the beetles in my net to be sure. Three. *Whew!* “Stupid thing to do. Could have hurt the beetles,” I whispered to myself.

“I hear you muttering over there, Katrien,” Brigitta spat. “You are so strange. Go home and play with your stupid bugs. Leave those of us who have respectable interests alone.”

My hands trembled with anger and tightened around my funnel

net, but I only retorted, “They are insects, Brigitta, not bugs. Try to learn something for once,” before I resumed my journey home.

I had comported myself with as much restraint as possible, but inside, my anger shook me with a force that rivaled the tremors in Batavia.



Chapter 3

Plop!

I dropped the last of my newly deceased beetles into a pot of not-quite boiling water and listened as some of the liquid splashed over the sides and sizzled on the hot stove top. In the pot, the water undulated with enough motion to cause the insect—about the size of a deck of cards cut lengthwise—to dance and shimmy across the surface, softening its limbs.

On a piece of wood near the stove sat the stag beetle I had just removed. I carried it from the kitchen into the parlor where I had better natural light. With tissue paper, I carefully dried the specimen's spindly legs, powerful mandibles and other delicate parts, drinking in the details as I worked.

I pushed my spectacles up. This stag beetle had orange eyes. Not so unusual. The darker orange flecks were different, though. I hadn't seen those before.

This beetle also had a solid black body. All my other specimens had brown heads and thoraxes with abdomens that appeared more like polished walnut. Was this a mutation? Or something more important, like an incipient species? I would have to collect hundreds more samples to determine that.

I pinned the unique stag beetle onto the cork and glanced at my watch-pin. Less time had passed than I thought. The insect in the

kitchen still needed a few more minutes to soften, so I had time to attack the next step in my stag beetle display, which I happened to dread most: the labeling.

Killing the beetles didn't bother me. That was simply a matter of placing each one in a glass jar with the lid tightly closed, which suffocated them. I explained this process to Oom Maarten once and he was horrified, but then, he didn't even like watching cats chase birds.

Boiling the beetles didn't bother me either, nor did pinning them to the display backing. But writing their names perfectly on those minuscule slips of paper with no drips, splotches, or spills? I shuddered.

It was then that I saw the sunlight was shining onto the varnished teak desk, lighting up my work space as if trying to encourage me. So, with a deep sigh, I set to work. I wrote as neatly as I could, but before long, the wooden pen began to shake in my grip, and black drops of ink splattered across the blotter and onto my fingers. Frustrated, I set the pen down and rubbed my face.

Drat. I forgot the ink on my fingers. I licked my upper lip and sure enough, a bitter taste filled my mouth. I hastily wiped at the ink smears that I knew were decorating my cheeks, and resumed scratching tiny letters onto the tiny paper: *H-e-x-a...*

On my sixth piece of paper, which would yield my second successful label if I managed it, I was startled by a sudden thump at the front door. Seconds later, Mrs. Brinckerhoff whirled through the double doors of our parlor, reminding me of a pink-headed fruit dove with her green skirts and pink hat. Mrs. Brinckerhoff never knocked. If I ever walked into someone's home unexpected, my aunt would have torn into me like an angry Javan tiger.

But Tante Greet considered Mrs. Brinckerhoff a friend, and that made all the difference, apparently. I didn't understand how. Mrs. Brinckerhoff was the type of person Brigitta would grow up to be.

"*Goede dag*, Katrien," she said, patting her brow with a gleaming white handkerchief.

I walked over to greet her, my aunt's reminders about courtesy

ringing in my head. She kissed me three times on the cheeks—right, left, right—as was customary.

“Good day to you, too, Mrs. Brinckerhoff.” I tried to sound polite, but I think I sounded more irritated. “How do you do?”

She let out a breath of air so massive that even her stiff hat moved atop her head. “The trip across the strait from Ketimbang was quite rough today. May I sit?” Before I could even nod, she eased into the overstuffed chair. “Is Greet home?”

“*Ja*, she is. I’ll get her.”

Horrid woman. As I left the room I thought of a quote from Mr. Charles Darwin: “*It would, indeed, have been a strange fact, had attention not been paid to breeding, for the inheritance of good and bad qualities is so obvious.*”

When I popped my head into the study, I didn’t see my aunt. Instead, our housekeeper, Indah, was there, dusting the bookshelves and humming some Javanese tune.

“Indah, have you seen Tante Greet?” I asked.

“Pantry,” she said in her thick accent.

Tante Greet stood inside the small room muttering numbers. She appeared to be counting jars of jam. A pointless exercise. Who cares how much jam is in the pantry? I almost spoke the question aloud, and caught myself just in time. No need to give Tante Greet an excuse to teach me yet another lesson. “You will need to know this when you run your own home, Katrien,” she would say.

No, I would not need to know that. I had no intention of running my own home. Especially if it involved counting jam jars.

I cleared my throat. “Mrs. Brinckerhoff is here.”

“Johanna?” Tante Greet shifted a bag of flour, rice or sugar—not sure which, they all looked alike to me—on the shelf.

“*Ja*,” I said, wondering if she knew another Mrs. Brinckerhoff. I slunk out of the pantry.

“Katrien,” my aunt called.

I poked my head back in the doorway.

She handed me a handkerchief. “Clean your face, please. You have ink by your mouth.”

My cheeks burned hot enough to melt the ink right off. I rubbed my face. “Is that better?”

She touched my cheek. “I think you’re going to need soap and water.”

“Mrs. Brinckerhoff saw.”

I expected her to be disappointed, but she surprised me and smiled. “She has children of her own. I daresay she’s seen ink where it doesn’t belong.”

Stiffening, I said, “I’m not a child. I’m thirteen.”

“Go clean your face, Katrien.”

I groaned but did as I was told. When I returned to the parlor, Mrs. Brinckerhoff had not moved a muscle. She sat rigid, like a wooden post being held erect by an invisible string. I longed to poke her. Instead I said, “My aunt will be right with you.”

She nodded, staring out the open doors at the Ousterhoudts’ across the street. The flowers in their front yard caught everyone’s attention. Deep reds, vibrant purples, golden yellows, bright oranges—they grew with wild abandon stretching from the ground up to and above the porch roof as if they were trying to impress God. Tante Greet seethed every time she saw them. Her own flower beds had more weeds than blooms.

I was trying to think of something to say that sounded polite and grown-up when a short screech erupted from the kitchen. I jumped, and Mrs. Brinckerhoff, I was pleased to notice, clutched her chest.

“Katrien!” My aunt’s voice carried down the hall.

I rushed out of the room. “What?”

Tante Greet, pale and shocked, stood in the kitchen pointing at the stove. “You forgot something.”

“Oh, no.” My stag beetle! I peered into the pot of water, now at a full boil. The beetle dipped and dived like a ship in a storm-tossed sea. Pieces of the mandible had broken off, and its legs floated and bobbed beside it. He looked mushy, too. I rubbed my eyes and groaned.

“Get rid of that thing, Katrien. Next time you do this, you do *not* leave the kitchen. And make sure you always use *that* pot!”

“*Ja*, Tante.” I grabbed some cloths and hauled the pot of water off the burner.

She shuddered. “I can’t abide the idea of a boiled bug.”

“Insect,” I corrected.

My poor stag beetle. Mutilated beyond repair.

“When you’ve finished in here, please join Johanna and me in the parlor for some civilized conversation.”

Wonderful. Trapped in a room with Tante Greet and Mrs. Brinckerhoff talking about dress patterns. What could be better?

I looked up and saw that Indah had appeared at my aunt’s side. Tante Greet shook her head as she left the room and muttered, “Never realized she used our kitchen pots for her bugs.” Indah followed her with a tea tray.

Once the water settled, I hauled the pot outside and tossed the water—beetle and all—then joined the ladies in the parlor as I was told. The two women chattered like birds, but I still had labels to complete. I sat at the desk and waited for Tante to object. She merely said, “Sit up straight, Katrien,” before returning her attention to her friend. “I have to admit I am surprised to see you, Johanna. I thought you would not be in Anjer until next month.”

I adjusted my posture and returned to my labels. Trying to look on the bright side, I reasoned that one less beetle meant one less label, but that still meant I had work to do. Once the new beetles sat under glass, I would place the little identification labels below them and they would officially be part of my collection. I already had twenty-five cases filled with twelve stag beetles in each. I hoped to collect thousands of these insects to see natural selection at work, to see the process Mr. Charles Darwin described in beautiful detail in his book:

“For during many successive generations each individual beetle which flew least, either from its wings having been ever so little less perfectly developed or from indolent habit, will have had the best chance of surviving from not being blown out to sea; and, on the other hand, those beetles which most readily took to flight would oftenest have been blown to sea, and thus destroyed.”

Mrs. Brinckerhoff's haughty voice floated across the room and interrupted Mr. Darwin's words. "I told my husband to go over to the island and see for himself what was happening. I mean, the natives just had to be wrong. A beach does not blow up!" Her hands moved in imitation of an explosion. Then, with a sniff, she pulled herself even straighter. "I imagined it was some simple phenomenon that had merely overwhelmed their smaller brains."

I jerked at the insult and the movement made my pen slide across the paper. Another label was ruined. "Homo sapiens," I muttered.

Tante Greet, who had the ears of a leopard, heard me. "Language, Katrien."

Even though I had said the Latin name for human, I meant it as a curse, and my aunt knew it. "Apologies, Tante."

Mrs. Brinckerhoff ignored me. Or maybe she didn't hear. She blabbered on about commanding her husband to go to the island and investigate, which he did. It was probably a wise decision, or he would have had to listen to her constant nagging.

"And what did he see on Krakatau?" my aunt asked, taking a sip of her tea.

"Why, he said the beach had split open, just as the natives reported!" Mrs. Brinckerhoff gave the side of her cup a firm tap with her spoon.

The beach had *what*? I pushed my spectacles up, suddenly eager to join the conversation. "Was that about two weeks ago?" I asked.

"Ja," Mrs. Brinckerhoff said, surprised. "On the twentieth of May."

Tante Greet asked, "Do you remember, Katrien? We felt those tremors that morning?"

I nodded, remembering Slamet's story about ash falling. So the two events were connected.

But Batavia was more than a hundred kilometers from Krakatau. An earthquake on that small island should have barely registered in the capital. And it certainly shouldn't have caused tremors for an hour.

But Mrs. Brinckerhoff hadn't said it was an earthquake. She said the beach exploded.

What could have caused this? An eruption? From an extinct volcano?

"My husband hopes we can all go to Batavia in July," said Mrs. Brinckerhoff, changing the subject. "He said the circus will be there, and the children would love to see the animals."

"If the circus is in town, I can guarantee that Maarten will attend," Tante Greet said. "You've heard me talk about him. He might even have more fun than your children."

The two of them laughed, but I missed what was so funny. I wanted to hear more about Krakatau and growled in frustration.

Tante Greet turned to me. "You may be excused, Katrien."

"*Dank u!*" I fled the room, leaving my labels for later. Right now, I had to tell Slamet what I had learned.