

# With a Sword in My Hand

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**An extract**

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## My father wants a boy. A son.

The knights of Flanders and Brabant will swear allegiance at the cradle of the infant. The leaders of the free cities will receive the child within their gates and wish him good fortune, health and wisdom. Merchants from the east will present the young nobleman with desert mice and spider monkeys for his enjoyment. Before he is yet seven years old, the kings of France and England will offer him their most beautiful daughters and confer with his father to arrange a marriage. The pope, God's vessel on the sea of humanity, will bless the boy in his prayers. My father's son will be Count of Flanders. He will be a leader, a warrior and a diplomat. He will be revered for his knowledge of the world and its mysteries. He will be able to sing in French, Flemish and Latin and to speak about the stars as though he personally scattered them through the skies. He will be able to bring down a boar when at full gallop and will never ask a superfluous question. He will be hard in war and gentle in love. He will be a man. A knight.

On the last day of the year one thousand, three hundred and forty-seven, my mother, the Duchess of Brabant, feels cramps in her sleep. She is lying in the women's quarters in the castle of Male, in a wide bed amongst ladies-in-waiting and laundresses. The women are lying alongside one another on sacks of straw and under blankets of sheepskin. They are lying skin against skin, as it is winter and not one breath of warmth may be lost. It is not silent in the hall. The women cough, mutter, sneeze and sniff. Their throats are as raw as butcher's meat and their noses as bunged up as the neck of a narrow oil pitcher. My mother suddenly feels a gush of warm water between her thighs. She sits up with a start. She can feel the cold hitting her naked back. She immediately realises that I will be born during this night of perishing cold. She has no idea how far the night has advanced. The world is suspended between compline and lauds, at a moment when the time is vague and the night has no name. A lady-in-waiting opens her eyes and asks what the matter is. My mother is trembling. Steam is escaping from her mouth. She says that the baby is on its way. Someone groans "Finally." It is the midwife Hanne, who has already stayed a month at the castle with her daughter to take care of the birth. A moment later, the entire bed comes to life. Ladies-in-waiting and laundresses stand up and, shivering with cold, pull shifts over their naked bodies. They take my mother to the kitchens, where the warm ovens are still glowing. This is the only place in the castle

where there is still a little warmth. They kick the kitchen boys awake and send them away. They lay red cushions on the long table and my mother lies down upon it.

A laundress runs across the courtyard to the main building. She hammers at the door of my father's room.

- "The time has come, my lord count," she cries.

A sound of grunting and yawning comes from the room. A moment later, the door opens. My father is naked. The laundress averts her eyes.

- "Have the chirurgeon woken," he mutters.

The laundress looks in surprise at my father. She hesitates. She wants to say that childbirth is women's business, but she doesn't dare.

- "What are you waiting for, woman, surely not some sign from God?" rasps my father, taking his shirt from a chair and pulling it over his head. The laundress runs to the men's sleeping quarters to look for the chirurgeon.

My father, the Count of Flanders, smashes the ice in the washbasin with his fist. He splashes water over his face and feels his cheeks tingling. He pulls on a black robe, a belt, hose and a hooded cloak. He walks across the courtyard to the kitchens. He sees his wife lying on her side. He grins and runs his scabbed fingers over her cheeks. "I love you, my Brabant," he whispers in her ear. She takes his hand, smiles and says: "I'm pleased to see you, my Flanders." And then she has a contraction that is so violent that she tears the skin of my father's arm with her nails. She gasps for air and wails. Midwife Hanne and her daughter Beatrijs both have muscular arms, stubby fingers and large heads with plump cheeks. They are mother and daughter but resemble each other so strongly that people take them for sisters. Beatrijs lights a fire in the kitchen hearth. She breaks the layer of ice on the water barrel, fills a cauldron with water and hangs it over the fire.

Physician Wirnt van Obrecht enters the room. He is one of the best chirurgeons in Flanders. He is wise and old, at least forty years, and exceptionally competent at treating a shoulder that has been run through or putting a shattered jawbone back together. He was married for only the first time last year, to the thirteen-year-old Elodie van Geraardsbergen, but still does not have the slightest idea about what goes on in the hard belly of a woman during childbirth. It has always remained a divine mystery to him. During the pregnancy, physician Van Obrecht prescribed calming poppy drinks daily for the countess and now that the day of delivery has arrived he is leaving the final part of the job to the midwife. Hanne has now slipped her hand inside my mother's belly. The wildly flickering hearth fire is the only source of light in the room and the corners of the kitchen remain invisible in the darkness of dancing, ghostly shadows.

- "I consulted the stars this very evening," says physician Van Obrecht to my father.

- "They are most favourable for the birth. Most favourable indeed. And, what's more, there's a new moon. A new moon!"

- "A good omen?" asks my father hopefully.

- "An excellent omen," the physician assures him expertly, "and this morning my apprentices tasted the water of the countess and it was sour!"

- "Sour?" asks the count with a note of concern.

- "Yes, another excellent omen. And then there's the colour as well, my lord count," whispers the physician, "the colour."

Wirnt van Obrecht reaches for the book of strips that is hanging from his belt. He unties the cords that hold the wooden covers together. Bound into his book are strips of fabric in colours ranging from pale yellow to inky black. The physician picks out a strip of a deep-orange colour. Triumphantly, he holds the material under my father's nose, as though the colour explains everything.

- "Good?" asks my father nervously.

- "It couldn't be better, my lord count," nods Wirnt van Obrecht meaningfully, "it really couldn't be any better."

At that, my mother yells out. The midwives give her a wad of linen to bite on. Her cheeks are glowing from the heat of the fire. The sweat is making her face sting. She pushes the wad of cloth away.

- "Oh, the pain's so strong," she wails, "it's so very strong."

- "Just as it should be, wife," my father beams, "he's going to be a big, strong boy."

Then Hanne takes her hand from my mother's belly and makes the sign of the cross. She turns to my father.

- "My lord count," she says, her voice calm, yet serious. "I advise you to have Mass said. And with haste. The countess needs all the help she can get tonight..."

- "What do you mean, woman?" the physician interrupts her, "all of the omens are favourable. The new moon, the stars..."

- "The child is lying the wrong way," interrupts Hanne, "and there's nothing the stars and the moon can do about that. Only God can help us."

My father looks at the physician, then at Hanne and finally at my mother. He can see the fear welling up in her eyes. My father storms out of the room and runs down the steps, cursing all of the saints who have walked the earth since Saint Peter and all of the saints who are still to come after his days are done. He curses Heaven, Hell, the Earth and Purgatory and once he's in the church he makes the sign of the cross, kneels before the altar and asks for forgiveness for his foolish profanities. He has the bells rung, drums up everyone - the knights, the squires, the soldiers, the laundresses, the kitchen boys, the stable hands and the shit-shovellers - and sends them to the chapel. He takes chaplain Johannes van Izeghem aside. The man is shivering with cold as he looks up at my father, who is two heads taller.

- "I want to hear everyone praying," hisses my father, "until they have no more spittle left in their mouths. And make sure that God hears you all!"

The little man nods and runs back into the chapel, shaking with cold. My father climbs the steps to the outer wall and marches along the battlements. The cold stops his nose. The wind snaps off the hairs of his beard. He pulls his hood down over his ears, tucks his hands under his cloak and balls his fingers into fists. He looks in the moonlight at the mire of snow stretching out around the castle. A sense of fear is tugging at his insides. Is it true what people say? That God has sent this eternal winter to punish mankind for its sins? It's almost Easter. Yet still the thaw has not come. Winter has seized the world in its deadly jaws of ice. Only last week, an iceberg, as big as a church tower, sank a caravel in the harbour at Sluis. And, on top of that, the supplies are running out. In the large barn in Lissewege, where one tenth of the peasants' harvest is stored, the monks are selling the last, mouldy grain for extortionate prices. In Kwaadkerken, a husband and wife were driven by sheer deprivation to eat their own children. In Gistel, the people pulled down the bodies of hanged men from the gallows to feed themselves. In Bruges, where the ice on the canals is thick enough for carts to ride over, the people go to the church of Our Dear Lady every morning to pray for forgiveness, kneeling on the cold church floor. Everyone is present: the priests, the nobles, the guild masters and even the rabble. At the hallelujah, they raise their eyes up to the vaulted ceiling, where the keystones are decorated with flowers to remind the people of the Bible's promise that after every winter comes a spring. But no matter how hard they pray, how firmly their trembling hands clasp on to crosses, how many candles they light before the statue of Our Dear Lady, the spring does not come. Never before has a winter been so harsh. Never before has a winter lasted so long. Even Morva, an ancient woman whose age no one knows, says so. Old peasants from these parts say that they knew Morva when they were young and that she was already ancient even then. There are stories that Morva slept with the devil and so has won eternal life. My father doesn't believe that, but he does know that she has rare insight into the matters of heaven and earth and the secrets of herbs. Here, my father's breath catches. His thoughts freeze. Why is he thinking about Morva? Is it a sign? Is it a thought sent to him by God? For a moment, the doubt grates in his mind, but then he knows for sure. Morva is the only one who can help his wife with the birth. He makes the sign of the cross and runs down the steps.

Morva is ancient and lives in Plathoeke, a hamlet near Moerkerke where most of the people are reed-cutters. The count has his best horses harnessed to a coach that is sent to fetch Morva. He hopes that his horses will not break their legs on the frozen roads. He marches over to the chapel, which has now filled up. Dozens of steaming mouths are murmuring prayers in the biting cold chapel, where even the holy water is frozen. The chaplain is furiously swinging the censer. But all the way into the chapel the count can hear his wife screaming and at each scream it seems as though the child in her belly is tearing her apart.

The water is boiling in the cauldron over the hearth. Hanne hangs linen cloths around a stick and holds it over the rising steam to clean them. Beatrijs lights the holy candle of Our Dear Lady and even physician Van Obrecht knows that a birth must be over before the candle has burned down. If not, the child will be dead when it enters the world. Hanne gives the countess a sprig of basil to hold in her left hand and a swallow's feather for the right. Throughout the castle, doors and closets are opened up to increase the opening in my mother's belly through which I have to enter the world. Five mercenaries out in the courtyard are shooting arrows up into the clouds to speed along the birth. It is all superstition and the church is opposed to it, but a child that is lying badly needs all the help it can get, so says Hanne.

The night drags on and the candle of Our Dear Lady slowly melts away. Beatrijs constantly keeps moistening my mother's forehead with water that has rose petals floating in it. Finally the opening is big enough and Beatrijs and Hanne press down on the hard belly with all of their strength to push me out. My mother screams in pain. All that comes out is my backside.

Hanne makes the sign of the cross, because she knows that I'm fated to die. She plunges a cup into the rosewater and empties it over my backside. And so they baptise my backside in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost Amen. So no harm can come to me. So my little soul will not languish for all eternity in the dark waiting room of Heaven and Hell that people call Purgatory. At that moment, old Morva appears in the room. She has long fingers, a small mouth with five lower teeth and a dark, festering hole where her left eye once used to be. The midwives stare at her in bewilderment and even the physician holds his breath. Morva needs only a few moments to take in the situation. From the candle of Our Dear Lady she can see how long the birth has been in progress and from the sight of my backside sticking out she realises that I am suffocating. Morva screeches that she must be left alone with the women. Her voice grates through the room, making the hairs on my father's neck stand on end. And my mother, gripped by fear and sorrow, weeps and wails.

Wirnt van Obrecht grabs the count's shoulder and whispers that he surely can't place any faith in that old hag. People call her 'the Witch of the Swamplands', he says. She is one of the devil's own. Even if the child is alive when it enters the world, then it will be cursed, he whispers. My father removes the pinching fingers of the physician from his shoulder. He looks at Morva with her one yellowish eye and says that the life of his son is in her hands. Then Morva repeats that she wants to be left alone with the midwives. My father takes the physician by the wrist, pushes him out of the room and pulls the door closed behind him. My mother faintly hears the physician shouting in the hallway, saying that the count is not respecting his knowledge, that he will talk to the head of his guild about this, and that the child will be destined for ill fortune.

My father has misgivings. Has he done the right thing? Was it really a sign from God? He was also shocked at Morva's mutilated appearance. Ten years ago, during the epidemic of the dreaded grain disease, which turned healthy people into dying wrecks overnight, the people of Plathoeke blamed old Morva for the disease. They said that she had poisoned the grain. One night at the end of the harvest month, they surrounded her clay-and-straw hut and set it on fire. But, one way or another, Morva had survived the fire. She had become a terrifying sight. Her hair and some of the flesh of her scalp had been singed off. The flames had also melted her left eye. Her face may have been mutilated, but her hands were spared. It is with those extremely skilled fingers that she pushes me back into the belly. Her lower arm disappears completely into my mother's body. I am like a child's ball, a plaything, in Morva's fingers. She turns me all the way around in the warmth of my mother's belly. The candle sputters, startling the midwives.

Morva has noticed it as well. Time is short. Morva screeches orders to the midwives, telling them to boil onions and hang red linen cloths over the steaming water. My mother fades in and out of consciousness. She moans and rambles in French. And then Morva finally pulls her arm back out of my mother's belly. She takes a small bottle from the bag on her belt and pushes her forefinger into it. When she pulls her finger out, a dark-red liquid is dripping from it. To the horror of the midwives, she draws strange, heathen circles on my mother's belly. With her bony hand stretched out over my mother's taut navel, she mumbles something unintelligible in a language that should have been long dead. The midwife Hanne stands up and makes a cross on the forehead of my unconscious mother. Then Morva slaps my mother in the face. The old woman hisses that the child is still alive, but that the countess now has to give it her all. And my mother pushes down with the

last energy she has in her body. Dozens of small veins in her face burst with the exertion as the midwives push on her hard belly with all of their might. My mother roars out as my head finally slides into Morva's hands.

It is Morva who is the first to carry me in her arms. She gives me a slap on the buttocks. I gasp for air and I let out a cry. But my cry is quiet, much too quiet. Morva bites through the umbilical cord as the candle of Our Dear Lady sputters out. I've been born just in time, but I look like a hundred-year-old gnome. I have dozens of wrinkles and am so thin that the midwives think I'm going to snap in two at any moment. Morva mashes the boiled, softened onions in her hand and rubs them into my little body. Time passes as the midwives wait patiently. The countess falls asleep and outside the dawn breaks. Finally, Morva gives me back to Hanne and Beatrijs, who rinse off my body with lukewarm rosewater. I already look much less wizened. I'm yellow and green like every other newborn baby. Beatrijs and Hanne wrap me up in red sheets to protect me from childhood illnesses and evil spirits. The countess wakes up and asks whether I'm going to live. Beatrijs and Hanne look down at the floor. They have already seen so many newborn babies die in the first weeks after the birth. Morva looks at the countess with her yellowish eye and a smile takes shape on her horribly mutilated face.

Morva turns round and walks to the door. Everything has gone quiet in the castle. She shuffles off down the hallway to wake my father, who is dozing on a bench. She tells him that the child is alive. My father asks how he can reward her for her services. She tells him that, every year, upon the first snow of winter, he must have a load of dry wood delivered to her so that she can keep her chimney smoking during the cold months. Then she asks if he will help her to her coach. As Morva totters away on my father's arm, my mother is wondering whether physician Van Obrecht was right. Whether Morva really has slept with the devil and whether her child is destined for ill fortune. She makes the sign of the cross and rattles off Hail Marys as Beatrijs swiftly washes away the heathen signs on her belly. Before my mother takes me in her arms, she anxiously inspects my body. Maybe somewhere on my body a sign of the devil could be seen. A clubfoot or a large birthmark in the shape of an animal's head. But all she sees is my hungry mouth working, my little jaws and my fingers seeking a hold on her body. She decides that I can't be destined for ill fortune and she whispers to me that everything will be fine, that I'm a descendant of the counts of Flanders and the kings of France. I am blessed and, just as she is, I am protected by twenty-six angels. No harm can come to me, my mother whispers in my ear, none whatsoever. I am destined for love, prosperity and good fortune. Just as she is.

My mother is startled from her thoughts as she sees her husband swaying into the room. He looks at my little face and my little body, which his wife has covered with the red cloths. My mother smiles. My father is glowing with happiness.

- "He looks like me," is all he says.

Then my mother's smile freezes and she lowers her eyes. My father uneasily lifts up a corner of the red cloth. His lips tremble when he sees the lower part of my body. He stares at my mother, his eyes spitting a thousand reproaches. He is so disheartened he can barely speak.

- "It... It's... a girl," he stutters. And then he turns round and slams the door shut behind him.